



Stigma
from the
Past

Anuli AUSBETH-AJAGU

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Anuli Ausbeth-Ajagu



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
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Dedication

To my beloved mother, Mrs. Ebele Grace Ufodike, who encapsulates the true essence of motherhood: a beautiful heart, kind and generous spirit, long suffering and enduring, inspiring and committed, compassionate and caring, merciful and gracious, loving, forgiving and practical in support. You are a beautiful mother and a real inspiration to your world.

Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	vii
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	9
Chapter Three.....	14
Chapter Four	18
Chapter Five	25
Chapter Six	31
Chapter Seven	35
Chapter Eight	46
Chapter Nine.....	59
Chapter Ten	75
Chapter Eleven.....	81
Chapter Twelve.....	86
Chapter Thirteen	91
Chapter Fourteen.....	96
Chapter Fifteen.....	103
Chapter Sixteen.....	111
Chapter Seventeen	116
Chapter Eighteen.....	123
Chapter Nineteen	127
Chapter Twenty	131
Chapter Twenty-One	137
Chapter Twenty-Two	155
Chapter Twenty-Three.....	160

Chapter Twenty-Four.....	162
Chapter Twenty-Five	164
Chapter Twenty-Six.....	168
Chapter Twenty-Seven	172
Chapter Twenty-Eight	175
Chapter Twenty-Nine	185
Chapter Thirty.....	189
Chapter Thirty-One.....	193
Chapter Thirty-Two.....	200
Chapter Thirty-Three	209
Chapter Thirty-Four	214
<i>Glossary</i>	218
<i>About the Author</i>	220

Prologue

It was raining heavily when the band of hoodlums filed out of the scene. They sauntered into the jalopy parked outside, their heads swirling, all seven of them falling into the truck, boozed and satiated. The driver hopped behind the wheel and ignited the engine, drove a few meters, and suddenly he started gyrating. All he could see were pictures running in duplicates. Possibly, it was the aftereffect of overindulgence in the bottles. Otherwise, how would one explain the faintness of his sight? Sadly though, his vision continued faltering, culminating in a complete loss of concentration. Suddenly, the vehicle made a leap off the road and started descending a cliff. His attempt at maneuvering was poor . . . and alas! Too late!

Meanwhile, their gang leader remained glued to the defilement spot. He was in no hurry to leave as he viewed, with utmost satisfaction, the helpless figure lying on the floor. Instinctively jolting out of introspection, an eerie feeling engulfed him. What were the likely consequences of the act? What if there was a scandal? The possibility couldn't be ruled out completely, going by the way the victim vehemently resisted their assault. A lot could be at stake for him, particularly his sustenance. It wasn't as though he particularly appreciated his present calling. Matter of fact, it was becoming a drag . . . except, of course, with his recent boorish feat.

Slowly and steadily, he pulled himself together, took a last long look at the victim and quietly made his way out of the room. He walked with quick strides, not minding the thundering and downpour, until he arrived at his flat located a few blocks away. Without thinking, he fished out a bag from his scanty wardrobe and started packing. As he threw in his possessions,

his mind was everywhere, roaming and wondering. The thought of leaving abruptly was really no concern at all. After all, he had often lived as a tramp. His problem and major concern was how to escape the possible arms of the law. Instinctively, he felt his dreadlocks. Certainly, that identity could easily betray him. Ironically, his victim shared the same, only hers were neatly bound to suit her femininity. Dada, that was his name and hers too, the traditional name in Nigeria for children born with natural dreadlocks.

Such irony, such similarity, yet they had always trod different paths. But alas, the time had come for a change—Dada Salako's physical alteration, his own deliberate change, a change of identity.

A total disguise will surely do him good, so he pulled open his drawer and reached out for a pair of scissors. Without thinking, he started chopping off the long tangled mass on his head. In a matter of minutes, the pile lay scattered on the floor. He couldn't believe his eyes when he looked at himself in the mirror. The haircut had dramatically transformed his appearance. Still, Dada Salako was not satisfied. He was not one to leave any traits for a clue, so he reached for his shaver and started shaving. How he managed to give himself a clean hair shave remained a mystery even to him.

By the time he gazed into the mirror to appraise his new look, it was clear he'd succeeded in disguising totally. To make his new look complete, he made up his mind to start growing a moustache . . .

