

Valley of *Decisions*



KEMI OYEDEPO

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Finally, to those who follow and have learnt a thing or two from Crisis-Proof Your Family (CPYF); I'm humbled.

I'm praying for you from the depth of my heart that in your life and in your family, the name of the Lord will be glorified!

If there is any crisis or storm in your life right now, I decree peace! Be still in Jesus name. Amen!

Peace & blessings,

~Kemi Oyedepo~



EQUIPPING YOU. EDUCATING YOU. ENRICHING YOUR FAMILY LIFE.

“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision...” – Joel 3:14

This is dedicated to you, regardless of what stage of life you may be in. May the decisions you make concerning your relationships and other areas of your life, move your destiny forward.

LAILA

It was a beautiful day in Baron and the weather smelled nice, engulfed in the bloom of flowers and the brightness of the shining sun. I had asked for a table outside but the café was full to the brim. There were people everywhere so we settled for a table in the middle of the café.

I was staring at the couple sitting beside us with their baby; they looked so in love, giggling and holding hands. I smiled wishing I was that lucky lady. The smile I had quickly faded as I turned back to continue my conversation with my boyfriend. I had asked him a very important question but he refused to give me the answer.

He looked up from his phone, stared at me for a few seconds and carried on with whatever he was doing on his phone. I wanted to grab the phone out of his hands and fling it as far away as possible. Instead, I banged my hands on the table and said, "I am getting so tired of you stringing me along Ben; enough of this. Do you want to marry me or not?"

Taken aback, he looked at me like I was crazy but still managed to catch the bottle of lemonade that almost fell off the table.

"Laila, look I have told you more than a thousand times that we will get married when the time is right," he said. "Stop putting pressure on me, okay?"

I stared at him blankly and began to think about my life. How did I get myself into this mess? This is not what I had in mind at all. I had done everything possible I knew to do. I had spoken up, poured out my heart, and even dragged Ben to every relationship seminar I heard of, just to get him to commit to me.

Nothing seemed to work!

In fact, we had just taken a one-day road trip out of town to Rockville, for yet another relationship seminar and decided to stop somewhere for a snack as we headed back home.

We had already eaten but I told him I wanted us to talk about something very important before we left. I needed to get this over and done with.

His voice and the snapping of his fingers brought me back to reality. "Laila! Hello! Did you hear me? I said are we good to go?"

I was upset at his utter disregard for my feelings, and before I knew it, I was yelling, totally ignoring the stares I was getting from the people around.

"I never put pressure on you! How many times do I have to remind you that you need to meet my parents? We have been in this thing you call a relationship for seven years and my parents don't know anything about you." I paused to catch my breath. "If they'd never spoken to you, I doubt that they'd believe you exist. Does that make any sense to you?"

Ben looked around the cafe embarrassed as he removed his wallet from his pocket.

He looked at me disapprovingly.

"I think it's time to leave," he said and sighed loudly as he opened his wallet and brought out a few bills.

"Look, I've told you I will meet them when I am ready to propose to you. You're being a drama queen." Ben folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "If that's not good enough for you, too bad!"

I also leaned back as I let out a frustrated sigh, struggling to keep myself from slapping him hard, right across the face.

"I've had it, Ben!" I blurted out. "You're not going to keep playing me for a fool. What do you mean by when you're ready to propose? Exactly how much longer do you need to make up your mind?"

I didn't wait for his response.

I was close to tears and started talking loudly to myself as I placed both my hands on my head. "Laila, why are you doing this to yourself? Why would you allow anyone to treat you...?"

Ben stood up abruptly before I could finish my sentence, and just as he was about to grab his jacket, I stood up and shoved him back into his chair.

By this time, I could hear some murmuring and giggling around me, but I didn't care.

Not now.

He looked at me shocked and said, "You need to get yourself together and stop making a scene. If I didn't want to be with you, don't you think I would have gotten lost a long time ago?"

I sat down abruptly and picked up my fork, ready to throw it at him.

I was too slow. He almost knocked the table over trying to dodge my pitch.

“Stop asking me silly questions,” I yelled. “What about me? Are you thinking about how all this makes me feel?” I laughed. “No! Of course, you’re not. It’s all about Ben. It’s all about Benjamin Manda. As long as everything is working out for you, his royal highness, no one else matters. Not even me; the woman you claim to love,” I said as I rolled my eyes dramatically.

I started to calm down as I noticed the puzzled stares from around the cafe. I admit I shouldn’t have been so dramatic but I had taken more than enough of this. I can be a drama queen sometimes but anyone who knows Ben won’t blame me. He hardly takes anything seriously. I could feel a migraine coming and my tears were getting closer to the surface but I was not going to let this man make me cry so I guess I felt yelling was a better option.

The baby beside us suddenly burst out screaming. That was my cue to end this drama I was playing out in front of all these strangers. As much as I didn't want to, I finally succumbed to the irritated and disapproving stares shot my way, so I lowered my voice.

I leaned forward and began to whisper. "Don't call me a drama queen, Ben. I just want to be sure of this path that we've been on since Noah started building the ark."

He suddenly burst out laughing like he had heard the joke of the century. His laughter was aggravating my migraine and I seriously reconsidered holding back that slap. He took a sip from his glass of lemonade and looked straight at me. "I am done talking about this," he said. "Since you're obviously not in a hurry to get back home, let's talk about something else. How's that employment discrimination case you're handling?"

I couldn't believe him. He dismissed me just like that! I waved him off. "I don't want to discuss that with you," I said. "We are not done with this conversation. You think I don't see that you are brushing me off again?"

Ben knew I loved my job as a lawyer and I could talk about it even in my sleep. Anytime he wants to change the conversation – which is often, he begins with my cases at work. Many times, I fell for it but I made up my mind that not this time. I was done with him treating me like a little child he could wind around his little finger.

I looked him straight in his eyes, channelling every emotion I felt in that moment to him, and said, "I am giving you this ultimatum for the final time, Ben. My parents will be here in 2 months and I expect you to do right by me or..."

He slammed his glass on the table and pointed his finger at me. "I would advise you not to finish that statement, Laila Ocheng. I won't take that from you."

I was about to respond when my eye caught a waitress storming towards our table. At that moment, Ben stood up, grabbed his jacket, flung the cash on the table and stormed out without saying a word to me.

I called out to this man who had chosen to make a complete fool out of me.

"Ben! Don't walk out on me! Let's end this conversation here. Ben! Ben Manda..."

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Excuse me, ma'am. It's time for you to leave. You are being a nuisance to the customers here." She stood there with a scowl on her face and her hands on her hips.

I began to pack my things together. "Me? Leave? A nuisance? How?" I asked. "I was just trying to have a conversation with my boy..."

She cut me off with the wave of her hand. "Yes, we all heard. You have spent seven years with him and you have nothing to show for it." She said this while rolling her eyes and shaking her ring finger in my face. I didn't miss the laughter that erupted from the two ladies on the other side of my table. I wanted to shrink.

I stood up. "I won't dignify that with a response; otherwise I may end up in jail tonight," I said. "Excuse me," I angrily muttered as I intentionally brushed past her, and scurried through the café, towards the door.

I stepped outside and began to walk to where we had parked the car, Bay 7. I remember because that is how long I have wasted on Ben. 7 years of my adult life; and just like the waitress said, I have nothing to show for it!

I was fuming so much on the inside that I didn't realize I was at bay 13. I walked back to bay 7 and I was greeted by an empty parking bay. "Where is the car?" I screamed to no one in particular. I refused to believe that Ben left me here, over two hours away from home.

I paced back and forth between the bays in disbelief and looked around, hoping the car would magically appear with Ben in it. There was no sign of him.

I stood in the middle of the parking lot, looking helpless. I couldn't hold back the tears anymore. I lowered myself to the ground, leaned on a car and let the tears flow.

Every. Last. Drop.

I don't know how long I sobbed uncontrollably for but I didn't stop until I was interrupted.

"Excuse me. Are you alright?" I looked up and saw a gentleman standing in front of me, handing me some tissue.

I stood up and began to dust myself off. "Uhm. Yes, I am just fine. Thank you for this," I said as I reached for the tissue.

I was too embarrassed to say anything more so I walked away from him as quickly as I could. He called out to me but I ignored him.

I suddenly stopped and frantically searched through my handbag for my cell phone. I called Ben, and it rang for what seemed like an eternity before he bothered to pick up.

"Hello!" he said hastily.

"Ben! You have got to be kidding me," I said in disbelief.

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Laila, what do you want?" he asked.

If I could grab his throat through the phone, I would have. "Are you serious?" I yelled. "Ben, you left me here in the middle of nowhere. Are you insane? How do you expect me to get home?" I asked.

He had the nerve to laugh. "Okay, I will come back for you if you promise not to nag me over this again."

I dropped my shoulders. "Ben, I wasn't nagging you. I only asked you the same question I've been asking for a long time. If you are no longer interested, just tell me and we can break up. Isn't that part of what we learnt today?"

He sighed. "I need more time, Laila. I don't want to rush into marriage."

More time, after 7 long years? I thought to myself. However, I didn't have the energy to get into another pointless row with Ben. At this point, all I wanted was to get home. I just needed him to come back and pick me up. "I hear you, Ben. Can you please come and pick me up?" I dryly asked.

He took his time to respond. "I need you to promise me that we won't have this conversation again for some time, Laila." Hesitantly, I said, "Whatever Ben, it's a deal."

Ben's black Nissan Altima appeared behind me in what seemed like less than a minute. He parked the car beside me and unlocked the car. I was still very upset and it showed in the way I opened the passenger door, jumped in and slammed the door shut.

He had a wide grin on his face, which I found very irritating but he didn't seem to care. He reached behind my seat and gave me a bouquet of red roses - my favourite! "I'm sorry for driving off. Please forgive me," he said.

I took the flowers, leaned back and closed my eyes. "It's fine. Let's go," I said. Remember I have my dentist appointment and I need to make it to church in time for the service this evening."

I looked at him. "I promised Rachel that I'll sit with her twin babies while she joins the choir."

His grin turned into a frown. "Yeah, yeah! I know you have to get to church," he said as he reached for his sunglasses. "You do know that once we get married, you will have to slow down on all your church duties, right?"

Oh no, I thought! We're not about to start another round on this long journey home!

