

# **LOVE AND LUST**

**Moji Salako**

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Plot 1 Emmanuel Anabor Street, off Mopo road, Akakaiye, United Estate,  
Sangotedo, Lekki-Epe Expressway, Lagos, Nigeria

Tel: +2347032212481

Email: [publish@harmonypublishing.com.ng](mailto:publish@harmonypublishing.com.ng)

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## **DEDICATION**

THANK YOU LORD.

TO MY LATE FATHER, ALHAJI ADEREMI SALAKO: MY LOVE FOR YOU SHALL LIVE FOREVER. CONTINUE TO REST IN PEACE.

TO MY MOTHER, MERCY SALAKO: THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING YOU DO MA, I LOVE YOU.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my family especially my sisters: Sister Bolanle, Sister Biola, and Sister Toyin.

To my uncles and aunties: Uncle Kayode, Auntie Diana, Uncle Jide, Auntie Faiza, Uncle Rotimi, Uncle Wale, Mummy 2, Auntie Gani, I am grateful. I appreciate the entire Salako family, Asemota family.

Thank you all for everything you've done for me over the years.  
GOD BLESS YOU ALL.

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To MA, thank you for bringing out the best in me.

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## *Chapter One*

It's always raining heavily in the month of July, and I'm sitting here lost in my thoughts, and thinking of possible ways I can move out of Port Harcourt to further my education. For as much as I can remember, I have always been obsessed with two things, which I nursed since I was younger: becoming a graduate, and living in Lagos. As I grew older, the likelihood of my dreams coming true continued to dwindle, and by the time I got into SS3, reality was staring at me right in the face so harshly that I could almost hear its wicked laughter. The life I envisioned was truly not as easy as I thought it would be. I'm done with my secondary school education, and my parents cannot afford to send me to university, talk less of a good one in Lagos. The tuition fees and cost of living was way beyond their budget. So, even though I have always been one of the best in my class, my academic future seemed bleak due to the financial constraints of my parents.

I have lived in Port Harcourt all my life and have grown tired as I seek for a new adventure. There is a smallness to it that chokes me, and the fact that every day is the same frightens me; I cannot

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bear the thought of such a dull, monotonous existence. For most of my 19 years, I have dreamed of escaping from Port Harcourt to a place where I can spread my wings and soar like an eagle, where I would be able to express myself and become the woman I'm meant to be.

There's no way I can remain here. There's nothing here for me. This is my chance to leave and achieve my life's purpose. I put in so much effort and sacrifice into my WAEC and JAMB examinations. I stayed up late night after night reading the huge textbooks I had borrowed from friends who could afford them, and poring over copious notes I painstakingly took in school. In the end, I passed with flying colours. Unfortunately, there is no one to sponsor my University education, and that became the genesis of heartache as my mother wants me to learn a trade.

I honestly can't wrap my head around the fact that I might end up as a hairdresser or tailor if I don't find a way out by myself. That would be the death of all my dreams, hopes and aspirations. My hard work and sacrifice would be in vain, and my excellent results would become useless. I can feel the tears stinging my eyes just at its thought. There has to be a way. I must go to Lagos, and I must get a college degree.

I've been trying to think of someone who can help me in any possible way. I have no rich aunt or uncle to run to for help. My friend Rita is the only person I know who is doing well financially. I can't really tell how rich she is, but she seems to be very successful. Rita is two years older than I am. She recently celebrated her 21st birthday at Bonny Island and it was a huge rave. She's been shuttling between Lagos and Port Harcourt for

