
BEST SELLING AUTHOR OF MANY WATERS
ROSEMARY OKAFOR
AKWAUGO
WHEN THE FORBIDDEN BECOMES DESIRABLE

Akwaugo

Rosemary Okafor



OceanofPDF.com

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Praise for Akwaugo

“This story! It’s good good good! Deserves awards, study and attention because it focuses on core tradition, society and the heart. Deep with plot, characters and story.” — ***Margaret Adetimehin*.**

“Everything I am looking for in an African Paranormal romance. Reading it is like a breath of fresh air. I love the depth of description, the character building, the interface of deities, tradition, fate and love.” — ***Ozioma David***

“Damn! I couldn’t stop reading, hoping and wishing it wouldn’t end. The plot twists... when you think you have gotten to the end, a new twist.” — ***Titilayo Awobode***

“Boyyyy! This is a page-turner!” — ***Biyai Garrick (Bookstagrammer)***

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Also By the Author

Many Waters

God, Michael and Me

One More Night

Paradise

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From me to you

Dear reader,

I loved writing this story because... well, I just don’t know what to say other than the characters were easy to connect with. They told their stories on their own—I was only a channel.

This is, as usual, based on true-to-life individuals I encountered some time ago. There were so many parts of this story that I simply couldn’t use because they were too unbelievable.

Ah, truth is always stranger than fiction, but I think and hope that you’ll enjoy these characters that will make you want to punch the wall, laugh, cry, and of course fall in love.

So, take the trip and have fun.

Rosemary O.

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For you. The beautiful Nnewi woman with eyes the colour of a desert sand.

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Prologue

She was born with skin as bright as dawn, her eyes the colour of desert sand.

The villagers tagged her an *Ógbànjê*, a child from the waters, whose aim was to bring woe to her parents. But her father, Mathew the catechist, thought otherwise.

“Every good and perfect gift comes from God,” he said, “children inclusive.”

However, he agreed with the villagers on one thing; the child radiated a beauty too much to be given a Christian name. So, he called her Akwaugo, to the surprise of everyone.

Akwaugo grew up to become an enchantress. She was good-nurtured and had smiles like the bloom of a fine morning. It was a while before she began to pull the attentions of men. Even when her chest was yet to form buds, they toppled over themselves to get her to look.

They would wait by the side of the river, sometimes, by the road that led to the community school just to offer her gifts and win a smile from her.

But one man stood out among the others.

The twenty-one-year-old, craggy line faced Mezie whose height was comparable to a bottle of *Malta Guinness.*

Mezie was persistent in showering the young girl with gifts, praises, and promises.

“*Asa*, fairest of all maidens,” he would call her. “I will go and learn business at Onitsha and after I am done, I will come home to take you as my wife, we will leave in a big block house that has iron roof.” Mezie

would say as he strolled alongside the shy and young Akwaugo on their way to morning mass. Like a wild cat, he marked the young lady with his constant presence, ensuring her parents were aware of his intention. He fearlessly engaged in physical confrontations with any man who dared to cast a smile in her direction.

Mezie left the village for Onitsha a year later. But he never lost touch with his dream wife. Not a week passed without him writing her, and for her sake, he visited the village every two weeks.

When he concluded his apprenticeship seven years later, he returned and established a drug store at *Nkwor Nnewi*. He traded for two more years, gathered enough money to pull down his late father's dilapidated mud house, and erected a three-bedroom apartment with iron roofs.

Mezie didn't forget his pledge to make the young lady his wife. How could he? Akwaugo was the reason he had decided to make money in the first place. "My Asa will not suffer," was his everyday anthem.

Akwaugo was in her fifth year in secondary school when Mezie came for her hand in marriage. Promises were made, the kind that brought relief and eased burdens off Akwaugo's parents.

"From today onward, I will take care of everything concerning my wife, from her school fees down to the pant she wears, I don't want anybody buying anything for her."

Akwaugo was the dawn Mezie woke up to every day and the soft rain droplets on his skin. He would pick her up from the house, drop her at school, and would return before the final bell that announced the school dismissal to take her home.

"*Asa'm, Bányè machin kám bùnà gî*," he would say to her.

He was dedicated, but also arrogant and insecure.

"Asa m, I will kill any man I see around you," he would say to Akwaugo. "They think that because I didn't go to school, that they will now use their big-big English to take you away from me. I have money, they don't."

But Akwaugo had eyes for no other man except Mezie. He was the song she sang, the thought that occupied her mind. She couldn't wait to finish senior secondary school to become his wife and join him in his drugstore so they would make more money together.

"No *Asa*, you will go to Nursing school, I want you to be a Midwife, the first in our kindred, *ínùgò*?"

They made plans together; a happy man who was blessed with a woman as fair as the goddess of the river, and a young beautiful lady, who found favor in the eyes of a man ready to spend so much to make her his wife.

But, there’s always a twist to every beautiful story that will have to alter the destinies of those involved.

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Chapter 1

Akwaugo



Nnewi, Anambra state

The wind was on a rampage that morning, clearing the surface of everything that had no firm grip, making a mockery of beauty and supple flesh. Akwaugo threw a shawl over her head, wrapped both ends of the material across her neck, and hurried down the road that led to *Otolo* community youth hall.

The road still had the black look of the night, however, the hue of the sky was more bluish than charcoal.

“Auntie, good morning,” some children trotting up the road, with baskets of freshly picked *ùdàlá*, chorused.

“Mm-hm.”

On a normal day, she would stop to ask for one or two of the seasonal juicy tart fruits from them. But not today, she had to meet with this man who had agreed to help her after two weeks of pleading with him. If she was lucky, the deed would be done before the sun ascended the sky, ensuring she returned home with ample time to prepare her husband's breakfast.

After walking for a while, the house came into sight. The man said she would recognise it when she saw it and she did. A big white house, unique for its city architectural design. Her heart began to race faster as she hastened down. It’s going to be just this one act. God would understand why she did it.

She hastily wiped her face with the back of her hand, swallowed the rue that clogged her throat and continued walking. Now wasn't the time to mourn the demise of her decency, and she wouldn't nurture the shame and guilt that was trying so hard to grip the whole of her either. If fate was kind to her, she wouldn't be seeking the help of another man to…to…

She wouldn't want to say it, she would rather concentrate on the *positive outcome* as Mezie suggested.

"*Asa m,* think about the result," he had told her last night. "Think about the joy after."

If only it was that simple, she thought as she stood in front of the intimidating gate that was separating her from the abomination she was about to commit. She should go back, but Mezie had made her swear to go achieve this—task. As she inched closer, her eyes darting from one of the pillars that held the gate to the other in search of the doorbell the man said she should ring.

She wasn't sure if the blue rectangular object fixed on one of the pillars was the device as it looked nothing like the one in the Reverend father's parsonage, or the one at Chief Ekwueme's new duplex, but it had a round spot at the center that looked like a button she could push. So, she pressed on it—a quick press, then withdrew her finger to wait for someone to come out.

A rustle behind made her heart leap from her chest, and she turned quickly. Relief washed through her as she saw no one approaching but a waterproof bag rolling down the dusty road. She exhaled and turned towards the gate. Yet, the palpitations in her chest continued. Nobody should see her standing here alone or she would be the subject of discussion in the next women's meeting.

She pressed the button again, this time she followed the action with a mindless tap of her fingers on her lap, as she mumbled numbers. She would abandon the quest and go home if no one came out of the gate by the time she got to twenty, and it would be a sign. But on the eighteenth count, the gate bolt-lock clanged, the small leaf of the metal door swung open, and the man stood before her.

They stared at each other for a while. Then he looked away, muttering something under his breath, and lifted his eyes to look at her again. *Please don't send me away, don't tell me that agreeing to help me was a mistake.*

She would go down on her knees and beg him, wet his feet with her tears until he would reconsider.

“Three of my security men have gone to spend Christmas with their families. The remaining one left this morning to go see his son in the hospital.” His voice was as nonchalant as his gaze. “How long have you been standing here?”

“Not, not long.” She stole another glance at the road and frowned, “nobody must see—”

“I understand,” the man said, took her by the hand and led her into the large compound. He pushed the door to the house open and allowed her to walk in first before he followed, shutting the door behind him.

A shiver ran through her body as her eyes roamed the magnificent interior. The place looked like...like...heaven. Did he own the house, or it belonged to someone else—perhaps, a rich relative?

“Come,” he said and headed for the staircase. She followed. What was it that convinced her that this man held the solution to her problem? This total stranger that only came to buy *ukwa* and *ugba* from her. She had taken a look at him that first day and decided that if she must do what Mezie was asking of her, it had to be with this man.

That day, he gave her a stare that conveyed his thoughts towards her request, *you must be mad*. But he returned the next day, this time he stayed longer to listen to her story. The *not-so-complicated* part of it. He had shown sympathy and even offered to give her money so she could adopt a baby for her husband. But Mezie would want nothing less than a seed from her own womb, planted there in the natural way. So, she pressed on. And he kept rejecting her but continued coming back to her shop.

Until he couldn’t refuse her anymore.

“You still want us to go ahead?” The man walked to a corner in the mirror-like floor of the room, where a giant fridge stood. Akwaugo turned away from him and swallowed hard, she wished he would hasten with the act. She had not come to his home—that is if it belonged to him—to watch him prowl the length and breadth of his magnificent room.

“Hope you won’t regret this.” He walked back to where she stood with a bottle and a glass, poured some wine into the cup, and offered it to her.

She shook her head.

He placed both the bottle and the glass on top of the table, and pulled her towards him, his eyes searching and holding hers. “You won’t change

your mind?”

She shook her head again.

His intense stare left her trembling, his firm grip on her shoulders wasn’t helping the situation either.

“Okay.” He left her and went to lay on the bed. “Come lie beside me.”

She didn’t move.

“If I’m going to help make a baby for another man, I’ll like to enjoy every bit of the process. You should also try and do same.”

Enjoy? *May God forbid*! She would never take delight in any man other than her husband. What she needed from this man was his seed, only his seed. Why wouldn’t he just plant it inside her so she could go home?

“Why are you doing this, woman?” He eased off the bed and strolled towards her.

When did he remove his shirt? *Mother Mary*! His body was—no, no, no, she shouldn’t look at him too much.

“You can change your mind now.”

“I can’t.” Though she had her eyes settled on the mirror behind him, she was aware of his bare torso. “This is the only way to wipe away my husband's shame,” she said.

He raised his hands to touch her cheek, but she flinched, pulling the shawl on her head to cover her face.

“You don’t want to do this,” he said. “Look at you. You are scared.”

He was right, she was trembling like a naive thief about to steal yams from a stranger's barn. But she wasn’t going to allow the man to talk her out of this, Mezie would kill her if she returned without performing the act.

“If I don’t want to do it, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Then why are you covering your face?” he reached out to grab the shawl, but she avoided his touch. “Let me see every part of your face,” he requested.

She shook her head. “My face shouldn’t be of importance to you now.”

“You are in my house, about to have me make... have sex with you. I demand to see the whole of you.” He held the shawl and gently slid it off her head.

“How old are you?” he asked, as he patted her cheek.

“It doesn’t matter sir.” The heat of his touch burnt raw and ignited something inside her, she shuffled a few steps away from him. This wasn’t supposed to be a delightful act, she shouldn’t feel any form of sensation.

“It matters to me if I am going to fuck you.”

Fuck? Such a dirty word. To hear him describe what he was about to do to her with such a word made her feel as if she was *nwàmgbêkê* the village prostitute. Yet, there was something about how he said it that almost got the cove between her legs tingling.

“How old?”

“Old enough to want a child for my husband.”

He was staring hard at her. Was he considering—no, he mustn’t. Akwaugo wouldn’t want to go through the pain of scouting for another man who didn’t reside in the village and wouldn’t know her husband. This one was from the big city, he said so himself. He rarely visited the village. He had decided to come home this season, and as early as the first week of December because he wanted to start a project.

“Please, sir, we have to do this now so I can go. I don’t want anyone to see me coming out of this place like—like this.” The words rolled out of her lips.

“Okay.” He hesitated for a while, “let’s do it.”

There was nothing much to remove from her body as she had only a wrapper tied around her chest with nothing underneath. She bit her lip and turned away from his stare which was as uncomfortable as the chilled air emanating from somewhere in the room. When he loosened her wrapper, her hand flung across her chest in a poor effort to cover her breasts as the piece of cloth slid down her body.

Eyes shut. Lips tightened. She waited.

Nothing.

She peeped and caught him ogling at her body and the urge to grab her wrapper, cover herself, and run out of the room came strong on her. *Holy Mary Mother of God*. This was the first time another man would see her nakedness. And the way this man was licking up her body with his eyes—

“Who is your husband?”

“You…you don’t have to know him.”

“You refused to tell me anything about you.”

“I told you my name and you know my shop in the market.”

“Why do I feel that you lied about your name? You said it’s Mmesoma, but your neighbors call you something else.”

“Sir, please.”

“Tell me who your husband is.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It is. I have to know the man I’m about to fuck his wife.”

“Please sir, don’t make me tell you, don’t punish my husband further.”

“You came...he sent you to me.”

“And that should be enough.”

The man was delaying, and Mezie would be so worried if she didn’t return on time.

“Please sir, do this for us.”

The man held her gaze for another few seconds.

“Okay,” he said, “come.”

She hesitated.

He muttered something under his breath as he closed the gap between them to wrap his arms around her, gently pulling her closer so her breasts brushed against his bare chest.

“You have to be comfortable with me,” he said. “I don’t want it to look like I’m raping you.”

His hand moved up to her cheekbone, then to her lips. “You are trembling,” he muttered, and lifted her off the floor, carried her through the room to placed her on the bed, and went ahead to loosen the rope of his grey sweatpants.

“Close the curtains, and, Uhm, turn off the light, *bìkô*.” She didn’t want to see his length, neither did she want to see his face when he would enter her.

He did as he was told and returned to start the work.

And so was it that at that hour of the morning, while her husband tossed and turned on his bed, Akwaugo lay in the arms of another man. A shameful thing she would never forget. More shameful was the fact that she was enjoying what this surprisingly gentle stranger, who kept asking if he was hurting her as he thrust, was doing to her.

She sobbed quietly throughout the act, not of pains but of the shameless pleasure that had swept through her as he *fucked* her. His fingers, locking in her hair, kept massaging her scalp while he whispered soft words into her ears. She wasn’t supposed to find it pleasurable. She shouldn’t find the whole act pleasurable, but she did.

And he knew.

He also knew she was struggling with this foreign pleasant sensation that overwhelmed her body. She didn’t want to moan as he stroked her

walls with such skill and carefulness she'd never experienced before. But he was determined to break her.

"Let yourself go, *nnê*. Enjoy it, don't deprive yourself." His voice was the softest, most beautiful deep tone she'd heard in a long while. "Don't hold back, please."

She didn't know how long it lasted. However, she pretended to be relieved when it was over—that was a lie, she didn't want him to stop when he did, though she wouldn't tell anyone that.

"My name is Tobechukwu," the stranger had said while seeing her off to the gate.

She knew. He had mentioned it to her before that day. But it didn't matter. She had vowed never to see him again. If her *chì* was by her side, this one act would get her pregnant.

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Chapter 2

Akwaugo



Her husband was still in bed when she got home. She knew he was awake because he had his hands padding the back of his head and his legs moving the way they normally do when he was deep in thought.

"*Dìm*," she called out softly.

He hissed and turned towards the wall.

"My husband, I'm back."

He said nothing.

She understood the hurt and the rage he was nursing and knew that going to lie beside him on the bed would infuriate him the more. So, she quietly walked out and shut the door behind her.

Their relationship had deteriorated with every barren year that passed. Now, they barely had conversations like they used to. But she understood. If only she could give him a child, a son precisely, things would return to normal.

"Akwa weldon o!" Her neighbor walked into the compound. "I was here earlier to buy *Ukwa* for my sister's son who is going back to Ùnûbí this morning, but your husband's boys said you left the house."

"Yes, I needed to check Nnè Ùkwùòmà." She adjusted her wrapper and sat down on a bench. She could still feel wetness in the triangular region between her legs, a reminder of the abomination she committed earlier that day. The man had wanted her to take a bath, but she had refused. The sooner she left there the sooner she would forget that it ever happened.

That was if she would ever forget.

She gathered her wrapper, and tucked it in between her thighs, stylishly wiping some of the stubborn seeds that had dripped out from her canal.

“Hope it's well, this one you went to see Nnè Ùkwùòmà?”

“Yes o. I went to book her breadfruits. I didn’t want other sellers to approach her first.” She let out a groan as she got up and ambled towards the backyard.

“Are you wounded?” Her neighbor followed her.

“Aren’t we all?” Akwaugo uncovered a big basin. “To be barren for seven years is worse than any wound.” She dipped a measuring cup inside. “How many cups do you want?”

Mezie chose that moment to come out, clearing his throat, as he sat on the rocking chair on the veranda.

“Fifteen cups,” the woman said, glancing over her shoulder. “Is your husband well?”

“Mm, why do you ask?”

“He didn’t respond to my greeting when I came earlier, and now he is looking at you as if you denied him sex last night.”

Akwaugo glanced at her husband and looked away, shame and guilt pricking her hard.

“Are you both quarreling?” Her neighbor asked.

“Maybe he had a bad dream,” Akwaugo replied, handed the bagged grains to her neighbor and waited for the woman who untied her wrapper, brought out some money, and handed it to her. “Thank you,” she said as she walked the woman to the gate.

“How many times?” Mezie asked as soon as she returned.

She perceived the disgust in his voice, and thought it wise not to fuel his blooming rage that early, she lowered her head and made to walk past him.

“Am I not talking to you?” Mezie sprang to his feet and grabbed her arm in a vice manner. “Didn’t you hear me? How many times did he do it?”

“Mezie bìkó nú, we are outside.”

“Answer me! How many rounds did he go?”

“Once!” She snatched her arm away from him. “Only once.”

“I saw you when you walked in. There was no sign of remorse in your face,” he said, spitting on the ground.

Was he expecting her to wail like a woman whose child died or one who was being dragged in the market square by Ùmûâdâ for being a witch? Would he believe her if she had told him how she had run like a woman

being pursued by a furious thunder and had stumbled over a fallen tree on her way home because she was blinded by her tears?

“Did you like it?” Glancing over his shoulder and settling his gaze back at her. “Was it sweet?”

Akwaugo ignored him, took an iron bucket that was at the far end of the veranda, scuttled to the backyard, filled it with water, and made to enter the house when he grabbed her forcefully. The bucket slipped off her grip, and landed on her big toe, at the same time emptying its content all over the floor.

“Chìm, Chìm o!” She yelped as pain traveled from her toe to her brain.

“Oga, we are ready to go to the shop.” One of his sales boys walked into the scene.

Seeing her opportunity to get away, Akwaugo limped inside the house.

She should be angry at Mezie. After all, it was for him she did what she did. Yet, she wasn’t going to blame him. It was her chì that had refused to give her children when other women were having theirs.

Mezie had a chewing stick in his mouth when she came out with her wares an hour later. Her hair tied in three places. Her face was devoid of beauty add-ons, just the way he loved it.

“I am ready to go to the market, my husband,” she muttered.

He continued chewing in silence for a while. “Did you have your bath?” he finally spoke to her, his earlier anger vanished as if it was never there.

“Yes, I found a bucket of water inside the bathroom.”

Another silent beat.

“I am sorry for what I said to you,” he said.

“I'm not angry, my husband.”

“Nwòkê ôzô rárá nwùnyém,” he said as though she hadn’t spoken. “Another man had sex with my wife, how do you think I am feeling about it?” He hissed. “Did he know who I am?”

“No, my husband.”

“Do you know him?”

“I have never seen him before that day he came to my shop.” That day, she returned and told Mezie about him. “And I didn’t bother to ask whose son or whose husband he is.”

“He is married?”

She shrugged, “While he doesn’t look old, he isn’t a child either.”

“So, you had time to look at his face, eh? What else did you take time to look at? The size of his Àmú?”

He wasn’t expecting her to answer that, so she remained silent.

“Was he gentle with you?”

What? How could he ask her that?

“Was he?”

Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, she looked away. Yes, he was so gentle that she had wanted to wrap her legs around him and nudged him to do more things to her. His loving whispers in her ears had awoken the desire she never knew she had. But she wouldn’t tell Mezie that.

Mezie was the first that opened her fountain of womanhood, the first and only man to take her through the journey of intimacy between a man and woman, until this morning. Telling him how nice this man was with her would kill him.

“What mattered was the seed he planted, I told him the terms and he understood,” Akwaugo replied.

“You understand that nobody should know about this?”

She nodded.

“And that you will never set your eyes on him again?”

“Àmá m nk’àhú. I understand perfectly.”

“I would kill you and the man if I ever hear that you are meeting him in secret.”

She wanted to ask him what would happen if this once didn’t get her pregnant but remembered instantly that countering Mezie’s orders with questions, no matter how reasonable, would earn her nothing but beatings. “He will be going back to the city soon.”

“Eh-eh?”

“Eh, my husband. I will not be seeing him again.”

They slid into silence while he continued cleaning his teeth.

“Are you sure it entered very well? I don’t want us to go over this thing again.” Mezie said suddenly. The question was both shocking and amusing at the same time.

“Yes, my husband. I—” She had wanted to say that she had held the man’s buttocks, pressing it against her pelvic when he told her he was about to release. But she wasn’t sure how Mezie would react to it. “I am sure,” she said instead.

Leaning off the pavement, Mezie gargled his mouth with water. “Oya, wait for me, let me dress up and drop you in the market.”

“Thank you, my husband.”

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Chapter 3

Tobe



He turned the shower head and lifted his face to the rush of warm water. Eyes closed, he scrubbed his head with his palms, then his face and spat out water that had found its way into his mouth.

Tobe wished he could stay inside the cubicle long enough for the water to totally wash away his sin. How long is long enough? Forever. That's what it would take to get his heart off the despicable act he just committed.

What in the name of God was he thinking? How could he fail like this? Like a man lacking in morality.

How many visits to that shop did it take to get him moaning on top of another man's wife? Something he had never dreamt of doing in his life. One look into her eyes—a liquid amber that reminded him of the yellow-rusty sardonyx gleaming stone he bought recently from Egypt—and he couldn't connect with reasoning anymore. He didn't even think of safety. What if she had a disease?

God, goodness!

Who the fuck was that woman?

Aside from the fact that she sells foodstuffs in the market, he knew nothing else about her. Yet, he had had sex with her, and enjoyed it. That's the most annoying part! He wasn't supposed to enjoy humping another man's wife!

He had almost backed out of the whole thing, then he made the mistake of pulling her into his arms, her bare breasts pressing against his chest, and he lost it. She was so desirable. Her skin was like bone china, so delicate that he had feared that the slightest caress would have broken her form.

Remembering the gasp that escaped her lips when he slipped his penis inside her warm essence, he shuddered with excitement.

Jesus! Tobe, what is wrong with you?

Maybe that woman cast a spell on him. Either that or something must have struck him the first day he entered the market. That was the only explanation for the hex that got him into this mess.

And what sort of husband would allow his beautiful wife to sleep with another man because of a child?

He turned the shower off, walked out of the steamy cubicle and grabbed a towel from a fixed metal hanger on the tiled wall. Stepping into the room, he cast his eyes on the bed, swallowed hard, and went to sit at the edge, placing his hands on the rumpled sheet.

“She’s inexperienced.” He felt her innocence the instant he touched her.

He gathered a fist full of the sheet, brought it close to his nose and inhaled her scent of morning dew and another sweet smell he couldn't identify. He regretted allowing her to go so soon. There was so much he would have asked her, so much he wanted to know.

But she had rushed out like one running away from a raging fire. “*Do not come looking for me please*,” She had pleaded. And he had promised not to. But some promises like this one were meant to be broken. She wouldn’t get him to sleep with her, run off, and expect him not to come after her.

His phone buzzed, rudely interrupting his thoughts. Letting the sheet go, he stood up to get the gadget from the dressing table, listened to the caller for a moment, responded with a few words and the line went dead.

He was supposed to go to *‘Ókòngwú grammar school’* to check on the work going on there. It was a project he picked up that year. Many years ago, the school had been one of the best in the village. Now education has evolved, and the school needed an upgrade.

From there, he would be visiting the acres of land his uncle had helped him purchase at *Ùgwù Àkpátí Ôzü*. If things worked out the way he planned it, work would commence there too.

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Chapter 4

Akwaugo



The village was a cacophony of laughter. In two days, it would be Christmas; the whole market was already agog with the festivity. The whole market but one shop.

Akwaugo brought out a bottle of petroleum jelly, mashed it on her palms, and rubbed evenly on both legs and arms, wincing as her fingers touched her throbbing big toe—it was the toe that received the impact of the iron bucket that slipped off her hand earlier that day when Mezie was exhibiting his madness. She hissed and inserted a little quantity of petroleum jelly inside her nose and inhaled.

It was the worst time of the year for her delicate skin. If not for the original shea-butter her mother sent to her, which she now mixed with her palm-kernel oil, she would have been treating painful blisters this season like she had done on Christmas of the past years.

The only good thing the season brought with it was the extra money she was making in her business, as old women who would want to cook special delicacies for their children always paid more for her breadfruits and oil beans.

“Akwa, your wares are almost finished.”

It took a second or two for the voice to sink into Akwaugo’s head and her lips stretched into a grin as her brows arched up.

Nwamaka.

When was the last time Akwaugo set her eyes on this stray daughter of Ánàédó, her secondary school classmate?

“Nne, I didn’t know you are back, when did you return?” Akwaugo asked, staring down at Nwamaka's manicured fingers.

“Three days ago, o. You know I will not miss ‘*Ózò ébúnú*’ masquerade dance for any reason,” Nwamaka said.

“*Nnòó*. Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Akwa.” She lifted her hand to move the hair that had fallen to her face.

Akwaugo didn’t miss the shiny rings on Nwamaka's fingers and the beautiful wristwatch that decorated her wrist. Those looked very expensive, how many yards of wrapper would one of those buy?

“*Chai, Imâkâ*. You look so beautiful,” Akwaugo said, swallowing the envy that was welling inside her.

Who would have thought that the most notorious girl in class back then would turn out this successful? Nwamaka was an ‘*Ítíbòlìbô,*’ an academic dunce who did not only carry the class on her head at the end of every academic section but the whole school as well. To top it all, Nwamaka didn’t care a bit about school, she wanted to marry the richest man in Nnewi and have children, “*I want to marry Ìbétó’s son one day*,” Nwamaka would boast to the amusement of others.

Nwamaka left the village three months after Akwaugo’s wedding, to live with an auntie in Port Harcourt. The next thing that was heard about her was that she had gotten herself a white man who worked with *Julius Berger* and drove a big jeep.

“How are your children, did you come with them, how many do you have now?” Akwaugo asked.

“I have only two o, and they are here.”

How could someone call two children *only*? Two was already too much. If she could have one child at least, she was sure she wouldn’t ask for any other favor from her *chì*. “I thank God for you, my sister.” Akwaugo got up, dusted her backside, and walked to hug her old friend. “You are looking amazing! Port Harcourt is doing you well.”

Nwamaka smiled proudly. “Why wouldn’t it? I didn’t go to Port Harcourt to count bridges, and my husband pampers me like a baby,” she bragged. “So, how is life treating you, Akwa?”

“You have seen me *nau*, I am fine.” Akwaugo managed a smile.

“You are not fine, Akwa. You look like a maid.”

“Nwamaka *ìbîâkwâ*. Everybody mustn’t be a fashionista like you. Some of us like being natural.”

“Natural my foot. Akwaugo, you? The most beautiful girl in Maria Regina secondary school.”

“Nwamaka leave me o, people change.”

“Agreed, but some are changed by their husbands. Talking of husband, how is that local champion of yours?”

“Nwamaka please stop, I will not allow you to talk about my Mezie that way.”

“I know, he is your hero that is why you are not seeing what you have become under him. I have told you to leave that man and come to the city.”

“Come to the city to do what exactly without my husband?”

“You still call that one husband? Abandon that insecure man, *bìkô*.”

“Even Jesus and his mother Mary will not forgive me if I leave my husband. Do you know what you are saying? Mezie is my life! He has done so much for me.”

“Does that give him the right to treat you like this?”

“Like what?”

“Sorry o, I don’t mean to offend you. But I think that the world is moving, and you should move with it. I heard he sent you to a nursing school, yet here you are in *Éké Àmàngwú* market. He couldn’t even allow you to work in the Government hospital.”

“We want it that way, at least, until I’m done with...ehm childbearing.”

“It's okay,” Nwamaka interrupted. “Do you still have oil beans? I want to but plenty o.”

Akwaugo exhaled, relieved that the topic was changed, she hurriedly attended to her friend and bade her farewell.

It would take an hour later for her to remember that she hadn’t bought the Christmas fowl.

Swearing under her breath as she untied her apron and threw it under her table, she took some naira notes from the container where she kept her daily sales, called out for her neighbor to look after her shop, and went in search of whatever fowl she could find by that time of the day.

She returned with two sick-looking birds, the kind her mother would have referred to as ‘*nwùrióm*.’ Lost in her resentment towards Nwamaka for causing her to miss out on the chance to acquire robust birds, she failed to notice the man leisurely leaning against a nearby pole by the side of her

shop. By the time her attention finally shifted, it was too late for her to execute a swift turnaround and vanish. The man had already caught sight of her, a relaxed smile playing upon his lips.

“Thank God,” he muttered, his face glimmering like a polished piece of brown wood. “I was about asking your neighbor where you went to.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t—” He sighed. “Please, we need to talk.”

We need to talk kwá?

The birds she bought flapped and clucked furiously as her fingers tightened around their legs. Muttering curses under her breath, she strode past him, ignoring his presence. With a dismissive gesture, she flung the agitated birds into a corner of her shop.

“I have to see you.” The man followed her inside.

“Why?” She snapped. “I told you not to look for me. You shouldn’t be here!”

“What I did to you this morning—it’s so wrong and I want to apologise.”

“There was no *this morning* between us!” She interrupted, “I don’t know you. You don’t know me. Get out of here before my husband arrives.”

“Did you really mean it when you say your husband knows about the arrangement?”

“Mother Mary! I am not mad to want to have sex with...with another man just for fun,” she hushed, aware that her voice had scaled the walls.

The man shook his head, “Unbelievable,” he murmured.

“I told you. You agreed.”

“I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Akwaugo tightened her lips and fought the urge to yell at the man who had moved even deeper into the shop, to remind him of the trouble he was putting her into by just showing his face again. When he placed his slender fingers on her shoulder, she jerked her head and snapped. “You promised to keep what happened between us to yourself. You said you will forget about it, why are you here looking for me *nau*?”

“I’m sorry, lady.”

“I’m not a lady o. I am a woman! A married woman, please go away now.”

Never before had Akwaugo noticed how time was so much like the ‘*Nkwù enû*’ that passes slowly, a drop at a time. Every second that passed

with the man staring intensely at her, seemed like forever. She wished he would just leave. Having him standing there, looking like one of those men on the back cover of the immoral novels Nwamaka used to bring to school back then, was causing enough damage to her core.

“Go, please,” she insisted, then turned her face away from his gaze for fear of losing her moral sense. To describe the man's skin as *dark* would be doing it much injustice; it reminded her of the Ígbó-ùkwù bronze artifact, a well-cleaned and polished one. And he had the kind of face that could stop one on one’s track. A kind of handsomeness that wafted like a strong, intoxicating perfume. It didn’t help that he was so modest about it.

“Why did you do it?”

Mother Mary! How many times would this man ask her this question? What did he want to hear from her? “O o!” She turned to face him. “Please *nau*, leave me alone! Go away, don’t put me in trouble *bìkô nu*!”

He ran his tongue over his slightly parted lips and shook his head. “What can you sell to me?”

The gap between his perfectly sized upper incisors made it impossible for her to take her eyes away from his face this time. How can one man be this good-looking?

Why was she becoming aware of his every beautiful feature?

“I have to buy something, so people don’t suspect us,” he added.

Getting up to check what was remaining in her basin, she picked up a nylon bag and began to scoop grains inside. She was aware his eyes were mirroring every one of her movements and that gave her so much discomfort.

“Let me help,” he said, taking the nylon bag from her hand. She held her breath as his fingers brushed hers. Feigning ignorance of the spark his touch lit in her, she watched him went ahead to serve himself.

“What quantity do you want?”

“I don't know,” he said, dropping the measuring cup and weighing the half-filled nylon bag. “I think this is enough. How much do you think it’s worth?”

“How many cups are in there?”

“I wasn’t counting.” He gave her a weak smile.

“I will have to remeasure it then.” She took the bag from him.

“Bring it to my car when you are done,” he said and walked out.

Akwaugo shut her eyes and inhaled deeply. Then she poured the grain back inside her basin and picked up her measuring cup. Earlier that morning, she had thought that the man was an average man who was living with a rich relative. But from her close observation of him—the rich fabrics of his clothes, his scent, his commanding tone—she must have been wrong about him.

The more reason she should avoid him like women avoid going to the stream on Ékè day.

Determined to dismiss him for good, Akwaugo proceeded to tie the bag. By the time she got to the spot where he had always parked his car whenever he came to the market, he was already seated inside the car, with one leg hanging out the opened door.

He got down as soon as he saw her, hands buried inside his jean pocket, waiting for her to come close.

“How much?” He took the bag from her and dumped it inside his car.

“Three thousand, four hundred and twenty naira.”

He brought out some notes from his pocket, counted, and offered them to her.

She shook her head.

“Please, take it,” he urged.

“It’s more than the cost of the *Ùkwá*.”

“I know. I just want you to have it.”

“I dare not take more than what is mine.”

His brows arched in shock, then creased as he gazed from the notes in his hand to her face, back to the money. He must be a man not accustomed to rejection, she thought as she watched him count out four thousand Naira and offered to her.

“This is okay, I guess?”

She nodded, and stretched her hand to take the money, but he took her arm and didn’t let go. Fear widened Akwaugo's eyes and set off an alarm in her head. They were on the road, people would see, and someone would tell her husband.

Her husband!

Mother Mary! Mezie might be somewhere watching, or someone might tell him. “Let go of me.”

“Your real name, just tell me your real name.”

“Please, let me go!”

“Your neighbors call you Akwa, is that your name?”

Akwaugo went pale. “Please let me go,” she whispered.

“Akwa, egg. Is that it?” he sounded as though it’s ridiculous for one to have that as a name.

“Sir, let me go!” She could hear her heart thumping like the local drum used by her church choir. Not only for fear of being seen with this man but his grip around her arm was sending the thoughts of what they did earlier rushing back into her head, the longing he aroused in her with his gentle thrusts and words. No man had ever drawn such feeling from her in a long while, not since she met Mezie. She had never felt an attraction so strong and fear so loud.

“Akwaugo. My name is Akwaugo.”

“Akwaugo,” he repeated slowly. “That makes sense now.”

“*Asa*?”

A gasp escaped her mouth as her husband’s voice snapped her back to reality. She pulled off from his grip, causing the money to scatter in different directions, Akwaugo hurried to stand before her husband.

“What is this man telling you?” Mezie blunted. Akwaugo could count the hair inside his flared nose.

“He bought something from me—”

“Is it in the car that you now sell things to people? Don’t you know you are a married woman? *Nwànyi nô ná dî!*”

“Good evening, sir. I’m—”

Mother Mary, no! The man shouldn’t have gotten involved. Now Mezie would have the reason to exhibit his madness.

“Mr man, this woman is somebody’s wife!” Mezie cut in.

“I know, she wasn’t doing anything—”

“Did I ask you? *Ònyè íbéríbré*. Won’t you enter this coffin you call a car and go? Or you want to buy my wife as well?” He turned to her, “*Ngwà nù*, come let us be going.” He grabbed her hand and began to pull her along as he walked back into the market.

The man was still where they left him, shock etched on his face as she glanced at him.

Mezie

Fate, they say is like an unpredictable and unfaithful woman, she doesn't smile at you the same way forever.

The little girl he married years ago had bloomed into a very beautiful woman, and shooing men off her, like one would do flies circling a mango fruit, was now becoming a tiring job. Men from big cities, with beautiful cars, would stop her by the road just to speak to her, offering to drive her to anywhere she was heading. Some would even be bold enough to follow her home.

The thought that his wife would give in to any of those men and would leave him troubled his mind greatly, so much so that he was almost losing his mind. Even the oath he made her take seven years ago could no longer ease his worry as it used to before.

The idea to make her take an oath of faithfulness, an oath with death as its penalty, came eight months after their wedding when he realised that despite he had legally made Akwaugo his wife, men still sought her attention and offered her gifts.

He had taken her to the *Édó* shrine where the priest made her drink an herbal mixture, and gave her an ointment with the instruction; "You will rub it in your vagina for seven days. If any man except your husband enters you after you must have done this, you will die."

She hated the place, the secret ceremony, the priest, and the fact that he didn't tell her before taking her there. She had refused to give her hand to be cut until he threatened to send her packing, and wouldn't accept the ointment from the priest. Mezie had accepted it on her behalf, and thanked the priest as they left.

She refused to speak to him throughout the ride home, but he didn't care.

He was being protective of his woman.

To make sure the priest's instructions were carried out, Mezie had taken it upon himself to be applying the ointment on her every day until seven days. Opening her legs and inserting fingers inside her vagina was not new to him. Before their marriage, when she was still in secondary school, he would bring her to his chemist shop, pull her skirt up and insert his two fingers into her to check if another man had broken her virginity.

The oath settled his fear. He began to allow her little freedom. She could go to the market without him following her, he even allowed her exchange smiles with other men—nothing more than mild smiles.

But when he thought his anxiety was over, fate clothed him with a sack of shame. Exactly one year after she took the oath, his manhood slept and didn't wake up. He didn't give it a thought at first, but as days passed it began to worry him. And as weeks rolled into months, then to years, he knew his enemies must be responsible for his predicament.

He spent years visiting *Oyibo* and herbal doctors, taking drugs and concoctions, yet nothing changed. His fear that his wife would seek the service of another man to *scratch* her vagina, irrespective of the oath, and the pressure to have children that would carry on his lineage drove him into forcing her to take another oath.

This time, he chose the secret coven of the most dreaded *Ókìjá* deity. He wanted a child and the only way to get it was for Akwaugo to meet another man. She had to swear before the deity that she was going to do it for him, and she must not tell anyone about it.

But it came with a price, he had to hold his wife's hand on a totem and tell her what led to his predicament.

"I mistakenly slept with Nnuego, Okorie's wife," he said. "Okorie caught me and swore with his *ófò* that my manhood would never wake up again."

"Mistake? Mezie! You made me swear that I will not desire another man, why then did you do this to me?"

"That's not important now. You have to meet another man once. Once oh. So, we can have a child. But you must swear not to tell anyone about it," Mezie insisted. "No one but the man that will do it with you should ever know I am not responsible for the child that will come out of the act. Swear before *Ókìjá*, swear now."

"What of the oath that prevents me from sleeping with another man? The penalty is death!"

Mezie had thought of this before bringing her here. "The oath will not do anything to you as long as I, your husband, is permitting you to do it," he said impatiently. "You are doing it for me, for us."

That didn't convince her.

"We need a child, *Asa m*. And you know this is the only way. Please, for the love you have for me, if truly you appreciate all I have done for you, do

this little thing for me, *biko nu*."

"But, *Àgbárá Ókìjá* can make you a man again."

"It doesn't work that way woman," the priest had corrected. "The person who lay the curse on him must revoke the curse with his *ófò* first."

"Then let's go back to Okorie and plead for his forgiveness," she said.

"You think I have not tried?" He hated that she was being unreasonable. She shouldn't even refuse this plan. After all, it would be for her good. "Take the oath now, we can still go to Okorie later."

Six months had gone since she took the oath. Six months of searching for the right man for the job—she refused all the men he suggested to her, even his own brother, Nwadi, whom he would have equally sworn to secrecy had she accepted, wasn't good enough.

Last November, he lost his patience and told her that it was either she accepted one of those men or he would be forced to get another woman who would gladly do his bidding, and she knew what that meant. A week into December, she returned from the market one evening and told him she had found someone, a total stranger she hadn't seen before in her life. It had bothered him though; what if this man had madness in his linage? Or stealing in his blood?

However, he didn't argue much with her, at least she had finally agreed to do it.

As Mezie sat on his wooden chair, eating roasted chicken and giving his wife who was sitting on top of the pavement, peeling melon, furtive glances, he thought of the night she had gone to be with the man.

"*Ptwaa*." He spat on the heap of sand beside him. "If anybody had told me that a day like this would come, I would have wrestled the person to the ground," he murmured.

He didn't know why it still hurt so much. Thank God he didn't know who the man was, he wouldn't have been able to live with seeing his face and knowing it was him who slept with his wife.

He leaned forward, gathered his loin cloth, and stuck it between his thighs, his brows wrinkled. What if his wife had lied about not revealing his identity? What if this man was an old lover? After all, she was the one who had found the man and had made every arrangement.

Shaking his head, he dismissed the possibility of an old lover. Akwaugo was a very fearful woman. The thought of death wouldn't allow her to speak not to talk of agreeing to date another man.

Mezie threw the remaining meat inside his mouth and licked his fingers while wondering what he would do if this effort didn't yield the desired fruit. He had been watching his wife closely after that day, to see her vomit or complain of morning sickness but she had remained as strong as a mule.

"*Asa*," He beckoned to her. "*Bíà*, come."

His wife was still beautiful, blooming like fresh vegetables, her waist slim and her hips wider. Pity, her beauty no longer excited but rather mocked him, reminding him of his *shame*.

"Are you well?" he asked as soon as she neared him.

"Yes, my husband. Why do you ask?"

"I am just concerned, are you sure you are not feeling sick? I can bring a pregnancy test kit from my shop if you want."

She laughed, "No, I am fine." Then she walked back to continue with what she was doing.

He lifted a cup of water to his lips, gulped, took another mouthful, gargled, and spat out.

His wife's response wasn't what he wanted to hear, but he would wait.

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Chapter 5

Akwaugo



She was clutching her Rosary to her chest, yet her mind was far from '*hail Mary*,' but on her husband whom she never found unattractive until now. His slim and smallish nature had never bothered her before, neither had his voice that could pass for that of a female. In fact, Akwaugo had even boasted about how ageless her husband was. But as she looked at him from the window now, a pack of bones slouching like a rejected lizard, she felt irritation welling inside her.

She knew it was because of that stranger: Tobechukwu. The thought of him had taken over her senses. Even now, she could feel a tingling sensation down her womanhood as the image of his face flooded into her head, and she began to remanence on his voice that knew how and where to stroke, his nonchalant but penetrating gaze. She clamped her thighs, shut her eyes, and inhaled deeply. It was so bad that she had started wishing that —ah! God forbid that such abominable thoughts would keep crossing her mind.

"*Nnê ânyí dî âsô, bìkô nû*. Mother Mary, please help me overcome this temptation."

Adultery is a sin, but what she had with Tobe was like an erotic spiritual rite of passage. He was deliberate with his thrusts, as though he intended to arouse her buried desires, to leave her wanting more.

Mbá nú, Akwaugo. You shouldn't be thinking about another man when your husband is alive and well.

Mezie, well? Hm—

She wiped her face with her wrapper, sat up from the chair, wore the Rosary round her neck, and walked outside to go pick up the empty plate beside her husband. Years ago, when they were newly married, he would insist she seat beside him while he breaks morning kola, he would give her a piece to chew when he was done thanking his ancestors—a traditional ritual he had refused to let go of even though he was a Christian. But things have changed, Mezie now enjoyed solitude more than having her around.

