

Two men. Two worlds.
One choice that could cost her everything.

Her past.
The man of God
she once loved.

Her present.
The man
God redeemed.

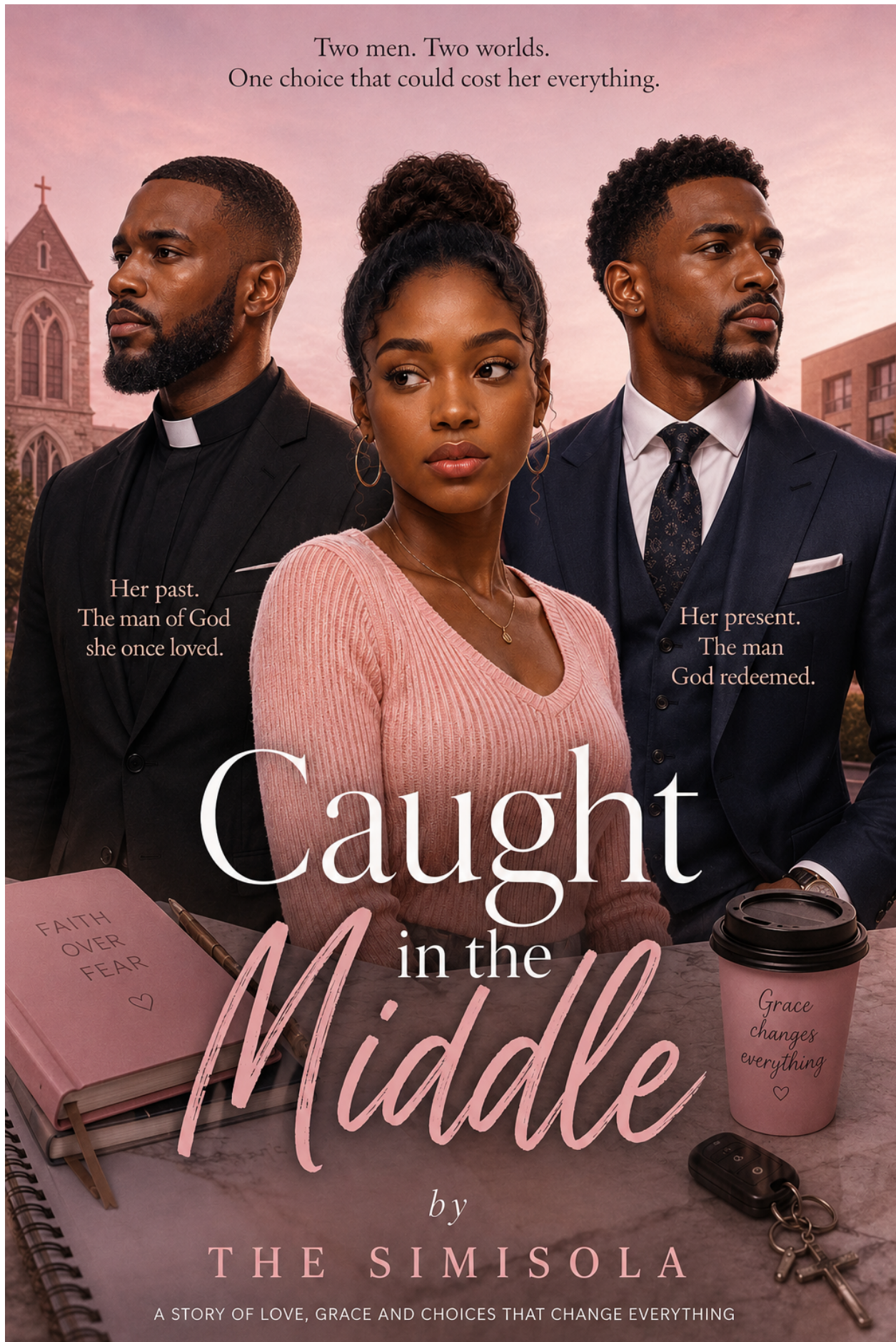
Caught in the

Middle

by

THE SIMISOLA

A STORY OF LOVE, GRACE AND CHOICES THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING



DEDICATION

To the little girl within me,

who held on to her dreams even when life took her down different roads,
and who always found her way back home to herself.

And to my Father, God,

who has walked with me through every season,
always reminding me that I am His battle-axe.

Ten years later, we are still here. Still dreaming. Still becoming.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Epilogue

Glossary

From the Desk of The Simisola

Copyright © 2026

The Simisola

All rights reserved. No part of this e-book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the writer. This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment and cannot be resold or used for commercial content.

All characters, names, descriptions and traits are the product of the author's imaginations. Similarities of actual people, living or dead are purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE

ADENIKE Kupoluyi fell into a chair in her favorite study room, slipped her aching feet out of her undersized shoes, and arranged her books on the table. After a long day of attending classes, completing group assignments, and making arrangements for her fellowship's upcoming executives' retreat, she barely had enough time to prepare for Friday's test. There was so much to do and so little time. Every day felt like a never-ending rush, even for a three hundred level student. What could be more demanding than everything she had to deal with right now? Maybe being the CEO of a multi-million dollar company. Or managing the World Bank.

Nike, as she was fondly called, studied her dream course, Business Management, at Oregon Federal University. She was tall, light-skinned, and had a beautiful oval-shaped face adorned with cute dimples. She could hardly go unnoticed in a crowd, drawing attention wherever she went. Though she was tagged "SU," most guys still tried their luck asking her out.

She was the head usher and welfare secretary of the Great Cornerstone Fellowship, one of the most popular fellowships on campus, with over five hundred members. The effect of the weekly executive meetings on her academics could hardly be ignored. Between fellowship meetings, executives' meetings, and departmental meetings, she barely had enough time to study.

As if that was not enough, the new pastor of her fellowship was her ex-fiancé. She had broken off the relationship a year earlier after catching him in a compromising position with one of the sisters in the fellowship. At the time, he was still the choir coordinator, and he had constantly tried to pressure her into immoral sexual activities. Only a few people knew the real reason for the breakup, and she never volunteered more information than necessary because she did not want to fuel gossip.

However she knew most people blamed her for the break in their relationship, and most of her friends had not stopped wondering why she would let go of such a good guy. If only they knew that he was not innocent as he appeared. She could not totally blame him though, at the time she agreed to go out with him, she was young and easily swayed by a guy who quoted the scriptures and led the choir. He was also very good looking and had a deep baritone voice.

He was the fellowship's most eligible bachelor, and he chose her. How could she not be swept off her feet? She never prayed with him or even about him; she simply believed he would be perfect for her. On campus, being so "worded" practically made someone ideal Christian husband material.

Why was she even thinking about all that again? It was in the past now and the least of her worries. She comforted herself with the thought that he would not have become senior pastor if God did not want him there.

She forced her thoughts back to the present situation, made worse by the badly timed power outage. Thank goodness she had come with her flashlight.

She had a weekend retreat to prepare for, an executives' meeting to attend, and an important test to study for.

"Gosh!" she gasped, shining her flashlight at her wristwatch. She had barely four hours left before study time would be over.

"Lord, I need Your extraordinary abilities more than ever," she muttered under her breath as she flipped through the pages of her book to see how much she still had left to cover.

Not too long after that, she heard noises from the back of the class. She turned to check and saw a guy hailing someone outside. The other person sauntered into the dark classroom. He was tall and surrounded by some other guys who looked like bodyguards. The others in the class joined the hailing chorus which was quickly becoming almost uproarious, or so she exaggeratedly thought.

She was about to caution them and remind them that this was a classroom, but on second thought, she kept quiet. It was not worth entangling herself in any cult trouble. Suppose they were members of one of the rumored cult groups on campus?

The tall figure walked toward her and sat a few seats away. Right at that moment, power was restored and she was grateful the outage had not lasted long. He looked in her direction while responding to another round of hailing from one of his admirers.

She turned properly this time and realized it was Rolling Dollars, Ree Dee! One of her annoying colleagues. Her senior too. He was a final year student.

She hissed and turned back to her books. Rich kids usually annoyed her, especially the ones girls and guys bent over backwards to please, and this Ree Dee was no different.

They said he was of royal blood and heir to a throne somewhere in South Africa. Rumor also had it that his parents owned several renowned companies in Nigeria alongside countless properties tied to their family name.

As if that was not enough, he was one of the top students in her department, not to mention annoyingly handsome. Annoying because he knew it and carried himself like he did. Always flaunting himself around and flashing that charming smile every chance he got.

How does one person get to be so lucky?

He had everything going for him. Spoilt rich kids.

Nike hissed again and continued reading.

Ree Dee, whose actual name was Gboyega, turned in the direction the hiss had come from. He was used to girls making sounds and acting funny just to get his attention, but if this lady thought that was all it took, then she had better step up her game and try again.

She sounded like an injured snake.

This was one of the reasons he hardly read outside his house. Going to class was always stressful because everyone wanted to be his friend somehow. At first, he had thought it was nice, but after a while it became exhausting. The ladies made things too easy for him, so the “ladies’ man” reputation was not even something to be proud of anymore.

As a fresher, he had not known any better. He was free and had practically everyone on campus doting on him. Life was good.

That could make anybody lose their senses for a while, especially a rich teenage boy who had just escaped the clutches of strict parents.

Now, he was proud of the self control he had developed, but more importantly, he had received Jesus. All thanks to God and the mentorship of the senior pastor of his church, Rhema Assembly International.

He smiled ruefully and shook his head. Most of his old friends probably did not believe he had changed, but he knew he was different now.

Dear Jesus. How he loved Him. How grateful he was.

They would just have to come to terms with his new life.

As he tried to return his focus to studying, the lady hissed again and began packing her bag noisily. He wondered what exactly her problem was.

Meanwhile, Nike had been struggling to study because of all the girls drooling over him. To make matters worse, he had been smiling like the flirt that he was.

She took her time packing up, getting grumpier by the second, so he finally said politely,

“Excuse me, can you be quieter? I am a little distracted by the noise.”

“Are you talking to me?” she asked, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“Yes ma’am,” he replied, wondering why she was so edgy.

She sighed to calm herself, dropped her bag, and looked him straight in the eye.

“Ree Dee or whatever it is you are called, I am honestly surprised you are actually here to study. Really, I am. You and your minions are the reason I am leaving. You were the ones who turned this place upside down, yet you are asking me to keep it down?”

She picked up her bag again.

“I do not have time for this.”

“My name is Adegboyega Hilma Benson. If you were trying to start a conversation, you did not have to be rude about it.”

He flashed his trademark smile.

Why is this one smiling? she thought irritably as she sized him up with disdain and walked away muttering under her breath, “Stupid rich kids.”

By now, everyone in the class was staring, and even people outside peeked in to see what was happening.

That was quite a scene, Gboyega thought. Throwing his hands up dramatically, he said loud enough for a few people to hear,

“There goes today’s reading.”

He packed his books and left, catching a few flirty smiles on his way out. They always had to make a scene, did they not?

This one was quite pretty though. And surprisingly good at her act too.

Just as he got to the door, someone called after him.

“Sorry, Ree Dee,” the girl said with a slight wave. “Do not mind that girl. She is one of those fellowship sisters who think they are better than everybody else. *She be your junior sef o.*”

He nodded with a faint smile and headed out.

That girl’s face was etched in his mind now. Along with her funny reaction. What exactly was he supposed to do with that?

He was not even angry. He was used to the drama. Usually, he just went with the flow and gave girls what they wanted while pretending to fall for whatever scheme they were trying to pull.

But there was no need for that anymore.

Nike was still seething when she left the study room, but she caught herself midway. She rarely got angry and hardly ever displayed it publicly. Even when her ex, Pastor Mike, embarrassed her during executives’ meetings, she never gave him the satisfaction of knowing she was hurt.

She was a Christian. She should have controlled her anger instead of reducing herself before someone like Ree Dee.

Still, she was secretly glad she had spoken her mind. She had wanted to for a long time. Ree Dee was notoriously known for being condescending, especially toward girls. She even knew ladies he had played badly.

Though she was not naïve enough to place all the blame on him. No sensible girl should carelessly entrust her heart to someone like that.

People like him did not change.

She entered another room to study. She could not afford a B in this course now. She hoped to graduate with a first class, and nothing in the world was going to stop her.

She was going to make her struggling parents proud.

CHAPTER TWO

THE lecture room for the class was very rowdy and noisy. While some students hung outside to finish their last minute study for the test, some sat together in groups discussing past questions while others were indifferent as they noisily chattered. The reason for the indifference could be because there had been a notice that lecturers in the department had a meeting with the Dean of the faculty, Nike thought.

She turned back to her books to finish her revision. She was sure of acing the test if it was held today. She looked around again and pushed out the unnecessary apprehension that was seen on most of her colleagues.

“I do not have the spirit of fear, but love, power and sound mind”, she muttered as she turned back to Anna and Funso, her best friends who sat by her side also revising for the test.

Anna looked up from her book and caught Nike’s eyes. She was not only one of Nike’s best friends, but also the Sisters’ Coordinator of Great Cornerstone Fellowship.

“Nike, what is wrong with you?” Anna asked.

Nike smiled ruefully.

“Nothing, Mummy Anna. Just thinking about the test and wondering whether it would hold.”

She was grateful for the lecturer’s timely arrival as everyone immediately began shuffling around, putting away bags and books. She knew Anna did not buy the rubbish response she had just given.

Aside from being a terrible liar, Anna knew her too well and would definitely probe further. At least she had escaped that conversation for now, thanks to Mr Afolabi.

Mr Afolabi, nicknamed “Fobz” by the students, stood in front of the class and shouted,

“Everyone drop your bags and books outside. I have no time to waste.”

The sight of desperate students trying to cram one last thing before the test began brought a tiny smile to Nike’s face and she let out a light chuckle. Perhaps some of them would get lucky enough to catch an *expo* before rushing back to their seats.

He continued, “I would not be the one invigilating you. Your senior colleagues would supervise the test instead. I have a meeting with the Dean, but if anybody is caught cheating, you would be severely punished.”

Looking toward the back, he called out, “Gboye and Tony, please do as I instructed. The test is just forty five minutes.”

With that, he left.

Nike settled back into her seat after dropping her bag outside. Thank God they had listened to the Holy Spirit’s prompting not to believe the rumor about the test not holding.

She bowed her head briefly to say a quick prayer as the invigilators shared the question papers.

Nike looked up just as Ree Dee handed her own to her.

He just had to be everywhere, like a mobile billboard.

She sighed.

She was simply going to write her test and move on to the gazillion other things demanding her attention. One of which was finding decent accommodation for the executives' retreat. It was not easy finding a place that was both comfortable and affordable these days. The dilemma of a Welfare Secretary, even in the middle of a test.

She pushed the thought aside and focused on the questions before her.

The test began. Nike focused on the questions and started drafting her answers at the back of the question paper so her answer booklet would not become rough.

"You are free to ask your friends for the answers quietly. *Abi* what do you think, Gboyega?" one of the invigilators said.

Nike looked up from her question paper toward the invigilators in disbelief.

Who encourages such nonsense? Shameless people, she thought.

Even though she knew the voice belonged to the other guy, did birds of the same feather not fly together? If these were the people chosen to stand in for their lecturer, they might as well turn the test into a group assignment.

"Tony, please stop encouraging them to cheat," Gboyega cautioned his friend before turning to the class.

"If I catch anybody cheating, I will write a malpractice report on your answer sheet."

As much as he wanted to criticize Tony for encouraging malpractice, he knew he probably would have said the same thing himself two years ago before he got saved. Quietly, he said another prayer for Tony as he scanned the class.

There goes the fierce cuteness, he thought.

He smiled when their eyes met briefly. He had noticed her barely five minutes after entering the hall. Apparently, she really was as prim and proper as she appeared. Sitting in the front row and concentrating seriously on her work.

Still, he liked the thought that somewhere from the corner of her eye, she was stealing quick glances at him. He was almost certain that eventually she would get tired of her act and melt like butter before him.

Since getting saved, he had met church girls who turned out very different from what they first appeared to be. That experience had taught him not to make assumptions about everyone who claimed to be Christian.

Besides, he had already given up on love for now.

Gotcha, he thought.

He had caught her staring again, but he could not tell what the look meant. Admiration or irritation? Surely the former.

He actually looked forward to talking to her after the test. It was not arrogance. He simply knew enough about female antics to believe she was interested in him.

However, much to his surprise, she had occupied his thoughts for the past three days, and somehow he wanted to see her again. Looking at her from the podium as she bent over her script scribbling answers, he could not help thinking it was a shame such a pretty face came with such a nasty attitude.

Love was not even on his to do list right now. He just wanted to finish his bachelor's degree and move to Canada immediately after graduation for further studies.

Nike was irritated, but why exactly? Maybe because he had disappointed her.

Who was this guy anyway, and why had she spent so much time thinking about him in just a few minutes, especially during a test?

He was not worth it.

She shrugged off the thought, scribbled down her final answer, and quickly scanned through her script from the beginning. After handing it over, she stepped outside to wait for her friends.

Immediately Anna and Funso came out, Nike walked toward them holding their handbags.

"How was the test, Anna and Funso?" she asked.

"We bless God jare, Nike", Funso replied tiredly.

"How can they encourage cheating during a test? What is this department turning into? I know they are a bunch of irresponsible boys, but at least they should have some decency," Anna burst out angrily, not even bothering to answer Nike properly.

Funso responded calmly, "But Anna, it was not both of them now. Ree Dee did not encourage it. His friend did."

Anna shook her head. Sometimes she honestly did not understand Funso. The way she tried to justify bad behavior was unbecoming of a Christian.

"Are you supporting them now, Funso?"

"Of course not. I am just saying it is wrong to call both of them irresponsible because of something only one person did."

"Is Ree Dee any different?" Anna asked sarcastically before turning to Nike.

"You should have seen how girls were practically throwing themselves at him after the test. If he truly disapproved, he could have cautioned his friend more sternly."

Funso rolled her eyes. Anna's self righteous stance exhausted her sometimes. Not everybody could be as harsh as she was.

Adjusting her bag, she said, "Excuse me, Anna, all I am saying is..."

Nike, though secretly agreeing with Anna about Ree Dee, wanted to stop the argument before it escalated.

She hurriedly cut in, "Please, both of you. We just finished a test we spent all of last week preparing for, and the executives' conference starts in two hours. Can we discuss something better than Ree Dee and his friend?"

Both girls fell silent, much to the disappointment of nearby students who pretended to mind their business while obviously waiting for the argument to become a full blown fight.

Funso and Anna hardly got along. Most times, whenever they were together, Nike found herself playing umpire between them.

Though they were both Christians, Funso was more liberal and accommodating of people's flaws than Anna. Anna did not believe in middle ground. To her, you either got it right in the faith or you got out.

Though she never said it aloud, Anna believed Funso was not a serious Christian. But Nike knew that when it truly came down to it, Funso's life revolved around God.

Once they left the department, Funso turned sideways and said, "I am going for my dance rehearsal. I will catch up with you executives later."

Nike shook her head and called after her retreating figure, "Do not worry. I pray you are chosen as an executive next year, then you will not be able to abandon me like this."

"Executive indeed," Anna scoffed as they crossed the road toward their hostels to prepare for the executives' conference.

On Monday afternoon, Nike rushed into the fellowship pavilion where they usually held executives' meetings. She was already fifteen minutes late. There should not even have been a meeting today considering they had just ended the executives' conference yesterday, but nobody could go against the senior pastor's order.

Her only prayer was that she would not miss her 4pm class because Pastor Mike could talk for Africa.

Immediately she entered, she noticed everyone was already seated and Pastor Mike stood at the front of the pavilion. She quietly moved toward a seat at the back, hoping not to draw attention to herself.

Just as she was about to sit down, Pastor Mike looked up.

“Stand up, Nike.”

“You are late. Would you care to explain to the whole house why you arrived fifteen minutes after the appointed time?” Pastor Mike asked.

Nike was beyond embarrassed. This was the first time she had ever come late, and if Pastor Mike did not already have a personal issue with her, he probably would have let it slide.

She regained her composure and answered apologetically.

“I am sorry sir. I only found out about the meeting a few minutes before I got here.”

“How come? Are you not on the WhatsApp group? And even if you were not, are you not staying in the same hostel as Mummy Anna?”

“Yes sir, but my phone battery died last night, and Mummy Anna and I have not seen each other today because I left for the library very early. I only just charged my phone when power was restored,” she explained.

“You are just full of excuses, aren’t you? Too bad.” He said it with a dismissive shrug, earning a few snickers from some executives. On the other hand, Nike gained the sympathy of a few others.

“Sit down. I am in a good mood today, so I will not punish anybody.” A smug smile settled on his face.

“Thank you sir.” Nike sat down quietly as Pastor Mike continued speaking. She had already decided she would not give in to anger whenever he made remarks like this during meetings. He was still her pastor, and he had every right to correct her for coming late regardless of their history.

She tried to focus on the meeting while silently praying it would end before her class.

Two hours later, the meeting still was not over. Nike shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She was already late for class, and Pastor Mike showed no signs of wrapping up.

Nike stood and raised her hand politely. “Excuse me sir, please I have a class by 4pm.”

The entire pavilion fell silent. Pastor Mike stared at her angrily. “You came late, yet you want to leave first? Always asking for favors”

Seeing he was already irritated, she quickly tried to explain herself, “I am sorry sir, I am not asking for favors...”

Pastor Mike cut her off sharply. “...Then what exactly are you doing? Nobody leaves here until I am done, and all phones must remain switched off.”

Thirty minutes later, the meeting finally ended and the executives hurried out of the pavilion. As Nike rushed toward her class, she switched on her phone and two messages entered almost immediately. One was from Funso.

She opened it quickly. *We just finished a test, 30 marks.* Blood drained from Nike’s face. She immediately quickened her pace and jumped on a bike to her department.

The entire ride, she prayed silently under her breath. As soon as she arrived, she called Funso.

“Hello, where are you?” Nike asked in panic immediately Funso picked up.

“I am already in my room. We finished the test a while ago. Where did you disappear to?”

“We had an impromptu executives’ meeting. I tried to excuse myself, but I was not allowed to leave,” Nike explained.

This Pastor Mike *sef* just likes causing *wahala jare*,” Funso said angrily over the phone.

“What do I do now, Funso? I cannot lose thirty marks.” Nike fought hard to keep herself from crying.

“Go to his office and beg him.”

“*Ehn?*”

The call ended immediately. Nike checked her phone and realized her airtime had finished.

She checked her purse and found only the twenty naira balance the bike man had returned to her earlier. There was no way she could call Funso back. She would have to face the lecturer alone.

Summoning courage, she whispered a quick prayer under her breath. “Just like Esther, let me find favor.”

CHAPTER THREE

FADEYI Aderibigbe reclined in his office chair, smiling at Gboyega and Tony. They were both his students, though Gboyega happened to be his cousin's son.

Looking at them, he continued his story.

"Your mother was completely in love the first time she met your father. I still remember how my uncle, the Iwajale of Ijale and your grandfather, practically disowned her for marrying him. Back then, it was taboo for anyone from the five Iwajale royal families to marry an *ajeji*.

"But your mother stood her ground. She said she was not leaving her man. Families begged your grandfather and even explained that your father was also from a royal family in South Africa, but the elders refused to budge."

Gboyega and Tony smiled as Uncle Fadeyi retold a story the Benson family already knew too well, one that had practically become public legend.

His parents' love story was almost mythical in Nigeria. Beyond their royal status and wealth, people constantly used them as an example of successful inter country marriage in Africa.

Even after twenty six years together, they still looked deeply in love. Their public displays of affection, much to the embarrassment of their children, regularly made it onto blogs across Nigeria.

"You know, Uncle, I have always wished to find a woman I could love like that. But in this generation where *slay queens* and *pepper dem* girls are reigning, I honestly do not think that kind of love still exists."

Gboyega said this as he rubbed both hands over his face tiredly.

Uncle Fadeyi rubbed his potbellied stomach mockingly.

"That kind of love is rare o. But I thought you now claim to be a Christian. What happened to all the Christian ladies in your church? *Shey* you people call them virtuous women?"

Gboyega rolled his eyes at the obvious jab at his faith.

"Uncle, I am a Christian. I am not claiming to be one. And the truth is, not every lady who attends church is actually born again, just like not everybody in this university is truly a student.

"Besides, we do not just choose anybody randomly. We trust God to direct us, even in marriage."

Tony, who had been quiet all along, finally decided to contribute.

"See, those Christian girls are the most confusing set. They can convince you that you are the chosen one with all their dreams and visions. One sister did that to my guy once. If not *that my guy sharp well well*, he would have fallen for her trap.

"And honestly, many of them are too gullible. Unlike babes outside, they love too easily and expect nothing in return. To me, that kind of thing is just dumb."

Gboyega shook his head. His uncle and Tony were already turning the entire discussion into a joke, and he was no longer interested in defending his faith.

“They are not cheap. Some of them are just emotional, same as people outside church. But a Christian should not let emotions control them *sha*.”

“Until I find my own woman, I remain single.”

Fadeyi sat up straighter.

“That one is an understatement, Gboye...”

A knock sounded on the door, abruptly ending the conversation.

“Come in,” Uncle Fadeyi bellowed.

Nike pushed the door open timidly and stepped into Dr. Aderibigbe’s office, only to realize he was not alone.

She had not expected to meet any of her colleagues there. Now she had to make her plea in front of Ree Dee and his unserious friend.

Silently, she began to pray as three pairs of eyes studied her with different expressions.

“Would you care to explain what you want instead of standing there like a statue?” Uncle Fadeyi asked impatiently.

It was common knowledge in the Business Management department that he was especially harsh toward female students. At every opportunity, he called them “*Ashawo*.”

Nike curtsied slightly.

“Excuse me sir, I wanted to see you about the test you conducted this afternoon.”

Uncle Fadeyi adjusted his glasses and glared at her.

“Yes? What about it?”

She forced herself to meet his eyes.

“Sir, I was not around because I had some assignments I needed to take care of.”

Uncle Fadeyi stared at her, waiting for further explanation. When she said nothing, he pressed further.

“What assignment?”

Dr. Aderibigbe was a known atheist who constantly tried to disprove the existence of God. He openly fought against religious activities on campus and especially disliked popular fellowship leaders in his department.

Nike knew all this, yet she could not bring herself to lie, not even for thirty marks.

She glanced around the room hopefully, searching for anyone who could help plead her case, but the blank expressions on the two guys’ faces immediately discouraged her.

Uncle Fadeyi scowled when she still hesitated.

“I am waiting, Miss...”

“...Kupoluyi Nike,” she quickly supplied before continuing nervously.

“Ehhmm sir, I was in an impromptu executives’ meeting for my fellowship. I only found out around 2pm, while I was already on my way there, that we had a fixed class. I thought the meeting would end on time, but it did not.”