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two years. Every time she goes and returns, she appears richer and even more beautiful. Her lifestyle and affluence constantly had tongues wagging. Within two years, she had opened two boutiques here in Port Harcourt and she drives a black Toyota Camry. Everyone knows the money didn't come from her parents because they simply cannot afford such luxury. Yet, no one really knows what Rita did to get all this money. At this point, I am not really interested in speculations about the source of her money. I need help, and I think she will be able to help me at this breaking point. I should have a heart to heart conversation with her.

~~~~~

I sent Rita a “please call me” text. I rarely had airtime on my phone, and even when I did, it was rarely sufficient for calls. So, I sent her an SMS in the hopes that she would respond, and I waited patiently. It was only a few minutes, but it was the longest wait of my life. Even though I was expecting it, I jumped to my feet at the sound of the incoming call.

“Hello,” I said as soon as I answered the call.

“What’s up? I got your text message,” Rita replied.

“Nothing much babe, just chilling. Please I need to see you urgently.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious? I am at the boutique on Peter Odili Road, you should come over,” she said.

“OK, I’ll be there in 30 minutes.”

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Hope surged through my whole being as I hung up and I was somewhat relieved. Not only did she call back, she actually sounded open to hearing whatever I had to say.

I quickly went through my set of ugly, worn out clothes I had bought as second-hand. I didn't even have anything nice to wear, and my hair was so untidy. Even though I was going to ask for help, I knew I had to look a bit presentable to Rita. To be honest, we were not the closest of friends because my parents never liked her in the first place. They felt she was growing up too fast, as she was always acting older than her age. Nonetheless, their opinion did not really matter to me at this point. A solid education is the best thing parents can give to their child, and my parents simply couldn't afford that. Thinking about the situation got me upset, and I had to take deep breaths to compose myself. I reminded myself there was no use of getting annoyed and all worked up over what I could not change. It was better to focus on finding a way out. I looked through my clothes one more time and decided on a pair of blue jeans and a white shirt. I pulled my hair into a bun, laid my edges, put on a little makeup, and hit the road-. I wished I could take a cab- but I had just N2,000 in my purse so I had to take a bike to Rita's boutique.

She was attending to a customer when I arrived, and so I took the chair closest to me and waited, grateful for the air conditioning after enduring the scorching sun all through the ride on the bike. I watched Rita as she gestured in conversation with her customer. Her hair, her outfit, her well-manicured nails, the beautiful jewellery that adorned her fingers and wrists, her perfect makeup, and her glowing skin instantly fuelled my

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hunger for a better future. I knew I was fashionable, but I had no money to *flex* or make myself look good. I quickly looked around the boutique, all the clothes there were brand new and obviously expensive. I wanted it all.

“Hey girl,” I said, standing up as she walked towards me. “*Na wa o*, you are always looking good! See how fresh your skin is.”

“Stop *whining* me abeg,” she said, laughing and leading me to a private corner with a desk that had leather chairs on both sides. She took her seat and pointed to one of the chairs opposite her. She turned to her left, took out a bottle of malt and a glass cup from the small fridge beside her, and filled my glass with the drink. “What’s up? You sounded very strange over the phone,” she said, placing the drink in front of me.

The glass frosted immediately, which means that the drink would be refreshingly cold, but I wasn’t there for that. I ignored it and leaned towards her. “Rita, thank you. I will drink later please. I need to get out of here and move to Lagos. Things have not been easy with me. My parents barely managed to see me through secondary school and even though I passed my WAEC in flying colours, it’s looking like I will be stuck here without achieving my dreams. And I can’t allow that to happen. I won’t sit in this town with my parents while life passes me by, please help me. I am willing to do absolutely anything to make my dreams come true. My parents are not making any effort to help me achieve my goals at all. Imagine, my mum asking me to choose between tailoring and hairdressing. Rita, I just cannot imagine it, after all the effort I put into getting good results. Being in that house, watching my parents with zero ambition is

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killing me. I need to leave this place by any means possible, please. I need to find a way to get to Lagos, make some money, and further my education. You are the only person I know who can help me out, I have no wealthy relatives I can ask for help. Please help me.”