"That man I met you with at the market yesterday," he started as she bent to pick the plate. "I don't want you to see him again," he said, picking his teeth with his fingernail.

She already knew who he was talking about. "I have not been seeing him before."

"I didn't ask if you are seeing him before, I said you shouldn't see him again."

"What if he comes to buy from me?"

"Don't sell to him, let him buy from someone else. You are not the only person selling in that market."

She wanted to object, but she thought again and decided not to argue with him that morning. It would not end well.

"I know him."

Her heart sank into her belly. "You...you know him?"

Mezie whipped his head up to stare her hard on the face. "Ehen, are you shocked?"

"No o." She looked away while praying that he didn't see her discomfort. "I... Uhm... just that... I was wondering how... where you know him from. He looks like someone who hasn't visited home for a long time."

"What do I care if that small boy from Ótòlò chose to stay away from the village for the rest of his life?" Mezie cleaned his teeth with his tongue. "In fact, I would avoid the village if I were him."

"Why?"

"Who doesn't know their family? Outcasts. *Ósù*!" She caught his glance. "Their ancestors were offered to *Édó* as slaves."

Really? She lowered her gaze to hide her shock. "But the belief has been aboli—"

"*Taa!* Who abolished it?"

The *Ósù* caste system was an old practice that Christianity had rendered obsolete. But somehow, this new knowledge made her uncomfortable.

Maybe it's the disdain that accompanied Mezie's words. He would die a thousand times if he learned that the man she slept with was the same man he was talking about. An *Ósù*.

“He left the village after the death of his parents and didn’t return until after many years,” Mezie continued. “They said he traveled to *the white man’s country* and made a lot of money.” He leaned back on the chair, contoured his face to a sneer. “But we all know he did *ògwú êgõ*, money ritual.”

Akwaugo turned the plate over to dust off the sand from its back and started walking into the house. Then she remembered the conversation they were having before he left her to come to sit outside. A conversation she knew he didn’t want to continue but she had to raise it, nevertheless. “My husband.” She turned to face him. “I think, I'm still suggesting we should go see Okorie—”

“*Àgû dówà kwà gí ágbá*. Idiot!”

She was sure he would have slapped the living daylight out of her If she was within his reach. How she wished he would reason like a man—or like a woman whose essence was oiled again after a long year of abandonment.



Mezie

He grabbed the keg of palm wine by its neck, twirled the content, poured it into a wooden cup, and handed it to his friend Goodluck. He would have complained about the visit as it was too early to walk into someone’s house to share drinks and small talks like jobless women, but Goodluck was one of those friends he would forgive almost anything. *Almost*. Mezie wouldn’t hesitate to kill Goodluck if he dared come close to his wife, Akwaugo.

“Nwachukwu the drunk fell off his bicycle and landed inside the gutter while coming back from Ngoka’s daughter’s Traditional wedding,” his friend said after downing the drink.

“Who allowed Nwachukwu to ride his bicycle back home, did they want him to kill himself?” Refilling his friend's cup, Mezie picked a piece

of kola nut from the plate on the stool in front of them and threw it into his mouth.

“You know Nwachukwu is a stubborn goat, he would not listen to anybody.” Goodluck swallowed the wine all at once, then allowed a long pause. “Good palm wine is not easy to come by.” He rid his cup of drops of wine by flapping the cup repeatedly.

“It’s the season. I was even lucky to get this one from Nathaniel.” Mezie cleared his throat and adjusted his buttocks on the bench. “Goodluck my friend, have you quarreled with your parish priest that you’ve decided to come share a keg of palm wine with me instead of being in church this morning? Are you not supposed to go to mass?”

“What of you, Mezie? Will you die if you go to church?”

“Everybody knows I left church for the likes of you, six years ago,” Mezie said, picking another kola nut.

“*Òkè ènyím*, my good friend?”

“Mm?”

“I have come to ask why you’ve chosen to sell the acres of land along *Ùgwù àkpátí ôzü*? The last time I brought an Agent from the Government, you said it was an inheritance from your father and you are keeping it for your children?”

Mezie adjusted himself to face his visitor. “Which land are you talking about?”

“The one after Area command.”

Mezie hissed. “Is this your way of reminding me that you are still interested in that land? I already told you, I don’t want to sell.”

“Mezie, if I don’t know you, I would have called you a liar,” Goodluck said. “You have sold that land, my friend. Why are you hiding the truth?”

“A matured man doesn’t spit and lick up his spittle. If I have the intention of selling that land, I would have informed you. You came to me first.”

“Then where is the information coming from?”

“You tell me—you came to my house with the accusation.”

“Well, I saw tractors clearing the land and there are building materials __”

“*Bíà*, are you joking with me?” Mezie was visibly angry.

“Do I look like I am joking? Eh? I heard that boy from Ótòlò is planning to build a health center there.”

“Which boy?”

“Tobechukwu *nau*. The son of Ochudo, that one his late father was the school headmaster.”

“Tobechukwu—from Ótòlò?”

“Yes. Tobe *nau*. CEO Rayonile. His spare-parts manufacturing plant is at *Ùrù*, beside Innoson’s—”

Mezie jumped to his feet like a man whose pant was on fire. “*Méchìè gî ônü*, close your mouth! Someone is about to take what belongs to me and you are here giving me his personality profile.” He hastily wore his shirt and hurried out of the gate.

“Mezie, wait! Let’s think of a better way to settle this before you get yourself into trouble!” his friend called after him.

“There is nothing to think! I am going to kill anybody I see on that land.”

“Mezie, hold on first. Let’s think this through!”

“He thinks he has money, that he can do anything he wants, *Ókwáyà*? Because I don’t have a son?”

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Chapter 6

Akwaugo



Mezie and his friend couldn't possibly have referred to the same Tobechukwu that had wrapped her in his warmth the other morning, sending ripples of pleasure down her core until her mouth was let loose and moans erupted from her throat.

Or were they?

Was the man she gave herself to actually the owner of *Rayonile Steel*? The multi-billionaire that single-handedly built the mighty cathedral in Ótòlò and was rumored to have constructed all the major roads in the village. Some said he owned properties all over the world—but she didn't believe that. *Nobody could be that rich.*

Turning her face away from the window where she was watching Mezie and his friend and eavesdropping on their discussion—before they hurried out, she collapsed on the couch and heaved a sigh as her mind went back to the discussion she overheard.

"*Mbá nú*." The man she opened her legs for the other day didn't look anything like a billionaire.

She knew he was a *big man* even before Mezie confirmed it. But... but... he couldn't be *Rayonile nau*. Billionaires like that should be older, loud, pot-bellied, and with title beads around their ankles. They wouldn't come to the Market without bodyguards. They weren't even supposed to be seen in the market at all.

She sighed again and leaned back on the chair. It definitely must be a coincidence that the man that slept with her had the same name as the

multi-billionaire Mezie and his friend were talking about and that both of them were from the same village.

It had to be, she thought, bending to massage her big toe that still hurt from that bucket incident. What if both men were one and the same? Why would Tobechukwu want to take her husband's land? He must have known that the land belonged to Mezie, her husband. Was it because of her? Or because Mezie had insulted him that day at the market?

She got up and closed the curtain by the window, left the sitting room for the kitchen to check on the pot of cassava she had on the fire. She added more wood into the flame under the three-legged pot.

As the evening passed quite slowly and her husband hadn't returned, anxiety nested in her brain, fragments of it settled below her smiles, her actions, and her silly jokes with the women that visited her. No matter how much she would want to appear calm throughout the day, she couldn't help the dread that denied her the appetite to even eat dinner.

She was in the backyard, soaking sliced cassava, an oil lantern illuminating the darkness around her when her husband returned with bruises all over, making threats and cursing. It was obvious he had engaged in a fight that he lost. She knew that he would make her bear the brunt of his defeat if she dared open her mouth to ask him about what happened, so she decided to allow him to fume in peace.

Two hours later, Mezie was asleep—she was sure—when she snuck out of the house with his bike and set out to go confront Tobe.



"WHY DO you want to destroy my husband and me, what did we do to you, what is our crime?"

She didn't mind that he had visitors, she had marched up to where he was standing with some men—two security guards hurrying behind to stop her and had thrown the accusation to his face. "You took advantage of me, of us!"

The shock that was registered on his face told her he wasn't expecting to see her in his house by that time of the night.

"Akwaugo," he turned to the men with him, he muttered an apology, dismissed them and the guard that would have grabbed and thrown her out

at his command. Then turned back to her. “What are you doing here?”

“The land you took! The one that is beside the Area Command, it belongs to my husband. How could you do something like this?”

He scanned the environment, then took her arm and led her away from earshot of the men dining and laughing boisterously over the ambient festive music playing in his compound. “I have not taken any land from anybody,” he gritted, pulling her to a stop as soon as they stepped out of the gate.

“Lie!” She shut back, surprised at her boldness. “Are you not the owner of *Rayonile*?”

His silence was the confirmation she needed.

“How could you be this wicked?” She said as two men strolled out of the gate, stopped by to say their appreciation, and headed towards a car parked by the other side of the road. “Why would you do this to us, what did we do?” she added in a hushed tone.

He hesitated, then, “a liar and a wicked man, is that what you think of me?” His voice was thick with disappointment.

“And an *Ósù*, an outcast.” The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“What did you call me?”

Oh, blessed Mother Mary, she shouldn’t have allowed her mouth to run ahead of her head.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“You called me an *Ósù*!”

“I'm sorry, It's not—”

“Where did you hear that from?”

“Sir, I'm really sorry—”

“Where?!”

“My husband and his friend. They said you are...I am sorry...I didn’t know—”

“Would you have allowed me touch you if you knew I was an *Ósù*?” He cut in.

Abolished or not, she would have circled her hand over her head, snapped her fingers, and shouted *túfiàkwá* if she had known before that day. But now, she wasn’t even sure if she would refuse him if he demanded that she give him herself again.

“Tell me, Akwaugo. Would you have moaned with pleasure on my bed as I made love to you?”

“You didn’t make love to me,” she snapped, turning her face away from his intense stare. “And I didn’t...” even her essence reminded her that she was about to lie. “I didn’t moan.”

“You didn’t? You want to swear you didn’t?”

“Stop, please.” She was hot with embarrassment. “Don’t say those words.” Reminding her of that weak moment, was that his way of getting back at her for calling him an *Ósù*?

“I am an honorable man and when I tell you I didn’t take any land, I mean it. Why would I? I have all the money I need to buy any number of lands I want.”

“Then why did you come for mine? I know you have no regard for my husband after your brief encounter with him at the market, but you didn’t even think of me!” Her voice trembled.

“I didn’t buy the land myself, my cousin, Nchekwube did,” he said in an angry rasp. “The men that sold the land told him it belonged to the kinsmen and they unanimously agreed to sell it!”

“How could you buy land without proper investigation?” She wiped her face with the sleeve of her dress, “It belongs to my husband alone and he didn’t send anyone to sell it for him.”

“I’ll give it back,” he cut in.

He’ll— “What?”

“I said I’ll give it back to you and your husband.”

He's not joking, was he? “What about your money? How do you plan to get it back?”

“That shouldn’t bother you,” he said. “Tell your husband it wasn’t my intention and I am very sorry.”

He would let go of the land? Just like that? Just because she asked? She felt her knees buckle. This wasn’t the response she anticipated.

“Thank you,” she muttered. “I should be going now. My husband doesn’t know I came here.” She allowed a moment's silent pass. “Thank you again, I, uh, sorry for disturbing your party.”

She should really be going now that she still had the will to do so. Oh, she doubted if she could move a foot from where she stood as the man had his eyes on her. Even with her face lowered, she could feel him looking her over and probably grinning. *Éwò, Nnè ânyî d’âsô*, the bright searchlights

lined up from his gate, up to the junction that led to the major road aided in exposing her nervousness to him.

“Why do I feel you have been dying to see me and this was just an excuse for you to fulfill your craving?” he said.

“I came because of the land and nothing more,” she flashed him a glance. The man would have had the face of an angel if the edge of his slightly parted lips wasn’t pushed up, and one of his eyes scrunched in an arrogantly seductive manner.

“And you said your husband doesn’t know about your coming.” She didn’t miss the laughter in his voice. “*Asa*—”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Isn’t that what your husband called you the other day?”

“It’s reserved for him alone.” She jerked her head sideways, to shot him a glare, but as her eyes locked with his, she became lost in the brilliant darkness, it was difficult to pull away from the taunting beauty emanating from them. “You mustn’t call me that name,” she whispered.

He nodded and licked his lips. Mother Mary! This man didn’t know the effect every part of him, every of his body movement, was having on her. Maybe he did and was using it as a weapon of seduction on her. She swallowed the desire that had gripped her and lowered her gaze. The morning he had her, she had refused his lips, the agreement was for him to pour his seed inside her not to suck on her mouth, however, seeing him wet his lips now, she knew she would want to have him kiss her. At least once.

“I returned to your shop after your husband came around, but you were not there.”

“Why? I told you not to.”

“Don’t blame me, I was worried. The way he spoke to you, I wanted to be sure you were okay.” He placed his hand on her shoulder, concern heavy in his eyes.

“Don’t touch me.” She shrugged his hand off. But her body was saying otherwise. She wanted this man, wanted his hand not only on her shoulder but on every part of her body. Blessed mother! Why was life drawing her into a struggle she was obviously going to lose?

“I’m concerned about you,” he said. “That man—”

“Is my husband,” she interrupted, hoping he read the warning in her voice, she hurriedly left him, aware that he was still standing there, watching her as she mounted Mezie’s bike and rode away.

Her husband was awake, pacing the compound when she got home. The look he gave her stopped her in her stride.

“You are awake my husband,” she greeted.

“Where are you coming from?” His eyes moved from her to the bike. “With my *Machin!*”

“Nwamaka’s child was running temperature.”

“You are now a doctor that treats people’s children?”

“She sent someone to call me and... I felt I could go help her.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before leaving?”

“You were sleeping, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

She waited for him to say something more, but he turned and started walking back into the house. “How are you feeling now?” She asked, pulling the bike along as she headed toward the backyard where she would park it.

“My neck hurts.”

“Okay let me boil water to help you massage it, *ínùgò*?”

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Chapter 7

Tobe



“Ó *dògwù, chì êjî gô*. It's late. I should start going to my house.” His cousin, the man he had grown to call *brother*, relaxed his weight on his crutch, took the toothpick that was dangling from his mouth, and began picking his teeth. “*Èwô*, what a feast. I bet our kinsmen would ever forget today.”

“You are talking as if it’s the first time.” Three men walked by, said their gratitude, and left. “You’ve been hosting them on my behalf for years now. What’s so special about this one?”

“Your presence,” his cousin said, hopping closer so he could rest his elbow on the crutch’s sponge rubber padding while his withered leg hung freely off the ground. “You hardly honor them with it.”

“I’m a busy man, Nchekwube *Nwànnáà*. You know this.”

“That’s not an excuse, Tobe.”

“It’s not?”

“Yes, It's not.”

“Really? Brother, your response amazes me. Take you, for example, your wife complains of you no longer spending enough time with the family since you took over the reins of the steel company here in Nnewi. She blames me for it. I shouldn’t have made you the manager.”

“She is a whining witch.”

“A whining witch that loves you.”

“I know.” Nchekwube cleaned his teeth with his tongue. “I love her too, but I can’t help it. Managing the company is time-consuming.”

“You see yourself?!” Tobe let off a burst of laughter. “Now compare your situation with mine. I have chains of businesses to oversee. A whole conglomerate to chair!”

“Not to mention competitors to beat and more investments to make.”

“I know,” his cousin added. “But those things would break you one day. Family is everything. Home is home, Tobe.”

Home is home. His uncle, Nchekwube’s father had always said that to him. “*Tobechukwu you have a people and you need to get close to them no matter how they treated us in the past. Those were ignorant days.*”

Tobe understood. These were his people just as his uncle said, he wouldn’t abandon them. That was why he had brought his wealth home, engaging in community development services and rendering help to those that had once looked down on the entire Ochudo family.

“Those things, like you call them, are bringing in the money that is earning us some level of acceptance and respect among our kinsmen,” he said. “Believe it or not Nchekwube, these people gathered here are relating with us now because we have money and we are doing things for them.”

“No, *Ódògwù*. It's because almost all of them have embraced the church and now know that the *Ósù* caste system was something our forefathers practiced out of ignorance.”

“Not all of them have let go.” That woman had called him an *Ósù* today. She didn’t flinch when she uttered those words. The most surprising thing was that he didn’t get angry at her but at her husband and his idiotic friend that had the time to talk about a man’s lineage.

“You have a good heart, Tobechukwu. Don't let the past keep you away from your kinsmen.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“They hardly see you.”

“I take care of them.”

“Money is not all they need. They need you. The people you are showing kindness to need to know you— they need to thank you personally. I'm tired of accepting gifts on your behalf.”

“There is nothing wrong with you accepting gifts and ‘thank you’ on my behalf.”

“Well, I don’t want to do that anymore.” Nchekwube straightened up. “I should be on my way before my crazy wife comes here to remind me that I

have just one leg and shouldn't be staying out late. As if staying out late is meant only for those with complete legs."

Tobe laughed. "Come on, Nchekwube. She is only looking out for you." Both men started strolling out of the compound.

"You know," Nchekwube said as they stepped out of the gate. "You should get someone to be looking out for you too."

"Favor is doing that already, thank you."

"She will get married someday."

"Until then." When they got to his brother's car, they stood.

"Seriously, Tobe. You are thirty-six, richer than some presidents of nations."

"*Nwànnáà wérè nwàyó*." Laughter busted out of his mouth. "Don't exaggerate too much. If I'm as rich as you just described, I wouldn't be roasting my behind looking for money."

"You chose to roast your behind, Tobe. You and I know that with the kind of money you control, your children, down to the third generation would not see poverty. That is if you're planning to have kids."

"Of course, I want to have kids."

"Then get a woman. It's not a hard thing to do *nau*."

Getting a woman who would walk the *Forever* part with him wasn't as easy as closing a deal or signing contracts. He'd dated a handful of women but hadn't found fulfillment in any of them. His last try was a year ago. "I'm taking my time," he said.

"Your time? *Nwòkêm*, you would soon be plucking grey hair from your head and you are here talking about time. If getting a woman is becoming a hard task for you, tell me so I can help you find a sweet-looking young lady from the village."

And just like that, the thought of Akwaugo came rushing back to his mind. Tobe was sure that his brother's statement shouldn't have prompted the thoughts, and for the love of God! She was another man's wife. What he had with her was a mistake.

"I know you are looking for a woman that will love you not because of your wealth but it's impossible to find such a woman now..."

She had rejected my money. The extra cash I offered her that day at the market.

"Tobe?"

"Mm?"

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Uhm, yes.” Damn! “I’m just tired,” he murmured, opening the car for his brother to settle in, and closing it back.

His brother wind down the car’s window, “Don’t wait for every one of those men to go before you retire,” his brother said. “You need rest.”

What I need is to inhale her scent again. Fuck. Get a grip, Tobe. What is wrong with you?

“Tobechukwu?”

“Mm?” he ran his palm on his head. “Sorry, I was a little distracted.”

“Obviously.” Nchekwube gave him a long stare. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Why?” Another long stare from his brother, “Come on, *Nwànnáà*, I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Then go straight to bed immediately after I leave here.”

“I have no intention of staying up beyond now,” he said, backing away from the car so his brother could wind up the car’s window.

“Ehem,” It seemed like Nchekwube wasn’t ready to call it a night yet. “I heard you’ve been frequenting *Ékè Àmàngwú* market since you returned.”

“You heard from where?” He replied casually, slipping his hands inside his pockets.

“Does it matter where?”

“See me see *wáhàlá*,” he muttered under his breath, turning his face away from his brother, his eyes caught a lady standing a few feet away, almost hidden from the streetlight. The lady waved and he nodded, then returned his attention to his brother. “Where I visit while I'm here shouldn’t be a topic of discussion, Nchekwube,” he said wearily.

“It shouldn’t. But moving around this village alone, without security! That calls for concern.” That made Tobe laugh. “It’s not funny, *Nwòkêm*. You could get harmed, or kidnapped.”

“This is Nnewi, not Lagos or Abuja.”

“You think everyone here is a saint? You surprise me with your ignorance, Tobechukwu.”

It wasn’t ignorance, it was that Akwaugo. After the first visit to the market, which he did with his security guards, he decided to be going alone as he didn’t want her to see him with them. That would give her the impression that he was someone very important and might get her uncomfortable, which wasn’t what he wanted. Unfortunately, she had to find out who he was from her husband.

“So, what has been taking you there by the way?”

Argh! Typical of Nchekwube to probe the life out of him, “Nothing you should bother yourself about.”

“Was that where you get those delicious *Ùkwá* you always gift my wife each time you visit?”

“Yes,” he said with finality, pushing his head inside the car from the front window. “Drive,” he said to the driver.

“Jesus Christ! How did I land him as a guardian?” Tobe muttered under his breath as the car took a turn to the left and disappeared. He knew how though.

Tobe was sixteen when his parents died in an auto crash on their way to Enugu. That incident threw him into the streets where he did menial jobs and street hawking. Life gave him a chance when his uncle Chief Maduka, Nchekwube’s father, picked him up and took him to Abuja. Nchekwube had assumed the big brother role immediately, advising, admonishing, and sometimes beating him to shape. Even now, with all Tobe's money and affluence, Nchekwube would always exhibit a sense of responsibility towards him.

He glanced at the corner where he had seen a lady earlier, she was now with another lady and a guy, Tobe started walking towards the entrance gate, changed his mind, and took the back gate instead.

In a few minutes, he was in his room, on his work desk, with his laptop opened and a PDF copy of the Steel industry’s annual report spread on the screen. But his mind had wandered away from the task facing him and was frolicking with the memory of Akwaugo.

Each time he entered this room he remembered. Everything here smelt of her and reminded him of that morning.

She is another man's wife.

“Damn!” He rubbed his eyes, he drew his seat closer and fixed his gaze on the laptop, but it was difficult, almost impossible to get his mind to concentrate. “Fuck!”

He shut down the laptop, and rested his elbows on the desk, probing his jaw with his palm. He was an honorable man who wouldn’t take what doesn’t belong to him. Then why would he be losing his mind over another man’s wife?

What was wrong with him?

He'd managed to navigate the rest of that day without giving too much thought to the shameful desires welling inside of him. A longing for her. And when he thought he was winning the mental battle, she showed up in his house, shocking and arousing him afresh.

What was it about that woman that is making it impossible for me to forget her?

She had even referred to him as an *Ósù* today. Nobody had called him that in a very long while. His people had welcomed him as an illustrious son, accepting every gift and infrastructural development he'd been bringing to them. Tobe knew they would be whispering behind his back, but he didn't care. He was very wealthy and that had bought him respect and acceptance from everybody, everybody but this woman and her husband.

Yet, he couldn't stop thinking about her. At first, he had convinced himself that it was pity. He was reacting to her sorry story of childlessness but now...

God! He hated this unholy lust towards another man's wife that was consuming him. Maybe he should scout for a woman tonight, someone to have sex with just to get her off his system.

He leaned back and rubbed his eyes again and shook his head. Casual sex was not his thing. He couldn't even remember the last time he had one.

But you had it with a married woman.

That was a mistake.

A planned mistake.

I was only helping.

He sounded ridiculous even to himself. God! He shouldn't have gotten involved with her, now he had to deal with this burden, this insatiable desire for her. He had to get out of this village fast or he was going to lose his mind thinking about her.

Good a thing he would be leaving for Lagos in two days to honor an invite from Mike Adenuga. Then he would be jetting out to Canada to meet with an associate.

Good thing. Only if he could suppress the subtle voice inside his head telling him to go look for her;

See her for the last time. You can't leave without bidding her goodbye and wishing her well.

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Chapter 8

Akwaugo



She sat up, yawned and got her feet down on the floor. Her head was pounding as if someone was beating *Ígbá mmânwû* inside it, and the dinner she managed to eat last night sat like a stone in her stomach. She yawned again and dragged herself to the sitting room.

A rush of cold wind on her scantily covered body made her shiver as she stepped outside. Wrapping her arms around her midriff, she walked towards the laundry line to gather her clothes.

The gate flung open and her husband stormed in.

“Where did you say you went to last night?” he raged.

“Mezie! What happened?”

“I swear, I will invoke *Ámàdìóhá* on you now if you ask me that stupid question again. Who did you go to see last night?”

“Nwamaka... she...” the slap that landed on her cheek sent her staggering like a drunken hen, she could swear she heard sirens ringing in her head.

“You went to meet that man I saw you with at the market! Prostitute! *Ákwúná*, Whore! You think nobody would see you?”

“It was because of the land!” she screamed, palming her cheek. Defending her lie would do her no good, so she had to come out with the truth.

“Which land?” He grabbed her arm and pulled her closer and landed another neck-turning slap on her face. “What was the offer? Your *Òtú*?”

“No! Please. He didn’t touch me!”

He wasn’t listening to her. “To have a taste of that miserable hole between your legs, was that what he demanded in exchange for the land? My own land that he took?” It wasn’t the first time he was accusing her of adultery even with the oath she took. “Are you so horny that you couldn’t wait for me to die before you sneaked into another man’s bed? *Òtú óná’kò gî ôkô?*”

She saw his hand raise again and shielded her face with her free arm, his slap landed on her elbow. “Ungrateful woman! After what I did for you, you have mocked me with my enemies.”

“I did it for...” A yelp ended her statement as his fist landed on her back. Realising that it was time to save herself, she began struggling to dislodge her hand from his grip. She succeeded, and ran, far from his reach. “I only went there to ask him to leave the land!”

“May thunders strike you dead, *ànùòfîá*!” he said, marching towards her. “Who told you a woman should involve herself in land matters?”

Not going to wait for him to grab her again, she made her escape through the gate.



HER PARENTS WOULD HAVE REPORTED the matter to both the kinsmen and the church priest. Then Mezie would be summoned and that would yield nothing but more trouble for her. So, the best place to run to was Nwamaka’s house.

“What if he had killed you?”

“He was just angry, Nwamaka.”

“I’ve told you to abandon that man.”

“You don’t abandon someone because of a single mistake. He was angry.”

“You call beating you, a mistake? Akwaugo! When will you open your eyes and see that Mezie is turning you into a timid fool?”

Arguing with Nwamaka was useless. The lady hated Mezie the first day she set her eyes on him and had always held the opinion that, *that ugly short man*, like she had always called him, wasn’t qualified to be her husband. “My eyes are opened, Nwamaka. Mezie is just—” What word

would she use to describe what her husband was going through at the moment? “Things are not going well for him now.”

“Akwa, this man is ruining you. He is turning you to an old hag. Soon, he would discard you and get himself another woman.”

Akwaugo shook her head, “Mezie will not do that.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Mezie is anything but inconsiderate. See Nwamaka, I know why he is agitated.” She stretched herself on her friend's soft bed. “My husband is not wicked. Fate is not just kind to him,” she said, wishing that Nwamaka could either stop talking or maybe change the topic.

“I heard the ministry of health has announced the recruitment of nurses into health centers,” Nwamaka said as though she had read her thoughts. “You have to apply. You may be lucky,” Nwamaka paused for a while. “Akwa, are you paying attention to what I’m saying at all?”

“Mm? Yes. Just that I’m not sure.”

“Professor Chioma is the medical director at the teaching hospital, she can help you get in.”

Akwaugo hissed. Years ago, the information would have gotten her all pumped up and enthusiastic, but now…

“Akwaugo!”

“Mm?”

“Are you going to apply for the job?”

“I don’t know.” What position would she even go for? It’s been year’s she left nursing school, she doubted if she could still remember what a stethoscope was used for. “Amaka, I've forgotten everything I learned in school.”

“Then study.” Nwamaka got up from the chair she was seated on to sit beside Akwaugo on the bed. “You still have your books, open them.”

“Okay.” Opening her books won’t be a problem. She might even pass the tests if she put her mind to it. But Mezie, would he allow her work? “I’ll have to tell my husband.”

“My friend, close your mouth. *ímákwádí ìhè*? What if he tells you not to apply?”

“I don’t know, I'll try to convince him.”

“You are not telling anyone. Not until you get employed.”

“But Nwamaka—”

“Akwaugo, have some sense!”

She didn’t understand why Nwamaka would be getting angry that she wanted to seek her husband's permission first. Wasn’t that what was expected of her as a wife?

“You can write the application here and leave it with me. I'll submit it for you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she said. “Though I still think Mezie should know.”

“That’s your business. Just write the application now that you are here.”

“Amaka,” she took her friend's hands, and gave them a gentle squeeze, “thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

“I think God is delaying your going back to the city because of me.”

“Mm-mm.” Nwamaka got up to squash a cockroach crawling on the wall with her slipper. “I'm still here because the man I thought I'm married to was catching cruise with me. The buffoon has a wife who has been in abroad all this while.”

“What? Amaka!”

“He called me on the New Year’s Eve to tell me that his wife is back and that I shouldn’t bother returning.”

“I'm so sorry, *nwànnê m*.”

“Come on.” Nwamaka returned to the bed. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. This is nothing,” Nwamaka said with a sad smile on her face.

“How can you say it’s nothing? What of your children?”

“They will be staying with me.”



Mezie

He stepped into the bathroom, shut the door, and loosened his towel. Years ago, when he was still a ‘*man*,’ he would stroll unabashedly naked from his room to the washroom. But that had changed, now he would rather go days without bathing than have Akwaugo staring at his nakedness, shaming him with her eyes and her silence.

She wasn’t at home now, had not returned since she ran out of the house that morning, yet he could still feel her eyes on him.

“Stupid woman.” He hissed and bent to scoop water from the bucket in front of him. He let out a sigh as it touched his head. When it ran down his torso and cascaded to his groin, he cupped his penis, half-expecting a miracle.

He remembered when heated water like this one was enough to give him an erection. Now, no matter what he did or ate, *his thing* would remain limp like a rotten fruit about to fall.

He hissed again as he let the *thing* drop and started washing other parts of his body.

He hadn't given his condition a serious thought for a while now. But yesterday, Akwaugo had made him remember. She had brought the issue up, that was before Goodluck came visiting.

“My husband, do you think it's getting better?” she had started.

They had just returned from the market and were relaxing in the sitting room.

“What is getting better?” he had replied.

“This thing.” She’d pointed at his groin. “*Àmú gì*.”

He had given her a stern glare that should have warned her to drop the subject.

“*Dìm ômâ*, it's been years *nau*, go and meet Okorie *bìkô nû*. If he wants you to tell the Umunna what you did, then do it. After all, people would only talk about it for a while,” she had grumbled ignoring his glare.

“I am not going to beg Okorie!” He had hissed. “I know what he wants —to disgrace me before my kinsmen but I will not give him that pleasure.”

“Then what are we going to do about this, I'm a woman, I have needs!”

“But you met with a man yesterday!” he had shot back. “*Nk’àhu êzûghírí gì*? Wasn’t that enough?” Seeing the hurt in her eyes, he lowered his voice. “I'm trying other means, *Asa m*. My manhood will get up when the time is ripe. Magic will not happen now because you had a taste of a man yesterday and your vagina is now begging for more.”

Yet, she wouldn’t drop the issue. She had brought it up again some minutes later when she came out to pick up his plate. Again, he had shouted her down.

How would he have known she was planning to do the unthinkable? To sneak out that night and go meet a man, that city dog. An *Ósù*!

Did they arrange the meeting that day he caught them together in the market? But she had sworn to him that it was her first time seeing him and

that he only came to buy processed breadfruits from her. It was obvious she had lied to him. Hei! How come he didn’t suspect a thing?

He wouldn’t have found out if not that someone saw her in the man's house last night. The shameless fool was having a party and Akwaugo had gone there to warm his bed.

In exchange for what?

A shiver ran through him as the thought of another man humping his wife, ramming his dirty rod inside her secret pot filled his head. Once was enough. It was for a reason, to get her pregnant. But to have her do it again, with a man she just met in the market, a rich fool that dared to take his land, that he wouldn’t take.

Prostitute! He spat on the bathroom floor. Shameless prostitute that cared little about the oath she took, and nothing about all he did for her and her family. But he would show her that he was still her husband. She wasn’t going to shame him in this village.

He lifted the bucket to his head, shut his eyes as the remaining water in it poured on him, he thought of the possibility of Akwaugo not getting pregnant even after meeting the first man, despair and sobs began to rock his shoulders. Strange, silent sobs. Maybe that was why she met this new man.

It was all his fault. He pushed her into this. His chí hadn’t been fair to him either. He had confessed his sin to his wife, to *Àgbárá Ókìjá*, and to God himself, yet his *thing* had remained as dead as a dry stick.

He was now sure that God and the deities had connived with his wife to disgrace him. They also wanted him to do what Okorie asked—confess before the Umunna how he raped Okorie's wife. But he wasn’t going to do it. His ego which was as huge as a mountain wouldn’t let him.

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Chapter 9

Tobe



"Finally."

Relief brought a smile to his lips as she came in sight. His informant told him that she walked that part to morning mass every day. So, he'd come waiting for her inside his car, parked under the big Kolanut tree.

Reining the flurry of excitement in his belly, he turned his ignition off, stepped out of the car, and leaned on it. His eyes stayed on her face, scanning every little detail; her flushed cheeks could be the effect of the harsh harmattan wind; her childlike nose that was in congregation with her beautiful eyes and her cherry pink lips.

She was a terrestrial beauty.

Another man's wife.

Yes, yes. He wasn't forgetting that part.

Really? Then what was he doing standing on a lonely road, by some minutes past 7 a.m., waiting for a woman that belonged to another?

He asked himself that question two nights ago when he dialed Nchekwube and demanded for the contact of anyone who could help him find someone in *Ûmúnnêálám* village. His brother had asked for the identity of the person he wanted to find but Tobe had avoided giving him a direct answer.

The contact that was sent to Tobe a few minutes later was Okorie, a laborer at one of their sites. It didn't take Tobe much to get the man to spill everything he knew about Akwaugo and her husband.

Now, as he watched her make her way down the narrow-zigzagged footpath, he reminded himself that he was there only to bid her farewell and ask if there was any way he could help her. He would love to do something for her, anything at all.

“Akwaugo!” he called out, making her steps falter as she jerked her head in his direction.

He eased off the car and began walking toward her. “Akwa?”

“What are you doing here?!” The words came out as a gasp as she threw glances around, then settled her widened eyes back on him. “Someone can see you!”

He didn’t care. “I was told you follow this path to morning mass every day. I couldn’t meet up that early to accompany you to church, so I decided to wait for you here.” He closed the gap between them, his fingers brushed against the skin of her neck as he folded the collar of her knee-length fitted dress and he felt her shiver.

“I like your dress,” he said for want of words.

The slow smile that warmed her face—a perfect blend of shyness and sweetness, came as a surprise to him. He had only seen her smile a few times, the first few days he visited her shop in the market.

“And your eyes too,” as delicate and as sweet as swirling pure honey, not brown, more like the colour of wood. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Waiting for me here is risky.” She didn’t sound scared. Could it be that she was becoming comfortable around him? “Someone would walk past any moment.”

“I’m leaving,” he had his hands in his pockets, afraid he might not be able to resist the urge to touch her, “to Lagos.”

“What?” Her face whipped up to meet his. “Why, I mean when?”

“Today. I’m sorry.” He shouldn’t be apologising.

She began to fiddle with her fingers. “Why then did you come to see me? You would have just... gone.”

“Is that what you want?” His arched brows looked down on her sweeping eyelashes that were the same colour as her hair, honey blond. “Will it make you happy that I go?”

“I, sir—” Discomfort sat on her face, making him want to ignore every self-discipline and pull her into his arms.

“I know, my leaving will be good for you and your husband.”

She nodded.

“I’m going to miss you.”

“But you only met me some weeks ago.”

And made love to you. Why wouldn’t she mention that? “That’s enough time to get used to someone. I don’t think I will ever get you off my mind.”

“You have to.”

“I'll try.” A few seconds of silence lingered. “Will you think of me in your spare time, at least?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She had her eyes lowered, her big toe drawing a pattern on the sand.

“Akwa—”

“No!” She took a few steps backward as he reached out to take her arm. “Please, don’t touch me,” she whimpered, aiming those intriguing eyes at him. Eyes so mesmerising and in their depth, he was able to see—Fuck! He could see her desire, her fear. She was fighting something that had bloomed inside of her.

“You have developed feelings for me,” he said.

“What? *Mbá kwá*, No!”

“Akwaugo?”

“I don’t have any feelings for you.” She was lying. It was evident in her face, the trembling of her lips. “I can’t do this with you, it’s... it’s wrong.”

“Come.” She didn’t resist when he took her hand this time and led her to the car, opening the front passenger’s door for her to get in.

This wasn’t how I wanted this to play out, he thought as he settled on the driver’s seat, tightening his grip on the steering wheel in a bid to calm himself. He never planned to make her know his longing for her. But this thing he saw in her eyes—this feeling she was trying without success to hide—

“Sir,” she said after some seconds’ silence. “Someone would see me here and tell my husband.”

“The windows are tinted, Akwa.” Pitch black. “Nobody will see you.”

His assurance wasn’t enough to make her relax. Even in this enclosure, she was still as scared as a bird driven right into the fowler’s nest. Her eyes had not left the window since she got into the car. Maybe he should let her go. But there was this crazy idea in his head to shamelessly confess his feelings to her. “I also am attracted to you,” he said, swearing under his breath as she turned to face him, and he saw colour disappear from her face.

“Don’t get me wrong, I'm not trying to—” This was harder than he thought. “From that first day I saw you in the market, then you showed up in my house—and we made love.”

“Stop calling it that, please,” she whispered. The tremor that came with those words confirmed his suspicion. She was attracted to him and it was scaring the hell out of her.

He adjusted his bulk to face her properly. “I know you said what we did was to make a baby for your husband. I also wanted it to be just that but—” suddenly, *just* was no longer enough. He wanted more. “Making love to you that morning aroused something in me.” Something that had kept disturbing and exciting him. He didn’t know if it was the fact that what they did was forbidden, or that she was innocently sweet that was making him want to do things with her—sinful, pleasurable things.

“Sir,” she shook her head. “Stop saying these things.”

“Akwa, I can’t help it.”

“I'm married.” He knew that already! “You have to forget you ever met me, please *nau*.”

She wanted him to erase the images of that morning. The sounds they made together—her stifled but obvious moaning that had kept singing in his head like a song on replay? How was he going to do that? And why? This memory was the only thing of hers he might have.

“Akwaugo, what we had, no matter the circumstance was beautiful.” A whimper escaped her throat as she shifted her body to face the door. “I made love to you.” Which was over in less than fifteen minutes, he was sure she didn’t get maximum satisfaction, but it was still an amazing experience. “It was more than anything I’ve had in a long while. I wouldn’t deny the fact that I felt ashamed after. I regretted agreeing to do it. That was why I came looking for you, to tell you how sorry I was.”

She slowly turned her face to look at him and something in the way her eyes searched his, her lips slightly parted made him want to grab her jaw and covered her mouth with his. He didn’t get the privilege of kissing her that day—she had refused him the favor.

“Akwaugo,” Her eyes dropped to his chest. “I don’t regret what we did anymore. I know it’s wrong, but I am not ashamed to say I made love to you.”

“Sir—”

“The heart doesn’t lie, Akwaugo.” He placed his hand on her chest, feeling the rising and falling of her bosom, he let off a groan. “Hearts don’t lie. Yours is speaking to me.”

Removing his hand. “My heart is for my Mezie,” she whispered.

“Are you sure now?” he asked, feeling jealousy stirring inside him. That man shouldn’t be her husband. He wasn’t worthy of her.

“I’m—he is my husband.”

He let out a sad laughter then straightened up. “That’s okay,” he said. “But we can be friends at least. It’s not every day one meets a beautiful woman like you.”

His statement settled well with her. The fear and discomfort that was evident on her face seemed to have relaxed a bit and it pleased him. “Excuse me,” he stretched his hand to fetch something from the back seat, his arm brushed against her shoulder and he heard her gasp. “Come on, Akwaugo. Relax,” he said, stifling the erratic excitement that also flashed through his body. “Merry Christmas.” Settling back in his seat, he presented a gift box to her.

All it took was a call to Favor, his sister who was also doubling as his PA, and the perfect gift was delivered yesterday.

She looked from the box to him and shook her head. “*Mbá*. I can’t take anything from you.”

“Why?”

“You ask why?”

“Because I am an *Ósù*?” She got to know from her stupid husband about his lineage, and boom! She would rather die than have anything to do with him. That explained so much. “You wouldn’t accept anything from an *Ósù* man, is that it?”

“No!” He could hear the shock in her voice. “I would never avoid you because of that. The other day was a mistake.”

“Then why are you refusing my gift?”

“My husband will kill me.”

“Oh.” It’s always about that furious, insecure, miniature husband of hers. “It’s just a gift, Akwaugo.”

“He warned me, he warned me never to accept anything from any man.”

“He controls you.”

“He is my husband.”

“I didn’t say he is not!” Oh, God! Must she always remind him? “I’m sorry for raising my voice.” He inhaled and exhaled deeply. “Please, beautiful one. It is just a gift. Accept it from me, please.”

She seemed unsure at first, then she took the box, opened it and a gasp escaped her throat. “I can’t have this!”

“You’ll hurt me deeply if you don’t take it.”

“But my husband—how do I explain it to him?”

“You like it?”

“Yes.”

“Then your husband can go to hell.”

“But I just can’t take it.”

Oh fuck.

He leaned closer so he could grip her jaw and turn her face towards him, his gaze met hers and he fell so deep inside those eyes he could taste her sweet depths like a piece of gourmet candy in his mouth. Immediately, his body responded with a surge of desire. “It will mean so much to me if you take it,” he said in a strangled voice.

“I can’t.”

“Please *Òmàlìchà* m, I beg you.” *Òmàlìchà—his beauty*? Hmm.

She tightened her lips, returned her gaze to the gift, and stared at it for a while, “Okay. Thank you.”

“No, Akwaugo. Thank you,” he said with satisfaction as she carefully placed the box in her handbag.

“I have to go.” She breathed out and made for the door.

He grabbed her arm, pulled her back, and before she could resist, he was pressing her head against his chest. Then he lifted her face and planted a kiss on her forehead. “I will miss you my—friend,” he said, bringing his thumb to her lips, and stroking them.

He half expected her to push him away, but she didn’t, rather he felt her body relaxing to his touch. And slowly, she shut her eyes, allowing him to stroke not just her lips now, but her brows, the bridge of her nose, her cheeks. His eyes made a slow journey to her chest and his heart began to thump faster, the temptation of allowing his hand to stray to her breast was so strong.

Control yourself Tobechukwu! He wasn’t going to take advantage of her ever again. “Will you call me?” he asked, withdrawing his hand.

“I can’t, I don’t have a phone.”

He was disappointed, though he still fetched his card from the pigeonhole and handed it to her. “Keep this. You may need it someday.”

“Okay, thank you.” Her fingers rested on the interior door handle, but she hesitated. “What really brought you to the market that first day? A man as wealthy as you are must have a woman—people doing things for him.”

Was she indirectly asking if he has a wife? What would it matter to her?

“I can’t answer that now.” He leaned back, “Maybe it was fate,” he said.

She nodded, slid the card inside her handbag, and stepped out of the car without giving him a second glance.



Akwaugo

“Father Theo held a special prayer for me after the mass.” The lies rolled out with ease from Akwaugo’s mouth as she dropped her husband’s food on the table. Then she sat on the sofa beside him and began humming a tune, her jaw resting in her hand. She was lost in nostalgia when her husband’s angry voice jarred her back to the present.