Uncle Fadeyi rarely lost his temper, but statements like this irritated him deeply. Turning to Gboyega and Tony, he scoffed.

“Can you imagine this kind of foolishness? Was she admitted into this university to study or to attend a fellowship?”

The two young men wisely kept quiet. There was obviously no correct response to that question.

Uncle Fadeyi turned back to Nike.

“And where were you on Friday when I announced after your test that there would be a fixed class today by 5pm?”

Nike immediately dropped to her knees, close to tears.

“Please sir, I left for a retreat immediately after the test and only returned last night.”

Gboyega stared at her incredulously. This girl was unbelievable. Did she not realize his uncle hated anything related to church or fellowship activities?

Uncle Fadeyi shook his head in disbelief.

“Obviously, you do not need the thirty marks. I can already see how unserious you are. Just get out of my office.”

Nike remained on her knees, stretching both hands toward him desperately.

“Please sir, I can explain.”

“I said get out. And just so you know, I have noted your face, and I promise you will fail that course.”

Uncle Fadeyi shouted as he rose from his seat.

Seeing the situation escalating, Gboyega quickly stepped in.

“Uncle please, *e jo e ma binu*.” His voice carried genuine concern.

Uncle Fadeyi shook his head angrily. “What exactly are you begging me for, Gboyega? Young lady, get out of my office.”

Nike left the office dejectedly as tears streamed freely down her face. She tried to pray, but her throat felt too tight for words.

She did not even bother wiping her tears as she walked blindly down the corridor.

She barely heard someone call her name until she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

“Hey Nike, stop crying.” Gboyega said awkwardly as she turned toward him with tear filled eyes. He had never been comfortable around crying women. Honestly, he would rather be anywhere else than standing here right now, but she clearly needed help.

Trying not to let her tears affect him, he added,

“Wait here. Let me help you talk to him.”

Nike shook her head once she processed what he had said.

“Do not worry. I will see him again tomorrow. I do not want to put anybody in trouble.”

Gboyega smiled slightly. Even while she was on the verge of losing thirty marks, she was still worried about putting him in trouble.

“I can hardly get into trouble for speaking to my own uncle. Just wait here for me.”

With that, he turned and walked back into the office.

She waited because there was really nothing else she could do. Watching him disappear back into the office, she silently reminded herself that God could use anybody to help His children.

Fifteen minutes later, Gboyega stepped out smiling faintly. He honestly did not know what had pushed him to help her, but he also knew he would not have had peace if he ignored someone clearly in distress.

Besides, his uncle was not a wicked man. He simply hated religious activities.

He walked toward her slowly. She was staring blankly at a poster on the wall without really seeing it.

Looking at her properly now, he realized she was naturally beautiful even without makeup, despite her swollen tear stained face.

“What happened?” she asked when she realized he was standing beside her.

“No test for you,” he began.

“Hmmm... thanks for trying anyway.”

Nike said quietly, disappointment washing over her face. Deep down, she had already suspected nothing would come out of it.

She picked up her bag to leave.

Gboyega quickly raised a hand to stop her.

“Actually, he gave me this assignment for you to submit first thing tomorrow morning.”

He handed the paper to her. Nike collected it, scanned through the question, then looked back at him in confusion.

“An assignment?”

Gboyega smiled.

“Yes. But nothing less than twenty five pages.”

Relief flooded Nike instantly. This was a miracle. A complete testimony.

Looking from the question sheet to Gboyega, she said excitedly,

“Are you serious? Thank you so much. God bless you. I honestly do not know how to repay you...”

Gboyega smiled and interrupted lightly.

“...Actually, you already know how you can repay me.”

Nike slowly lifted her head and looked at him in disbelief. Then anger flashed across her face.

“You must be on something if you think I would sleep with you because of an assignment. I am not a prostitute, you sex starved animal. I do not care about the marks. You can keep your question.”

She shoved the paper back into his hand and bent to pick up her bag which had fallen while collecting it.

Gboyega stared at her as though she had suddenly grown two heads.

Pushing the paper back into her hands, he snapped angrily, “Hey, hold up. What exactly is wrong with you? I never said you should sleep with me, so get your mind out of the gutter. I only wanted you to apologize for insulting me the other day. And madam, if you truly claim to be pure, not every action people take should look evil to you.”

He shook his head in frustration before lowering his voice slightly.

“Submit the assignment anyway. But just so you know, if I wanted free sex, I know where to get it and definitely not from a deranged woman like you.”

Furious, he stormed off.

What had she just done?

Throughout the night, Nike could not sleep. She tried explaining everything that happened to Anna and Funso. Anna supported her reaction immediately, while Funso insisted she owed him an apology.

Nike wanted to believe Gboyega only reacted that way because she had exposed his “real intentions,” but deep down, for some reason she could not explain, she suspected he had actually been sincere.

“Mum, I just want to marry a beautiful woman like you,” Gboyega said over the phone as he tried to divert his mother’s attention from her usual marriage discussion.

His mother had called early that morning to discuss marriage and grandchildren. If she had her way, he would become a father before leaving for his MBA. Ever since he got saved, she worried he had suddenly lost interest in women entirely.

“Adegboyega, *oko mi*, everything is not about beauty. No matter how physically blessed a woman is, if she lacks good character and manners, she will eventually rebel against you.”

His mother continued, clearly not distracted by his tactics.

Gboyega groaned. This topic has slowly taken over most of their conversations lately. He was only twenty six and still in his final year at the university, yet his mother was already hinting about marriage at every opportunity.

“But Mum, how do you even know a woman has bad character these days? We mostly just see fine faces everywhere. And honestly, I want what you and Dad have. That kind of love.”

He said it gently, hoping to calm her down.

His mother responded immediately.

“You will meet a better woman than me. No woman is perfect, but you must make sure she is a Christian. Even though your father and I got married as unbelievers because we did not know better then, I thank God you have now received Christ. At least you understand what it means not to be unequally yoked.”

“Okay ma. How was your trip to Addis Ababa?” Gboyega quickly tried distracting her again.

This time, she fell for the bait completely. She launched into stories about the stress of the trip and everything that happened in Addis Ababa.

By the time she finally ended the call, she still reminded him to think seriously about their earlier discussion.

Scoffing lightly, Gboyega strode out of the car park toward his department.

Remembering the way Nike had looked at him the previous day, like he was dirt beneath her shoes, only strengthened his resolve to avoid relationships until he returned from Canada.

At first, he had actually admired the fact that she did not seem impressed by him like most girls were. That was partly why he decided to help her in the first place.

Instead, he got insulted for his trouble. Deep down, he knew he should not have asked for anything in return. Once kindness starts expecting repayment, it stops being kindness. But honestly, he had only wanted to clear the air between them and correct whatever wrong impression she had about him.

But these days, the moment a man acted nice toward a woman, it was automatically assumed he wanted something from her. People were entitled to whatever opinion they wanted to have about him. His duty as a Christian was simply to walk in love.

Still, even after reminding himself of that, her words continued to sting.

As he approached the faculty basement, he spotted his old clique shouting loudly as usual.

Normally, he would have avoided them completely. But constantly ignoring them would not help draw them toward the new life in Christ he had now found.

“Ree Dee baba, wetin dey happen now? My guy, you no dey show face for our usual spot again.”

One of his old friends, Baby Face, called out immediately as he got closer.

Gboyega shook his head as he greeted the guys before sitting down. Turning to Baby Face, he said,

“Guy, show face for where? And I don tell you say my name no be Ree Dee. Na Adegboyega.”

“Please excuse me.”

A familiar voice sounded behind him.

Gboyega turned immediately and came face to face with Nike.

Wonderful. Could this morning get any worse?

Nike waved awkwardly at the guys, all of whom were staring at her with obvious interest, before turning back to Gboyega.

“Ree Dee, I need to talk to you.”

Gboyega scowled immediately at the nickname. “My name is not Ree Dee.”

“Sorry, Mr...”

Nike paused and looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to supply the name himself again.

“Adegboyega,” Tony supplied helpfully.

He was clearly amused by the entire situation. Honestly, if girls like this were part of the reason Gboyega became born again two years ago, he might not mind following him to church too.

The girl was fine. Very fine. And those dimples? *Omo*.

“Please, can I talk to you, Adegboyega?” Nike asked again.

Gboyega shook his head.

“For what exactly? So you can insult me again?” His tone was noticeably harsh.

Nike immediately shook her head. Glancing at the guys who were openly watching both of them now, she figured if Gboyega did not mind discussing yesterday in front of his friends, then so be it.

“I just wanted to apologize for yesterday. I did not mean to call you...”

Gboyega cut her off immediately. “Can we talk over there?” He motioned toward the other side of the basement.

He was already mortified. This girl had claws. Was she seriously about to disgrace him in front of his friends? They would never let him hear the end of it.

Once they were out of his friends’ hearing, Gboyega turned to her and tried calming himself before speaking.

“Were you seriously about to bring up yesterday in front of those guys?”

Nike shrugged lightly.

“You did not give me much choice. I assumed you did not mind.”

Gboyega stared at her in disbelief.

“And your best idea was to discuss it in front of my friends?”

He sat beside her quietly and waited for her response.

Nike avoided his gaze. She honestly had not planned for this much drama.

“I just wanted to apologize, and I know I probably would not have the courage to do it again.”

The words came out in one rushed mumble.

Gboyega smiled despite himself. There was something oddly endearing about her reluctant apology.

"I thought you already knew what you said was wrong."

Nike looked up quickly.

"I never said that..."

Gboyega interrupted immediately.

"...So you are trying to tell me what you said was right?"

"See, Gboyega, I am trying to make peace here. Your reputation is not exactly the best, so I honestly thought you meant something else. But I am sorry, and I really appreciate what you did for me. I was able to submit the assignment because of you."

Nike raised both hands defensively as she rushed through the apology.

"What kind of apology is that?" Gboyega shook his head lightly before standing up. "Anyway, I am glad I could help. And yesterday, I genuinely just wanted to clear the air between us. I did not have any hidden intention. I am also sorry for shouting at you. But honestly, even as a Christian, I cannot imagine suggesting something like that."

Nike shrugged internally. Christian indeed. Who exactly was he trying to deceive?

"I will try to keep that in mind. Let me be on my way now, I have a class."

"Alright then. Have a nice day."

He stepped aside to let her pass.

Women. You simply could not understand them. Yesterday she had practically bitten his head off, and today she was acting all calm and apologetic like butter would not melt in her mouth.

Yet beneath the apology and soft voice, he could still see the spitfire hiding underneath.

And worst of all, she clearly did not believe he was truly born again.

This definitely was not the kind of girl he needed complications with, especially now that he was trying to live differently.

He walked back toward his friends.

"Ree Dee, if na this kind babe dey church, I no mind follow you go. Where you carry her from?"

Segun shouted immediately as Gboyega sat down.

Tony grinned mischievously. *"Na yesterday I meet the fine girl o, Gbo..."*

Gboyega cut in sharply. "...Guys, enough. She is not even my friend."

Segun ignored his irritation completely. *"Abeg forget all that one. If you no want am, send her come my side oo."*

"Would you people just stop? Nothing is happening, and she is not that kind of girl." Gboyega said firmly.

Baby Face tried jumping in again. "Ree Dee, but that babe..."

Gboyega cut him off before he could say anything else disrespectful about Nike. "...Enough! I said stop it. If this nonsense is what you people still want to continue doing, then count me out. And let me repeat myself again. My name is Adegboyega Hilma Benson, not Ree Dee."

Angry now, he grabbed his bag and walked out of the basement. He should never have bothered sitting with them in the first place. They were clearly not ready to change, and every interaction with them only dragged him back toward the image he was trying to leave behind.

One of the guys called after him as he walked away.

“Gboyega, *e never reach that level now.*”

CHAPTER FOUR

DURING the service on Sunday, Nike received a note from the senior pastor asking her to wait behind for a brief meeting.

She had no idea what Pastor Mike wanted, but it was most likely something unnecessary. He hardly approached her for personal conversations when other fellowship members were around.

Thirty minutes after service, Mike finally walked up to where she sat waiting quietly with her head bowed.

“Nike, how have you been?”

He placed his hands around her shoulders like they were old lovers reconnecting after a misunderstanding. To anyone still lingering in the auditorium, it would easily look like the pastor and his ex fiancée were getting back together.

Nike forced a polite smile, stood up, and immediately stepped out of his reach.

“I am fine sir. The service was great.”

Mike shook his head, clearly displeased by her reaction.

“You never cease to amaze me, Nike. What exactly are you trying to achieve with these childish attitudes? I honestly expected you to have outgrown this by now.”

He paused and whispered, “I offended you by playing rough with Caroline and I already apologized, yet you still refuse to forgive me. If we were married, would you hold grudges till the kingdom of God comes?”

Nike shook her head slowly. Even now, Mike still did not see anything seriously wrong with what he did.

If it had only been about her feelings, she would have forgiven him long ago and moved on. But the problem went far deeper than that. Mike was unwilling to let go of certain dangerous habits.

“Playing rough?” Nike tilted her head slightly in disbelief.

“So that is what it is called now? You were caught half naked kissing and touching another woman, yet you describe it as playing rough, Pastor Mike?”

“Lower your voice. People are around.”

Mike quickly glanced around to see if anyone had heard them. A few people were already staring in their direction, though nobody was close enough to hear clearly.

Nike almost laughed bitterly. He was more worried about protecting his image than actually admitting he was wrong.

“So much for rough play.”

She laughed bitterly before continuing.

“I forgave you a long time ago, Mike. But if this meeting is about us getting back together, then forget it. My future is already settled.”

Mike quickly pulled her closer and grabbed both her hands.

“You cannot mean that,” he whispered desperately. “I refuse to believe you can just forget everything we shared. We made plans together, Nike. How can you suddenly talk about a future without me in it?”

“Are you serious right now? Wake up, Mike. The world does not revolve around you.”

Nike yanked her hands free and stormed out of the auditorium, no longer caring whether people stared or not.

It was not like this would be the first time people gossiped about her, and she doubted it would be the last.

If any of them wanted Pastor Mike that badly, they were free to have him.

Outside the auditorium, Funso immediately noticed Nike storming out without looking back. She had been waiting outside for the meeting to end so they could head back to the hostel together.

Nike did not even acknowledge her presence. Clearly, the meeting had gone badly.

“Nike! Nike!! Nike!!!”

Funso shouted as she hurried after her.

“Wait now! You know I am wearing heels. Nike!”

“What is it?”

Nike turned around sharply, frustration obvious in her voice.

“Wow.”

Funso raised both hands dramatically and took a step back.

“What has our beloved Pastor Mike done again?”

Instead of replying, Nike burst into tears as they slowly began walking toward the bus stop to get a bike back to the hostel.

Sadly, this was becoming normal anytime she had a meeting with Pastor Mike. She had given two years of her life to him, yet looking back now, it felt like she had been blind all along.

Not only was he involved in inappropriate relationships with church members, he also struggled with pornography. Some of the things she later heard from a former fellowship member finally opened her eyes to how much she had ignored his obvious flaws.

Funso moved closer and wrapped an arm around her friend.

“You cannot seriously be crying over that guy again. Babe please, you know he does not deserve any version of your tears, whether crocodile or original. Just wipe your face and tell me the latest episode of Pastor Mike’s drama.”

She said it playfully, trying to make Nike laugh.

Nike sniffed loudly before laughing through her tears.

“You are not serious, Funso.”

“You cannot have me any other way, baby.”

Nike recounted everything that happened while Funso listened quietly. But from the expression on her face and the way her fists kept clenching, she clearly looked ready to fight Mike herself if he appeared nearby.

Funso shook her head.

“I have always said it. Just because a man flows in spiritual gifts does not mean he is spiritually mature. That guy seriously needs help. In fact, being a fellowship pastor has only entered his head. He thinks quoting scriptures automatically makes him spiritual. Honestly, I pray he gets help before it is too late because that guy is a walking time bomb.”

Nike smiled sadly as she wiped the remaining tears from her face.

“I just want him to leave me alone. I am tired of the constant insults. He always finds a way to pick on me during executives’ meetings, and I still have to be careful how I respond because he is the pastor.”

Funso stretched out her hand and helped Nike across a large gutter.

“Babe, obviously you are the more mature person here. No matter what happens, you cannot disrespect authority. Even though I hate what he is doing to you, he is still our pastor. Just avoid unnecessary confrontation with him for now. And if it gets worse, report him to someone higher up, maybe the fellowship patron.”

She paused a little and smiled mischievously. “Honestly, he is just acting out because he cannot handle rejection. Deep down, the guy still believes he should be the one marrying you.”

“If I ever decide to get married, it will be to a man who loves God more than himself.”

“*Na so!*” Funso coughed dramatically and cleared her throat mischievously.

“What? Why are you coughing like that?”

Funso cleared her throat again. “*Hmmph...* What about Ree Dee?”

Nike narrowed her eyes at her friend. “What about Ree Dee?”

“You know exactly what I mean.” Funso nudged her shoulder lightly while whistling teasingly.

Nike shook her head immediately. She had already told Funso about her encounters with Gboyega, and in typical Funso fashion, her friend had already started building a full blown love story in her head.

“He is not even my friend. More like an acquaintance. And you seriously do not think I would date Ree Dee?”

“Why not?” Funso practically screeched.

“Duh, because he is practically a stranger and he is Ree Dee. Though, point of correction, he actually prefers being called Gboyega.”

Immediately, she remembered the irritation on his face the last time she called him Ree Dee. “*My name is not Ree Dee*,” he had snapped angrily.

Funso smirked immediately, “Ohh, so you people are already on a first name basis now? And from what I heard, the guy is now born again o.”

Nike turned sharply as they stopped at the bike junction.

“*Na so!* Born again indeed. *All na wash*, Funso!”

Funso glanced across the T junction and immediately spotted Ree Dee opposite Alima’s Supermarket, walking toward his car with a few paper bags in hand.

Today suddenly became interesting.

Grinning widely, she pointed across the road.

“Talking about an angel, is that not Ree Dee over there?”

Without waiting for Nike’s response, Funso immediately started waving dramatically.

“Ree Dee! Ree Dee!!”

Nike looked across the road and saw Gboyega beside his car dressed in a navy blue sweatshirt and trousers.

She slapped Funso’s arm lightly as her friend kept waving at him even after he entered his car. “Can you stop embarrassing your ancestors? He cannot even hear you.”

Gboyega suddenly began driving toward them.

Funso smirked triumphantly at Nike. “You were saying?”

Nike watched his car pull out of the parking space and head toward them. Suddenly nervous, she tried dragging Funso away before he arrived.

“Babe, let us just take a bike and go home. I honestly do not understand your obsession with this guy.”

“Is it your obsession?” Funso adjusted herself proudly and looked at Nike. “You are free to take the bike home if you want. But as for me and my beautiful self, we are getting into a well air-conditioned car this afternoon.”

Nike grabbed her arm again desperately. “I really do not think this is a good idea...”

“Hello ladies.”

Gboyega called out casually as he parked beside them.

"You are the Lion and the Lamb, the Word of the Father, forever You would be the same," Gboyega sang softly as he opened the back seat of his car to drop the groceries he bought from Alima's Supermarket.

Hearing his name from across the road, he looked up and spotted Nike and her friend standing at the other side, probably waiting for a bike.

Wonderful. This was the exact lady he had been trying to avoid.

He had met people like her before. The overly rigid, self righteous type who believed people could never truly change. To them, a former Saul would always remain Saul.

He smiled ruefully as Nike's friend kept shouting his old nickname across the road like a town crier.

He noticed Nike trying to stop her friend, but against his better judgment, he still decided to drive toward them.

Driving off without acknowledging them would honestly feel rude. Still, why exactly did he even care?

As he got to the T junction, he parked beside them and stepped out.

He noticed Nike trying to drag her friend away.

So she really did not want to see him. He smirked slightly. Too bad. He was already here now.

"Hello ladies." Gboyega greeted them with one of his usual charming smiles.

Funso immediately escaped Nike's grip and hurried toward Gboyega like they were long lost friends reunited after years apart.

Nike simply looked away in irritation.

"Gboyega, good afternoon. How was the service?"

"Good afternoon Miss..." He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her name.

"...Funso." She stretched out her hand excitedly. "I am Nike's best friend. I have heard so much about you."

Funso gushed like an excited secondary school girl.

Nike whipped her head toward Funso immediately. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Is he not the one that helped you with your assignment?" Funso asked innocently. "And I never said everything I heard came from you, so stop being defensive."

Gboyega looked between both ladies, struggling not to smile as Nike tried regaining her composure while carefully avoiding his eyes.

She finally turned awkwardly toward Gboyega and properly took in his appearance. Well tailored 3-piece suit!

Honestly, how could someone look this fine just for Sunday service? The man looked like he had stepped out of a GQ magazine photoshoot instead of church.

“Good afternoon, Mr Gboyega. How are you, and how was the service?” she asked politely.

“Good afternoon, Miss Nike.” Gboyega deliberately copied her formal tone while holding her gaze. “I am fine, and service was great.”

“Oh, that is great. We should not keep you standing here in the sun. Babe, let’s go.” She tried dragging away a now pouting Funso.

“I can drop both of you if you do not mind,” he offered casually.

Nike immediately shook her head. “We would not want to bother you. We will just...”

“...It is really not a bother,” Gboyega interrupted smoothly. “I am actually going to drop something off for Tony, so I can easily drop you ladies after.”

“You see? It is already his route. Madam, let’s go.” Funso hurried toward the car before Nike could protest again.

Nike reluctantly followed behind her.

Gboyega opened the door for them before getting into the driver’s seat and driving off.

CHAPTER FIVE

MONDAY morning came with its usual hustle and bustle as students rushed in and out of hostels preparing for lectures.

Nike had six classes that day with only one free hour in between. She hurriedly packed her books and headed toward Funso and Anna's hostel block to call them.

Standing at the entrance of the hostel block, Nike shouted,

"Funso! Anna!! Hurry up, we have barely twenty five minutes to get to class."

Funso rushed outside almost immediately. "Nike, *abeg* you people should go ahead. I will meet you in class, just help me keep a seat." Without waiting for a response, she dashed off again.

A few minutes later, Anna stepped outside while stuffing books into her handbag.

"Where is Funso?"

"She just left now. She did not say where she was going, but I think she went to collect her assignment from Shay."

Anna shook her head like she wanted to complain, but Nike immediately waved her off.

"Please Anna, let's just go."

Nike walked briskly while Anna struggled to keep up with her long strides.

Once they stepped out of the hostel area, Anna finally decided to bring up the issue that had kept her awake half the night. Pastor Mike had already shared his concerns with her, and after what she saw yesterday, Anna felt she needed to caution her friend before things got worse.

"Nike, there is something I want us to talk about."

"About what?"

Anna tried to tread carefully so Nike would not immediately become defensive. Relationship conversations were always tricky with her.

"Do you remember the scripture that says, '*Be not deceived, evil communication corrupts good manners,*' and the one about not being *unequally yoked with unbelievers*?"

Nike nodded immediately. Those scriptures were common knowledge among fellowship members.

"Yes. First Corinthians 15:33 and Second Corinthians 6:14."

"Do you actually understand what those scriptures mean, especially when it comes to relationships, marriage, and even friendships?" Anna watched her closely for a reaction.

"Yes Anna, I do. Please just say what you want to say." Nike's impatience was already showing. She honestly had no time for riddles that morning, especially when they were already running late.

Anna stopped walking briefly and looked directly at Nike. "Are you even a Christian at all?"

Nike stopped walking completely and stared at her in disbelief. "What kind of question is that?"

Anna immediately realized she had spoken more harshly than she intended. Watching Nike's face redden, she softened slightly. Trying to calm the tension, she gently pulled Nike along again. "If you are, then just answer yes."

"You know I am." Nike snapped immediately.

"Then your recent behavior is confusing me, because I honestly do not understand what a Christian lady is doing in the company of an unbeliever." Anna's tone turned firm again.

Nike frowned deeply. "Please, which unbeliever are you talking about again?"

Anna decided there was no point beating around the bush anymore before they got to class. After all, she believed she was only telling Nike the truth.

"Pastor Mike and I were standing near the hostel library yesterday when Ree Dee dropped you and Funso. If it was only Funso, I might have understood. But Nike, you should honestly know better. That guy is an unbeliever, and a Christian lady should not be found moving around with someone like him."

Nike groaned inwardly the moment Pastor Mike's name entered the conversation again, but she forced herself to stay calm.

"Ree Dee, or better still Gboyega, is not an unbeliever."

Anna shook her head stubbornly. "Ree Dee is nothing but a sneaky chameleon trying to get between your legs."

Speaking very slowly, she continued. "Everybody on campus knows about Ree Dee's past. His best friend released different sex tapes back in their first year. Most of his close friends are cultists or fraud boys. The guy practically sleeps with anything in a skirt and has no regard for women. He is not a believer."

Nike tried processing everything Anna was saying while still defending the version of Gboyega she had recently encountered. It was not like she had never heard some of those stories herself. But Gboyega said he was now a Christian... right?

"And I am glad you used the word 'past,' Anna. Let us not forget we all had a past before receiving Christ."

Anna stared at Nike in disbelief. To her, it already sounded like Nike was slowly getting deceived like everyone else who believed Ree Dee had changed.

"Nike, you are already drifting from the right path. Even Pastor Mike said he has noticed changes in you and he is worried. He even heard that Ree Dee once made a bet with his friends that he would sleep with five Christian sisters before graduation. That kind of man has no..."

Nike stopped abruptly and cut her off angrily. "...Please spare me all this, *Pastor Mike said.*' You people should keep the hypocrisy to yourselves. I took one ride home with Funso present, not a marriage proposal."

With that, Nike stormed off angrily, leaving Anna standing there stunned by the outburst.

After her classes, Nike walked briskly toward the place students called “The Platform.”

The place had been converted into a prayer ground where students could pray, study scriptures, and meditate without needing to go all the way to the fellowship arenas located off the main campus site.

Even though the place was rarely empty, there was still a strange quietness she always found there. She walked toward her usual spot and sat quietly on the pavement.

She was still deeply unsettled by the argument she had with Anna earlier that morning. If it had been anybody else questioning her about Gboyega, she honestly would not have cared. But Anna had been her friend for years, and that made her words harder to ignore.

As if that was not enough, her mother had called earlier to explain that she would not be able to send money that month because salaries had still not been paid.

Calling her father was not even an option. The man was retired, and his pension barely covered feeding and tithe at home.

As she sat there quietly, a scripture suddenly came to mind, “*Be anxious for nothing, but through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known unto God.*”

She stood up immediately and began to pray softly.

“Lord, I thank You because You are my source and my provider. You shall supply all my needs according to Your riches in glory. Therefore, I, Adenike Kupoluyi, do not lack. I abound in sufficiency. Provision is made available for me. I receive favor before God and before men.