As I gushed about my struggles and frustrations, Rita listened to me with a pitying look on her face. When I finished, she sighed deeply.

“Cecilia, I know that everyone thinks I am a prostitute, that sells my body for financial favours,” she said, looking into my eyes. “Don’t even try to deny it, I know that’s the popular belief. I’ve heard the rumours and all the side talks. People look at me, my boutiques, my car and the little luxury I’ve been able to achieve, and the only conclusion they can come up with is that I sell my body for money. Cecilia, the truth is I don’t.”

I remained silent as she leaned forward, bringing her face closer to mine. Everyone knew she achieved her wealth through *runs* and frankly, if I had to sell my pussy to get out of my situation, I was willing to do just that.

“I met a guy, a white man in his 30s,” she said. “He took a liking to me and decided to change my life. All I had to do was agree to be his companion and that was how things turned around for me.”

I didn’t believe a word she said, but that wasn’t any of my business at this point. “Rita, please how can you help me?”

Rita picked up her phone and excused herself. “Let me make a call, I’ll be back.” She was on the phone for about 10 minutes. I

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could not read her lips but I did hope that something positive would come out of the conversation. Finally, she ended her conversation over the phone and walked back to me.

“So, I just called my friend and he wants to meet you.” She scanned me with her eyes from my head to foot and frowned slightly. “This your hair and clothes look somehow *sha*.”

“Meet me?” I asked. “What does that have to do with me getting to Lagos?”

“Don’t worry, he will help you. Just do what he says.”

“OK, when do I have to meet him?”

“He is a very busy man but he said Saturday will be fine. Pick two dresses from that rack and try them on. I will lend you my black wig too,” Rita said.

“Thank you, but I don’t have any money to pay for the dresses,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I’m not selling them to you. Consider them as gifts from me. When you get there, please be well-mannered and act classy. And don’t tell him your real age,” she added. “Got that?”

“Yes. I’m so grateful Rita, but I hope I don’t have to do anything if I don’t want to?”

“Are you accusing me of being a pimp? *Abeg o*, I’m just helping you. What I am doing is giving you connection *o*. What you do with it is your own choice.”

“Oh okay, thank you very much. God bless you. So, this your friend...”

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“His name is James,” she cuts in. “He’s an older guy in his 40’s, but he’s cool and very rich. He’s not from here, he just lives here because he works with a multinational here. I’ll text you the time and place of meeting, as well as his number. Finish your drink and come choose your dresses,” she said.

I emptied the glass quickly and went with her. After looking at all the gorgeous dresses on display, I picked two beautiful ones.

“Thank you so much, Rita,” I said as she wrapped up a black bag with the two dresses and handed the bag to me.

“You’re welcome my dear.” She counted five N1, 000 notes, placed them in an envelope, and handed it over to me. “When you’re going to see James on Saturday, please take a cab, and not a bike.” At that, we could not help but burst into laughter.

I arrived home tired and hungry. As usual, no one in the house had prepared any food. Everyone was waiting for me to handle the chores. My sixteen-year-old twin siblings, Michael and Martha, were seated at the dining table doing their homework. As soon as I walked in, the demands began.

“Sister Cecilia, please help me with my homework.”

“Sister Cecilia, I am very hungry, we haven’t eaten anything.”

“Sister...”

This is the story of my life, day in, day out. I have become a glorified house girl in my own home, and my parents have no desire to see that my present status changes. I honestly can’t wait for Saturday. I am hopeful things will go well. I can’t wait. At last, my dream of going to Lagos will become reality.

## *Chapter Two*

I really do not understand how my parents live so comfortably in mediocrity. Mum is content with the peanuts she makes from her little provision store. My dad seems to be comfortable with his job as a civil servant that can barely pay for our rent and other bills. Sometimes, the government even delays his salary, and the family suffers dearly for it. I cannot count how many times I was sent home from school over a delay in the payment of school fees, so it wasn't much of a surprise to see my younger brother and sister walk in at 10 a.m on a school day. Martha was in tears but I already knew her answer, but I asked anyway.

“Michael, why are you both home at this time, and why is Martha crying?”

“The school sent us home because our fees haven't been paid,” he replied.

“Sister, they even asked us not to come back,” Martha said as tears kept flowing down her face, “Because we owe every term. They embarrassed us in front of the class.”

I pulled her close and hugged her. “Please, stop crying. Don't worry, when Daddy comes back, we will sort it out.”