“Where did you keep your mind, woman? I have been talking to you since you sat down there, and you’ve been moping at the door as if your late grandfather’s head is hanging on it.”

“*Ndo*.” She hissed. “Sorry, I had my mind on…” Words disappeared from her mouth as her eyes caught the glittering necklace, the gift that man, Tobe, gave to her, hanging on Mezie’s Finger. Her mind did a quick flashback and she recalled she had left her bag here when she came in this morning and had rushed to draw water for Mezie’s bath.

“I said I found this thing in your bag.” Mezie jiggled the precious gemstone as if it was a worthless piece.

“Nwamaka! She gave it to me, she brought it from the city.” Another lie poured out smoothly from her mouth.

Mezie gave the piece of jewelry scrutiny. “This thing is gold o,” he exclaimed, dropping the piece of yam he was about to eat back into the place and licking his pottage-smeared fingers. “Where did Nwamaka get the money for such an expensive jewelry?”

“She said her husband brings a lot of them from Óbódó Oyibo and she wanted me to have this one.”

“So Nwamaka now goes to morning mass?” He gave her a suspicious look, before laying the jewelry on the arm of the sofa he was seating on.

“I was surprised too.” Akwaugo shrugged. “Maybe because she wanted to see me.”

“Eh-ehn? Is that so?”

“You know you don’t like her coming here *nau*.”

Her boldness surprised her. She didn’t flinch or bat her eyelids as those unrehearsed lies flowed out. The lies were so convincing that Mezie had to place the jewelry back into the box, hand it to her, and continued with his food.

She smiled to herself, stood up and murmured her exit. She would wait for him to finish his food and leave the house, then she would race down to Nwamaka’s house to plead that she accepts that the jewelry had come from her, in case Mezie wanted to probe.

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Chapter 10

Akwaugo



"Madam, Oga said I should tell you he has gone to Onitsha."

Akwaugo shrugged absent-mindedly. What did she care if Mezie was on his way to *Katangora*? He had stopped telling her about his trips. Not that they still talked about anything concerning his business. Three years ago, he made it clear that she shouldn't bother herself with any part of his dealings, she wasn't even allowed to near his shop. "When did you call him?" Akwaugo asked the sales boy that brought the message.

"He called me, ma."

"Okay." She dismissed the boy with a flick of her fingers.

It didn't bother her that Mezie would rather buy phones for his sales boys and not give her any. After all, she used to have one—an old Tecno phone he should have discarded but chose to give it to her. Three months after, he accused her of giving her number to every creature that had "*long thing dangling between their leg*" and took the phone back.

She hissed, bent to pick a stone from the ground, hurled it at a strutting rooster, and watched it run into her cocoyam garden. Then she slowly turned her eyes away, and her mind back on Mezie. Nothing Mezie did now would make her lose sleep, especially not something as trivial as not telling her of his whereabouts.

But Tobe; now that's a totally different discussion. She was a little ashamed to admit to that man, Tobe, that she didn't have a phone.

Tobe. A slow smile worked its way up her face as memories she thought she had buried flared. "Blessed Mother Mary," she muttered, shutting her

eyes and leaning her head against the tree she'd been sitting under since she woke up that morning.

It's been two weeks since he left the village. Long enough for her to forget how his scent had caressed her sense while his shaft performed magic inside her. The feeling of his body on hers, his soft, gentle whispers while he was thrusting.

"Let me know if you're feeling pain in any way," he kept saying into her ears. "Don't pretend, speak to me, should I go slower?"

Oh, God! She could feel heat flooding up her face as she remembered how he would stop at intervals to look at her, waiting for her to tell him to stop.

Chai! Mother Mary. It's been long *nau*, why was she still shivering at the odd reminder? How could he be so rich and so gentle?

And nice too.

Nicer than Mezie.

The sudden comparison made her frown. Mother Mary! Mezie was her husband while Tobe was a good man that happened to cross her path, made love, no, had sex with her so she could produce a child. Now, he was gone.

And she missed him so much. She didn't want to admit it when he had wanted her to, because it wasn't safe then. Now she felt she could indulge freely, savoring the feelings he imprinted inside her mind, his voice that sounded as if he was talking from the nose especially when he speaks Igbo.

She giggled as she remembered how hilarious he sounded the few times he made a statement in the local dialect.

"Your neighbors said you have not been at your shop for a while."

"Nwamaka?" When did she—Akwaugo must have been lost in the sweet memories Tobe left in her head that she didn't realise when the other lady walked through the gate. "You said you were at my shop?"

"Yes, this morning." Hands akimbo, Nwamaka gave Akwaugo a suspicious stare. "What are you dreaming about?"

"What do you mean what am I dreaming about? Was I sleeping when you came in?" Akwaugo shut back.

The other woman drew the bench that was lying carelessly on a heap of sand beside the tree and sat. "So, this is where Mezie wants you now eh?"

"Amaka, *Ì bîâkwâ*. Leave me and my husband alone *nau*."

"Am I not saying the truth? He wants you at home so he can monitor your every move."

“I thought you have gone back to Port Harcourt?”

“I told you, that won’t be happening soon.”

“*Nwànnê m*, please forgive me.” She'd forgotten that her friend was having trouble with the man she was supposed to be married to. “I don’t mean to be insensitive.”

“Don’t worry. I think I even like it here. For now.”

“Oh, good. That means you won’t have any problem keeping me company until my husband returns.” Trying to get up from the chair she was seated on, she felt lightheaded and flumped back.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

“I don’t know, I feel so—” nauseated. “Oh God, I don’t want to be sick now, I can’t deal with it.”

“Your husband is a self-acclaimed pharmacist, you have drugs around you, and you are complaining of feeling sick?” The other woman laughed, “Anyway, I am curious my friend, I want to know who gave you that necklace that you came to my house with the other day.”

“I told you, it belongs to someone.”

“Come on, I'm not a child.” She pulled her seat closer. “I know that jewelry is a gift, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is a gift.” There was no need to lie. Nwamaka was her friend.

“You don’t say... from where did this precious gift come?”

“Knowing the person is not necessary, Nwamaka. Besides, he is gone.”

“A he? Now we are getting somewhere.” Nwamaka smiled coyly. “Is he from this Nnewi? Which community?”

“An old friend, I don’t think mentioning his name would do us any good.”

“Ha! Akwaugo. I only asked for the identity of this giver, not his address.”

“And I said it’s not necessary.”

Her friend stared at her with amazement. “Hm, o o!” shrugged. “So, where is it now?”

“Where is what?” Akwaugo was getting tired of the conversation.

“The necklaces!”

“Oh, I have put it away.”

“Don’t be silly!” Her friend's sudden outburst gave Akwaugo a shudder. “You put what away? Do you know what that thing is worth? Do you even know what it is?”

“Amaka, my husband—”

“Your husband should go and eat shit! *Yà gã ríê nsî*!”

Ah-ah, this sudden fury exuding from Nwamaka—was it only because of the necklace, or did someone offend her earlier? “*Òzúgô nû*, Amaka, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay! Why would you give that precious gem away because of Mezie? Who did you even give it to? Tell me so I can go get it back!”

Now laughing, Akwaugo carefully got up and her friend followed. “I was only pulling your legs, my friend. I didn’t give it to anyone. But I'm still being careful.”

“It better be true o, or I will never forgive you.”

“It is true. Please come inside, let me prepare something for you to eat.”

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Chapter 11

Akwaugo



What started as body weakness, graduated into morning fever and cold. Akwaugo doubted if it was malaria because she took antimalarial tablets last month.

She got up from the toilet bowl, walked back into the room she once shared with her husband—now solely hers. Mezie moved out a few days after the night she went to meet Tobe concerning their acres of land. She thought she would feel bad about his move, but she wasn't. At least, he seemed comfortable in the spare room opposite hers that he was now occupying, so, why would she break her head over him?

She walked through the room to get to the calendar that was hanging on the wall, she carefully studied the numbers she marked. Her *monthly visitor* hadn't come for the past three months now. Could it be what she'd prayed for? Had God opened her womb? But her stomach was still flat, and this sickness only started last week.

She thought of the absence of her monthly periods again and contemplated telling Mezie but dismissed the idea. He would conclude it pregnancy and would be heartbroken if it turned out not to be true.

She ambled back to the bed, reached for a pack of mint sweets on top of an outmoded, locker by the bedside, unwrapped one, and threw it into her mouth. Then lay back down and covered her legs with a wrapper.

It would be too early to speak a word about this to Mezie, Akwaugo thought as she sucked on the mint to ebb the bitter taste in her mouth. She would go for a test on her own first. If it turns out positive, Mezie would then hear.

Hope ran through her and she began to murmur prayers. A baby would change everything. Mezie might even learn to love her again if this miracle happens.

Even when the baby belongs to another man?

She hoped so.



Tobe

Lagos

"Sales have been bullish in Ghana for the past five months and that is a good thing."

He stroked his nape, rolled his shoulders and relaxed his back on his executive chair. The board meeting was taking longer than he envisaged. Voices and egos were soaring higher, heating the heavily air-conditioned room.

The meeting was necessary though. If Rayonile would be planted in South Africa, it had to be decided here and the sooner they do that, the better for everyone.

"Good thing? We ran that company with no profit for eight months, eight solid months," a board member retorted.

"That was two years ago. The company was still young in Ghana then. But sales have skyrocketed within the years, our products have gained recognition and most importantly we are gradually taking over the market!" Marcus, the man that spoke first cut in.

Sensing the heated tension in the room, Tobe decided to keep quiet and allow the gentlemen and ladies to battle, while he listened for who provided the superior argument. He would come in when the time was right.

"Shut your large mouth, Marcus! What do you know about the market? If not that your father managed to buy you a place here, would you even be sitting amongst us?"

"Do not insult me, you this old man. If you have at least critically gone through the Ghana plant annual report of last year, you wouldn't be

splattering your ignorance here!" Marcus retorted, turning to Tobe. "I say we give South Africa a go!"

"You are mad for suggesting that!" The older man, a chief, shot back. The younger man was about to respond when Tobe stopped him with a raise of his hand.

"Why do you think we should abandon this idea, Chief Olu?" Tobe asked the Chief.

"You of all people should know that barely two years of breaking even, after so long in Ghana, is not enough to count that project a success. Trust me, you don't want to take another risk in South Africa."

"Two years of a bullish market, a consistent success I must say, Chief —" His statement aroused some murmur which he ignored. "Our company is doing well in Ghana irrespective of huge competition."

"I say we should give this some time, Mr. CEO. Let's say two more years, then we can plant in South Africa," Another member suggested.

"Exactly my point!" Throwing glances around, Chief Olu splayed his hands for emphasis. "We lost a lot of money those years we struggled in Ghana, now things are beginning to look up over there and he is planning of splitting the company's finance to birth another plant we don't know if it would see the light of the day." The Chief gave Tobe a demeaning stare. "Sometimes I wonder if you are fit to sit on that chair as the CEO of this board!"

"He is the founder of the company as well as the highest Shareholder," someone interjected.

"Well, let him act like someone who has brains in his head and not some liquid sugar!"

"I understand your point Chief Olu. Believe me, I have considered every side of this idea and our performance so far in Ghana. However, I think the Executive Director has explained extensively the leverages we have over other competitors in Ghana and the chances we have in South Africa."

Chief Olu snorted.

Chief Olu, the board's chairman, unfortunately, could be overbearing, annoying most of the time. A total pessimistic jerk who never saw any advantage in starting up something new.

"What that squashed brain ED explained doesn't make any sense! On papers, yes, but in reality—" The chief threw desperate glances around.

“Isn’t someone seeing what I am trying to save us all from?”

“Can we put this to vote?” Tobe has had enough of the whole back-and-forth argument. “Mr. Secretary, please.”

Only nine out of the twenty-one board members voted in favor.

“I guess it will take a while before we move into South Africa then,” Tobe said, forcing a smile.

He ignored the victorious glint on Chief Olu’s face, drummed his fingers on the polished wooden table and pushed his chair backward as he stood up. “That is all for today, Gentlemen and ladies. As usual, you will have reports sent to you. Once again, I apologise for gathering us on this very short notice.”

“This meeting was unnecessary, you ended up wasting our time. I suggest we use the zoom app for a meeting like this next time,” Olu muttered. “So, I can exit the meeting if it’s not making sense.”

“I promise we are going to consider that next time, Chief. If you don’t mind coming to the club on Saturday, you can vent your anger on me at the golf course.” This drew laughter from the members who were also on their feet.

“That’s better,” Tobe added amidst laughter as he walked out of the room.



DRAINED.

That’s what running the company does to him. Yet he wouldn’t wish to be doing any other thing. Rayonile wasn’t just a company, it was his life. One he built over the years, and as energy-sapping as it was, he wouldn’t deny the rewards and privileges sitting as the CEO of that company had given him.

“*Brother* Tobe, would you want me to cancel your other appointments?”

He shut the window blinds and turned to face Favor, his sister. “Are they all gone?” he asked.

“Chief Olu is at the parking lot with three other members.”

“Yeah, saw them from my window.” He walked on the Persian rug that matched the opulent design of his office, to the refrigerator adjacent to the window, he took out a bottle of water and walked back to his chair.

“I don’t like that man, Brother.”

“Nne,” *Mother*. The endearing name he started addressing her with, a few years after the death of their parents because she reminded him of their mother who was strong, determined, and caring. “He is a major shareholder in the company.” Tobe unscrewed the bottle and belted down the content. “There is nothing anybody can do about that.”

“He is a difficult man.”

“I will meet him at the club on Saturday and I believe we can work things out.”

She picked a highlighter that was lying carelessly on the table, Favor slipped it back into a desk, and moved the laptop on the table so the screen would face Tobe properly. “The EFCC appointment, you have less than an hour.”

Can the day get any better? He just got his ass roasted by twenty-nine board members and in less than an hour, he would be sitting in the EFCC office for some bank transaction fraud bullshit! “Let me have a quick look at that letter again and while you are at it, get all our recent transactions with Mobrit Bank.”

“Okay, brother.”

“And get their managing director on phone. That bastard wants to play politics with me. I’ll soon find out those playing this music for him.”

“But brother Tobe, what do these people want from you?”

First, it was the issue of unpaid taxes, a waiver given to him by the former minister of finance. It had taken him almost a year to rectify. Now an alleged fraudulent bank transaction. But Tobe had put in years of hard work to allow aggrieved competitors, who had some political backings, to pull him down.

“We will come out of this like we’ve always done, Nne.” He was a man who knew how to play the game, no matter how dirty.

“Okay o,” his sister said. “Ehen, bro Nchekwube called.”

“What did he say?”

“I should take care of you, make sure you get enough food and rest.”

He turned his system on, he stared at the screen for a while. “I’m a grown-ass man,” he muttered, typing in his password to get the window unlocked.

“And I'm not your wife,” his sister started strolling towards the door. “I told bro Nchekwube that it’s high time you started thinking about getting

married.” She exited before he could give her a bit of his mind.

What was this obsession with them and him getting married? Won’t they simply accept that he hadn’t found the right woman? Oh, he forgot that Favor said there was no right woman. “*Just find one from the left and drag her to the right*,” she would say. “*Every woman is taken. Snatch one from an unserious guy and make her your wife*.”

For some reason, his mind was flooded with the thoughts of the woman he met in the village and a groan left his mouth as a frown dented his face. It's been more than three months, yet that woman seemed to have gained free access into his head; sauntering in anytime and messing with his thoughts and concentration.

It’s good that he left the village when he did. He would have seriously considered Favor's idea of snatching another guy's woman. In this case, another man's wife.

Now, the desire to do that has reduced—not really.

Fuck! He hated complications and this unebbing longing for this strange woman, even from this distance was driving him crazy. The craziest thing was that he woke up every day since he returned to Lagos, expecting that she would give him a call.

“The car is ready,” Favor pushed the door open and announced.

“Perfect,” he muttered, getting up. “Tell the secretary to send those files to my email, I’ll study them in the car.” His eyes connected to his phone again as he walked out of the office, half expecting to see a message, a missed call. Disappointment flashed through his heart as he slipped the phone into his pocket and entered the waiting SUV.

He’d had women in time past, had engaged in romance that left him so empty and miserable that he decided to go on a break as far as relationships were concerned. But this strange one—Akwaugo, had stirred emotions that he thought were in hibernation. He had thought the memory of her would fade as he settled back into city life. But every night, in the comfort of his home, under his sheet, his heart went to her. He saw her face, her eyes as troubled as stirred waters, yet as innocent as a child's laughter. And those times, he desired more than anything, to hold her.

As he walked into his car, he wondered if she was also thinking of him.

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Chapter 12

Akwaugo



Nnewi, Anambra State

"D*ìm?*"

"Hmm?" Mezie licked his fingers, lifted the plate to his lips and slurped what was remaining of the soup.

Akwaugo waited for him to drop the plate before making the announcement. "I'm pregnant." She had kept the news to herself until now, afraid that it might not be true, that maybe God was playing *kpùkpùkpû ôgênê* with her.

Mezie went still for a split second, then he spoke. "*Kédù ìhè ìkwúrú kìtá?*"

"I said that I am with child." Her hand went to her belly.

"*I híèèèé*!" Mezie screamed. "It has happened o!" Realising that his voice had scaled the walls of his house, he lowered his tone. "Are you sure? How did you know?"

"I went to the hospital, and they confirmed it." Smiling broadly, Mezie jerked up from the chair, knocking plates off the table as he pogoed around in traditional dance moves. "The Doctor said it's three months."

"Three months cha? A whole three months?"

"Yes."

"Ehen, *kám sì kwànù*. I knew it! All those times you were behaving as if you would die at any moment. I suspected this but didn't want to say it."

Her vision blurred instantly and before she knew it, tears were sipping out of her eyes. "Thank you, God," she murmured, her lips stretching with a

genuine smile. “Our blessed mother Mary, I honor you.” Their effort wasn’t in vain. Her husband has gotten what he wanted—a child. It would be a boy, and Mezie would be able to speak among his kinsmen again.

Later that night, she lay in his arms for the first time in months while he promised her heaven on earth. “If it’s a boy ehn, I will kill a cow for you. In fact, I will bring down this house and build another big one, *ínùgò*? I will buy you your own *machin* so you will be moving around this village and everybody will see Mezie’s wife.”

She was right when she thought that a baby would change everything. When was the last time her husband promised her anything?

“You have made me a proud man, *Asa m*. You have thrown sand into the eyes of my enemies.”

“I'm happy, my husband.”

“You should. Our sacrifice wasn’t in vain.”

And just with that innocent comment, he succeeded in reminding her of the man who made this day possible. Tobechukwu. Would he be happy to hear that what they did that morning produced a result? Anyway, how he would feel shouldn’t bother her now. What mattered was that she was finally going to be a mother, and Mezie, a father.

But, she wished she could share the news with him and watch his face beam. She was sure he would be excited for her. Maybe he would visit again. She would want him to visit, then she would tell him…

“Are you okay?” Mezie asked, pulling her mind back to the present.

“Yes—yes, my husband.”

“You were quiet for a while.”

“I’m just amazed,” she said. Shifting closer, her backside brushed against his groin.

Both of them remained still for a while, then he gently pushed her away.

“Don’t forget you are not to tell anybody that this pregnancy belongs to another man.”

“I'll not do that, my husband.”

“You know what will come upon you if you do.”



Mezie

The next day

“A bastard doesn’t have any inheritance among us!”

Spittle flew like missiles as angry voices tore the silence of the night, swallowing the chirping of the crickets and the brooding of hens on their nests.

“You people knew this, yet you accepted him into the *Ùmúnná*!” someone bellowed.

“Inducting him into the kinsmen's meeting doesn’t make him one of us!”

“*Òzúgô nú*! It’s okay! Let our leader speak, please!”

“Are we not forgetting the tradition? If a woman gives birth to another man’s child in her husband’s house, the child automatically belongs to the family,” Nze Azoka tried to be heard.

“What tradition are we even talking about? We all know that our brother died without a son, his wife was seen with pregnancy a few months after he died,” Okorie spoke.

“He may have impregnated her before his death,” Mezie interjected.

“He was ill for years before his death, where did he get the strength to climb his wife?” Someone asked.

“Where you there with them? How do you know he didn’t meet with his wife?” Mezie retorted. “As long as no man has come to claim the paternity of that child, he is still our son and has the right to be given a parcel of land!” Mezie snapped, his jaw clenching as veins made ridges on his forehead.

“Someone is in support of this because he knows he is not man enough to get his wife pregnant and he isn’t even sure of who the father of his own unborn baby is!” Okorie fixed his bloodshot eyes on Mezie, his chest covered with sweat, rose and fall heavily.

The silence that followed his statement was as thick as the darkness that had clothed the sky.

“Okorie, what did you just say?” Mezie asked.

“When a stone fight is announced, a bald man seeks for a cap!”

Staring at each other with cold hatred, both men dared each other to throw the first physical punch.

Chai! How Mezie would want to beat Okorie until he wouldn’t be able to differentiate his nose from his mouth, but that would be his own undoing, as he knew Okorie was looking for the opportunity to tell everyone that he raped his wife.

“Both of you should respect yourselves!” someone commented.

“No, allow Mezie to talk!” Okorie challenged. “Mezie kwúò nù òkwú!”

It’s not that he didn’t know what to say to this weasel, but he had to be careful not to open his anus for everybody to see how dirty it was. So, he allowed words to get stuck in his throat like a bone.

“You don’t want to talk again?” Okorie continued.

“I see that madness has taken over some people,” Mezie murmured. He kicked a plastic chair out of the way, avoided eye contact, and stomped out of the meeting.

He didn’t return his wife’s greeting as he got home, nor touch the food she kept for him. He walked straight into his room, locked the door before she could follow him in, shut his ears to her plea for him to open up and tell her what the problem was.

For hours he stayed awake thinking about what Okorie said. The Imbecile had openly told everyone about the Akwaugo's pregnancy.

How did he know about it?

Wasn’t it only yesterday that Akwaugo announced the good news to him? And they have vowed to keep it secret until it would become obvious?

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Chapter 13

Tobe



Lagos

"You look terrible."

Ignoring the sultry feminine voice that greeted him as he stepped out of his car, Tobe swallowed the anger that had followed him back from the EFCC Chief's office and started walking towards his front porch.

God! That man was a bastard! It was obvious that the bank transaction balderdash was just a cover for something… more personal. Someone in the government wanted him out of the playing field!

"Bad day, eh?" The lady followed him inside. "Two glasses of wine please," He heard her say to the housekeeper. Soon she was sashaying toward him. "Here, this will help." She handed him one of the filled glasses.

"So, tell me how it went down with the security watchdogs," she said, taking a sit.

"Who told you?"

"The media. Doing a great job telling the world about every one of your movements," she said. "So, tell me, how did it go?"

"You don't want to know about it, trust me," He sipped while observing her. A tight-fitted mini dress worn on a very curvy body. She was oozing sensuality and class. Quaffing the rest of his wine, he set the glass aside, and loosen his tie.

"Try me," The lady crossed her long legs.

The first time they met was in a business meeting chaired by the Nigerian vice president. She had sat at the same table with him and Tony

Elumelu and had kept throwing glances at him every now and then—he noticed.

“I finally met the formidable man behind the name, Rayonile. I must say, he doesn’t look an inch like what I had assumed,” she had said as she approached him immediately after the meeting.

“So, tell me. What was your assumption?” he had asked.

“Definitely not this smashingly good-looking. Goodness! You look more gorgeous in person than in the media. I could stare at your face all day without getting bored.”

“Wow, that’s too much flatter for one man.” Having women come out straight with their feelings for him was something he had gotten used to, but this lady was different. Bold. “Now I don’t know what to do. I guess ‘thank you’ is in other?”

“Come on, you've probably had a lot of women hitting on you, so mine shouldn’t make you uncomfortable.”

They had exchanged numbers. She called him first and proposed a date which he kindly refused. The second time she called, he had no excuse to give so he agreed to go out with her. One date led to another, and yet another, until her strolling into his office and his house became a normal thing. Yet, he had been careful with her.

“How did you know I will be here?” Tobe asked.

“Your PA,” she purred. Her voice low and sexy.

“She is my sister.”

“I know.” She combed the sitting room with her eyes. “Nice furnishing,” turned her head to face him. “Italy?”

“Mm.” He’d come to like her. She was always good company, though could be overbearing sometimes. But he wasn’t sure their relationship would grow past this level. He knew she wanted romance, possibly marriage. However, he felt it would never work between them. She wasn’t the kind of woman he would want to have as a romantic partner.

“I would have done a better job though, but you’ve chosen to ignore me.” She uncrossed her legs and drained her glass as her phone rang. Getting the gadget out of her handbag, she engaged in a conversation with someone at the other end of the phone while throwing flirtatious glances at him now and then.

Memories are often invoked by the actions of another. For Tobe, it was the noise that came forth from the lady like a cross between a snort and a

burst of drunken laughter, that reminded him of Akwaugo's soft giggle, driving his mind back to those moments he spent with her, those short but sweet moments.

Fuck! Tobe, you are helplessly doomed.

This was so absurd. So unheard of...

Nothing is ever unheard of.

Yet, it's unlike him, Tobe! To be fantasising about another man's wife. What would his family say? His uncle would slap him hard on the face if he ever heard about this madness!

"I can press some buttons to get the EFCC off your back," the lady said, putting her phone back inside her bag and coming to seat near him. "You know I can do that for you."

"I know you can."

"Mm-hm. Can do that and much more things. I don't know why you are so cold to me."

"Jenifer. I'm fine," he said, shifting away from her. "I'm handling everything perfectly."

"But I can help." Inching closer, she thrust her bosom up so his eyes wouldn't miss her cleavage even if he fought the urge to look. "Tobe, you know I can do anything for you."

"I don't want anything."

"Oh, come on. You know what I'm offering you. Why are you acting as though you are not a man?"

Yes, why was he not grabbing this lady right now, ripping off her clothes, and fucking her until she was satisfied? No, until he was satisfied?

Casual sex is not your thing.

He could try. It's what he needed to get the crazy lust for another man's wife off his head.

Only that it wasn't just lust anymore. It's something else, something he's so scared of.

"I'm tired, Jenifer. I want to rest now. You can find your way out," he said, got up and headed upstairs.



Mezie

Nnewi, Anambra State

The sky picked up smoke, thick enough to darken the heavens. Flames pirouetted up, unleashing fury, eating up everything. Mezie was halfway to his house when his phone rang.

"Ógà o! Ógà o! The market is on fire…everything…shop—"

"What are you blabbing about *nwòkê m*? Are you drunk?"

"Ógà, smoke…Nkwòr is on fire!"

That was all Mezie heard that made him abandon his bike and began to run back to the market to meet burnt bricks and ashes where his two shops —filled with goods—stood some hours ago.

"*Chì m ô! Chì m êgbû ô mu ô*!" He threw himself to the ground and let out a gut-wrenching yell. "My money! My shops!"

"Take it easy, it is not the end of the world." Someone tried to console him

"It is the end of my life!" He bawled, "What is remaining for me?"

He refused to go home, he sat on the ground and watched everything he worked for—the only thing that still made him feel like a man—taken away.



Akwaugo

Masked faces. Painted bodies. Ugly teeth. It was the nightmare again.

But this time, they placed a pot on her head and made her follow them into the forest.

"*Édó has come for his debt. Édó never forgets*," The strange creatures chanted.

"*Édó never forgets*." Their voices were louder as they led her deeper.

"*Édó never forgets*."

“Blessed Mother Mary!” She woke from her sleep, her gown wet with perspiration, clinging to her body, Akwaugo’s hand went to her baby bump. “Jesus, Jesus.” Then she grabbed her Rosary by the bed, did the sign of the cross, and was about to start muttering the ‘*Hail Mary*' when she heard the noise outside.

“Nkwor Nnewi is on fire.”



Mezie

“*Ndò nú ô*!”

Mezie was sure that the neighbors pouring in did not pity him. They only came to laugh at his misery.

Mezie the bad luck man, they must be saying.

“I went to see my son in the boarding school at Ùmúdíkê, only to come back to hear the disaster.” Goodluck his friend contoured his face in sadness, “This is really bad.”

Giving his friend a sidelong glance, Mezie wondered why he would choose to visit his son the same day disaster came upon him.

“My friend.” Goodluck coughed and spat on the ground. “What will you do now? How will you start over again?”

“I don’t know my brother; I am shocked to even think.”

“We were all happy that the almighty God remembered your family—your wife’s pregnancy, now this bad news.”

“See me now, my own chi gives me with one hand and takes with another. But it's okay, this is not the end of a man.”

“True, you have to find a way to bounce back.” Goodluck cleared his throat and gave Mezie a side glance. “You can sell some part of that land you have by Area Command.”

“Which land?”

“The one I have been telling you about *nau*. It will bring enough money for you to start all over. Especially now that this boy—Ochudo’s son is building the health center near it. You can double the price.” Goodluck

shifted closer to Mezie, “You can even contact him to buy it since he was previously interested.”

Mezie stared at his friend; eyes like an unsatisfied locust, and a mouth like the beak of a bird, Mezie felt like grabbing a knife and cutting the man’s tongue off. “A true son of Nnewi doesn’t sell a land he inherited from his father,” he said.

“I am not asking you to sell all, just a part of it.”

“I am not selling!” he bellowed. “Even if I want to sell, it will not be to that outcast!”

“Mezie, you know that the community can fine you if you keep referring to that man or anyone at all as an *Ósù*. That system has been abolished!”

“Abolished or not, an outcast is an outcast and that man is an outcast! His ancestors offered their whole lineage as slaves to the deity, what does that make them?”

“That was several decades ago. Mezie, the village has moved on. Come on my friend. This man has the money to save you from sinking completely. Approach him with an offer.”

“If you are not my friend, I would have sent you out of my house right now, Goodluck.”

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Chapter 14

Akwaugo



Nnewi, Anambra State

"D*ìm*, come and have your bath."

Her husband had found comfort in doing nothing but sitting by the tree every morning, moping at an empty space like one whose soul was lost. His pain was deep, his angst powerful. Everything she said or did to draw him back seemed to drive him farther.

"Please my husband. Your silence hurts me."

"You have brought me nothing but shame and reproach," he finally said in a strange, cold voice. "I lost my manhood because I married you."

Akwaugo wanted to scream, "*You lost your manhood because you were stupid enough to sleep with another man's wife!*" But she stood there numb to the bones.

"Now I am forced to accept a bastard in my house, to pretend he is from my loin, strange blood that could as well belong to a mad man or a thief. You are an embodiment of bad luck, a trap set by the gods, a sneer to stupid idiots like me." With his gaze fixed ahead, he spoke as if she wasn't standing beside him. "Because of you, the only thing I still intimidate my mates with has also been taken from me. Now they would gather like a pack of hyenas to devour my flesh. Once, they hid their mouths when talking, now they would mock me to my face."

The pain in her soul rose like a lump on her throat, escaping as a sob. "What are you saying, my husband?"

“I gave you everything Akwaugo, what did you give me in return for all the things I did for you and your miserable parents?”

“I gave you this,” she said, propping up her belly like a package. “I got pregnant for you, Mezie.”

“That is not my child.” His voice rose, his cold stare locked with hers. “A child you got from another man, an abomination.”

“Mezie!”

Her husband had gone past the borders of reason, and his words continued to strike her like the sting of a venomous snake. “You whore. Do you think I don’t know you wanted it? It was a license to taste what you have not had for years, that was why you jumped at the idea.”

“You made me do it. You begged me. I didn’t want to do it o.”

“Your whoredom has brought me penury. You evil woman!” His jaw tightened.

For the first time in their marriage, she felt like slapping his face so he could withdraw the words he just spewed, but she took them all in—the bitterness and blame. Maybe he was right, she had brought him nothing but sorrow. When he exhausted all the *acid* he had in his bowel and shut his mouth, she left him, entered her room, and shut the door

She wasn’t going to blame him for his heart being sour with anguish. She only wished there was something she could do to lift his pains.

Maybe there was...

She wiped her face with the end of her wrapper, got down on her knees beside the bed and pulled out a chest. She threw it open, brought out the gift box she hid beneath the neatly folded cloths, opened it, and brought out the jewelry.

Yes, there was something she could do to help her husband.



Two days later

“WHAT IS THIS?”

“Some money to help us start over,” she said, pushing the big brown envelope that she dropped on the table closer to her husband’s side.

Mezie leaned forward, eyed the envelope with disinterest, and slouched back on the sofa that seemed to swallow his shrunk frame. “Where did you get it from?”

“I sold the necklace, the one Nwamaka gave me.”

He glanced at the envelope again, then back at her. “What are you trying to do?” he flared. “Are you saying I cannot raise money for my business?”

“*Mbá kwá*, I know you are very hard working, my husband. But we need money, this will give us a good start.” She had anticipated his rejection. Mezie would hardly accept help from anyone, not even from her. “We will start with this.”

“When did I ask for your help?”

His question suddenly injected a wave of uncontrollable anger into her bloodstream. She had traveled to Onitsha very early that day in search of a buyer. It wasn’t easy finding one. When she finally did, the man almost called the police on her because he suspected she stole the jewel.

Now Mezie was looking down at her effort?

“I did it for us,” she muttered.

“Says who? You did it for yourself. You are giving me money so you can make me feel like nothing.” He sprang up from his seat and she backed away. “I will not have you shame me in my house. I got married to you, have been feeding you all my life with my hard-earned money! I don’t need your help.”

“What do you want from me? My blood?” Akwaugo asked. She had never talked back at her husband before. “What haven’t I done to make you see I am a good wife! I have tried Mezie, you know I have.”

“*Ànùòfíá*! Animal!” His chin held high, eyes hard, she sensed he was going to hit her, but she didn’t care. “You can now talk back at me because you lay some money down?”

“Yes! Yes, Mezie. You don’t know what it cost me. I gave up something…” she clenched her fist, “You don’t know what it meant to me.” Tears rolled down her cheek.

“A miserable necklace! When I was Mezie I could afford two of that!”

“Then why didn’t you? Oh, I know, I will be noticed by other men and will sleep with them. Isn’t that what you feared?”

Tongue-tied, Mezie staggered back to the sofa, shaking his head. “Chai! Mezie, you have suffered When a man loses his legs, children challenge him in a wrestling match.”

Too angry to care if he took the money or burnt it, Akwaugo stomped out of the room.

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Chapter 15

Tobe



Lagos

He had an insane desire to grab a little bag and leave the country for a place he would do nothing but sleep, eat and sleep again. But he had so much to do today, meetings he wouldn't be able to cancel, or he would lose money. God! He was becoming busier as he got older.

Out of the bath, with a towel wrapped around his waist, Tobe crossed to the wardrobe and pick out a three-piece gray suit with a matching tie, then he began whistling as he strolled back to lay the clothes neatly on the bed.

"Mondays are for suits," he muttered as he began to dress up. He was a meticulous man down to his raiment and believed that a man, when properly accoutered, would be led up to the high table to dine with kings. *Isn't that what the bible says?*

'*Not bad*,' he smiled, double-checking his look. Leaning his face closer to the mirror, he carefully plucked a strand of gray from his hair; he would be thirty-seven in the next four months. Thirty-seven and alone.

"At least I have a company that keeps me busy," he said, grabbed his phones that were on top of the table and left the room. A few seconds later, he entered his waiting SUV.

As the driver hit the road, Tobe's mind did a rapid check of his activities for the day; 11am appointment with the minister for transport, brunch with Mr. Huang of Chaoxiang steel. If he was lucky, the meeting with the bank and the anti-graft agency, which was scheduled for three p. m. would be

over in an hour or two then he would be able to make a quick stop at his designer's place.

It was already some minutes past nine when his SUV pulled up at the entrance of the building that had '*Rayonile'* conspicuously engraved above it, and he stepped out.

"This invitation just came for you sir," Favor met him at the glass automatic entry door.

"Madam," he was *getting back* at her for calling him 'sir' instead of 'brother Tobe'. "When did you leave the house?" he asked without slowing his gait as he headed towards the elevator that would take him to his office on the last floor.

"You were sleeping like a king."

"I was up before nine."

"Nine is already too late for me. I don't want my salary deducted for coming to work late."

Perfect, he thought as his eyes swept through the office and he took his seat. "So, who would dare deduct your salary?" he gave his sister a wild grin. "You are the boss' sister, remember?"

"Ha! Nwànnê m nwòkê, I know you well, you don't tolerate laxity from anyone no matter the relationship."

"Mm—true. But I can forgive you a few times."

"Brother," she gave him a suspicious stare, "you are in good spirits this morning."

"I'm always in good spirits."

"No," Favor pulled out one of the chairs by the desk and sat down, "There's something to this happiness I'm seeing in your face." Giving him a coy smile, "You found a girl?" She asked.

Yes! He wanted to scream. "I wish," he hissed instead. "*Nne*, have you been following social media lately?

"Yes, brother. The company's issue with Mobrit Bank is the number one trending topic on Twitter," she near-screamed.

"Meanwhile—" Tobe cut in, "The bank is now calling for settlement."

"Fucking idiots."

"Language, young lady."

"Learnt from you."

He glared at her.

"Okay, sorry. But I'm so pissed at those people right now."

“*Nne*, no need to be. Nigerians are already fighting for us.”

“Yes! I read that a lot of people are closing their accounts with them in protest.”

“That’s the power of social media. The community we built there over the years wouldn’t fold their arms and watch this company go down.”

“Brother, they love you.”

That he was sure. Sometimes he wondered what he did to deserve the sacrifices Nigerian youths were making to make sure that the *powers that be* didn’t erase Rayonile the way they did other companies that the monopoly big players saw as threats.

“I’m humbled.”

“You have done so much for them.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Tobe sighed, “Thank you, *Nne*. You have a way of lifting my spirit. Sometimes I forget you are just twenty-nine and relate to you as though you are mother, God rest her soul.”

“Brother, It’s just the two of us *nau*, so I’m your mother.”

“Says who? Come on get out.” Both burst out in laughter. “So, the invitation card, who is it from?”

“Oh.” Favor opened the envelope, her face scrunching as she silently read the card. “From that your girlfriend, Jenifer. She has a house-warming party this Sunday.”

“She’s not my girlfriend, Favor.”

“She wants you.”

“That doesn’t make her my girlfriend.”

“Good to know because I don’t like her.”

“You’ve never liked any woman that had shown interest in me.”

“They are all desperate!”

“Desperation is not a bad thing,” he said as his sister got up to leave. She was the only sibling he had, and he had gotten so attached to her that the thought of her getting married and leaving him discomforted him. However, he knew she would leave some day and he was already preparing his mind for it. “Please check my schedule and let me know if I will be free next weekend.”

“You'll not be free,” she cut in.

“Have you checked?”

“I don’t want you going to her party.”

“*Nne*, *bìkô* check my schedule for next week and get back to me.”

She nodded, started walking towards the door, then stopped. “Ehen, brother Tobe?” She searched her handbag while walking back to him, brought out something sealed in a thick cellophane and placed it on his desk.

“What’s this?”

“The Jewelry you made me abandon my Tinapa Christmas trip with the girls to get for you—”

“The one you had a jeweler made for—”

“‘*Your* ‘special someone’. Chai, brother Tobe, I’ve not forgiven you for making me miss that trip o. I practically prowled every street in Lagos, surfed the net for the best jeweler—your instruction. My girls left me!”

But... he was sure... “Is it the same necklace or a replica?” He slipped his hand inside the cellophane to bring out the familiar gift box, his confusion accelerated.

“Yup. One and the same,” his sister added a voice to his thought. It was the same necklace.

“I don’t understand— How did you... how come it’s with you?”

“I guess your ‘special someone’ had better things to do with money than to wear a necklace worth millions of naira around her neck...”

Why would favor assume that this ‘special someone’ was a female?

She is not dumb.

“So, she sold it.”

His sister’s last word hit him like a bullet in the chest. Fuck! How it hurt to even think of it. She could have...would have... If she needed money as Favor said, she should have just... just... said so that time they were together.

Or maybe she just wanted to get rid of it. After all, she was a married woman whose husband didn’t like her going about accepting gifts from strangers.

“Luckily for you, it made a journey back to Lagos. I saw it at *Zavandi Jewelry shop*. At first, I couldn’t believe it was the same until I took a closer look and—flipped the back of the pendant where your name was engraved on...” He had instructed favor to stamp his name somewhere on the piece of jewelry and she did a perfect job hiding it there. “So, I bought it back.”

He was speechless and confused. He felt so stupid. All this while he'd thought... He could feel a burgeoning anger at the pit of his stomach.

"You owe me a refund, brother. I almost closed my account to get it back," Favor said and left the office.

His gaze returned to the necklace, and he tried to make sense of what just happened. Why would she do this to him? She couldn't even wear it for a month. Or was it her husband? He must have threatened her. Could have even been the one who sold it.

The last possibility aggravated the anger inside of him so much that he could feel his blood pumping in his ears. He swallowed and closed the box.

He had no right to be this angry. After all, she didn't ask him to give her the gift and had refused it at first. Yet, he felt the elation that was once his companion earlier that day leaving him.



Akwaugo

Nnewi, Anambra State

She heaved a sigh of relief when she found the card where she had kept it in her purse. It was drizzling, yet she proceeded to Nwamaka's place. The rain came with mighty wind, the kind that permeates the skin to chill the bones. But she wouldn't turn back. The man, Tobechukwu, had to know what she did with the jewelry, and Nwamaka was the only person who would lend her a phone to call him.

The money she had made from the sale had remained where she left it for two days, everyone avoiding it like meat sacrificed to the gods. Until this morning when Mezie woke her up in the wee hours to come lock the gate. She noticed that the money had disappeared from the table and suspected that her husband must have decided to swallow his pride and reason like a businessman.

"You are going to Onitsha?" She asked him.

"If you like, run your mouth like tap to the entire village," he retorted. "Tell everyone that you gave me money."

She didn’t give him a response, wasn’t in the mood for that. Something else was weighing heavy on her heart.

She veered off the road, hurried past two buildings and stopped in front of her friend’s house. She pushed the gate and let herself in.

“Ha! Akwaugo. Did you wake up with the cockerels?” Nwamaka who was on the front porch with a cup of water in her hand said.

“It is already Nine.” She joined her friend on the porch. “And stop looking at me as if I have poxes all over my face.” Leaning on the pavement, she turned her face away from Nwamaka’s scrutiny.

“Pregnancy doesn’t suit you Akwa, you look sick,” Nwamaka put the cup down on the pavement, inched closer, and leaned beside Akwaugo.

“I’m six months gone, what do you expect?”

“Still, you look malnourished, Akwa, are you eating well?”

“I hardly have an appetite for food now.”

“No, that’s not the case. I think that husband of yours isn’t taking care of you.”

“Amaka, I will regain what I lost once the child comes. Trust me.”

“Okay o.”

They were silent for a while, then— “Amaka I want to call someone, and I don’t… I want…”

“You want my phone.”

“Yes, please.”

“Did anybody die?”

“What?”

“This one you want to make a call, did somebody die?”

“No o!”

“How is Mezie?”

“Mezie went to Onitsha this morning. He would soon start business again.”

“Is he not coming back today?”

She hadn’t wanted to lie, but since Nwamaka had assumed it was Mezie she wanted to call, it was better she kept quiet and allow her go with that thought. “I don’t know. Amaka please, It’s important.”

“Okay o.” The other woman strolled inside and came out. “Here.” Handed her a phone, “I hope you know how to use it?”

“I have used a phone before.”

“Not this type Akwa, this one is a touch screen, American phone.”

Both women burst out laughing.