There was more thundering, just as his roaring laughter echoed in the walls. He was happy . . . satisfied . . . contented with his new identity. Nobody will recognize him. Not even the victim. A thought struck him. The new man would certainly not be complete without a new name. "A new name?" he wondered. "Hmm . . . a change of name wouldn't be a bad idea." He certainly could do with a complete change of scene, a change of environment. As he racked his brain for a solution, the answer hit him like a thunderbolt. He couldn't believe his luck. What on earth could be better than the substantive offer he got earlier

in the year? It was still valid for a couple of weeks so he needn't search further. That sorted, his mind again began to wander, this time to the girl. "Will she survive the ordeal?" he wondered. Without further delay, he threw the remaining items into the bag, packed the mass of hair he'd just chopped off, took a last look around the empty room and stepped into the dark.

Fortunately, the rain had finally stopped so he had no problem hurrying to the main gate. Meanwhile, his mind flashed to his cohorts—the idle hoodlums he'd contacted to join in desecrating his victim. They'd done an excellent job and deserved his commendation, so he chose their hideout as his first point of call. By the time he arrived at their place, there was no sign of them. He lit a cigarette and decided to wait patiently for their arrival . . . they never made it back. He was to discover a few days later that their vehicle had skidded off the road and somersaulted into the lagoon. Some of their mangled bodies were recovered. Others were hungrily devoured by ravenous crocodiles. Dada was shocked but counted himself very lucky. Very lucky indeed because the deed was done and nothing, absolutely nothing, could ever expose him. Now to the present: He was set for a long journey, a very long journey into another phase in his already eventful life.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a cold, wet, and windy night in June. The fierceness of the thundering and the terrifying downpour kept most residents of the National Foundation for Young Mothers and Kids indoors, away from their usual weekend barbecue night. The philanthropic institution, under the aegis of a munificent mission, was established for the primary aim of giving shelter, counsel, and hope to abandoned and underprivileged young mothers in Ghana. Located in Tamale, in the northern region of Ghana, the highly reputable institution had liaison offices in major cities like Accra, Kumasi, and Takoradi. The charity was considered the leading lifesaving organization in the country because of their proactive crusade against abortion and child abuse. Various activities were in progress to mark their twentieth anniversary. Their target for the year was to raise sufficient funds for the orphanage, which needed expansion and sponsorship for the increasing number of children in their care. Mercy, as head of the organizing committee, was laden with the responsibility of making necessary contacts with generous and good-spirited individuals who could donate in cash and kind to their laudable mission. Her mind was preoccupied with the planning as she lay in bed under the warmth of a thick woolly blanket, appreciating the serenity of the quietened weather.

Besides the intermittent sound of ceasing raindrops, everywhere was tranquil. The atmosphere looked heavenly, with stars glistening in the sky, the moon disappearing in the horizon, and the freshness of the earth filling the air. It was indeed a shivery night, and cool as it was, nature's refreshing allure could not pass by unappreciated. She could have remained lost in her reverie but for the sudden thrust at her door. Esi entered to announce that Mercy was urgently required by the reverend

mother. Their training and calling as nuns required prompt response at any time of the day to emergency calls to duty. She immediately sprang to her feet, threw on her robe and in a matter of minutes was descending several corridors that led to Mother Araba's office.

There was a stranger in her company; a very unusual one at that. Extremely pretty, very ostentatious, elegant, and stately, she looked every inch like royalty. Her perfectly manicured fingers were adorned with dainty gold rings, while her glittering necklace and earrings were made of fine diamonds. The sweet fragrance of her Elizabeth Arden perfume filled the air, and her elaborate coiffure was a classic African design adorned with silver beads. Underneath the glamorous appearance, however, was the saddest, loneliest figure of a woman in dire need of help.

"Meet Mrs. Tisco," Mother Araba introduced briefly. "She'll like to see you privately."

"Certainly, Mother," Mercy responded with a bow before facing the visitor. "You'll please come with me," she stated, leading the way into an adjoining office.

"Welcome madam," Mercy greeted as they settled on their seats. The office was sparsely furnished, with a conference table, six chairs, and a chest of drawers.

"I've come a very long way," Elizabeth Tisco began the moment they were seated. "I have been informed by the reverend mother that you are in charge of the orphanage."

"Yes I am, though we work together as a team."

"Can I trust you?" she probed, her eyes gazing intently at Mercy, who was thrown off balance by the question. "Can I trust you?" she reiterated, unmindful of the former's quizzical expression.

"Well, *em*, trust in the Lord with all thy heart . . . but you can count on me," Mercy responded simply.