She paused and continued, “Concerning the issues surrounding Gboyega, every emotion, thought, and feeling is brought into subjection and obedience to Christ. The Lord delivers me from strange children whose mouths speak vanity and whose right hand is a hand of falsehood.”

After praying, Nike picked up her bag, but another thought suddenly crept into her mind.

What if Gboyega was actually in her life for a reason? What if God truly wanted to use him, just like Cornelius or Saul?

Nike waved the thought away unconsciously like she was physically pushing it aside. “*Abegi.* Of all people God would use.”

“Denike!”

A voice called from behind her. Nike turned immediately toward the sound.

Only one person called her that way. Her distant cousin.

She had barely seen him lately ever since he became the Evangelical Secretary of the Joint Christian Fellowship in the university.

Nike spotted the owner of the voice and smiled warmly as she walked toward the light skinned young man standing beside the large tree at the center of the Platform. He was dressed in a blue Ankara shirt and black trousers.

Nike laughed softly.

“If it is not the one and only Babatunde Smith. So you finally remembered your baby cousin exists? What should I do to you, Pastor Babs?”

The moment she got to him, he pulled her into a tight hug.

“I am sorry, Nike. I know I have not been checking on you the way I should, but you know how mission work can be. At this point, I barely even have enough time for academics. We are always moving from one outreach to another.

“Hope it is not too stressful?” Nike asked eagerly. She genuinely loved hearing stories about evangelism and mission work.

She had already decided that after the fellowship’s handing over service, she wanted to fully commit herself to mission work.

Babs smiled and shook his head.

“Not at all. Honestly, seeing lives transformed during missions refreshes us more than anything else. One of these days, you should come along with us. I know you would be a great help during field missions.”

Nike would have loved to join the university evangelical unit fully, but as the Head Usher in her fellowship, she felt tied down by responsibilities.

“You know how much I love mission work, but I cannot just abandon my responsibilities in the fellowship. I will still participate whenever fellowship activities are not clashing with it. Then after the executives hand-over, I can fully commit.”

Babs noticed the conflict written all over her face and immediately tried to reassure her.

“You can always ask the pastor for permission once in a while. Pastor Alfred used to allow me to participate occasionally before I became JUF’s Evangelical Secretary.”

Nike sighed heavily.

“Have you forgotten that Pastor Mike is now the fellowship pastor and not Pastor Alfred? Even on days when I do everything right, he still finds a way to insult me in front of the executives. It is just not possible.”

Babs nodded slowly in understanding. Her reluctance suddenly made complete sense to him.

He had known Mike long before he became the fellowship pastor. Back then, he had even warned Nike about him, but she had been too in love to listen.

He led her toward a quieter corner where they both sat down. Hearing the pain behind her words made him feel even guiltier for staying away so long.

“I should have checked on you sooner. Honestly, I forgot how difficult things have been with Pastor Mike. I am sorry.”

He apologized quietly while Nike struggled to stop herself from crying again.

“Every chance he gets, he throws one snide comment or another at me. And it is not even only him. I also have immature members acting like I committed a crime by leaving Pastor Mike. But how do I start telling people that I caught him kissing and fondling another member? Or that he constantly pressured me for sex?”

Her voice broke into sobs.

“Denike, calm down. I know this is painful, but trials strengthen us.”

Pulling into a tight hug. “Some of us already know the kind of person Pastor Mike is, and we keep praying for him. You should too. You should honestly thank God you discovered all this before marriage. The fact that you saw who he truly was and still found the strength to walk away is already a testimony. Not many women would.”

When her tears finally reduced, he gently wiped her face with his handkerchief before continuing.

“The fact that you are not going around spreading gossip already shows maturity. Still, do not stop praying for him. He is still part of the body of Christ. I believe God will deal with his heart eventually because we are all in different character classes with God.”

Looking at her more closely. “At least your friends have been standing by you through all this, right?”

Nike slowly shook her head and began telling him everything that had happened since the relationship ended.

At first, the story came out in broken pieces. But as she noticed Babs’ shock was directed more at Pastor Mike, Anna, and the fellowship members than at her, the words began flowing easier.

Babs pulled her into another hug, whispering comforting words while she cried quietly against him.

Eventually, she also told him about Gboyega and Anna’s harsh criticisms concerning him.

Silence settled between them for a while as Babs processed everything she had said. Beside him, Nike fidgeted nervously with the handkerchief in her hands. She already knew he would not judge her, but she still desperately wanted to hear his opinion about Gboyega.

Gboyega’s conversion had become a major discussion among Christians on campus. While many still doubted him, a few genuinely believed he had changed.

After a long pause, Babs finally looked up with a small smile. Though the information surprised him, something about Nike’s account gave him peace. Gboyega had been his friend for almost a year, and each time he saw the once notorious campus playboy genuinely living for Christ, he silently thanked God.

“I know Adegboyega Hilma Benson quite well. He is actually a good guy. He joins us for missions often and even supports us financially. He gave his life to Christ two years ago, and since then he has been genuinely on fire for God. The guy is disciplined too and surprisingly level headed.”

Holding Nike’s hands gently, he looked at her seriously.

“Do not join people in condemning him. Otherwise, you would be behaving like Peter when he called unclean what God had already cleansed. What God has cleansed, you cannot call common.”

Nike sighed quietly in relief. Finally, someone else was confirming what she already felt God had been telling her about Gboyega.

“I would never criticize him now. I did before, but after the few encounters I have had with him, I honestly believe he is a Christian.”

“So... is he asking you out?”

“No.” She shook her head quickly for emphasis.

Babs wanted to tease her further, but the stubborn look on her face made him let the matter rest. If God truly had a bigger purpose involving both of them, then He would reveal it in His own time.

“So what exactly is the problem then? You cannot keep living your life based on people’s opinions. Sometimes I pray for the body of Christ honestly. We pray for armed robbers and prostitutes to be saved, yet when they actually change, we still refuse to accept them.”

He grabbed her hand playfully and pulled her up.

“Come, let us go and find something good to eat. All these serious discussions have made me seriously hungry. At least let me spoil my baby cousin a little today.”

Nike followed him with a lighter heart.

“Thank you. Honestly, I was already wondering what I would even eat tonight.”

“I will try to be more available. But even if I forget to call, make sure you reach out whenever something is bothering you.

Pulling out his wallet. “Take this. I already know federal workers have not been paid, so I figured Aunty would not have sent money.”

Nike collected the money gratefully and hugged him tightly. “Thank you Pastor Babs.”

Babs groaned dramatically and held her at arm’s length.

“Enough of this ‘*Pastor Babs*’ matter. I am just Babs to you. Now, let us go and find food before the worms in your stomach start protesting.”

Nike laughed and hit him lightly on the shoulder as they both walked out of the Platform together.

Gboyega sat with his friends Chidi and Femi, on the balcony of his house, enjoying the cool evening breeze. His parents had built the house a few years before he gained admission into Oregon University. The mansion was one of the most admired properties in Oregon. It had an indoor swimming pool, a game room, a spa, and its own service staff.

His father handed him the keys to the house the moment he gained admission into Oregon on scholarship. He had emerged as the best student during the entrance examinations and had maintained that standard ever since.

Topping his class had never really been a struggle, even though it completely contradicted the usual rich kid stereotype people expected. Somehow, his thoughts drifted back to Nike again.

He had not seen her since the day he dropped her and her friend at the hostel three weeks ago. Not that he had been counting or anything, but there was just something about her that stayed in his mind longer than it should.

He smiled to himself as he remembered how reluctant she had been to enter his car, like he was planning to kidnap her in broad daylight. That girl was honestly too stubborn for her own good.

“Gboyega, you hear *wetin* Femi talk?” Chidi suddenly cut into his thoughts.

“What did he say?”

Gboyega looked between both of them as they stared at him suspiciously.

“Who exactly were you smiling at just now?” Femi, the smallest among the three, asked suspiciously.

“Nobody.” Gboyega answered quickly, hoping they would finally drop the matter.

Femi ignored him completely.

“If *na woman dey make* you smile like that, just tell us so we can join you in prayers.”

“It is none of your business. I can pray for myself, thank you very much.”

Chidi immediately sensed Gboyega’s discomfort and knew a woman was somehow involved. They had been close friends for over a year, and there were barely any secrets among them.

“But honestly, it would not hurt if we joined you in prayers now. What are friends for?”

“Guys, there is nobody. Besides, all of you already know I am not interested in any relationship right now. I just want to focus on my goals for now. When the time is right, the right woman will come.” Gboyega said carefully.

Femi shook his head immediately. “And why exactly is this not the right time, Gboyega? And what are these goals *sef*? At the end of the day, God’s plan is still greater than whatever plans you have.”

“I have already applied to schools in Canada for my MBA. Does it make sense to start something I cannot properly commit to? I do not even know when marriage is happening for me.

For now, I just want to focus on God, school, and my future plans. There is honestly no space for any woman right now.”

“But what happens if you meet someone you genuinely like now?” Chidi asked.

Nike’s face flashed briefly through his mind again, but he immediately pushed the thought aside.

“Guys, if God is truly involved, then the woman will wait till I finish my MBA. I am not running away from marriage.”

Femi laughed as he poured the fruit juice on the stool into his cup. “You are only thinking from your own angle, Gboyega. If it is truly God, He will tell you what to do.”

Gboyega stood up, picked up his phones and car keys from the stool, then slipped them into his pocket.

Chidi looked up from his phone. “Where are you off to?”

“I need to see the Pastor before he travels to Abeokuta this evening. Will you guys still be here when I get back?”

They both nodded while he turned toward the staircase.

Chidi glanced at his wristwatch and called after him. “Come back early. Remember we still have that match by seven.”

“Relax, I will be back before then.”

CHAPTER SIX

On Saturday evening, Nike lay on her bed reading the March edition of *Every Woman*, a magazine published monthly by All Believers Fellowship. Her roommate always gave her a copy, and she genuinely enjoyed every edition.

Her phone rang. When she checked the screen, it was Anna calling.

"Hello," she said as she picked up the call.

"Where are you?" Anna asked impatiently.

"In the hostel," Nike replied, closing the magazine properly now that Anna sounded agitated.

"Are you there? I need your help. If you are free, can you follow me somewhere?"

Nike groaned inwardly. She had planned to rest today. "Where exactly?"

"You know we are having a Sisters' Conference in two months, and Pastor Vanessa Adeoye of Rhema Assembly International is the guest minister.

"Why can't you go with Thelma? She is the assistant sisters' coordinator."

"Thelma is not around. She travelled home urgently yesterday. Please Nike, I really don't want to go alone."

Nike sighed and got off the bed. She smoothened the rough patches on her bedsheet and walked toward her wardrobe to change, still holding the phone to her ear.

"Anna, I am already picking my clothes. I will be with you soon." The call ended and she quickly dressed up, waved at her roommates, and left the room.

When she got to the student union building, she saw Anna sitting under a palm tree. She walked up to Anna, and after exchanging pleasantries, they headed for Pastor Vanessa's house.

They arrived at a beautiful duplex in Winnows Estate, Oregon. Anna knocked on the gate, and the loud barking of dogs immediately sent a chill down Nike's spine.

She was terrified of dogs. If she had known there were dogs in the compound, she might not have followed Anna at all. The gate opened shortly after, and a young man ushered them inside.

Nike remained outside briefly, trying to locate where exactly the barking was coming from.

"Good afternoon... please where are the dogs?"

The young man tried hard not to laugh at her obvious fear. "Afternoon. Don't be afraid, I already locked them inside their cage."

Nike smiled in gratitude at the young man and walked inside. "Thank you very much, Mr..."

"...Sunday." He supplied.

Anna, who had been watching the entire drama while waiting for Nike to enter, looked at Sunday. "Alright then, let us go, Nike." Anna said, pulling her along.

Nike kept glancing nervously toward the cage where the dogs were locked as they walked in. There were three dogs in the cage and they were very large. The dogs barked ferociously, rattling the cage violently. She quickened her steps and ensured she was not left behind.

Sunday pushed the entrance door open, and the two ladies hurried inside before shutting it quickly behind them. Cool air immediately washed over them as they stepped into the house.

A middle-aged woman sat facing the television near the entrance. She seemed too focused on whatever she was watching to notice them enter.

Sunday coughed lightly to get her attention.

“Ma, the visitors have arrived.”

The woman looked up in surprise, clearly startled to find three pairs of eyes fixed on her.

“Oh my dears, you are welcome o.”

“Good afternoon ma,” they both chorused, curtsying respectfully.

“Thank you so much for creating time out of your busy schedule to see us,” Anna continued politely.

“That is no problem at all. Saturdays are usually less busy for me. Please sit down.”

Then she pointed toward Anna after both ladies had settled down.

“You must be Anna Omoruyi, the sisters’ coordinator of the Great Cornerstone Fellowship.”

“Yes ma,” Anna replied.

Pastor Vanessa turned to Nike. “And what is your name dear?”

Nike smiled shyly.

“I am Adenike Kupoluyi ma.”

“Are you also an executive in the fellowship?”

“Yes ma. I am the head usher and the welfare secretary.”

“Okay, that is good. So what will you eat? I made *semovita* and *efo-riro* this afternoon.”

They both shook their heads immediately and Anna answered politely, “No ma, we are not eating anything.”

“Anna, speak for yourself o.” Pastor Vanessa chided playfully. “Nike, what about you? The food was just made.”

“No ma, I am okay as well.”

“You are following your sisters’ coordinator decision, I am sure it has been a while since you ate proper homemade food. Just try some.”

Nike smiled warmly at her. “We are okay ma, thank you.”

“Poju! Poju!” Pastor Vanessa called, looking toward one of the inner doors.

A young lady rushed out immediately. “Ma?”

“Help me bring two bottles of water, one pack of yogurt, and two glass cups please.”

“Okay ma.”

She hurried back inside.

Anna watched the young lady disappear inside before turning back to Pastor Vanessa. “Ma, please hope all this is not for us?”

“Are you fasting?”

For one brief moment, Anna considered saying yes.

However, she knew she could not lie about something like that. Besides, something in Pastor Vanessa’s demeanor made it obvious she already knew they were simply trying to be polite.

She sighed, folded her hands, and leaned back reluctantly.

“No.”

“Then it is definitely for you.” Pastor Vanessa concluded, waving off their concern before turning back to Anna.

Anna sat up straighter and immediately began discussing the program.

She brought out the invitation letter while speaking. Pastor Vanessa collected it and glanced through it briefly before looking back up at Anna.

While they discussed the conference, Nike quietly surveyed the living room. The duplex was tastefully furnished with modern art pieces and elegant furniture. Pictures of Pastor Vanessa and her husband hung in different corners of the living room. From the pictures, they appeared to have three beautiful children, two boys and a little girl.

Poju returned shortly after with the bottles of water, the pack of yogurt, and the glass cups. After thanking her, Pastor Vanessa stood up, collected the tray from Poju, and placed it before the two ladies.

Just as Poju turned to leave, Pastor Vanessa called her back.

“Poju, please help me pack the *semovita* and *efo-riro* with two plastic bottles of Coke in separate takeaway packs. Put everything inside one of those gift bags and add four rolls of tomato paste.”

“Should I bring it here when I am done?”

“No, just leave it in the kitchen.”

Poju left, and Pastor Vanessa turned back to Anna and continued the conversation.

This time, Nike quietly sipped her drink while listening to the conversation.

The sound of children rushing down the stairs interrupted the discussion, and all three women turned toward the noise.

“Uncle Gboyega, carry me too! It is only Phoebe you have been carrying since.”

That is because Phoebe is my one and only baby. You boys are already big men.” another mature voice replied, mimicking the child dramatically.

Nike froze instantly. That voice could not belong to anyone else except the recent bane of her prayers.

Moments later, four people appeared in the living room and true to her suspicion, it was Gboyega with Pastor Vanessa's children.

He quickly masked his surprise with a polite smile and nodded in greeting. The younger boy immediately climbed into Pastor Vanessa's lap.

"Mommy, Uncle Gboyega refused to carry me. He has only been carrying Phoebe."

"Don't mind him. At least Mommy is carrying you now and not Phoebe. You are Mommy's baby."

Looking at the older boy, "David, have all of you finished your assignments?"

The boy fidgeted awkwardly and looked at her sheepishly. "Almost, Mommy."

"I told you not to come downstairs until you finish your assignments."

David held tightly to Gboyega's hand and looked at his mother with pleading eyes.

"Uncle Gboyega told us to see him off."

He pouted dramatically while explaining himself.

Gboyega finally took his eyes off Nike and smiled mischievously at Pastor Vanessa. "My Pastor Mrs., I was the one who told them to see me off o."

Pastor Vanessa gently lowered the smaller boy from her lap. "That smile, Gboyega, will not get them out of their assignments. David, take Paul and Phoebe upstairs. I will join you very soon."

David clung stubbornly to Gboyega's hand and protested.

"...You were saying?"

David sighed dramatically the moment he saw the look on his mother's face. "Alright Mommy. Paul, Phoebe, let's go." David collected his sister from Gboyega and reluctantly dragged Paul upstairs.

"When you finish your assignments and behave yourselves, Mommy will give you the ice cream I brought this afternoon." Gboyega called after them.

Pastor Vanessa looked at Gboyega and tried unsuccessfully to frown at him. "Adegboyega!"

Gboyega raised both hands in surrender. "I am sorry. I just don't like seeing my babies heartbroken."

Pastor Vanessa shook her head fondly. "You are ridiculous. Anyway, has Pastor approved the concert proposal?"

"Yes," he replied. "The church board agreed to release the full three million naira."

"Congratulations. I am sure the choir will be happy."

"Definitely. Minister Segun and I will announce it during rehearsal tomorrow."

Pastor Vanessa turned back to Anna and Nike, who had been looking at Gboyega all along. "Sorry ladies, let me get back to you, it is already getting late."

Gboyega checked his wristwatch. It was quarter past six and the football match was starting by seven. "Ma, let me be on my way."

“Wait Gboyega, I want you to help me drop these ladies on campus. I will soon be done with them.”

Gboyega nodded. He still had forty-five minutes before the match would begin.

However, Nike was not comfortable with the arrangement. “Ma, there would be no need for him to wait.”

“Don’t worry yourself, Nike,” Pastor Vanessa said as she turned back to Anna to conclude their discussion. “I want you to think about all I have said and ensure you call to remind me about the program once in a while, so I would not have any other engagement. Though I would put it in my diary now, it would still be good if you call once or twice to pass any information.”

“Alright ma.”

“Wait for me.” Pastor Vanessa got up and went into the kitchen to get the gift bags prepared earlier by Poju. She handed them to Anna immediately she got back. “So that would be all ladies. Those items inside those bags are for both of you.”

They both got up and Anna smiled graciously at her. “Thank you very much ma.”

“We are so grateful for the hospitality and love ma,” Nike added as they were about to leave.

Pastor Vanessa smiled back at them before turning to Gboyega, who was lounging on a seat at the entrance. “So Gboyega, help me drop Miss Anna and Miss Adenike at their hostels. They are both executives in the Great Cornerstone Fellowship.”

Gboyega nodded in understanding. “I know the two of them, though I have only been privileged to meet Miss Adenike.”

Pastor Vanessa looked between them in surprise. “So Nike, you know our Minister Gboyega?”

“Is he a minister?” Anna inquired immediately, unable to hide the shock in her voice.

Pastor Vanessa looked at Anna and smiled. “Yes, he is the Sound Director, Assistant Music Minister in our church, and also the head of the youths’ evangelism unit.”

Nike was shocked as well. She turned to Gboyega and found him staring at her.

Gboyega continued staring at Nike, gauging her reaction. The look on her face was more disbelief than anything else. He wanted to laugh at her for being quick to judge, but he knew his past had made her react rashly towards him.

Pastor Vanessa looked between the two as they stole glances at each other beneath lowered lashes. She had noticed the way they kept looking at each other inside. There was definitely something going on between these two. She had never seen Gboyega show any form of interest in any lady since he started attending their church, even when women openly threw themselves at him. This was a new development and, smiling inwardly, she knew she needed to pray for them.

“Nike and Anna, are you in any relationship?”

They smiled shyly and shook their heads.

Pastor Vanessa smiled and looked at Gboyega, who finally tore his eyes away from Nike and looked at her.

He immediately averted his eyes as though he was hiding something.

“Just concentrate on your personal relationship and service to God. Trust me, he that would come would come and not tarry. And as of today, you have both found a big sister in me, so come to me anytime.”

“Alright ma,” they chorused.

“Okay then, goodbye to you all.”

They all waved as Pastor Vanessa closed the door behind them. As they walked towards the gate and the dogs started barking, Nike moved backwards in fear.

Gboyega looked at her as she kept glancing around nervously. “Madam, don’t tell me you are scared of dogs?”

Nike, not bothering to answer his question, looked between Anna and Gboyega. “Please help me tell Sunday to lock them properly.”

“They are always in their cage, let us go.” He walked towards her and gently pulled her along towards the gate while Anna walked beside them.

“Adenike, you are a big girl. You should not be scared of dogs at this age,” Gboyega chided.

Nike hissed. “Please, would the dogs ask for my birth certificate before they bite me?”

That got Gboyega and Anna laughing as they all walked towards his car parked about two houses away. He greeted the gateman sitting in front of the house where he parked in another language, and then they all got in. Anna sat in front with him while Nike sat at the back.

Anna turned to Gboyega. “If you do not mind me asking, Mr Gboyega...”

Gboyega gave her a sideways glance as he buckled his seat belt and put the car in drive. “Please, just Gboyega.”

“Gboyega, what was the language you were speaking back there with that man?”

Gboyega drove out of the street. “Tapa. It is a language spoken by the Tapa people of Kwara State.”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “I know you are not from Tapa. I heard something about a South African descent and an Ogun State dynasty.”

He shook his head as he responded. “No, I am not from Tapa.”

Anna wanted to ask more questions but decided to try a different approach since he did not elaborate on his last answer. “How many languages do you speak?”

Gboyega reluctantly decided to indulge her curiosity. “I speak about eighteen. Nine Nigerian, nine non-Nigerian. About five are African and the rest are foreign.”

Anna gasped. “How is that possible?”

Gboyega maneuvered the car slowly as the evening traffic thickened around them. He wondered how he would answer Anna without sounding arrogant. "From childhood, we went on vacations to different places. My mother ensured we learnt the basics of those languages."

Nike, who had been listening to the whole conversation without contributing, muttered sarcastically, "Rich people and show off."

Gboyega looked at her through the rear view mirror while Anna looked back, silently cautioning Nike. He just could not get anything right with this girl.

This kind of information would have impressed other ladies, but not this one. Though he had not said it with the intention of impressing her or her friend.

He stopped at the traffic light close to the campus gate when it turned red and spoke to her through the rear view mirror.

"Madam Nike, I am not trying to sound cocky. It is just what it is. She asked me a question and I answered. That was just basic information anyone would have shared."

"Sorry, but I am not madam, Mr Citizen of the World." Nike quipped as she ignored Anna, who cautioned her again.

Gboyega smiled ruefully and retorted, "You are wrong dear. I am a child of God, a citizen of the state which is in heaven."

Nike said slowly, "If you say so."

"I do not just say so, I know so." Gboyega stated confidently just as the light turned green and he drove through the campus gate, waving at the security officials as they hailed him while he drove past.

As he drove towards their hostel, Anna asked Nike, "Would you please follow me to Pastor Mike to give him feedback?"

Anna knew that she would not disagree about their pastor in the presence of a third party. "You know my answer to that."

Anna sighed. "Please now, I would be there with you."

Nike said slowly, if not too slowly. "As if that has ever held him back. The answer is no, Anna. Please don't ask that of me."

Gboyega wondered who this Pastor was that made Nike so uncomfortable, but he knew he could not ask without sounding nosey as he pulled into their hostel parking lot.

Anna got down and waved at him.

"Thank you," Nike murmured as she looked at him through the rear view mirror.

They held each other's gaze for a few seconds before Gboyega smiled. "You are welcome, dear." Nike opened the car door and stepped out to stand beside Anna.

They waved at Gboyega, who waved back before driving out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER classes on Friday afternoon, Nike, Anna, and Funso headed back to the hostel, talking about their weekend plans. Halfway down the path, Funso glanced at her smartphone calendar and suddenly broke into a little dance, hopping from side to side.

Nike looked at her confused. "What has gotten you so excited?"

Funso threw both hands in the air.

"TGIF! Thank God it's Friday, ladies!"

A few students standing outside the Oceanic Bank Lecture Theatre turned to look as the trio walked past.

Anna frowned. "Anyone seeing you jubilating would think you're excited because you're hitting the club this weekend. It's just another weekend."

Nike snickered as they crossed to the other side of the road while Funso thought of a befitting comeback.

"It might be just another weekend for you oldies, but for this young girl," Funso pointed to herself, "I will definitely find somewhere to go."

Nike cocked her head to the side, taking a good look at Funso. "Where are you always going to *sef*? If I didn't know better, I would think you're going on a weekend getaway with a guy or something."

Funso smirked. "I would definitely find somewhere to go. Two weekends ago, I was at the dance-drama stage play performed at the Cultural Theatre. Last weekend, I had movie night with the ladies in my dance group after our night vigil. So yes, I am a Christian. That does not make me boring."

Nike clasped her hands together in a mock dramatic display.

"Please, pray tell us, where are you going this weekend, Miss Fun and Spontaneous?"

Funso's eyes widened in mock surprise as she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Didn't you hear that there's an all-night praise concert by Rhema Assembly International Choir? Kane Diggs and Lanre Olusola will be ministering."

Anna nodded in remembrance. "That is true. I saw Pastor Vanessa's profile picture on WhatsApp about the concert, but it is on the twenty-fourth of this month."

Funso sighed. "Did you not date your lecture notes today? Today is the twenty-fourth, oldies."

Nike didn't even know anything about the concert. She had a triangle lifestyle on campus: classes, fellowship, and her room. She barely even noticed anything else. Funso was the one who always told them the latest gist and updates.

Turning to Funso, she said, "But you cannot go as well. We have a prayer meeting."

"And I am going after the prayer meeting," Funso deadpanned.

Anna shook her head at Funso, who was now walking in front of them, and said loudly, “We have a meeting after the prayer meeting.”

Funso twirled around and gave a tight smile. “No, y’all have a meeting after the general prayer meeting. I am not an executive, so stop roping me into your activities.”

She turned around and resumed walking.

After a few minutes of walking in silence, Anna sighed and said sadly, “I would have loved to be there. According to the profile picture, this is the first praise concert held by the church. It is even taking place on campus at Oriental Event Centre. Lanre Olusola and Kane Diggs are coming.”

Nike knew she was not going. Even though a part of her would have loved to see Lanre Olusola and Kane Diggs minister, the program was being hosted by Rhema Assembly International, and she knew Gboyega would be there.

She finally had to admit to herself that she was attracted to him.

But her friends must not know about it, especially Anna. Otherwise, she would be regarded as one of those groupie girls who were after him because of what he had. Knowing that he was a genuine Christian and even an executive in his church did not help her wandering thoughts and emotions.