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. I wouldn't let him push my buttons for a second time today. With all the calmness I could muster, I said, "Look, Ben. As I have told you time and again, not even you can separate me from some things."

"We'll see about that, Laila Ocheng," he said.

He put on his sunglasses, increased the volume of the song on the radio, and sped off before I could respond.

LAILA

"I don't know why you keep investing your time and energy into that waste of space, Laila. You deserve so much better."

"Kiki, I won't take that from you. I know you don't approve of this relationship, but please don't talk about Ben that way."

My best friend, Kiki and I were spending some time together at her place before heading out to dinner. We were in her bedroom rearranging her closet, as I gave her an update on my journey back from the seminar with Ben. She didn't like Ben, and she never could hide it, even when he was around her.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever! I hope that for your sake, this relationship is worth it in the end. You both are in completely different worlds. You are a Christian, he claims to be one. You are doing well as a lawyer; he is still playing games, claiming to be a media mogul. Both of you are just not on the same level." She flung some clothes into her laundry basket. "You keep acting as though he is the last man on earth. You need to make the decision to kick him to the curb before he does it to you."

I chuckled. "I hear ya, Pastor Kiki," I said. "I see no ring on your finger and you don't have a man but you know how to dish out relationship advice like an expert."

Kiki dramatically held her stomach and bent over like she had just been punched. "Ouch. That was a low blow sis, but I'll let it slide," she said.

I playfully blew her a kiss and laughed. "I didn't mean it," I said. "Anyway, what do you think I should do?"

She rolled her eyes again. "You know what you should do Laila, I don't need to tell you. At this point, you need to do what you need to do and make room for your heavenly baked hubby."

Kiki smiled sheepishly, which made me look at her strangely.

"What's with that smile, Kiki?" I asked.

She giggled. "Can't a girl smile sheepishly for the fun of it?" she asked, as she playfully shoved me.

"Uhm, no you can't," I said. "And did I just hear you say heavenly baked hubby? Really, Kiki?"

We stared at each other for a few seconds and burst into laughter.

"You are something else," I said as I sat down on her bed. "Anyway, I want to say you're right but at the same time, I've put way too much into this relationship. Breaking it off is easier said than done."

Kiki walked into the bathroom, shaking her head like she had some kind of revelation. She popped her head out of the door and said, "It's fear that's stopping you, my friend."

I smirked. "Really Kiki, Fear? I am not afraid of anything."

She walked out of the bathroom, shaking a nail clipper in her hand.

"You are afraid of being alone, Laila," she said. "You have been with him since you were 23. You don't want to be above 30 and single. You have also invested so much into him, and you want your dividends, girl."

I walked to her bedroom window and stared blankly. "Kiki, I have been with him for so long; I've given him so much, I've even graciously saved myself for him. Do you know how hard that has been? He has been good to wait for me."

Kiki walked over to her bed and sat down. "He has been good to wait? Laila, do you hear yourself?" She smirked. "Okay friend, if you say so."

Right from the day Kiki met Ben, she told me, "Sis, he's not yours." Of course, I didn't appreciate that because I thought she was being judgmental. While we were in law school, all I heard from her was 'let him go. He'll only do you more harm than good'. And he really has, if I am being honest with myself. In the past 7 years, Ben has been no stranger to getting into some kind of trouble. Each time, he apologized and seemed remorseful but within weeks or months, something came up again. According to Kiki, being with him has made me age faster than I should; she says I look 10 years older than I am!

"Hello! Earth to Laila Ocheng. Are you listening to me at all? You look lost in space," Kiki called.

I chuckled. "Oh, I'm sorry, Kiki. What did you say?"

"I said enough about Ben," Kiki said. "So, I met this guy a few days ago who asked me to go to lunch with him on Sunday. I agreed but I made him promise to attend the 9 am service with me, first." My best friend suddenly jumped up began to dance in front of her mirror, grinning from ear to ear. I couldn't believe it!

"A ha!" I said. That's why that silly smile was on your face earlier."

She stopped dancing and chuckled. "Maybe," she said.

"Wow! I don't think I've ever seen you blush like this, Kiki," I said excitedly. "This must be something serious. How come you're just telling me about him?"

She looked at me in disbelief. "Uhm let's see Laila, maybe because you're always going on and on about that loser... sorry, Ben. There was no way I could tell you about... drumroll, please... Timothy."

"Oh la la, Timothy," I teased. "So, tell me all about him. I want to know what he looks like and what he does. Oh wait, how did you meet him?"

Kiki laughed. "Okay, Miss Lawyer. Slow down. I didn't hear you ask if he is born again. Shouldn't that be one of your first concerns?" she asked.

I took a sip of my drink on her dresser and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Men will always bring some kind of drama with them."

Her smile faded as she stared at herself in the mirror. "No. Not this one Laila," she said. "I've been praying about him and watching him and this looking good. Very promising."

I walked over to her. "Praying about it? What for? That's over the top. Start the relationship first, girl."

She kept her gaze in the mirror and said, "Oh no, missy. I would rather be sure before stepping into a relationship that could lead to marriage."

I put my hands on my best friend's shoulders. It was time to tell her the truth. "Look Kiki," I said. "I've invested 7 years of my life into my relationship, hoping it'll get somewhere. What makes you think that yours will be so straightforward?"

Kiki shoved me and walked back into the bathroom. "Where are all these low blows coming from, Laila?" she asked raising her voice. "I know you're hurting but please give me a break. I made the decision not to jump into any relationship until I am fully ready and I shouldn't be made to feel bad about that. Besides, I don't need to be in a relationship for 7 long years just to be sure." She sighed. "I didn't say I was getting married to him tomorrow. It's still the early stages and I want to be sure before every step. Please don't take your pain out on me."

"You're right, Kiki. I'm sorry," I said as I sat down on the bed. "So... when do I get to meet him?"

"I'd rather you wait," she answered. "I want to spend a bit of time getting to know him better before I start introducing him to everyone." Kiki walked out of the bathroom with some nail polish remover and cotton wool as she sat beside me.

I was staring at her in confusion. "Everyone?" I asked. "I didn't know I was in the category of 'everyone'. That's not right, Kiki. At least I should meet him and tell you what I think."

She took my right hand and began to clip my nails. "Laila, just relax. You will meet him when the time is right. Don't pressure me, okay?"

She looked at me. "Anyway, so where are we going for dinner? Can I choose the restaurant?"

I stared at my hands. "Okay that's fine; but what's all this for? I didn't ask for a manicure," I said while wriggling my free fingers.

Kiki released a hearty laugh. "First of all, because I'm a good friend, secondly, your nails look like claws and this nail polish is chipping off." She grinned. "Thirdly, it's time to change the subject, and fourthly, I recommend we go to that brand new expensive Italian restaurant downtown."

I furrowed my brows. "Okay, that still doesn't make sense. Why exactly have you decided to give me a manicure, Kiki?"

Kiki began to recoat my nails with the same beautiful bright pink colour already on them. "Well, because I also recommend that you foot the bill tonight and I'm hoping that my act of love and service to you will make it happen."

I laughed out loudly.

Kiki picked up her cell phone and began to make a call. "I'll take that as an 'okay'. It's a good thing I have their number on speed dial."

I shoved her lightly. "You, my friend are so sneaky," I said as she made a reservation for two.

BEN

"Ben, You know you have to stop playing games with Laila at some point. Enough of stringing her along; just break it off with her, already."

Here we go again! I thought.

My friend, Matthew always has something to say when we get together. We just had lunch together and we were catching up. He never misses an opportunity to jump to Laila's defence as if she paid him.

"Matt, let's not do this now," I said as I stood up from the dining table. "I've told you I need to keep my options open. I have to be sure if I want Laila, if I want Lola or if I want Dee." I grinned. "Until I am sure, three of them remain my ladies. Besides, why are you always fighting for Laila and not the other two? They are also good women, you know."

Matthew took a bite of his apple. "Well, you have been with Laila the longest and she has not slept with you which by the way, I'm proud of her for being able to put you in your place concerning that. Secondly, she is the one who keeps bailing you out of trouble. She is a good woman, Ben." He paused. "Listen, brother, you are wrong and you know it. I'm still not sure what she sees in you. I never knew it was possible to be so accomplished yet so insecure."

I lifted up my hands and shook my head. "Please don't start with me on this again." As I cleared the dishes off the table, I paused and looked at Matthew. "Hey, and what do you mean by you're not sure what she sees in me?" I asked. "I don't appreciate that comment. I'll have you know I'm a pretty decent catch, Mr Smith."

Matthew smirked. "Tell that to the birds," he said as he followed me into the kitchen. "I cannot believe I used to think like you before. You sound ridiculous."

I tapped his shoulders, and said, "Stop acting like a saint. You were once a bad boy."

Matthew looked at me. "Exactly! The key word is 'were'. That's a thing of the past. Once I became born again, everything wrong about me got right. Remember that's why I broke up with Danielle? To start everything in my life afresh. My life has never been the same since then."

We walked out of the kitchen and headed to the patio. "How can I forget?" I asked. "It was around the same time you abruptly ended our friendship. It's a miracle that I get to see you these days. At first, I didn't see you for almost 3 whole years, Matt."

Matthew took a sip of his glass of water and sat down. "Well I needed to stay clear of a toxic environment and besides I told you why I gave it all up but you were not interested. Don't get it twisted; I'm still waiting for you to see the light."

I shook my head and said, "Not interested, Pastor Matthew Smith."

Matthew laughed a little too loudly and said, "Very funny. You don't have to be interested. Trust me, you'll come to a point when you wouldn't see it as an option. In fact, you'll be pushed to make that decision for your own good."

My facial expression was enough to let Matthew know how exhausted I was from his preaching to me. "Hold on, are you here to check up on me or preach to me?" I asked.

He looked at me un-phased and said, "Both, actually."

"Okay, preaching over," I said as I sat down across from him. "Now let's get back to the checking up on me. Actually, let me check up on you, Mr Smith. How's life?"

A huge grin appeared on his face. "Life is great. Thank God. Since the promotion at work, I have been stretched a whole lot more but I enjoy it and most importantly, lives are getting changed each day."

Matthew has always been ambitious. In fact, he has always been a go-getter. He was one of those guys who joked around all day with everyone and then at night while we were all asleep, he'd be in the library studying his way to the top. We all wondered how he excelled in school while we crawled our way to a pass mark until I caught him sneaking out to study one night.