“I’ll like to make the call inside,” Akwaugo said as soon as she sobered up.

“Come.”

She followed the other woman inside and waited for her footsteps to thin out before she brought out the card and dialed his number.

“Hello?” The familiar voice that filtered through the phone aroused lust —hot and fast—inside her and her body responded with a surge of sexual excitement that she had to clench her teeth to suppress.

“It’s me, Akwaugo.” The silence that followed stole her breath. Maybe she shouldn’t have called.

“Akwa,” He finally said. His voice—soft and gentle. “I have waited for your call.”

Pulse racing. “I want to tell you something.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“I sold the necklace you gave to me.” Her voice shook.

Silence

“My Husband, he lost everything in the fire, I couldn’t watch him suffer.”

Silence

But she knew he was there, listening. Maybe too angry to respond to her but he was listening. “I’m so sorry, sir. I didn’t want to do it, it's the fire, he lost everything and—”

“Are you with child now?”



Tobe

Lagos

He was right. Fuck! It was because of that man who wasn’t worthy to even untie the lace of her sandals.

Her husband.

A controlling fool!

He is still her husband.

Yes. Fuck, he knew that. Hissing, Tobe glanced at his wristwatch. He had eighteen minutes left to get to the office of the Lagos State transport minister. But thanks to this call, he's now seriously considering sending a representative for the meeting instead.

"Akwaugo," he groaned. He should be mad at her for discarding such a precious gift. Precious, not because of the cost, but because he had given it to her with love. *Love*? He gave off a chuckle. Would he call what he had for another man's wife *love?*

Of course, yes. Although he had been careful not to openly admit it the last time they spoke in the village because it was obvious the woman was loyal to her husband and she would give up anything to please the unfortunate man. Anything, including her pride *and my gift*.

Tobe didn't blame her though. He'd seen women do things for the men in their lives. Very crazy things.

"Akwa?" he called again.

"Sir?"

He wished she would say his name instead of this… formal title, *sir*. "I asked you a question."

"Sir, I... ehm..."

He leaned back, relishing the feeling her voice was arousing in him. The combination of innocence and sensuality in her tone was warming him from the inside out. He cast a glance at the gift box, wondering if she ever wore the necklace and if it reminded her of him. That was the idea; for her to have something that would constantly remind her of him.

One-time sex wasn't enough. Not for him, and maybe not for her, except…

"Are you with child now?" he asked again.

"Sir…"

She was pregnant! Ha! She didn't need to voice it, her hesitation was all the answer he needed.

"We have made something beautiful, Akwa." *From a sinful act*, his thought challenged as he heard her choke out a sob. "Are you not happy?" he asked.

"I'm happy."

"Good, because I am too."

"But, don't forget sir. You did it to help me and my husband."

He hesitated for a while to calm his excited heart. “A child is growing. That’s what matters,” he said.

“Thank you so much, sir.”

Why was she suddenly sounding as though it was the end of the road for the both of them? That now she'd gotten what she wanted, he should go away and never come back?

“You made me a mother, you took away shame from my face.”

“Akwa?” he cut in.

“Mm?”

“I want to see you again.”

“What?”

“Fate didn’t bring us together just to birth a child for another man.”

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Chapter 16

Mezie



Nnewi, Anambra state

Two things tickled him to laughter, making him flap his legs repeatedly as he relaxed under the tree, his hand padding the back of his head;

He was back in business. His wife wasn't useless after all, the money she gave to him had been of enormous help. But he wasn't going to tell her that. Wouldn't want her to now think herself superior to him like Nwankwor's wife who *grew a penis* because she got a job at the local government council and started bringing money home.

A smile crossed his face as he thought of the second reason. Okorie. He had floored him today in a fight!

His smile turned into a guffaw that got him stamping his feet on the dry sand. "Chai! Ridiculous man," he muttered. Okorie should have asked about him before opening that latrine he called mouth.

Both men had met on the lonely footpath that led to *Ùkwú-ôfô*.

"*Ònyè chì òjôô*, bad lucked man," Okorie had hissed, an ugly snarl contorting his sweaty face.

Without thinking, Mezie rushed the much taller man, meandering through his legs to lift him off the ground. Before Okorie could regain his composure, he was already spatting dust out of his mouth while spectators cheered and booed.

Mezie knew the implication of what he did, but he didn't care. He would pay any fine levied on him by the kinsmen, but could the wretched

fool Okorie, who didn’t know where his next meal would come from, do so without borrowing?

He laughed again, “*Ònyè kâ mmâdú ká chì yâ*.” he said. Okorie had learned that daring him next time would mean death, the fool wouldn’t have the balls to openly challenge him again.

However, Mezie’s bushy brows came down in a frown as something crossed his mind. Okorie would want to get back at him by going to their kinsmen with the ugly secret he'd been trying to hide from everyone, and if that happens…

Scratching his head, Mezie began to regret the fight. How would he stop Okorie from stripping him naked before the kinsmen? Truly, the man had become a fly that is perched on an enlarged scrotum.

Mezie hissed, settled his gaze on his wife who was dawdling towards him, and shook his head. If he was to suggest something to God, it would be that children should be thrown down from Heaven, because pregnancy didn’t look good on his wife. Her protrusion had taken all her robustness, giving her the appearance of a malnourished child!

“I brought coconut for you, my husband.”

“Hmm,” he acknowledged but didn’t take the plate from her. She should just drop it and walk away.

“I had that dream again last night,” she said, pulling the short stool beside him to sit down. “I’m worried, Mezie.”

He too was beginning to get bothered by the constant nightmares that always left his wife screaming like a demon-possessed woman. He had dismissed it initially as one of the things that came with the pregnancy. But it had persisted, each day worse than the previous one.

“I beg you, my husband, pay *Édó* shrine a visit, we have to find out why this is happening to me.”

“I told you this has nothing to do with the deity or her shrine, we settled this matter before, we have made the necessary sacrifices.”

The day he went to see the priest concerning the oath his wife took that forbade her from sleeping with another man, the priest had instructed that both himself and his wife should bathe in a sacred river for two nights. Akwaugo had refused at first, her faith was against it. But she came around when she was told that death would visit her if she continued to be adamant.

“Then why am I seeing myself there? They call my name. This morning I was being pursued by masquerades.”

“Nothing will happen to you. Or didn’t you hear the priest? As long as I am the person who permitted you to do it, the deity will not come for you.” He stared at her, “Wait o, have you met another man after that one? The oath will hunt you if you have done so.”

“I’ll never do such an abomination again, my husband. Once was enough.” Shifting closer to him, she gripped his lap. “All I’m asking is for you to go and ask *Èdó* why I keep seeing things in my dreams. Is it that the cleansing bath wasn’t done properly, or the sacrifices were not accepted?”

“Shut up woman. Stop saying what you don’t know.” He took a piece of coconut from the plate in her hand. “Except you have committed another adultery. If not, you have nothing to worry about.”

She swallowed a sob, got up, and walked back into the house. What would she be doing inside? Reciting her rosary and crying?

His wife cries easily these days, the sound of her sobbing got on his nerves. One day he would snap and beat her so she would cry to her fill since she now preferred tears to food.

Mezie thought of the nightmares again and shudder. Was the oath responsible for them? If yes, why had it continued after all they’d gone through to appease the deity? The priest had even assured him that it was over.

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Chapter 17

Akwaugo



Filled with helpless emptiness, Akwaugo took no bother about the grasses heavy with rain droplets that were wetting the hem of her dress and turning her brown flat shoes into a glossy water shine. She also didn't notice the man that just stepped out of a car parked a little distance from the path and was now striding towards her as she walked through the shaggy footpath leading to the church.

"Akwaugo."

She turned her head sharply to the sound of Tobe's voice, and stumbled over a strayed tree root, her teeth sinking in her tongue, stopping her from screaming out her shock. He was by her side before she hit the ground, his arms holding her waist firmly.

"Easy now, I got you," he said, steadying her. A familiar warmth flashed through her as her body rested against his while his free hand skimmed down her stomach. "I won't let you fall." His eyes, clouded with concern, were on her face.

Realising how suspicious their position was and that someone might walk past, she stepped away from him. "How… you are here..."

"I came in yesterday to supervise the work going on at the health center and the school."

It was a lie. She knew he was lying, and from the look on his face, he knew she didn't believe him.

"I just came to see you, Akwa."

"I told you to stay away."

“I can’t.” He reached for her arm, pulled her to himself before she could resist. “I don't want to stay away, Akwaugo. Don’t ask me to, please.”

He made her rest her head on his chest so she could hear his heart beating so fast. “Don’t push me away,” he added, shattering her defense walls and she began to sob softly. Tears of the months she had missed him, though she didn’t want to, soiled and his shirt.

“It's okay beautiful one. I’m here now.”

No, you are not, she wanted to tell him. *You will never be with me*.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

“I'm married,” she murmured between sobs. “We can’t be seen together.”

“I wish there was a way I could forget you, but each time I tried to do so, I fail. I want you.”

She stepped away from him. “You don’t want me,” she said. “You cannot want what will never be yours. Can't you see? I will never be yours.”

He stood gazing at her for a while, “What if we have a destiny together?”

Tobe

If the news leaks that he was being careless with another man’s heavily pregnant wife, a lot could go wrong. His integrity would be at stake. So would hers. It would be worse for her even. She would be shamed and would never be allowed to participate in the women’s gathering.

He wouldn’t want that. As much as he would want to damn every consequence and make her his, he didn’t want to make her an object of scorn.

“I’m sorry Akwa, I shouldn’t have... I wasn’t thinking straight.” Of course, he wasn’t. No right-thinking man would sleep and wake up with the thought of another man’s wife in his head and his groin burning with a hunger for her. “How is your husband?” he managed to ask.

“Fine, he has started his business again.”

Tobe didn’t want to talk about her husband. “And how are you coping with pregnancy?” Anguish struck his heart as he thought of the baby, *his baby* in her womb. The thought that they had created a beautiful thing, yet he was going to pretend it never happened. He would have loved to be part of it, to take care of her and the baby at least. But he had promised her, he wasn’t going to break his promise. “I hope you are well?”

“Yes, thank you,” she muttered.

She wasn’t looking well. “Come with me.” He took her arm, led her to the car, opened the back seat so she would get in and he sat beside her. “Tell me, are you really well?”

She remained silent.

“*Òmàlìchà m*, are you okay?”

She adjusted her dress, glanced at him and lowered her head.

Something was wrong with her, it was evident in her frown and her trembling lips. “Beautiful one, let me know what bothers your heart, please.”

“I am scared,” she finally spoke. “Something is happening to me, I can’t explain it.”

“Your husband?”

She shook her head. “I told you he’s fine.”

“The baby? You need money to take care of yourself and the baby?”

“*Mbá*, no.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know, I can’t sleep without...without having nightmares and…” she trailed off.

Tobe had not been with a pregnant woman before, so he was at a loss on what to do or say.

“Something terrible is happening to me, I feel I’m going to die”

“No! Oh God, no,” he said. “Don’t say that, *Òmàlìchà m*. Nothing will happen to you.” Fuck! That man wasn’t taking care of her, she looked so fragile, so sick. “Let me hold you.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

When he adjusted so she could rest her head on his chest, his heart tightened with the need to protect her. If she were his, he would give anything, do anything to keep her safe and happy.

He tightened his grip around her and sighed as he resigned to what this thing was, this crazy feeling welling inside of him for this simple, village

woman.

Love. That's what it was. Tobechukwu Ochudo was in love with another man's wife.

He reached for her neck with both hands, slightly lifting her face to meet his, and kissed her forehead. "*Òmàlìchà m*." His eyes holding hers. "I wish you are mine." But she was not, and it hurt so much. "I wish the situation was different, that you are not—" he trailed off, looking up for a brief moment and then settling his eyes back on hers. "I think about you."

Grim lines bracketed his mouth, and the rest of the words tumbled out in a headlong rush.

"All the time. I can't stop…I think about touching you, inhaling the smell of your skin, the same one you left on my bed that day." Her whimper set off his own groan. "I fall asleep with your face in my mind and wake up aching and hard with your name on my lips."

"Tobechukwu."

Did she call his name? For the very first time she…

"You called my name." A chuckle burst out of his lips. "And it sounds so beautiful."

She smiled and lowered her gaze. "I like your name," she muttered.

His insides bubbled with happiness as he tipped her jaw up with his fingers. "I love you, Akwaugo."

She gasped, then shook her head.

"I know I shouldn't fall in love with you but there's nothing I can do now. I've fallen so bad, it's like I'm losing my mind."

"You can't love me, I'm with another..."

"Man," he finished for her. "I know. That's why I'll not ask you to be mine," he said, and kissed her head. "It hurts, my love. So, so bad."

He felt her shiver as his lips touched her cheek and stayed there.

"Let me wet your face with kisses, beautiful one. Just this once. I'll not take what you are not willing to give me," he whispered against her skin.

When she said nothing, he brushed his mouth against the hollow of her temple and traced it back to her cheek.

I should be alright, he thought as he drank of her skin, wetting her face and neck with kisses. *I'm in control, wouldn't lose myself*. Then his lips grazed through hers as they journeyed to the other side of her face and self-control deserted him instantly. He tilted his head to the side, then covered her mouth with his. Fuck! Her lips were soft, so soft and perfectly fitted

inside his mouth. If he was going to retreat before, he wasn't sure now that she whimpered her yielding and clung to him as if he were the only solid thing in her dizzy, swaying world.

She arched back her head across his arm, his tongue parted her lips and with a swift gradation of intensity, he began to kiss her with so much fervency, as if there's nothing else in the world he wanted more, and yet there was also a tenderness as if she was more precious to him than breath.

She was inexperienced. He could taste it as much as he could taste her desire to have him plunder her mouth. She was encouraging him with her moans and her hands against his chest, not pushing but clenching and releasing his shirt.

"Akwaugo m. My love." Tobe murmured into her mouth, pulling the scarf on her head off and burying his fingers in her rich, mass of natural curls while his tongue probed deeper.

"Tobe…my husband."

It sounded to him as though she was calling him her husband and that soared his hunger. "Yes, my love," he murmured against her lips.

"Mezie—"

Oh, shit! He pulled his lips away from hers but did not attempt to loosen his grip around her. "Akwaugo I..." What was he going to say? *I'm so sorry, kissing you was a bad idea, so was my desire to strip off your clothes and slowly make love to you here, in the car. Pregnancy or not, I want you so much.*

"My Innocent baby," he whispered as he caught a glimpse of shame on her face. "I keep doing this to you each time we are together."

A short silence passed.

Then she found her voice, "How did you know I would be walking through this path by this time?" she asked.

"I wasn't sure. Just decided to gamble, hoping that the angels would bring you towards this path."

They slid into another silence that lasted for a few seconds before she edged away from him, "I have to go, Father Theo must be waiting for me. I told him I would see him this evening."

"Let me take you there."

"No!"

He caught her by the arm before she could open the door. "Call me. Let me know if you need anything. I may not be your husband, but fate brought

us together. Please, my love, for the sake of our baby… uhm, the baby."

"I will try," she muttered and left.

He watched her hurry away without looking back.



Akwaugo

He desired her. With her shape gone and her skin rough, he had looked at her like a man would look at his new bride on their first night together. And he had kissed her. She never quite figured if the beauty of the kiss was the softness of his lips against hers, or the endearing words pouring out of his mouth while he explored her mouth.

Touching her lips, she moaned softly. Mezie did kiss her occasionally but never had he swept the whole of her mouth with his tongue, plowing deep like a man digging a field in search of gold the way Tobe did today. And never had her husband ignited this kind of fire in her when his *thing* was still working. Tobe had sent a wild tremor through her nerves with his tongue, evoking from her sensations she thought she had forgotten. And to think that she had put up no resistance. She didn't even want him to stop. Even as she lay beside her husband, her lips craved Tobe's kisses. Her body burned for his touch. She wanted his fingers in her hair, his breath on her face, her name on his lips. Blessed mother Mary! How could she deal with this thing growing inside her?

As she stroked her chest, she turned to stare at her husband, her eyes skimming through his lanky frame and settled at the corner of his slacked lips where some crust had gathered. She marveled at how fast he had aged and how ugly looking he was.

A woman shouldn't see her husband as ugly, her conscience whispered.

But he started it first, kept taunting her with this pregnancy, telling her that she had lost her beauty because of it.

She tugged gently to free the end of her wrapper that was stuck underneath the sleeping man, got up and left the room to hers where she would freely think about the man who had kissed her lips and looked at her sickly figure with much adoration.

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Chapter 18

Mezie



"Have you come to check if I slept and didn't wake up?"

It was obvious Okorie hadn't gotten over the fight they had the other time and Mezie didn't blame him. What happened wasn't a fight, it was a show of shame. If he was Okorie, he wouldn't get over it fast too.

"You have come to know if I am dead, haven't you?" Okorie asked again.

Mezie would have loved to tell Okorie that it would have been better if he were dead, but that wouldn't do anything to solve his problem.

"That is not why I am here Okorie," he said.

Poverty has become this man's chì, Mezie thought as his eyes roamed the sitting room which walls were in a worse state than the chairs in it. He sat on one of the chairs and urged the owner of the house to do the same, but Okorie remained standing.

"Why are you in my house, Mezie?" Okorie said with seething resentment.

"You know we have been summoned by our kinsmen because of that beating I gave you that day?"

Okorie's face darkened. "What does that have to do with you being in my house this early morning?"

"I want to remind you that you have not paid me the money you borrowed Nine years ago." His eyes danced with scorn.

"So?"

“So, before you open your miserable mouth and tell them about my…” he swallowed hard, “…my predicament. Remember you will have to pay me the whole one hundred and twenty thousand. And with interest. Nine years’ interest!”

Okorie’s face deepened with a frown, his chest rising and falling with the burden of hatred he bore. “You are not only a selfish idiot, you are also terrible, Mezie.”

“I am not moved by whatever you chose to call me, you must not talk about me and my wife! Or, I will make you pay what you owe me there.” Mezie knew he had Okorie on the jugular. The wretched fool had no money to repay his debt. Even the money he made from selling a part of the only parcel of land his useless father left for him was used to send his youngest son off to secondary school.

“When I caught you humping my wife like *mkpì*, you bought my silence with this debt,” Okorie accused. “You said you will not bring it up again. You wanted all that had bitten in the night to be counted as mosquitos.”

“But you didn’t allow it to rest my good friend. You had refused to reverse the curse you lay on me with your *Ófò* and had kept taunting me with my woe! And if I leave you, you will still open your mouth *waaaa* like diarrhea.” The man was not as tough as he seemed. Looking at his pitiable face now, Mezie felt like laughing so hard.

“You climbed my wife and the gods of my fathers are punishing you for your sins, now you want to take it on me?”

“Let the gods of your fathers also give you money to repay your debt.”

“Mezie, you climbed my wife!”

“Whose buttocks were too big for you to carry, I helped you do what you couldn’t do.”

Both men glared at each other, nose flared, fists tightened.

“Just as someone has also helped you do what you couldn’t do and is still helping you oil your wife’s vagina!” Okorie retorted.

“Nobody is climbing my wife! Akwaugo is not as loose as your horny insatiable woman!” Mezie shot back, earning himself a guffaw from Okorie.

“You are so blind. You think she stayed waiting for your limb manhood all these years?” Okorie laughed again. “You think you still own her? You are a loser Mezie, a dead man. In a short while, the owner of that baby you

are bragging with would come for it and our kinsmen would know the truth eventually."

"Shut up!"

"You don't own the world, Mezie. You can't always have everything you want."

"Of course, you know I can have anything I want. I have money, you don't.

"Then, plead with the gods to restore your manhood so you can enjoy what remains of your wife's *òtú*!"

Mezie felt a sudden throbbing in his head as anger gave his face an ugly contour and like a mad dog, he bared his teeth. "I will kill and bury you in your house and nobody will look for you!"

"Try it *nau*! *Ójí nwànyí êjîghî àmú!* Husband with no penis!" Okorie shouted back.

"Don't dare me Okorie, I'm warning you. Don't open your mouth to the kinsmen about my condition."

"I don't have to. They have eyes and know what is going on in your house."

Angry and in loss for words, Mezie stormed out of the house, his slippers scooping dry sand as he hurried out of Okorie's compound.

The oaths failed. The dreaded *Édó* and Ókìjá deities had turned their backs while his wife graced the beds of every man in this village! How many of his kinsmen had tasted her? How many have buried their filthy erections inside her womanhood?

"*You think she stayed waiting for your limb manhood? Someone is still servicing your wife's vagina*."

Okorie would not just say these words to spite him. Akwaugo had been sleeping with other men in this village. Evil woman! She had taken *Ndágbù îyî concoction* to nullify the oath she took with him so she wouldn't die while committing adultery.

When Mezie got home, he met his wife sprawled on the floor of her room. Blinded by rage, he kicked her in the ribs. "Adulteress!" He kicked again, the body shifted but she didn't stir, neither did she crack a sound. "How many are they? How many have eaten from the sacred pot between your legs? *Akwuna!* Shameless prostitute!" With anger squeezing him like a cloth in a wringer, he poured his shame, anguish, and frustration on the body.

When he exhausted himself, he retreated to a corner in the white-washed room groaning. “Akwaugo you have killed me. You dine with my enemies and they laugh at us behind our backs,” he keened.

By the time he calmed himself and went to the body, she was far gone.

He was dragging her body out of the room when Nwamaka walked in, screamed, and ran out, returning after a short while with a taxi and Akwaugo’s mother.



ONE LOOK at his wife’s stiffened body as they rolled her into the ICU and a sudden realisation that his world had come crumbling donned on him. He was going to lose her and their baby, his child, his only hope of keeping his father’s name alive! So, he ran like a man with a runny stomach to the *Édó* shrine, hoping to find answers and probably a miracle.

“You made your choice the last time you came here Mezie.”

It was when he could no longer pretend that his wife's many nightmares weren’t connected to the fidelity oath he made her take. Mezie had visited the shrine for *ìjû ásé*, to know why his wife was constantly tormented in her dreams since it was him that made her sleep with another man.

“You were given two options,” the priest said. “You knew this day would come, why are you pretending like you are caught up in the battle you didn’t prepare for?”

“Because I didn’t! You told me she would be fine!”

“I told you that there is no reversal to an oath sealed with blood,” the priest shot back. “It is either her life or yours.”

“But there was a third option—”

“If you could make her not to set her eyes again on the man whose seed she carries, both of you would be cleansed in *Édó* sacred river, sacrifices would be made, and everything will be fine.”

“We made the sacrifices. You assured me.” He was going hysteric. “The act was done once, and my wife swore that she wouldn’t meet the man again. She swore to me.”

“She may not have met him like a woman meets a man, but she must have set her eyes on him.”

Silence passed.

“What would the deity want from me?”

“A drop of your blood at the feet of *Édó*.”

“And?”

“It’s your life for hers. She lives and takes care of your child, while you die. But *Édó* can decide to show mercy.”

“Your deity would kill me?” Mezie said. “Why? I did what every desperate man would do. And when it was time to clean the mess, I did. If anything went wrong, it must be from Akwaugo. She must have met that man or other men.”

“The ways of the deity are unpredictable.”

His mouth hung open, eyes widened. Mezie weighed what was laid before him.

“There is another option—” the priest cut into his thought. “If you can get a son of *Édó*, a man who has a history with the deity to drop his blood on this alter, you and your wife would be free.”

Mezie gaped at the priest for a while, stood up, and walked out of the shrine.

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Chapter 19

Tobe



The doctor said she would come around in a few hours. But it was nightfall, yet Akwaugo still lay as lifeless as a body about to be pushed into the morgue. Sitting at the edge of the backseat of his car with one foot hanging out, he glanced back at the hospital entrance. “Please, God. Bring her back to me,” he muttered, regret gnawing the pit of his stomach.

He shouldn’t have left the second time without taking her with him. Damn! She had hinted him about this, he was just too ignorant... too carried away by his burning desire to think!

But what would he have done? She belonged to another man, the same man that did this to her.

“Jesus!” Why didn’t Akwaugo come out straight and tell him that her husband was abusing her? Why did she keep it to herself? If not for the lady that called him this morning—saying she saved his number after Akwaugo had called him with her phone some time ago—while he was on his way to the airport, he wouldn’t have known that she was in danger.

He had to cancel his appointment with the CEO of Lethabo group, South Africa, and booked a jet to Owerri, where he met with Nchekwube's driver who drove him down to the village.

Unable to calm down, Tobe decided to prowl the hospital premises, at least his trepidation would ebb for a while if his limbs were moving. But walking didn’t help. Nothing would ease his fear that something might go wrong, that Akwaugo... the baby... The doctor suggested operating on her to get it out.

Then what would happen to his Akwaugo?

“God please don’t do this to me. I can do anything, donate any amount of money to charity—and the church. Please don’t take her away.”

Approaching footsteps forced him to turn. “Sir, the baby is out now, and the doctor would want to speak with her husband,” a nurse said.

“I’m not her husband.”

“I know, sir. But her friend said you can take care of things.” By *things*, he knew they meant any expenses.

As he walked the long hall that led to the doctor’s office, he realised he had not seen Akwaugo’s husband anywhere in the hospital since he arrived.



“I OVERHEARD her conversation with you that day, I knew you...uhm...must mean something to her. So, I had to save your number, sir.”

Away from the doctor’s office, and with the baby now placed in an incubator, they had to wait for the best or the worst. Akwaugo was still unconscious, every effort to bring her back was proving abortive, and so was his attempt to convince the doctor to allow him to take her to a better hospital.

“A chopper will come to pick her from here to Lagos, she can be flown abroad, if need be,” he had pleaded with the doctor.

“Sorry, sir. Only her husband can make that decision.”

Even when her parents were in support of him taking her to any hospital he felt would save her?

“Her husband must give his consent.”

Jesus! Why wouldn’t they allow him take care of her? Why was everyone denying him that right? She is the mother of his child.

Nobody knows that.

Standing now with her family and friend in the hospital's corridor, he felt hurt and deprived. Where in God’s name is her fucking husband? He thought.

“Thank you for coming to our aid, *nwà m*.” A woman that had introduced herself as Akwugo’s mother said. “I don’t know why this thing will happen to her, my only daughter.”

He placed his hand on the woman’s shoulder. “She will be fine,” he assured, swallowing hard as he saw the despair on the woman’s face.

“If only they will allow you to take her to Lagos,” her friend said, inching closer, same time Akwaugo’s husband staggered in and flumped on the floor of the hospital’s corridor.

Shameless bastard! “Everyone has been looking for you,” Tobe gritted, anger running up his throat. “Where have you been?”

The other man slowly looked up at him and frowned. “Don’t I know you? What are you doing here?”

“You should be asking how she is doing! How can you be this irresponsible?”

“*Kédù ìhè ì'né mè èb’á?* What business do you have with my wife? *Nwòkêm* why are you here?”

“Will you shut your mouth!”

“May *Ámàdìóhá* strike you deaf and dumb, *ànùmpámá*!” The two women echoed in unison.

Feeling outnumbered and subdued, the man pulled his knees to his chest and rested his hands on them. “It was her stubbornness,” he hissed. “I warned her. *Édó* forbids it, the oath would kill her.”

Grabbing the man by the shoulder, Tobe hurled him up. “Come with me.” His voice, raw with rage. “You are going to talk to the Doctor now, she is leaving this place,” he said, dragging the man towards the hallway.

“No need,” the man said, slumping back to the floor. “Too late.”

Stupid halfwit with an ego large enough to fill a big warehouse. Now, he looked so deflected. One could mistake him for a shrimp out of water. “Get your ass up!”

“No doctor will be able to save her,” the man said, crawling further away from Tobe until his back hit the wall. “It’s the oath, she would die if it’s not broken.”

“What oath?” *What the fuck*!

The man broke down instantly, sobbing into his palm. “She wasn’t supposed to see him again. I warned her.”

“Tell me everything. Everything! Or you will regret crossing paths with me,” Tobe threatened.

The man did.

And Goodness! It was the most horrifying thing Tobe has heard in years.

“But there is a way.” The man leveled a gaze at him. “If only we can get an *Ósù* someone whose lineage is linked to the deity to carry the sacrifice.”

Bastard!

“I know you like her.” There was desperation in his eyes. “You can save her, help me save my wife.”

Stupid bastard!



TWO LOCAL TORCHES hung on the totems that stood at the entrance of the shrine, providing the light that was making it possible to pick out the old priest's face in the darkness.

“Son of Ochudo, why do you want to do this?” the priest asked.

Akwaugo's husband was gone now, scurried out like a rat with fire on its tail after bringing Tobe to the shrine so he could make the priest undo whatever he did to Akwaugo.

Tobe intended to use threats, he would call the police on the old man if he refused to undo whatever was done. But the drumbeat changed when he learned that Akwaugo’s life was hanging on a thread that would soon be cut if nothing was done.

“He said there is another option,” Tobe pinched his nose to the strong smoke emanating from a clay pot beside him. “If he can get someone whose history is linked to the deity to carry the sacrifice on his behalf.”

The priest tilted his head backward and observed him from the slit of his eyes. “I know your father very well, he was my best friend those days. He used to share palm wine with me here in my shrine. Then one day he stopped coming. I heard he gave his life to Christ.” The man laughed. “Is that not how you people say it? Giving life to Christ.” The priest seemed not to be in a hurry. “Your father wouldn’t want you here.”

“My father is late now.”

The old man went silent for a while.

“I’m an *Ósù*.” He never thought that a day would come when he would eagerly admit to being a son of *Édó*. “My history is linked to the deity.”

The man stared at him, a satisfying smile playing on his lips. “The day a man admits who he is, is the day he starts living,” he said. “But your father would be rolling on his grave because of what you just said now.”

“How long will this take? She must not…I don’t want her to die.”

“Yes, she has no time.” He adjusted himself on the bench he was seated on, the priest cleared his throat. “You know you can walk out of this place and nobody will blame you. After all, it’s not your business if a selfish man suffers for his selfishness.”

“It isn’t for the man that I’m doing this.” It was for his Akwaugo. A woman he had come to love more than he had ever loved before. And the child, his baby. When he stood by that incubator watching the little fragile life, he knew it would be wrong of him to do nothing while the mother of this beautiful gift fades.

The Priest bit off a piece of kola nut and chewed noisily, observing him for a while. “Have you visited a place like this before?”

“I don’t do voodoo and traditional worshiping.”

“You have given your life to Christ, like your father?”

“I go to church and also try to live a morally right life.”

“Don’t they teach you in your church that you shouldn’t be equally yoked with people like us?”

“I am doing what needs to be done to make sure that the mother of my...” Fuck! He almost revealed the secret. “That Akwaugo lives.”

The priest burst out in laughter. “Does he know you are the man that slept with his wife?”

He couldn’t get himself to speak.

“Does he?”

“No.”

The priest laughed, then began a chant;

“*The gods will not kill his own,*

Édó is merciful to his hand-made,

The ways of the gods are not the ways of men.”

Then he rose. “Come,” he said, getting up to enter inside the little hut by the shrine. Tobe followed.



Akwaugo

Life rushed into her nostrils, traveling down her lungs, jerking her up. She opened her eyes to two pairs of troubled orbs staring at her face, firm grips on both of her hands and voices talking at the same time.

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Chapter 20

Tobe



To ask how he felt was like asking a man who had been in a coma how he felt on the first day of connecting back with life. It wasn't a high or a low feeling, but a slight warm flat surge as if he was walking on a path he could simply stay on forever or chose to turn back. His mind was blank, his body felt like it wasn't his, and his head hurt terribly.

He winced, rolled to his side and made effort to sit up.

"Welcome back." The priest put down a calabash and walked to his side.

"How long have I been out?" Tobe groaned.

"A night."

He staggered to his feet and tottered to the wall of the house he was in now, not the same hut he had followed the priest in earlier. This one was made of bricks. Was it the priest's house? He arched his back, but pains rushed through his body like ignited fire. Every part of him hurt, every damn place. He leaned off the wall, took a few steps forward and collapsed on a nearby chair, squeezed his eyes shut.

"You have to rest more."

"Resting is the last thing on my mind," he blurted. Slowly, the pains were fading. "What now?"

"You are a good soul, even the spirits recognised that."

"What of her?" Accepting a cup of herbal concoction, he hesitated, then took a sip at the priest's encouragement. "Fuck." He squeezed his face as the bitter taste slapped his palate.

"It will help with the wound on your chest," the priest assured.

He gazed down at the jagged raw incision on his left breast, he shuddered.

“I’ll put some herbs on it.”

He handed the cup of concoction back to the priest, “I have to go back to work, I don’t want to do that carrying green leaves around,” he said.

“You are free to use whatever you civilised people use for treatment, but herbs work better and faster.”

“So, what will happen to her now?”

“She lives.”

“And the oath?”

“Broken, she is free.”

A comforting silence descended on them.

Then, the priest coughed and shook his head, “Maybe your *chì* has plans for you and that woman. I don’t know but I have a feeling something will come out of this.”

The next day, with the ache in his body dull, as if a lazy torturer was standing behind him, applying enough pressure to be an annoyance, and the thought of the heated argument he just had with Nchekwube over his involvement with another man's wife—sadly, Nchekwube got to know about it from his driver and Tobe knew that it won’t long before his uncle would hear and would summon him—he walked into the hospital.

“I didn’t know you are still around. Nwamaka said she called you,” Akwaugo said as he stepped into her room, flashing him a weak smile that stilled his breath. “Thank you for everything you did to save me.”

He sat at the edge of the bed, he took her hand. “I want you to leave Mezie. He’s a terrible man.”

“Tobechukwu!” She snatched her hand from his as if burnt.

“You deserve to be loved, let me be that man that will love you.”

“You don’t get it, Tobe.”

“I don’t want to get it anymore. I’m in love with you and it breaks my heart that you are with him. He doesn’t know how to treat you right.”

“It’s hard—I’m married to him.”

“Let him go, divorce him.”

“Then what next?”

“Come with me. Marry me.”

“And tell my kinsmen what?”

“Your kinsmen are not the problem.” She was. If she could just accept him, every other person would understand. “Please beautiful one, come with me. I’ve never wanted anything as bad as I want you.” He moved closer so his body brushed against hers.

“It's not right. What you are asking me to do will hurt Mezie.”

Jesus! How could she still be thinking about that man after what he did to her? What kind of talisman did he use on her?

“What of you? Don’t you feel anything for me? Don’t you want to... Akwa why are you doing this to me, to yourself?” To their baby? As far as he was concerned, that man wasn’t capable of loving anyone, not even a baby.

“What I feel for you is dirty.” His heart constricted immediately that word left her mouth. “I think about you and crave for your...crave for a repeat of that thing we did that morning, and it’s wrong! I ache all over and you made it so. I desire you like I have never done for any man including my— *Mbá nú*, *bìkô* Tobe, go away.”

No, please Tobe, go away. God! How could such few words hurt so much?

He stood up, slipped his hands inside his trouser pockets. Pain like thick syrup ran through his veins as he turned to stare at her. “It was either you or your husband. But he didn’t want to lose his life, so he ran to me.” His pain turned to anger that felt like a hot knife in his stomach. “Me! The man he abhorred so much. I chose to answer a slave to the deity for your sake. For you, Akwaugo.”

Why was she not seeing that she has a destiny with him and not with that man she calls ‘*husband’*? Why was she scared of setting herself free from his shackles?

“Wait…you…you…what sacrifice are you talking about?” Carefully getting up from the bed, she came to him. “What did you do?”

“It doesn’t matter now.” His voice was soft, almost fragile, as if it would break any minute. Perhaps, his heart was already broken.

She was standing behind him, so close that he could feel her breath on his back, “Tobechukwu, please, what sacrifice?”

He shrugged off her hand, then turned to face her fully. “I’ll be around —for my baby. And I pray you will one day realise what this man has done to you.” Letting out a heavy sigh, he walked out.

The hurt he felt deep in his heart seemed to have numbed his physical aches.



Akwaugo

She let down the window drape and covered her mouth with her hand as her shoulder rocked in a quiet yet heart-wrenching sob. Pain shot from the wound on her stomach to the whole of her body as the sutured skin stretched against the thread that held them together, yet she couldn’t stop herself from crying.

She loves him. Oh God, she loves him so much! Now he's gone, she sent him away. But what would she have done to stop him? What he was asking of her was impossible, something that would bring her shame and haunt her for the rest of her life.

With her hand on her stomach, she made her way back to the bed and sank her butt at the edge where he had sat earlier. Inhaling the scent he left behind, she wiped her face.

It’s for good. She's married to Mezie and she owes him her honor and dedication.

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Chapter 21

Mezie



"N*wòkêm* what are you doing on top of the roof when you are supposed to be with your wife and your new child in the hospital or sharing *Nkwù ènû* with your kinsmen?"

Mezie continued to hammer.

"Mezie what is it? At least come down and offer me a chair and a box of snuff, God has remembered your family."

He ignored his friend and continued his task.

"I heard the child is a girl, born prematurely."

Mezie stilled, poised in a squat as if to pounce on his friend or vanish. Slowly he picked the cup of nails and climbed down the ladder, cracked his backbone, and drew a bench for both of them to sit.

"Goodluck." He dropped the cup of nails on the ground and clapped dust off his hands. "I wasn't expecting anyone."

"You are a strange man Mezie, the birth of a child is a merry thing no matter what."

Mezie balanced his elbows on his knees and looked away. He had almost lost his mind when he was told she would die with the baby, his baby! A son! But when he walked into that hospital after he had returned from the shrine where he left that man with the priest, and set his eyes on the child, a girl, he knew he was wise not to have agreed to give his life. It would have been in vain.

"They said you have refused to see the child and the mother, why?" Goodluck asked. "It's unlike you, my friend. This is your *Asa* we are talking about, and a child you had sort for many years."

“Do you remember one of the meetings we had last year? The one that Anekwe shut me up because I had no son?” Mezie fixed his gaze on his friend. “Imagine Anekwe! That drunk!” He shook his head, “I have waited these months, endured so much, hoping that I would finally get a son like my mates. And she gave me a daughter? Hasn’t she spite me enough?”

“Don’t say that my friend.” Goodluck patted him on the shoulder, “There is nothing wrong with a female child—”

“What will I do with a female child?” Mezie cut in. “Can a female child mend my roof when it starts leaking again, or can she till the ground? Or even help me out in my business?”

“You still have many chances to have a male child. You and your wife are not dying this night, she will get pregnant again and this time you will have a male child.”

“You will not understand my friend.” He swatted a fly off his face, “I worry about my life; I think I am cursed. She brought that curse with her to my house.”

“*Mezie! Kpúchìè ònû gî*! Close your mouth before another ear hears this.”

“I shouldn’t have married her.”

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Chapter 22

Akwaugo



It wasn’t the first time she was catching her husband looking at the baby like one would do vermin. Today, there was something in his eyes that sent a terrifying chill up her nape.

As though the baby sensed the cold contemptuous stare, she stirred, stretched, and gnawed on her thumb for a while then let out a tiny cry. From the door where Akwaugo stood observing, she willed her husband to get up and carry the baby—he'd not done that since they returned from the hospital—but he didn’t budge. Disappointed, she leaned off the door and went to go sit beside the baby on the sofa.

“She looks nothing like you.”

That was the first conversation they were having about the baby. In fact, the first time he was speaking to her calmly since she came back from the hospital.

“You have not held her in your arms since we returned.” Neither had he asked how she managed to settle the hospital bill. Rather, he had roamed the house like a ghost, sneaking in and out of his own compound just to avoid seeing her and the child. When he did bump into them, he would either pull a straight face or glare at the baby.

Unruffled, Mezie slightly lifted a butt cheek and gave out a croaky fart. “At least I am generous enough to give her a roof over her head. She should be grateful.”

Generous? He called treating an infant, his own baby, like a rabid puppy, being generous? If the child was a boy, wouldn’t he have welcomed

him with feasting? “I was at your shop today,” her voice quaked, “You told your boys not to release any money to me.”

“It's barely one month since you returned, you are not supposed to be seen outside.”

She wasn’t supposed to be seen outside? Yet he had continued to ignore their needs! Had insisted that her mother wouldn’t come for *Ómùgwó* for the stupid reason that her mother would spot the lack of resemblance between the baby and himself. “The baby needs clothes and a cot. I need money.”

“I have no money for unplanned expenses.”

He got up from the sofa, and started walking out, then stopped abruptly. “I heard the oath is broken, you are now free to grace beds and fend for your bastard child.” The door rebounded as he made his exit.

She clutched the baby close to her chest, and wept softly. For the umpteenth time, she wished she had accepted Tobe's offer. At least, he would take care of his daughter.

Some minutes later, when she settled in the gloom of her room, with the baby suckling on her nipple, Akwaugo plunged her hand under her mattress and came out with four wands of crispy notes. She muttered a prayer of thanksgiving, before pulling out ten notes from one wand.

Three afternoons ago, she had an unexpected visitor, a man with a bad leg that said he was Tobe's cousin.

Thank God her husband wasn’t around that time, it would have been another *Ágúlèrí* and *Ùmúlèrí* war.

The man handed her a big brown envelope and said it was from Tobe.

He didn’t stay long, didn’t even accept the seat she offered him. But he had asked for the child's name and if she needed anything.

“No,” she had replied, ashamed to ask for favors from him. But the man had looked at her with doubt and pity.

“He told me everything,” he said. “I was angry at him. My father was too,” he shrugged. “But Tobe refused to regret his relationship with you, said what happened between the both of you has the hand of fate in it.”

“How—how is he?” She had whispered, her heart skipping a few beats.

“He is—” it was as though the man was finding it difficult to get the right words out of his mouth. “Maybe you should call him. At least, that would put his heart at rest.”

“I can’t, I don’t have a phone.”

“He said you’ve called him before with your friend’s phone.”

“Yes.” She was silent, thinking of the danger of being caught sneaking out of the house to go use Nwamaka’s phone since she was still observing the mandatory three-months *Ómùgwó*. And all the time Nwamaka had visited her, there was always someone else around; either Mezie, his family, or his boys.

She missed Tobe so much, the need to see him, to speak to him, to know if he was angry for what she did to him. The thought was driving her crazy. She didn’t want to think about the desire to hate herself for turning down his offer that has remained heavy in her heart. Most times, it left her feeling like some half-dead animal brought in from the frozen, threatening outside world.

“He said I should come here myself, not to send anyone.” The man shook his head and muttered under his breath. “That I should let you know that he thinks about you every day.”

He was still thinking about her? She covered her mouth with the palm of her hand as her eyes got clouded with tears, she felt excitement and sadness gripping her. “He thinks about me? Tobechukwu thinks about me?”

“He’s crazy. You will put him in trouble,” the man said with resignation. “I don’t even know why I agreed to do this for him.”

It didn’t matter what the man thought of her or how he felt about his cousin’s relationship with her. What mattered was that after all this while, her Tobechukwu still thought about her. She was about to ask if she could call him with the man’s phone when Mezie’s mother and two other women walked in through the gate.

“My father sent him to ask for the baby’s name so he can register her for baptism,” she had lied to the old woman, praying that she wouldn’t ask further, or even decide to later confirm from her father if what she said was the truth.

It was later that night, when she was alone in her room, her door securely locked that she opened the envelope the man gave her and found money—four hundred thousand Naira. She never breathed a word about the visit to Mezie and had hidden the money where she was sure no one would stumble upon it.

She laid the baby on the bed and stroked her chubby cheeks, Akwaugo giggled as the baby bared her toothless gum in a smile. “*Òlâédó*,” she murmured her baby's name, and bent over to kiss her forehead. “Your father

is a good man.” she wasn’t referring to Mezie but Tobe. “A very good man.” If only she had met him earlier. If only Mezie hadn’t come for her hand first.