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I felt very bad because I knew how embarrassing it must have been for them. I endured the same humiliation myself as a student, and most times, I cried myself to sleep for many nights. I had to figure out a way to make my younger ones happy. Out of the N5, 000 Rita gave me to pick a cab on Saturday, I had already spent N1, 500 on a pair of sandals, and N1000 on matching panties and bra. None of my worn out shoes went with the dresses Rita had given to me, and I was ashamed to ask her for sandals after she had given me money, dresses, and lent me a wig. I also needed a decent lingerie just in case something happened with Mr James.

I figured that the best thing to do for my siblings at the moment was to buy them ice cream and donuts. That would definitely make them feel better. I thought about the lovely fast food place just around the filling station, about 5 minutes away. If I spend N1, 000 out of the N2500 remaining, I would be left with N1, 500, which would no longer be enough for a cab to GRA. I knew Rita wouldn't be happy with me squeezing into a shared taxi to see Mr James but at this point, I didn't think I had a choice. It was my duty to make my younger brother and sister happy. My heart was sad and my head was filled with thoughts of making it in life, earning good money, taking good care of them, and being a good role model to them.

“Michael, Martha, go and take your baths. Put on something nice, we are going to an eatery right away.”

“Sister, with which money?” Martha asked.

“Don't ask questions, just do as I say.”

They put on the best they had, which was their “Christmas

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clothes” as Nigerians would say, and their mood lightened up a bit. We joined a taxi to the eatery and when we arrived, the waitress pointed to a corner so we could sit.

“What would you like ma?” she asked.

“Two donuts and a mini bowl of vanilla ice cream please,” I answered.

“Sister, please I want chocolate ice cream, I don’t like vanilla,” Michael said.

“OK, chocolate it is then,” I said, turning to the waitress.

“What about you ma, what would you like to have?” she asked, looking directly at me.

“Nothing, I’m OK. Please what’s the total cost?”

“N1,500,” she said.

I was taken aback. “Ah, for two donuts and one bowl of ice cream? How come?”

“Our prices were recently reviewed ma.”

This was way above my budget. If I had come alone, I would have picked up my purse and left quietly, but I took one look at the eager faces in front of me and knew there was nothing I could do but to succumb.

“Okay, let’s have them please,” I said.

I was upset at myself for spending more than I bargained for, but I wanted to do anything possible to keep the twins happy. The snacks arrived and their faces brightened up. I was happy I

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made a difference, albeit in a small way. They ate slowly and chatted about their school mates. They were more concerned about whether anyone would still want to be their friend when they got back to school, and I thought that was sad.

“Listen, real friends would never change because of mere school fees. Anyone who stops being your friend because you were sent home over school fees was never truly your friend in the first place. You understand?”

They nodded their heads in agreement.

“It’s getting late, finish up let’s go home.”

“OK sister,” Martha said.

Mum and Dad were already home when we returned.

“Where are you people coming from?” they asked in unison.

My siblings turned to me, not sure on what answer to give.

I quickly replied, “They were sent home because they haven’t paid their fees, and they were even asked not to come back because it happens every term. Martha came back home crying, so I decided we should go out for some fresh air to cheer them up.”

On a good day, my parents would have probed further, wanting to know where exactly we went to, but the news about the school fees was too disheartening, which prompted them not to push further with more questions. They looked at each other in disappointment, then my Dad cleared his throat.

“We will figure out a way for both of you to return to school next week, OK?” My father said.

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The twins nodded, while I looked on irritated. Same old line I had heard every time I was sent home over school fees, *we will figure out a way*. It usually meant I would spend a week out of school, then return to at least two weeks of struggling to catch up and begging my classmates for their notebooks so I could stay up late copying the notes from the classes I had missed. Tears stung my eyes at the memory. Dad was a man of few words. To many, it was an admirable quality but to me it was the opposite, because it went hand in hand with his laidback attitude to life which my very soul despised. Why couldn't he just make an effort to get more out of life than to be stuck on a spot?

“Cecilia, please, you will coach your younger ones in the meantime, so they don't stay idle. By God's grace, they should be back in school next week,” my mother said.

“OK Mummy, I will,” I agreed without hesitation. I would possibly do anything to help my siblings.

“I bought a form for you,” she said, handing me a brown envelope.