He graduated with one of the highest grades in the entire Department of Engineering. He was one of the three fortunate Engineering graduates at our school to get a job at OXTEN, the largest chemical plant in the city, and he started out at the top. He never joked with his education and quest for knowledge. No wonder, it's paying off now.

I stared at him intently. "Every time I hear from you, you have either just been promoted or you got some type of award. There is just no stopping you, man."

Matthew looked up and said, "It is all God, Ben."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Seriously, why can't you just say thank you? Everything is always about God."

He walked over to the edge of the deck. "Ben, I can't separate myself from my lifeline so what do you expect?"

Okay, that's deep, I thought.

"You need to quit your job and become a Pastor somewhere," I said.

He turned around and said, "I won't mind that but I won't do it unless God speaks to me Himself."

I jumped up and stood beside him. "Okay let's not start that conversation again. Moving on. Who's the lady in your life?"

Matthew chuckled. "None at the moment, Ben. I'm actually ready to settle down but I'm praying and watching before I make a move."

"So there is someone?" I grinned. "Do tell."

Matthew shook his head and lifted up his hands. "Oh no. No telling going on. Not yet, anyway. When the time is right, you'll be one of the first to know."

"So is this lady even aware? You're just watching her from afar?" I asked.

Matthew smiled. "Yes, I'm watching. But that's not all I'm doing. I'm praying, and I'm waiting. I want to be absolutely sure before approaching. I'm not interested in joking around, Ben."

I rubbed my hands together and grinned, ready to impart some wisdom. "Well, while you're doing all that, let me give you some tips, bro."

He waved me off and snickered. “Thanks. But no thanks.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. “Matthew! Come on. I’ve got 3 ladies in my life and they know nothing about each other. Won't you want some advice from someone like me?”

Matthew raised his eyebrows and placed his right hand on my shoulder. “I’m praying for you, Ben Manda,” he said as he laughed. “No offence, bro but unless I want to become like you, I would never accept any relationship advice from you. We both know I don't condone what you are doing one bit.”

I shook his hand off and walked over to sit down. “Okay, Mr preacher man. Let's see how this your praying works out.”

Matthew hummed a tune and laughed. “Trust me, my prayers don't fail. They never have. They never will.”

MATTHEW

I once had the biggest crush on Laila.

Since the day I saw her 8 years ago, she has never left my mind. I met her in the Student Union and stared at her intensely. She was beautiful and carried herself with such dignity. I was young but I knew a mature lady when I saw one.

I walked up to her and introduced myself. She was new in town to attend law school. I asked for her number, which I didn't get, but she insisted that I gave her mine. I never heard from her or saw her again until that day!

That fateful day!

Ben was so excited and wanted me to meet a law student whom he was so in love with even though he had met her just 3 weeks before. He brought her to meet a group of us at a restaurant uptown. As soon as they walked in, my heart stopped beating. There she was looking more beautiful than ever. She remembered me and gave me all the excuses in the world why she hadn't called. It didn't matter then; she was with my best friend and to me, that meant it was a closed chapter.

I was a little angry that Ben caught her attention but I was convinced that she'd see through him and the relationship would end as fast as it started. My mind changed with each passing year, and I concluded that she was drawn to the bad boy, heartbreaker type of guy. I knew she had made a mistake but it wasn't my place to get involved. Besides, my relationship with Ben was quite important to me back then. I knew all the things he was doing behind the scenes and I tried as much as possible never to be around her when they were together.

"Why do women always sell themselves short?" I asked no one in particular. I was in my office staring out of my window.

"Would you like me to answer that, sir?"

I turned around to see Donna, my secretary. She's worked for me since I joined OXTEN. She is effective but can be quite intrusive. "Donna, I didn't realize you were there. Why didn't you call or knock?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said as I stood up and walked around my table.

"I called your phone several times but it had the Do Not Disturb sign on so it rang engaged. I actually have been knocking for a few minutes, sir," she said.

"That's alright," I said, stopping inches in front of her. "Is the boardroom set for my meeting?"

"Not quite sir," she said. "Mr Donjo will be late. He sends his apologies."

"Fine. Let me know when he gets here." I motioned for her to leave my office. "You may go Donna."

"Will do sir. Can I get you anything?" she asked as she made her way to the door.

"Some iced tea will be perfect. And please shut the door behind you," I answered. Once my door was shut, I began pacing around my office. "Matthew, get yourself together!" I said a little too loudly.

The sound of my cell phone vibrating on my table distracted me. It was Naomi, a lady my brother introduced me to. He thought we'd be perfect together so I took her out a few times but we never seemed to connect well. I'll return her call later, I thought.

Just about everyone, from my mother to my Pastor has the perfect lady for me. The pressure can be overwhelming! I sighed heavily and walked over to my window, staring blankly. "Holy Spirit, I need Your help. I'm trusting you to lead me," I said.

"Sir, the meeting is ready to begin." I turned around abruptly at the sound of Donna's voice. "Donna! Please learn to knock before you come in," I said frustratingly.

She sighed. "I did sir. Again, there was no response. I'm sorry to startle you."

"Fine. Please learn to wait for an answer before you come in," I said as I reached for a folder and a pen. Let them know I'll be with them shortly. Place the iced tea on my table," I said as I adjusted my tie and suit jacket in front of my full-length mirror. She placed an oval tray on the edge of my table and hurried out of my office, almost slamming the door shut. As I watched her leave, I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

I took a sip of my drink and made a beeline towards the door.

Note to self: I've really got to stop daydreaming in the office!

LAILA

"Laila. How are you? I've been calling you all day."

"I'm alright Ben," I answered dryly. "I've been busy preparing for the meeting I told you about." I snickered. "As usual, I'm sure you forgot. I'm on my way to the office right now."

"Please don't start, Laila," Ben said. "Are we still on for dinner tonight?" He sounded frustrated.

"Sure," I said.

"Good. I'll pick you up at 8. See you later. I love you."

"Yeah, you too," I said offhandedly and hung up.

Lord knows Ben is starting to irk me! My parents will be here next month and he's still not assured me that he would meet them as my fiancé.

I'll deal with that later. I was already late for my meeting and my boss was very unhappy with me.

I was led down the hall and into a boardroom; the meeting was in progress.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said as I stepped in. "The traffic was incredible and I was sp..."

Mr Donjo, my boss interrupted me. "No explanation necessary right now, Miss Ocheng. Just sit."

I did as I was told and just sat.

I hurriedly removed some folders from my briefcase and placed them on the table.

While the presentation carried on, I felt someone staring at me and I glanced back. That looked like Matthew Smith, I thought.

He smiled at me and I smiled back.

That caught the attention of Mr Donjo, who looked at me disapprovingly.

I sat up but I couldn't help but wonder why in the world Matthew was here. He looked F-I-N-E too, I thought.

When the presentation was over, Matthew made some comments, which made me realise he was the Vice President of OXTEN. I was flabbergasted!

I couldn't tell what the conclusion of the meeting was because I stopped paying attention and watched his every move. I was not focused. I had not seen this man in years and he looked more handsome than I remember.

I wondered what happened to him. Each time I asked Ben, he just told me that Matthew found God and lost his way. If this is what losing your way after finding God looks like, count me in!

I remember him getting a job here but you don't become VP of OXTEN just like that. Good for you Matthew, I thought.

"Miss Ocheng, we are waiting for your thoughts. Hello." Mr Donjo was staring at me... again.

I cleared my throat. "Oh I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

My boss let out a frustrated sigh. "I said this presentation has been thorough and robust. However, I need to know what you think about the section on dealing with employee grievances."

Okay! I really should have listened. If I heard a single word, that would have helped but I don't even know what is under that section. I will have to wing it.

I smiled. "I thought... Sir... it was thorough and robust."

Mr Donjo stood up. "Yes, Mr Smith just said that. Even I just said that. Any additional thoughts, Miss Ocheng?"

If my skin was lighter, I would have turned red. I stood up. "Oh. I agree with all remarks and I have nothing further to recommend, sir." I knew I was going to get an earful back at the office.

"Okay, Mr Smith. Without further ado, it looks like we are ready to do business with your company. We will take the entire document back and read through one more time and then come back to you with our final feedback." Mr Donjo said this while staring at me sternly.

I am in big trouble, I thought.

I didn't miss the opportunity to smile at Matthew as I followed my boss out of the office and out of the building, sheepishly.

As we walked out of the OXTEN building, Mr Donjo turned around abruptly causing me to almost bump into him. "Miss Ocheng, I don't need to know what you were thinking about in that meeting but let me remind you that daydreaming was not in your contract."

I felt like a little schoolgirl who was being told off. "Sir, my sincere apo....."

He cut me off. "Like I said in there, no apologies necessary. It must not happen again. I expect you to go through the documents thoroughly for the rest of the day and give me your contributions by 9 am tomorrow morning. No excuses, Laila."

When Mr Donjo addresses me by my first name, warning signs go off in my head. Careful Laila, I thought.

He motioned for his Personal Assistant to give me the folders, which I reluctantly collected. "Will do, sir. No excuses. Have a good day."

Without a word, Mr Donjo entered the back seat of his car and his chauffeur sped off.

I stood there looking like a lost sheep. Where do I even begin? How in the world am I supposed to finish reading a 500-page document before tomorrow morning? The thought of it made me groan. "This is going to be a very long night, Laila. This is what you get," I said to myself.

As I began to walk towards my car, I heard Matthew call out to me. "Laila Ocheng! Talk about a pleasant surprise," He said.

Talk about wrong timing, I thought. I felt dishevelled.

"Hi, Matthew Smith." I tried to smile widely. "I didn't expect to see you here today. I had no idea you still worked here. And look at you, VP. Good for you!"

He reached out for the folders. "You mean you didn't know?" he asked. "I thought Ben might have told you."

I rolled my eyes as I handed the folders over. "Ben?" I asked as we walked towards my car. "Ben is... never mind." I didn't want to start anything I couldn't finish.

Matthew got the hint. "I'll walk you to your car," he said. "You never checked on me anyway so how would you have known?"

"No comment," I said as I chuckled. I pointed to the OXTEN building and said, "You have done really well for yourself though."