There were so many *ifs* and *onlys* but she wasn’t going to dwell in regrets now. She wiped her face, straightened up, tucked her breast back inside her bra, and slipped the remaining money back under her mattress. Next month, she would be going to the ministry of health for a job interview.

Nwamaka had kept the news of her name being shortlisted for the exercise until she was discharged from the hospital and was strong enough to express happiness without wincing. Nwamaka also said that the salary would be reasonable and that was what Akwaugo needed. She wouldn’t want to depend on anyone to take care of her baby and her. Not even Tobe.

It was night when Mezie came in, from her slightly opened door she watched his pacing figure cast a shadow on the sitting-room wall, aided by the light from the oil lantern. She hissed and left the door to lay on the bed, turning her face to the wall. In a short while, she heard the clanging of plates covers and knew he had sat to eat. She would meet the plate empty tomorrow morning, yet he would not ask where she got the money to cook for him.

“Ungrateful wicked man,” she hissed again.



Tobe

“I asked if she is well and not your opinion on what I should or shouldn’t do.” Tobe picked his plate of food, pushed his chair backward and started to walk toward the sitting room. With his phone trapped to his ear with his shoulder, he scooped a spoon of pottage beans into his mouth, then sat on the sofa.

“And I say you should stop contacting her!”

“Nchekwube, I just want to know how they are doing.” He set the plate down on a side stool beside the sofa, he took another spoon full of the food before dropping the spoon on the plate so he could hold the phone.

“No, you want to keep in touch with her, Tobechukwu. And you should stop!”

Stop? If only it was that easy. After she’d vehemently refused his offer the last day he came to see her at the hospital, he’d returned to Lagos dejected. For days, he slept and woke up with misery and rage; he wasn’t sure which was the greater.

At first, it had been rage that she should dare to reject him after what he did to save her, dared to cast him away without even a second thought, choosing that selfish good-for-nothing husband of hers over him. He had found it difficult to understand why she could quickly and easily do that, couldn’t make meaning of her many reasons.

Then he had feared also for her safety and that of their child. How would she fare living in that man’s house with their tiny little daughter? His daughter. How dare she, how could she expose the little angel to such cruelty he saw in that man’s eyes? It was terrible. The choice she made was so outrageous and dreadfully wrong. When he finally saw her again, he would make sure she realised the enormity of the wrong she had done, then it occurred to him that he might never see her again, and he wept.

Yes. For days he wept because his heart was broken. She destroyed him emotionally, and the worst part was that he still wanted her even in his sorrow and rage. He didn’t want to call what he felt for her an obsession because that would be scary, but what he felt, what he was still feeling was scary, and depressing, and, and—Jesus!

“Nchekwube, how is she?” he asked, staring at the food with no interest.

“Your daughter is fine.”

He was sure his brother knew he wasn’t just asking about his daughter but Akwaugo too; the woman who had subtly walked into his life and had wrapped the whole of him around her fingers without even knowing.

“Tobe, *Nwànnáà bìkô nû*. Don’t destroy yourself holding on to this woman.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Nchekwube.”

“You are losing your mind!”

Was he?

There were times he would be in his office or some other place, and Akwaugo’s picture would float into his head. He would stare at her while wondering how he was going to endure life without her, and how he was going to live with himself knowing that she didn’t want him. “I’m okay,

Nchekwube," he said, getting up to take the half-eaten food back to the kitchen. "So, tell me—"

Was she excited about me? Did she miss me at all?

"Is she doing well?"

"Yes, she is." Nchekwube was lying, both of them knew that. "Oh, Christ! Okay, she's not looking too good, okay? But I don't think you should involve yourself—"

He couldn't concentrate anymore on the conversation as a sense of worry and dread descended on him. He knew it wouldn't be long and that man her husband would send her back to misery.

"Tobechukwu?"

God! Why would she choose this life? What was it that was keeping her tied to this man who was hell-bent on destroying her?

"Tobechukwu Ochudo?"

"I can't leave her, Nchekwube."

"You don't mean what you just said now, do you?"

"That man will kill her."

"You know this is not about you saving her from her animalistic husband, you just want to get her out of that marriage so you can have her. My goodness! *Ódògwù*, what has happened to your reasoning?"

"Come on, brother. We are talking about a woman that's being abused here."

"A woman you want to have in your bed again!"

"It's not—" True? Was he going to deny that he hadn't created mental porn where the woman and himself were the actors, the directors, and the audience? The location for the crazy sinful acts being his bed and every other place comfortable for both of them. "Nchekwube I'm—" Fuck! "I also love her. I really do."

"What nonsense are you spewing from your mouth? *Chìnêké* God! What is this *bìkô nú*? Have you even considered what this will do to your reputation in the village?"

"I am helplessly in love—"

"With another man's wife? *Ódògwù*, she is another man's wife!"

"He doesn't deserve her."

"And you think you do?"

He'd given himself for her. Accepted a title that would have made his father disown him had he been alive. The only family he had now thought

him crazy and under some hex because of what he did. And he had also let her have the baby, his daughter. All those and this thing he was feeling deep inside him for her, weren't they enough to earn him a place in her life?

"Nchekwube, I just want her to leave that man," he said with resignation.

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Chapter 23

Tobe



“What did I ever do to you that you have decided to leave me in the cold.”

Jenifer, argh. He thought she would give up trying to get him entangled in a relationship he wasn’t ready for and may never will. Not that the thought of dating her hadn’t crossed his mind, just that with a lady like Jenifer—a treacherous, self-seeking, self-indulgent woman—one had to be careful.

“You are drinking again,” he stated calmly, noticing the unusual excitement in her voice.

“It’s 11a.m.”

“Too early to get wasted.” She was a woman frequently driven to the bottles by heartbreaks, she seemed to have a lot of that. “Who is it this time?”

“You, darling,” she slurred, strutting towards him. “You abandoned me,” made to sit on his lap and he pushed her off.

“See what I’m saying?” Disappointment thickened her voice as she sat at the edge of his desk. The low-cut neckline of her top left almost nothing for his imagination. “You weren’t at my party Tobe, I organised it for you.”

“The card said it’s a house-warming party.” He got up from his chair and moved to the couch.

“Whatever—” She flicked her fingers and rolled her eyes. “It would have been a good time for you to know where I stay, you know, get to know how good I can be to you. I wanted to appreciate you for always listening to me when I am down.”

She was trying too hard. Had it not been that his heart still bleeds, he might have considered her. “I was very busy.”

“Always busy,” she cut in. “You don’t make out time for me except when you want to talk stocks and count figures.”

“You have a nose for good business deals.” He saw the frown on her face immediately after those words left his lips, “I am sorry Jenny, but I can’t be who you want me to be, my life is complicated right now.”

She shrugged, picked a candy from a plate on top of the table and popped it into her mouth. “I got sick after the party. Told your annoying sister who took your call to tell you. Guess she didn’t.”

“What did you eat at the party?”

“I don’t know. But one thing is certain to me now—I could have died and you wouldn’t care.”

“So sorry.”

“Do I disgust you, Tobe?”

Her question caught him off guard. “What? Why would you say that?”

“Why can’t you at least fuck me?”

Tongue-tied, he stared at her and she stared back. “Is that what you want?”

“Not really. But you are not making things easy for me. So, maybe—” She shrugged. “Maybe, if we have sex, you may change your mind about me.”

He wished it was that easy. That he could stick his dick inside this woman and the memory of the sweet, pleasurable abomination he committed last Christmas would be wiped off, together with the face of the woman he did it with. Maybe that’s what he needed, to have sex with Jenifer or any other woman and then these haunting memories would be erased.

Would they really? “It is not going to be easy,” he muttered.

“Don't be absurd, Tobe. What’s not going to be easy? You can’t sleep with a woman or is it just me? Wait, are you gay?”

“Do I look like one?” He asked amidst a chuckle.

“You tell me.” She sighed. “I just want you, Tobe.”



Akwaugo

Nnewi, Anambra State

“You told them I am incompetent!”

The upper hinges of their gate broke off and the metal sheet angled downward as Akwaugo pushed her way into the compound with rage. She sighted some cartons neatly stacked beside their water drum, she rushed towards it and in one kick, she sent the stack crumbling.

“What is wrong with you, woman? Have you lost your eyes alongside your mind?” He got up from where he was counting his other wares, Mezie walked towards the scattered cartons and began gathering them.

Infuriated, Akwaugo lurched towards the packs he was counting earlier and began to stomp on them, only stopping to tighten the wrapper that held her baby to her back before continuing with her rampage.

Her husband rushed to grab her arm, but she slipped out of his grip and began marching toward the cartons. He grabbed her from behind, pushed her aside, and went to salvage what was left of his wares. Like a mad bull, she charged again, pushed his hunched figure to the ground.

Madness they say has its bright side. People either pay attention to you or leave you alone. Her husband chose the latter, stepping aside while she continued pouring her pains and frustration on his wares.

Three months—Three months of hoping and praying, reading as she had never done in her life, cramming words and formulas, only for Mezie to go over there and tell them to cancel her appointment?

How could he do this to her? How did he even know about the job? She remembered that the day Nwamaka told her about her name being shortlisted, it was only Mezie’s younger sister that was in the house with her. Mezie’s younger sister... yes, that was it!

She halted as the realisation hit her and began to justle the crying baby on her back while thinking why Mezie’s sister, a girl she had done no wrong to, would betray her like this. Was it her brother that put her up to it? Eavesdropping on her conversations and reporting to him? Or maybe it was a harmless action. The girl might have innocently broken the good news to Mezie, unaware that her brother would do this evil.

As frustration took over her rage, she plodded towards the Úbè tree, untied her now-wailing baby, and flopped on the foot of the trunk. Embosoming the baby, her eyes rested on her husband scampering all over, gathering his wares and cursing under his breath.

“Wicked, miserable man!” she cried, clutching her baby to her chest, rocking back and forth. “Frustrated beast!”

“I can see your madness has gotten loose.” Mezie pointed at her, “You are lucky I am not in the mood for your drama.”

“They said I am a thief, a prostitute. You told them!” Her voice trembled.

“Is that not what you are? How does one explain all the money you have been spending since you came back from the hospital? Where did you get it from?”

That was his problem? The money she was spending on feeding him and the baby? “You never lost your money.” She got to her feet, balancing the whining baby on her elbow. “You have never caught me with any man, except the man you sent me to meet!” She flared.

He recognised rage when he saw it and took a few steps backward.

“What did I ever do to you Mezie?” She asked, moving closer to him. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“You owe me.” He moved again.

She followed her baby crying louder. “How much! I will do anything to get away from you!”

“Your entire life cannot pay for all I did for you, I lost everything because of your bad luck! What have you brought to me aside from pain?”

“A child!” She pushed the baby to his chest.

“Gotten from your waywardness. You slept with another man and brought his bastard for me to raise.” He pushed the baby back to her.

“I’ll surprise you Mezie. You called my child a bastard, you will not believe what I will do.”

“What are you planning?” He followed her as she hurried into the house. “Don’t you even try to toll that line o, you will lose! *Àrûsî Ókìjá* is not like *Édó*, you will drop dead before you even think of opening your mouth.”

“If that Àrûsî is as stupid as you are, he should as well start striking me dead now.” She shut her door, hurriedly packed a few things and left for her father’s house.

Mezie didn’t try to stop her.

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Chapter 24

Akwaugo



Two weeks later

"We cannot sit here and listen to a raging woman rant lies against me!" Eyes widened, teeth bare, spittle flying out of his mouth, anybody could have mistaken Mezie for *Ókwé* the mad man who always chased market women with a stick along the market road. "We are men! We have our sense of judgment!" His frail figure shook like a dry leave in harmattan, eyes darting from one elder to another, seeking support. "My wife is lying against me, and all of you sit here like castrated men!"

His last statement drew a mocking guffaw from Okorie, who was busy drinking cups of wine after cups of wine, smacking his lips and shaking his head happily as if the gathering was for a new yam ceremony. "He calls us castrated, even though he is the one without manhood." Okorie guffawed as Mezie shot him a glance.

Akwaugo stood, her hands clasped behind her, her face expressionless. There was no going back now, she thought. Thanks to her mother who insisted that she must tell their kinsmen the kind of monster Mezie was.

"This is too much! That man cannot make you go through all these things and go free," her mother had said.

"He led me to an oath, I mustn't tell a soul about his inability to father a child." Her disclosure of the information to her mother could even invoke the wrath of the Ókìjá deity.

"*Òbú ásì!* It's a lie! He cannot be the source of your misery and still deprive you the freedom of crying when hurt," her mother had said.

At that moment, she remembered that going ahead with her mother's plan would mean not just exposing Mezie's secret, but her adultery with Tobe. “I can't, Mama. My child, people will mock her.”

“And so?” The woman had gone ahead to arrange for the meeting with the elders.

Now standing in the midst of the kinsmen, she knew no fear. And as she uttered her first word, every other thing in her heart—pains he'd caused her; the shame of the woman he made her become; how much she now loathed him—all came tumbling out of her mouth.

“Are you people still listening to her?” He was screaming like a rat caught in a trap. His eyes bulged, muscles strutting out from his neck. “She is lying!”

“Mezie, shut that thing you call your mouth and sit down!” an elder commanded. “Ehen, our wife, please continue.”

“He led me on an oath in Ókìjá shrine to keep his shame—not to allow anyone know he can’t father a child,” she continued. “I was desperate to do anything for my husband. I wanted to make him talk when other men are talking. To go for chieftaincy titles like his mates, to be proud of himself. I agreed to everything he asked of me, including sleeping with another man to give him a child after seven years without any sign.” She leveled her gaze on Mezie who was on his feet again.

“She is a liar! A prostitute!” he shouted. “Akwaugo, tell them *nau*—tell them all you said are lies!”

“*Méchìè ònù nsì gîá Nwòkê m*!” Okorie interjected as he staggered to his feet. “My kinsmen, what this woman said here is true.”

Akwaugo exhaled, she felt like gathering Okorie in a warm embrace at that moment.

“This man here is the liar and a he-goat,” Okorie continued. “I am aware of his impotency. He cannot father even a bee!”

Mezie lurched towards Okorie but was restrained by another man beside him. “Leave me alone! Leave me, let me teach this poor idiot a lesson,” he said. “Since you know how to talk, tell them why you castrated me with your Júju!” he blurted, realising the damage he had just done almost immediately.

“So, you are admitting that you can’t father a child?” Someone asked him.

This was turning out good, better than Akwaugo thought. Her husband was going to help expose his stupidity.

“Is it my fault?” Mezie shut back, then turn to face Okorie again. “Tell them you could not scratch your wife’s *Òtu* properly and I helped you do that, you ungrateful Lammer!” Unaware of the disgusting looks cast on him, he continued, “Yes! I slept with your wife! She liked it! And you—you took my manhood!”

“I should have taken your life instead!” Okorie challenged.

“Our wife,” calming the pandemonium so attention would be given to Akwaugo once again. “Do you know about this?” The leader asked.

“Yes.”

“And you kept this all these years? Why?”

Why? Why would any woman hide a scandal that would destroy her home if let out? Why would a woman know that her husband had plunged his manhood in another woman’s honeypot and yet looked away? Why would a woman want to do anything to please a man who had taken her in when she knew nothing?

“I didn’t want him to lose his respect in this village,” she replied. “He… he is the first man I knew.”

“So why do you choose to come out now? What do you want from us?”

Akwaugo steadied her breathing, looked at Mezie for a moment, just a moment and she was tempted to change her mind.

She owed part of her life to this difficult, demanding, autocratic creature who had given her nine years of his life. He had not been easy, had not been tender or gentle or patient with her, but he had undoubtedly loved her in his selfish way. What sort of person had she become that she was throwing nine years of marriage away to go in search of a man she just met last Christmas?

Then she took her eyes away from him, willing the resentment she had felt for him to return. “I don’t want to be his wife again,” she said. “And he should never have anything to do with my daughter.”

“*Òmênû*! It has happened.” Okorie leaped from his seat, held his sides, and began to laugh.

“Our wife, hope you know that the tradition forbids you from walking away with that child? She belongs to Mezie, since this mysterious man has no legal or traditional right over you?” Someone asked.

“He calls her a bastard and has asked me several times to return her to the real father. I’m afraid *Ndì dìm*. He may hurt her if she is allowed anywhere near him.” Her eyes didn’t leave Mezie's face while she spoke.

“Who is then the father?”

Her lips curled in a faint smile.

Later in the evening, she called him on Nwamaka's phone.

“I've left him, Tobe.”

He was glad.



Tobe

He was at the airport, about to board the plane that would take him to China when the call came. He only had to see the caller ID for his heart to begin pounding hard.

“Excuse me,” he said to the group of acquaintances he just stumbled on. “I have to answer this.”

Moving a little farther from where the others were, he tapped on his Bluetooth. “Hello, Nwamaka.”

“It’s not Nwamaka.” Her words came out breathy, uneasy, struggling with sob.

“Akwaugo.”

“Mm?”

“What’s wrong.”

“I left him.”

His world condensed into a little orb as soon as she said that, squeezing him tight and making it difficult for him to breathe.

So, it had happened, as he prayed of course that it would.

Feeling the beginning of tensed excitement welling inside him, he let out a sigh, running his hand over his head as the familiar sensation that comes with hearing her voice invaded him.

“Tobe?”

He was silent. Then a reluctant smile curled up his lips. “It’s really brave, what you just did.”

She gave off a chuckle.

“How did it happen? No, don’t tell me now.” There might be time for her to narrate everything to him but now wasn’t that time. “I want to know if you really wanted to leave him. You didn’t do it because—”

“No,” she cut in. “I couldn’t stand him anymore.”

“Was it because of me?” he asked her; she didn’t respond. “Akwa, did you leave him because of me?”

“Tobe, I, uh… I wouldn’t have stayed any longer than this even if I didn’t meet you.”

That was a relief. Knowing that it was her decision, her choice. And that he didn’t hoodwink her into doing it. “What do you want to do now?”

“I—that's why I'm calling you. What do you want me to do?”

He knew what she was asking, and it pleased him. “Do you want me to come to the village? I’ll like to meet with your family.”

“No, please,” she said. “It’s— it’s not the right time yet. People will talk.”

“I really want to do it so we can be together.” He knew he just sounded like a child—a demanding, spoilt child. “Oh, Akwa m, I want to be with you right now.”

“I know, but the scandal… I just don’t want us to fan it.”

“I understand you, my love,” he said. Though he really didn’t care so much about scandals. He told Nchekwube that before. “I have an idea. You should leave the village.”

“Tobe, but—”

“Let me finish, Akwa m,” he said. “I’m not asking you to come stay in my house.” Though that would give him enormous joy. “Let me get a place for you and our daughter. Somewhere you can stay while this whole dust settles, and then we can meet your parents.”

“Where? In Lagos?”

“Yes, but not with me.”

There was a long silence, then she said, “Will I be seeing you once in a while?”

“You will be seeing me more than once in a while.”

“I will like that so much.”

“This is very good to know.”

Before boarding the flight, he put a call to Nchekwube, and with a smile on his face, he gave him the news.

“Congratulations to her,” Nchekwube said. “So, what has that got to do with us?”

“Ah-ah. Nchekwube, *wérèkwànù yâ nwâyó*. Take it easy.”

“*Ódògwù*, tell me why you are calling me, *bìkó*.”

“I want her out of that village.”

“To where?”

“Lagos.”

“Your place?!”

“Not mine. I'll get her a house.”

“Oh, for a brief moment I thought you wanted to continue from where you stopped with her.”

This made him laugh as he began to walk toward the waiting plane. “You are going to help me arrange her departure.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“Yes, you will.” He was laughing heartily now. “You know you will.”

“Why do you think I'll want to do this for you?”

“Because you love me to a fault. You've never said no to me even when we were kids.”

“That's because papa let you get away with everything.”

True. His uncle had taken him and his sister in after the death of their parents and had treated him as though the sun worshipped his feet. Nothing he ever did was wrong. Maybe the old man was trying to make him forget the pain of being an orphan or because he was his godson. But for his uncle’s wife—that woman who had iron fists and daggers in her eyes—he would have grown into a very selfish, controlling, useless man.

And Nchekwube. The preferential treatments like the one his father gave Tobe should have evoked jealousy inside the boy—now a man. But he had equally treated him like a *silly* younger brother, ignoring his many tantrums and stubbornness with rolling of eyes and shaking of heads. Both of them had gone abroad for their master's degree. Nchekwube first, then him later. However, years after, it was Tobe that got lucky with money. He made a lot of it—so much that he didn’t know what to do with all the money. That also should have made the large-hearted cousin of his jealous, but Nchekwube had dismissed every thought of jealousy with the simple words, “*making money is not by age*”, and was glad to come into the company when he offered.

“I didn’t want to be in papa’s bad book because of you.”

“You still wouldn’t want to do that now,” Tobe said, taking his seat in the first-class compartment of the aircraft.

“You are a grown-ass man so don’t try to pull that card. Besides, papa is angry with you.”

“Come on, brother. Do this for me.”

“Papa doesn’t approve of this, Tobechukwu.”

“Mommy seems to be on my side.” Surprisingly. “We will sort Papa out later.”

“I guess you'll want me to help you with that too.” That was a statement of fact that made Tobe chuckle.

“You and mum, you know *nau*.”

“Stubborn cow.”

“Runs in the family.”

“Yours is annoying.”

“Yet you love me too much.”

“I wish I didn’t.”

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Book 2

And suddenly, you know— it’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings.

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Chapter 25

Akwaugo



Lagos

They say that new life doesn’t unfold like Christmas presents, but hers came with wonder, like warm sunlight hitting her on a cold day.

She loved it—this new life Tobe had given her, this freedom to breathe without looking over her shoulders, to smile and mean it.

Drawing the milk-coloured curtain aside in one strong motion, light flooded into the sitting room, turning the walls that had the colour of a golden sun into a flamboyant butter hue. Resting her forehead against the window, her fingers stroked the rich fabric of the curtain, the temptation to run its smoothness against her cheeks and inhale its scent tugged so strong. But doing that would prove to anyone who might be watching that she was a “village girl”.

A glance behind her put her mind to rest, as there was no one in sight save Gerald who was putting fresh flowers in a glass vase on top of a new, finely-polished bookshelf—that looked nothing like the moth-eaten rolls in Father Theo's parish house.

She wore a half-smile as she moved away from the window, walking through the spacious sitting room. Her hands lightly brushed the intricately carved deep-gold wooden backrest of the couch, which perfectly matched the colour of the curtain. Finally, she reached the shelf.

Gerald gave her a slight bow, his lips stretched in a grin. “What can I help you with, madam?”

She? Madam? Akwaugo suppressed laughter. “I only want a book to read, sir, uhm, Gerald.” She had made this mistake the first day she arrived in the house, addressing every human who came to welcome her as sir or ma, and she had wondered why they were amused by her show of respect until the woman called Favor approached her and said,

“You are their madam. My brother employed them to attend to you and the baby so…” Favor placed a patronising hand on Akwaugo’s shoulder. “They should call you ma, not the other way round.”

Six days later, Akwaugo was still faltering in this new role. Who would blame her? She wasn’t at all familiar with the lifestyle of a lazy queen.

“I’ll help myself, Gerald,” she said. Her voice, a little stronger.

The man nodded and walked away.

Gradually, she thought. *I will get used to this life*.

She turned her attention to the shelf and frowned. Wasn’t it meant to house books? Why was it un-used? Only three books lay on the second compartment, and it smelt like woods fresh from the factory?

Shrugging, she picked the books one after the other, reading blurbs, flipping through a few pages. Then she settled for one titled “*Pride and Prejudice*”, and then retired to her room.

Dropping the book on a nightstand, she slipped her robe off her shoulders, walked over it, and fall backward on the bed. Eyes shut, she allowed her skin to absorb the good feeling of safety, comfort, and riches.

“This is life,” she murmured, letting out a chuckle. She didn’t know how long it was going to last, but the whole of her wanted to greedily bask in it now.

She let out another laughter, rolled to her side and began to caress the soft sheets. Then she began to feel dread. At first, it came in drops, but soon it flowed into her head and mind like a river, quenching her joy, stealing her peace, filling her with guilt and the thought of…of Mezie.

Last night, she dreamt about him and had woken up with a pang of self-reproach. The more she wanted to erase him from her life, the stronger he held on inside her head—taunting her, reminding her he was lurking in her shadows and would destroy her when the time comes.

She jerked up from the bed, slid her night garment off her shoulder, wrapped her braids—yesterday, Favor had taken her to the salon—into a bun, and strolled into the bathroom to wash her body and her fear. This was

the life she deserved; she wasn’t going to allow the thought of Mezie to ruin it.

An elderly woman who introduced herself as Eunice the first day Akwaugo arrived, was waiting to hand her bawling baby to her immediately after she stepped out of the bathroom.

“This lovely one needs to be fed,” the woman said. Waited for her to sit and push a nipple into the baby’s mouth. “She has his eyes.”

“Yes.” Akwaugo loosened her towel more so the baby could play with her breast while suckling.

They allowed some silence pass while they watched the baby.

“Her father,” Akwaugo started, looking up to the woman. “He’s not been here since I arrived.” Though he had been calling to know if they were happy in this new place. That morning, he had called and asked her if she was resting enough. His call had woken her from sleep.

But there was no mention of why he hadn’t visited and when he would. No hint of his eagerness to see her, to be with her.

“He was here a day before you arrived,” the woman said. “He wanted everything to be perfect for you.”

Everything would have been perfect if he was there to tell her how much he missed her as he had done those times he visited the village. She wanted to see that spark, that desire for her, to look into his eyes and be assured that this was what he wanted as well.

“I have never seen him so excited,” the woman said. “You brought sunshine to his life.”

She, the baby, or the both of them? Akwaugo would have loved to talk some more but the woman had started walking out. She thought of calling her back for a little gossip but decided against it. She wouldn’t want to give a not-so-good impression of herself.

With the woman gone and her baby now asleep, Akwaugo felt a wave of loneliness wash through her. The kind that reading a few pages of the book she took, gluing her eyes to the television, leaving the room to sit on the balcony where the soft hum of the washing machine from the laundry room competed with the rhythmic passing of cars on the street which was even less therapeutic.

In the village, there was always something to do. When she wasn’t at the market selling her wares, she would be at home washing melons or breadfruits for the next day's sales.

But here, she had nothing to do but watch the day feather without hurry.

Akwaugo eased herself off the balcony rail and made her way to the kitchen where Eunice was getting things out from the big refrigerator standing by the corner.

“Let me make the dinner,” Akwaugo offered as she walked through the kitchen floor that glittered as if stardust were sprinkled on it, to the kitchen top that also had the same gleam.

“Oh no, ma'am. Mr. Tobe said not to allow you to stress yourself,” the woman said but didn’t stop her when she grabbed the *ùgù* leaves that were in a tray on top of the slab and began to pluck.

“What are we making?” Akwaugo asked the dumbfounded woman.

“Vegetable yam porridge.”

“Have you peeled and cut the yam?”

“No, ma.”

“Call me Akwaugo, Eunice.” Getting used to this new title, *Madam*, would take some time.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, very sure.”

“I don’t think Mr. Tobe will like that o,” the woman said amidst chuckles.

“I'm sure he wouldn’t mind. After all, you call him by his name too.”

By the time the food was ready, both women had developed a bond that would last for a very long time.



He is here.

It was in the night, and she was in the kitchen when a car drove in. She knew it was him because Eunice had gotten up, saying “Oga is here”, and had left in a hurry. She contemplated going to meet him but decided to rather stay in the kitchen, sipping her water slowly while he sought for her.

Giggling at her childish decision, she got up from the chair and walked with the cup in her hand to the kitchen slab as her excitement grew with a little grasp of uneasiness. She grabbed the bottle of water that was on top of the slab and began to refill her cup. Done, she set the bottle down and stretched her hand to pick up the glass of water but ended up knocking it

over. She hissed, glanced around the kitchen top in search of anything she could dab the spill with.

“Up there.”

He was right behind her, the scent of his collagen ensnaring her senses, making her insides tingle. “Tobechukwu,” she whispered, holding on to the slap to steady her jittering limbs.

“Mm?” Reaching up to get the towel hanging on the door of the kitchen cabinet, he leaned forward so his chest was relaxing on her back. Her essence acknowledged him, responding violently to every movement of his groin against her backside as he began to leisurely dry the surface.

Done with the task, she expected him to step away, but he moved in closer, making her aware of his desire, arousing her with it.

“Why are you hiding here?” He whispered into her ears, his warm breath sending a flurry of sensations down her stomach.

“I’m not…” His hands had found hers now and his jaw rested on her shoulder. “I’m not hiding.”

“I thought you were.”

Every word came out soft, seductive, and they reminded her of that morning in the village, when they had mated. The words that were pouring out of his mouth—

“Tobechukwu,” She gasped as his hands left hers to grip her waist.

“*Òmàlìchà m*.”

He called her beautiful again. Smiling, she turned to face him, rushing into his arms as soon as their eyes met.

“I was scared,” she said, her face buried in the softness of his neck.

“Why?”

“I thought you wouldn’t want to see me.”

He laughed. “You don’t know how I have desired to be with you before now. You are the thought that fills my head,” he said, tightening his arms around her.



Tobe

He wasn’t sure if nature rooted for this moment or if his mind tricked him into a perfect present. But every scent of her he took in reminded him of how much he wanted her. The warm feeling of her breath, although destabilising, was inviting. He didn’t know how much he missed her until that simple moment he had her in his arms. Her soothing closeness awakening every part of him that had laid frozen. He had tightened his grip around her to be sure that she was real and there with him.

“Akwaugo,” he murmured, brushing her hair backward with his fingers to plant a kiss on it.

When he bent slightly and kissed her neck, his tongue lingered on the soft skin. “Nice,” he murmured as he felt her relax, lifting her face with his finger to meet his. He had merely wanted to look at her, expecting only that the expression of aesthetic delight he was sure to find in her eyes would correspond to the spark in his heart, but then he had caught her alluring lips and he couldn’t look away, neither was he able to quench the maddening longing racing through his blood.

He pulled her even closer still, his lips covered hers in a long warm kiss that left him short of breath and heat rising from his stomach to his chest as she moaned and opened more for him.

She was kissing him back! Taking the whole of his mouth in hungrily. “Akwa m. My love,” he muttered against her lips. It shocked as well as pleased him that she was unfolding like a flower in its bloom right in his arm.

Then she gasped and pulled back. “I can’t, we can’t…”

Her innocence always fascinated as well as shamed him. “You are right,” he agreed, licking the remnant of their kiss off his lips. “I shouldn’t rush you.” He had decided that he would take his time with her, that when he would have her again, it would be the whole of her, as his own.

“You shouldn’t be apologising, Tobe,” she said without pause, and then spent long seconds staring at her fingers.

Amazing, the ease at which her cheeks changed from porcelain light to rose pink when she blushed. “It will be wrong for me to rush you into my bed even though that is exactly what I want right now.” He hadn't forgotten how sweet her pussy was that morning they did it. So tight. So wet and warm. Yet he would want to take his time with her as he wasn’t a man who takes with reservations. He wouldn’t want to share her with her past.

“I—we missed you,” she stuttered.

“You don't know how much I’ve longed to hear you say this.” He gave her nose a playful pinch, “Have you been thinking about me too?”

She nodded and gave him a shy smile.

“That’s good to know because there's no day that passed without me thinking about you,” he said, leaving her to check the pot on top of the cooker-burner.

“We made the food.”

“We?”

“Eunice and I.”

“I told her to allow you some good rest.” He carefully dropped the lid of the pot on the slab, picked a spoon from the plate rack, scooped some porridge, and ate. “Delicious,” he muttered, getting a plate to help himself.

“Let me do that,” she said, taking the plate from him.

Leaning with his back on the slab, he watched her dish the food. “She’s so beautiful,” he said.

“Who?”

“Our daughter,” he took the food from her and reached for the spoon he used earlier. “She has your face.”

“You’ve not even seen her,” she said, coming to stand beside him.

“I have. As soon as I came in.”

There in the kitchen, with a plate of food in his hands, he urged her to tell him everything that happened, everything that made her choose to finally leave her husband.

And she did. Patiently he listened, chipping in verbal expressions, while his gaze stayed on her bosom which looked fuller and sensual from the flimsy fabric of her night dress. She had no bra on. He could see her nipples —pink, hard, like ripe cherries begging to be plucked, and he'd always liked cherries. He laughed at her poor effort to shield her bosom with her hand when she became aware of his lustful stare.

“Come to South Africa with me next month,” he said as she ended her story.

“I don’t know… will that be wise? I’m not married to you—”

“Yet,” he corrected. “I’ll get my lawyer to draft a divorce paper and send it to *that man*. Then, we can get married anytime you are ready.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Tobe. My parents have to return the bride price Mezie paid on my head.”

“I know the tradition. All I'm saying is that we move on with our lives while your parents do the needful.”

“Tobe—”

“Do you realise this man wouldn’t want to let you go easily? Why then would you want to put your life on hold because of tradition?”

She said nothing.

“My love.” He took her hands. “Come with me to South Africa and let’s have fun in the company of each other.”

“What will people say?”

“I don’t care, and you shouldn’t too.”

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Chapter 26

Mezie



A miserable five thousand naira! Was that what he, Mezie, was worth? Did it take care of everything he spent on their daughter all those years?

"*Nwòkêm* take the money and the drink! A woman said she doesn't want to marry you again, is it by force?" Okorie retorted.

"Let her come and tell me herself!"

"But she did! You are the only person who doesn't understand that your marriage is over! Take this money and the drink please, that is what my family owes you," Akwaugo's father said.

"*Ósí gìnî*? What did you just say? You wretched church rat," Mezie spat out. "Because you saw little money, you now look me in the face and vomit this rubbish? Have you forgotten what I did for you and your family? Would that daughter of yours finish ordinary secondary school if not for me? Now she has run off with one man, instead of you to beg me to accept her back, you are here with these miserable men to disgrace yourselves!"

"You are calling us miserable?" One of the men that came with Akwaugo's father picked offense. "How dare you, Mezie?"

"Are you people not miserable?" Mezie shot back. "Why will you follow this village catechist to my house if you have something better to do with your lives?"

"This is the height of it. I will not stand here and watch this man insult me," another man said and began to leave. Others followed.

"*Caty*, please let us leave this mad man," Okorie grabbed Akwaugo's father's hand, equally turned towards the gate. "We cannot be here begging

someone you know has no sense inside his big head."

Mezie picked a stone and hurled it towards the men who had made their escape out of the gate. "*Àrà gbàchípú ùnú ntí*. May lightning strike all of you to pieces. Animals."

He didn't blame them, not at all. Akwaugo had made him a laughingstock, a thing of ridicule. Women now discuss him in their gatherings. They would say, "Mezie the man without manhood, whose wife ran away with another man."

Chai! Akwaugo had taken his pride and his voice, but she would see. She wanted to be free, but he would not grant her that. She would return to this village the same way she left, then he would show her the fiber he was made of.

But, till then—*ká òdì bà gòdì*.

He slammed the gate as the last of the men left. His eyes caught the two crates of malt they had come with. "*Ùmú ànùòfîâ*, animals!" he spat out, then he opened the gate again so he could carry the crates one after the other and dump them outside. "Take your miserable drinks with you. I am not thirsty!"

He stomped back inside, flumped onto his chair, braced his jaw against his palm, as his heart trotted wildly.

Why was his life like this? Why had his *chì* abandoned him? He was only a man protecting what was his. Yes, he made a mistake, which anybody could make! Why was his own different? No family. No friend. No wife! What was it that Akwaugo did that the gods had chosen to spare her? The oath that was broken was the one she took at the *Édó* shrine that forbade her from sleeping with another man. But there was another oath, the one she took at the *Ókìjá* shrine. That one should kill her. Her death would have been his redemption. His kinsmen would believe him if the news of her death infiltrated the village.

But Ókìjá deity had remained weak and powerless! The idol had chosen to sleep when it was his turn to get justice.

Akwaugo

“You look so beautiful, Akwa.”

Exquisite was the better word for how she looked.

Favor, Tobe's sister, had pulled the front of her brunette curls up, away from her face leaving the rest to cascade over her shoulders. She had also flattered her with touches of gold on her cheeks, and eyelids, there was even a subtle touch on her lips.

“*Éwò*! You are divine. In fact, you are a goddess.” She stepped back to survey her. “A beauty like yours is rear.”

“Thank you, Favor.” Akwaugo smiled shyly and stepped back to check herself out in the full-length mirror. The white shirt with the black pencil skirt looked good on her. And oh, the shoes—she'd never worn anything that expensive in her life! The money Tobe had paid for it could buy her at least ten *Hollandies* wrappers. She had pleaded at the big shop where he took her to before they set out to South-Africa, to get her something cheap instead, but he had insisted that she deserved every money he was spending on her.

“And to the final touch…” Favor brought out a bottle of perfume and sprayed it generously on her. “For the effect,” she said, giggling. “I swear, my brother will find it difficult taking his eyes off you today.”

“But he will be busy.”

“Busy looking at you and warning other men off you.”

Favor's phone rang. “Excuse me,” she said, putting the bottle of perfume down to get her phone. “It’s my brother,” she enthused, then placed the phone to her ear, “Hey, brother… yes… sure. She's ready.” Giggled. “Of course, you know what I'm capable of.”

She put the gadget down after a few more seconds. “He wants to know if you are ready. He's at the reception hall waiting.”

“I’m so nervous, Favor, I don’t know why he wants me in there.” She had felt like a queen when he asked her to follow him down here. It was a seminar. He wanted to be looking at her face while delivering his paper. But now, her excitement had turned to qualm as she didn’t know what would be expected of her.

“Seeing you will give him confidence.”

“Now that's ridiculous, Tobe has all the confidence in the world.”

“Well, your face would give him an extra.” Both laughed. “Here.” Favor gave her a black and white handbag that had *Kelly* engraving on it. “Have a wonderful time, Beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She moved to the bed where her daughter was gnawing on a plastic toy with no care in the world, bent over the baby. “*Òlá m*, I will be back soon,” she said, tickling the baby's side.

“She will be fine,” Favor joined them.

“There’s some breast milk for her, it’s—”

“In the freezer, I know. Don’t bother about this little one, she would have a great time with me.”

“You have to warm it before—”

“I know!”

Laughing, she hugged the other lady and began walking out of the room.

Favor reminded her of Nwamaka, of her wit, humor, and readiness to help her in every way.

Akwaugo thought of Nwamaka as she came out to the long corridor of the hotel and began to descend the stairs. The last time they spoke, the rascal said she was going back to Port Harcourt with her children to hustle since her Oyibo husband didn’t want her back. She was lucky he left his house for her as compensation.

She would give her a call again when this party—this meeting, was over.

Getting to the bottom stair landing, she threw a passing glance around the reception hall in search of Tobe who Favor said would be waiting for her there. Oh, there he was, amidst some men. What they were discussing seemed serious; she wouldn’t want to interrupt.

As if her hesitation announced her presence, he turned. His smile started from his lips, like a spring flower opening, lighting his eyes, reaching out to her. Deep inside, she could feel every doubt, every fear, and the disapproving voices, dissolving into a single emotion—excitement.

“Gentlemen, meet my lady: Akwaugo,” he said, sliding his hand around her waist to give her a gentle squeeze as the men muttered their approvals.

He walked with her to the car that would be taking them to the event center. His hands never left hers as he stopped at the entrance to exchange pleasantries with some men. He was flaunting her with the pride of a man who got everything he’d ever wanted.

When they finally got inside the venue, he made her sit very close to the podium where she would be able to see him.

She watched him proceed to the podium. He had an aura of power. Exuding confidence as he turned to the large screen behind him that changed pictures and letters whenever he pointed that small *something* in his hand at it, made her heart swell with pride.

She'd never imagined him this powerful. Taking her gaze off him for a few seconds, her eyes combed the auditorium. He seemed to have eaten into the heart of everyone in the room—they had their attentions fixed on him, smiling and nodding, laughing at his witty speeches.

It amazed her how he could do that without effort.

In the same way, he was able to make me fall helplessly in love with him without even trying hard.

But he seemed not to be in a hurry to possess her body. Since she came to join him in Lagos, he had only teased, tempted, and heightened her desire for him.

“Miss?” A soft female voice whispered into her ear.

Turning, Akwaugo came face to face with a bronze-skinned lady, who had taken the empty seat beside her. “Hi.” She was about to bring her eyes down when she remembered; *confidence, Akwaugo. Look them in the eyes while speaking to them,* Tobe had told her that earlier. “Hello,” she said, holding the lady's gaze with a smile on her lips.

“Jenifer.” The woman offered her hand for a shake and Akwaugo took it. “Jenifer Olu.”

“Akwaugo.” Success sat as stylishly on the lady as the two-piece suit that adorned her figure.

“Akwa… you've got an English name?”

Akwaugo felt her face flush, “No, it’s just Akwaugo.”

“You are Igbo, I guess.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look like them.”

“Well, I am.” The lady was beginning to make her nervous.

“And you are too beautiful for your own good.”

“Mm?”

“Just joking.” She got up. “Akwa, uh, what do you do? You work?”

The contempt in the lady's voice jarred her. “Nurse, I'm a nurse.”

“Hm.” The lady looked her over, “He prefers a nurse, how nice.” The woman gave her a slight bow and walked away.

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Chapter 27

Tobe



Things didn’t work the way he planned it, or would he rather say he didn’t get the chance to *have fun* with her the way he had thought. He was either meeting with one proposed business partner, or both of them honoring an impromptu invitation. They had spent three days in South Africa and none of those days was spent with them alone, enjoying each other's company.

“I'm so sorry,” he said as their plane touched the ground. “I thought we could…” His words trailed off as he leaned forward to plant a kiss on Òlâédó’s nose; his action seemed to pacify the little one who had been getting fussy.

“She’s at home in your arms,” Akwaugo said.

“I'm her father.” His voice was thick with pride. “My arms are her home.” *And your home too*. Only that she was holding back, always reminding him that they shouldn’t cross a certain line because her husband —ex-husband—was refusing to accept the bride price he had paid to have her hand in that mistake they had in the name of marriage.

That imbecile, stupid halfwit.

“Give her to me,” Favor stretched her hand to take the baby from him as they began to disembark the plane.

“Don’t worry, me and her have a lot of catching up to do,” he said, looking down at Òlâédó who had now gathered a fistful of his shirt and was trying to push it into her mouth.

“Ehen, brother?”

“Mm?”

“I’ll not be joining you people in the car.”

“Where are you going?”

“Ehm, someone is coming to... Someone will be picking me up.”

“Someone? Who?” Feeling Akwaugo's hand on his arm, he swallowed his curiosity. “Okay. But I need to be sure that this person will be bringing you straight home.”

“But brother, he is going—”

“A *he*?”

Akwaugo squeezed his arm and he understood.

“Okay,” he said with a sigh. “Send me the name and the number of this *he* that is coming to pick you up.”

“Thank you, brother.”

“And I want to know where he is taking you to.”

“I will ask him and will let you know.”

Stepping out of the aircraft, he grabbed Akwaugo's hand while balancing Òlâédó on his other arm as they made their way to the parking lot.

“People are watching us,” she said to him.

“Let them watch.”

“What if... what if someone that knows us is here? He will spread the gossip in the village.”