I looked at her smiling face as I took the envelope, trying to imagine what she was so pleased about. I took out the form and it was an application form for a tailoring course.

Mentally, my eyes rolled into the back of my head, but I plastered a fake smile on my face. I didn't want to burst her bubble at that moment, since there were more pressing issues at hand. I remained calm.

“Thank you Mummy,” I said, and walked away to my room.

I could think of nothing but Saturday.

## *Chapter Three*

Saturday finally came.

Rita already sent me a text with the address of the restaurant in GRA where I would be meeting with Mr James at 4 p.m. I told my parents that I was going for a friend's birthday party. They consented without hesitation and asked that I return on or before 9 p.m. I wasn't surprised they let me go without asking too many questions as they usually did. The situation with the school fees was weighing heavily on their minds, amongst the many other challenges they already had to deal with. Poverty can be such a bitch. It ripped them off of their thoughts that moment.

I carefully applied my makeup, then slipped into one of the dresses Rita gave to me and put on my new sandals. They looked as cheap as they were, but they would have to do. The wig Rita lent me was so long, silky and curly, and I knew it must have cost her lot of money. Running my fingers through it, I wondered when I would be able to afford these beautiful things myself. I put it on, and my image in the mirror took my own breath away. I was looking astonishingly beautiful. I stared at

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myself, amazed at the transformation a gorgeous wig and an elegant dress could bring about. I'm clearly not made for a life of struggle, I thought, as I lingered at the mirror, then picked up my purse and headed out.

Since I had spent N4,000 on lingerie and cheering Martha and Michael up, I was left with only N1,000. I had to take several taxis and walk the rest of the way to the restaurant. Rita would not be pleased, but then, she would never find out.

I got to the restaurant and followed the instructions Mr James had left for me. He had sent me a text message earlier that he would be about fifteen minutes late but he already booked a table for us. All I had to do was to give my name to the waitress, sit tight and wait for him to arrive. I followed his instructions and did as I was told.

"First time here ma'am?" the waitress asked me.

"Yes," I replied.

"Would you like to order or wait?"

"I would prefer to wait but please, can I have water?" I had become thirsty while hopping from taxi to taxi, and after trekking under the scorching sun, I was totally parched.

"Room temperature?" she enquired.

"Yes."

I glanced around me. Everyone looked so classy and coordinated. The waitress returned with my water and I quickly downed it, then leaned back in my chair and waited patiently. It wasn't long

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before a handsome man walked up to me.

“Are you Cecilia?”

“Yes.” I said.

To be honest, he was not what I imagined. I expected someone old and ugly, and I had prepared my mind to endure his company and whatever else he needed just so I could achieve my dream, but the man standing right before me was the complete opposite of my thoughts. Rita said he was in his 40s, but he looked younger and was dressed in a fitted black suit. His nice full beard and neat haircut enhanced his youthful good looks even more. I was happy with his physical appearance as it was better than average. That gave me a measure of hope.

“Hi. Why didn’t you order anything?” he asked as he took his seat, his eyes never leaving my face.

“I was waiting for you. Good afternoon, Mr James.”

“Please call me James.”

“OK. It’s nice to meet you, James,” I said, trying it out. It felt strange calling him just by his first name. After all, he was at least 20 years older than me, and we barely knew each other, neither were we friends.

“You look very young. And naïve, in fact. Not what I expected at all. So tell me, how old are you?”

I didn’t forget that Rita told me to lie about my age, but what was the point of lying? The truth would eventually come out some day, so why not tell it from the start?

“I’m 19 years old sir.”

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“You are young, too young. You shouldn’t even be here, where are your parents?”

“They are at home.”

“Do you even know why you are here?”

“No sir.”

“A naïve little girl, all right. Well, you are too young for me, and I honestly don’t have the time or the energy for the childishness and drama that would come with dealing with someone of your age. Here is what’s going to happen. We’ll have a nice meal, you’ll go home, and you’ll have to lose my number. OK?”

I was so intimidated by his confidence that I simply nodded, unable to say anything in my defence. At that point, I realized I had sabotaged myself by telling the truth. It was absolutely unnecessary. I should have listened to Rita.

He beckoned to the waiter and ordered fried rice, chicken, moi-moi, and salad.

“What will you have?” he asked me.

“Same,” I said, feeling smaller and smaller by the minute. I lost confidence.