We stopped by my car and I opened the door. "Yes. I'm grateful for the life I have," he said. "I should say the same about you," he said as I took the folders from him and placed them on the backseat. "I didn't know you were at Donjo & Mitchell law firm. The cream of the crop in this country is connected to your firm, you know. You're a boss lady," he said.

I waved him off and laughed. "I've been with them for a while now... Looking to become senior partner someday hopefully."

Matthew leaned on the car and smirked. "Well, that's if you still have a job."

I shoved him. "What does that mean?"

"Mr Donjo didn't seem too pleased with you today," he said as he laughed.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Oh don't worry about him. We have this special love-hate relationship. He always comes around."

He laughed again and his laughter sounded like sweet music to my ears. I found myself staring at him intensely until he cleared his throat, which brought me back to the moment. "Well," he said. "If you do lose your job, just remember you know a VP in this city who can get you a job in a hurry."

I air punched him and said, "Good joke. That's my cue to leave. It's been nice catching up. I have a pile of work waiting for me."

His smile vanished as I hurriedly hopped into the driver's seat.

"Wait, how can I get in touch with you?" he asked.

I looked at him and said, "You know where to find me."

He nodded his head and took a step back as I shut my car door.

Without another word, I drove off but I didn't take my eyes off Matthew Smith in the rear-view mirror!

LAILA

"I hope when mum and I are there, we'll be receiving some good news from you, Laila."

"Sure, dad. I always have good news." I tried to sound upbeat through the phone.

My dad sighed. "You know what I mean. It's about time we meet this mystery man of yours. We have heard too much about him and we are beginning to question his seriousness about you."

My parents would be here in two weeks. Instead of feeling excited, I'm anxious!

"Daddy! He is serious about me. We are serious about each other. We love each other. Trust me when I say you will meet him this time."

My dad chuckled. "As what? A fiancé or a friend?"

I began to pout over the phone. "Come on dad. Give me a break. This isn't easy for me."

"I know," he said. "I keep telling you that you deserve so much better. In fact, I've told you this for too long, Laila. I feel as if you're forcing this relationship. Mum and I have never put pressure on you."

"I know. Thanks, dad." I said. "You and mum have been so understanding. I am sure of what I am doing and you both will love Ben when you meet him."

Dad took a deep breath. "If you say so, Laila. We are praying for you all the same. We want you to make the best decision according to God's will." He paused. "Listen, Mum says she would call you back. She is on the phone with your sister."

"Okay dad. Talk to you soon. I love you."

"Love you too, Laila."

I hung up the phone and shut my eyes tightly. Talking to them gets much harder these days. Each time I pray, I get the signal to break it off with Ben. I know Kiki is right; I'm afraid of being single. I've been acting as if singleness is a disease or something.

I dialled Kiki's number. She picked up after the first ring. "Hello, sis. How are you? We were just talking about you," she said.

"We? Who is we?" I asked surprised.

Kiki laughed. "Tim and I of course."

These two have been inseparable from the day he came to church with her. Even though she refused to let me meet him, I kept my eyes on them during the service and as they walked out of the building, I popped out of nowhere, much to her dismay. He, on the other hand, found it very funny. We chatted for a bit and I was so impressed by him. In fact, I loved him for her a whole lot more when I met them for lunch the next day. I leaned over and told her, "Sis, I give him an 8/10." She was shocked and looked at me worried. I said, "You know there is always room for improvement, right?" That made her relax!

VALLEY OF DECISIONS

"We're at MIDAS and I was telling him about some shoes I'm sure you'd love to have," Kiki said, bringing me back to the moment.

I laughed. "Please buy them for me as a token of your love."

She laughed harder. "Girl, get out of here. How are you doing?"

"I'm good, just finished talking to my dad. It was draining as usual. They are anxious about coming down and not meeting Ben... again," I said.

Her voice got louder than it needed to be. "Laila, listen to me well. Please do whatever must be done to get him to see them. Tie him up and keep him bound in your condo if you need to. I mean, if it were up to me, he'd be history by now but since you're so bent on hanging on..."

I could hear Timothy's laughter and I was embarrassed. "Ugh, you don't need to let your boyfriend know my business, Kiki! I already know I'm desperate. No need to announce it."

Kiki sighed and lowered her voice. "I'm sorry, Laila! It breaks my heart to hear you talk like that though. You're not desperate. I think you need to see how amazing you are then you'd know that a guy like Ben is not worthy of you. I feel like I've done everything I can to show you that this is not worth it."

I chuckled. "I know. I know. I need help at this point. But I need God to send me a word. Show me a sign. Something. Anything to let me know what to do, you know?"

I knew Kiki was frustrated with me at this point.

"Girl, remember He also gives us choice and it's our decisions that determine our experience to a great extent."

She paused. "I won't say I told you so but it was obvious from the beginning. You chose, Laila. You chose to stay there and let Ben trample over you. Right now, I need you to make the decision to get out of it."

I felt the tears drop from my eyes. "Kiki, you're out," I said. "I'm sorry. Call me back when you're alone."

"Laila, I am always here for you and I'll come over tonight, okay?" Kiki said. "Do you need anything?" she asked.

I suddenly giggled. "Well, it'll be nice if I get a pair of shoes as a gift. I'm sure I'll feel a little better."

Kiki laughed loudly. "You, my friend, are something else."

I chuckled through my tears. "Well, you asked. Say hi to Timothy for me. Bye."

I hung up before she could respond.

LAILA

Knock! Knock! Knock!

I opened my eyes and noticed that it was 3 am.

"Who in the world is banging on my door at 3 am in the morning?" I asked myself as I glanced at my bedside clock.

"Laila! Laila! Laila." I heard someone screaming my name and recognized the voice.

"Kiki?" I jumped out of bed, ran down the hallway and swung the door open.

Sure enough there she was with a wide grin.

"Kiki! What is wrong with you? Why are you yelling out here like an insane woman at this early hour?" I asked.

She walked past me dragging some bags. "Do you know how long I've been ringing your bell and knocking on this door? I told you I would come over, didn't I?" She looked at me confused. "Why in the world are you dressed like this to sleep?"

I looked at my outfit and realized I was in my fitness clothes including my trainers.

"I planned on going to the gym but I dozed off," I answered. "Why are you so hyper at this time, Kiki?"

"Well, I went home and then remembered that I was supposed to check on you," she said as she made her way to the guest room.

"Since it's Saturday, I decided to just come over and spend the weekend with you. Yay!"

She stopped midway and did a little dance.

Though I was still grumpy, I had to laugh. I was glad she came. I needed my best friend. "Thanks, sis. You are simply the best of the best," I said as I followed her.

"I know," Kiki yelled from the bedroom. "Come, let's talk."

"Talk about what?" I asked. "Ben and I had a huge fight before I dozed off. I called him back to apologize and..." She threw the bags on the bed and spun around.

"What? Laila! That's enough. I will break up with that loser for you if you don't do it yourself. Look at you! You are beautiful, you are accomplished, and you are phenomenal! Why are you doing this to yourself?" Kiki looked like she was fuming.

I sat down on the bed, sulking as I took off my trainers.

"Who'd want me again Kiki? There are so many 40-plus single women out there and many of them became like that because they let go of what they had."

Kiki opened one bag and began to pull out her clothes. I could tell she was frustrated with me. "So tell me, my friend; is it better to be married and miserable or single and full of life and satisfied and fulfilled and joyful and just plain enjoying your life?" she asked.

I walked to the mirror and stared at myself. "I would rather be married, Kiki. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to be left out."

Kiki stood behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. "Laila. You have to stop looking down on yourself. It's not healthy. Obviously Ben really did a bad job with your self-esteem."

I spun around angrily and raised my voice higher than needed. "How can someone who doesn't even know God, help my esteem, Kiki? I can't believe it has taken me 7 years to realize some things. How stupid could I be?"

Kiki took a step back and put both hands up like she was surrendering. "Okay, first of all, calm down. Secondly, you, my friend are not stupid. It happens to the best of us. Better late than never, right?" She held my hands. "Besides, what does our Rev Israel always say? 'It doesn't matter how long you may have been on the wrong path; what matters is that you make a U-turn and get on the right path'." She pulled me close and gave me a hug. "Now it's time to make that U-turn."

I furrowed my eyebrows. "I don't remember that but then again, I haven't really been paying attention in church lately."

"Or attending! I was told," She said as she lightly shoved me and walked towards the closet.

I crossed my arms. "What? Why in the world would they tell you?"

Kiki laughed. "Well Miss Ocheng, everyone's been looking for you and asked me."

I slowly walked to the bed and sat down. "I guess I felt spiritually drained and embarrassed. Kiki, I really just wanted Ben to change."

Kiki began to hang some clothes in the closet. "That never happens! Besides if a person changes because of you, that change is not genuine or permanent. Come on, you know that!"

I sat there quietly staring at my best friend as she hummed a tune and put her belongings together. "You always know what to say. I'm sorry for snapping at you," I said.

She laughed and waved it off. "No big deal. Your emotions are everywhere. You're forgiven but don't you dare make it a habit, girl."

I laughed. "Yes, ma'am." Kiki changed into her pyjamas and playfully jumped on the bed. I almost fell off!

"You know what I'm thinking Laila?" she said as she leaned on me. "After you break up with Ben, you need to be single on purpose for a little while. Get to really know God's love for you. Get to know yourself better. Become content just being on your own with God. You have relied way too much on Mr Benjamin to the point that you have to have him in your life to feel validated. But you know that is a big lie."

I didn't want to hurriedly accept her words so I dryly said, "you're probably right."

Kiki positioned herself next to me and put her hand on my shoulder, giving me a side hug. "I'll tell you one thing; I'm happy you haven't slept with him. I don't know how you've done it but I'm glad you never gave in."

I smiled. "Yeah me too. Well, the fact that you were always in my business about it didn't help either, missy." Kiki burst out laughing. "Yeah I was too nosey but it's paid off, right? Look at you, you're intact!" she said as she gave me a standing ovation and sat down.

I rolled my eyes. "Intact? Really, Kiki?"

"Yes, intact. Or would you prefer whole? Undefined? Unmarked? Unbroken? Take your pick," she said as she giggled.

I looked at her in disgust. "Ugh," I said.