“It doesn’t fucking bother me.” *Calm down, Tobe. You shouldn’t get worked up for nothing.*

“We have to be careful, Tobe. Mezie still hasn’t—”

“My goodness. You keep mentioning that man in every conversation. Filling my head with talks about him and…” *Fuck.*

Suppressing the gradual anger welling inside of him, he gave a half smile to a young man that just called out his name from a little distance. It no longer surprised him or made him uncomfortable when he heard his name from strangers' lips. He was a known figure, a darling to young Nigerians—those in Twitterville especially, and of course, the crush of many Nigerian single ladies.

“Tobe, I'm sorry.” Her soft voice floated around him like a cold breeze, permeating deep and calming his edginess. “*Bìkô nû.*”

Why was he even angry? Wasn’t he the same man that promised he would wait until she was ready, even if it took another year? Yes, he was.

But it’s becoming difficult to be with her for a few minutes without wanting to slip her panties down and thrust into her.

Taking her hand, he pulled her to a stop. “I should be the one apologising, *Òmàlìchà m*.” Maybe it’s the sexual tension between them that was making him throw tantrums like an entitled baby. He could no longer swallow his need for her that was threatening to choke the life out of him.

Damn! He hated that he was losing control. Always staring at her as if she was his favorite ice cream. Every movement of her body sent heat weaving through his. Yet there seemed to be this wall between them.

Last night, when he led her back into her room after one of those impromptu meetings, he had pulled her to his body and made her touch the bulge in his pants while his lips trailed the lines of her jaw and the sweet spots behind her ears. Gripping his shoulders tight, she had moaned his name, her body quivering to the sexual thrills he was sending down her core.

Then she remembered that man and gasped, yanking herself away from him. He apologised and walked away.

He was so angry that he punched the wall when he got into his room.

What did Mezie do to earn a permanent place in her head? Why would she always bring him up each time they were in the throes of pleasure?

Tobe allowed his eyes to travel from Akwaugo's face to her collar bone, and back to her face. “I'm so sorry for acting like a dick,” he said.

She flushed with embarrassment at the word *dick*, covering her mouth with the palm of her hand, she giggled. Transferring the baby to his left arm, he took her hand and began to laugh too. “I’m really sorry, my love,” he said as they continued walking. There was something disarming about Akwaugo, her innocence—her strength hidden in vulnerability he couldn’t resist. He loved her so much. Fuck that her halfwit ex-husband that has placed this huge gate between them. The insensitive clod had refused to take back his bride price and leave Akwaugo the fuck alone.

Now by the car, he waited for her to get in, then handed the baby to her before he settled beside her.



Akwaugo

Òlâédó was making a fuss and Akwaugo knew why. It was time to feed, that meant getting her breast out for the baby to suck. Such a simple task, she had done it over and over before *nau*. But not with Tobe sitting beside her.

“What’s wrong with her?” he asked.

“She…” Swallowing hard, she justled the baby on her lap. “She’s hungry.”

“You can…” The silence that followed his incomplete statement made her turn to look at him. “Oh,” he burst out laughing, making her flush.

“It’s okay,” he continued, moving closer to place his hand on her lap—that too made the flush coursing all over her hotter. “I’ll look away.” There was still humor in his voice. “And don’t worry, the driver isn’t going to be watching. That partition only allows him to use the rear-view mirror. Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.”

She raised her top and eased her breast out of the bra cup. On impulse, she flashed him a glance and he was staring! Only looking away when her eyes caught his. Embarrassed, her hand trembled as she tried to push her nipple inside the baby's mouth, but her top slipped down and got in the way, infuriating the impatient baby who gave off a fitful cry.

“Let me help.”

He was by her side before she could suck in nerve-calming air, gently pushing her back into the seat. Would it be bad if she just cry? Mother Mary! Why would clumsiness decide to visit her today of all days—when she desperately needed to do this right?

“Relax,” he murmured, gently adjusting the baby closer to her nipple.

Oh, how she just wanted to disappear right now, yet her hands itched to grab his collar and sink her tongue into his mouth as he rolled her top up, holding it in place with her bra strap. The baby found the nipple and began to suckle voraciously.

“I’m so jealous of her right now,” he said amidst a chuckle. “Touching and suckling on this beauty while I only watch and swallow hard.” Her skin tingled at the lust that came out with those words. “Fuck!” he muttered more to himself, shifting away.

From the side of her eyes, she saw him loosening his tie, then he unbuttoned his shirt, and folded his sleeves.

She wasn't the only one uncomfortable; he too was fighting this sinful desire. *Sinful?* Why would she still call it that? She had left Mezie, hadn't she? Yet she felt him watching her, his voice was in her head, his laughter, the oath—

Her nipple slipped out of her baby's mouth.

"Let me," he said, taking the sleeping baby from her while she covered up.

"Have you been with a nursing mother before?" she asked.

"I'm learning with you."

And he seemed to know what to do at the right time.

"Thank you, Tobechukwu."

"It's a great pleasure, my love. You don't know how much joy it gives me that you both are here."

They rode in silence until they got to her house.

"You are not getting down here." He held her back to the seat with his arm as she made to open the door. "I want to take you somewhere."

"With Òlâédó?"

"No."

Her eyes caught the housekeeper coming out of the building.

"Eunice will take care of her while we are gone."

He opened his door and stepped out to hand the baby to the housekeeper, stood to speak with her for a while, and then came back. "She said you have to extract some milk for the baby."

Nodding, Akwaugo searched through her nursing bag for the pump.

"Do you want to do it here or inside the house?"

"Inside."

"You want me to go in with you? I can help hold the dress up while you do your thing." He coughed to hide his chuckle.

"No, I uh…" Mother Mary! How could he be so naughty and desirable at the same time?

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Chapter 28

Tobe



“Where is this place?” she asked as the car pulled into his compound.

“Our home.”

“You live with your family here?”

“Just me and Favor, and a bunch of domestic staff.”

“Mother Mary!” she exclaimed softly. And right before his eyes, she became a little girl, squirming with her hands covering her mouth. His smile grew as excitement like inner sunshine brightened her eyes. “Tobechukwu?” Without waiting for him, she opened the car and stepped out, her eyes holding that bewildered look.

“I should have brought you here earlier, but I wasn’t too sure,” he said, coming to stand beside her. “I don’t trust myself to behave properly around you here.” Even now, his blood was waking up his brain as he watched her childish exhilaration, but he would try to keep his word until she was ready to allow him to have not just her body but every part of her.

“Come, I have a lot to show you.” Taking her hand, he led her towards the mansion that stood as if it was conjured from the most beautiful architectural imaginations. Seeing her gazing with a gleam at the manicured lawn, neatly lined from the gate up to the porch gave him a sense of pride.

“You like it?”

“It’s bigger than the one in the village,” she half-screamed with excitement. “I’ve never been in a house like this before.”

“Then it’s my pleasure to be the first to bring you to one of the many you would be entering.” He pushed the door open and led her inside. It seemed like there was no one in. The staff must have gone back to their

quarters. Good, just the way he wanted it. They would be alone, and he would get the chance to—

"Tobe, I can get lost here," she whispered, leaving him to walk even deeper into the sitting room.

He laughed, strolled towards her, and held her waist. "I'm already lost in you." He began to run his fingers up and down her curve. "*Òmàlìchà*." He bent to whisper into her ears, he turned her to face him.

"*Ùnó gì ámàkà*, your house is beautiful."

"Our house, Akwaugo." Pulling her to his body, his nails dug into her flesh under her red chiffon top. "And you are beautiful," he said, his hands skimming back down and settling on her hips.

She was curvaceously desirable, so appealing that he couldn't resist the urge to palm her ass and give it a gentle squeeze. Oh, he shouldn't have done that. Now, she's giggling and covering her face like a virgin woman about to get laid for the first time.

Sucking in air through his teeth, he moved his hand away from her ass. He shouldn't do this. He agreed to wait until she was ready.

But she was ready.

Maybe not. She might still stop him halfway when the thought of that man creeps into her head. That would be frustrating; he didn't know if he would take that anymore. So, the best thing would be to respect the barrier between them, until she erased that man from her head and properly become his.

He would... *Fuck*! She was touching his face and... *Fuck! Fuck*! Her touch was like an electric shock, making his heart pound and his dick jerk.

"Akwaugo." His voice was rusty with need.

"Mm?"

"I think we should…" Her hand was on his neck now, stroking down to his chest. "*Nnê, Àkpâlî nê m*. Don't arouse me further," he pleaded in a strangled voice.

"*Àchóró m*…" She began to draw a circle pattern on his chest. "Tobe, *àchóró m k'ì míá m ònû*."

"You want me to kiss you?"

"Yes. I like what your tongue does inside my mouth."

"*Òmàlìchà m*." His heart was beating faster and faster as her face came up to his own. He had kissed her before, three separate times. But what made this one different and special was that she was asking for it. The

sincerity in her request, the plea in her eyes. “My love.” He didn’t know who moved in first but instantaneous and urgent was his tongue inside her mouth as every thought of waiting for the right time vanished. Actually, he couldn’t think at all, only feel! And having Akwaugo in his arms right now, her body curving into the hard contour of his, felt so good.

“Tobechukwu, *bìkô nû*,” she moaned against his lips as he lifted one of her legs and wrapped it around his waist.

“*Nne, kedu ih’ìchóró*?” Lifting her skirt, he found his way to her panties. He moved it aside. Jesus, Lord! The feel of her bare ass in his hand was going to make him forget even his name. Tightening his grip around her, his fingers made a hasty journey down to find her pussy from behind. The slimy pool down there sent his body into a state of delirium. “Oh, fuck.” Sucking in a breath, he slid a finger.

“Akwaugo m.” Her eagerness surprised as well as excited him. Capturing her lips again in a long, hard kiss. “I fucking want you right now,” he muttered as he pulled his mouth away so they can catch some breath. “Please let me in, let me give you pleasure.”

They were in an awkward standing position and could fall with a thud on the marble floor if they didn’t get to the bedroom or hurry to the sofa soon.

“It’s just the two of us here. Please let me fuck you good— *nnwà, kà m ràà nù gî bìkô nû.*”

A mistake! He felt her gradual withdrawal.

“Akwa m. I want to give you something better than what we had the first time.”

Damn! He was losing her to that man again.

“Akwaugo!”

“*Mbá*, Tobe.” She had pulled away, leaving him aching all over, his unspent erection threatening to tear his briefs, his juice-coated fingers hanging by his side. “We are not married yet.”

“We weren’t married when we did it before.” Christ! She was making him sound like an unreasonable horny bastard.

“*Nk’àhú d’ìché*. That one was different.” She was straightening her skirt.

“Oh stop,” he retorted, “I want you as bad as you want me. You even asked me to kiss you!”

“Tobechukwu,” she swallowed. “Mezie is still—”

“Good gracious!” He turned her face to look at him. “Marry me.”

“What?”

“Yes, Akwaugo. Marry me now.”

“It’s not going to be as easy as you think. My mother said Mezie had still not accepted the bride price.”

“Forget about him. Just say ‘yes’ to me and I will go down to that village myself. Money stops bullshit.” It’s not that hard *nau*. He loved her so much and he knew she cared about him a lot, but why was she hesitating?

“*Ègwú ná'tù m*. I’m scared.”

“Why?!”

“He led me into an oath.”

“Which has been broken.”

“No, not that. I swore to keep his secret, not to tell anyone about his impotency, I swore before Ókìjá deity.”

“Ókìjá! I thought it was only *Édó*?” Jesus Christ!

“Tobe, something could happen to me, to you, our daughter!”

Letting go of her face, he turned around, rubbing his palm on his head. This was evil. That man was evil. How could he— “How could he do this to you? Why did you even allow him to talk you into doing it?”

“He was my husband. I wanted to make him happy.”

What the fuck? “Akwaugo, it’s time to put an end to this bullshit.”

“How?”

Unbuttoning his shirt, he slipped it off his shoulders, pulled his singlet off, and dropped both on the floor. “Look at this.” He took her hand and guided it to his left breast, and slowly, her fingers ran through the crooked line of his scar.

“I did it for you, to break the oath you had with that bastard.” One out of the many oaths, unfortunately. “And I will do it again and again.”

“Tobe.”

“*Òmàlìchà m*,” he cut in. “Can’t you see? No curse can stop us!”

But trouble was brewing in the dark.



Mezie

The priest of a deity as powerful as Ókìjá wasn't supposed to be asking stupid questions, but this man kept asking him the same thing over and over again as though he was an apprentice *dìbìá*.

"My wife broke the oath. She has uncovered my nakedness for everyone to see."

"I ask you again, what do you want Ókìjá to do?"

Mezie cracked his knuckles and leaned forward. "Let Ókìjá do what he promised. The penalty for her crime is death!"

"You want your wife to die?"

"An oath is an oath! The penalty is death, it is not my fault," he retorted, adjusting his buttocks on the bench. He, Mezie, wasn't a bad man. If Akwaugo had kept her mouth shut, all these wouldn't have happened.

"You are a selfish man." The priest's gaze burned his face. "You have never cared for that woman."

How dare the priest accuse him of not caring for Akwaugo? He had cared for that treacherous woman all his life. And what did she reward him with? Disgrace, wickedness. "I have done nothing but love my wife since I married her."

"That wasn't what I saw the day you brought her here."

"*Bíà*, I didn't come to you so you can preach to me." He placed his elbows on his laps to support his weight. "I'm a sinking man," his voice quaked. "I lost everything. She took all from me."

The silence that followed made his heart sink. The priest wasn't going to help him, it was a bad idea coming here.

"You can forgive her," the priest said.

"There is no room in my heart for forgiveness."

"There is always room in one's heart for forgiveness."

"I am not a man that forgives." Even if he was, he didn't want to forgive Akwaugo. However, he's not the kind of man. Forgiveness is for the weak, and he, Mezie, wasn't weak. "They are laughing at me." His voice cracked as he tried to suppress the sobs biting the back of his throat. "It's terrible facing any of them. What they do to me, their open mockery…"

"She is not part of those laughing at you."

"She is. I know she is. She and that fool she ran away with."

Another silent beat. Then, “Ókìjá has received your offering,” the man said.

“Are you saying—”

“Ókìjá has heard you.”

“Will he help me?”

“He will fulfill his words.”

“Hei!” Mezie jumped to his feet, he did a little dance. “*Òmê nû*. Ehen, this is what I'm talking about.”

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Chapter 29

Akwaugo



His face was hardened in concentration as the driver meandered through the gridlock to bring the car to the walkway where it continued racing down with urgency.

Akwaugo blew off a curl of hair that had strayed to her face and gave him a sidelong glance. “Tobe, *Kédù ìf’òbû?* What's going on?”

They were still talking about Mezie and the oath when his phone went off. A few seconds later, he was screaming orders to the driver, the gateman, yet he refused to tell her what it was that suddenly got him all worked up. The only thing he said to her was that they had to get back to her house.

“Tobechukwu.”

“*Akwa m*, nothing is wrong.” He fished his phone from his pocket, dialed someone and waited, rubbing his fingers on his creased forehead. “How bad?” he asked whoever it was that was at the other end. “Someone trapped?”

Then he took her hand and squeezed it without looking at her. Something wasn’t right.

“Tobe, what is it?”

The answer to her question stared her in the face as the car halted at the other side of the road, opposite her... house? “Mother Mary!” Shifting closer to the window, her eyes widened in horror as she watched flames rising to the sky and sparks flowing out and dispersing.

“Akwa m.”

Her house was on fire.

“My love.”

She shrugged his hand off her shoulder. “Òlâédó... My baby...” She would have flown out of the car had he not stopped her with one arm grabbing her waist and pulling her back.

“Stay here,” he commanded, then knocked on the car partition for the driver to roll down. “Lock the car after me,” he ordered, opened the car, and left.

“What do you…” How could he lock her in here and just leave? “Open this car!” she shouted at the driver, hitting on the door with all her strength.

“*Bìkô nû*, open the car!” Her voice rough with the anguish tearing her body.

There were people inside that house—her daughter, the staff.

“Please.” Her voice broke with sobs as a sudden realisation hit her: The oath, the oath! Mezie's shop was burnt down months after she slept with Tobe, and now it was happening again. This time, it was going to take her daughter and… and other people. *Chìm ô*! She braced herself as a mind-blanking pain slashed through her heart and a sudden chill gripped her bones. “Hei!” It had found her. It had finally found her.

Feeling lightheaded, as though she was going to faint, she dragged in a deep breath and collapsed on the seat as tears pooled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

A knock on the other side of the window made her turn her head. Tobe was back, with a bundle wrapped in swaddling cloth in his arms.

She was alive! Her eyes brightened as the driver unlocked the car and let Tobe in. Òlâédó was alive!

Snatching the baby from him, she clutched her to her bosom and began to sob.

“Get us out of here,” she heard Tobe say to the driver.

They had driven for a while when she asked, “Eunice, where is Eunice?”

“She is fine. They all got out before the fire engulfed the whole place.” He slipped his hand around her neck and guided her head to rest on his shoulder.

“But where is she?”

“She will be coming with the others to the house later,” he said, stroking her cheek. “Favor is there too.”

“Your sister? I thought—”

“She was the one that alerted me. Said Eunice called her.”

Mother Mary!

“Thank God, nobody is hurt.”

Not for long. Ókìjá is a ruthless deity, deadlier than *Édó*. Once it's awoken, it destroys until there’s nothing left.

Shivering, she tightened her grip around her baby and swallowed a sob.

“Akwa, it’s okay.”

No, it’s not. Why wasn’t he seeing it? Just last night he had almost convinced her that everything was alright. *No curse can stop us*, he’d said. She felt like letting out a bitter laugh and telling him, *I told you so*.

“This is a sign, Tobe.”

“A sign of what?”

“The oath. It's alive and breathing.”

He sighed wearily but said nothing, a clear indication that he didn’t want to talk about it.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You didn’t cause this.” He removed his hand from her shoulder to lean closer to the baby lying on her thighs. “My little angel, what would I have done if I had lost you?”



Tobe

“I can’t believe it.”

“Nchekwube, It’s just a house. I can always buy another one.” Tobe turned his head, and his eyes stayed on Akwaugo who was now breastfeeding Òlâédó on the sofa. He wished she would look up at him so he could smile at her. At least, that might ease the tension between them right now, because he didn’t like how it was affecting him that she kept panicking over what happened. “Accidents happen, brother. It’s not the end of the world.”

“*Ódògwù*, you don’t get. I know you are capable of buying ten houses or more right now, but this is mysterious. Favor said—”

“Forget what Favor told you. She wasn’t there when the fire started.” He threw a glance over his shoulder when he heard the baby whimper, and

he began walking towards the door. Right then, his phone buzzed with an incoming call.

His uncle, Nchekwube's father.

“Papa is calling,” he said to Nchekwube, adjusting his ear pod while his heart skipped multiple times. The man had not spoken to him for months now, since the sacrifice at the *Édó* shrine happened. Not that Tobe hadn’t tried to reach out, but the man had vehemently refused to speak to him over the phone. The week he flew to Abuja to see the man he had called ‘father’ for the past twenty years, he was told that the man left for India for medicals.

Was he back now?

“I guess the news of the fire is too much for him,” Nchekwube said. “You are still his favorite son, after all.”

“His rebellious son, you mean?” The phone had stopped buzzing now. The most courteous thing to do was to return the call, but Tobe wasn’t sure he wanted to speak to his uncle yet. He wasn’t prepared to listen to the disappointment that would be evident in the man's voice.

“Thank God you know,” Nchekwube said, and the line went dead.

Abandoning the thought of stepping outside, he strolled to the dining and sat down, scrubbed his face with the palm of his hand. Again, he thought of dialing his uncle back, but his heart failed him.

Jesus!

How he wished the situation was different, that his relationship with Akwaugo wasn’t this complicated. Then he wouldn’t be feeling like a lone kid each time he thought of his uncle's disapproval, his uncle wouldn’t even disapprove of him loving Akwaugo.

The giggling of Òlâédó, his baby, made him pause his thought to look back. Akwaugo had her face buried on the baby's stomach, making bubbly noise to the delight of the infant.

His lips stretched in an involuntary smile as he watched the woman and the child, and one word flashed through his mind. Family. This was his family, his home, his joy. Whatever he did to earn this was worth it.

What of the things you lost?

His phone began to buzz again, dragging him out of his mental reverie.

Checking his phone, he took in a large breath, then tapped on his ear pod.

“Papa.”

“Where are you?”

No formalities? Tobe's heart tightened with sadness. “In Lagos.”

“In Lagos where?”

“At home.”

The man's sigh of relief grazed into his ears.

“So, how is she?”

Tobe swallowed. Was he asking of… “You mean—”

“The woman you took as yours, how is she?”

Tobe shifted uncomfortably on the chair, running his fingers on his forehead.

Finally, they were about to have that conversation. It wasn’t how he wanted it, but it was time.

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Chapter 30

Akwaugo



It was for the best.

Picking her phone from the bed, her gaze swept through the room that Tobe had declared hers *for now*.

She sniffled, then wiped her face with the back of her hand and continued shoving things inside the duffel bag on top of the bed: her clothes, a few pairs of slippers, and her daughter's essentials. The bag shouldn't be heavy, or it would be difficult for her to carry it with the baby.

She was a fool to have thought that exposing Mezie wouldn't come with consequences. He warned her but she was determined, now he must be having a good laugh. Whoever told her she had a chance at happiness?

She wiped away tears, picked her babbling baby up and leveled her face with the little girl's. "Come, sweetheart. We have to go."

The baby's face scrunched, lips curled down, ready to let out a protesting wail.

"*Bìkô*, don't cry, we don't want to wake daddy up." Leaning the baby's head on her shoulder, she began to mutter a lullaby, patting the baby's back.

To get past the security guards that manned the gate by that time of the night would be a hurdle, but Akwaugo had concocted a lie. But with this fear that was making her inside quiver, she doubted she would be able to go on with the lie without toppling over her words.

And Tobe. The thought of leaving him was bruising her emotionally, but it's what she must do to keep him alive. If only he had listened, if only he left her alone when she warned him to. There were so many *if onlys* but one

reality; the dreaded Ókìjá had come to take its price, that was why she must leave, to go pay her debt alone.

“I hope your father understands why I have to do this,” she said to the baby. “And I hope you will understand too when you grow older.” She balanced the baby in the carrier fastened around her, she pushed a shawl inside her already filled bag and quietly left the room.

The light from her phone cut through the darkness in the corridor as she opened her door and stepped out. “*Shi* Ola, *shiii*,” she whispered to the cackling baby. Tobe's room was next to hers and she wouldn’t want to wake him or leaving would be more difficult. She might never leave at all. Adjusting the bag strap on her shoulder, she began walking down the hallway, her heart thumping fast as she made her way down the stairs to the foyer.

A soft creak from the sitting room made her catch her breath in a startled gasp. She turned towards the sound, her phone slithered off her hand and landed on her foot.

“Akwaugo?” The light from a laptop provided the only illumination that revealed his figure on the sofa, now staring at her. “Alexa, turn the light on,” he commanded and the whole place was flooded with brightness.

He got up and came to stand in front of her. “You are…” A frown creased his forehead as his gaze moved to her bag.

“Tobe.”

“What is going on?” His eyes came up to search her face. “Where are you going?”

“Tobechukwu.” She propped the baby carrier, she shook it gently to calm the baby down. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand. Sorry for what?”

“I…” She bit her lips to keep them from quivering and blinked her eyes to get rid of the blur. “I love you so much,” she whispered.

For a moment, he simply gazed into her eyes, then he drew in a deep breath. “You don’t know how happy you just made me feel by saying these words.” But there was discomfort in his voice. “Akwa m, *kédù zì?* What is it?”

“I…” How was she going to say this to him? “I’m going back to the village.”

He didn’t say anything, didn’t shake, just stood there staring at her.

“Tobe.” God! What had she done? “This is the only way.” She reached out to touch him.

“Don’t!” His explosion jolted the baby into crying. “Akwaugo, why do you want to do this?” he asked, calmed now. “It’s him.” His words gritted like a jagged stone against a metal surface. “You are scared of him.”

She swallowed as weakness overtook her. “I'm scared of what he may do to you. What this Ókìjá oath will do to us,” she whispered.

In his silence, she noticed that he was fighting the anger steaming within him.

“I know you really love me.”

“No,” he cut in. “You don’t know that. If you do, you will understand when I say I'm ready to do anything to keep you— to keep us safe. Akwaugo, real love is protective, a defensive, a ride-or-die connection that stays with you for always and in all ways.” He held her shoulders. “That is who I want to be to you.”

“Tobe,” she whispered. “*Áchòghî m ìhè g'èmè gî*. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“And what do you think you are doing now? You are ripping me apart.” He turned away from her, strode to the wall and landed a punch on it. “Goddamnit!”

“I will only bring trouble to you,” she said and moved to sit on the sofa, releasing the restless baby and laying her down on the chair. “It's already begun. The fire… Tobe, a curse is hanging over my head.”

“Can you just shut up?” He turned and began walking back toward her. “I finally got to seal a deal and establish my company in South Africa, a few weeks after you came here. Got victory on a case that would have landed me in prison and plunge my company into bankruptcy after I set my eyes on you. My life has been an amazing ride since that day I made love to you.” He got on his knees, moved her legs apart so he could move closer and lay his head on her belly while wrapping his hand around her waist. “There is no curse, Akwaugo. The deities are not without empathy.”

“But Mezie said—”

“Nothing.” His hands began to stroke her hip. “As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing that man said to you that means anything.”

“I am scared.” She shook her head. “The oath at Ókìjá shrine has not been broken!”

“To hell with Ókìjá,” he muttered. “Just tell me, what do you want me to do? What can I offer to make you stay?”

“Nothing.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I want to stay with you, Tobe,” she sobbed.

“Then stay. Give me the whole of you.”

“I’m yours.”

“Sometimes I feel you are but other times… I don’t know, it’s like he still controls you.”

“He doesn’t control me.”

“He's the reason you don’t want me to… you don’t want us to make love,”

No, it’s the tradition that forbade it until I'm totally separated from Mezie.

“The fear of him is always in your eyes. Akwaugo, you reverence him like he is a god.” His fingers pressed hard on her waist as his voice cracked with so much anguish.

As if sensing her father’s pains, the baby began to fuss. Tobe got up and carried the little one. “*Nne*, it’s late, go back to sleep. We will talk in the morning.” He began heading upstairs.

Later that night, as restlessness denied her sleep, she propped her curtain open and found him by his private poolside, prowling the deck with his hands on his jaw. Then he stopped, and peeled his robe off his shoulder, discarding it on the floor. The calm brightness of the moon upon his frame added to his sensuality. Swallowing the fluid that had rushed into her mouth with the lump that had lodged in her throat, she let the curtain go as he whipped his head up towards her window as though he knew she was there.

A few minutes passed before she dared to look again. He was observing the pool, then he dived in, sinking deep. When he resurfaced at the other end, he spat out and scrubbed his face.

That glorious sight sent heat coursing through her body as she finally lay down.

“Mother Mary,” she murmured. How could she want him to this aching point and yet be so scared to give in to this lust? How was it even possible that she had been this close to having him inside her several time and yet—

“Still awake?” Tobe asked from behind her, jerking her back to reality. She had not heard him open her door and walk in.

“I… Tobe…” The brightness of the moon pouring in through her open window highlighted his perfect body. He was wet in places. Jesus! Seeing him this way was doing something to her core.

“I thought I saw you through the window.” His lips were curled up in a naughty smile, making him even more desirable. “I wanted to be sure.”

“Yes, uhm…” The ease at which he let go of anger baffled her. Wasn't it just some minutes ago that he almost punched down the wall of his house because she wanted to leave? “I couldn’t sleep.”

“You want to come stay with Òlá and me in my room?” he asked. “It will be nice.”

She gave off a nervous smile as he came to sit beside her.

“I, uh.” He cleared his throat and shifted closer, then he took her hands. “*Nnê, gbàghárà m*. Forgive me for acting like a selfish, inconsiderate bastard. It’s just… I don’t want to lose you.”

“Tobe.” He owed her no apology for getting angry each time she drove him to the edge—which she'd been doing since they met. Yet, he was always quick to apologise. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Akwa. I owe you this apology,” he said. “I wasn’t ready to reason this whole situation from your angle, and that's because… because losing you will drive me crazy. I'm obsessed with you.” He was staring into her eyes. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing but… I can't bear it when you push me away because of that man.”

“It’s not because of him only.”

“I understand.”

“And I love you too, Tobe.” It was her turn to stare deep into his eyes. “*Àfúrúm gí n’ànyà rìnnê*.”

“That’s all I want to know, my love. All the assurance I need to make this work,” he said, pulling her to a seating position. “I want us to go to the village tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Or you are not ready?”

“I am.”

“Then let’s go and settle this once and for all.”

She nodded and felt a slice of sadness when his hands left hers and he stood to leave.

“By the way. What you did today—did you have a car ready and waiting to take you down the village or you would have gone in search of

one this night?” He waited for her answer, but she had none. He shook his head and said, “You don’t want to imagine the danger that is out there. And for a defenseless woman, with a child. Please, promise me you are not going to try that again.”

“I promise.”

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Chapter 31

Mezie



Nnewi, Anambra state

It is bad enough that a man should have prostrate. Adding stomachache to his predicament would be a death sentence.

Mezie's gaze swept around the town hall as he entered, lingering on Okorie who was slouching on a plastic chair with an air of satisfaction. He unfolded his wooden seat, sat down, brought out a cob of alligator pepper from his satchel, and began picking the seeds and throwing them into his mouth.

Loneliness had been his dearest friend lately and he seemed to be liking it. With his money gone—he came one evening to realise that someone had broken into his house and taken the money he kept for his trip to Onitsha the next day—and drugs disappearing from his counter without replacement, he had come to appreciate the company of emptiness.

"Mezie *nwànnáà*," the chairman started. "We heard what happened to you, it's a pity my brother."

Mezie ignored the man, continued picking and throwing the tiny peppery seeds into his mouth while wondering how the news of his stolen money seeped out.

"No matter what happened, Mezie, you are our kinsman—"

"Why do you summon me here?" he cut in with a rough voice. Their pretense was beginning to make his skin crawl.

"Well, we are here because of your wife."

"She is not his wife," someone interrupted the chairman.

“My friend, allow me to talk!” the chairman shot back. “Ehen, Mezie. Like I was saying, it’s about Akwaugo.”

Finally, some news that would make his heart somersault with joy. Mezie adjusted his buttocks on the chair. The Ókìjá priest had promised him that the deity would fight for him. This might be it.

“We want to ask you to—oh, here he comes,” the chairman said with a smile, his eyes fixed ahead on someone that was just walking in.

Mezie turned to see who it was. He felt a sharp pain in his gut as he watched his adversary sauntering up to the table where the meeting executives were seated. Their eyes met and the man, Tobe, even had the nerve to give him an acknowledging nod.

Shameless he-goat. Unapologetic wife snatcher, miserable son of an outcast.

Mezie's heart boiled as he watched Tobe take his seat beside the Chairman after pulling two phones from his pocket, speaking into one, and placing them on the table. *Ànùòfîâ! Animal*! Jealousy bubbled inside him as he gave Tobe a thorough perusal; skin like one that had never seen any hard time. His teeth had a gap at the center like that of a woman, they were so white that one would doubt if they have ever seen oil. Tobe was saying something that sent everyone seated around the table laughing, the Chairman’s laughter louder than the others.

Fools. Inhaling deeply, Mezie paused his lips to steel the gales of anger rumbling inside him as the chairman rose to speak.

“Yes, our son here has indicated an interest in Akwaugo, he wants to officially make her his wife according to the tradition.”

What?

Mezie’s snuff box slithered out of his hand and fell to the ground. *How dare he? How dare this city he-goat come here to smear shit on my face?*

“Mezie, we summoned you so you can consider accepting back the bride price you paid to—”

“You are mad!” He jerked up, his chair clamped shut and hit the ground. “All of you here are mad! *Àrà ná’pú únú n’ìlê!* So, what you brought me here for is to ask me to relinquish my right as a man to this…this *Éwù* seated here? Because of what? Money?” He turned to face Tobe who sat with his arms folded across his chest, unperturbed, looking down at him as if he was just a child throwing tantrums. “Over my dead body!”

“You will soon die!” Okorie sprang up like a man who was waiting for an opportunity to run his mouth. “What is left of you? You are a dead man already!”

Mezie ignored. His problem wasn’t with Okorie but with this rich idiot from Ótòlò. It was time to show him that he was still a strong man no matter what had befallen him. He, Mezie, would not go down without a fight.

Tobe leisurely rose to his feet, drawing the eyes of all the kinsmen to himself. From what Mezie saw on their faces, they would kiss the man’s feet if he asked them to.

“My fathers and my brothers,” Tobe began. “I’m not here to make trouble but to right my wrong and to persuade this man to accept the bride price which he paid so my woman can be free.”

“Your woman, you say?” Mezie sneered. “When you should be talking about cleansing the land for the abomination you committed!”

“An abomination you aided. You sent her to me that morning.”

“I didn’t send her to anybody.” Tobe levelled a mocking gaze at him. “Ehen? Even though I supported her sleeping with another man, does it give you the right to continue sleeping with her after that? You even took her in for how many months now? *I n’àrà yâ, n’àkwòrí yâ, ón’àtô gî!*”

“You don’t know how much I would have loved to—” Tobe stopped, narrowing a scorching glare at him. “Akwaugo is a decent woman.”

“Tàá!” Mezie scoffed.

“You don’t deserve her.”

“And you think I’ll allow you to have her? You lie.”

“You lost her years ago, even before she met me. I only gave her the reason to leave you.”

Murmurs erupted in the hall.

“Mezie, a man doesn’t spit on the ground and lick it up again,” the Chairman came in. “You accused Akwaugo of adultery and openly told us she brought you bad luck. Why don’t you want to let her go?”

Because keeping her would prove him a *man*. “She is my wife!”

“She bore a child for this man here—”

“Tradition made me the father of that child,” he cut in. “You people shouldn’t deprive me of my possessions.”

“Akwaugo and Òlá are not your possession!” Tobe blurted. “They were never yours, you never wanted them.”

“You are not just a wife snatcher. You are an unrepentant one that should be castrated and sent on exile—if only all these men seated here had some balls.”

“Insult me one more time and you would wish you were dead!” For a moment, Mezie thought Tobe would charge at him and his heart skipped. Then Tobe turned to face the Chairman. “This man cannot even take care of himself not to talk of taking care of a woman who gave him a baby that isn’t his.”

“I began taking care of Akwaugo since she was in junior secondary!”

“Yet she was unhappy, unsatisfied. I’ve been a better man to Akwaugo than you were for the donkey years you said you took care of her. I make her happy.”

“As a clown *nau*? You make her happy as the dancing masquerade that you are,” Mezie said. “Well, if you like, make her see the stars. You will not have my wife and my daughter. I will not allow you.”

“What daughter are you even talking about? I can’t believe we are even having this conversation.” Tobe said. “I’m trying not to lose it and do something ugly because of the respect I have for this gathering, not that I don’t know what to do to get what I want. You suppressed Akwaugo for many years!”

“What concerns you with how I treat my wife?”

“She is no longer your wife!”

“I paid her bride price!”

“How much?” Closing the distance between them.

“*See me see trouble o*. Akwaugo only came to you so you can help her make a baby for me. A man who is invited to eat shouldn’t take the whole pot of soup to his house!”

“You should be ashamed. Which sane man gives his wife to another man to sleep with?”

“A man without a penis,” someone said but the two raging men didn’t share in the joke as they stood glaring at each other, chests rising and falling heavily.

“Men, men, please let us calm down,” the Chairman cut in. “There is nothing serious in this matter. Mezie, you cannot force a woman to remain married to you when she has already made up her mind to be with someone else.”

“How do you know that?” Mezie faced the Chairman. “Did Akwaugo tell you she no longer wants this marriage?”

He knew the answer to that question already, but he wasn’t going to accept it like a coward.

“We can settle this as mature men,” Tobe said in a surprisingly calm voice. “I know it hurts but think about it, what sort of marriage do you think you will still have with Akwaugo? Besides, my daughter needs her mother, and I will not allow her to be raised in your house. I can give you anything __”

Mezie knew it would eventually come to Tobe flexing his wealth. How dare Tobe offer him money? Him, Mezie! *The dry meat that fills the mouth.* When Mezie made his first million, this boy was still washing pants for *oyinbo* women abroad!

He hit Tobe’s chest with his finger, “You can buy the support of these shallow men, but they will never make me give you what you came for. Akwaugo and her daughter belong to me now, tomorrow, and till she dies. The sooner you realise that the better for you.” Looking Tobe over, he turned to leave. “Miserable thing sacrificed to *Édó*. *Ósù*,” he murmured.



Tobe

He called me Ósù again today.

That dimwit had the gut to mutter the words “miserable thing sacrificed to *Édó*” to his face. He threw the garden egg which was offered to him at the unfortunate meeting into the car’s trash can, and relaxed his back and shut his eyes.

Such a despicable man with an odious attitude. Why would he want to keep a woman he doesn’t want? Out of bitterness? What does he want?

“Let’s go,” he muttered audibly enough for his driver to hear and pulled the car out of the parking lot.

“Where, sir?”

“To my wife's—to Akwaugo's father's place.”

When they got to the house that stood amidst farmlands, he ordered the driver to pull to the side.

The gate opened to the pressure of his hand. The sight of Akwaugo on her knees, hunched over the baby, and both engaged in what seemed like a serious conversation made him smile. He didn't want to interrupt the magical moment, but the baby had seen him and was stretching her arms for him to pick her up. Then Akwaugo turned, lifting the baby and balancing her on her hip.

"How long have you been watching?"

She reached out to touch his face, but he caught her hand midair and kissed her palm passionately. "Long enough to enjoy your babble." He stroked her chin and took the baby from her.

"So how did it go? Did he agree?"

"You don't expect him to just hand you over, do you?" He saw her face crease and pulled her to his chest. "Come on, beautiful one. It's not going to be easy, but we are not leaving here without me making you mine."

"I don't think Mezie will bend."

"There are many ways to get things done."

"Everything is not about money, Tobe."

"You will be amazed what money can do, my love. You will be amazed." He knew she wasn't convinced. "I want you to have faith in me. Believe in us Akwaugo, please."

"I'm trying," she said, wiping drool that dripped from the baby's mouth to his shirt.

"That man will not have you or my daughter. I promise you that."

She nodded. "Come, I made Bitterleaf soup with *àkpù*. It will please me to see you eat the food I made by myself, for once."

What else would please her? He thought as he followed her, deliberately falling behind so he could watch the sensuous movement of her hips as she walked. So seductive. She carried herself with such ingenuous lusciousness.

If she had agreed to stay in his country house with him, he was sure that he would have her pinned against his body, his hands squeezing her ass while he played with her lips the way she loved it.

But she had vehemently refused to go home with him.

"This is Nnewi, not Lagos. It must not be heard that I am now staying in your house," she had insisted.

“I can bet that half of them here already know you are staying with me in Lagos,” he had replied.

“They can pretend they don’t know that. But rubbing it on their faces here will generate a scandal. The women will not take it lightly.”

Well, his village still held morality in high esteem and even though he shouldn’t give a shit about what they think, he wouldn’t want Akwaugo to be alienated from the people she’d known as family.

“No one is in this compound except us?”

She turned her head and flashed him one of those smiles. “Mama has gone to the church to clean the parsonage with the other women, Papa has not returned since he left for the meeting.”

“Yes, I met him there and he told me he would come over to my house for a talk.” He grabbed her by the waist with his free hand, he pulled her to his body, her ass brushing against his groin most sweetly. “I didn’t tell him I was coming here though,” he whispered into her ears.

She slipped out of his hold. “Careful, Tobe,” she said, squirming in a shy delight. “Someone may be watching from any of the palm trees around.”

“*Bí’èbè á bìkô*, forget whoever is watching.”

“No o, this is Nnewi.”

“And so?”

“*Ràpù m âkâ bìkó*. You want to make me the topic of discussion in this village.”

“Aren’t we already?”

Giggling, she ran into the house, and he followed.

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Chapter 32

Mezie



Relief descended on him as the cloud in his eyes dissolved into tears and trickled down his cheeks. Crying wasn't a privilege he allowed himself to enjoy for fear of his *boys* seeing him as weak. Their disturbing gazes following him had been worse than the mad rage he was fighting. Now they were all gone, he was free to weep for his shattered life.

Before now, Mezie would have worried so much about his *boys'* impromptu resignations and departure, but after Akwaugo betrayed him, nothing would ever surprise him again.

He carried a stool from a corner, matched off to settle under the tree, wiped off his face, picked up the cutlass and the coconut he abandoned earlier and began shaving off the skin. "Money is a bastard," he said, then hissed as what happened yesterday at the kinsmen's meeting played in his head. "That outcast—that unfortunate maggot that should be castrated thought he could influence everything with money."

He already did, the little voice in his head whispered.

He hissed again, abandoning the task at hand. He gathered his loin cloth, pushed them between his thighs, and finally leaned back.

Akwaugo had succeeded in humiliating him. She had made him a mockery in this village. Women now looked at him with pity on their faces and laughter in their hearts.

"Chai!" He kicked the half-shaved coconut and stood up to go sit on his relaxing chair.

One thing that surprised him though was his recent desire to have Akwaugo back. Contrary to what people might think, it wasn't pride or

wickedness that was pushing this longing but something more… weakening.

He never thought he would come to a point in his life where he would admit that Akwaugo was the center of his happiness. It really hurt to admit that now, and to also admit that it was his fault that she left, his fault that that man took her. If only he had done things differently…

The sound of his gate opening interrupted his train of thoughts and as he turned to see who it was that came looking for him—*Chìnêkê*! Was he dreaming or was it Akwaugo walking in?

He frowned as something caved inside him and his heart began to thump with excitement. He tore his eyes away from her as she walked past him to get the bench propping against the wall of the house.

Where had all his rage gone to? The desire for vengeance? All he wanted now was the woman sashaying back to sit beside him.

“You have grown,” he said, watching as her eyes roamed the place that used to be hers, a place that she once transformed into a beautiful home—just that he didn’t see it then.

“So much has happened these past months.” She widened her legs and balanced her elbows on her laps to support her weight.

Given her a slow perusal, he shook his head. She now wore trousers—something she wouldn’t dare when she was with him. Truly, that man had taught his Akwaugo the ways of loose women. She even coloured her lips red like a prostitute.

“This place is so quiet,” she muttered.

Such a kind word, he thought. She would have slapped him with the glaring truth—his compound was dead. “I am alone now; nobody stays with me anymore.”

She didn’t ask why.

“This man—when are you leaving him?” he asked. “You know you can never be with him, and our baby will never be his. Did you tell him that?”

“That is why I am here, Mezie.”

Mezie? Hm. She couldn’t even call him *my husband* like she used to. And the way she even called his name, with no reverence at all. *Chai*!

“You have no life with him, Asa m. You belong here with me.”

“Mezie, please.”

“Look at what he did to you.” How could she be blind to the changes the man was making in her? Bad, immoral changes. The artificial hair she

was wearing, The scent of her body! He had told her that it's loose women that wear perfumes so they can attract men. “He has taken your innocence.”

“I'm not here to discuss Tobe but to plead with you to allow me to move on.”

“With whom? Him?” What was it that this man was giving Akwaugo that he, Mezie, wouldn’t give her? “I want to move on with you, Akwaugo. If you don’t want to stay with me in this village, I don’t mind moving to the city as long as you will come with me. We can go to Onitsha. I will start another business over there. With time, I will make a lot of money like that man. You know I am hard-working.”

“Mezie, you don’t understand,” she whispered. “I’m not coming back.”

A steely silence passed between them.

“I know you, Asa m, I know what you want, what is good for you. Believe me when I say he is not what you want.”