We talked over lunch. Actually, he talked and I listened, speaking only when I had a question. I said nothing about myself. I found out he was a divorcee, and that he and his ex-wife had no children together. He worked for an oil company, spending two weeks on the rig in Port Harcourt, and his two weeks off in Lagos where he owned a home. He didn’t have many friends, and he went on a vacation twice a year.

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Listening to him, I concluded he was a hardworking man who had a lot to say, and I could see he really needed company. Unfortunately, I had blown my one chance at escaping my life in Port Harcourt and embracing a promising new life in Lagos, which I had always dreamed. What would I tell Rita? Who would help me now?

“I’ll get you a cab now.”

His voice snapped me out of my thoughts. He was on his feet already. Our date was over.

“Here,” he said, handing me a bundle of N1000 notes. “That’s a N100,000. Take care of yourself, and never call me again. You understand?”

“Yes. Thank you very much, Mr James.”

“I asked you to call me James,” he said as we walked towards the reception. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

He was right. It didn’t matter. I would never see him again. Tears threatened to embarrass me, and I blinked them back furiously. The last thing I needed was to reinforce his view of me as a “little girl”. I had to let everything slide.

He stopped a cab outside the restaurant, and I got in without saying anything.

“Be careful,” he said softly, and turned back towards the restaurant.

As I watched his retreating back, I finally let the tears I had been holding back. I had such a perfect chance to make a nice man happy while achieving my dreams, and I blew it.

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“Sister, where we dey go?” the cab man asked.

I sniffled and wiped my face with the back of my hand. “Diobu.”

As we left GRA, I continued to lament the way I fucked up and how I was never going to leave Port Harcourt because I messed up by not following a simple instruction not to tell him my real age. However, as we crossed over to the other side of town, brighter thoughts started to chase the cloud away. I just got a N100,000 for no reason. If I could get this much out of him for doing absolutely nothing, how much more could I get if we got together? I decided I was going to obey his rule for a week before calling him. Maybe, I could convince him to help me. Perhaps, when he gets to hear my plans for school and life, he would change his mind. What was the worst that could happen? He would say yes, or he would probably say no.

## *Chapter Four*

Sunday morning found me still feeling overwhelmed by the fact that I got a N100,000 from a man who didn't really know me, a man who didn't owe me anything. The feeling lingered as the days went by. Of course, I was happy; N100,000 was a lot of money, and I got it easily, for no apparent reason. Yet, along with that happiness came the feeling that all was not lost because I knew Mr James was concerned and it would be a mistake to give up. I was more certain now that if he heard my story and got to know me better, he would be even more generous.

The week-long wait I planned was more difficult than I had imagined. I couldn't stop thinking about Mr James. Yes, he instructed me to lose his number and never to call but I highly doubted if he truly meant it. Come Saturday, he would hear my story and forget about all he said at the restaurant. I was going to take the bull by the horn, eliminate fear, and ask for his help directly. It could either go right or wrong. I figured I had nothing to lose except for a few days of nursing a bruised ego, and I was willing to take that risk.

Rita called me to scold me. "I told you not to say your real age,

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yet you went there and told him 19. Forget your baby face, with your boobs and ass you could have passed for 22 or 23. How could you blow a perfect chance like this? It was a simple instruction for goodness' sake, Cecilia. Do you really mean well for yourself?"

Mr James had obviously gotten back to her. What could I say, than to agree with her that telling him my real age had been a bad idea? I didn't tell her about my plans for the coming weekend. I just thanked her for her help, and promised to return her wig the following week.

"There's no need, just keep the wig," she said. "It's the least I can do now that we're out of options."

"Thank you Rita, you've been so kind to me and I really appreciate your help."

After her call, I was even more determined to salvage the situation. The long-awaited Saturday eventually came, and I decided to wait till about 4 p.m. to increase my chances of catching Mr James at a good time. I chose that time because it was his free time the Saturday we met, and hopefully it would be so again. I was home alone as the twins had gone with Mum to her shop, and my Dad had a "business meeting" to attend, which usually meant he had gone to ask someone for a loan. My siblings had lost a week at school already.

At 4 o'clock on the dot, I called Mr James. At the sound of the first ring, I found myself unable to sit still, so I stood and began walking around the sitting room. He answered on the third ring.