She shoved me lightly. "I'm serious Laila." Hello! I'm not a virgin, remember? Do you remember how I was so full of regret and shame? And how I cried for several weeks back in school?" She laughed. "You did everything you could to make me feel better but I literally felt like my life was over. I felt God wanted nothing to do with me because I messed up." She chuckled. "It was knowing and receiving His forgiveness that helped me get over every feeling of guilt. I guess that's why I was really determined to help you stay on track."

I elbowed her. "How could I forget? It was such a tough time for you. That's when you really got serious about God and dragged me along," I said laughing. "I remember exactly where we were when everything changed for you. It was at Bible study, remember?" She looked at me keenly as I continued. "When Shawn and Linda talked about the forgiveness of God. They said if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. They said we literally become brand new." I clapped my hands excitedly. "Oh remember they said God is not interested in condemning us but in correcting us and that He doesn't abandon us when we need him the most? I think that's what got to you."

Kiki burst out laughing.

"I'm serious Kiki," I said. "After that statement, you leaned over and told me, 'That was for me, Laila. No more feeling condemned'." I took her hand in mine. "I remain thankful for that day, Kiki," I said.

She looked at me wide-eyed. "Laila Ocheng! You remember all that? I'm speechless."

"Of course I do, Kiki. It was a very important time in your life. And you're a very important person in my life. I'm glad you've been here to help me through everything. I mean, I know I'm still a work in progress but you've been a great influence." I smirked. "Frankly, I think I may have slept with Ben a long time ago if you weren't such a busybody."

"Hey!" She yelled as she shoved me. "If that's your way of saying 'thank you', you're welcome."

We smiled at each other and hugged tightly. I stood up and pulled her up. "Okay enough about my drama. Let's go get some ice cream while you give me the scoop on you and Timothy. You guys have been hanging out so much. This is serious. Go Kiki," I teased. Kiki blushed and started to do a little dance as she twirled out of the bedroom. "Wow, Laila. It has been fantastic. He is just wonderful and I love the fact that he is all about God; just what I need. Any man that genuinely loves God will never have a problem loving me freely. Plus we have both prayed and are convinced this is it."

"I'm so happy for you, sis. You really deserve it," I said as I brought out some bowls and spoons from the dishwasher. "Truth be told, I used to wonder how you were so happy being single for so long. I guess all that was preparing you for such a time as this."

She grinned widely. "You got that right. In fact, I feel like Queen Esther" she said as she handed me the tub of ice cream.

We both began to laugh uncontrollably.

"So, Queen Esther, what's the plan now?" I asked as I scooped some ice cream.

"We'd love to get married soon, Laila," she said as she sat on the barstool. "There's really no point in putting it off. I would be lying if I say God has not been good to me... to us." She put a spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. "I mean, we're actually talking about so many things that we naturally would have left until later."

I could feel her excitement. "I am excited for you. As your chief bridesmaid, keep me informed," I said, as I sat down next to her.

Kiki rolled her eyes. "Really? Couldn't you even wait for me to ask?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Why ask when I already know? Anyway, this thing about Ben, where do I go from here?" I asked.

Kiki walked over to the living room and sat down on the sofa. "Listen, Laila," she said. "I've learnt that anytime I feel a reservation in my heart about anything... or anyone, I need to get away from that thing or person as fast as I can." She sighed as she picked up the remote control. "Sis, you know that word you have been asking God about? I think it came somewhere in our chitchat this morning. You, know exactly what to do and I'm praying that you do it sooner rather than later."

I remained silent as Kiki flipped through the channels. It's strange but I actually felt lighter. Like some heavy load had been lifted off my shoulders. I thought back on what she said about being single on purpose. As much as I hate to admit it, she was right.

MATTHEW

"Well, Mr Smith. I look forward to this business relationship we have just begun. I know for sure there will be no regrets."

"Mr Donjo, I share the same sentiments. Thank you for accepting our terms, and thank you Miss Ocheng for reading through the legal documents and making all necessary changes."

Laila and her boss came by to give their feedback and sign all relevant documents. This is one of the greatest moves this company has made till date; my boss will be pleased. Donjo & Mitchell is the most reputable law firm in the city with strong expertise in the chemical industry. Having them as our legal representatives gives us a clear advantage in accessing the most lucrative deals.

Seeing Laila was pure delight. I was tempted to call her up for lunch or dinner, since the last time we saw but I have had to constantly remind myself that she's still in a relationship with Ben and it'll be wise not to get in the way.

"Mr Smith, you'll have to excuse me, I have to leave so I can catch up with another appointment. Miss Ocheng is capable of answering any questions that may arise. I will be in touch," Mr Donjo said.

"That's alright. I look forward to speaking soon, Mr Donjo," I said.

Mr Donjo and I shook hands and said our goodbyes. As soon as he stepped out, I focused my attention on Laila.

Laila Ocheng!

I sat down next to her and my heart was gradually picking up the pace.

"So how have you been, Laila? It's been such a pleasant surprise bumping into you and now doing business with your law firm. It's really strange how life turns out."

She laughed. "I know, isn't it? Anyway, I've been great, Matthew," she said. "Working hard and trying to catch up with clients here and there. I love my job so no complaints from me. Then there are church duties so that takes up a lot of my time too."

"And you and Ben?" I asked.

Her countenance changed. "Ben and I are ok. We are working on a lot of issues. We will see where we go."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I hope you both work it out."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Anyway, how about you? How is the Mrs? The Kids?" she asked.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Laila! I know you can't see a wedding band anywhere on my fingers."

"It doesn't matter, Mr Smith," she said as she began to place some files in folders. "Isn't that the trend these days? Husbands and wives with no wedding bands. So to avoid getting into trouble, it's better to ask than to assume. Plus we haven't had a decent conversation in ages."

I leaned back in my seat. "You're right. Well, I am not married. And, I do not have any children. Not yet, at least. I do look forward to having a family sometime soon. My career is wonderful. I'm enjoying my growth as a Christian. I'm sure at the right time, the Mrs. will show up."

She looked at me in disbelief. "I know there are many women around you. No woman in her right mind would pass you up."

I released a hearty laugh. "Well, there are but it doesn't make them the right one. I want the right one. Not just any woman."

"Okay. Well, I wish you the best in everything," she said as she stood up and began to put her folders in her briefcase.

"Thank you. So what church do you attend?" I asked as I also stood up.

"It's called HeavenBound Bible Church," she said. "It's a wonderful place. I have grown so much and there is always a word there to lift me up."

"Wow! HeavenBound huh? I would need to visit sometime," I said.

"You should. Let me know when you want to come by. How about you?" she asked.

"It's Redemption City. It's a great place." She looked surprised. "Wait. Redemption City? That's the one with Pastor Austin Mackrel, right? He is on TV. I watch him all the time. So you attend that church? That's nice. It looks massive. I would get lost in there."

I chuckled. "It is huge. I felt that way until I got more involved. Don't laugh but I'm in the church choir."

Her eyes widened. "You? The Choir? Since when do you sing? Plus... no offence but you don't look like you can sing at all."

I bent over like my gut had been punched. "Ouch! Why does everybody say that? Is there a certain look for a singer or something? I've always loved to sing. Call it a hidden talent or something."

She touched my arm lightly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You just seem too serious to be in the choir." She crossed her arms. "I guess it is a hidden talent then. I don't mean to be stereotypical but I would have thought you'd be doing something more... Macho," she said as she laughed.

I faked a surprised look and took a step back. "Macho, huh? Deep down inside I act like a little girl."

She closed her briefcase. "Ha, ha! Matthew, you're a jokester. Well, it would be good to hear you sing someday."

I grinned. "Uhm, we'll see about that," I said.

At that moment, her cell phone rang and she scrambled through her handbag in search of it. "Hello. Oh hi, mum. I'm good thanks, just in a meeting. Okay, enjoy your flight. See you soon. Bye."

"Your mum is coming to town?" I asked as she hung up.

"More like my parents," she said as she walked towards the door. "They want to spend some time with me and meet Ben. Hopefully."

I followed her. "Wait! This is finally about to happen? Wish I could be there. Why did it take this long though?"

She rolled her eyes and stood by the door. "Don't act like you didn't know, Matthew. I am sure Ben has filled you in on that."

I put my hands on my chest. "No! He never did. I... Never mind. I just hope it works out this time," I said.

She smiled faintly. "Like I said, hopefully."

We stood there staring at each other and the silence was deafening. "Anyway, Matthew it was really nice catching up with you," she said as she walked out of the office towards the elevator. "I hope we can do so again sometime soon. I have to make my way back to the office and then head to the airport to pick them up."

I followed behind her. "Same here, Laila. Will you need any help with picking them up?" I asked.

"I have it handled thank you. My friend, Kiki will be joining me."

I touched her arm lightly. "Wait. The same Kiki who was in law school with you? Wow. You both are still friends?"

She laughed. "Yes! It's the same one. Kiki is the best. I couldn't let her go."

"That's great, tell her I said hello," I said as I pressed the elevator button.

"I will, Matthew. Thank you."

"Laila, please keep in touch," I said as she walked into the elevator.

"Will do. Have a good afternoon, Matthew."

"Thanks. You too."

I kept my eyes glued on Liala Ocheng until the elevator doors were tightly shut.

LAILA

"Laila, I have to tell you that if dad and I don't meet Ben tonight as planned, I will never accept him as a son in law. Remember that."

I rolled my eyes as I walked to my kitchen. Here we go again, I thought. We'd been sitting in my living room for the past hour chatting about everything and nothing, and my mother managed to keep Ben out of the conversation. "Mum, please relax," I said as I walked into the kitchen. "Do you want anything from the fridge?"

She kept her eyes glued to the television but I knew she had a whole lot more to say.

I stared at nothing in particular in the fridge, waiting for an answer. Ben and I talked about this visit and he promised to show up tonight. I'm only hoping he keeps his promise... This time.

I felt a migraine coming on.

My mum looked my way and finally asked for some cold water. "I am very relaxed, Laila," she said gently. "I just want you to know where we stand. A man that has no regard for my daughter is not worthy of her. You're an adult who allowed this to happen to you," she said as I handed a glass of water.

She drank some water then continued. "If it were up to me, I would have ended this a long time ago." I heaved a sigh. "I understand mum and you will meet him and love him," I said half-heartedly.

It was time to change the topic.