She was getting impatient now, it was as though sitting beside him was irritating her. Or maybe it was what he was saying to her. But he had to try. “You loved the life I gave you, you told me I was the only man who would have your heart. I was good to you from the first day I came to your father's house. I did everything to prove that I love you.”

“You loved me in your own way, Mezie.”

“Thank God, you know that.”

“And I'm grateful for everything. But there is another man now.”

“That outcast?”

“Do not call him that!”

“When you were with me, you did not have any problems with me referring to him as an *Ósù*.”

“I did. I just didn't know how to tell you to stop.”

Now she knew how. Because that man had taught her to be wild, to look a man in the eyes and talk.

“Do you love him?” What would he do if she said yes?

“Mezie, *bìkô nù àjûlâ m àjújù àhú*. Don’t ask me that.”

Maybe it was the question or something else, but she was no longer comfortable. Could it be that she now found him irritating? Him—her husband? “Is it his money?”

“I never cared about money.”

“Then why are you with him? I gave you the life that was good for you.”

“Was that life really good for me?”

“You never complained.”

“I complained, Mezie. You didn’t listen.” She shut her eyes and shook her head. “Tobechukwu listens to me.”

“Do not mention his name!” he snapped. She was going to make him mad again and he didn’t like it. “Pack your things and come back. We will leave for Onitsha tomorrow.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you, Mezie.”

“You will,” he said. She didn’t withdraw her hands when he took them. “You have to. We have nothing left but each other. Asa m, please.”

“*Mbá*, Mezie. Let me go.”

“The man can have his child back, but he can’t have you Akwaugo. You are mine. I am ready to start all over, to be a better husband.” He would even go to Okorie and do whatever it would take to get his erection back. “Give me another chance to make you happy.”

She withdrew her hand from his grip. “It’s already late.”

“No time is ever late, Asa m.”

“My heart belongs to Tobe now.”

“You will forget him with time. I will help you.”

“I can’t love you, Mezie.”

“You don’t have to love me. Coming back and respecting me as your husband the way you used to is enough.”

“Mezie, I’m not coming back.”

“Not even if I go down on my knees and beg?” His Akwaugo wouldn’t allow him to bend his knees, she knew it was an abomination for a man to kneel for a woman. But this stranger seating beside him… “Akwaugo, will my kneeling before you make you reconsider?”

She said nothing.

“Will it melt your heart?”

“No.”

“Is this what he turned you into? Hardening your heart to the man whom you once called lord? The man who did everything to make you the woman you are today? He wouldn’t have found you appealing if not for me.”

“Mezie, I appreciate what you did for me. But please, let me go.”

She wasn’t pleading, just asking, the same way her new man had asked.

“If you want me to be happy, let me go,” she continued. “Accept back the bride price.”

“Your happiness is with me.”

“I have never been happy with you.” How could she say that? “Yes, there were few times but—I've found something more in Tobe.”

“And you are choosing him over me.”

“I’m giving myself a chance to love and be loved.”

“What do you want me to do, Akwaugo?” He was getting weary of begging her. “How do I prove to you that we are meant to be together?”

“We are not meant to be together, Mezie.”

He sighed. “*Ngwà nù*, it’s okay.” It was time to change tactics. “I’m not letting you go. And you know that as long as your father is still with that bride price, you are mine.”

“Mezie, are you not tired of all this? *Ìkè àgwûbéghí dí gí?*”

Him, Mezie, tired of this fight? Never! “Also don’t forget that the oath of silence you took has not been nullified. You broke your vow by running your mouth to the kinsmen, the repercussions await.” He paused for that to sink into her head. “I alone can set you free from that curse.”

“I don’t care anymore about the oath, Mezie. Ókìjá should go ahead and strike me dead if he is so unjust.”

Her boldness shocked him.

“You are the one who did me wrong.” Her voice rose. “For years, I lived to please you. Yet, you were never satisfied. Mezie, accept back your bride price.”

“I will not. Period!”

“Not even when I have something of much importance to offer you in return?”

“What can you possibly offer a dead man like me?”

“Life. To become a man again, to get back what Okorie took from you.” She must have seen the twitching of his mouth and the widening of his eyes. “I can make him give it back to you so you can start a new life, get married, and have kids,” she added.

“What do I need a performing manhood for, if I cannot have you.”

She got up. “Ask yourself what you will choose. Remain miserable or grab what I’m offering you. When you make your decision, go to Okorie, he will tell you what to do to get your manhood back.”

As she left, tears filled his eyes and his hands trembled against his thighs. “*Nwà á énwè tà m!”* he cried. She got him where it hurt so bad.



Tobe

He intended to stay not more than three days in the village, but thanks to Mezie, he had spent five days, yet there seemed to be no headway. He had thought of using some military men to force Mezie into accepting back the bride price, but Akwaugo's father insisted it would worsen the situation.

It didn’t make sense to him how Mezie could hold everyone by the balls, yet they wanted him, Tobechukwu the son of Ochudo, to be calm and follow due fucking process when all he wanted to do was show that bastard that he was messing with the wrong person.

It was bad enough that he refused to accept the bride price, but smearing insults on his face, calling him an outcast and daring him to do his worst? Oh, that was the height of it.

A rustle at the gate made him abandon his thoughts as he looked up to find Akwaugo walking in. She stopped to say something to the security men, making them break into smiles. Grinning, he leaned forward, balancing his elbows on the handrail.

She caught his gaze, and her face flushed—one of her most beautiful features that he loved to see.

“Morning to you, *Òmàlìchà m*.” Catching her by the wrist as she came close to him, he pulled her, so her body crashed against his. He loved that too; her body against his, and that exhibition of shyness that always warmed his heart. “I was about coming to your place.”

“Dad said both of you will be going to see the *Igwe* this morning.”

“And you’re here to see me first.”

“You didn’t come around yesterday.”

Fiddling with her fingers and biting down her lip, she reminded him of the day he first kissed her. He had waited for her on that lonely road leading to the church, under the big tree. And when she appeared, he had taken her into his car and—it was a kiss that sealed his fate with her.

“But we spoke on the phone,” he said, stroking her arms. “That wasn’t enough?”

She shook her head. That was cute too. Oh goodness, everything about her excited him.

“Girl, you are something,” he muttered, sucking in a breath. “Everything you do arouses me.”

There was excitement sparkling in her eyes when she lifted her face to look at him. She seemed to like that he hungered for her. “But you know we cannot do anything.”

“I know.” And it sucked. “But I can kiss you, hm?” Giggling, she nodded. “You’ll like that?” Another nod. “Say it, my love. Tell me how much you love to have my lips on yours.”

“I want it, Tobe.”

“Good girl.” He laughed. “Let’s go inside so I can do it properly.”

“Okay,” she said, running her tongue over her lips. Fuck! That did something to his dick.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her to his body again. “*Nne*, you are punishing me, *èzìòkwû m*.”

“How?”

She knew how, yet she was feigning ignorance, and that was sexy. “See ehn, when I finally make you mine, *à gá m árà gî gwó-gwó*.” He knew she loved it when he talked dirty and raw; it made her flush so hard. “I’ll so fuck you that your pussy would pulsate for days.”

“*Chì m ô*, Tobechukwu!” She slipped off his grip and ran a few distance away from him, giggling.

“*Ìhè m g’árá gì*.” Joining in the laughter, he reached out to grab her. “The way I will fuck you ehn...”

“Stop saying it, Tobe. You are making me feel—”

“Like having me fuck you senseless already?”

She made a face. “I don’t want to say it.”

Because she was shy. “You’ll learn with time, my love. Come, let’s go inside,” he said as they began walking into the house. “Your father thinks the paramount ruler would force Mezie to accept the bride price.” Discussing this would help him keep his mind off making love to her for now. But what would happen when he gives her the open-mouthed, sensual kissing she craved?

“There won’t be any need for that again.”

“Why?”

“I offered Mezie something I know he can’t refuse. It’s costing me almost all the money you paid into my account though.”

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Chapter 33

Mezie



Riding down the path that led to Okorie's house, Mezie went through the speech he prepared for the umpteenth time, cringing at the part where he had to beg. Maybe he should remove that part. Akwaugo said she had sorted everything out so there might not be a need to humiliate himself further.

Drawing closer, the persisting thumbing, the shrill sound as if something was being drilled into a hard surface, and the incoherent chatters coming from Okorie's compound piqued his curiosity. Killing his bike's engine, he stood the machine beside the fence of the house that seemed to have changed overnight. A concrete wall had replaced the mud barricade. There was also an iron sheet where a termite-eaten wooden gate once stood. He was about to turn back when the gate opened and Okorie swaggered out.

“I was right! I heard the sound of your bike, then I didn’t hear it again. I wanted to be sure it was you.” Pushing his new gate wider to give Mezie the chance to peek inside the compound.

“Ah-ah, *Nwòkêm*. What is happening in your compound?” Mezie fought the seething jealousy gnawing in the pit of his stomach.

“Won’t you come inside?”

Following Okorie in, his shock and jealousy grew. Not just the renovations going on, but Okorie's sudden niceness was arousing his suspicion. As his gaze drifted to the left, where a new brick house bigger than his own was being erected, he gritted his teeth. Where did this wretched Okorie get the money to be doing all this? “*Nwòkê m*, it’s like you

robbed the bank," he said as Okorie led him into his old house and ushered him to a seat.

"Robbed the bank *kwà*? You know I'm not a thief *nau*."

That is true, the man had no history of stealing. Yet, money didn't fall from the sky for Okorie. Something must have happened, and he would soon find out what it was.

"Okorie, you know why I am here," Mezie said as he took his seat.

"I know." Okorie sat down as well. "But first, I have to offer you this." He pulled out a big brown envelope from under the table and slammed it on a side stool which he pushed closer to Mezie.

"What is this?"

"*Mépè yà bû ngwúgwú*. Open the envelop and see for yourself!"

The audacity, Mezie thought as he slowly took the envelope and peered inside, whipping his gaze back at Okorie.

"What is this for?"

"Ah! It's your money of course. Have you forgotten the debt I owe you?"

"I told you not to pay back, since we both have a—something we were…"

"A man never forgets the debt he owes a friend," Okorie said. "Since I can afford it, why won't I pay you? Especially now you need it more than I do."

Would this man ever stop insulting him with every slightest chance? "Okorie, look, I don't need this money now." *Yes, he did*. Only that he wouldn't take it at the moment—a deal was a deal. "I am only here because I am not as hard-hearted as you people think. I have decided to let Akwaugo have her way. Let the gods be the judge of all of us."

Okorie observed him for a while. "You are here because you want to get your manhood back, Mezie. Don't make it seem like you have suddenly turned nice, we all know who you are."

There was no pretending about it, the man was right. As much as he would not want to accept back the bride price until Akwaugo returns to him, he would also want to feel erections again, to feel the pleasure of digging into a woman's warm *òtú*, possibly Akwaugo's. Tobechukwu had vowed at the meeting that he hadn't touched her yet. Such a fool. Which man with a working penis would leave a beautiful, juicy woman like Akwaugo

untouched? Anyway, it was to his advantage. The god of his fathers knew that Akwaugo was his and was keeping her for him.

“I am here because I was told you have agreed to set me free, to restore my manhood,” he murmured.

“True. Your wi...Akwaugo spoke to me. Such a good woman, looking out for you after what you did to her. Left for me, you will die with your lifeless manhood. You don’t deserve pity at all.”

“*Nwòkêm*, reverse this thing let me get out of here!” Mezie didn’t need to hear the litany of Akwaugo's goodness.

“Oh, you are raising your voice at me?” Okorie shot back, leveling a glare at Mezie, then looked away. “Anyway, there’s a condition attached.”

“I have agreed to let her go, what other condition does she want?”

“You accept the bride price. And then, you will have to follow her to Ókìjá to annul the oath you made her take.”

“Is that what she is requesting?” His face tightened.

“Yes.”

He gripped the arm of the chair, his fingers dug into the worn-out material. Akwaugo, the little hungry daughter of a nobody whom he picked from nowhere, now thought herself wise now, eh?

“Forget it.” Easing himself off the seat and dusting his buttocks. “I will never do what she is asking of me. She can continue sleeping with that man as long as she wants, I will not follow her anywhere.” That oath was the one strong thing he had against her.

“You are a fool!” Okorie was on his feet also. “*Kédù ìfè n'êmê dî gï?* What is it you want?”

“Everything!” he snapped. “I started this whole story, I will end it my way!”

“You are such a terrible man!”

“Let’s see how you will react when your wife walks away from you after everything you did for her!”

“You are not the first to help someone!”

“I don’t care.”

“Let me advise you, Mezie. You will never be happy with a woman whose heart belongs to another. And that baby— you will never love her as your own.”

“Keep your advice to yourself.” Straightening his shirt, Mezie picked up the envelope and left.



HE WAS in the backyard that same day when some visitors walked in through the gate. He strolled out to meet them, his gaze swept through their faces—only one person dared hold his stare. Okorie.

“We are here as custom demands,” Akwaugo's father started.

“Spare me the long sermon, Catechist. Just go straight to the point or leave my compound.” It was good Akwaugo didn’t come with them, this sting of defeat would have been more painful.

One by one, Akwaugo's father lay the traditionally required items at Mezie's feet: kegs of palm wine, malt drinks, and cartons of beer. Then he turned and whispered to his wife who brought out an envelope from her handbag and handed it over to her husband. “This is the money,” the man said, offering him the envelope.

He snatched it from the man.

“It's a check,” Okorie added, victory dancing in his voice as Mezie stretched his hand to accept the envelope.

He eyed Okorie with disdain. “You people can leave now.”

“What of the oath?” someone asked.

“Yes, the oath. When are you going to Ókìjá with Akwaugo?”

“I said, get out of my house before I do something everyone would regret!” Mezie bellowed.

“But, my daughter would want to—”

“*Nwòkê m*, I'll call you when I'm ready to make that journey.” But he knew deep down that he was never going to annul that oath. He wasn’t going to lose the power he still wielded over Akwaugo. “As for now, take your miserable kinsmen and get out of here.”

The men began to murmur among themselves. From where he stood watching them, they looked like a pack of hyenas planning an attack on him, and that made him want to laugh. They didn’t know him at all. He would show them that he wasn’t easy prey.

“Okay,” Akwaugo's father said after their brief consultation. “We have heard you. But you have to give us a date. My daughter will not remain in this village waiting for you to make up your mind.”

“I will send a message across to you when I am ready. Then you can let her know.”

Another brief consultation. Then they bid him farewell, told him they would be waiting to hear from him, and began to walk out of his compound.

They would be waiting for eternity.

Cold silence descended on him as the last of them left, reminding him how empty his life was. Opening the envelope, he brought out the check and his eyes widened at the amount he saw written on it, then he frowned. Akwaugo's father couldn't be the one offering him five million Naira. As far as Mezie knew, the man could not still afford a decent meal, maybe he could now because of this Tobechukwu. But Mezie was sure that this money came from the same Tobe. That daring son of an outcast was paying him off. Unfortunately, he could no longer refuse. With that kind of money, he could relocate from the village to Onitsha and start a new life there.

Slipping the check back inside the envelope, he rose and walked inside.

That night, as he lay on his flat mattress, hands propping the back of his head, eyes on his caved ceiling boards, he felt a gradual warmth around his groin which grew with the heaviness that descended on his manhood. Snatching his hands off the back of his head, he reached for his penis. What his hands felt gave him a start. He threw himself off the bed and staggered into the bathroom where he pulled his boxers down.

His hand trembled as he grabbed his engorged penis and a loud moan erupted from his throat. Excitement moved him to lather his palms with soap and water, and then he began stroking his stiffness up and down. Slowly at first. Then his urge heightened, a desire that ran from his groin up his torso and paralyzed his legs. He threw his head back and began stroking vigorously, faster, moaning and groaning out loud as a shuttering start of thick white fluid flew upward with a spurt and sent a convulsive shiver all over him. Grabbing with both hands, he felt his squirt all over his fingers. His seeds. Collapsing against the wall, he began to cry and laugh at the same time.

He was a man again.



Tobe

Her mother had allowed him into her room, but she was sleeping when he walked in. He would have quietly walked away had she not turned to call his name.

"*Òmàlìchà m*." He sat beside her and took her hand in a clasp. "There's something I would like you to have again." He had not seen someone so white, yet so flawlessly beautiful. Swallowing his excitement, he brought out the little gift box. "You remember this?"

She sat up immediately and snatched the box from him, looking it over with widened eyes. "This is…looks like…"

"Open it." He grinned.

She did and squirmed. "You made another one for me?"

"It is the same one. I bought it back. Favor did, actually."

"How... Where did she... Oh my God! Tobe, I never thought I would set my eyes on it again!" She rushed into his arms. "I shouldn't have sold it. I have regretted that decision since that day."

"It's okay, Akwa m." He planted a kiss on her hair, then held her face and kissed her nose as well. "I wanted the moment to be right for me to give it back to you." He looked into her eyes. "You are mine now. We can do anything we want with our lives."

"I don't understand. Mezie…"

"Has agreed to let you be."

"Tobe?"

"It's over my queen. Your father called me to give me the news."

"Is this true? My goodness. You know what this means?"

"Yes, *Òmàlìchà m*. We can get married when you are ready." He had learned patience through her.

"I'll want nothing more than to be yours."

"My love, I can wait if you don't want it immediately."

"No, let's do it now. I love you so much, Tobe."

"*Akwaugo m*, *Òmàlìchà m*." He took the gift box from her and opened it. "Will you accept this gift from this humble man now?"

"Yes. And I promise not to lose it again."

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Book 3

Sometimes, the end is just the beginning.

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Chapter 34

Tobe



Lagos

Love and music were in the air as if they were a new kind of electricity. So palpable and real. Amidst the flowers and the petals in romantic hue, walked in Akwaugo, his symbol of hope and bravery of love. Her friend, Nwamaka, and his sister, Favor, were by her side.

Tobe watched her take in the cheers, waves and camera clicks with amiable calmness. His first thought was how much she had changed these past months. Growth was the perfect word.

“She looks like a water goddess,” someone muttered beside him, making him chuckle.

“If you'll excuse me,” he said to the men with him. Dusting off imaginary lint from his slim-fitted, black long-sleeved senator suit, and adjusting the black cap with white embroidery that sat perfectly on his head, he began walking towards her.

Breathtaking was the word his mind was searching for as his eyes ravished her perfect curves which were accentuated by her crimson red silk fishtail gown. She was dripping with so much beauty that nearly knocked him into a frozen, dreamlike state.

Letting out a nervous breath, he stood before the three ladies, smiling like a child who just won a prize.

“Our job here is done,” Favor said, dragging Nwamaka along as she left Akwaugo's side.

“They are amazing,” Akwaugo said, her eyes still on the ladies walking away.

“Yes. And you are stunning, my beautiful one.”

“I’m nervous,” she said.

“You don’t have to be, I’m here.” He took her arms and felt her relax as she held his gaze. There was something in her eyes that he would never find in another woman, something soothing, settling. It was difficult to explain, yet he loved it.

“Favor and Nwamaka said it’s a small party. It doesn’t look anything small,” she whispered.

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Tobe! How do I handle all this?”

“Same way you've handled everything. With grace.”

“Mother Mary, the people here are—”

He took her hand and brushed his lips on the back of her palm. “Nothing you can’t handle.” His fingers trailed the silver stones on the neckline of her gown, down to the silhouette between her flattering bust.

Someone cleared his throat behind him. “Sir, the guests are waiting.”

A roar of laughter erupted in the crowd.

“Come on, girl. Let’s go and make news.” He led her deeper into the exclusively reserved event center. “You look divine,” he whispered into her ears as they climbed the raised platform decorated for them.

“And you look like you are about to steal a thousand hearts away. Should I be worried?”

“This old heart belongs to you forever, my love.”

He had never been more proud introducing anyone than he was at the moment. He could see the eyes of most of the men ogling her, even the women couldn’t stop staring.

When he finally slid the pear-cut diamond ring on her ring finger and watched her cheeks turn rose pink, his heart swelled as he took her in his arms and sealed the engagement with a kiss amid cheers and thunderous claps.

“I’m madly, irrevocably in love with you, *Òmàlìchà m*.”

She nodded. “I love you too, Tobechukwu. From that day you came back looking for me when I told you not to.”

Some minutes later, she was taken away from him by friends and family, while his colleagues chose that odd place to talk business! Tobe

swiped a glass of Champagne off the tray being carried around by a bartender and sipped from the glass, while his eyes and heart galloped through an invincible bridge to four tables away, where Akwaugo was laughing hard at whatever Nwamaka was saying.

When her eyes caught his and she smiled, he tipped his glass towards her, throwing what was remaining of his wine into his mouth.



Akwaugo

“Love nwàntìntì.”

“Mm?” Akwaugo pulled her gaze away from Tobe who was doing everything to make her laugh harder than she was already doing, then she shifted her focus on Nwamaka. “What?”

“*Gìnî bú* what? You have been looking at your man, blushing each time he throws one silly expression at you. I doubt if you even heard a single thing I was saying.”

“Nwamaka—”

“Don’t Nwamaka me.” They burst into laughter. “Seriously, my friend, I'm so happy for you.” She signalled an attendant with small chops passing by, Nwamaka grabbed a plate and shoved two spring rolls inside her mouth. “See ehn, I've not eaten anything here o,” she said with her mouth full.

“You just finished a plate of rice and chicken sauce.”

“What is that? Ah, Akwaugo. You sef should know that's not food.” She swallowed and slapped her chest to give the food clot in her throat a free passage. “I want *àkpù* and bitter leaf soup!”

Akwaugo picked a puff from the plate and began nibbling. “Bitter leaf soup here?”

“Yes *nau*. What is an Anambra couple's party without the native delicacy?”

“This is city o.” Throwing a glance toward Tobe, she stifled a giggle as he gave her a helpless look and shook his head. It was obvious he would want to be right beside her at the moment, was it not for the people around him that were all fighting for his attention.

“Both of you are doing it again!” Nwamaka near-screamed, forcing Akwaugo’s eyes away from Tobe.

“Doing what?”

“Flirting with each other while I’m seated right beside you!”

“Oh.” She couldn’t help it. Tobe was a sweet distraction, had always been, the way he captured joy with those beautiful subtle smiles that reminded her of a cute little boy with a naughty secret to share. “I didn’t know I could ever look at another man with such…such…” It’s indescribable. “I thought I would never love any other man.”

“You never loved before.”

“Mezie.”

“Respected and feared him, yes. But not love.”

Months ago, she would have argued with Nwamaka on this, but that’s because she had only known Mezie’s own kind of affection. Now she had tasted something new, something sweet with a man she never thought would want her so much.

“Love doesn’t stifle, it liberates.”

She didn’t think of Mezie's attitude to her as stifling, rather he was securing what was his. *What was his*, a phrase he frequently used when referring to her. But never had Tobe treated her as though she was a possession, never made her feel she owed him anything.

“*Bìkô*, forget Mezie, *ínùgò*? He is in the past now.”

“Congratulations, to the bride-to-be.” A familiar voice cut into their conversation. Looking up, Akwaugo was forced to smile back at the dark-skinned beauty who approached her months ago, during the conference where Tobe took her in South Africa.

The lady took the seat opposite hers without asking if it would be okay for her to join them. “Your—” She eyed Nwamaka with the same eerie smile that was on her face the day they first met. “—friend?”

“Her sister,” Nwamaka enthused.

“There’s no resemblance at all.” Her eyes lingered on Nwamaka who was busy stuffing more of the small chops inside her mouth. Then, she turned to Akwaugo and said, “Anyway, I just want to congratulate you on your big day.”

“Thank you, miss.”

“Jenifer.”

“Yes, I remember now.”

An attendant stopped by their table with glasses of wine, set the tray down and began to serve the drinks one for each lady. “Let’s toast.” Jenifer eagerly lifted her glass. “To happiness.”

“Happiness for her, a rich man for me,” Nwamaka added.

“Nwamaka!”

“Yes *nau*. Who no like better thing?” laughter erupted among them.

“She’s right,” Jenifer said. “What is better than becoming the wife of one of the wealthiest men in the country?”

“He may not be this wealthy, but if he can take care of my bills…” Nwamaka shrugged.

“Oh, but that’s a mediocre dream. I, for one, would not settle for less.”

There was something about the way the lady Jenifer said those words, the disturbing glint in her eyes, like what Akwaugo saw in Mezie's that day she went to beg him to leave her alone so she could marry Tobe.

“I toast to a happy ending for all of us,” Jenifer added, sipping from her glass.

Nwamaka followed suit.

“You are not drinking,” Jenifer asked.

Akwaugo lifted the drink to her lips.

Jenifer stood and said, “I hope to see you more often.” And then she left.

“Strange,” Nwamaka said after a brief silence. “Who is she?”

“I met her only once.” Akwaugo said, setting her glass down.

“She looks rich.” Nwamaka got up and gulped what remained of her drink. “I’m coming, my friend. I have to find someone.”

“Ah-ah. *Ónyè kwà*?”

“I've made friends within this short period.” Nwamaka's eyes sparkled with excitement.

“*Ehe*?”

“Abeg close your mouth before a fly enters inside. Anyway, I met this guy earlier today and he gave me his complimentary card.” Fishing out the object from her bag, she handed it to Akwaugo, and snatched it from her almost immediately. “He said he will be going back to Port Harcourt today and I want to go with him.”

“He stays there?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. Amaka are you sure this is safe?”

“Akwa, trust me. He looks like a nice guy.”

“What if he is—”

“*Bìkô*, don’t put fear inside me now. Besides, I can do with the free ride.”

“I can give you money for transport back to Port Harcourt.”

“Come on, get out.” They both burst out laughing as Nwamaka began to walk away.

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Chapter 35

Tobe



He found her in a dimmed lit enclosed booth. Alone. Her long braids moved to one side of her shoulder, exposing her smooth slender neck. She was leaning her elbows on the table, her willowy waist arched in.

She whipped her face back as he snuck up to her, and she grinned at him.

“You are fucking beautiful,” he said, nudging her with his hip as he sat beside her.

“You’ve said this a thousand times.”

“Have I?” he asked, tipping her jaw so his gaze held hers in an electrifying lock.

“Yes. Though without that word,” she said, lowering her gaze.

“Which word?”

“I can’t say it.”

“I want you to say it.”

Her colour-infused cheeks dimpled with a shy smile as the word *‘Fucking’* left her lips and he couldn’t help the laughter that rolled out of his mouth. It was the most innocent way he had heard anyone say that word.

Cupping her face, he said, “You are so innocent, my beautiful one.” And then his tongue was in her mouth, drinking of her sweetness and something more, making contortive sweeps of her mouth vault.

“Tobechukwu,” she murmured against his lips. The urgency in her soft moan aroused inside of him a rush of helplessness, hunger, and intense lust. “Tobe—”

“*Òmàlìchà*.” Wrapping his hands around her waist, he pulled her even closer to him. “You are the death of me.” He groaned, adjusted her hair to the back.

“No, Tobe. I'll never be your death.”

“Then you are my life.” Her body against his, the way her bosom rose and fell, the sweet aroma of champagne in her warm breath. “I want to lie beside you tonight, to possess your body while you take mine.”

“Is it the right time?” She slipped her hand under his cloth, and traced a pattern on his stomach, sending a tide of desire all over him.

“You know it is.” Fuck! His aroused dick was nudging against the tightness of his pants. “You are mine before God and man.” He had performed every traditional rite, what was left was ceremonies to mark their union.

“Okay.”

“There is so much I want to teach you, my love.” Would he be able to control his wild lust and take her through the journey of sexual pleasure?

“I will want to learn from you.”

How was it that she always knew what to say to set him on fire? “Come on, let's get out of here.” Heart swelled with excitement, he drank from the wine she left on the table, abandoned what was remaining, picked up her purse, and helped her up.



THE FIRST STAB of pain hit him as he eased himself into the comfort of his car and disappeared as fast as it came. Adjusting himself, he pulled his lady closer and planted a kiss on her lips.

“The driver!” She giggled.

“He is minding the roa—” The second stab jagged through his stomach to his chest. Jolting him away from her. He screamed, clutched his chest, and then he twisted and turned as the pain traveled all over his body.

“*Ó gìnî*? Tobe! What is happening?!”

“Get this cloth off me!” Something was moving inside him, tearing his organs. He gripped her hand. “Something is… Ahhhh!” He could hear her screams. She was yelling at the driver?

Every second that passed brought pains that accelerated with fear. In those moments that stretched to infinity, her hands were around him. And as life slipped out of him, her tears-stained face was the last he saw.

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Chapter 36

Akwaugo



"Favor, *ànwûkwâ m'ô*."

"You are not dead."

"If he dies, I die."

"My brother has a strong spirit. He will not just succumb to death," Favor, who arrived some minutes after, said, handing Akwaugo a very hot cup of tea she didn't know how and where she got it from.

Akwaugo didn't want the tea, but she took it. Cradling the mug in both hands, she pressed her face into the steam until she felt pain pricking her skin, deadening her cheeks, and stinging her eyes. She needed the numbness to blur the scenes that wouldn't leave her head.

"You are not drinking that tea," Favor said. "Should I get you food instead?"

She towered over Akwaugo and Akwaugo knew she should look up. But she couldn't bear to. How could Favor be this calm to even offer her food and drink while her brother's life was hanging on the line? Not even a single question of what happened, how did it happen?

Why wasn't Favor blaming her for Tobe's situation?

A wave of nausea welled up inside her and she swallowed the acrid taste back down. "No, thank you," she said. "I'm not hungry."

The incident was playing on a loop inside her head. She wanted to pause it, but the film was relentless: his body writhing with pains, then gradually going still. The blood trickling down from his mouth, his eyes staring blankly into hers. "Blessed mother Mary," she muttered, raising the

mug to her face again, but the tea had cooled and the warmth on her skin wasn't enough to hurt.

"You have to go home now," Favor said, pacing the hall in front of her. "I've called the driver."

"My home is with him, by his side." She could feel the tears forming, fat droplets burst and hit her knees. She watched them soak into her dress and scratched her nails across a share of blood—his blood on her thigh.

"You have to go take care of Òlâédó. Let me stay here."

"Eunice is taking care of Òlá." Her hands hurt from holding the mug. She could feel her pulse beating rapidly and light in her wrists. And she was glad that her head was aching too. She wished she could feel more of the pains, that it was her on the hospital bed, breathing through a pipe and not Tobe.

Two men, perhaps the doctors, walked into the hall and started speaking with Favor. They would throw pitiful glances at her and mutter *he'll be fine* as though they were sure. *He ingested some poisonous substance—*

Poison?

How? How!

The room suddenly began to spin, and she fixed her gaze on the table in front of her, nodding when it seemed appropriate. A few more minutes later, the men gave her patronising nods and left, then Favor strode to the window, stood there for a while, and came back.

"He was poisoned?" Akwaugo whispered. "How?"

"I don't understand."

"I was with him…" She trailed off as she remembered she wasn't with him throughout that evening. He had been with a lot of people and might have shared drinks with them. He had also drunk from her glass of wine, that was the last thing he took!

Her hand began to shake, getting up to put down her untouched tea, she clattered the China ware against the glass tabletop, drawing the attention of the three nurses standing some few feet away.

"You have to calm down." Favor was by her side, guiding her back to the seat.

"Sorry," Akwaugo said. There was a metallic taste in her mouth, and she realised she'd bitten through the inside of her lips. "It's just that…he is my everything." She swallowed the blood in her mouth, and her voice shook with sobs. "I don't know what to do."

“My brother knows he has a lot of enemies. He has always been careful.”

There was frustration in Favor’s voice and for the first time, Akwaugo was seeing fear in her eyes.

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Chapter 37

Tobe



A day after

"Thank God," someone muttered beside him.

Tobe slowly opened his eyes and saw a man's face leaning close to his. For some seconds, he wasn't sure where he was, then his brain began a slow recollection as his eyes left the man's face to the woman behind him. Nurse Titi, the Chief Matron of St Thomas Hospital, which had been serving as his private clinic for nine years now.

"How are you feeling, sir?" the doctor asked, peering into his eyeballs, one after the other.

"I don't know." He blinked several times to adjust his eyes to the light in the room. "Everywhere hurts."

"He's fully awake," the doctor said.

"Thank God." The woman inched closer.

Tobe closed his eyes again and tried to clear his head. Fuck! His insides hurt terribly. Breathing seemed like he was pushing a fine cloth over a thorny surface, and there was a rush of noise in his head, like an underground train.

"You were brought in yesterday," the doctor continued. "We suspected food poisoning. So, we intubated your trachea and gastric lavage was performed on you."

Not sure he understood the medical balderdash, Tobe nodded, nevertheless. "I…" Damn, something was covering his nose and his mouth.

An oxygen mask? “Can't mo…” He tried again. Jesus! Even his tongue felt like there was hot coal on it.

“He is trying to speak, sir,” the nurse said.

“That’s good.”

“Should I allow those news people to come in and see him now?”

“Are they still here?”

“Three left when I told them Mr. Ochudo is not seeing anyone yet. Two stayed behind to speak to his wife-to-be.”

“Wife to be?”

“Mm-hm. I heard it was their engagement party last night.”

“Oh, yes. His sister mentioned something like that.”

Engagement. It was Akwaugo! He was supposed to engage her yesterday.

Sensing his discomfort, the doctor removed the mask.

“Akwaugo,” he said, his voice throaty. Speaking hurt badly. “My Wife.”

“Nurse, please send for her.”



Akwaugo

When she woke up that morning, for a few seconds she didn’t remember yesterday. Everything seemed the same. But when she opened her eyes to welcome the ray of the morning sun filtering in through her window, it all came back, playing out in motion scenes she couldn’t pause or mute. She pressed the heels of her palms into her temples as though she could make the images from yesterday go away through brute force, but still, they came —his cries, his body writhing in pain, the blood trickling down from his mouth.

She had dissolved into a puddle of tears and that was how Favor found her when she came into the room.

“I just got back to check on you.”

Words were not enough to explain how the whole thing was making her feel, so she simply shook her head while stroking her sleeping baby.

“Eunice said you didn’t eat anything when you got back last night.”

“Has he…is he awake?” she muttered, ignoring Favor's statement about not eating last night.

“Not yet.”

An hour later, she was sitting on the same seat she had occupied last night, staring at the same table where she’d dropped the untouched coffee. A woman strolled in to sit next to her, fished out a newspaper from her bag and opened it. Suddenly, it felt as though someone was pressing Akwaugo’s chest. Tobe’s face was staring at her from the woman’s newspaper, his eyes rebuking her for allowing this to happen to him. She forced herself to continue looking at the picture even as a hard knot tightened in her throat. Her vision blurred and she couldn’t read the words in the paper, but she didn’t need to. Two presenters were talking about the incident from the television hanging in one corner of the hall.

The woman beside her tutted and started talking, half to herself,

“Terrible, isn’t it? And just on his engagement party.”

Akwaugo said nothing.

“There must be something evil about that lady he wants to marry,” she tutted again. “This is a sign, I tell you. If he comes out of this, I’ll advise he doesn’t marry the lady.”

Akwaugo couldn’t help it, she let out a sob. Hot tears streaming down her cheeks into the tissue pushed gently into her hand.

“Poor lamb,” the woman said, as though soothing a small child. It wasn’t clear if she was talking about Akwaugo or Tobe. “You can’t imagine what his family is going through now, can you?”

But Akwaugo could imagine. She wanted to tell the woman that whatever she was imagining, it was a thousand times worse. However, she felt no need to talk, so she got up and began pacing the hospital hall with a headache that felt like demons were stomping inside her head, mouth so dry that it was an effort to swallow.

Was Tobe really poisoned or could it be something else?

The Ókìjá oath.

She'd forgotten about it after Mezie accepted the bride price. Mother Mary! How could she—knowing the potency of the deity—be this careless?

The sound of approaching footsteps pulled her out of her thoughts, turning in the direction of the sound, she saw the middle-aged nurse that attended to them yesterday walking towards her. A satisfying smile on her face.

“How is…”

“He is asking after you.”

“You mean…”

“Yes. He is conscious.”

Oh, Jesus. Sweet mother Mary.

She hurried out of the reception hall, climbing the stairs to get to the exclusive room he was kept.

“You are here.” The doctor met her by the door.

“Yes.” She snifled. “Yes.”

“Thank God you brought him here early enough.”

Swallowing the urge to cry as the doctor left, she turned her gaze to the man lying face up, eyes closed on the bed. Dragging her legs deeper into the room, she wondered if he would open those eyes soon.

When he did, her breath hitched as he turned to stare at her.

His face broke out in a smile, and he ordered, “Come.”

With laughter mixed with a sob, she shook off the tears that clouded her eyes and covered the distance between them in just two strides to sit at the edge of the bed and she took his hand.

“Tobechukwu. Oh, Tobechukwu.”

Tightening his fingers around hers. “*Òmàlìchà m*.” His voice was so coarse, but his breath had evened.

“I thought I lost you. I didn’t know what to do.”

“My love,” he muttered. “I’m here. Not going anywhere.”

“Tobe, I’ve brought nothing but misery to you—”

“Oh, shut up,” he sighed. “What nonsense are you talking about?”

“Tobe,” she whispered, biting off a sob.

Carefully placing his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her closer until her head was resting on his chest and he dug his fingers inside her hair. “You want to know what you brought into my life?” he asked. “Satisfaction and pride.”

A moan escaped her lips as he began to massage her scalp the way he loved doing.

“I don’t care if the world burns to ashes, Akwaugo. As long as you love me as much as I love you.”

What she felt for him was more than any love she had ever seen or read about, she could as well rip her heart out and give it to him. “I love you, my Tobe. *Ódì m n'òbí*.”

“*Ódì m n'òbí* — the one in my heart. Nice,” he murmured as he gently pushed her head slightly up. “Where did we stop with our naughty play before this happened?”

“Our naughty play?” She didn’t get it at first.

“Oh yes, we were planning to rip each other’s clothes off and fuck hard, weren’t we?”

“Tobe!” Pulling away from him, she covered her face with the palm of her hands. “You are just getting well, you shouldn’t be talking about…about this thing.”

“What thing?”

“You know. You know.”

He laughed wearily. “Stop being a baby.” More laughter. “I know you can’t wait for us to do it.”

Yes. The thought of finally having him enter her again after all this time made her essence tingle in a sweet way.

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Chapter 38

Akwaugo



Three weeks later

"I want you tonight."

Opening her eyes, she met him gazing down at her with burning hunger.

"Tobe?" She didn't even hear him enter the bathroom to sit on the rim of the tub, so there was no time to sink deeper into the water where she had stayed longer than she should—a habit she had developed lately. And why would he even come in here knowing very well that... that...

Mother Mary!

A slow smile was playing on his lips, that kind that makes her shiver. But she wasn't sure it was the smile now or his hand that had slipped under the arm she crossed over her chest, loosening it so he could cup her breast under the water that was sending thrill all over her.

"You are as smooth as silk." His voice was rough with desire. "You are doing things to me." His thumb began flicking her nipple. Up. Down. Making her shiver even more.

"Òlá—does she still—"

"Mm-m." Shaking her head. "She has been weaned," she said, not wanting him to stop touching her there.

"Oh, yes. I remember you said that last week."

"Mm."

He was giving her breast a gentle squeeze while watching her part her lips and throw her head to the side as waves of pleasure hit her.

“*Òmàlìchà m, ì n’ághàsám ìsì*.” His voice had reduced to a sexy groan. “I can’t believe I left you untouched this long.”

She couldn’t believe it either. However, she was glad that he waited till now when every one of her fears had been driven away. Fear... Mezie. No... Please... Tightening her grip on the rim of the bath, she fought the image that had suddenly popped into her head and the panic that came with it.

“Akwa m,” Tobe called her. “Stay with me, *Òmàlìchà m*.” He was leaning very close to her face, his warm breath stroking her lips even as his words began to melt her panic. “Think of me tonight. All the pleasure I’ll make you feel, babe.”

“Tobechukwu.” Why was it that he always knew the right things to say and the right moment to say them? Loosening her grip on the rim of the bath, she placed them around his neck and pulled him closer so that her lips were brushing against his as she spoke. “You have me. All of me.”

“Good. I don’t want to share you with—”

She shut him up with a rough kiss, and then she froze as realisation hit her. She had moved in first. Had covered his lips with hers. He had been the one who always make the first move, him taking her lips in his. Unsure if she had kissed him right, she began to pull away, but he held her back—not kissing her, not letting her go. Then, slowly, deliberately, he ran his tongue over her lips in such a way that sent instant heat spreading through her. And, oh, it felt so good.

“You ignite a fire in me, Akwaugo,” he murmured over her lips. “Why —what did you do to me?”

She couldn’t help the whimper that escaped her lips as she felt his hand again on her breast and his nail cutting through her nipple, sending a painful, pleasurable sensation down her core. “Kiss me again, Tobe.”

“It was you who kissed me.” There was humor in his voice. “I don’t mind you doing it again.”

Flushing all over, she lowered her gaze. She wished she could summon boldness again to kiss him. Unfortunately, that trait had flown away, leaving her a pack of nerves.

He laughed and pulled his hand away. “The heat is so intense tonight, my love.”

The heat had always been intense, only that she had been scared. Mezie's threats and their tradition had made her fight the lust that hovered

like steam around them. She had always desired to have this man inside her, his weight pinning her down, his sweat pouring on her naked body.

“Are we going... are we going to do it here?” she asked, her lips still yawning for his. She wished he hadn’t broken the moment.

“Won’t that be beautiful?”

“I’ve not done it any other place except... on a bed.”

“There’s a lot you've not done, my love.” He stroked her cheek, then brought her face up so she could look at him. “I’m glad to be the one to spoil you.”

A grin spread across his face. “So, tell me, where will you want it to be first?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes moved down to the conspicuous bulge in his trousers. “I guess...in the room.” On the bed. There, she could hide her lack of experience under the sheets and cover her face with the pillow as she wasn’t sure she would be able to meet his expectations tonight.

“I'll be gentle with you, my love. Like the first time,” he said. “And I think you should get out of the water now before you catch a cold. Let me help you.”

“No!” Oh, Mother Mary! Why was she feeling this sudden shyness? Wasn’t this what she wanted? “I'll come out myself.”

He laughed and stood up. “I just want to help.”

“Go.”

“Go? I thought—”

“Tobechukwu!” she whined, making a face.

“Now you are confusing me.”

“I mean.” Oh Jesus. “I want you... I want us to do it but... I don't want you to see me naked.” What was she even saying?

“Okay,” he said, laughing again. He began walking out, but then stopped. “Can I come back tonight?”

“Yes.”

Some minutes later, she stood gazing at her reflection in the huge mirror on the wall, with just a white woolly robe on. Her wet thick natural curls held up in a bun, beads of water cascading from her head down. She was beautiful, but tonight, she suddenly felt inadequate. So inexperienced for a man like Tobe.

Palming her cheeks, she wondered if she would be able to please him. It had been a long while since they, uhm, did it. Their first and their last time.

Even then, she wasn't sure she made him happy in a way that a woman makes a man happy.

But he came back looking for her. Wasn't that what started this whole thing in the first place?

She was yet to dismiss the thought when she heard the door open, and Tobe walked in. Fresh. His unclad torso glimmered under the bright light in the room. Swallowing hard, she allowed her eyes to feast on his amazing body—the lines below his abdomen that disappeared under his loose joggers. She hadn't seen many adult male bodies but this one was everything beautiful.

"You said I can come back," he said. If his eyes were an ocean, they would have not just drowned her, but wrapped her in their waves.