“That is great, but we cannot make it. Only Funso can go,” she said, trying to reason with Anna.

Funso frowned and looked back at them.

“Why can’t you come? The program is not until eleven p.m. It’s an all-night praise concert, so it would end in the wee hours of the morning.”

Anna’s face lit up immediately.

“Really? After the meeting, we would just come to the venue of the program.”

“I don’t know if I would be available.” Nike tried to excuse herself from their plans.

Sensing Nike’s tactic, Funso turned to her immediately.

“Madam, you are not doing anything. Just come along with Anna,” she stated.

“Don’t mind her, she is coming. Funso, just wait at the entrance. We will text you after the meeting so that we can all sit together.”

Anna’s conclusion effectively shut Nike up from saying anything else without raising suspicion.

When they finally got to the hostel gate, Funso stopped and looked back at her friends as they climbed up the porch to join her.

“Enough said about the concert. Please, who has food? I am hungry.”

Nike looked up and said, “I boiled rice this morning before leaving.”

“Did you make enough for the three of us?”

Funso clasped her hands together, silently praying that the answer would be yes.

"It would be enough for the three of us."

Funso hugged her and pecked her cheeks. "You are a lifesaver and the best girlfriend ever."

"Because of food?" Nike mocked.

"No, girl. You know I love you," she said cheekily.

"*Wash!*" Nike replied.

"Ah, you just trifle with my feelings. But it's okay, I have forgiven you."

Funso dabbed dramatically at her eyes, wiping away fake tears.

"You are just a drama queen. Just bring your laptop. We need to finish listening to that Pastor Nneoma Ola message we were listening to yesterday," Nike responded.

"Okay, let me get to my room then. I will buy all three of us zobo drinks to take with the rice. But Nike, start warming the rice," she warned as she left with Anna.

"I would, Food Monger!" Nike shouted at their retreating figures before turning towards her hostel block.

The choristers were doing the necessary last-minute rehearsals. They had stopped rehearsing the day before to preserve their voices. Gboyega walked in with the choir coordinator, Minister Segun, to speak with them. They had only thirty minutes before the concert started.

Minister Segun coughed lightly to gain their attention.

"I thank God for today. I also thank God for putting each and every one of you in this room. But tonight is not about our talent or the number of rehearsals we have had. Tonight is about the display of God's power. In light of that, I would like Minister Gboyega to lead us in prayer before the concert."

Gboyega stepped forward.

"I don't want us to exert ourselves while praying now. I just want us to pray fervently. Before tonight, words of prophecy, visions, and revelations have gone ahead of us. Tonight is all about God. Let none of us receive the glory tonight, but let all glory and honour be unto Him. First Peter chapter four verse eleven says that we should minister according to the ability God has given us."

Half of the hall was filled even before the service started. Students were strutting into the hall in large numbers. Many of them were directed to their seats, while a few ignored the ushers altogether.

After the prayer, the choristers walked to the podium while Gboyega stepped forward to collect the microphone from the senior pastor.

"Praise God!"

"Hallelujah!" the people shouted.

“I know a lot of people came here for different reasons. But tonight is all about Jesus and Him crucified. Some of you know the man I used to be, a chronic womanizer and drunkard. But you are not different from that man, even if you are morally upright, without Jesus. Tonight is an experience. Some come seeking a sign, others come to be entertained, but the time is now when true worshippers of God worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

After the admonition, he began singing.

“It is all because of You.

Jesus, it is all because of You.

It is all because of You.

It is all because of You.

Our God, my God,

My Redeemer,

Jesus, You are God!”

Somewhere else in the hall, Nike, Anna, and Funso lifted their hands alongside over two thousand worshippers.

It was amazing how students would troop out for worship concerts yet show little interest in attending church. Most people preferred worship concerts and drama nights. The need to draw people to church had even pushed some churches to include comedy segments in their services.

Nike had listened intently as Gboyega recounted his past without shame. His voice was sonorous and beautiful as he led the choir into Travis Greene's *The Hill*. Her respect and admiration for him skyrocketed as she watched him worship.

“Wow, I never knew Gboyega could sing like that. Omo, *see voice!*” Funso whispered loudly.

Nike smiled and lifted her hands higher as she joined everyone in singing.

Without a single doubt, he was a Christian who was not ashamed of the gospel.

She felt guilty for all the times she had ignored him and spoken harshly to him. He was mature, too, because if it were some of the other men she knew, they would have acted just as childish as she had. Part of her wanted to blame Anna for poisoning her heart against him, but she knew the fault lay more with her for judging him.

She looked sideways and saw Anna and Funso equally lost in worship, just like most people in the hall.

After the concert, the three friends held hands as they tried to make their way out of the hall. They trudged behind the sea of people streaming towards the exit.

Funso kept humming one of the new songs the choir had sung, while Anna kept shouting, “Please walk fast!” to those ahead of them.

The moment they stepped outside, the trio burst into the song Funso had been humming as though it had been planned beforehand. Laughing and pulling one another along, they sang as they passed groups of people standing outside the hall.

“But Nike, I did not know Gboyega could sing like that. So he is not just fine, brilliant, rich, and spiritual, but also has a good voice.” Funso gushed.

Nike laughed quietly as Funso continued fawning over Gboyega. She herself could not deny that he had a very good voice.

“Funso, good voice aside,” Anna chimed in, “let us not forget that he is worded. Did you see the number of people that stepped out after he shared the word to give their lives to Christ? Really, no one would have ever thought that man was a Christian.”

“Really, no one,” Nike agreed. “It is true that God uses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise.”

Funso listened as the two of them carried on about the story of how God had converted a cultist into a pastor, smiling to herself.

She knew her friend had been in denial about her feelings for Gboyega. Nike liked him, but for whatever religious reason, she had made up her mind not to be with him or even acknowledge his friendship. Even though Funso got to know Nike long after she got to know Anna, she knew when her friend was interested in someone, which was not a common occurrence.

During the concert, Nike looked at Gboyega like a child in an ice-cream store. The look had gone far beyond admiration.

She would not allow Nike to rest until she admitted that she liked Gboyega, but Anna must not be present or Nike would never admit to such a thing.

As much as she loved Anna, the pretence and hypocrisy in their conversations could not be hidden. Anna reminded her of those old Pentecostal deaconesses with thick glasses and judgmental eyes.

Funso laughed out loud as she imagined Anna in a long skirt and blouse, topped with a large hat and thick-rimmed glasses.

“What are you laughing about, Funso?” the subject of her laughter inquired.

“Nothing ooo, Mummy Anna,” Funso replied with a straight face, trying hard not to laugh.

Anna shook her head. Funso always acted weird, but she loved her all the same. She was good company, even though Anna tolerated most of her excesses because of Nike.

Checking the time and seeing that it was already two a.m., Anna turned back to Nike as they walked towards their hostel blocks.

"Nike, I will see you tomorrow. Please don't wake up late. Remember we have to be at Pastor Mike's house before ten a.m."

"Yes, ma'am," Nike replied churlishly.

"Don't *ma'am* me, madam," Anna responded sharply.

"Yes, Mama," Nike replied mockingly.

"You are just a case study," Anna said as she continued walking towards her block.

Nike looked at Funso when she made no attempt to go to her own room but kept following her instead.

"Are you sleeping in my room tonight?"

"Yup. I have a gist for you, and I don't want Anna to hear about it."

"You and these weird stories." Nike shook her head and continued walking. "Please, if it is any gossip story, I don't want to hear it. I need to sleep."

"Madam, it is not gossip, so just drop your religious antenna and stop pretending you don't want to hear what I have to say," Funso snapped.

Nike stopped walking and gaped at her retreating figure.

Funso never gossiped, but her harsh manner of speaking could annoy anyone. She claimed not to judge people, yet she was not one to back down from forcing her opinions on others.

Even though she genuinely preferred Funso's company to Anna's, Funso had a tendency to see right through her, a trait she did not find particularly endearing.

"*Shey you go come to the room?*" Funso called from the entrance of Nike's room.

"Stop shouting! My roommates are sleeping," Nike whispered harshly as she reached the door and unlocked it.

They entered the room, and Nike changed into her nightgown. She also gave Funso a bum-short and a loose top to sleep in.

"Nike, what are you guys going to do in Pastor Mike's house tomorrow?" Funso asked quietly as they settled down for the night.

"He asked us to come and help him with the questionnaire for his project topic."

"All the executives?"

"No, just Anna and I."

Funso snorted loudly and hissed.

"Scam alert! The guy just wants to worm his way back into your heart."

"And he is *jonzing*! It can never happen," Nike replied.

She pulled her blanket over and shared part of it with Funso to shield her from the cold. The night was chilly.

Funso hit her lightly on the shoulder and smiled.

“That is my girl. It is high time you got someone who would treat you with dignity and respect. Someone like Gboyega.”

She stared intently at Nike to make sure the message landed.

Nike rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to disagree, but Funso raised her hand to silence her.

“Do not roll your eyes at me, girlfriend. I know what you want to say, and I am also aware that you like him, so why not just quit the pretense? I am not saying you should date him, but why not let go of all your prejudices and just pray about it?”

Funso admonished as she looked Nike squarely in the eyes. She knew how to make anyone squirm in their seat if she wanted them to admit the truth. Sometimes her father called her a prosecuting counsel because of her habit of making people reluctantly admit things they would rather avoid.

Nike sighed.

“And who told you I have not been praying?”

Funso burst out laughing.

Nike immediately cautioned her to stop disturbing the room, and Funso quickly brought her hands to her lips, trying to stifle her laughter.

“So you have finally admitted that you like him?”

“Please, who wouldn’t? I know almost every girl on campus likes him, and I am even ashamed that I am attracted to him too. I have been praying about it, and I believe I will get over it.”

Nike responded convincingly, though she did not know whether she was trying to convince Funso or herself.

“And if you don’t get over it?”

Nike looked at her fiercely. “I must, Funso. There are thousands of ladies who would want him for themselves, especially now that he is a Christian. Besides, he does not like me like that.”

“But what is God saying?” Funso pressed further.

Nike shook her head violently, as though trying to physically push Funso’s words out of her mind.

“Madam, it is not about what God is saying right now. There is nothing between Gboyega and me.”

Funso stared at Nike in disbelief.

She knew Nike still had issues with the phrase *the will of God*, a phrase that had been widely used and misused. Yet there was nothing Christians did that was outside of God.

“Miss Adenike, we cannot leave out what God is saying. I am not saying Gboyega is the one and only man for you, but please pray about it. Ask God to help you let go of your prejudices. At least we have already established that he is a Christian.”

“I have heard you, Funso. Please let us sleep.”

“Okay. But I do not want you to use your past experiences with Pastor Mike to judge Gboyega. Just try to get to know him as your friend. Then who knows? You both might decide to take it further. Do not let Mike spoil your idea of what a good man should be. Good night.”

Funso turned her back and pulled the blanket over herself.

Long after Funso had fallen asleep, Nike remained awake.

Don't let Mike spoil your idea of what a good man should be.

Funso's words echoed in her mind.

Nike closed her eyes and found herself drifting back to the past.

She remembered how she met Mike during her pre-degree days when he was the choir director of the fellowship.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It all started when Nike passed the entrance examination for Oregon University's pre-degree programme. Her parents were elated that their first child was finally leaving home. After waiting at home for two years following her O-levels, they had agreed to let her sit for the pre-degree examination, even though it would cost them a great deal of money.

Mrs. Kupoluyi had taken out a bank loan to pay for her daughter's tuition and other expenses. The shame of having their first daughter sitting at home for so long had persuaded her to join her husband in financing Nike's pre-degree programme. If Nike successfully completed it, she would gain admission into the university the following year.

News of her admission soon spread, and in the days leading up to her departure for school, neighbours and fellow church members came to celebrate with her parents and see for themselves whether the news was true. Some brought gifts and food items, each offering advice and saying a prayer for her.

When Nike arrived at the pre-degree campus with her mother on the resumption day, she waited at the gate for her cousin, Babatunde. She had called him earlier, and he had promised to come with members of his fellowship to pick her up.

Mrs. Kupoluyi, who had accompanied her daughter, sat on a stone pavement while they waited for her nephew, who was studying Microbiology at the main campus of Oregon University. He had instructed them to wait at the bus stop and look out for the blue bus belonging to Great Cornerstone Fellowship.

Buses were everywhere, with students carrying placards bearing the names of their fellowships and eagerly offering assistance to new arrivals. Several groups had already approached Nike, and she might have gone with them if Babatunde had not promised to help her settle in. Besides, her mother preferred to hand Nike over to a familiar face before catching the night bus back to Ogbomosho in Oyo State.

Babs, as he was fondly called by his siblings and cousins, eventually arrived in the fellowship bus and helped Nike move into her hostel. She met several fellowship members, all of whom tried to make conversation with her. They called her cousin Oga Babs and spoke to him with noticeable respect. Being associated with him made her feel important.

Her mother soon took her leave, but not before reminding Nike to remember the family she came from and never forget the sacrifices it had taken to pay her fees. She delivered the warning in front of everyone, making Nike feel both grateful and slightly embarrassed.

After her mother left, a new figure joined the circle of fellowship members. The man was tall and well-built, reminding Nike of the male models she had seen on television. His arrival

immediately changed the atmosphere. The ladies gravitated towards him, while the men regarded him with admiration and respect.

Nike guessed he must be someone important, much like her cousin Babs, because almost everyone seemed eager to greet him as he addressed them. He was undeniably handsome, and he appeared fully aware of it, wearing an arrogant smirk as he soaked in the attention.

She looked around for her cousin but found him occupied with other newcomers like herself. Deciding not to disturb him, she returned to filling out her forms.

Then she sensed someone watching her.

Looking up, she found the stranger's eyes fixed on her with unwavering intensity. Instantly, she began preparing the response she would give if he approached her. Arrogant pretty boys usually did. If he thought she was one of those fresh students he could easily prey on, he was about to learn otherwise.

However, Mike, as she later got to know his name, did not approach her that day or in the days that followed whenever they met.

She joined the Great Cornerstone Fellowship, where she came to know him as "Oga Mike." He was the choir director and one of the most eligible bachelors in the fellowship. He was popular among the female members, who always seemed to have one tale or another to tell about Oga Mike.

Most times, he stared at her but never approached her.

She later learned from her cousin that Mike had been asking about her through him. The news elated her. She felt special knowing that a man desired by most of the ladies in the fellowship was interested in her.

At every meeting she knew Mike would attend, she made sure she looked her best, hoping that would be the day they would finally become closer.

She always left disappointed because Mike never approached her. Instead, he always seemed to be surrounded by different ladies after every service.

Being on the pre-degree campus did not help matters. She only got to see Mike during Sunday services and whenever he came for the pre-degree Bible study meetings. He was always quoting Bible verses and was deeply grounded in the Word whenever he contributed during discussions.

He was definitely every lady's fantasy. She knew he was interested in her.

She had caught him staring at her during services countless times, and he was always quick to support her opinions whenever she contributed during Bible study.

One day, during a discussion on submission, she stood and said,

"I believe submission, as used by Apostle Paul, was for the wife to her husband and not just to any man. Though the Bible requires us to submit to one another as believers."

Mike had immediately stood up and applauded her contribution.

“That is an interesting contribution and actually what was spoken of in Ephesians chapter five...”

Yet he still did not approach her throughout her pre-degree programme.

After passing her pre-degree examinations and gaining admission into Oregon University to study Business Management, Nike joined the ushering department of the fellowship alongside her only close friend from her pre-degree days, Anna.

The two of them committed themselves fully to serving in the fellowship.

It was during this period that Mike finally approached her.

One evening after service, he called her and asked her to wait behind.

She was thrilled. At last, she was going to have a conversation with *Oga* Mike.

What made it even better was that other female members were still hanging around after service. Some were waiting for friends, some were carrying out post-service duties, and others were simply lingering around, hoping one of the eligible brothers in the fellowship would approach them.

Nike excused herself from her friends and walked elegantly towards where Mike was standing.

Anna kept giggling and whispering,

“Walk fast. I am waiting to hear the gist.”

Nike and Mike exchanged greetings before stepping aside for a little privacy away from curious eyes.

Mike held her hand and greeted her cheerfully.

Nike's heart was pounding so loudly she was sure he could hear it.

She looked everywhere except directly at him.

“Sir, you said you wanted to see me.”

Her voice came out barely above a whisper.

Mike smiled knowingly.

Then he decided to get straight to the point.

“I have been observing you for a while to fully understand what God is saying. Considering the number of ladies I have come across, I wanted to be convinced that this was truly the Lord's doing.

“There is just something about you that draws me in. During the prayer meeting today, the Spirit of the Lord told me to tell you that if we miss this opportunity, we would both miss destiny and purpose.

“Some pastor friends of mine have also prayed about it with me and confirmed it.

“So, Miss Adenike, the Lord is telling me that you are my wife.”

“Oga Mike...” Nike began slowly.

“Just Mike. I cannot have my fiancée calling me Oga Mike.”

Mike cut in with a boyish smile and easy confidence.

Nike blushed and looked away as she tried to regain her composure.

Looking down, she finally said,

“Mike, I am honoured to be considered your wife, but can I give you my response tomorrow?”

Mike frowned.

Using his fingers, he gently lifted her chin so that she looked at him.

He had expected a more affirmative response.

Looking directly into her eyes, he said,

“Nike, it is not a consideration. It is God's will.

“I know you ladies like to play hard to get by delaying your response, but let us not delay our destiny and purpose together.

“I will give you until tomorrow. I believe that if you also hear from God, He will confirm it to you.”

Nike smiled gratefully.

She could have said yes immediately, but she did not want to sound cheap by accepting his proposal too quickly.

Nothing was going to stop her from saying yes.

He was everything a young Christian lady could want in a man.

She was determined to give him her answer the next day before another lady came between them or he lost interest.

“Alright, Mike. Where will I see you tomorrow?” she asked.

“My beloved Adenike, please come behind the platform around seven p.m. I should be done with rehearsal by then.”

Nike returned to Anna.

As they walked back to the hostel, she recounted everything that had happened.

Anna gushed over Mike's confidence.

“This must be God's plan.”

Nike felt even happier knowing her friend had arrived at the same conclusion.

Later, she called her cousin Babs and shared the news with him.

The two of them hardly kept secrets from each other.

Besides, as the fellowship's Evangelical Secretary, he would eventually find out anyway since all executive relationships were announced to the fellowship.

Babs was not enthusiastic about the news. He told her to pray and be sure before giving Mike an answer. He advised her not to give in to any pressure from him and to take time to know him properly first.

Nike ignored his warning.

The following day, she gave Mike her consent.

She had carried feelings for him for well over a year, and this proposal only confirmed to her that God was indeed a God of awesome wonders.

During the early days of their relationship, Nike was always impressed by the way Mike treated her. He always seemed to have ready-made answers to every question she asked, and their relationship was envied by many of the female members in the fellowship.

It was about three months into the relationship that Nike began to see another side of Mike.

He was always hanging around different ladies after service. Sometimes he stayed out late at night talking with them.

Oregon University was one of the safest schools around. Students could walk freely through every corner of the campus without fear. The school also enjoyed twenty-four-hour uninterrupted electricity.

It was no secret that many of the basic amenities enjoyed by the federal university were not provided by the government but by wealthy individuals whose children attended the institution. Because of this, some of Nike's friends who often attended night classes would occasionally spot Mike in different parts of campus with different ladies.

Whenever she questioned him about it, he always had an explanation.

According to him, the ladies needed help discussing difficult matters, and as an executive in the fellowship, he could not turn them away.

One day, he even turned the conversation around and made her feel guilty for asking.

"Nike, you know what God has called me to do. If every time you see me with a lady you react like this, what will you do when I start ministering to thousands of people? Our relationship is not like that of the heathens who need the other person to complete them. I have a duty to God. So you have to understand that whether male or female, if God leads someone to me, I have to obey the calling of God upon my life first."

After that conversation, Nike stopped asking questions.

Instead, she began praying about what she saw as her own insecurities.

Mike was a Christian. Surely he could not be cheating on her.

Perhaps God truly was leading those ladies to him.

However, when she shared the issue with Funso, who had become one of her closest friends in the fellowship as well as her course mate, Funso was not convinced.

"How come it is only ladies that God leads Oga Mike to?" she asked. "Nike, you better shine your eyes. That guy is taking you for granted. If the reverse were the case, do you think he would tolerate you frolicking around with different men at night in the name of sharing the gospel?"

Funso's words disturbed Nike. Even so, she chose to trust Mike.

After all, he constantly reminded her that God had called them into ministry together.

Whenever they were together, he spoke passionately about their future and always made her feel special in front of her friends.

But their relationship was not destined to enjoy smooth sailing for long.

One Wednesday morning, Nike woke up to a disturbing message from Mike on WhatsApp.

He had sent her a video containing pornographic material and attached a simple question beneath it. *What do you think?*

She was furious. Her first instinct was to call him immediately, but she did not want to cause a scene in front of her friends.

Instead, she decided to go to his room and confront him in person.

As she walked there, she made up her mind. If his explanation was not satisfactory, she would end the relationship.

She knew Mike usually did not have classes on Wednesdays and would most likely still be in his room.

When she arrived, she knocked.

Mike opened the door and ushered her inside. Since he stayed alone, there was no one else in the room.

The moment he locked the door behind them, Nike exploded.

“Mike, what is the meaning of the rubbish you sent me yesterday?”

“Calm down. What is it?” Mike asked quietly.

“The video you sent.”

“I only asked what you thought about it.”

Nike stared at him, wondering if he had lost his mind.

“What did you think I would think? How can you send me something like that? Better still, how can you even have such things with you?”

Mike shifted uncomfortably and avoided her eyes.

“I was sent the video by a lady in the fellowship,” he explained. “She is addicted to such videos and needs help. I thought that since you are a good Christian lady, and soon-to-be minister’s wife, you would be able to advise her. Knowing fully well that you will meet ladies with these kinds of issues in the future, you need to prepare yourself for how to relate with them without judging them.”

Nike studied his face carefully and sighed with relief when he met her gaze without flinching.

She had genuinely thought Mike was into pornography.

“You should have completed the message when you sent the video, or better still, not bothered sending it at all. Just telling me about it would have been enough. I was scared. I thought you watched videos like that.”

“How can I watch videos like that? You have forgotten that I am an executive in the fellowship.” Mike lied smoothly, sounding completely convincing.

“I am so sorry for believing the worst about you.” Nike held his hands and smiled at him lovingly.

“So what about the lady?”

“Do not worry yourself. I have already sent her some memory verses to meditate on and prayers to pray whenever the urge to watch those kinds of movies comes.”

Nike looked at him with admiration.

“I am so proud of you. I love the way you give yourself to God's work. You are truly a man of God.”

“It is nothing,” Mike replied, looking away as the admiration in her eyes made him uncomfortable.

“Okay then, let me go to class. I was so disturbed by the video that I decided to come here after my first class. I am really sorry for thinking such things about you.”

Nike looked at him apologetically as she walked towards the door.

Mike saw her off and promised to call her later.

If Mike's demeanor had changed after that conversation, Nike did not notice.

She walked back to class feeling reassured.

Later that day, after her lectures, she told her two friends about her childish behaviour and about Mike's maturity in handling the situation.

Anna had chided her for mistrusting him.

Funso had merely snorted in disbelief and said, “*Na so.*”

Things between Mike and Nike remained good for a long while after that.

Then the devil reared his ugly head again.

Mike began pressuring her to show him more affection beyond words because, according to him, he was not convinced that she loved him as much as he loved her.

Nike agreed to kissing him, and their relationship never went beyond that.

Still, she noticed the glazed desire in his eyes each time they were together. It made her aware that he wanted more, yet he always restrained himself for her sake.

His friendship with other ladies also continued. Some of those ladies even visited him in his room, much to Nike's discomfort.

During this period, Funso repeatedly advised her to address certain issues with Mike. Nike was not willing to risk damaging the relationship. In fact, she gradually began to resent Funso and stopped discussing her relationship with her.

Anna was not an option either. She idolized Mike and would never have believed any complaint made against him.

The final incident that tore them apart came as a complete shock.

Nike had tried calling Mike several times, but his number would not connect.

For nearly two weeks they barely saw each other outside church. Whenever she asked to spend time with him, he claimed to be busy with schoolwork.

Meanwhile, her friends kept reporting that they had seen him all over campus with Caroline, one of the ladies in the choir. Eventually, Nike decided to visit his department on a Tuesday to check on him.

There she met one of his course mates, Wale, who informed her that Mike had not attended class that day.

She tried calling him again. His phone was switched off. Concerned that he might be ill, she decided to check his room. When she arrived, she pushed lightly against the door. To her surprise, it swung open. That meant Mike was inside.

Without bothering to knock, she stepped in.

Mike was sprawled across his bed wearing only his boxers. Caroline sat on his lap wearing only her underwear.

They were wrapped up in each other, completely oblivious to her presence.

For a moment, Nike simply froze. Then she staggered backwards. In shock, she pulled the door shut behind her. The loud bang finally got Mike's attention.

"What happened?" he shouted, jumping up.

Then he rushed outside. Before leaving, he turned to Caroline.

"I thought you said you locked the door!"

The moment he saw Nike, he ran after her. He pleaded. He explained. He begged.

But Nike already knew there was no future left between them. That day, she ended the relationship. Then she went back to her room and cried. Only Funso, Anna, and Babs knew the full story.

For days she cried. For weeks she stopped attending fellowship and began worshipping elsewhere. Before long, word spread that she and Mike were no longer together. As expected, many people took Mike's side. Some said she did not have what it took to be a minister's wife. Others claimed she left because of money.

Mike occasionally tried to speak to her. Yet every conversation always ended the same way.

"Please do not let anyone know what happened between Caroline and me. You are more mature than that."

It was then Nike realized something painful. Mike cared more about preserving his image than dealing with his wrongdoing.

She had been gullible. She had fallen in love with what his office represented rather than the content of his character.

Some executives approached her privately to find out what had happened. She remained silent. Not because of Mike. Simply because she did not have the strength to relive it. She wanted to move on.

The trial of that season pushed her closer to God. Only those closest to her understood the depth of the pain she carried. Breaking up with a man she loved was difficult. Remaining silent while bearing the blame for his actions was torture.

The ridicule only intensified after Mike became the senior pastor of the fellowship. Then people began repeating phrases like, '*The stone that was rejected has now become the chief cornerstone.*' Each time she heard it, the wound cut a little deeper.

Nike smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes as she reflected on the past.

A particular verse of Scripture came to her heart, *Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before.*

She prayed softly and smiled as the Holy Spirit brought to remembrance the verses that had been resonating in her heart all this while. Ephesians 5:17: "*Therefore do not be vague and thoughtless and foolish, but understanding and firmly grasping what the will of the Lord is.*"

She knew what God wanted her to do. She had simply been too stubborn to accept it. Tears of joy streamed down her face as she whispered her acknowledgement to God.