"Are you and dad still up for going to the mall this afternoon?" I asked. No matter how upset she is, she never passes up a trip to the mall. "Sure, she said. "I've told him he needs to take me shopping anyway."

"And I've told you that shopping is the last thing you need." I turned around abruptly, at the sound of my dad's voice. "Dad! You startled us. I thought you went jogging," I said.

"I did. I just got back. This neighbourhood is really beautiful, Laila," he said as he sat down on a barstool.

"Oh, It is, dad. I like living here." I smiled at him sheepishly. "Anyway, mum may not need to go shopping but I do. And I nominate you to sponsor it," I said as I sat down next to my mum.

He chuckled. "Let me think about it. I hope dinner plans have not changed for tonight. I am expecting to finally see this mystery man."

I rolled my eyes. "Like I have told mum, relax, daddy! He'll be there."

"Okay. If you say so," he said as he shrugged his shoulders and stood up. I also stood up as quickly as I could. "I'll be right back," I said as I picked up my vibrating phone and walked towards my bedroom. It was Ben.

"Hello!" "Hi, Ben. How are you?"

"Hey, Laila. I'm good. You?" Ben asked.

"I'm alright. My parents were just grilling me about you," I said. "I Hope you're still up for dinner tonight." I tried to sound as excited as I possibly could.

Silence!

"Ben. I know you heard me. You didn't forget, did you?" I asked with an irritated tone. Ben sighed. "How can I forget, Laila?" he asked. "Who forgets threats? Look, I actually called to reschedule. Something has come up that I need to deal with. Can we move it to tomorrow night?"

I began pacing around my bedroom. "Really Ben? This is not right! I'm done with all this!"

Ben was quiet for a few seconds then spoke calmly. "I'm sorry, Laila. This is really important. I just won't be able to make it tonight. I need you to just be understanding right now."

That migraine was coming on stronger, I felt like I was about to pass out. "Fine! I'll change the reservation to tomorrow night," I calmly said. "Just don't make a fool out of me, Ben. Be there and..."

He cut me off. "Look! I will be there like I've said a thousand times," he said sharply. "I... I have to go now." With that, he hung up.

I plopped down on my bed, facing the ceiling. What am I going to do if he doesn't show up?

MATTHEW

"Excuse me, Mr Smith, a Ben Manda is here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment but he says it's rather urgent."

"That's fine, Donna. Please let him in."

I was staring out of my window, as usual watching people walking by and going about their business before my thoughts were interrupted. I wonder what has brought Ben all the way here to see me.

"But sir," Donna said. "Your meeting is just about to begin. Everyone is seated."

"It's okay. Tell them if I don't step in within ten minutes, the meeting should commence and I'll join them," I said as I stood up. "Donna, send Mr Manda in, please," I said trying to keep my cool.

She nodded her head and shut the door as she stepped out of my office.

Within seconds, Ben loudly knocked on my door and barged in.

"Mr Vice President!" he yelled. "May I enter?"

"Oh please, Ben. Stop playing. Come on in. Well, this is a pleasant surprise," I said as I walked towards him and gave him a handshake and our normal brotherly hug. I shut the door while Ben took in my office space with admiration. I pointed at a seat but he opted to take a tour around the office

"Matthew! This is incredible," he said with excitement. "You really are on top. You make most of us look like nobodies, man."

I chuckled. "This is all God, bro. He gets the glory."

"Matthew, are you telling me you didn't work hard to get here?" he asked as he admired some of my diplomas and awards on a shelf.

"Well, that's the half-truth," I said. "Christians are not to be lazy so of course I worked hard but it doesn't mean there weren't more qualified people around. It's all God's favour, you know."

He turned around and shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said with zero conviction. I walked over to the couches in my office and sat down. "Anyway, why are you here? I know you didn't come by just to check out my office. Sit down."

"Let's see. Where do I begin?" he said as he walked over and sat across from me. "How about from the beginning?" I asked as I crossed my legs and leaned back.

Ben looked me straight in my eyes and leaned forward. I knew this had to be serious.

"Matt, I came to you because out of everybody I know, you are the one who would tell me what I have done wrong, correct me and then show me the way to correct any wrongs." He paused. "I know you are aware of Lola and Dee. I know you don't approve of all I have done."

I leaned forward. "Where are you heading, Ben? What's going on?"

He stood up and walked towards my window. "My wrongdoings have caught up with me, Matthew." I stood up. "Ben! Cut to the chase. What happ..."

He interrupted me. "Lola and Dee are pregnant!" I stopped in my tracks in silence!

"I said Lola and Dee are pregnant, Matthew," he said, staring at me.

Silence!

"Matthew..."

I put my hands in my pockets. "Benjamin Manda! I consider you a jokester but even you know there is a line that should not be crossed," I said annoyed. Ben looked at me helplessly. "This is not a joke, bro. I mean it. Lola told me two days ago and Dee told me a week ago. I have been trying to figure out who to speak to."

I was at a loss for words. "Have you told Laila?" I asked.

He chuckled. "No way, man. I guarantee I won't be alive and breathing right now if she knew. Remember, she doesn't know about them, how will she take this?" He turned to face the window.

"I had to cancel dinner with her and her parents last night," he said.

My eyes widened. "Ben, you still haven't met her parents? What is wrong with you?" I asked as soon as I gathered my thoughts. While I was fuming on the inside, I didn't want Ben feeling as if he made a mistake coming to speak to me so I kept my cool. I began pacing my office as Ben continued to stare out of the window.

"Ben, you need to get yourself together. You've joked around long enough," I said.

Ben hung his head low and took his sunglasses off his head. "How did I get here Matthew? I should have followed you when you made a U-turn."

I walked over to him. "Look, beating yourself up is not the answer now. You've done wrong and you have to accept responsibility for your actions." I stared out the window as I stood beside him for a few minutes. "Lola and Dee cannot be left alone because you were part of making those babies. It's going to be a long road but you'll be okay as long as you're willing to right your wrongs."

Ben turned to me. "You know Matthew, for a while now I've been thinking about what you said the last time we met." I chuckled. "I said a lot of things, Ben. Be exact," I said.

Ben stared at me intensely. "Matthew, you told me a time would come when I would no longer see accepting Jesus Christ as an option, and that my decisions would force me to do so."

"Yes, I remember that," I said. "But where are you heading with this?" I asked.

"I think that time has come, Matt," he said with conviction.

I put my hands on his shoulders. "Really, Ben?" I furrowed my brows. "Look, I hope you don't think that you can just accept Jesus and the babies you put into those ladies would vanish. You still have to take responsibility, bro." He laughed out loud. "Come on, bro. What do you take me for? I know I still have to bear the consequences of my actions. I just want a change in my life. I need a change. How do I make that change, Matthew?"

I could feel the desperation in his voice so I knew he was serious. I took a step back and looked at my oldest friend.

"Okay, Ben," I said. "I hear you loud and clear. I know you've heard me talk about Jesus a lot but you have to believe in your heart that He really did die for your sins and rose again just to save you and cleanse you of your sins. Then you need to confess Him as your Lord and Saviour with your own mouth." He looked at me rather surprised. "That's it, Matthew? Seriously?"

I laughed. "Come. Let's sit," I said as we walked back to the couches and sat down. "Ben, it's that simple. The Bible says that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. That's it."

Ben listened to me keenly and I could feel him connect with my words. I lifted my hands up. "It doesn't end there though. You have to begin to make some serious changes in your life until your actions match up with what you believe. Get it?" I could see the sparkle in my friend's eyes and that got me excited. He laughed out loud and clapped his hands excitedly. "Of course I get it! I'm ready." He jumped up. "I know I'll need a lot of help but I am ready."

I stood up and put my hands on his shoulders. "I'm excited for you! And I'm here for you, Ben. More importantly, the Holy Spirit will help you make the right decisions from today. I paused. "Look, I'd like you to come to church with me and get settled. Listen to what you hear and then apply it. That's the only way you'll see changes."

Ben's countenance suddenly changed. He wasn't convinced about how easy it seemed. "Matthew, I have to admit, I expected some serious drama with this whole salvation thing. I can't believe how easy it is. I should have followed you a long time ago. We were all little rascals running around without purpose just a few years ago and look at you."

I waved my friend off. "Okay. That's enough. That's the past. No matter how long you are in the wrong lane, it's never too late to get it right. That should be your focus - getting it right. Are you ready?" I asked.

Ben saluted me with a grin on his face. "Sir, yes sir".

I couldn't help but laugh. "Okay, let's get serious. It's an easy process but it's a serious one. In fact, it's a life-changing one. Don't be dramatic about it either, Ben. Just close your eyes and repeat these words after me:

Lord Jesus. I come to you right now, giving you my whole life. I believe in you. I believe that you died and rose on the third day just to save me and give me victory. Jesus! Come into my life and take control of me. Let your grace that has saved me; remain with me until the end of my life on earth. Now I know that I am born again. Thank You, Lord for saving me and assuring me of eternal life, in Jesus name. Amen."

I opened my eyes to see a sobbing Ben; he was crying like a baby. At that moment, I knew he was really serious. He lifted up his hands, knelt down and kept bellowing "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!"

Donna suddenly came bursting into my office. "Sir is everything ok in.....?"

I turned around abruptly. "Donna! Out of my office," I yelled pointing to the door. She couldn't shut the door fast enough.

Ben sat on the floor staring blankly. I put my hand on his shoulder and he immediately rose up and gave me the tightest hug, refusing to let go. This was the opposite of the hardheaded Ben I knew.

"Matthew, I feel as if a huge load has been lifted off me," he said. "I literally feel like a changed person already." He took a step back, keeping his hands on my shoulders. "I need to know though, have my sins been forgiven? Just like that?" he asked.

I chuckled. "Believe it or not, yes. Listen anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone and the new life has begun. That's what the Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:17."

Ben had the widest smile on his face. I couldn't help but laugh. "You have made mistakes and you still have to deal with the consequences but the good news is that now that you are born again, God will give you all the help you need to get through this... and anything else that comes your way."

"Preacher Man!" Ben said as he laughed. "Am I going to start talking like you now?" he asked. I air punched him. "You play too much. I'm being serious here," I said.