"I hear you are in charge of adoption procedure."

The former replied in the affirmative before the stranger spoke almost in a whisper.

"I need a baby. I'll prefer a male . . . dark in complexion, oval face, dark hair, and AA genotype. O-positive blood group, and please, this is strictly confidential."

Mercy wore a perplexed expression as she listened to the woman. It seemed she'd taken no notice of the nun's bewilderment because she quickly added, "How much?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"How much will I pay you to give me a baby?" She asked, bringing out a checkbook from her handbag. She made to endorse one when the nun's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"It appears you have gotten things mixed up. Adoption certainly isn't a buying and selling trade. Moreover, specific physical criteria are difficult to meet. Hair color, blood group, et cetera have hardly been of any consideration for fosterage. Besides, we don't get such an avalanche of children to pick from."

"Now we are talking. Let's say you have about nine months from now to do the planning. I'm counting on you to give me a baby . . . my baby," she stated in a doleful tone. "I'm desperate. If I don't get this baby, my life will be ruined. Oh sister, promise you will give me a baby," she pleaded, tears dripping from her eyes.

"You don't have to cry, please," Mercy said, moved by her sentiments. She offered her a paper napkin and squeezed her hand reassuringly before speaking. "Let's start from the beginning. Why do you want this baby in the first place?"

"I have to give my husband an heir, or else he'll remarry. Or rather, his callous mother will impose another wife on him."

"Permit me to ask you some personal questions. Your husband, does he love you?"

"Yes . . . I can swear Nick loves me."

"For how long have you been married?"

"Three years."

"Three years?"

"Yes"

"Only three years and you're already desperate?"

"His mother has been watching my stomach since we got married. By the fifth month into our marriage and with no signs of pregnancy, she's been on my neck—our neck, pressuring her son, calling me horrible names. She'll regret this . . . I swear she will."

“Thou shall not swear,” cautioned Mercy, before questioning further. “But why the anxiety? She should exercise some patience.”

“She hates me. She hates me because Nick married me against her wish. She’s prejudiced, egocentric, and malicious.”

Mercy took a deep breath and pondered for a while before speaking.

“You live here in Tamale?”

“No. I came in from Nigeria.”

“You—you came all the way from Nigeria?”

Elizabeth nodded her head, and observed the nun’s bewilderment.

“Aren’t there—I mean, surely there are orphanages there in Nigeria. Why come all the way just to adopt a child?”

“Don’t you understand? Don’t you understand that nobody’s to know the child isn’t mine? I’ll be a laughing stock if I’m ever discovered. Nobody’s to know the baby isn’t mine. Not even . . . not even my husband.”

Mercy wore a disapproving expression before Elizabeth quickly added.

“I hate to do this to Nick . . . but I have to. I can’t stand losing him.”

“You should tell him. I mean, if he loves you, surely he will understand. Besides, you need his consent for things to work out.”

“You don’t understand, sister. You don’t understand the nightmare I’ve been through. My mother-in-law will broadcast the news that I didn’t bear the child.”

“You might end up complicating things, ma’am. I mean, how do you prove that the baby’s yours when your husband knows you aren’t pregnant?”

“I’ll think of something. I’ll pretend I’m pregnant . . . I’ll take a long vacation. I’ll . . . oh please, sister, just get me the baby. I’ll sort myself out somehow,” she spluttered, suddenly feeling odd and jittery.

“I know this means a lot to you, but I insist you think seriously before acting,” Mercy pressed.

“I don’t think you’re getting me right. I don’t think you understand what I am going through. Do you know what it’s like to be taunted because you don’t have a child? Do you know just what it feels like being labeled a barren witch? I thought this out seriously before coming all the way. There is nothing more to think about. I need a baby, okay? I said I need a baby!” Elizabeth thundered, reaching out for the handkerchief in her bag. Her tears trickled and burst into a downpour.

Mercy watched in awe, unable to speak. She’d never seen such display of sentiments. “Not even that night,” she thought with a shiver; her memory betraying her. She quickly brushed aside the intellection and faced the woman.

“I—madam, please don’t cry. I only needed to be sure you won’t regret your decision in the future.”

“There can never be regrets. This is the only solution; otherwise, my marriage will crumble.”

“But this is surprising,” Mercy put in. “I mean, if your husband truly loves you, he should speak to his mother to stop pushing.”

“What hasn’t Nick done to pacify her? What hasn’t my poor Nick done to have her back off? But no, never will she give up. She’s bent on ruining us. She’s obsessed with her son. She thinks she knows what’s best for him.”