Beside her, Funso stirred in her sleep. She blinked awake and stared at her friend, who seemed to be smiling at nobody in particular.

"Nike, are you okay?"

Nike turned and smiled. "I have never been better."

Funso continued staring at her strangely while Nike wiped the tears from her eyes and kept smiling.

"Funso, get some sleep. I will tell you all about it later. I have to wake up early so I can make it to Pastor Mike's appointment." Nike gently tapped her friend's shoulder before turning over and checking the time on her phone.

It was already four o'clock in the morning. A smile lingered on her lips as she closed her eyes. Within moments, she drifted off to sleep.

Meanwhile, Funso remained awake, staring at Nike in wonder.

CHAPTER NINE

Gboyega walked into the Adeoyes' house, and immediately Phoebe started trotting towards him, giggling and stretching out her hands. He carried her and tossed her gently into the air. She screamed in delight.

Vanessa, who had followed her daughter to the door, shut it behind him.

"How does she always sense when you or my husband is coming?" Vanessa asked as she walked behind them.

"Because I am her favourite uncle, and that connection is deeper than any human mind can fathom," Gboyega replied as he settled Phoebe on his shoulders.

"Connection indeed!" Vanessa jeered as she walked into the living room with them.

Settling onto the couch, she collected a reluctant Phoebe so she could feed her while Gboyega switched on the flat-screen television and immediately changed the channel to BBC Sports.

Looking up from the spaghetti she was feeding Phoebe, Vanessa asked, "Why didn't you come again yesterday? I made spaghetti and tomato sauce for you in vain."

Gboyega tried to look contrite. "I am sorry. Our lectures ended quite late, and I had to drop some people off campus. By the time I finished, I joined Chidi at a pub to watch a match and forgot to call you back. Don't worry, I am here to eat the spaghetti and whatever sauce you have made."

He walked towards her with his arms spread wide for a hug. Vanessa pushed him away and continued feeding Phoebe.

"Don't bribe me with hugs! The food has been given to the dogs."

Gboyega placed a hand over his chest and pretended to be wounded. "How can you give what belongs to Gboyega to dogs?"

He started wiping imaginary tears from his eyes, much to Phoebe's amusement and Vanessa shook her head.

"I packed yours in the fridge. You can take it home with you, but I made potato salad today, so you can help yourself in the kitchen."

He hugged her from the side. "I knew you loved me."

"Who does my wife love in my house apart from me?" Pastor Bankole Adeoye bellowed as he entered the living room.

Then, noticing the display before him, he added, "And the person is hugging my wife too."

"You know there is only one person with the audacity to say that, Pastor," Gboyega replied as he headed towards the kitchen.

Pastor Bankole sat beside his wife, who carefully handed the sleeping Phoebe over to him.

"How are you, Gboyega? Why didn't you make it yesterday? You made my wife worried." Pastor Bankole called after him from the living room.

Vanessa smiled. "I just asked him the same thing. I even threatened that I gave his portion of food to the dogs."

A few moments later, Gboyega returned carrying a plate of potato salad and sat opposite the couple. "I am sorry, Pastor. We had late lectures, and Chelsea had a match yesterday."

Pastor Bankole immediately looked up. "What was the score?"

"Really?" Vanessa asked sarcastically, staring at her husband in disbelief. She had expected him to reprimand Gboyega. "Just like that? What he did has been forgotten?"

"Babe, he is sorry. I know he won't do it again." Pastor Bankole pecked his wife on the lips and pulled her closer in an attempt to pacify her. Behind her head, he winked at Gboyega.

"The score was three goals to one, and those Chelsea guys were superb," Gboyega answered.

"I will watch it online later. Let's change the topic before my wife kicks us out of the living room." Pastor Bankole pecked Vanessa on the forehead before adding teasingly, "I don't want to be sent to the dog house today."

Vanessa pulled away from him and slapped his shoulder playfully. "As if you would go if I asked you to." Then she turned to Gboyega. "This man here loves his wife too much and hates sleeping alone."

Pastor Bankole gently pulled her closer again, careful not to wake Phoebe. "Which man would want to sleep alone when he has such a beautiful woman as his wife, Gboyega?"

He smiled. "We only sleep apart when we are physically apart. Other than that, I would walk on hot coals if it meant keeping this woman by my side through the night."

Vanessa blushed and kissed her husband lightly on the lips.

Gboyega shook his head.

He was already used to their public displays of affection.

He had also grown up in a home where his parents saw nothing wrong with kissing in public. Sometimes he even had to avert his eyes when they became a little too romantic, much to his embarrassment.

"You people are just hilarious."

Pastor Bankole laughed. "Just wait. When you get married, you will understand better. Or when the *babe* comes, we will see how you will be behaving."

Gboyega shook his head immediately. "Pastor, even if the *babe* comes, I am not ready for any relationship."

"Why?" Vanessa asked, sitting up.

“Ma, you know I am preparing to go for my MBA. I am not ready to start anything with any lady right now.”

“So if you were already married and had to travel for your MBA, would you divorce your wife because of the distance?” Pastor Bankole countered.

“Definitely not! But there is a level of commitment in marriage that is different from a relationship.”

“True,” Pastor Bankole agreed, “but commitment depends on the people involved. There are people who are married and still not committed to their spouses. If two people want to make a relationship work, it will work.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “Vanessa and I were apart for a year too. I was serving as a youth corper in Maiduguri while she was serving in Enugu. I did not come home throughout my service year because I was the Head of the Corpers' Fellowship. Most of our communication happened through midnight phone calls and emails.”

Gboyega sighed and lowered his head in thought.

The couple exchanged a look. After silently communicating with each other, Vanessa spoke.

“Gboyega, is there anything wrong? You know you can tell us anything.”

Gboyega sighed again and finally raised his head.

After a moment of hesitation, he decided to stop dancing around the issue. The Adeoyes knew his deepest secrets. They had seen him at his worst and had helped him through seasons he was not proud of.

“I am deeply in love with a girl, and I do not know what to do about it.” The words seemed to lift a burden from his chest. “I have tried ignoring the feelings, but I don't know again. No woman has held my attention like this, not even during my *whoring* days.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and sat back. “There is just something about her that I cannot place my hands on.”

“Who is she?” Vanessa asked immediately. “Is she in our church? Do we know her?” The innocent look on her face was completely ruined by the mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

“You have met her before, and she is not in our church. In fact, I have a feeling you already know who I am talking about.”

His mind drifted back to the sisters' programme where Pastor Vanessa had ministered as a guest speaker. He remembered volunteering to be her designated driver.

Pastor Vanessa had teased him mercilessly that day. At the time, he had pretended not to understand what she meant and had acted completely innocent. Yet throughout most of the programme, his eyes had repeatedly drifted towards Nike. She had been seated near the front with the other ladies.

“What is her name?” Vanessa asked, still pretending ignorance. “I do not think I know who you are talking about.”

Gboyega laughed softly. “Her name is Adenike Kupoluyi. She came with the Sisters’ Coordinator of Great Cornerstone Fellowship the other time.”

“Oh,” Vanessa said, pretending to remember. “Is it the Nike you were looking at while I was ministering at their fellowship programme? The same day you gladly offered to be my driver?”

Gboyega blushed in embarrassment.

“Babe, stop harassing the young man,” Pastor Bankole chided his wife playfully.

Then he turned to Gboyega. “So you love Adenike. That’s good news. My wife already told me what she saw about you two, so don’t mind all the drama she just put up.”

He paused briefly before continuing. “But back to the main discussion. Have you prayed about your fears and feelings?”

“Yes, I have,” Gboyega replied, sitting up straighter. “I am just scared of her rejecting me. That is why I have been using my MBA as an excuse.”

“Rejection has never killed anyone,” Vanessa said. “I advise you to get to know her a little better and trust the Holy Spirit’s leading in this.”

“If you are sure she is the woman for you, then go for it,” Pastor Bankole added. “Running off to do your MBA is a cowardly move. Get to know her first as a friend, then state your intentions. If she is a serious-minded girl, your MBA will not come between the two of you.”

“Alright, sir.”

Gboyega fell silent as he reflected on their words. After a while, he got up to leave.

The couple prayed with him and walked him to the door before seeing him off.

CHAPTER TEN

Around twelve o'clock in the afternoon, Nike, Anna, and Funso stepped outside their classroom. They had come out to take a break from their reading.

It was lecture-free week according to the university calendar, a period when no lectures were held and students were given a week to prepare for their forthcoming examinations.

Funso stopped and looked between her friends. "Girls, please can we buy lunch at the cafeteria? I am hungry."

"But you took custard and beans cake this morning. We have to continue the revision," Anna replied.

"All the revision we have been doing since has not yielded much result. Maybe when we eat, we will actually understand the calculus better."

Anna and Nike burst out laughing.

Funso never joked with food, but despite how much she ate, she was slimmer than both her friends because of her fast metabolism.

"Just say you are hungry and cannot function properly without food." Nike stretched out her hand. "However, we will pause the revision and follow you to the cafeteria on one condition, you buy us both meat pie and cold drinks."

She waited for Funso's response.

"Fine. I would have bought it for you girls anyway." Funso shook Nike's hand to seal the deal.

A few moments later, the three friends were walking down the corridor towards the cafeteria. After placing their orders, they settled down to discuss the forthcoming examinations.

The apprehension on the faces of students around them was obvious. Some had even brought their books into the cafeteria.

"I don't understand how people can read in a place like this," Anna said, looking around. "The noise alone would distract me, not to talk of people eating."

Nike glanced around as well. "Some people actually enjoy reading in places like this, but I don't believe any serious reading can be done here."

"Exactly," Anna agreed.

"I can read here," Funso replied.

The two girls looked at her.

"It is just that I won't be reading my school books. I will be studying the menu."

Anna and Nike laughed.

Just then, the waiter arrived with their food. Funso immediately grabbed hers and started eating.

“You won’t even pray over it?” Anna asked.

Funso looked up. “I don’t remember to pray over my food all the time, but since you mentioned it...” She raised one hand dramatically. “Bless this food, oh Lord, for Christ’s sake. Amen!”

Nike shook her head and started sipping her drink.

Suddenly Anna nudged her shoulder. “Is that not Gboyega?” She pointed discreetly towards the entrance.

Nike looked up immediately. The moment she recognized him, she pushed Anna’s hand down. “Stop pointing. He is the one.”

However, Gboyega had already seen them. He waved at the three friends before continuing his conversation with a few ladies standing near the door.

One of the girls stepped closer to adjust his collar and casually placed a hand around him. Gboyega immediately stepped out of her reach and continued talking. The girl, however, kept inching closer.

Funso dropped her fork and hissed. “But can girls like this just stop being desperate?”

“Funso, reduce your voice. People can hear you,” Anna warned.

Nike remained silent. Though she did not join the conversation, she monitored Gboyega’s movements from the corner of her eye. He was no longer speaking with the ladies at the entrance. Instead, he had stopped to greet some guys seated two tables away from them.

A few moments later, he looked in their direction. Immediately, Nike lowered her gaze to her phone and focused intently on its keypad while taking a bite of her meat pie.

Then she sensed someone standing behind her. She refused to look up.

“Good afternoon, ladies.” Gboyega’s voice came from directly behind her.

“Mr. Gboyega, good afternoon. How is your day going?” Anna replied.

“Mr. Gboyega of life!” Funso hailed. At the same time, she nudged Nike’s shoulder.

Nike, who was pretending not to have heard his greeting, frowned. “What is it?”

“Look back,” Funso said.

Nike finally turned around. Gboyega was standing directly behind her chair with a smug smile on his face. “Hey, Mr. Gboyega,” she said, pretending to be surprised.

Gboyega simply nodded in acknowledgement and laughed. Then he turned to the others as he pulled a chair closer. “Can I sit with you?”

“No problem,” Funso quipped as she adjusted her seat to accommodate him.

As Gboyega sat down with them, he signalled to a waiter to take his order. “Ladies, do you want something else apart from all these?”

The three of them shook their heads, and the waiter left.

“So what’s up with you girls? How is *jacking*?”

“We just came out to relax. We have been in the study room since eight a.m., and if not for this madam here who said she was hungry, we would have gone right back.” Anna pointed at Funso.

“I needed to refuel myself. Don’t you know that when you read, you burn calories?”

“But you ate this morning. And where exactly did you hear that reading burns calories, Nutritionist Funso?” Nike asked.

“I saw it on Facebook,” Funso replied confidently.

“Madam, just admit that you are a foodie,” Nike concluded.

The others laughed while Funso picked up a serviette and threw it at Nike.

“What course are you all having first?” Gboyega directed the question to all three of them, though his eyes lingered on Nike as the waiter served his food.

“Calculus,” Nike answered. She carefully avoided his intense gaze.

He was looking at her as though nobody else was seated at the table. Oddly enough, it did not irritate her. It simply made her feel very aware of herself.

Sensing her discomfort, Gboyega shifted his attention to the other ladies. “So how is studying Calculus going?”

Anna smiled. “It has been going well.”

Funso immediately shook her head. “Anna, it has not been going well. I am not looking forward to going back to that study room.”

“I believe we will get the hang of it if we continue.” Anna said

Gboyega remembered the technicalities that came with the course. Calculus was the bane of many three-hundred-level students. Most people had to retake it before finally passing, and some even ended up applying for an extra year before they eventually cleared it. “Do any of you have *Fundamentals of Calculus* by Dr. Stan?”

The three ladies shook their heads.

“My roommate in four- hundred level also talked about that book,” Nike said, finally looking directly at him. “Do you know anyone who has it?”

“I do. I have a copy, and I can bring it to the department tomorrow.”

Nike smiled at him appreciatively. That smile was seriously doing a number on him. Not only was she beautiful, but she had good dentition to go with those gorgeous dimples. This was the kind of smile a wife gave her husband, the kind that made a man feel like a superhero.

Where had that thought come from? Gboyega mentally shook himself while Anna and Funso thanked him. “But if you are free tomorrow, I can also take you guys in Calculus around noon,” he added.

“Free?” Funso asked immediately. She dropped her fork and clapped her hands together. “What exactly would I be doing that would stop me from being free?”

Gboyega laughed. “What about you two?”

“Sure.”

“Certainly.”

Anna and Nike answered together.

Gboyega nodded. “Then let’s meet at the EC meeting room. I will get the key from the Faculty Secretary.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Gboyega. You are a lifesaver. A heaven-sent angel,” Funso gushed.

“You are welcome,” Gboyega replied. “I know how technical Calculus can be. When I was in three-hundred level, only twenty students passed the course out of more than seventy.”

“What grade did you have?” Anna asked.

“I had an A, though I already had the advantage of taking some professional examinations involving Calculus before I resumed.”

“*Guru*,” Nike hailed. “Please help us become like you.”

Gboyega shook his head. “You don’t need to be like me. There are people who passed that same course effortlessly. Besides, I know all of you have what it takes to get an A as well.”

“That is true.” Nike stretched her phone towards him. “Please let me have your phone number so I can remind you.”

“No problem.” He took her phone and saved his number. Then he handed his own phone to her so she could do the same.

Funso looked between them as they exchanged numbers. They were both pretending they had no interest in each other, yet here they were exchanging phone numbers.

Turning to Gboyega, she grinned as she changed the subject. “Uncle Gboyega, you are quite popular. See how those girls were fawning over you at the door. I am sure they would not mind being Mrs. Gboyega Benson.” She waited patiently for his response.

“There is no Mrs. Gboyega among them,” he replied calmly. “I try to acknowledge people’s greetings as much as possible. For now, I am single and not engaged.”

Anna immediately perked up at the conversation. “But you must be considering it. Or are you one of those men who want to achieve everything before settling down?”

Gboyega smiled. “I was actually considering that before now, but with the right woman, I might start setting things in motion.”

“So, have you met the right woman yet?” Funso asked.

Nike stood up immediately. She knew exactly where Funso was heading with the conversation. “Gboyega, please don’t answer her.”

Then she turned to Funso. “It was food I knew you came here for. Now that you have eaten, let’s return to the study room.”

Funso waved them off without standing. “You girls can run along. I will catch up with you later.”

Anna got up as well. "Thank you so much, Mr. Gboyega. We will meet up tomorrow."

"Bye, Gboyega. I will call you in the morning to remind you." Nike smiled briefly before leaving with Anna.

Gboyega watched them walk away. He knew that if he wanted any future with Nike, he would have to tread carefully. She was friendlier now than when they first met, but she was still cautious of his intentions.

Funso coughed loudly. When he still did not look away from the door, she coughed again.

This time, Gboyega turned and faced her with a straight expression.

Funso picked up one of the chicken legs on her plate and spoke without looking up. "Back to my question."

"What question?" he asked smoothly.

Funso fought back a smile. *This guy was tough meat.* Then again, so was Nike. She had never backed down from a challenge, and until she figured out exactly what Gboyega's intentions were, she intended to keep asking questions.

Nobody was going to hurt her friend again. Once had been more than enough. She decided to be just as direct with him as she had been with Nike. If he shared Nike's habit of telling the truth, she would get her answer eventually. "What do you like about Nike?"

Gboyega nearly choked to his surprise. This Funso girl must have superpowers. He had genuinely believed he was hiding his interest in Nike well enough. That was the whole reason he had taken his time before approaching their table.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. "Is it because I offered to teach you guys Calculus?" He deliberately sounded offended.

"Your help is appreciated, but I want to be sure you do not have any bad intentions towards my friend." Funso's voice remained steady and unapologetic.

The playful smile disappeared from Gboyega's face. Her loyalty towards Nike was admirable. From the look in her eyes, if he ever tried any rubbish with Nike, not that he intended to, Funso would gladly serve his head on a platter.

"Funso, relax. I come with only good intentions." He leaned back slightly. "Much more than what you wish for your friend, I wish for her too."

"So you admit that you like her and would like to take things further with her?"

"I admit to no such thing." Gboyega caught the shocked look on her face and continued. "If and when I decide to make any admission, I would appreciate the main subject of my interest being the first person informed."

Funso sighed. He was a smart man. And he had just earned another level of respect from her. Smiling knowingly, she wiped her hands with a serviette and picked up her bag.

"You are a good man. Just know that I am in support of this union."

Gboyega stood up to allow her pass. Without waiting for a response, or even looking back, Funso walked away from the table.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gboyega finally got up from his reading table at eleven twenty a.m. to prepare for the tutorial he had planned with Nike and her friends. Nike had called him at ten minutes past eight that morning to remind him of the schedule, as if he had been thinking about anything else all night.

He had already picked out his clothes and gone through the topics he planned to teach them late the previous night. He told himself he was not trying to impress her. Truthfully, he just did not want to guff in front of her.

A little preparation was not a bid to impress anybody. Or was it?

He changed into slim-fit jeans, a light blue shirt, and a fitted jacket. He considered wearing his gold-plated wristwatch. Then he changed his mind and wore his leather watch instead.

Again, he was not trying to impress Nike or her friends.

The face of Funso immediately came to mind, and he started laughing. If she were here, she would have seen through every bit of his pretence. Remembering their conversation from the previous day, he shook his head. The girl had almost succeeded in making him declare his undying love for Nike right there in the cafeteria.

Finally stepping into his shoes, he grabbed his car keys and bag, switched off the lights, and left. As he got to his car, he pulled out his phone and called Nike to let her know he was on his way.

"Hello, Nike. I am on my way to the department. Are you guys ready?"

"Yes, but there might be a slight change of plans. I hope you won't be offended."

"No. What is it?" he asked.

"Some of our classmates heard about the tutorial and want to take part."

"Like how many people are we talking about?"

"They are about twenty-five."

Gboyega sighed. "We cannot make use of the EC meeting room then."

"We decided to use the main auditorium."

"You people want to turn me into a lecturer this morning." His tone was teasing.

"I am very sorry..."

"No, it's fine. For you, I would do anything." He cut in before she could continue apologising.

Nike laughed uneasily on the other end of the line.

"I will be there soon." He ended the call and entered his car.

Fifteen minutes later, he walked into the main auditorium and found everyone already seated, awaiting his arrival. After greeting them, he commenced the tutorial.

He did his best to simplify each topic and patiently repeated explanations whenever someone complained that they did not understand. Two hours later, and after answering what felt like an endless stream of questions, he finally ended the session.

When almost everyone had left, he signalled to Anna, Nike, and Funso.

“As much as I enjoyed helping your classmates, this tutorial was originally put together for you three. I just want to be sure that you understood the topics we covered.”

Funso spoke first. “Mr. Gboyega, I am so grateful. You are the angel God sent to deliver me from the jaws of Calculus.”

The others burst out laughing.

“I don’t know anything about being an angel,” Gboyega replied. “I am a man of like passions as yourself, but I am glad I was able to help.”

Nike shook her head. “You were more than a help. You were really amazing. You should be a lecturer. You have a way of making people understand.”

Ignoring the little dance his heart did at her praise, Gboyega answered, “I have no intention of becoming a lecturer, but that does not mean I cannot tutor people.” He zipped up his bag before continuing. “The marking, collating of results, and all those things turn me off. Besides, I would probably end up giving all my students an A.”

The ladies laughed.

“But if you ever need help in any subject, just reach out. Even if I cannot help immediately, I will find someone who can.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gboyega,” Anna said.

“Today was a huge success. Calculus finally makes sense.”

Gboyega gathered the last of his books and placed them inside his bag. “Let me be on my way, ladies. I need to go and study too. I will talk to you later.”

After he left, the three friends remained in the auditorium, going through the questions they had solved and looking through the textbook and study notes he had given them.

“Nike, can you ask Gboyega for the rest of the study notes he used for his other courses?” Anna asked.

Nike looked up immediately. “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him yourself?” She still had no idea what Anna’s thoughts about Gboyega were, and she did not want to reveal anything either.

“But you have his number now. You can easily chat with him on WhatsApp.”

“Okay, I will.” Nike replied with carefully practiced indifference.

After solving past questions for another hour, the three friends decided to take a break and return later in the evening to continue reading. As they stepped out of the hall, Nike immediately opened WhatsApp and sent Gboyega a message.

Me: Hi, Gboyega. Can you please lend us your study notes for the other courses? This one with us was very helpful.

She sent the message and clicked on his profile picture. Six women were in the photograph. Five of them appeared relatively young, while the woman standing in the middle looked older. Nike guessed she was his mother and the others were his sisters.

A few minutes later, he replied.

Gboyega: Sure. I will bring them tomorrow when I come to campus. Are you done reading?

Me: Yes, we are. We are on our way to the hostel. What about you? Hope I am not disturbing your study time?

Gboyega: No. I actually got up to cook a few minutes ago. A man must eat now, and some people said reading burns calories.

Nike laughed immediately. Funso had said the exact same thing earlier.

Her two friends looked at her curiously.

“What is making you laugh, madam?” Funso asked.

“Gboyega just said that lame statement you made about reading to burn calories.”

“You see? Finally, I have one brilliant person in my corner, unlike you two who know nothing about mental and physical health.”

“Sorry, health practitioner. You just like food.”

“So it is Gboyega you have been talking to since?” Anna asked.

“Which one is *since* again?” Nike protested. “I just started chatting with him when we left class, and you were the one who wanted the study notes.”

“*Haba*, Nike. I was not judging you now. I only asked a question.”

The three friends fell silent and continued walking.

Meanwhile, Nike replied to Gboyega.

Me: You just like food. I am going to eat too, though.

Almost immediately, his reply came in.

Gboyega: See who is talking. So you are going to eat, and you claim I am the one who likes food? SMH.

Me: Shake your head all you want. At least I didn't use health facts to defend my eating. I can't imagine you cooking, though. I thought people cooked for you.

Gboyega: So you thought I employ people to cook or enjoy free services from ladies?

Me: You seem like the type that would employ people to cook.

Gboyega: Don't stereotype me, Nike, or else you will fail each time you add things up. I have a cook among the service staff, but she hardly does anything except buy groceries. She works more when my parents are around.

Me: Alright, let me leave you to your cooking, Mr. Chef. Let's see what you come up with.

Gboyega: Okay then. Take care, dear. I will send pictures of the finished product as evidence of good cooking.

Nike laughed at his confidence as she closed WhatsApp.

As they got closer to the hostel, Anna suddenly looked up. "Nike, I know I have not been supportive of your breakup with Pastor Mike. I am sorry."

Nike and Funso exchanged surprised looks. Where did that come from?

"Anna, you don't need to apologize. I understand that you wanted the best for me," Nike said gently when she noticed the anguish on her friend's face.

"No." Anna shook her head. "I failed as a friend." Her voice was heavy with regret. "Even after you told me everything that happened, I did not stand by you the way I should have. I saw the pain you went through every time he insulted you publicly, but I overlooked it."

She paused briefly. "I sincerely apologize. You deserved better." Nike remained silent as Anna gathered herself before continuing. "And if it is Mr. Gboyega, I am totally in support." A small smile appeared on her face. "He is a good man."

Nike stopped walking, causing the other two girls to stop and look at her. She was shocked by Anna's statement. Yet deep down, she realized she had wanted her friends' approval of Gboyega all along.

Without warning, she stepped forward and hugged Anna. "Thank you," she whispered.

Funso immediately dabbed at her eyes dramatically. "After this public display of affection, can we please go to the hostel? I am hungry."

The two friends pulled apart and burst into laughter. Trust Funso to bring up food.

Nike looked from one friend to the other as they resumed walking. She was grateful to have them in her life. They did not always agree, but somehow they always stayed together.

"Girls," she began, "I don't know what God has planned, but I trust Him in this." She paused briefly. "As Anna said, Gboyega is a good man, and it is amazing how God revealed that to me."

The admission felt strange and freeing at the same time. "I have feelings for him, which I have tried very hard not to acknowledge, but I don't know if he feels the same way."

Funso immediately started laughing. "This is good," she said between laughs. "I am so happy to have a front-row seat to this love story."

Then she pointed at Nike. "Trust me, dear. He does too."

Nike narrowed her eyes. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"Nope," Funso replied quickly.

"So how do you know he has feelings for her too?" Anna asked as they entered the hostel compound.

“Female intuition.” Funso answered with a perfectly straight face. Then she picked up her pace. “Alright, ladies. I am going to eat. We will see in the evening.” Before either of them could question her further, she hurried away.

“It is obvious she is hiding something,” Anna observed. “But that aside, just continue praying about everything.”

“I have, and I will continue praying,” Nike replied.

“Good.” Anna nodded. “We will talk later then. Maybe after reading this evening.” She turned towards her hostel block and walked away.

Nike headed towards hers as well. Almost immediately, she opened WhatsApp. A smile appeared on her face.

Gboyega had already sent her a picture of jollof rice, fried plantain, and fried turkey. True to his word.

She quickly typed a response.

Me: Excellent!