He placed his hands on his chest and got serious. "Okay. I'll stop. Wow! Matthew, thank you for not giving up on me when I needed you the most." I gave my friend a hug again. He was grinning from ear to ear. He literally transformed right in the middle of my office. As I walked over to the couch, Ben stopped me in my tracks. "One more question, Matt. A serious one."

"Sure," I said as I sat down. He grinned. "Am I going to start saying 'thank God' for everything like you do?"

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Really, Ben? That's your serious question? Who knows?" I asked. "Besides thanking God is just my way of recognizing the fact that He's the one who has brought me this far."

Ben leaned on my table. "Hhmm I hear you. I was just wondering if that's how I'm supposed to start talking."

"Look, Ben, don't worry about all that," I said as I poured myself a glass of water. "If it comes naturally to you, fine." Ben quickly walked over to me, picked up the glass of water before I could, and laughed as he walked towards my office window. "Thank you," he said.

I laughed as I poured myself another glass of water. "Right now, I want you to focus on the new experience of life you've just found. Take it from me – it's the greatest step you have ever taken in your life." He turned around, looked at me rather seriously, and said, "You know what, Matthew? I believe so too."

"Do something for me, Ben, will you?" I asked as I stood up and walked towards him. "Anything," Ben said. I looked at him seriously. "I want you to do right by Laila. Whatever you do Ben, do right by her, Ben" I said.

I opened up the drawer on the side of my table and brought out a brand new Bible. "Here take this," I said as I put the Bible in his hands. "Read it and get to know God for yourself. He is a loving Father who wants to bless you and help you live right. Don't ever forget that." I squeezed his shoulders. "Ben, this is the greatest treasure you'll ever have."

I turned around and walked towards the door before he could respond. "I have an important meeting to attend. I'll call you," I said. "Let yourself out when you're ready." As I shut the door, I caught a glimpse of Ben leaning against the window in thought. I stared at him for a few seconds. "Thank you, Lord," I muttered.

One of my most important prayers has finally been answered.

LAILA

"Can I get you anything else while you wait for the final member of your party?" the waiter asked. I looked at his nametag frustratingly. This waiter was rather annoying, I thought.

He had been coming to our table every few minutes to ask us questions. Despite my angry glares at him, he refused to get the hint.

It's time to give him a piece of my mind!

"Peter? Your name is Peter right?" I asked. "How many times do I have to tell you that if we need anything, we'll call you over here?" Peter took a step back, as his smile faded away.

My sister, Debbie touched my arm lightly. "Laila, relax." She turned to Peter. "Can I please have a glass of pineapple juice?" Debbie lives 3 hours away from me. She drove down to surprise our parents.

"Mum? Dad? Do you want anything?" she asked. "I think water will do for us, thank you," my dad answered. Peter walked away, looking upset. I felt terrible for yelling at him but my problems were much bigger than his feelings.

We had been waiting for Ben for almost 2 hours and there was still no sign of him. My mum began to rub my shoulders.

"Laila," she said. "Dad and I need you to calm down. It's not the end of the world. If he's not coming, it's okay. We can get some food and head back home so you can get some rest."

I felt my world crumbling down. "Mum, dad, please just a few more minutes. I know he'll show up. He's probably caught up in traffic somewhere," I said as my voice cracked.

I stood up. "Please excuse me, let me give him a call." My dad abruptly stood up also. "No! You are not going to call him. Leave him alone. No man would make a fool of my baby girl. Will you stop doing this to yourself? As your father, Laila, I forbid you to call him."

I sat down sheepishly. He did the same. That's fine. I won't call him now, I thought. I made a mental note to give Ben some parting words that would remain with him for life. "Alright, dad. I'll respect your wish. Let me say this – Ben will rot in hell for making a fool out of me and..."

My dad cut me off. "Hold it right there. I understand your pain but there's no need to take it that far, Laila. I won't say I told you so but if you're honest with yourself, you knew this relationship wasn't going anywhere." He squeezed my hand. "I want you to focus on yourself now."

I noticed Peter walking towards our table with a tray of glasses. He placed the drinks on the table and handed me an envelope. "Excuse me. A gentleman asked me to give this to you," he said.

I took the envelope and opened it. It was from Ben. This can't be good, I thought.

I turned to the waiter. "Look, Peter, I am sorry about earlier. It's just one of those days."

"That's quite alright ma'am," he said. "Let me know when you are ready to order." He walked away as I skimmed through the letter.

I didn't realise tears were rolling down my cheeks until my dad wiped them away. "He isn't coming, is he?" he asked. I looked at him teary-eyed. "No dad, he is not. I am so sorry for wasting your time."

My mum took my hands and held them tightly. "No waste of time," she said. "This is a lesson learned. Don't beat yourself up over this, okay?"

"Thanks, mum," I said.

"Besides," Debbie said. "Any time you think you've wasted will be made up somehow. God's got you, sis."

While I was sad, I was grateful for the support system I had in my family.

Debbie handed me some tissue. "No time for wasted tears, Laila. It's a good thing I met him a couple of times. I'll be sure to warn my friends and enemies alike since I know what he looks like." My parents couldn't help but laugh out loud. I looked at my sister and chuckled. "Really? What a joke!" I said.

She nudged me lightly. "Come on. You have to admit that was a little funny." She sighed. "Okay, let's change the mood. What do you want us to do now? Should we head home or do you want us to have dinner?" she asked.

I took a long deep breath as my parents and sister stared at me eagerly expecting my response. "Let's have dinner," I said. "I'm starving and I don't want us to waste this time together." As my dad called on the waiter, I tucked the envelope into my handbag. I'll deal with that later.

"What can I get for you?" Peter asked as he brought out his pen and pad. I skimmed through the menu as my sister and parents placed their orders.

I knew I was still going to be emotional about all of this for some time, but I made up my mind there and then that the last time I spoke to Benjamin Manda was the last time forever.

LAILA

"Laila! Laila Ocheng!"

I've never appreciated my name being yelled out in public places. What if I was trying to avoid someone?

I was in the mall on a Saturday morning for some much-needed personal time and shopping. It was as rowdy as could be. Mothers with their children in strollers, children running around, people were everywhere and the atmosphere was full of excitement! I intentionally came out this early to avoid the crowd.

I guess we were all thinking the same thing.

I didn't want to be bothered so I deliberately ignored whoever it was.

"Laila Ocheng! Laila Ocheng!" My name was called out a few more times and the callers pitch was only getting louder so I had no choice but to turn around. Much to my chagrin, it was Matthew Smith standing right in front of me. "Matthew? Wow! What a pleasant surprise," I said, feeling rather silly.

Matthew grinned and cocked his head to the right side.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought you were ignoring me, Laila Ocheng," he said. I laughed out loud. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't sure who was calling out my name like that."

Matthew leaned in and gave me a hug. "No offence was taken. It's really good to see you. It's been almost a year, right?" he said as he stepped back. "Yes, it has. Ten months to be exact," I said.

We shared a silent moment before he spoke up. "You look beautiful Laila. Just as I remember." He furrowed his brows. "Thanks for returning my calls, by the way."

I looked a little lost. "Your calls? I didn't return your ca..."

He laughed. Then I realized he was being sarcastic. "Exactly. You didn't... but it's fine. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Ben spoke to me so I was just reaching out. After trying to get in touch with you for almost 2 months and it didn't look promising, I got the message and decided to leave you alone." I smiled sheepishly. "Since someone else was always representing you at our meetings, I figured you were not interested in seeing me."

Since the day I was embarrassed in front of my sister and parents, Ben called me and tried to see me relentlessly. I had nothing to say to him so I never spoke to him. Talking to him wouldn't have done either of us any good. Then Matthew's calls poured in but I felt I just needed some space to get myself together.

"Look, I'm sorry for ignoring you," I said. "Honestly, I really appreciate you reaching out to me. I just needed some time to be alone." He shrugged his shoulders. "Laila, no explanation necessary. All that matters is that you're fine. Come. Let's sit and catch up." He took my hand as we walked over to an empty bench and sat down.

"So how have you been?" I asked.

Matthew's eyes lit up. "Wow. All is fine, Laila. In fact, life is great. God has been good to me. How about you? How are your parents? And Kiki?" He paused in thought. "Yes, how is Kiki?"

"Everyone is great," I said. "Kiki is really good actually. I got back two weeks ago from her wedding. It was a destination wedding in Fiji. Extremely beautiful." Matthew clapped his hands excitedly. "Wow! That's great. So Kiki finally decided to change her last name, huh?"

I couldn't hold back my laughter. "Oh yes. God has sure been good to her. They're such a blessed couple." I poked his arm. "How about you, Matthew Smith? When will you be changing someone's last name?" The smile on Matthew's face widened. "Well, I'm glad you asked. You'd be pleased to know that I, Matthew Smith will be getting married soon. In about 5 months actually. I hope to see you there, Laila."

The news of his wedding caught me off guard so I took a moment to gather myself. "Oh... That's great news!" I said. "I'm so happy for you Matthew. Wow. This is just what you wanted, isn't it? Who is the blessed lady?"

Matthew leaned back, ready to fill me in. "It is more like I'm the blessed one," he said. He cleared his throat and became dramatic which made me laugh out loud. "Monica is a teacher I met through a friend and we realized we both attend the same church. It's been great so far and we're looking forward to the next step."

He sighed. "Laila, I think I've waited long enough. I mean, I've really enjoyed being single; working on my career and my Christian journey but I'm so ready to settle down."

I listened to Matthew keenly. "That's wonderful Matthew. I really wish you all the best. You both are blessed to have found each other."

Matthew's phone rang. "Let me take this call. It'll be brief," he said. He made some arrangements to meet the caller in 20 minutes and ended the call. "I'm sorry about that. That was a buddy of mine," he said. "I'm eager to hear about you, Laila. First, tell me, did you ever hear from Ben?"

I sighed. "Yes, I did. A lot actually... but we never spoke. Matthew, I'm completely over my relationship with Ben. He wasn't the one for me but I was holding on to him so tightly." I laughed. "In a lot of ways, I'm glad it didn't work out. It would have been a big mistake for both of us. After it ended, I just needed to heal; I mean that was 7 years of my life!" Matthew squeezed my shoulder. "Anyway, thank God, I'm back on track now. I've not kept up with his life and I think it's better that way." I smiled. "You didn't ask but yes I'm still very much single."