"Hello."

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“Hello, good day sir,” I said softly.

“Who am I speaking with please?”

“It’s Cecilia sir. I know you asked me not to call. I’m deeply sorry, but I just had to. Please can we meet for drinks? There are some things I would like to discuss with you please.”

“No,” he said emphatically. “We can’t, don’t ever call me again.”

“Sir...” I started, only to hear the line cut right on my ear.

I could not believe he hung up on me, but not being one who would back down easily, I called him again.

“Say what you want to say over the phone,” he said, his tone became authoritative. “I have just 5 minutes to spare, I’m listening.”

It was my chance to make a strong impression. My life and education moving forward now depended on me and how convincing I could sound. I started by telling him I had an excellent WAEC result and a high JAMB score.

“All A’s and B’s, and a JAMB score of 265! I’m impressed,” he said.

I then proceeded to tell him about my parents’ financial struggles, how my younger siblings had been sent away from school because their school fees had not been paid, and how my mother already settled for a mediocre life by getting me a form to learn tailoring.

“I’m very sorry to hear all this,” he said.

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I could hear the compassion in his voice, and it encouraged me to press on. I explained how I went to Rita for help and how desperate I wanted to leave Port Harcourt to Lagos. “I am going to study accounting and work in a multinational someday, just like you.”

“Now that’s interesting.”

“I’m serious sir. I want to be like you, and I would be very grateful if you can agree to be my mentor. If you invest in me now, I promise I will pay back every bit of it in the future.”

At that, he laughed out loud. It was the first trace of humour I had glimpsed in all our interactions. “I don’t need a payback for doing the right thing, Cecilia. You have N100,000 with you now. Apply to two private universities and one federal university. If you meet the entrance requirements and get admission, I’ll sponsor your education.

I gasped, unable to believe my ears. “Sir? My entire education?”

He laughed again. “Of course, I don’t intend to abandon you halfway. I have just begun.”

“I’m so grateful sir. Thank you so much! May God bless you and reward you. How can I ever repay you?” I didn’t have enough words to express my gratitude. This was beyond all I could have hoped for.

“You are welcome. I have just one thing to ask of you.”

At that point, I was ready to give him anything he asked for. How could I not be, when he was about to bring my most precious dream back to life?

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“Anything sir,” I said eagerly.

“Don’t take advantage of me. I’m helping you simply because I can afford it, and I like that you are transparent and honest. Those are rare traits to find in human beings in this generation. Do what you’ve said you’ll do. Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t take advantage of your kindness sir, and I won’t fail you, I promise. Thank you so much for your time sir.”

“One more thing,” he said.

“Yes sir?”

“Drop the sir and call me James. Please don’t make me ask again.”

I smiled. “Thank you, James. I’m truly grateful.”

Just like that, there was glimpse of hope in the air. It’s true what they say: nothing good comes from the comfort zone. I was so thankful that I made the decision I made to contact Mr James again, and followed through. The direction of my life would likely never have changed otherwise if I had listened to his scolding.

I was beyond happy. I was ecstatic. All I could think about was which schools to apply to. After devoting enough time to thoroughly research at the cyber café, I settled for two schools. I bought the forms online and sent my applications. The admission process would take about a month. I didn’t even tell my parents anything about the process, but I knew I would have to tell them about my plans immediately any of the schools accepted me. They probably would not believe someone decided to sponsor my education, so I knew I would have to lie.

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I called Rita to tell her the good news. She was indeed overjoyed.

“Babe, I’m so happy for you! James can be very principled when it comes to certain things, but he’s a very good man and that’s why I thought of him when you came to my shop that day.”

“I have you to thank you Rita, because without you this wouldn’t have happened. I’m so grateful, may God reward your kindness to me.”

“The pleasure is all mine, what are sisters for? But you’re brave *sha o*, after he told you to lose his number, you still ignore what he said and called...”

We laughed and chatted for nearly an hour, discussing our dreams and painting pictures of the future. Rita still travels to Lagos often, and she promised to keep in touch.

The following week, my siblings were back in school, thanks to whomever had loaned Dad money this time. Initially, I went with my Mum to her shop every day to assist her, but when she wouldn’t stop asking me about the form for the tailoring course, I stopped going. Instead, I enrolled for swimming lessons. I had always wanted to swim but that was not my main reason for going there. I wanted to start associating with the rich and successful people I would eventually meet. I wanted to begin leaving my old life behind me even before I got out.