Still smiling, she entered her room. As she began changing out of her clothes, she found herself glancing at her phone every few moments, waiting for his reply.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three weeks later, most students at Oregon Federal University had finished their first-semester examinations. The sharp sting of the Harmattan season could already be felt across campus in early December. It came with dry air and skin that cracked like parched earth. Chapped lips had become a common sight, and many students moved around with petroleum jelly, shea butter, or lip balm tucked away in their bags.

Nike immediately applied a mixture of coconut oil and shea butter to her skin. She also kept both supplies in her handbag in case the dryness worsened later in the evening. A special programme was taking place in her fellowship over the next three days.

Today, Thursday, was Drama Night. The final two days would be dedicated to a Word Feast.

Nike was especially happy she had finished her examinations on Tuesday because it meant she could fully participate in the preparations. She had joined the publicity team, and as the Head of Ushers, she also needed to ensure that all the ushers were properly dressed and prepared for the programme.

She had invited Gboyega. He had promised to attend since he had finished his examinations as well. Their friendship had truly blossomed over the last month. He was always open with her, and they spoke like old friends who had known each other for years.

Even if nothing more ever came from their friendship, she was grateful she had laid aside her prejudices and allowed herself to know him. He was not only a worshipper but also a man of integrity and wisdom.

Throughout the examination period, they had seen each other several times. He had even helped explain a few difficult topics to her. Somewhere along the way, they had built a friendship strong enough that they now spoke almost every day.

No matter how busy he was, he always seemed to make time for her. Stepping out of the hostel corridor with her bags, Nike checked the message Gboyega had sent earlier.

I am almost done with my uncle. I would come over for the programme immediately after. Cheers.

A smile tugged at her lips.

She quickly replied. *Alright, see you soon.*

After leaving the hostel, she flagged down a commercial motorcycle and gave the rider directions to the fellowship auditorium. The moment she spotted Pastor Mike standing near the entrance, her steps quickened. Keeping her head down and pretending to be occupied with her phone, she walked straight past him.

Whenever possible, she avoided him. Unfortunately, he still found ways to corner her from time to time. Once inside the auditorium, she greeted the members already present and immediately began assigning duties to the available ushers.

The programme started shortly afterwards. At exactly six p.m., Gboyega hurried into the auditorium. As he passed, he nodded at her in greeting before following one of the ushers to an empty seat.

As the drama presentation began, Nike occasionally glanced in his direction.

He sat facing the altar with complete attention fixed on the presentation. A smile touched her lips. Quietly, she offered a prayer for him.

Over the past few weeks, he had opened up to her about some of the struggles he had faced as a young believer. She admired the sincerity with which he spoke about his journey.

As she looked up again, she caught Pastor Mike staring at her. The look on his face was unmistakably disdainful. A few moments later, he turned his attention back to the drama presentation.

Nike frowned.

What had she done now? Quickly, she ran through her list of responsibilities.

Everything had been done. The ushers were in place. The arrangements had been made. Nothing had been overlooked.

Then she glanced back in Mike's direction. This time, she noticed something different. He was no longer looking at her. He was looking at Gboyega. Understanding dawned immediately.

"Oh." Shaking her head, she returned to her duties.

After the programme ended, Gboyega walked over with a smile. He thanked her for inviting him while several fellowship members looked on curiously.

Nike smiled and walked him outside. She accompanied him to his car before seeing him off. Before driving away, he promised to call her later that night.

Afterwards, she returned to the auditorium and joined the other executives for the post-programme meeting. A few recommendations were made, and several issues were discussed.

To Nike's surprise, Pastor Mike ended the meeting much earlier than usual. Not before asking her to remain behind.

Anna squeezed her shoulder supportively. The look she gave Nike said she already understood what this was about. Then she left, leaving Nike alone with Pastor Mike.

For several moments, neither of them spoke. They stood a few feet apart in uncomfortable silence.

Eventually, Mike broke it. "Nike, what are you doing in the company of a man like Ree-Dee?"

Nike sighed inwardly. "He is a friend of mine."

“Friend?” The word dripped with contempt. “Do you know what this friendship of yours makes of me in this fellowship?”

Nike stared at him in disbelief.

Mike continued. “Not only have you ridiculed me before the entire fellowship, but this is also a complete disrespect to me and a disregard for your office as the Welfare Secretary and Head of Ushers in this fellowship.”

Immediately, Nike raised her hand to stop him. When she spoke, her voice was quiet, but beneath the calmness she could feel her anger rising. “What relationship are you talking about?”

She took a deep breath. “How many times do I have to tell you that it is over between us?”

“Gboyega is my friend and a good man. There is nothing remotely intimate between us, but even if that happens, I would ensure that I inform the counselling committee.”

Pastor Mike stared at her angrily. “What do you mean by that?” His voice rose slightly. “I am sure you are not contemplating a relationship with someone who neither acts nor looks like a Christian while I am your pastor.”

Nike laughed. It was not a happy laugh. Adjusting her handbag on her shoulder, she answered, “Pastor, God does not need actors or people with the right look.” Her eyes met his steadily. “If a man is in Christ, he is a new creature.”

“And God does not change His mind either,” Mike shot back immediately. “God has chosen us to be together. You should not be changing God’s plan.” He paused before adding, “I hope you know this act of yours might cause an uproar in the fellowship and could even lead to suspension.”

Nike stared at him in disbelief. For a moment, she could hardly reconcile this man with the one she had once loved. This could not be the same man who had claimed to care for her. The same man who had claimed to protect her.

“You disappoint me sometimes, Pastor Mike.” Her voice trembled slightly. “Honestly, it should not be you threatening me with something like this.” She shook her head. “After I took the fall for our failed relationship, you are stooping to a new low.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “You caused me a lot of pain, and yet you are threatening me with suspension.”

Mike opened his mouth to speak, but Nike raised her hand again. This time, she was not finished.

“Just to remind you, I never said God chose you for me.” Her voice grew firmer. “That statement was entirely yours.” She wiped her eyes and continued. “But even if there was a point when I felt convinced it was God, remember that Saul was God’s choice before David.”

Silence settled between them.

“Threatening me will get you nowhere.” She shook her head sadly. “This is beneath you, Mike.”

For the first time since the conversation began, there was no anger in her voice. Only disappointment. "I pray you find your way back soon." She swallowed hard. "But I will never stop praying for you."

Without waiting for a response, Nike turned and walked away. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she left Mike standing there in stunned silence.

Several fellowship members greeted her as she passed. She managed a sad smile but kept walking. Outside, she met Anna waiting for her.

The moment they started walking, Nike told her everything.

The accusation.

The threat.

All of it.

By the time she finished speaking, tears were running freely down her face. Anna stopped walking and held her by the shoulders. Then she pulled her into a hug.

"All will be well," she whispered. "I am sorry for not standing by you all this while." She squeezed Nike tighter.

"You deserve the best, Nike." A smile touched her lips. "And thank God for giving you the strength to walk away when you did."

Later that night, Gboyega called as he had promised. He greeted her warmly, but almost immediately he sensed something was wrong. Her responses were short. Her voice lacked its usual brightness. Though she tried to hide it, he could tell she had been crying. By the end of the call, he had made up his mind. He promised to check on her the following morning at her hostel.

GBOYEGA got down from his car and waited in front of Nike's hostel.

She had promised to meet him outside instead of inviting him into her room since her roommates were around and they would not have been able to talk freely.

A few minutes later, he spotted her approaching. She was dressed in grey yoga pants and a blue camisole.

As she got closer, he noticed that her face was free of makeup. More importantly, her eyes were swollen.

She had obviously cried through the night.

After exchanging greetings and a brief handshake, Gboyega opened the passenger door for her.

Once she got in, he shut the door and walked around to the driver's side. For a while, neither of them spoke.

The silence was not uncomfortable.

Gboyega simply waited. He did not want to pressure her into talking before she was ready.

Eventually, Nike wiped her eyes. She accepted the handkerchief he offered and blew her nose before finally beginning.

Slowly, she told him everything. Her relationship with Mike. The breakup. The rumours. The manipulation. The confrontation from the previous night. And finally, the threat of suspension.

Throughout her explanation, Gboyega listened without interrupting. When she finished, he remained quiet for a few moments. Then he smiled sadly and nodded.

Under his breath, he whispered a short prayer before responding. "I am sorry you had to go through all of that." His voice was gentle.

"And trust me, your decision not to fuel gossip by exposing everything after the breakup says a lot about your maturity."

He reached over and gently turned her face towards him. "I don't know your pastor personally, but from everything you have told me, he sounds like a child of God who is still struggling with pride."

He smiled faintly. "Then again, all of us are still growing out of something."

Nike listened quietly.

"My advice is this," he continued. "Let go of any bitterness. Forgive him for the past, and forgive him for anything he may still do in the future." His tone remained calm and deliberate. "We have been forgiven, so we must also forgive."

He paused briefly before continuing. "More than forgiving him, I want you to genuinely pray for him and also forgive yourself."

Nike lowered her eyes.

"He may not be the man you marry, but he will eventually marry someone. He is still your brother in Christ." Gboyega leaned back in his seat. "And beyond that, he is still a leader over you. You have choices to make, but you cannot allow those choices to become disrespect to authority."

A thoughtful look crossed his face. "David never disregarded Saul, even when Saul was wrong."

Nike sighed. "I pray for him." She looked away through the windshield. "But sometimes I feel so betrayed." Her voice cracked. "Someone who claimed to love me now behaves as though I am a possession he can brag about."

Gboyega nodded slowly. He understood.

Far too many Christian men approached relationships as though they were collecting a wife that fit a list of requirements rather than loving an actual person.

Taking her hand gently, he asked, "Can you do something?"

Nike looked at him curiously. "What is that?"

"Can you invite him out somewhere and talk to him?" Like a friendly outing. Just the two of you talking without hostility."

Nike frowned immediately. "What would that achieve?"

"A lot." His answer came without hesitation. "I genuinely believe someone needs to talk to him about his attitude and actions. He is a man, and if a man is not careful, pride can creep in very easily." He paused. "More importantly, I think having an honest conversation could help both of you move forward."

Nike thought about it quietly. Then she nodded. "Alright, I will do it. But that will have to be after next week."

"What is happening next week?"

"You know fellowship executives are not allowed to stay away from campus for too long."

A smile appeared on her face. "So I am going home for my one-week break on Monday after the programme."

"That is good." Gboyega nodded.

Inside, another thought crossed his mind. A much more personal one. He had considered telling her how he felt. He had imagined having that conversation more times than he cared to admit.

But this was not the right moment.

Nike was still healing. Still processing. Still trying to make peace with her past. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel pressured.

So he kept the words to himself. For now. Instead, he silently prayed that when the time finally came, she would not turn him down.

"I have been meaning to ask you something, Gboyega."

"Go ahead."

Nike folded her arms. "What made the campus bad boy drop his playboy lifestyle and turn to Christ? I am sure there is a story behind it."

"Paparazzi and journalists always want the story at all costs." Gboyega straightened his shoulders dramatically. "You would have to book an appointment with my PA. I don't grant interviews just like that."

Nike laughed and hit him lightly on the shoulder. "Can you be serious for once?"

The sound of her laughter made him smile. That had been his intention all along. He had wanted to see her smile again. Those eyes of hers that lit up whenever she laughed could brighten any man's day.

For a brief moment, his thoughts drifted back to the proposal he had not yet made. If she ever said yes, he silently promised himself that he would do everything within his power to keep that smile on her face.

"Alright, Madam Journalist," he said. "I know you already know bits and pieces about my past, but I will try to be as open as possible."

Adjusting himself in his seat, he looked away for a moment before continuing.

“As you know, I was a player.” His tone was matter-of-fact. “I had very little regard for women. I had friends in both high and low places. Almost every yahoo boy and cultist on campus knew me, even though I never joined any of their activities.”

He paused then continued, “I was constantly seen with different girls, and although I never slept with most of them, many were simply happy to be known as Ree-Dee’s latest flame.”

A bitter smile crossed his face. “I enjoyed the attention. Until I met the last girl.”

Nike remained silent.

“Her name was Valerie. I met her at the initiation party of one of the cult groups popularly known as Ash. Even though I wasn’t a cult member, I was invited because of my family’s wealth. Valerie and I got talking and, like many others, she seemed happy to be associated with me. After that, she wanted exclusivity in public while still giving me freedom to see other girls.”

He shrugged. She was beautiful, popular in her own circle, and I did not see any reason to pass up the opportunity.”

His expression darkened. “Two months later, she came to my house and told me she was pregnant.”

Nike’s eyes widened slightly.

“I was terrified. I immediately told her to abort the baby because I was not ready to be a father.” He sighed. “And even though my parents would not have been happy, I knew they would eventually cajole me to marry her.”

“I was nervous. But what surprised me wasn’t the pregnancy. It was her reaction. I expected her to agree. Instead, she threatened to go to the press. She also threatened to tell her brother.”

Nike leaned forward slightly. “Her brother?”

Gboyega nodded. “That was when I discovered he was the head of the cult group that hosted the initiation party.”

“Wow,” Nike breathed.

“I pretended to agree to everything. To father the child. To marry her after delivery.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “I was buying time. Because even in that state, I knew I could not marry Valerie simply because she was pregnant.”

“After she left, I spent hours driving around the expressway. My head was a mess.”

“Eventually, I parked outside Rhema Assembly International.”

Nike listened quietly.

“Not because I was looking for God.” He laughed softly. “I was still trying to figure out how to convince Valerie to abort the pregnancy. While I was sitting there, a car coming out of the church stopped beside mine. The driver introduced himself as the pastor of the church.”

He smiled ruefully, “To be honest, I would have ignored him completely if his car had not accidentally brushed mine while he was stopping.”

Nike smiled.

“I was angry. Very angry. I cursed him out. Everything I had bottled up, I poured on him.”

“What did he do?” Nike asked.

“He apologised.”

The answer surprised her.

“He apologised repeatedly and offered to pay for the damage.”

“I shouted at him that the car and money were not my problem and I could even buy his generation.” Gboyega shook his head slowly. “Then he asked me a question.”

Nike waited.

“He asked me what my real problem was.”

For a moment, silence settled between them.

“Eventually I told him. Not because he was a pastor, but because he was a stranger. A stranger who knew nothing about me. A stranger I would probably never see again.”

His voice softened. “You know what shocked me? He didn’t start quoting Scriptures. He didn’t condemn me. He didn’t tell me I was headed for hell. He simply encouraged me to take responsibility. He told me I had done the right thing by choosing to father the child.”

He paused as a lump formed in his throat. “He prayed with me.”

A smile appeared on Gboyega’s face. “He even prayed that if abortion was truly what I wanted, God would help me.”

Nike blinked. “What?”

“Exactly.”

“By then I was wondering whether he was a genuine man of God.”

The two of them laughed.

“We exchanged numbers. He started calling me regularly. Praying with me and checking on me. Listening to me. Slowly, I accepted my fate. I was already preparing to tell my parents everything.”

His expression became serious again. “The Friday before Valerie and I were supposed to travel home to meet my parents, we went for an ultrasound appointment. Normally, I never went into the examination room with her. But that day I heard an argument. So I went in.”

He paused. “To cut a long story short, Valerie had attempted to bribe the doctor to prepare two different reports.”

Nike stared at him.

“The doctor refused. He was new and didn’t know her. According to the actual scan report, Valerie was already five months pregnant.”

Nike immediately did the maths. "And you had only known her for two months."

"Exactly."

A humourless laugh escaped him.

"I later discovered she, her brother, and the actual father of the child had planned the whole thing. They intended to make it appear as though I was responsible because of my family's money."

Nike slowly shook her head. "That is wicked."

"It was."

Gboyega nodded. "I was devastated. Heartbroken and humiliated."

"But I also knew something." He looked directly at her. "If I had not been living the way I was living, I would never have been that easy to set up."

His voice carried no self-pity. Only honesty. "That experience became my turning point. With the help of good counselling, discipleship, and God's mercy, I started my life over."

Nike blinked back tears. Even though Gboyega admitted he had contributed to many of his own problems, she could still hear the pain hidden beneath his words.

He had gone through his own share of heartbreak.

"I thank God for you, Gboyega," she said softly. "Not many people come out of something like that."

"Exactly." Gboyega nodded. "I still give Valerie a monthly stipend to help take care of herself and the child."

Nike looked at him in surprise.

He shrugged lightly. "I don't blame her for wanting an easy way out. Most people will do anything to get out of poverty." There was no bitterness in his voice. Only sadness. "And I keep praying that she will eventually see the light the same way I did."

Nike stared at him quietly.

For a moment, she found herself wondering how many people would have responded the same way. Most men she knew would have spent years nursing the anger and even revenge. Some would have used the story as proof that women could not be trusted. Yet here was Gboyega still praying for someone who had tried to ruin him.

Silence settled between them. Neither seemed in a hurry to speak.

Both sat quietly, reflecting on everything they had shared.

Eventually, they parted ways.

Before leaving, Gboyega promised that he would be present for the evening programme.

Nike watched him drive away before beginning the walk back to her hostel.

Her thoughts were a tangled mess. Gboyega was a man with a known and very public past. Everybody knew the stories. Everybody knew who he used to be.

Was it wise to be with a man like that? Or should she simply return to Mike and try to repair what had been broken?

The question unsettled her.

One man had a messy past but seemed genuinely transformed. The other had a spotless image but had left deep wounds behind. Or should she just avoid men at all cost.

By the time she reached her room, her mind was exhausted. She shut the door behind her and placed her bag on the floor. Then she knelt beside her bed. As she bowed her head, the only thing she knew for certain was that she needed God's direction.

So she began to pray quietly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On Monday morning, Nike was busy packing her bags while Anna and Funso sat comfortably on her bed, gisting about the fellowship programme that had taken place over the weekend.

Both of them had claimed they came to help her pack. So far, they have done nothing except talk.

As Nike pulled more clothes from her wardrobe, Funso suddenly called out, "Nike, please don't forget my shea butter. I will pay you when you get back."

"Nike, bring some for me too," Anna added. "I also need coconut oil for my hair."

She turned back to Funso. "I heard onions are good for growing natural hair. Rice water too."

Nike hissed. "Naturalists, can both of you please help me pack first?"

Anna stretched out lazily on the bed. "I am sorry, honey. I am still recovering from the weekend programme."

"Same here," Funso agreed immediately. "But don't worry, you will be fine and very soon you will get everything done." She folded her arms dramatically. "Let us just sit here and cheer you on."

Nike shook her head. She should have known better. Their presence was of absolutely no assistance. Still, they would be helping her carry her bags to the park later. And she had already decided they would carry the heaviest ones whether they liked it or not.

She folded the last of her clothes and began arranging her books. Some of them needed to go home with her.

Just then, her phone started ringing.

Looking around for it, she found it in Anna's hand.

Anna was smiling mischievously.

"Who is it?" Nike asked, stretching out her hand.

"Who else would it be if not our very soon-to-be in-law?"

Nike shushed her immediately and grabbed the phone. Even so, a smile had already found its way onto her face.

"Hello, Gboyee."

"Good morning, Adenike." His voice sounded hurried. "Where are you? Have you left already?"

Nike frowned slightly. There was an agitation in his voice that immediately caught her attention.

"No, I am still in the hostel. Hope there is no problem?"

"I will be travelling to Ibadan this morning." He paused briefly. "I wanted to know if I could be of any assistance with your trip since you are going to Ogbomosho."

The sadness in his voice became more noticeable.

Nike sat upright. "Hope everything is alright? You didn't mention travelling to Ibadan during our chat last night."

There was a brief silence.

Then Gboyega answered quietly. "We lost a very close family friend early this morning. He worked with my parents for over twenty years. He lives in Ibadan, and burial preparations have already started. I need to be there today."

Nike's heart sank. "I am very sorry to hear that." Her voice softened. "Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you."

She hesitated before continuing. "I will get back to you about travelling together in the next five minutes."

"Alright. No problem. I will be waiting."

After ending the call, Nike turned to her friends. Both of them had clearly been listening.

"Gboyega is travelling to Ibadan," she explained. "He asked if I would like to travel with him. He is going for the burial preparations of a close family friend who died this morning."

She paused. "I don't know if it is proper to travel with him."

Anna immediately sat up. "Is his character questionable enough for you to have reservations about travelling with him?"

"No."

"Is he your friend?"

Nike nodded. "Yes and he is a great guy."

Anna shrugged. "Then what exactly is the problem? It is a drive home, not a marriage proposal. He is simply being thoughtful and caring like any good friend should."

She pointed at Nike. "Stop adding unnecessary drama to a simple act of kindness."

"And stop acting like a prude," Funso added. "You like the guy." She grinned wickedly. "And you know he likes you too, before you start forming Miss Prim and Proper."

The two friends burst into laughter.

"You people are not serious." Nike rolled her eyes and picked up her phone.

A few moments later, she called Gboyega back and informed him she would be ready in an hour.

He agreed to pick her up at the hostel.

After ending the call, she hurriedly finished packing her books and moved her luggage closer to the door. Then she rushed off to take her bath.

Forty-five minutes later, Gboyega called again. This time to let her know he had arrived. He also told her not to rush.

Funso and Anna suddenly became remarkably helpful. Without being asked, they immediately started carrying her bags downstairs.

Nike knew exactly why. They wanted to see Gboyega. After finishing her makeup, she picked up her remaining bags and headed towards the car park.

Gboyega was already waiting.

The moment he saw her, he stepped forward and collected the bags from her hands. Then he carried them to the boot and arranged them with the luggage Anna and Funso had already brought down.

The two girls expressed their condolences over the loss of the family friend.

Gboyega thanked them sincerely. After exchanging a few more words, Anna and Funso finally left.

Nike watched them walk away before turning back. A few moments later, she and Gboyega entered the car.

He pulled out of the hostel car park without saying much.

Nike tried several times to start a conversation above the music playing through the stereo, but his responses were mostly limited to monosyllables.

She eventually gave up. Whatever was weighing on him was heavier than casual conversation.

As they joined the main expressway, Gboyega reached forward and switched off the stereo.

The sudden silence filled the car. Then he spoke. "Can you please join me in praying in tongues?"

Nike turned towards him immediately.

"I am feeling a bit down, and I would appreciate it if you could agree with me in prayer right now."

She nodded. Without hesitation, she began praying.

At first, both of them prayed quietly. Softly. Almost under their breath.

But as time passed, Gboyega's voice grew stronger. More intense.

Nike matched his pace.

The two of them continued praying as the kilometres rolled by beneath the tyres. They only stopped when they got to the toll gate before Ogun State.

Gboyega pulled over briefly and bought several loaves of bread and snacks. When he returned to the car, he handed them to Nike.

"These are for your family." Nike smiled.

"Thank you very much, Gboyega."

"You are welcome, dear." He started the car again.

Then he sighed. "And I am sorry for not being a good travel companion today." His eyes remained fixed on the road. "I am still trying to process the man's death."

Nike nodded in understanding. “Was he a believer?”

“Yes.” A small smile appeared on his face. “Uncle FG was a Christian and he loved God deeply.”

“Then we should not mourn like those who have no hope.” Nike’s voice was gentle. “He is in the best place possible.”

For the first time since the journey began, Gboyega smiled properly. He glanced at her briefly before returning his attention to the road.

“Thank you for that. I am grateful for your support.” He paused. “To be honest, I am not really struggling because of his death.”

Nike looked at him curiously.

“It is his children that worry me. Their mother abandoned them when they were young. Since then, they have been extremely close to their father. He was everything to them.”

His expression grew thoughtful. “And I honestly don’t know what state of mind they are in right now.”

“How old are they?”

“Alex, the eldest, is married and lives in Germany with his wife. Cassandra just finished university and Andrew is in medical school.” He shook his head. “I know they are not children anymore. But they have suffered so much heartbreak already.”

His voice softened. “Their father suffered alongside them for years. He should be alive now to enjoy the fruit of his labour.”

“Gboyega.” Nike reached across and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. “He is in a better place. I know God will keep his children the same way He has always kept them.”

She squeezed his shoulder lightly. “You and your family just need to be there for them. With God’s love and your support, they will be alright.”

“My mum will definitely take care of them.” A faint smile appeared on his face. “At one point, Alex and Cassandra were very close to my brother Akin. I don’t know what happened along the way.” He shrugged. (*Read my next book Feigned Innocence*)

He paused and continued, “But I will support them and continue praying for them. Don’t worry.”

Nike smiled. “I will support you in prayers too.”

“Thank you, Adenike.”

The way he said her name was warm. Personal.

Then he changed the subject. “So, what have you decided about our conversation on Saturday?”

Nike frowned. “What conversation?”

“Pastor Mike.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “That. I met him after the programme to tell him I would be travelling today. I also told him I would like us to meet when I return.”

“Oh, okay.” Gboyega nodded.

Then after a moment he added, “Just make sure you meet somewhere you would be comfortable.”

“I will.”

Nike understood immediately. Not because she believed Mike would assault her. But because she knew the conversation they needed to have would be difficult. And she had no intention of having it in an enclosed space.

Silence settled between them again. Nike turned slightly and looked at Gboyega. The sunlight filtered through the windshield as he navigated the roundabout ahead. Who would have imagined that the same man she had once dismissed and judged would become one of her closest confidants?

The thought made her smile.

Almost immediately, Gboyega turned and caught her staring.

Nike quickly looked away and fixed her eyes on the passing scenery outside her window.

A slow smile spread across Gboyega's face. “Adenike.”

She pretended not to hear.

“Adenike.”

Still she kept looking outside.

His smile widened. “Please look at me.”

Slowly, she turned back. A little shyly.

Their eyes met.

“There are some things I would like us to discuss when I get back.”

Nike's heart skipped.

He continued before she could respond. “By then, you should have spoken with Pastor Mike.”

She nodded. Unable to trust herself to speak.

“Also,” he added, “I would appreciate it if you could attend the burial. You don't have to worry about transportation. I will send one of the drivers to pick you up from Ogbomoso.”

Nike stared at him for a moment. Something in the way he spoke made it clear that the burial was not the only reason he wanted to see her when he returned. And from the look in his eyes, she suspected he knew she understood exactly what he meant.

“I have to travel back to Oregun on Sunday.” Nike frowned slightly. “I don't know if I can make the burial.”

“The burial is this Friday.” Gboyega kept his eyes on the road. “The children agreed that they didn't want a noisy affair.”

“But what would I be doing there?” The questions tumbled out before she could stop them. “I don’t even have what to wear to your kind of gathering. What would your guests say when they see me there? I don’t even know anybody.”

Gboyega chuckled softly. “Calm down.”

Nike immediately realized she had fired off all her concerns without giving him a chance to answer. Still smiling, Gboyega removed one hand from the steering wheel and gently separated the hands she had unconsciously clasped together.

“First of all,” he began, “you would be with me.” His voice was calm and reassuring. “And even if I am not with you, my brothers will be there.”

Nike relaxed a little.

“All you need is a black dress.” He glanced at her briefly. “And I know you have one because you wore it during your programme last week.”