Matthew nodded his head and laughed. "I'm really glad you're fine Laila. Honestly, I was worried about you." He paused and took a deep breath. "Laila, you have to know that Ben was crushed by his actions - every one of them. That's why he called you so much. He knew he shouldn't have put everything in that letter. That was a big mistake. I told him off for not being bold enough to say whatever he had to say to your face." He smiled widely. "Anyway, the really good news is that he actually made a U-turn in his life and he's now born again. He's doing great."

I lit up. That really was good news to me! "That's wonderful, Matthew. I'm thrilled to hear that." I paused. "Listen, do something for me, please. The next time you see him, tell him I've forgiven him and hold no grudges against him. I mean it." Matthew clapped his hands. "Look at you! I guess that means you're officially over everything that has happened to you, Miss Ocheng. That's great!"

I laughed. "Oh yes! Being unforgiving or bitter won't do me any good. There is only one direction for me to go now - forward," I said.

Matthew looked at me and smiled. "Well done, Miss Ocheng. I'm glad about this." I smiled back and nodded my head. "Me too. It's been nice catching up with you, Matthew. I know you have somewhere to be soon," I said as I looked at my watch. "Keep me informed about your wedding. Just let me know all I need to know so I can be there."

"That would mean a lot to me, Laila," Matthew said as we both stood up. I smacked his arm. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Mr Smith. As much as I'm coming for you, I'm also really coming for myself. My own man may just be at your wedding, you know."

Matthew let out a hearty laugh. "You're actually right. I promise to get you all the details so you don't miss out on that possibility." I leaned in and gave him a hug. "That'll be great. And I'll hold you to it!"

"I hope to see you soon Laila. Take care of yourself, Okay?" Matthew said as he squeezed my hands and let go. "And please pick up your phone when I call." I grinned. "I will. You take care also, Matthew."

I sat down on the bench and watched him walk away. Now that's a good man right there, I thought.

As I watched shoppers go about their business, I began to think about my life and all that happened within the past year. It dawned on me that every day, we find ourselves in our personal valley of decisions. And our decisions determine the direction of our lives.

I thought about Kiki who, despite her mistakes, found the forgiveness of God and her freedom in Jesus Christ. Her seriousness about God helped her prepare well and make the right decisions concerning her own life and relationship. I also thought about Matthew, now on his way to the altar. His own decision to maintain a strong spiritual core helped keep his life on the right track.

I admire their sense of worth and confidence in God, which has remained their driving force. Through their lives, I have seen the clear benefits of living a life led by God.

I thought about Ben, who made the greatest decision by responding to God, even though it took a crisis to get him there. The consequences of living his life carelessly ended up in chaos but I'm convinced that now that he has found God, he has truly found his way.

I thought about myself. My decision to completely let go of that toxic relationship, although it was painful, has helped me gain my confidence and self-esteem in God, back. Like Kiki said, I'm learning to be single on purpose. This has given me the chance to truly see my worth through God's eyes and it has taught me to be completely content with my singleness and enjoy this season of my life.

It's one of the greatest decisions I have ever made!

All this has taught me that while the decisions in our valleys may differ, the path we choose will either lead us closer to or further away from our destiny. As long as those decisions are guided by Biblical principles, everything must indeed work out for our good!

The sound of my phone ringing snapped me out of my thoughts.

It was my brother in law. I got excited!

"Hi Patrick," I practically screamed into the phone.

"Laila, it's time. Looks like they're coming today," he said. I jumped up and picked up my shopping bags as fast as I could. "Ahhh my babies are coming? Today?" I asked. I began to rush through the mall, bumping into some shoppers along the way.

"How's Debbie?" I asked. "How are you? How are they? Oh, nevermind... I'm heading over to you now."

Debbie and Patrick were expecting twins. I was particularly excited because they had been married for 5 years and were really eager to be parents. We've all been waiting for this grand arrival.!

"Laila, everyone's fine," Patrick said as he laughed. "We'll see you soon, okay?"

"See you soon. Tell my sister I love her," I shrieked loudly as I ran through the doors of the shopping mall.

I made a beeline straight to my car, jumped in and sped off.

I have a road-trip to take!

Thank you for reading this short story. Below are some questions to meditate on.

1. What specific lessons did you learn?
2. What character resonated with you the most?
3. Based on what you learnt, draw up an action plan of how the lessons from this novel can be applied to your own life.

*Scriptural references were from 1 John 1:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Romans 10:13

Are you born again?

The greatest decision you will ever make is accepting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of your life. You don't have to wait for a crisis to let Him in. Any day and any time are good enough. If you want to begin or renew your relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, simply say the following words out loud from the depth of your heart:

"Heavenly Father, I surrender my life to you right now. Thank you for sending your son Jesus to die just to save me. Lord Jesus, I believe you died for me and rose again on the third day so that I might be justified. Forgive me for my sins and wash me with your precious blood. Give me the grace to walk with you all the days of my life and enjoy the gift of eternal life.

Thank you for receiving me. Thank you for restoring me. Thank you for making my life brand new. May the rest of my days on earth bring glory and honour to Your name. In Jesus name, amen!"

Congratulations, you are now born again!

Now that you are born again!

1. Locate a Bible believing and Bible practising church.
2. Locate an area within the church where you can get involved.
3. Begin to spend time in prayer and in the studying of God's Word to build your spiritual life.
4. Surround yourself with fellow Christians who can help strengthen your faith.
5. Deliberately tell others about this new life that you have found so that they too can come to the knowledge of the truth and be set free.
6. Share your journey of faith and your testimonies with us.

For more family enriching resources that would be a blessing to you,
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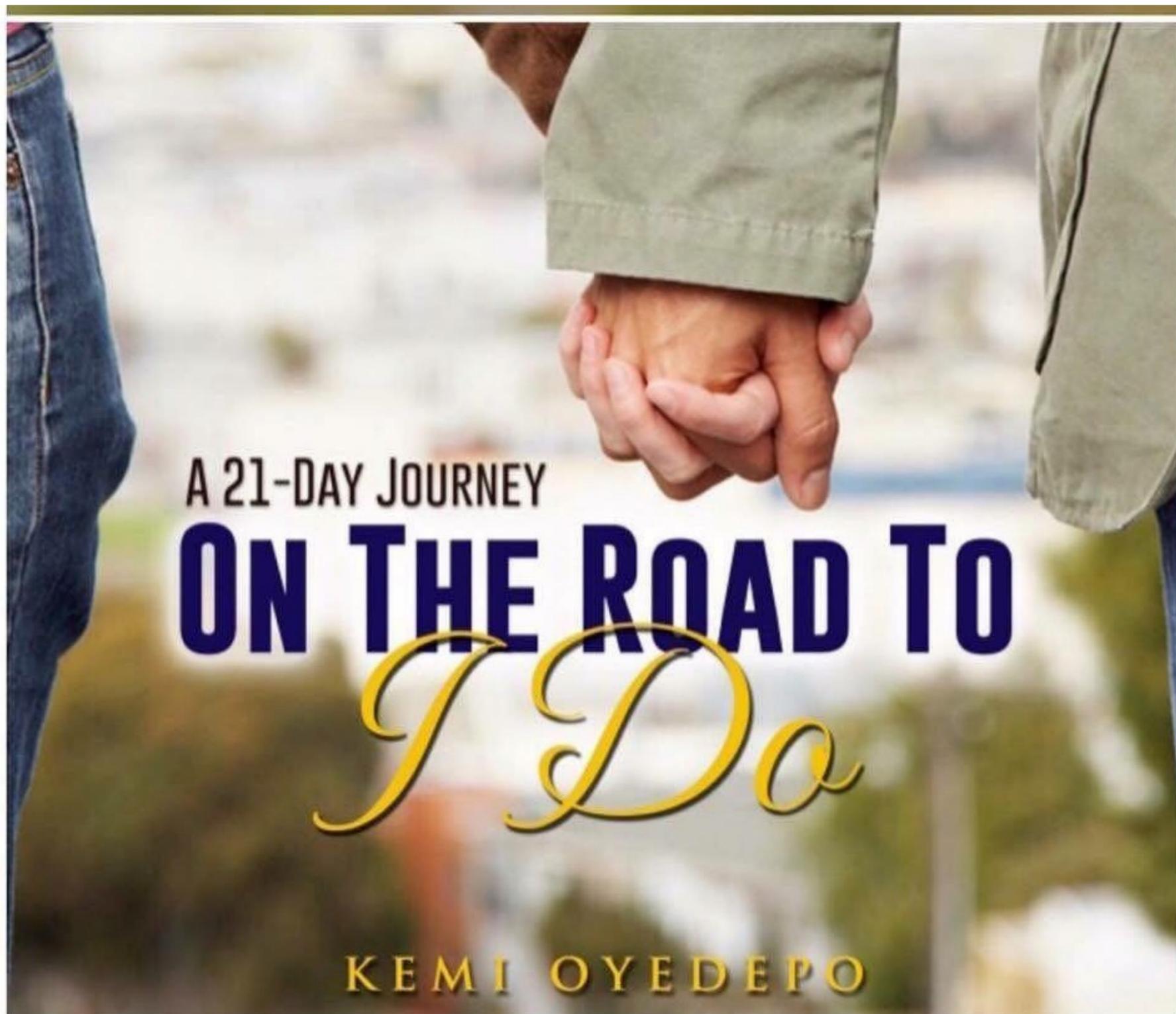
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Many single ladies and gentlemen are right in the middle of the valley of decisions especially relating to marriage. Some are under pressure to get married, causing them to make drastic decisions that fill them with regret. There are others, who take unwise steps that seem pleasurable at the moment, but end up costing them dearly. There are also those who accept each stage of their single days, make the most of them, and allow God to lead them down His own prepared path.

Which one are you?

Follow the lives of four individuals, as you learn about the importance of faith, friendships, forgiveness, and so much more. This is not just a novel but a treasure that would help guide you in making some critical decisions that will determine the direction of your own life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kemi Oyedepo has a passion to write and teach about relationships and family life in an exciting and engaging way. She uses her God-given platform – Crisis-Proof Your Family (CPYF) to communicate her message with a unique and practical style drawn from the Scriptures. Her vision is to help individuals build and maintain an enviable family life that glorifies God and draws multitudes to Jesus Christ. She is married to Pastor David Oyedepo Jnr and they are blessed with children.