“It’s amazing,” Mercy whispered. “Such is life. It beats my imagination, man’s unkindness to his fellow man. Yet God created us all in His image and likeness. Male or female, black or white, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Chinese, Indian, American, British, or Spanish, once married, every human being has a right to live without harassment.”

“Not my mother-in-law. She hates me, and I swear, I hate her too.”

“Please don’t swear. Don’t hate her either. Pray for her. Ask God to show her mercy,” Mercy said softly. “That way, you will be obeying the golden rule: do unto others, as you will have them do unto you.”

Elizabeth sat up in her chair. She shook her head before speaking. “No, no, sister. I believe an eye for an eye, a tooth for

a tooth. After all, it's not my fault things turned out this way. She hates me, and I assure you I hate her with a double measure. The feeling of animosity is mutual," Elizabeth asserted with a lingering baleful expression.

Mercy took a deep breath and watched the other woman. She could empathize with her situation, having experienced severe hurt herself. Her mind flashed back to that fateful day, and she immediately shook herself out of the unpleasant reverie.

"When do I get the baby?" Elizabeth asked, gazing intently at the reverend sister.

"We'll give you a baby," Mercy said, breathing hard. "There are about three young girls who'll be due for confinement in a couple of months."

Elizabeth listened with rapt attention as the reverend sister flipped through the huge diary on the table.

"The first girl will be due in about seven months, the other six, and the third says approximately five months from now. Let's keep our fingers crossed, Mrs. Tisco."

"Thank you, sister, thank you. Please call me Liz. Elizabeth if you prefer. I will forever be indebted to you."

"No problem. Just remember, we don't sell babies here. The important thing is having a healthy family environment to raise the child. Other procedure and documentation follow with ease."

"Once again, I appreciate this," Elizabeth uttered, before handing her a check. "For your foundation's anniversary."

"Thank you. We are most grateful," Mercy responded, examining the check. It was appropriately written in the name of the foundation, payable in cedis. It was the equivalent of USD \$10,000.

Elizabeth smiled back and for the first time, noticed the pretty, youthful face belying the plain convent clothes. Indeed, Mercy was a beautiful woman. With an average height of about five feet six inches, a smooth dark skin, hers could have been a face for modeling and magazine covers if she hadn't chosen the way of seclusion. Her slim figure would have been any photographer's delight, going by her innate elegance. Her calling, however, easily concealed the allure of the reverend sister's natural endowment.

“You’re a beautiful woman, sister,” Elizabeth said, almost in a whisper.

Mercy was numb for a moment. The word beautiful felt odd to qualify her. She was used to such connotations as reverend, holy, chaste, humble . . . but certainly not beautiful.

“Tell me, sister Mercy, what does it feel like to be a nun? What does it feel like to live without love?” Elizabeth probed, unaware of the nun’s inner turmoil. “Life is all about love, and I can’t imagine not loving Nick, or not having him love me in return.”

“I—well, people are made different,” Mercy managed to say, clearing her head of its many conflicts. “We have different callings in life. Mine is a life of service,” she avowed.

“Thanks for everything,” Elizabeth said finally, rising to her feet. “Yours is a life of service—a life of helping others. I’m counting on you to give me my baby,” she stated decisively, reaching out for the other woman. She embraced her, squeezed her shoulders, before concluding, “Here’s my call card. If you ever need my help, do not hesitate to call, and please keep me updated on the happenings.”

“I certainly will keep in touch,” the nun responded, rising to her feet as her visitor made to leave.

“Good night, sister Mercy.”

“Good night ma’am,” Mercy replied, watching the woman make a brisk exit and disappear into the dark. There and then, the reverend sister made up her mind not to disappoint the woman.

Day in, day out, Mercy prayed earnestly for a baby that would suit Elizabeth’s imagery and description. Months rolled by and nothing significant happened, except for the birth of a premature baby boy to one of the girls. Unfortunately though, the baby died. Mercy was dispirited, particularly when the second girl delivered a set of twin girls. Elizabeth didn’t want a girl. She wanted a son, one that would be heir apparent to her husband. There was just one more to go, and if things didn’t work out as planned, the woman would be devastated. She’d been in close contact with the foundation since her last visit.

Anuli Ausbeth-Ajagu

“Something positive better happen,” the compassionate nun often recited as she travailed night and day for the woman. She’d made a promise, and she needed to fulfill it.

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