My first time in a pool was an exhilarating experience. I loved the water and the ambience, and I relished rubbing shoulders with the wealthy. It was quite frustrating trying to fit in, not understanding most of what they were talking about as their references to TV shows and places they had travelled to sounded

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strange to me and I felt lost. Nonetheless, I had a nice time, and I reminded myself that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a step. I knew I would get there in no time.

The month went by quickly and I got a call from the shop attendant at the cyber cafe who helped me with the admission process. Not only had I been accepted into both schools, I was admitted to study the exact course I applied for! Finally, my dreams were coming to life. I picked up my phone immediately and called Mr James to share the good news.

“I’m so happy for you!” he said, genuine excitement was evident in his voice. He encouraged me to choose the private university as his friend had shares there.

“Thank you for all you’ve done for me, and all you are going to do. You have given me hope and a new lease on life. Thank you so much,” I gushed.

The only thing left was to face my parents, and pack my belongings to my new environment. I knew better than to tell my parents a man I just met was sponsoring my education. They would not believe it, and it would only make them uncomfortable to accept the proposal. I sat them down and told them the most reasonable lie I could come up with: that I won a scholarship and my full tuition and cost of living would be taken care of.

“So you’re going to be a graduate? I’m going to be the mother of a graduate? Glory be to God!” my mother said as she stood up and began to dance.

“My daughter, I must thank you for taking the initiative, for being brave and smart enough to apply for a scholarship,” my

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father said. “This is a really a great miracle, and a good example to your younger ones. Congratulations my child.”

They were so happy and grateful. If only they knew a divorced man was sponsoring their child’s education.

The resumption date was September 15th and I honestly couldn’t wait to leave for Lagos. My fees were sorted and Mr James had sent pocket money to my bank account. When I mentioned traveling by road, he bluntly refused.

“I’ll book a flight for you, please. My driver, David will pick you up at the airport in Lagos and take you to school.”

I couldn’t believe my good fortune. He had already sent more than enough money to cover my needs as far as school was concerned, and now I would be traveling by air for the first time in my life. I felt so pampered and privileged. I decided to take Michael and Martha out before I left, this time without skimping on cash.

“Cecilia, you want to finish your scholarship money?”

I laughed. “Mummy, it’s not snacks and ice cream that will finish the money. I’m managing it well, so don’t worry. I just needed to spoil them a little, and for the fact that it will be a while before I see them again.”

We went to a different eatery where the twins had donuts, meat pies and egg rolls, with each getting their own mini bowl of ice cream. They bought sausage rolls and drinks to take away, happy and talking excitedly all the way. It wasn’t just that my life that was changing, theirs would never be the same either, and they knew it.

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On the day of my departure, I got to the airport at Omagwa on time, and when we boarded I couldn't hold back my tears of joy. I was beyond grateful for the opportunity and blessings God had allowed me to enjoy. It was my first time on a plane, heading to a new city where I know nobody, and to start a new life. I couldn't wait to start living it.

## *Chapter Five*

The first day of school was a rollercoaster. We were required to complete all the necessary registration before the end of the week, including submitting all the required documents and getting assigned to a dorm. I realized that private universities came with a lot of rules; we couldn't wear certain types of clothes (like revealing ones, for instance) or leave school premises without an exeat. I picked a dorm upstairs because I figured it would give me more privacy. The room had two bunk beds and being the first to arrive, I had the chance to pick the bed under. I grabbed it immediately and set up my things in my corner. It was a nice dorm room and I hoped my roommates would be cool and easy to deal with because the last thing I needed was someone or anything that would distract me from my goals.

I settled in quickly and was soon on my way to being the top student in my class. For starters, my roommates were totally cool, and not much of a distraction in any way. I was really lucky; I had heard all kinds of horror stories about roommates. My bunk mate, Victoria was the last to move into the room. A project management major, she was beautiful, and also slow-