A reluctant smile appeared on her face.

“Finally, people will simply assume that you are my friend.” He shrugged. “Which you are. You don’t need to know everybody.”

Nike nodded. Outwardly, she appeared unaffected. Inside, however, her heart sank slightly.

My friend. The words echoed in her mind. Of course they were friends.

What else were they supposed to be? Still, she quickly pushed the thought away. Refusing to dwell on it, she decided to negotiate instead.

“I will come on one condition.”

Gboyega laughed. “Which is?”

“You are not sending a driver to pick me. Ogbomosho to Ibadan is barely two hours. I can get there myself.”

“If that’s what you want, no problem.” He nodded. “But I would really appreciate it if you come.”

Nike smiled.

“Alright then. I will come.”

After a brief silence, she added, “Just drop me at the junction. It would be easier for me to get a cab home from there.”

Gboyega immediately shook his head. “No.”

The answer came so quickly that Nike looked at him.

“Please let me drop you at the car park.” His tone softened. “I don’t trust all these roadside lifts. I would be worried.”

Nike tried not to smile.

Gboyega continued. “I would have dropped you at home myself if not for everything happening right now.”

“Alright, no *wahala*.” She finally relented. “Although car parks can take forever to fill up.”

Her heart immediately performed a small, giddy dance.

I would be worried. The words lingered in her mind. She quickly reminded herself that he had also called her his friend. Nothing more. Just a friend.

Still, she found herself smiling anyway. The rest of the journey passed in comfortable silence.

Eventually, Gboyega drove into the motor park. Before she could protest, he paid her transport fare. Then he helped her bring down her bags. After making sure she was settled, he finally left.

Nike stood there watching his car disappear into the distance before turning towards the waiting vehicles.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

One week passed quickly, and Nike returned to campus on Sunday. Her friends came around almost immediately to welcome her back. She shared the goodies she brought from home between her friends and roommates and kept some aside for members of the ushering unit.

Her mother had also taken the time to fry chicken and meat for her to bring back to school. After putting the meat aside, Nike brought out her pots and began preparing dinner.

She had bought fresh pepper and vegetables from the campus market and planned to make *efo riro* and chicken stew. As she washed the pots, Funso sat nearby cutting vegetables while Anna turned the garri they planned to eat with the soup.

Looking up from the bowl of garri, Anna asked, "Nike, you never finished telling me about the burial you attended."

Funso immediately looked up from the vegetables. "That is true." She pointed the knife in Nike's direction. "You only sent pictures of what you wore. What were the family members like? Did they act superior or somehow funny towards you?"

Nike rinsed the last pot and smiled. She moved closer to her friends, partly to join the conversation and partly to avoid her roommates listening in.

"Gist us now." Funso narrowed her eyes impatiently. "Or what is all this fashion parade that you are doing?"

"Calm down," Nike laughed. "I will gist you." She lowered her voice. "Come closer so my roommates won't hear."

Handing the pot to Anna, she sat on one of the kitchen stools. "Girls, the burial was simple but classy." She paused. "Even though it was a burial, the calibre of people that attended showed just how connected Gboyega's family is."

Both Anna and Funso exchanged glances.

"The deceased was actually an employee of his father, but he was also a very close confidant of the family." Nike shook her head.

"What surprised me most was discovering that Gboyega's family already knew about me."

That immediately got their attention.

"Really?" Anna asked incredulously. She almost forgot the garri in front of her.

"Yes." Nike nodded. "His mother came over to greet me personally and his brothers also said they had heard a lot about me."

Funso dropped the vegetables completely. "What?"

Nike laughed. "I was looking at Gboyega's face for an explanation. But he just kept looking elsewhere and avoiding eye contact."

"I go love ooo." Funso dragged the words dramatically.

“The guy obviously likes you enough to tell his family about you,” Anna added.

“Well...” Nike shrugged uncertainly. “Maybe. He did say he has something important to discuss with me after I speak to Pastor Mike.”

She hesitated. “But I don’t want to dwell on it.”

“Why?” Funso asked immediately.

“Because he called me his friend on Monday.”

The two girls stared at her.

Then Anna spoke first. “Babe, just relax.” Her voice softened into what Nike often called her *Sister Coordinator voice*. “Let’s give him time. If he says something, good. If he doesn’t, then maybe you two are simply meant to be friends.” She pointed at Nike. “And don’t allow anybody to lead you on.”

Nike nodded.

Meanwhile, Funso had started snickering.

Nike turned sharply. “What is funny?” “Please don’t shout at me.” Funso raised both hands defensively.

“I just remembered how you used to behave.”

Nike narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Funso grinned. “You practically crucified that poor man because he didn’t look or act like a MOG.”

Anna burst out laughing. “Honestly, we were all being stupid.” She shook her head. “How exactly is *acting like a Man of God* the criteria for being in a relationship?”

Nike smiled. “Like I told Pastor Mike, God doesn’t need actors.”

“Exactly.” Funso nodded vigorously. Then she changed the subject. “So when are you meeting Pastor Mike?”

“Today by five p.m.”

Immediately Anna became serious. “Please make sure it is somewhere open. And don’t provoke him. You know he has a lousy temper.”

“I know.” Nike nodded.

“Gboyega also advised me to meet him somewhere I would be comfortable.” She smiled unconsciously. “And he told me to call him before and after the meeting so he would know how it went.”

The moment the words left her mouth, Anna and Funso exchanged a look. Then they both burst into laughter and high-fived each other.

Nike rolled her eyes. “What is wrong with both of you now?”

Funso pointed at her dramatically. “The man is protecting his investment. One man’s loss is another man’s gain.”

Anna immediately joined in. “Yes now.” She laughed. “One man’s ‘I am not ready to be serious with you’ is another man’s ‘I have been waiting for you my whole life.’”

The two girls dissolved into another round of laughter.

“Wonderful.” Nike shook her head. “Well done, madams.” She pointed at the vegetables and the pot. “Can we please finish making this soup? I am hungry.”

The three friends immediately returned to what they were doing, still laughing as they continued preparing the meal together.

At four forty-five p.m., Nike arrived at Nature Parks. She had chosen the venue carefully. It was private enough for a serious conversation but not secluded enough for either party to feel uncomfortable.

Immediately she arrived, she called Gboyega and informed him of the venue.

Afterward, she settled down and waited for Mike. By five-thirty, he finally arrived.

Sauntering towards her table as though nothing had happened between them, he offered a brief apology for being late before taking his seat. Nike slid the bottle of Coca-Cola she had purchased towards him and he accepted it.

After exchanging the necessary pleasantries, she decided not to waste time.

“Pastor Mike—”

“Just call me Mike.” He interrupted her immediately. The familiar boyish grin appeared on his face. The same grin he often used whenever he expected her to overlook something.

Nike shook her head gently. “I am sorry, but I can’t call you Mike anymore.”

His smile disappeared.

“You are my pastor.” She paused. “And that is all you will ever be.”

The anger in his eyes was immediate. “Then why did you call this meeting?” His voice sharpened. “I thought you were finally ready to give us another chance.”

Nike took a slow breath. “Pastor Mike, a lot has happened between us.” She folded her hands in her lap. “I called this meeting because there are certain things I needed to discuss with you.”

When he said nothing, she continued. “I am sorry for the way I spoke to you last time. No matter what happened between us, you are still my pastor. I should have shown more respect.” She lowered her eyes briefly. “I want you to forgive me for any insults or pain I may have caused you.”

Mike waved the apology aside impatiently. “I have nothing against you, Nike. You know that.” He leaned forward. “But none of what you are saying addresses our relationship.”

Nike met his gaze steadily. "That relationship ended a long time ago."

The words hung between them.

"You are a gifted man. And if you deal with certain issues in your life, you will make a wonderful husband someday." She paused. "But I cannot be your wife, Mike."

The muscles in his jaw tightened. "Is this because of what you saw with Caroline?"

Nike remained silent.

"We didn't even have sex." His voice rose defensively. "You know how these girls throw themselves at me. Sometimes I try not to be rude. But I have never given them the sex they are looking for."

He sat back. "Honestly, you should be grateful for that."

Nike stared at him as he continued.

"All pastors are chased by women. It is the responsibility of the wife to understand that nobody can take her place as the first lady and her duty to keep protecting his ministry with prayers. I introduced you as my fiancée before the church to show how serious I am with you alone. Yet somehow that still wasn't enough." He shook his head. "Nike, don't you think you are the one who needs to deal with your insecurities?"

For several seconds, Nike simply looked at him. The amazement on her face was impossible to hide.

Then she spoke quietly. Very quietly. "Yes. Women throw themselves at different men. Pastors, Members, Celebrities, Everybody." She nodded. "But it takes a disciplined man to walk away." Her voice remained calm. "Even loose women know which men are not available for those games."

Mike shifted uncomfortably.

Nike continued. "I would never tolerate disrespect simply because I want to become a pastor's wife or a first lady." She shook her head firmly. "God forbid! Some pastors may behave that way. But not all pastors."

Her eyes held his. "Some men have not lost the character called discipline, self-control and temperance." She deliberately kept her voice level despite the anger building inside her.

Mike smirked. "So this new guy has gotten you hot and bothered."

Nike frowned.

"I have never seen this kind of fire from you before." His grin widened. "And honestly, it turns me on and makes me want you even more."

Nike immediately stiffened.

"You are burning for him." He licked his lips. "And now you're finally showing some passion."

A wave of disgust washed over her.

"Geez." She physically recoiled. "When did you become this crude?" Her voice carried genuine sadness. "This is not you, Pastor Mike."

She shook her head slowly. "Don't let this position make you so swollen-headed that you lose sight of who you really are. Drop the act and draw closer to God." Her eyes softened. "I will continue praying for you."

Mike ignored her completely. Instead, he stood. "So you want to leave me for him?"

Nike said nothing.

He laughed bitterly. "You know what? Good riddance to bad rubbish." Then he looked directly at her. "You were boring anyway."

The words landed like a slap.

Before Nike could respond, he spat the Coke onto the ground near her feet and stormed away.

Nike remained seated. For several moments, she simply stared at the path he had disappeared through. This was not how she imagined the conversation would go.

Not even remotely.

Eventually, she lowered her head. Then she did something she never expected.

She knelt down right there, in public and without caring who was watching, she prayed.

Not for herself.

For Mike.

She prayed for his heart, his walk with God, for restoration, humility and healing. About fifteen minutes later, she finally rose to her feet and began walking back towards the hostel.

Along the way, she called Gboyega and recounted the entire conversation. He listened carefully. Then encouraged her once again to keep praying for Mike. He also cautioned her not to repeat every detail of the discussion to others except those she trusts.

"Don't give people reasons to gossip about him," he advised. "Disrespecting him won't solve anything and it won't change the situation."

Nike agreed.

Later that night, she met Anna and Funso in Anna's room and told them what had happened.

Funso hissed loudly. "That guy is a complete disappointment." She folded her arms. "I pity the woman that eventually marries him."

"The more reason we should pray for him," Anna replied immediately.

Funso rolled her eyes but did not argue. Deep down, she knew Anna was right.

A few minutes later, all three girls agreed on the same thing. They would pray for him together. And they would also continue praying for him individually in their private devotion.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Three weeks later, Gboyega returned to school. There was only one week left before the next semester resumed. Most students rarely resumed during the first week. Some even returned after the second week had already started.

The first-semester holiday usually coincided with Christmas and New Year celebrations. Many students travelled to their villages. Others, especially those from wealthy families, travelled abroad.

The people usually left behind on campus were final-year students, some cultists who had nowhere else to celebrate, and fellowship executives.

Gboyega had originally planned to remain on campus throughout most of the break and travel home for only a week during Christmas and New Year. But Uncle FG's death had changed everything.

His project work was already far behind schedule. His original plan had been to complete most of it before the semester resumed.

Today, however, his project was the last thing on his mind. His thoughts were occupied by only one thing.

Nike.

Last week, he had fixed today as the day they would finally have their conversation.

The conversation.

The one he had replayed in his head countless times. The one that had somehow managed to make him nervous. Ridiculously nervous.

He still couldn't believe that he was this anxious about telling a woman how he felt. If his siblings saw him now, they would never let him hear the end of it. Even Chidi, who had stopped by earlier that morning, spent most of the visit teasing him because he kept checking the time every few minutes.

In a moment of desperation, he had even called Pastor Bankole earlier to ask for prayers. Thinking about it now would have made him laugh under normal circumstances.

Not today. Today was different.

What if she said no? What if she became uncomfortable? What if he had completely misread everything?

Immediately he pushed the thought away.

No. He had prayed. He trusted God.

Walking towards his wardrobe, he finally settled on slim-fitting navy jeans, a black round-neck shirt, and a jean jacket. Casual would work, especially very casual. Anything too formal would only make him more nervous.

After putting on his Adidas sneakers, he checked the time again. Fifteen minutes. Nike was always punctual. He grabbed his car keys immediately and left before he had enough time to talk himself out of the entire thing.

True to form, Nike was already preparing long before the agreed time. She had worn the outfit Anna and Funso had selected for her earlier that morning. Though Gboyega hadn't told her exactly what he wanted to discuss, deep down she hoped it was what she thought.

Still, she refused to assume anything. Instead, she called her cousin. Over the past few months, she had told him about her growing friendship with Gboyega, and he had consistently encouraged her to pray and trust God's leading.

Right now he was the only person she knew who could calm her nerves. After speaking with him for almost twenty minutes, she touched up her makeup, checked herself one last time, and left the hostel.

When she arrived at Nature Parks, she found Gboyega already seated, staring at his phone. The moment he saw her approaching, he stood up.

Nike smiled.

A part of her remembered asking him earlier why he specifically chose Nature Parks. His answer had surprised her. He wanted her to remember the place for something good. Not for the painful conversation she had with Mike. But for something better. Something beautiful.

As she sat down, Gboyega immediately tried distracting himself from his nerves. "So how were the holidays in school?"

Nike smiled. "The holidays were great. I didn't miss home that much because my friends were around. Funso didn't travel because her parents went to the UK to spend Christmas with her elder sister."

"So it wasn't boring." Gboyega coughed lightly. Then almost under his breath he asked, "So you didn't miss me?"

Nike immediately looked away. A smile threatened to appear on her lips.

"I missed you." She answered quickly. "At least you have become my good friend."

"Good friend?" Gboyega placed his hand dramatically on his chest. "So I have been officially friend-zoned." He shook his head. "Now I finally understand the pain behind Adekunle Gold's *Friend Zone*."

Nike frowned. "I don't understand what you are saying."

Gboyega laughed. "I am teasing you."

For a moment silence settled between them.

Then he cleared his throat again. "But seriously, Adenike." He leaned forward slightly. "What is all this friend business? Don't you think we can do something about it?"

Nike tilted her head innocently. "I don't understand. What exactly are you talking about?"

Gboyega rubbed his palms against his jeans.

Nike watched him carefully. This was the most nervous she had ever seen him.

He ran a hand across his face before finally speaking. "Nike..." His voice softened. "I would like us to take our friendship deeper."

The playful confidence was gone now. Only sincerity remained. "I love you."

Nike's heart immediately began pounding.

Gboyega continued. "And I would love to spend the rest of my life with you." He smiled nervously. "I didn't see any vision. No dream. No angel appeared to me."

A laugh escaped Nike despite herself.

Gboyega smiled too. "But what I know is that I have found the one woman I want to spend forever with."

Nike lowered her gaze. The sand beneath her shoes suddenly became very interesting.

Gboyega reached for her hand. "Nike." Slowly he lifted her chin until she looked at him. "I am stupendously in love with you." His voice was barely above a whisper. "My heart races whenever I think about you. And that happens every day."

He smiled. "You are God's masterpiece. Inside and outside. Sometimes I think I finally understand why Adam saw Eve and immediately knew she was different."

Nike felt her face growing warmer. She looked away again.

Then she asked softly, "Are you sure all these feelings are not just infatuation? Or maybe the devil is trying to confuse you?"

Gboyega shook his head so quickly that Nike almost laughed.

"No. Absolutely not. The devil cannot create something this beautiful."

Nike laughed despite herself. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

His expression became serious again. "Adenike, you are one of God's greatest gifts of mercy to me. He squeezed her hand gently. "I love you. And I promise to do right by you. In the short time I have known God, and in the short time I have known you, I have discovered that you are everything I admire. Everything I respect. And so much more than I ever hoped for in a wife."

Nike's cheeks flushed deeply. She lowered her eyes once again.

Gboyega smiled and gently turned her face back towards him. "Talk to me." His voice carried equal parts hope and fear. "Please, just say something. Anything"

Finding the courage to finally look into his eyes, Nike saw the depth of emotion sitting there. Sincerity, hope and vulnerability. For once, the usually confident Gboyega looked as though his entire future depended on her next words.

“Gboye,” she said softly. “I honestly don’t know what to say.” She lowered her gaze briefly. “Can you give me some time to respond?”

“Of course.” His answer came immediately. “You can take all the time you need.” He smiled reassuringly. “But if you have questions, please ask them. I would rather answer your questions than leave you confused.”

He shifted slightly in his seat. “To be honest, I would have waited until I returned from my MBA. But I decided I didn’t want to delay this any longer.”

Nike sat quietly.

Part of her wanted to laugh at herself. She already knew her answer. She had known it for a long time. Maybe since the praise concert. Maybe even before then. Whenever she was with Gboyega, she felt at peace, safe, seen and respected.

The problem wasn’t her feelings. The problem was everything else.

“What would people say about us?” The question escaped before she could stop it.

Gboyega blinked. Then slowly a smile spread across his face. Inside, his heart was already celebrating.

“Adenike,” he said carefully. “Can you think of at least five things people would say?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He folded his arms. “Mention them.”

Nike raised her fingers one after the other. “First, people would say I am with you because of your money.”

“One.”

“Second, people would say I am foolish for dating a man with your past.”

“Two.”

“Third, people would say you are only pretending because you want to sleep with me.”

“Three.”

“Fourth, people would say I am using you to get back at Pastor Mike.”

“Four.”

She took a deep breath.

“And fifth, people would say we are already sleeping together or that you would eventually break my heart.” The words lingered between them.

Gboyega nodded. “Exactly.”

Nike frowned. “Exactly?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “People will always talk.” He leaned forward. “The question is whether any of those things are true.”

Nike immediately shook her head. “No.”

“Do any of those accusations reflect your heart?”

“No.”

“Do they reflect mine?”

She thought about it. “No.”

“Then we don't have a problem.”

The simplicity of his answer made her smile. “But you are travelling abroad.” Her voice softened. “I have never been in a long-distance relationship before. People say they hardly work.”

Gboyega shook his head. “That is for people who don't know what they want.” Then he looked at her. “If we were married and I travelled abroad, would we get divorced because of distance?”

Nike laughed despite herself. “No.”

“Exactly.” He squeezed her hand.

“I will call. I will visit during the holidays. And you can visit me too.”

Nike immediately frowned. “I don't even have a passport.”

“That is the easiest problem to solve.” The confidence in his answer made her laugh.

Then he became serious again. “So? Are we doing this? Or do you still want time?” His expression softened. “Either answer is okay.”

Nike looked away. Then another concern surfaced. “What if your parents don't like me?” What if they think I am after you because of your family's money?”

Gboyega burst into laughter.

“Denike.” He held both her hands. “My parents already love you.”

Nike blinked. “What?”

“They knew about you long before the burial. I was the one begging them not to overwhelm you.”

Nike stared at him.

“Even my brothers know about you. My pastor knows about you. My friends know about you.”

Nike suddenly became very quiet. Everything around her seemed to fade. The questions, fears and doubts. All of them suddenly felt smaller.

Gboyega gently squeezed her hands. “You don't have to answer now. I mean that. If you decide you only want friendship, I will respect that and I won't pressure you.”

Nike finally lifted her eyes. For several seconds she simply looked at him. Then she whispered, “Yes.”

Gboyega froze. For a brief moment, he genuinely thought he had imagined it. "Sorry?"

Nike smiled shyly. "Yes." This time there was no hesitation. No uncertainty. "Yes."

For several seconds Gboyega simply stared at her. Waiting. Expecting her to change her mind.

When she didn't, a grin slowly spread across his face. Then before she could prepare herself, he pulled her into a hug.

"Thank you." His voice was thick with emotion. "Thank you, dear. I love you."

Nike laughed softly as she tried to free herself. "Let me breathe first."

Reluctantly, he released her.

She adjusted her clothes and shook her head at him. "I will still have questions. Lots of questions. And it is not because I am insecure." She pointed a finger at him. "When I am confused about something, I ask questions."

"No problem." He smiled. "I welcome every single question." His expression softened. "And I promise to do right by you. I love you dearly and I want you to know that you will always be special to me."

Before she could respond, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead gently. Then he released her again.

"But I have to inform the counselling committee." Nike immediately became serious. "The pastor and patron of the fellowship may also need to know. Those are the rules of my fellowship."

"I will go with you." His answer was immediate. "To anyone you need to meet."

Nike smiled. "Hope Pastor Mike isn't disturbing you again?"

Gboyega asked.

Nike shook her head. "He recently announced his engagement to a lady in another fellowship." She laughed softly. "And he ended the announcement by saying, 'All things work together for good.'"

Gboyega smiled knowingly. "To be fair, he isn't entirely wrong."

"No." Nike nodded. "He isn't."

"It is well." Gboyega glanced at his wristwatch. "Speaking of things working together for good, it is getting late. I want to stop by Chunkies and get us dinner before dropping you at the hostel."

Nike immediately shook her head. "No, you don't need to buy me anything."

Gboyega stared at her. "You just agreed to be my girlfriend. That deserves celebration." He looked around dramatically. "Besides, we have been sitting here for over an hour. You cannot tell me you are not hungry."

"I am fine. You don't have to spend money on me." The determination on her face told him this argument could continue indefinitely.

So he changed tactics. "When was the last time you ate?"

Nike hesitated. "I ate bread this morning. And I have stew in the hostel." She folded her arms. "To be honest, I am okay." Then she smiled mischievously. "I thought you didn't like people cooking for you."

"I enjoy my own cooking when I have the time." He shrugged. "But there is nothing wrong with fine dining."

He pointed towards the road. "Besides, Wellington's Place has the best smoky jollof rice on campus."

Nike laughed. "So this is about food?"

"It is always about food." He stood up and stretched out his hand.

"Come with me to get dinner." His smile widened. "Please."

"Fine, no problem." Nike already knew Gboyega was still going to find a way to buy the meal. The moment they settled into the car, she quickly opened her phone and sent a message to Funso.

Please lend me 10k.

She stared at her bank app screen. Her account balance wasn't enough. But she wasn't about to start this relationship with Gboyega, spending on her every chance he got. Her pride would not allow it. Her mother always said, *"Not having enough should not change one's name."* Nike believed that deeply. She was not a liability, she never wanted to become one and will prove that to him.

As he drove, Gboyega kept stealing glances at Nike through the mirror. Something was off and he just couldn't place it. She looked distracted and restless.

He knew she wasn't comfortable with him buying dinner. But honestly, he didn't understand why. It was only dinner. Nothing extravagant or serious.

Hopefully, with time, she will relax. Because if he was being honest with himself, he intended to take care of her the way he believed a man should care for the woman he loved.

By the time they arrived at Wellington's Place, several cars were already parked outside. A few students immediately waved at Gboyega. Some greeted him. Others looked curiously at Nike standing beside him.

Gboyega greeted them casually and continued walking. Nike noticed every stare, every glance and every whispered observation. Gboyega, meanwhile, appeared completely oblivious. He opened the car door for her. Then opened the restaurant door as well.

Nike's face warmed. That simple gesture alone already announced to everyone that she was someone important to him. The reality of what life with Gboyega might actually look like suddenly hit her, people noticing, talking and watching their every step.

The thought overwhelmed her and her chest tightened. She started coughing. Immediately, Gboyega abandoned whatever conversation he was having and rushed to her side.

A waiter hurried over. "Please get me a glass of water." Then he turned back to her. Concern was written all over his face. "Nike, dear, are you okay?"

She nodded. "I am fine." Taking a deep breath, she added, "I just had a little panic attack."

"A panic attack?" Without hesitation, he guided her towards a seat in the VIP section. "Why?"

Nike shook her head. "Nothing."

"Nike." His voice softened. "Please tell me. I am genuinely concerned." The waiter arrived with the water.

Gboyega thanked him and handed the glass to her. Nike took a few sips before finally speaking. "You are popular."

Gboyega blinked. "Okay."

"And now I am..."

She hesitated. "Your female friend. Or girlfriend. Or buddy."

"Fiancée." The correction came immediately.

Nike looked up. "Huh?"

"You heard me." He leaned back comfortably. "You are my fiancée."

Nike stared.

Gboyega smiled. "I understand this feels overwhelming. Trust me, I do. But I am going to marry you, that's what this is about. I can never engage in casual relationships as a Christian."

The certainty in his voice made her heart skip as he continued.

"So yes, this period is our courtship. We are getting to know each other. We are building something." He reached for her hand. "One day at a time. No pressure. I want us to build the kind of friendship that survives distance. The kind that survives misunderstandings. The kind that survives life."

He smiled warmly. "So don't focus on everybody else. You are still Adenike. And I am still Gboyega. Nothing has changed."

Nike felt herself relax. "Thank you." She smiled. "Seriously, thank you."

"Good." He nodded. "Now, since I am taking my dinner home, I am also ordering dinner for you."

"Gboyega, please—"

"No, Nike." He pointed at her playfully. "I am ordering food for you and your friends." That is the least I can do today. In heaven they are celebrating this union and the co-celebrant is refusing dinner."

Nike laughed despite herself. "Please. I am not comfortable with that." At that exact moment her phone vibrated. She glanced down.

Credit Alert.

Funso had sent the money. Immediately Nike straightened. "As you are also a co-celebrant, we are splitting the bill."

"Excuse me?" The bewilderment on Gboyega's face almost made her laugh.

"Yes. We are splitting it."

"Nike, I heard you." He shook his head. "Even when we were just friends, I wouldn't let you split a bill with me. Please don't raise that issue. It isn't a problem."

"Gboyega, you cannot be the only one spending."

"I have not even started spending."

Nike burst out laughing.

He continued. "Besides, Wellington's was my idea. So let me spend. You can spend another time. Thank you, ma."

Nike rolled her eyes. But she was smiling.

Eventually they placed their orders and picked up the food.

As Gboyega drove her back to the hostel, her phone started ringing.

It was Funso. Nike immediately lowered the volume before answering.

"Hello."

"Madam." Funso's voice came through immediately.

"Hope you are not in trouble?"

Nike laughed. "I am fine. I am on my way back to the hostel."

"What did you need ten thousand naira for?" There was obvious suspicion in her voice. "You are still with Gboyega, *abi*?"

"Don't worry." Nike smiled. "I will send it back. And I will gist you later. She ended the call.

Beside her, Gboyega glanced briefly in her direction. The conversation had been short. But he understood enough that Nike was very uncomfortable with him spending money on her.

He decided not to mention it. Not tonight. Some things would take time. And he was willing to give her that time.

When they arrived at the hostel, Gboyega helped her bring down the food packs.

Before she left, he held her hands and prayed with her. A simple prayer. Thanking God for the day, their relationship, wisdom, grace, and for the future.

When he finally finished, Nike smiled and thanked him. Then she carried her bags and food packs upstairs. The moment she opened the door to her room, she froze.

Funso was already there, waiting. Her arms folded and eyes shining. She was looking like a journalist who had finally secured an exclusive interview. Nike sighed. The gist tribunal was officially in session.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Funso, Nike, and Anna walked back to the hostel, the rain suddenly intensified. Students scrambled in different directions, running toward the nearest buildings for shelter. Some dashed into lecture halls while others squeezed under corridor roofs. By the time the three friends got to the Geology Museum, they were already damp from the rain.

Funso coughed and tried to swat the droplets gathering on the back of her blouse. Just then, Nike's phone rang and she glanced at the screen, it was Gboyega. The corner of her lips lifted immediately, her friends smiled at each other but neither of them said anything.

Nike answered. "Hi, babe."

Immediately, Funso and Anna clapped their hands dramatically and mimicked her.

"Hi, babe."

"Hi, babe."

Nike rolled her eyes. "I am here with Funso and Anna, but we are waiting at the Geology Museum."

"I can come back to campus and drop you girls off," Gboyega offered immediately.

Nike glanced at her friends. "Don't worry. We have already ordered a ride."

"Ah!" Funso exclaimed quietly and turned sharply toward Anna for support. Anna simply shook her head.

"Alright, babe," Nike continued quickly. "Thank you. I will let you know when I get to the hostel and after I am done meeting Pastor Babs."

"Okay then. Take care."

"Bye." She ended the call before he could change his mind. Then she slowly raised her head.

Two pairs of eyes were staring at her, waiting and judging already.

"You guys don't understand," Nike began immediately. "He was already outside campus and he was planning to drive all the way back just to pick us."

"Even so," Anna said. "You shouldn't lie to him, Nike."

"Mummy Anna," Nike groaned, "You know Gboyega would insist on coming back and I can't keep burdening him like that."

"Nike," Anna said patiently, "I agree that you shouldn't inconvenience people unnecessarily. But you also shouldn't make lying a habit because you are trying not to burden them."

Nike sighed. "Fine! I will book a ride now. That balances out the lie. And I will tell him the truth later."

"Uh-huh." Funso folded her arms. "Till then." Then she added casually, "Anyway, I already booked the ride while you were talking to your babe."

Nike clapped her hands, "You see—"

“Please spare me.” Funso cut in immediately, “I genuinely don’t understand why you constantly feel guilty receiving help from somebody you are dating.”

“We are not dating.” Nike corrected, “We are courting.”

“Whatever.” Funso waved dismissively, “The Gboyega I know won’t even understand the problem you are creating.”

Before Nike could respond, a blue Toyota Corolla pulled up in front of them and Funso checked the plate number and nodded. “Let’s go.”

The three friends hurried into the car.

When they arrived at the hostel, they rushed into the reception area to escape the rain. Anna immediately continued toward her block while Funso remained behind with Nike.

From the corridor, Anna called out. “Funso, are you not going to your room or did Nike cook?”

Nike responded before Funso could answer. “Her crush is coming to visit, so she is sticking to me like glue.”

“What do you mean by that?” Funso demanded. “I was watching a Korean series on your laptop. That is why I am going to your room.”

Anna smiled knowingly, “Please, what time is Pastor Babs coming?”

“In about an hour.” Nike said smiling at Funso

“Alright.” Anna nodded. “I will see you girls later or tomorrow morning.” Then she looked at Funso, “Touch up your makeup. Your lips are dry.”

“Please.” Funso rolled her eyes, “I am not interested in anyone. Much less a pastor.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Nike and Anna replied together and the two friends burst into laughter.

Funso hissed loudly. Nike grabbed her hand and dragged her toward her block while Anna continued toward hers.

Back in the room, Nike headed toward the kitchen area. “Funso, can you please help me check the food?”

“I checked it ten minutes ago. It is fine.”

“Please check it again.”

“I can’t, I am trying to rest.” Funso adjusted herself comfortably on the bed. “Not supervise your cooking.”

“But you are going to eat the food.” Nike reminded her. “*Abi?*”

“You won’t deny me that privilege now.” Funso replied without looking up and continued watching Mirrors on Nike’s laptop.

A few moments later, there was a knock on the door. From the kitchen, Nike shouted, “Can you at least get the door?”

“Yes, madam.” Funso stood reluctantly. “Who is there?”

“Funso, it is Babs. Can I come in?”

Immediately, Funso straightened. “Yes, you can.” She quickly adjusted the bedsheet, smoothed her clothes, checked herself in the mirror and pretended she had not done any of those things.

Nike stepped into the room just in time to catch the performance. She bit back a smile as Babs walked in.

“Good evening, Nike and good evening, Funso.”

“Oh, Pastor Babs!” Funso replied dramatically.

“Good evening.”

Then she narrowed her eyes. “Wait. How did you know it was me that opened the door?”

“I know your voice.” Babs replied casually. Seeing the hopeful look on her face, he quickly added, “Everyone knows your voice. Right, Nike?”

“Oh.” Funso’s face fell for a split second before she quickly recovered, “Wonderful.” She returned to the bed and resumed her movie.

The awkward silence that followed was almost amusing. Nike quickly rescued the situation, “Please sit down.”

Babs sat while Nike pulled up a chair opposite him. “I don’t think you have visited me once this semester. Is this how you take care of your cousin?”

“But we talk almost every week.” Babs laughed, “And I know you are doing well.”

“That is not enough.” Nike pouted.

“Okay, I am sorry.” Then he smiled. “But Gboyega is in the picture now. He is doing a good job looking after you and you also have the fabulous Anna and Funso.”

Funso smiled from the bed. “I didn’t know family responsibilities had been delegated to me.”

“But you are family too.” Babs replied immediately.

“What are you talking about?” Funso blinked.

Momentarily speechless, Babs quickly changed the subject, “Besides, I chat with Gboyega almost every week. He always tells me you are fine.”

Nike gasped dramatically, “So you sent Gboyega to spy on me?”

“It is not spying where you are concerned.” Babs leaned back. “And we have a gentleman’s understanding.”

“Really?” Nike looked amused then turned to Funso, “Did you know about this?”

Funso shook her head as she continued staring at Babs.

“Gboyega did not tell me anything about a gentleman’s understanding.” Nike continued, “But I know he told me you were among the first people he spoke to about our relationship.”

Babs pointed at her triumphantly. “See? Even before he officially asked you out, I was already in the picture.”

“Wow, he never told me that.” Nike got up from her seat then looked at the time on her phone and immediately changed the topic, “What would you like to eat? Funso and I made vegetable soup and oatmeal.”

“Speak for yourself,” Funso said immediately. “I didn’t make anything.”

Nike laughed. “I thought you would want to take credit.”

“I am good.” Funso sat up proudly, “I am an independent woman and I don’t do all those cooler ministry things.”

“Uhhmm.” Babs murmured under his breath, “Independent woman indeed.”

Funso’s head snapped toward him and said too sweetly, “Do you have something to say, Pastor Babs?”

“No ooo.” He lifted both hands in surrender and faced Nike, “I am very much okay, let’s gist first and I can eat later.”

He gently pulled Nike back into her seat, then he smiled, “So, how is everything going with Gboyega?”

Nike narrowed her eyes. “I thought you said you people have a gentleman’s agreement. What else do you want to hear from me?”

“Give me the tea.” Babs leaned forward, “What is going on? Where has he taken you? I want all the details.”

Funso dropped the laptop onto the bed immediately, “Yes o! Now we’re talking.”

Nike burst out laughing, “I never knew you were into gossip, Pastor Babs. I thought it was only the Holy Spirit and evangelism you knew.”

“Please.” Babs rolled his eyes, “I am every inch a human being. And when I meet my wife, I plan to spoil her silly too.”

“Oh well.” Funso’s face fell for the briefest moment before she quickly recovered. She folded her arms. “Your cousin here has chosen to become an ambassador for poor virtuous women. She keeps refusing to allow Gboyega to spoil her silly.”

“Funso!” Nike protested, “Watch your words. I am not poor in Jesus’ name. And a man doesn’t need to buy me expensive things before I know he loves me.”

“So how can he show you love?” Babs asked.

“Thank you!” Funso pointed dramatically at him, “*Baba Oko Mi*, thank you for that question.” Then she faced Nike. “Pray tell us, virtuous woman, how can he show you love?”

“By his actions.” Nike answered simply.

“Is spending on you not an action too?” Funso fired back immediately.

“It is.” Nike nodded, “But I don’t want money to become the foundation of our relationship. There is a time for everything and I want us to get to know each other first.”

“Ah!” Funso threw up her hands, “Pastor Babs, I didn’t know there was a timetable for collecting from a man. *Abi* it is hidden somewhere in the Bible and some of us have not reached that chapter yet?”

Nike laughed despite herself. “It is not about a timetable. I just don’t want Gboyega thinking I am with him because of his money.”

“*Eh yah*,” Funso shook her head dramatically, “Sorry o, all the women that helped him spend money before *nko*? Did he sue them?”

Nike rolled her eyes. “Funso.”

“No, answer me.” Funso continued. “What other women are praying for, fasting for, and speaking in tongues about. Looking for a man that will buy them designer bags. Take them on vacation and elevate their lives. You are here doing Mother Theresa. The guy is loaded and every woman’s dream.”

Babs shifted uncomfortably. “Funso, everything is not about money.”

Then he looked at her carefully. “Are you saying you cannot be with a man that isn’t wealthy?”

Funso sat back and defended. “I can! But he must aspire for more. He cannot be comfortable with peanuts. I have standards.”

“That is you.” Nike replied. “I want Gboyega to know I love him regardless of money or no money.”

“Well.” Babs smiled slightly, “To be honest, there is no ‘*regardless of money or no money*’ with Gboyega.”

The girls laughed.

“It is true. He comes from old money and affluence. You cannot date him and separate him from that reality. It is part of who he is.”

“Exactly!” Funso pointed triumphantly. “She is there splitting bills on dates. The other day Gboyega joined us for lunch, he was so embarrassed when she brought out her card to pay.”

Nike immediately turned to Babs as she countered. “But Gboyega didn’t complain to her.”

“He doesn’t have to.” Funso answered before Babs could, “It was obvious. He was embarrassed and we were also embarrassed. Because we all knew you were trying to prove a point.”

Nike opened her mouth to respond. Funso didn’t allow her and turning dramatically to Babs, she announced, “Your cousin is even planning to take a loan to buy him a birthday gift.”

Silence followed while Nike shot daggers at Funso. She should not have told Funso her plan.

Babs stared, “Nike, is that true?”

Nike looked away, “Well... I know he would go the extra mile for my birthday.”

Babs sighed. “But taking a loan is a stretch. Nike, the Gboyega I know would not mind if you bought him nothing, he would still be happy. The man is already excited that the two of you are together. There is no reason to put this kind of pressure on yourself.”

He paused and then added gently, "I am sure he already knows you are not with him because of his money."

The room became quiet while Nike lowered her eyes. Maybe he was right and maybe she had already made her point but no one understood, his wealth and affluence made her feel like she brought little to the table but voicing that out only made her look insecure.

After a moment she looked up. "Do you know what my mum said when I told her who I was dating?"

"What?" Funso and Babs asked together.

Nike smiled, "She said, '*money is the root of all evil.*'"

The three burst into laughter. Then Nike continued. "And she told me not to get carried away by the affairs of life."

"Look," Babs began, leaning forward slightly, "dating a poor man is not proof of righteousness."

The room fell silent. He continued as the two ladies stared intently at, "It is the character and heart of a man that matter."

He pointed at Nike for emphasis. "Gboyega is a very solid guy, I don't know if he has shown you his target board or discussed his future plans with you when he travels for his MBA, but if I had genuine concerns about him, I would have said so."

Nike nodded slowly. "I know, we are currently building a friendship that can withstand the distance." She smiled slightly. "I have spoken with his pastors, I have spoken severally to his mum and dad, I have spent time with his brothers too."

Then her smile faded, "But on my end, Mum and Dad are not that receptive. Especially after they heard from my sister, Fisayo, that Gboyega offered to buy her a laptop."

Babs frowned, "What?"

Nike nodded, "I didn't even know Fisayo asked him for a laptop. Mum called me afterwards and warned me not to be distracted. She said he was trying to use money to bribe his way into the family."

Funso sighed loudly, "See accusation."

Nike laughed despite herself while Babs shook his head and said, "Leave Mummy to me. I will see her during the holidays." Then he smiled, "Trust me, Gboyega is always offering to help people. It has nothing to do with bribery. He is currently sponsoring several students and has helped people secure IT placements. He pays school fees quietly and he doesn't even announce most of these things."

Babs shrugged, "If you have resources and a heart to help people, you help. It is that simple." He paused before continuing, "I know how determined he is to make things work between both of

you. But beyond all the conversations and planning, I will still tell you the same thing, leave everything to prayer and if you are genuinely convinced about him, God will handle the rest.”

Nike smiled, “Okay, I will try.”

Babs studied her face and then something suddenly occurred to him, “Wait, have you told him about Pastor Mike?”

“Yes.”

Babs sat up immediately, “You did?”

Nike nodded “Yes.”

“I know the counselling committee had already approved the relationship. But is Mike still disturbing you?”

Nike sighed, “Nothing serious, he is just throwing his usual jabs.” She shrugged, “Honestly, I am tired of giving him attention, hopefully after this semester I would have handed over my roles and by God's grace, our paths won't cross that often anymore.”

“Better.” Babs nodded firmly, “Set firm boundaries and protect your peace. Some battles are not worth revisiting.”

The room fell quiet for a moment then Babs looked at his wristwatch, then rubbed his stomach dramatically, “Now please ladies, bring my dinner.”

“Pastor has spoken.” Funso immediately jumped to her feet, “Let me help with that.”

Nike folded her arms, “I thought you were an independent woman.”

“I am.” Funso replied confidently and then she pointed at Babs, “But I am also my brother's keeper.” She grinned mischievously, “And since he has officially declared me family, it is only right that I take care of my brother.”

Babs laughed, “See this girl, who is your brother”

Nike shook her head, “You just want to eat first.”

“That too.” Funso admitted without shame as she headed toward the kitchen.

“Let's not pretend otherwise.” Babs echoed as the two ladies left to the kitchen.

EPILOGUE

One month became a year. Then before Nike knew it, two years had passed. Her relationship with Gboyega had blossomed into something far greater than she had ever imagined. He had recently completed his MBA program in Canada and should have returned home already. Instead, he explained that there were still a few things he needed to sort out before returning to Nigeria permanently.

Nike packed her books and prepared for her meeting with her project partner. She was now one of the few final year students still staying in the hostel. Funso had moved off campus in their four hundred level and now rented a one-room apartment.

Anna had transferred to another hostel. As for Nike, she hardly spent time in her room anymore. Most weekends found her at Gboyega's house off campus. Before leaving for Canada, he had formally introduced her to his entire family. They had welcomed her with so much warmth that at times she forgot she wasn't born into the Benson family. His sisters were not as openly affectionate as the others, but neither were they distant. They all treated her kindly, respectfully and like family already. She still had her insecurities and sometimes felt overwhelmed about how wealth they were but hopefully she will fit in with time.

Her own parents were still somewhat reserved around Gboyega, they were not hostile but just cautious. They acknowledged that God would ultimately determine who she married. Their greatest concern was simply that nobody should deceive their daughter. Thankfully, Gboyega had spent the last two years proving himself repeatedly and hopefully, one day, her parents would fully relax around him.

But beyond family approval, Gboyega himself had been incredible. Despite the time difference, he never missed their nightly video calls. When he visited Nigeria during holidays, he spent as much time with her as possible. The last time he came home, he bought her a MacBook and personally set up Skype for her before leaving. She knew most of his friends in Canada. She even had his roommate Jai's number and called him whenever Gboyega became unreachable.

Though she had never travelled to Canada herself because of her parents, Gboyega made sure she never felt excluded from that part of his life and even on the rare days when communication became difficult, the love between them never seemed to diminish. There was always understanding and trust.

This week, however, felt different. For almost a week now, reaching Gboyega had been unusually difficult. Ordinarily, it might be a day or maybe two, but never this long.

His phones were not going through. His roommate Jai always claimed Gboyega was either sleeping or away. The only consistent communication came through emails.

Whenever she asked what was happening, his response remained the same. Busy.

Travelling. Sorting things out.

She wanted to believe him and so she did, for now.

Her phone rang as she entered Administrative Lecture Room Three. Balancing her books against her hip, she checked the screen, it was Funso again. This was the third time she had called that evening.

Nike answered immediately, "Hello, Funso."

"Where are you?" Funso asked.

"I am at Admin Lecture Room Three. I am waiting for Tom. Are you coming?"

"Okay." The line disconnected.

Nike frowned. "Okay *ke*?" She stared at her phone and then shook her head as she rang back, Funso was not picking.

She entered the lecture room and sat down. The hall was unusually empty, for a Tuesday evening, that made no sense. Perhaps students were reading elsewhere. After waiting for about fifteen minutes, she decided to call Tom, just as she reached for her phone, something happened.

The walls lit up, at first she thought it was a projector malfunction. Then words slowly appeared across the wall, large, bright and impossible to miss.

ADENIKEMI, WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Nike froze. For several seconds she simply stared. Her brain refused to process what she was seeing. Then she slowly turned around and stopped breathing.

Gboyega was kneeling behind her, on one knee and a ring box rested in his hand.

For a moment the entire world disappeared, then the doors opened and people began trooping into the hall. Friends, family, pastors, siblings, all the people she loved and respected. All the people who had witnessed their journey, Funso, Anna, Pastor Babs, Gboyega's brothers, his parents and even her parents.

Nike blinked repeatedly. Surely she was imagining this, then she saw her mother again standing beside Mrs. Benson. Both women were smiling through tears while recording the moment on their phones.

The sight nearly broke her.

"Mummy?" Her voice cracked.

Gboyega cleared his throat dramatically. "Darling, I am still on my knees."

Laughter erupted around the hall.

Nike looked back at him. "How did you pull this off?" The words rushed out, "Where have you been? I have been so worried. I have been calling and calling—"

"I know..." His smile softened as he cut in, "...and I am sorry." Then he chuckled. "I have actually been in Nigeria for two days."

Nike gasped. "What?"

"I spent the last two days finalizing plans with my parents." Then he pointed toward her family, "And last night I was with your parents."

The room erupted again.

Nike's eyes widened. "You did what?",

"I officially asked for permission." His voice softened.

Then he opened the ring box. "Adenike." The hall became silent, "I have loved you through friendship, through distance, through waiting, through growth. You have become my safest place, my prayer partner, my best friend, my home."

His eyes glistened. "Will you say yes now?"

Tears rolled down Nike's cheeks. But another thought immediately surfaced.

"Aww, Gboyega." She laughed through tears, "Are you sure?"

The crowd groaned dramatically.

"Yes!" Gboyega answered immediately.

"No, I am serious." She wiped her eyes, "Just today somebody called me a gold digger on social media when an anonymous blog wrote about us."

Gboyega shook his head, "Adenike, you are not a gold digger."

Funso screamed from the back, "Say yes first!"

Nike pointed at her immediately, "Keep quiet!"

The hall burst into laughter.

She turned back to Gboyega, "I am serious."

"So am I." He smiled. "You are not a gold digger." Then he paused, "Besides, I don't even have gold buried underground for you to dig."

Nike frowned. "What?"

"The gold is already above ground." He grinned mischievously. "So maybe 'gold trailer driver' is the correct title."

"Get out!" Nike hit his shoulder.

The crowd laughed loudly.

Funso was practically jumping now, "Madam! Will you answer this man before his knee expires?"

By now everyone was laughing, even Nike. Looking around the hall, at her parents, his parents, their friends, the people who had supported them from the beginning, then back at Gboyega. This man had patiently loved her through every fear, question and doubt.

She smiled and whispered, "Yes."

The hall erupted.

Gboyega blinked. "Sorry?"

Nike laughed through tears. "Yes, of course yes."

Before she could say anything else, Gboyega slipped the ring onto her finger and pulled her into his arms. Cheers exploded around them, Funso and Anna screamed and cried openly, while the parents applauded.

And for the first time in two years of waiting, praying, trusting, and growing together, neither distance, fear, nor people's opinions stood between them anymore.

Gboyega kissed her forehead. Then, unable to stop smiling, whispered into her ear, "Thank God you finally said yes."

"Thank God you said yes." He repeated more loudly while looking through the room.

Nike laughed softly as he pulled her into another hug, for so long she had been afraid of making another mistake, afraid of trusting the wrong person or giving her heart away again. But Gboyega was different. He was kind, godly and was safe.

Surely that meant the hard part was over. Didn't it?

GLOSSARY

Abeg / Abegi — Please; also used informally to express impatience, disbelief or exasperation.

Abi — Right? / Isn't it? / Or what? Used to ask for confirmation.

Ajeji — A stranger or foreigner; someone from outside a particular community.

All na wash / Wash — It's all pretence, nonsense or something not to be believed. In the story, Nike uses "*Wash!*" jokingly when she doesn't believe Funso's declaration of affection.

Ashawo — Prostitute; can also be used as a derogatory insult.

Baba — Literally "father," but informally used as a friendly or respectful way of addressing a man.

Babe — An informal way of addressing a female friend or young woman.

Ehn? — What? / Really? / Huh? An expression of surprise, confusion or disbelief.

E jo, ẹ má bínú — Please, don't be angry. (*Yoruba.*)

Expo — Unauthorized examination answers, notes or materials used to cheat during an examination.

Fresher — A newly admitted or first-year university student.

Gist — News, gossip or an interesting story. *To gist* means to chat or tell someone what happened.

Jacking — Studying or reading intensively, especially in preparation for an examination.

Jare — An informal Yoruba expression used for emphasis. Depending on context, it can convey "please," "come on," "anyway," or simply strengthen what has just been said. Funso uses it in expressions such as "*We bless God jare.*"

Jonzing — Being unrealistic, unserious or delusional; dreaming about something unlikely to happen.

Madam — A respectful or playful way of addressing a woman; depending on tone, it can also be teasing or sarcastic.

Mummy — A respectful title used for female leaders in some Nigerian Christian fellowships. In the story, Anna is often addressed as “Mummy Anna.”

Na — Nigerian Pidgin for “is,” “it is,” or “that’s,” depending on context.

Na so — Literally “that’s how it is,” but it can also be used sarcastically to mean “Yeah, right” or “Sure.”

No wahala — No problem / No worries / It’s fine.

O — An expression added to the end of statements for emphasis. Its meaning depends on the context and tone.

Oga — Boss; a respectful or familiar title for a man in authority or someone senior. In the story, it is also used for respected male fellowship leaders.

Omo! — Literally “child” in Yoruba, but commonly used as an exclamation meaning something like “Wow!”, “Man!” or “Oh my!” depending on context. Funso uses it when she hears Gboyega sing: “*Omo, see voice!*”

Pepper dem — Nigerian slang associated with looking impressive, showing off or making others envious. A *pepper dem girl* generally refers to a fashionable, confident, attention-grabbing woman.

Sef — Used for emphasis in Nigerian Pidgin. Depending on context, it can mean “even,” “actually,” “anyway,” or add emphasis to a question or statement.

Sha — An informal Nigerian expression used to soften or qualify a statement; roughly “though,” “anyway,” or “at least,” depending on context.

Sharp well well — Very smart, alert or streetwise.

Shey — Isn’t it? / Right? / Did you? Used to seek confirmation.

Slay Queen — Slang for a fashionable, glamorous or image-conscious young woman.

SU — Short for *Scripture Union*; commonly used in Nigerian student culture as a label for someone perceived as very religious or particularly devoted to Christianity. Your novel introduces Nike as being tagged “SU.”

Wahala — Trouble, difficulty or a problematic situation.

Wetin — What.

Worded — Nigerian Christian slang for someone who is very knowledgeable about Scripture and can readily quote or explain Bible verses.

FROM THE DESK OF THE SIMISOLA

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Caught in the Middle*. I hope you enjoyed Nike's story and the journey of love, faith, healing and forgiveness woven through these pages.

My next book will be available soon, and I'll be sharing updates on Instagram and X (Twitter) at @simisolawrites. You can also read an excerpt below for a little glimpse of what's coming next.

I'd genuinely love to hear from you. Your thoughts, reflections and feedback are always welcome. You can reach me personally via email at thesimisola@gmail.com, or join the conversation with me on social media.

Thank you again for reading, and I hope you'll stay with me for the next story.

With love,
The Simisola

FEIGNED INNOCENCE

Akin looked around at the members of the drama department as he addressed them.

"For our upcoming drama night, according to the script, we need a female worship leader to take on the role of Susan."

He turned to the assistant drama coordinator, Mrs Petrak. "Ma, I don't know if you were able to meet with the music director to table our request."

The middle-aged woman adjusted her skirt before answering. "I met with Minister Sam last Sunday, and he recommended Cassandra Okafor, the new worship leader, your family friend, for the role."

The members responded enthusiastically, especially the men.

"She is perfect for that role. There is something about the way she sings."

"The lady is a Spirit-filled music minister."

"I love how she ministers. My spirit gets lifted every time she leads us in worship."

Mrs Petrak shushed everyone and continued. "I believe she would do justice to the role. She has the innocence and chaste character expected of the character."

"Innocence?" Akin repeated, bemused, as an unpleasant memory from years ago came rushing back.

He had been twenty-seven then, and Cassandra only nineteen.

He had been taking a nap in her brother's room when she woke him. What began as an awkward conversation quickly became something he had never expected.

"I want to be with you," Cassandra insisted. "I know you like me, and I like you too."

Akin sat up immediately, uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading.

"Sandra, no. You're too young for this. If, when you're older, you still feel the same way, I will properly court you. But right now, you need to focus on school. All I can be to you is a brother."

She refused to accept his answer and continued trying to persuade him. Akin remained firm, putting distance between them.

"We cannot do this, Sandra."

Before he could say anything more, the door suddenly opened just as Akin tried to get up from beneath Cassandra, who was still in the process of removing her clothes.

Alex stood there. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Alex, calm down," Akin said quickly. "It's not what you think. Nothing happened."

But Cassandra began to cry. She moved towards her brother and, before Akin could understand what was happening, said the words that would change everything.

"He lured me into your room and tried to rape me."

Akin stared at her in disbelief.

The next thing he knew, Alex's fist connected with his eye.

Back in the present, Akin slowly shook his head.

"Innocence," he repeated.