"Yes." He was a man who wasn't proud of his wealth alone but also his body. Or maybe he saw the hunger in her eyes and was making sure he heightened it. With his lips maintaining the wry smile it came in with, hands shoved inside his pocket, drawing the jogger even lower, exposing the upper part of his groin, a flood of heat washed up her throat to stain her cheeks.

"You're looking at me like this is the first time," he said, breaking the moment. He sauntered closer, took her palms, and planted a feathery kiss on each. "What am I saying? Of course, it's going to be like our first." Another kiss. "I will make it beautiful for us."

She nodded like a dumb lamb.

"Let me look at you," he said, dropping her hands to place his on her shoulders.

He was slow. Painfully slow. Deliberate with every move while watching her face. He unknotted the belt around her and skimmed the robe off her shoulders, his long, beautiful fingers brushed her skin and she gasped, shivering a little as the robe fell to her feet.

Stepping back, to give her body a thorough perusal. "Divine—amazing. Simply gorgeous," he muttered. "Jesus, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!"

She believed him because somehow, she knew he was being sincere.

"Come, *Òmàlìchà m*. I want you so much. Can't wait any longer." Picking her robe, he wrapped it around her, pulling her closer.

"Wait." Her breathing was shallow. "I want to let you know that I've known only two men in my life, Mezie and you. I'm… I don't know if I can

please you well.” Her heart was thumping wildly, her eyes, clouded with shameful tears, settled on his relaxed face. “I don’t know anything about making a man happy,” she added.

“Akwa, what do you think I’m looking for? I want you, babe. Just you. We will sail this boat together.” He gave her earlobe a playful bite. “You’ve just succeeded in making me want to do some crazy things with you. Things you will love,” he whispered into her ears and whisked her off the floor, with her hands curled around his neck and her head on his chest, he carried her out of the room.



THE ROOM he brought her to was the one he said was *theirs*, though she had refused to sleep in there with him—she wasn’t yet his then. But something seemed to have changed in it. In fact, everything has changed.

Setting her down, he allowed her to feed her eyes. “This is your room,” she said.

“Our room,” he said. “I changed everything.” He was soon behind her, whispering in her ears, his arms around her midriff, guiding her to the most beautiful palatial bed her eyes had ever seen.

“Why?” How could a man decide to change an interior that she knew was as fine as the type she used to watch on the television?

Turning her to face him, he cupped her face. “You don’t like it?”

“Yes. I mean… It’s beautiful. When did you do all this?”

“*Òmàlìchà m*. Does it matter when?” His forehead rested on hers. “I just wanted to surprise you.”

He was rubbing the evidence of his need on her pelvis, his grip tightening around her. “You are shivering.”

Yes, she was.

“Are you scared?”

“Mm-mm.” It was the excitement and anticipation that were killing her.

“You trust me?”

“Yes, I trust you.”

She knew what was coming when he tipped her jaw up and she was ready. But not ready for the flutter that attacked her stomach as he moaned against her lips. There were raw emotions in the way his hands slipped into

the robe, coming up to her back and his fingers digging into her flesh. Then he was kissing her harder, deeper, weakening her knees.

Akwaugo kept her eyes half open, sneaking a guilty peak at him each time he came up for air, just to be sure he wasn't going to stop.

Slipping the robe off her shoulders for good this time, he rested a hand on her back while the other padded the back her head, pulling her closer.

"*Òmàlìchà m, ìtôgbûgôm,*" he murmured. "I'm not sure I've tasted lips like yours."

Her heart was pounding in her chest as her limbs grew weaker. Curling her hands around his neck, she held his head down. "Don't stop please," she moaned.

"I wasn't going to."

Lifting her off the floor, he carried her across the room and lay her gently on the bed. Maybe time stopped as her back touched the softness of the sheets, but the flutter in her stomach intensified. Closing her eyes, she waited for his body to come on top of hers, focusing on how good having him that first time felt and how it would be today.

But Mezie—

No! She wasn't going to allow that thought now. Mezie was a rotten fruit that should be thrown out. A bad memory that had no business in her head. He had caged every part of her for years, preventing her from enjoying the pleasure of sexual lust. But today, she wasn't going to give him that power over her, she would allow her mind to focus on Tobechukwu, on how addictively he invaded all her senses. Her body would feel every of his touch without being ashamed and her womanhood—her pussy, as he called it—would belong to him. So, ridding her head of every unwelcome thought, she waited for him to lay beside her.

He didn't.

Had he changed his mind? She opened her eyes and saw him standing and staring at her as though he didn't know where to start. "*Tobe m*, is there something you want me to do first?"

"*Òmàlìchà*, seeing you here, in all your beauty is enough thing for me." Bending over her, his fingers began to caress her face. "Can't you see how overwhelmed you make me feel? I can't believe you are actually here—so beautiful, yet so innocent."

"Then take me now," she whimpered. Naked longing, a want that has been suppressed for a long time overtook her. "Please, Tobe. *Ìf'èá n'ágùsìm*

ìkè. Make me a woman again. Here, in your bed."

"*Òmàlìchà*, you don't want to imagine my own hunger for you right now."

He tugged on the rope of his joggers so that it came loose, rolled the piece of clothing down his legs and kicked it aside. At the sight of his huge length, she covered her face with her palms.

She had seen him in his naked form before, but today was different. Everything about this night was making her feel as though it was her first time with him.

"Are you scared?" He gently took her hands off her face.

"*Mbá*, no." Her eyes settled on his member again, and she felt fear and excitement wash through her. "I have done this before. With you."

"Good," he said and settled himself beside her, his erection brushing against her thighs.

He moved his tongue over her lips, his breathing harsh and erratic, filled with… oh, such a tender, terrible hunger. His need for her—her need for him—burning every one of her senses. With a harsh groan, she deepened the kiss, but he was already there before her, making tiny guttural sounds of pleasure and ravaging her lips, his hands slid down her skin, drinking every inch of her body with a need for her so absolute, so voracious that she gasped air between consuming kisses and insatiable want of his touch.

When he pulled his lips from hers to run his tongue on her shoulders and throat, she whined, arching impatiently against his body. Even though she wasn't able to give voice to her needs, he should know that he shouldn't keep her waiting for long. His hands found her aroused nipple and pinched, she writhed against him, squealed, and nudged her body closer.

"*Tobe m, Bìkô nû*."

"Not yet." He gritted. Pinning her flat on the bed, he knelt astride her, and his warm mouth took her nipple while he fondled her other breast. His tongue flickered on the pebble up and down, trailing her areola in a circular motion, sending a sweet sensation down her cove.

"*Chì m, Tobe bìkô nû*."

"You like it huh?" he murmured.

How could he ask her that? It was the best pleasure she had ever had as a woman and her moist core would explode if he didn't bury his erection down there fast.

"Yes," she whispered.

Chuckling, he brought his hand down and slid it gently over her folds, still sucking on her nipple.

"*Chìm ò*— yes— touch me there."

He did it again, this time, his fingertip slipping between and gathering her wetness. Parting her with two fingers, he found her clit and began rubbing it in small circles. Thrusting her hip up, she stifled out a moan, grabbing the sheet at both sides.

His mouth left her nipple and proceeded down. Brushing. Kissing and licking, forcing incoherent moans out of her mouth. She wasn't supposed to let her voice be heard while having sex—Mezie told her only loose women did that. But with this man, there was no pretence, no fighting to be modest. He was doing things to her no man had done before.

"Mother Mary!" His lips were on her thighs, working up to her leg. From the slit of her eyes, she watched him rub his cheek on her foot, bending her knee slightly to suck on her toes passionately.

"I love you beyond everything. *Òmàlìchà m*." Pushing her legs apart, he brought his head down to her mound, and on impulse she slipped her hand in and covered her entrance, preventing him from going further.

She could feel his sudden anger from the trembling of his hands on her legs and his heavy panting.

"Akwa, what is it again?"

"I—"

"Fuck!" he muttered. "It's Mezie again?"

No! Was that what he thought? "This thing you want to do to me…" She knew that city men licked their women's private parts because Nwamaka had told her stories. Mezie had called it a very dirty thing the day she mentioned it to him. "You want to dip your tongue inside me?"

"Yes."

"Is it—is it a good thing?"

He let go of her legs and went up to plant a kiss on her lips. "It's what men who love and adore every part of their women's body do, my love."

"But—"

"Shhh." Another kiss to shut her up. "I understand that you have not done this before, but trust me, *Òmàlìchà*. Let me introduce this to you." He stared at her for a while. "If you don't like it, I'll stop and never do it again."

"Okay."

He flashed her a smile and slid down again. “*Ngwà nù, mépèrè m ùkwù, ká m rà òtú gì*.” He slapped her lap gently. “Let me drink of your sweetness.”

She hesitated. “Tobechukwu,” she called.

“*Òmàlìchà m*.”

“Will you enjoy it?”

“More than any food in the world.”

“Okay.”

When he parted her legs again and buried his face in her moist entrance, she didn’t object. Then he began licking every part of her cove, sending tingles all over her. When he ran his tongue around the tip of her bud, she lost the will to remain in control and let out a loud moan.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

For that brief second he asked that question, she felt like grabbing his head and pushing it back down.

“Yes!”

“Should I stop?”

“No. bìkò, no.”

Letting out soft laughter, he began stroking her bud with his tongue; up and down, side to side. He was right, this new sensation that sent her head flying back, her fingers gripping the soft sheet on both sides and whimpering like a loose woman, wasn’t what she would want to miss.

Widening her trembling legs further, he took the whole of her engorged bud in his warm mouth, sending waves of sweet, unexplainable sensation up through the entire length of her body. Then he swooped down and penetrate her wet slit, his tongue digging deep, thrusting—making love to her.

The sound he was making was in sync with her rapid breathing and the whoosh-whoosh from her canal.

Mother Mary! He was letting something lose inside her. “*Chìm ô*! *Tobechukwu, Ì gbûgô m ô*,” she squealed, writhing with pleasure.

“You like it now,” he muttered against her... uh— pussy — as he would call it. Breathing hard on it, moaning like a man licking a delicious *órà* soup. “Nnê, you are so sweet.”

She felt a gradual tightening in her core, an electrifying spasm was building inside her. Something new and terrifyingly sweet. “*Tobe m*, I'm feeling somehow o— it’s like I want to— I want to— *hei* God!” There was

a kind of new strange thrills rippling inside her. Rippling, rippling, rippling, like a flapping overlapping of soft flames. Soft as feathers, running to a point of brilliance—It was like bells rippling to accumulation.

He knew what it was, and he held her legs wider, preventing her from moving. His tongue worked faster and frantic.

“Tobe, I'm feeling something strong…sweet…”

“Just how I want you to feel.”

Before she could object. She was quaking and quivering as a strange bolt of muscles gripping sensation shot through her core and traveled her whole body. She felt warm wetness jetting out of *her*, splashing all over his face.

She should be ashamed that she soiled him, and his bed too. But he seemed to like it.

“Yes, my love. Yes,” he moaned.

What was this thing—this heavenly feeling?

“*Òmàlìchà m*, I want to enter now—can’t hold on anymore.” He didn’t wait for her response. Balancing his knees astride her, he gripped her waist, lifted it, and pushed a pillow under her.

The first time he had her, it was just a contract, an act to get her pregnant for her ex-husband. He had turned off the light and shut the thick curtains in the room. She had hidden her face from him, ashamed to admit the pleasure that followed every thrust. Today she wasn’t ashamed that he was seeing her feel everything he was doing to her.

Spreading her legs again, he tapped on her mound, sending continued sparks of pleasure deep, deep inside her.

“I told you I’ll fuck you deep and hard that your thighs would squirm and your pussy would pulsate,” he said with a grunt.

Pussy. She loved how he always said it, the naughty glint in his eyes—he knew how to make dirty words arousing.

She watched him brace his huge erection with his eyes on her face, arousing her anew. And soon, his erection was scraping around her wet entrance. Then he was pushing his length inside, watching her reactions. Without warning, he drove his full length in with one hard thrust and she let out a loud moan, jerking her hips up to meet him.

“*Òmàlìchà*, are you okay?”

“Yes.” Typical of him to ask. He had always asked. Even the first time he took her, more than a year ago. God! He was making her love him more.

His gentle, yet fierce way of loving her was sending sweet messages to her senses.

For a while, he didn't move. His hands gripped her hips, and his erection grew even larger inside her. He was making her wait, as though he wanted her to brace herself. Then he began to thrust. Slowly. Very slowly.

"Tobe."

"Mm?"

"Do me faster."

"Faster. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Good, because I am about to ride you with abandonment," he said, pulling out slightly to give another thrust.

Moaning, her hands clawed the sheet in a tight grasp.

He gave off a guttural groan and began plowing her. The force of his thrust rammed her whole body up and down the sheets.

His face. Oh! With his eyes half closed, his mouth slightly parted, his tongue wetting his lips which he bit and sucked on as he ground her with the vigor of a male erotic dancer.

"This is fucking good! Akwaugo. What did you pour inside your pussy to make it this sweet?"

Holy mother Mary. He was the one destroying her secret garden in an amazing, breath-taking way, yet he was asking what was inside her *Òtú*. With his tongue, he'd given her convulsive pleasure, and now he was reaching her soul. Possessing her body, taking her in a most beautiful, fantastic way.

"My sweet, sweet little angel. My beautiful one, you are killing me," he said, moaning, pounding on her pussy. Winding his waist against her flesh, his hardness brushing against her walls in every form; back and forth, circular, thrusting deeper and deeper, ripping her apart and she loved every bit of it.

For all it took, she wanted him to keep plowing, to thrust deeper and deeper, to make her ache and get sore for him.

"Tobechukwu."

"How do you like it?"

"Just the way you are doing it." She couldn't believe she was the one making demands, but—oh! It felt so good. So, so good that she wanted him

to go all hard on her. She might not be able to face him the next day, would die of shame for acting like a cheap loose woman.

"Fuck!" He pulled out suddenly and roughly turned her around, with her face mashed against the pillow. He arched her back so her ready cove was bare to him. Then he shoved in again with one thrust.

She had not done it this way before, had not been mounted from behind. But it gave her a strange pressing sensation. The lewdness of it, the outright dirtiness, and the not-so-acceptable element, all gave her a wild thrill.

Years ago, she would frown at a woman being laid like a common whore. Mezie wouldn't even think of it. But here she was, having the thrill of her life.

As Tobe kept pounding her wildly and grunting, she started getting that strange tingling again, an electrifying pressure building deep inside her core.

"Tobechukwu!" she screamed.

"*Nnê m*."

"It's happening again. I can feel it coming…deep inside there." She was trembling wildly.

Leaning forward, his elbow circled her neck, jacking her face up. "*Nyè m yâ, nnê*. I want all of it on my dick," he gritted in her ears. Pounding harder and faster.

The spasm this time was very intense, she felt it from the root of her core up through her whole body. Screaming wildly, she tried to slip away but he held her in a tight grip, thrusting harder and wilder, making it difficult to control what was happening to her.

Her core was pulsating violently, her thighs trembling, and she began to moan loudly as the spasm sent her flat on her stomach, hot juice gushing out of her, pushing his erection out.

"Oh! Oh!" She groaned.

He gave her a few seconds to recover before he shoved his hardness back inside her and resumed riding, gently at first, stroking her soreness, then he increased his pace. In another few seconds, his whole body began to give off a series of shudders.

"Oh God—Oh fuck." With one last thrust and a grunt, he poured his warmth inside her.

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Chapter 39

Tobe



He studied her as she sashayed from one end of the kitchen to the other, humming a tune while picking baby bottles and dumping them in a steriliser. She looked so calm, so angelic in her flowing dress, her thick curls firmly held up in a single bun. Last night, he had taken the pleasure of locking his fingers in the lustrous mash, pulling off the band and allowing it to scatter on the pillow.

With one leg crossed over the other, he leaned on the door frame, his hand dipped inside the pocket of his joggers. Licking the remnants of her last night's kiss that still lingered on his lips, he shook his head. Last night, she was wild yet so innocent. Now, as he watched her, she looked nothing like the woman that had begged him to *do her harder and faster*.

She finally turned and saw him. "Tobe?" Her face scrunched in a fake frown. "What are you doing there?"

"Admiring my woman."

She was so fair. He didn't know that skin could be so luminous, so translucent. Last night, her fairness had even glowed under the brightness of the moon that had crept around the edges of the curtain and bounced on her skin. She was a statue—an African goddess came to life in his hands.

"*Bìkô hàpû m*." She was blushing rose pink.

"You know what I want to do now instead of leaving you alone?"

"Mm-mm."

"Take you back to the room so I can *do you* hard and fast."

"Tobe!"

He was making her flush and he loved it. “Your legs would shake and you will scream my name like you did last night.”

“Stop it *nau*.” She buried her face in her palms, giggling.

Beleaguered by lust, his fucking mood right now as he gazed at her baby-like face, the urge to pick her up, settle her on the granite cast kitchen unit, and eat her pussy over and over again, slurping and sucking her clit so intensely until both of them would get soaked with her squirt, then he would fuck her deep and hard with her legs hanging on his neck, grew.

“Oh, God! You are so, so crazy. You know that?”

“Yes, my love.” He walked towards her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You are the cause of my madness.” Nobody warned him about getting involved with her kind.

“Tobe, stop. I’m just a woman.”

“No, *Òmàlìchà m*. You are more than a woman.” Little wonder her ex couldn’t let her go. Which man would have a taste of her without losing his mind? “I thought I love you before, now I practically worship you.” He’d never experienced such overwhelming physical desire and spiritual connection. He wanted her so close, the heat of her body against his.

“You are making me feel somehow, Tobe. I’m just a common village—”

He placed his fingers over her lips and stopped her from finishing the sentence. “You are every strong man’s weakness. My weakness.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

She had her hands around his neck and her face a breath away from his. “I love you so much, my husband-to-be.”

“Husband to be, I like that.” But he wished she could stop using the phrase *To-be*. He had fucking paid her bride price. Had done every damn traditional marriage rite. And last night, they had consummated their union with an intense love making. Fuck, his dick just breathed at the thought of last night. Palming her face, he kissed her hard on the lips. “Let’s go back to bed.”

“But you said we have an appointment with the police commissioner today by 9 a.m.”

“The commissioner will understand if I call to reschedule.”

“It's about the incident, Tobe. He may have something about the person who tried to poison you.”

“Maybe. But that can wait.”

“No.” She giggled. “What is wrong with you?”

“You.” He tightened his grip around her, preventing her from getting away. “We can have it here if you don’t want the bed.”

“Jesus!”

“Yes, Jesus.”

“What of the staff?”

“They don’t get to this side of the house if not invited.”

“Favor?”

“Gone to work.”

“What do I do with you, Tobechukwu Ochudo?”

“Love me. Feed my mouth, my belly, and my dick. Then never leave me.”

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Chapter 40

Mezie



A few months ago, frustration forced him to accept venison from his enemy, a huge amount of money that saw him out of penury. But it came with a price: his Akwaugo. He couldn't bear the shame losing her brought him. The mockery, especially from his kinsmen.

Ndì òjòôr, he scuffed.

None of them knew when he left the village and where he went to.

And none knew he just returned.

From where he was, his house stood like a weeping old hag along the lonely bush part that led to the stream. It was as if no one had even tried to walk past it since he left. Unlocking his gate, he stood for a while, his eyes roaming around the compound. The whole place had been taken over by grasses. He walked in and carefully shut the gate as he didn't want to announce his return.

The noxious smell that wafted into his nose sent him coughing. What died and made his house its burial ground? Or had his kinsmen, concluding that he would no longer return to the village, turned his compound into a dump site for dead bodies? With his hand covering his nose, he footed deeper into the compound.

He didn't plan this short homecoming. But his visit to Ókìjá earlier that day —he had gone to remind the deity of the revenge it hadn't yet melted on his behalf— prompted it.

Akwaugo was no longer his obsession, that man must have ravished her *Òtú* badly, jabbing his adulterous manhood into her, right, front and center. No, an elder does not spit and lick up his spittle. Akwaugo was now

damaged goods as far as he was concerned. Besides, he had his manhood now, he could have any woman he so desired. But he would be a fool to let her go free. Not after bringing him shame and disgrace, exposing him the way she did that day before his kinsmen.

So, he had pleaded with the deity to remember its promise. “Do not make a mockery of your potency,” he had challenged.

Mezie wanted two things: that baby, the child she bore had to die, and she mustn't bear any other child for that man. She must be made to feel the pain of barrenness again. This time, there wouldn’t be any remedy for her situation.

“Get sands from your compound. *Ègò áyóró átò* and present yourself to Ókìjá. You will get what you want.”

And that was the reason for his impromptu visit to the village.

His feet sank into a puddle, smashing a rotten fruit that spilled its content all over his sandals. Hopping on one foot, his eyes roamed the compound for a stick that he could use to wipe the offending rubbish off his newly acquired footwear. Done with that task, he fished out a bottle from the pocket of his trousers, squatted to clear a potion with the stick he found, and scooped a handful of sand into the container.

The hooting of an owl somewhere not far from where he was made him turn his head sharply. Even in the darkness, he could see the bird’s glistering big eyes. He grabbed the stick he used earlier and hurled it at the bird but the evil thing didn’t move. Instead, it flapped its wings and... and... *Chìnêkê*! What kind of sorcery was this? Did the bird just turn into a miniature image of an *Édó* deity and change back? Or were Mezie's eyes playing tricks on him?

For a brief moment, his body was clothed with goosebumps.

“I am the son of this land. I succumb to no evil,” he gritted, gathering a fistful of sand and aiming at the bird again. It screeched and flew away, leaving Mezie alone to finish his work. He was supposed to get back to *Àgbárá Ókìjá* that night, and when the sacrifice was completed, he would be returning to Onitsha.

He didn’t give another thought about the owl as he set out to leave, neither did he notice the dark figure that hovered over the closely knitted palm trees, regarding him while he hurried up the road.



Akwaugo

When the witch cries in the night and the baby dies in the morning, there is no need to ask who did the killing. Evil has its face behind it so it can snatch without compassion.

When Akwaugo heard the heart-wrenching cry of her daughter Òlâédó, one thought rushed into her head: evil had returned to collect its debt.

She jumped out of bed and waited. Maybe it was nothing, she must be having her breakfast and not liking it. The child had suddenly developed a dislike for beans which used to be her favorite food. Yet, Akwaugo felt the blood pounding in her ears and her inside trembling to the panic that had rushed into her brain like a masquerade caught in the rain.

She had woken up that day with this feeling that disaster was looming. An inkling she had dismissed after speaking with Tobe over the phone—he had left for Ghana two days ago. The day had moved on until mid-morning when the discomfort came again and nested in her brain like fermented palm wine. Nothing she did was able to get it out.

Another scream.

Mother Mary!

She dashed out of the room she now shared with Tobe and ran through the hallway to her daughter's room where the scream had come from. She could hear Eunice's desperate voice. "Òlá! Òlâédó!"

She forced herself into the room, then her body froze, same as her brain. Eunice had Òlâédó in her hands, and it was like the child—

Akwaugo staggered backward, her hand covering her mouth as nausea racked her inside.

"I don't know what happened to her, ma."

She wasn't moving, her baby wasn't moving!

"I heard her cry and came. She started convulsing, and... and..."

What she feared had finally come upon her.

"Let's take her to the hospital, ma."

"*Chìm—Chìm ò*," she mumbled. "*Ósèbúlùwá*—my God!"

"I have the family doctor's number, let me call him."

Akwaugo wasn’t listening as her whole being had been catapulted back to the village where she could see Mezie’s sneer, the mocking glint in his eyes while he reminded her of the oath they took before the scary antiques displayed inside the Ókìjá shrine.

“Ma, let's get her to the hospital, there’s no time.”

They’d taken her child, the problem now was she didn’t know which of the deities that did it, and for what sin? Was it for revealing to everyone the paternity of the child or agreeing to make love with another man other than Mezie?

She felt a hand on her shoulder shaking her to consciousness.

“Hmm?” She turned to face one of the housekeepers, then her eyes roamed. How many were in the room? Six? Seven? Almost all the staff had gathered. Who summoned them? For what reason?

“We should take Òlá to the hospital, I have called the doctor.”

“Hospital kwá. Which Ólá?”

She couldn’t comprehend what they were all muttering about. Hospital. Òlá. What was going on? And why were they looking at her as if she had lost her mind?

“Please dial Oga’s number,” someone said. “I think she's not okay.”

“I’ve called Favor.”



Mezie

“*Ógbù ônyê mgbé ndú n’ágù yâ*!” Mezie hailed himself as he unlocked his door and stepped into the interior of the decently furnished apartment he recently moved into. A stench wafted into his nose as he entered the restroom to relieve himself of the pressure that threatened to bust his bladder. He didn’t know if it was his unflushed toilet or the rancid odor from the forest of Ókìjá which was now glued to his skin like mortal sin, but goodness! The smell could kill a thousand rats.

As he relieved himself, he thought of the shrine again and shuddered. How anyone could stand a place so baleful and bloodcurdling as the thick Ókìjá forest where he was asked to put down the objects of sacrifice and

strip naked, baffled him. But he had done it, now all he had to do was to wait for the deity to do its part.

Done with his business, he peeled his muddied clothing, dumped them inside a bucket in the restroom, and swaggered naked with another bucket to get water which he would take back to the bathroom and scrub himself thoroughly.

"Wait for the news," the priest had told him.

He would.

What if they hid their misfortune from people?

Mezie scoffed while scrubbing his armpit with intensity.

Death cannot be hidden for long.

He smiled as he bent to scoop water with his palms, threw it on his face, and allowed it to cascade down his body. He spat out the ones that ran into his mouth, bent again, scooped, and threw more water on his back, arms, head, and face, over and over again until he was sure every scent of evil had been washed away. Then, he lifted the bucket and threw the remaining water over his head, moving his neck side to side like a child dancing in the rain.

He spat again, scrubbed his face, and swaggered out of the bathroom.

He would defer going to his chemist shop today, just that day would not make his customers run away. In fact, he was beginning to consider getting himself a salesboy. His business had started looking up, Onitsha was treating him well.

You ungrateful fool, if not for the money given to you by Ochudo's son, you would have been gone by now.

"Did I ask him for his money?" he retorted, settling his bare butt on his bed. Conscience could be stupid. Why would the uncooperative thing want him to feel grateful to the rich he-goat who stole his Akwaugo from him?

He hissed and pulled his legs off the floor, sprawled on the bed, his hands padding his head.

Vengeance is sweet, and he was going to enjoy every bit of it.

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Chapter 41

Tobe



It had been two days since he left Nigeria. Two days of hopping from one meeting to the other with little rest at intervals. He could see red lines on his white eyeballs when he looked in the mirror. Any attempt to blink and his eyes would hurt as if there were sand poured inside them.

One more day, he thought as he stared out of the window of his hotel room. One more day to round off the visits to his company's distributors in Ghana after this visit to the Ghanaian minister of Commerce, then he would head home to his family.

Family. Ha! Thinking of Akwaugo and Òlá his daughter made him want to scream for joy. And the fact that his uncle now seemed to be okay with Akwaugo, thanks to Nchekwube and his wife. In fact, the whole family went all out for him, making his joy complete.

Everything was falling in place for him, as though he was being compensated for a good he didn't know when he did. Even the police had some good news too. The person who tried to poison him had been found and he couldn't believe it when they told him who. All his life, he never thought Jenifer was capable of such dastardly acts. First, paying someone to set Akwaugo's house on fire, and when that didn't work as she had planned, she resolved to poison Akwaugo's drink, only that it was him who got hit and not Akwaugo. How could one be this heinous? And to think he had considered getting married to her when he'd thought Akwaugo wasn't going to be his. Well, he guessed one could not be able to tell what another could do when desperate.

Already dressed, waiting for his chauffeur to take him to the agreed business breakfast arrangement with the Ghanaian minister, he smoothened his grey tux, adjusted his tie, and checked his time. He still had fifteen more minutes to wait, enough time to treat himself to a cup of coffee and reminisce on how beautiful his life had turned.

Tobe had a lot to be thankful for. His rising from grass to grace; he could afford practically anything his heart so desired, and the universe had equally blessed him with a beautiful and amazing woman whom he would be walking down the aisle with next month.

He left the window to get his phone from the bed then dialed Favor.

“Nne, I’m thinking... are you okay? What happened?”

“Akwaugo is gone.”

“What do you mean she's gone?”

“I don’t know, brother. They said Òlâédó was convulsing, then… I just don’t know!”

Òlâédó was convulsing. Akwaugo left. What was Favor talking about?

“She took Òlá with her.”

“What are you talking about? She took Òlá to where? Wasn’t someone with her in the house?” What the… How was this even possible? “You said Òlá was convulsing?”

“Eunice called me, said that Òlá wasn’t breathing and Akwaugo…she was acting weird.” He could hear sobs in between Favor's words and that got him more worried because Favor hardly got perturbed over things. If she's crying now, then it meant this was serious.

“Did you check the hospital?”

“She's not there. I called Doctor Afolabi!”

Jesus. It just didn’t make sense; how could she take a dying child and disappear? Where did she go to? *Jesus*, *Jesus*. Anger and panic bubbled within him.

“Where in God's name did she go to?”

“They said they left her with Òlá at some point.” All of them left her? What kind of story was this? “She was nowhere to be found when they came back to get mother and child so they could proceed to the hospital.”

“And nobody saw her leave? The drivers? The security men? It doesn’t even make sense!”

“Brother Tobe,” Favor's voice quivered. “I'm confused.”

“I'm coming home.”

“Eh?”

With no more words for his sister, he ended the call and stood, staring at his phone for a while. Whatever made Akwaugo do this? Did anybody from the village contact her? Mezie, did he threaten her?

The hotel room phone buzzed, and he knew the chauffeur was waiting. Quickly, he pulled out his bag from the wardrobe and began to pack his things. He would order the man to take him to the airport instead. Would apologise to the Ghanaian minister on his way there.

Finding his family was the most important thing.



Akwaugo

Darkness has covered the sky by the time she arrived in Onitsha and boarded another bus to Ókìjá. All the while, she was swallowing her grief like one would swallow a bone stuck in the throat. She avoided curious eyes, the same way she did when she sat on the bus that brought her from Lagos to Onitsha and hoped people wouldn’t ask why the baby, wrapped in a heavy blanket, wasn’t cracking a sound.

Now, with her body wary, and her shoulders stiffened out of the burden she’d been carrying for long, she sank to her knees in front of the deserted shrine, not minding the damp mud.

Her tears came down with anguish. Wouldn’t it have been better if it was her and not the baby? It would have saved Tobe the pain, at least he would still have his child as a consolation.

Clutching the baby tightly to her chest, with her face buried in the little body, she gave in to the enormity of her grief, shivering out of raging agony than cold, groaning like a hurting animal.

It was more than crying, like a desolate sobbing that came from a person drained of all hope. A heart-wrenching sob emanating from a long-suppressed sorrow.

“Why do you have to punish a child for the sin of her mother? Why cause pain to visit a man because of me? Couldn’t you have taken it out on me?” She mumbled. Her breath hitched as anguish raked her frame.

“I tried. You know I tried to stay. You placed this weight on me, what would you have me do? It was so heavy. *Chìm*, the weight was too heavy. All I wanted was a good life, to know how it feels to be loved and to give my Òlá a loving father. I didn’t ask for much. *Chìm*.”

When the wracking sob passed, she cried in such a desolate way that wearied the heart of spirits.



Tobe

The call came when he was about to leave the police station where he's gone to seek the help of the inspector in finding Akwaugo.

I saw her running down the valley, towards the river that leads to the Ókìjá shrine. I wasn’t sure at first but when I called her by name and she turned, I knew something must be wrong.

Tobe didn’t ask how Okorie got his number, or what the man was doing at Ókìjá by that time of the evening. What was heavy in his heart was how to get to the place as fast as possible.

All it took was a call to a friend and a chopper was arranged. Two hours later and he was trotting down the part that led to the river.

She was nowhere around there.

He flashed his phone torch around, called out her name but was greeted by the sound of the gentle breeze over the river.

A sudden rustling behind startled him, jerking his head to the sound, he heaved a sigh as he saw a turtle retiring into the bush through a narrow path he didn’t see before.

With nothing that looked like a better option than to follow the conjured path, he directed his feet towards it.

The path faded into a thick forest that was belching up constant waves of foul and rancid odor that smelt like sickly excrement. But for the lightning that flashed at intervals, and the light from his phone that couldn’t travel far in the Acheron darkness gleaming with a deadly luster, he swore he wouldn’t be able to see anything.

What the hell! He stepped backward, as his phone slipped off his hand. Jesus! Something just ran over his feet. A snake? Oh goodness! He had never been so scared of walking in the dark as he was now. Maybe because he had never been to a place like this before. Even the *Édó* shrine had some air of comfort around it.

He let out a heavy sigh, as he went in search of his phone. He found it, picked it up and proceeded forward.

He should have turned and returned home, no sane human would be in here at this time of the night, but Okorie was certain he'd seen her on that path earlier.

He didn't know how long he walked when his eyes caught something that made his heart begin pacing faster. He hastened to the spot, then let out a whimper.

It was her.

She was lying on her side with the bundle firmly secured in front of her. At first, he thought she was dead and had panicked, but when he bent over her and heard the whizzing of her ragged breath and her teeth chattering, he was relieved.

"Akwaugo."

She didn't stir.

He shook her. "Akwaugo."

She groaned, turned her head, and stared into his face. Her eyes had frozen over like the surface of a winter puddle, rubbing them of their usual warmth.

"We have to get out of here now," he said, dropped his phone on the ground to take the child from her. Dead or alive, his child wasn't going to be buried in the forest. But her grip tightened around the child.

"*Òmàlìchà m*, please. Allow me to hold her."

She let him have the child but didn't make the effort to get up from where she laid.

One look at his daughter and defeat descended on him like the darkness that was around them. Once again, he felt the ugly claws of grief upon his shoulder, grief worse than what he felt when his parents died.

Yet he wouldn't cry. Akwaugo mustn't see his tears, it would break her more.

"*Òmàlìchà*, please, let's get out of here," he pleaded.

Akwaugo, who sat with legs stretched out remained motionless, as though she too was gone.

“We can... we can save her if we get to the hospital.” He knew he sounded ridiculous.

“Get away from me,” she whispered.

“Let us go, please!”

“This is my home. Here, this forest, with my child.”

“You don’t know what you are saying.”

“I won’t be able to bring misery to anyone if I remain here.”

The death of a child and watching the woman he loves lose her mind was more than what a man could take in a single night. “Akwa.” He touched her cold chin and she flinched.

“What do you want?”

“You. My wife.”

She blinked. For the first time since he arrived, he saw tears streaming down her face. And when she looked at him, he knew she was really seeing him.

“Òlâédó is no more. Our child is dead.” She sobbed. “I killed her, Tobe. I killed our child. I should have listened and stayed away from you.”

As she spoke, his agony became an icy wind choking the breath from his lungs and making a noose around his neck. Its savage, bitter blast cut right to his bones and gripped his brain in its freezing claws. His heart constricted as if it would stop beating.

He kissed the baby’s cheeks and finally let out the cry that had been knocking at the back of his throat. When tears came, the first one after a very long time, he knew the battle to get hold of himself was lost.

“She wouldn’t have died. I didn’t listen,” she muttered.

Tobe knew he had to say something, but nothing other than a sob escaped his lungs when he opened his mouth.

Sitting beside her, holding the child, he wrapped his hand around her waist from behind and waited.

It was getting late. Soon it would be midnight. They needed to get out of there, so he could bury his child in his country house and mourn her properly.

“Let’s go home,” he pleaded.

“Leave me alone, Tobe. I don’t want to cause you more pain.”

“I'm not leaving without you, Akwaugo. For Christ’s sake, you are my wife, my everything.”

“I’m cursed.”

“We will find a way to either break it or live with it, *Akwa m*.”

It was funny how what he had seen in the movies had become real, with him playing the major cast. There he was, in a dreaded forest, at the dead of the night, with a lifeless child in his arms and a heart filled with agony, professing undying love to an unstable woman.

“If you leave me, then I lose everything,” he murmured, tightening his grip around the baby whose body was getting... warm?

Wait. Scrambling for his phone and aiming the light at the child. His brain stuttered for a moment. “Akwaugo.” Every part of him went on pause while his head tried to catch up with what his eyes were seeing. “Akwa—see!”

Òlâédó was moving.

His daughter was alive.

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Chapter 42

Mezie



Once out of the breath-stifling Onitsha main market, he navigated by intersections and aroma, the angry grunt in his stomach heightened his need to find something to eat. Thank God, the usual business rush was over. His sales boy would be able to attend to the few customers that would be strolling in now while he was away.

"Look where you are going!" He shoved a much taller woman who almost collided with him. Being jostled by strong, sweaty bodies was one of the few disgusting things he doubted if he would ever get used to in this town.

With the smell of *Ákárá* wafting through his nose strongly, he knew he had found what he was looking for. Unconsciously squeezing the back pocket of his trousers, he froze. "*Èzù ò há m òshí*," he muttered. Someone had picked his pocket!

Unbelievable. How could someone take his wallet and he didn't know? Then he remembered the lady that collided with him. "*Hei!*" he turned quickly, his eyes darted here and there. "*Bíà*, *hei!*" He could see her, blue shirt with red trousers. She glanced back, eyes widened in shock as their eyes locked, then she picked her pace.

Abandoning the desire for food, he gave her a hot pursuit. "Stop! Thief!" Why wasn't anyone helping him to catch the lady? Rather, they stood laughing like morons. "*Ònyè òshî*!"

She was about to slip into a gate when he grabbed her shirt, pulling her back.

"Where is my money?" He gritted.

Colour evaporated from her face faster than dry season rain on the tarmac, replaced with the horrific realisation of being caught.

“Leave me alone!” Her lips quivered.

He landed a slap on her face and whatever was remaining of the air in her miserable lungs got stuck in her throat.

“*Ònyè òshî*. Thief. Where is my money?” he barked, not minding the eyes staring at them.

As if the slap invoked demons into her, the lady took a few steps backward and lashed out. “Which money? Am I owing you?”

Ànùmpámá. Did she want to play games ehn? Well, he wasn’t going to leave her until she returned his wallet.

“Young lady, I am not joking o, where is the wallet you picked from my pocket!”

“See me oh, I am not owing this man.” Gesticulating to the onlookers. “He took me in for a job, till daybreak and he refused to pay. I only collected what he owed me and left, that was it o.”

“*Ègbé êlü gbáchípùgì ntí*, mad girl. Who did you sleep with till daybreak? You heartless, wicked witch.”

Burning rage hissed through his body like deadly poison. He had not laid his hands on anyone for some time now, but he wouldn’t mind beating this lady to a pulp if that was what it would take to get his money back.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” the lady retorted. She shrugged off his hand and slipped into the little crowd.

She would disappear with his wallet—*Chùkwù èkwênà*. Mezie would not allow that. Not when fury was sweeping through him like ferocious waves.

He pushed his way through the crowd and chased her again.

She glanced over her shoulders and ran, infuriating him the more. “Stupid girl. Miserable thief!” If he got his hands on her, he would make sure she loses her teeth.

She ran across the road, and he followed.

“Idiot, you are not getting away with my money.”

Then he was no longer seeing her, no longer seeing anything at all. He couldn’t feel his legs on the tared road, yet he was moving, floating like a leaf in harmattan. He was back to Nnewi, in his compound, scooping sand into a bottle. The hooting owl was there too. A shadow was cast before him

— an unusual creature, a dark naked figure that had leaves around its loins, with *Ófò* in its right hand. The figure's cold glassy eyes were cast on him.

Hadn't he done this before? Why was he sent back here again? And who was this ghastly ethereal buffy being?

"Chùkwùmézièé, son of Ókákà. *Ósèbúlùwá* has given his verdict."

He was dreaming in broad daylight. *Òrìá ìbá*, that must be it. He had to treat himself against malaria. But first, he had to wake up from this dark place.

The trance disappeared as fast as it came. That was when he saw the truck running at full speed towards him. Looking around he realised he was at the center of the road. His legs were rooted to the ground as if held by unseen forces.

He had to get out, to save himself!

Too late. He was on the ground in a matter of seconds, fading away so fast to an icy numbness, the only thing he could feel was his own heartbeat and the movement of his eyeballs.

His breath came in ragged, shallow gasps. Then he started hearing voices. People swimming over him, trying to help him up. In his state, he wanted to laugh at their ignorance of the realm that had controlled what happened to him. He felt for them for trying to help whom his *chì* had condemned.

It was over for him.

His only prayer was that the angel of death would take his life faster.

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Chapter 43

Akwaugo



Lagos

"I was scared."

It had been days since he tracked her down to Ókìjá to save her and their daughter. Yes, it was him that brought Òlâédó back to life. His stubbornness. His determination to stay or die with her.

"Scared of what? Why?"

"I couldn't forget the last oath Mezie made me take at Ókìjá. It was hunting me."

"And when Òlá took ill, you thought it was—"

"Everything happened so fast, I thought we'd lost her."

"*Òmàlìchà m*," He sat at the edge of the bed as the Nurse left and took her hands. "I was one call away. Or you should have even called the doctor, he would have rushed down or sent an ambulance. You know that already."

"I thought leaving was the only way. I was tired."

"You were tired of staying with me?

"No! I'll never dream of leaving you, Tobe." Never. He was her definition of goodness, selflessness, and unflinching love. How could anyone want to throw that away? "I wanted answers, and I felt only that shrine could give me that."

"You didn't think of me. We could have faced your fears together."

"I didn't want to keep stressing you anymore."

"See where that got us. You are here, down with fever. And I'm left to take care of our daughter alone."

The child's quick recovery shocked everyone. Four days after they were admitted into the hospital, the doctor declared her healthy. Aside from redness on her skin due to insect bites, the doctor insisted there was nothing wrong with the child. The convulsion that knocked her unconscious earlier was unexplainable. “But Favor and Eunice are helping.”

“I know, my love. But after what happened, I'm still finding it difficult not being with her every minute of the day.”

In the same way, he was finding it difficult to leave her side.

“When I heard you left, I almost died.” He shifted closer, adjusting the tube that was connected to the cannula which was stuck in her wrist. “A thousand thoughts ran through my mind and, I didn't know what to do. I couldn’t think of why you did it, where you were, the danger you might be in. You and our daughter.”

“I lost control of my mind, Tobe.” She couldn’t explain what happened to her that day, how she was able to make that journey, and then found the place even though she had only been there once. “It was as though something was controlling me.”

“*Òmàlìchà m*. I died of panic. What if I lost you, the both of you?”

“I didn’t mean to take you through all that.”

“But you did. When I walked into that forest and saw you.” His voice cracked with emotions. “I thought you were…that I've lost you! I was devastated, Akwaugo.”

“Why?”

“Why?”

Yes, why? Why would he always put his life at stake for her? Meddling with traditional practices he would not ordinarily pay attention to, just to save her.

“Why did you come to Ókìjá that night?” she muttered.

“Because someone said he saw you going in there and I had to find you. Akwaugo, you and our daughter are the most important things in my life, and I wasn’t ready to lose both of you.”

“Òlá was as good as dead.”

“And you wanted to die too?”

“I wanted to keep you safe.”

“To do what? Ha! Akwaugo. I don’t want to be safe away from you.”

“That’s why you came after me without considering the danger that would have come upon you? That deity is known for ruthlessness.”

“*Òmàlìchà m*.” He shook his head. “You don’t understand when I tell you that I can go down to hell for you.” He began to stroke her hand. “I love you so fucking much, Akwaugo. I'm willing to give up my all for you.”

“I love you too,” she said. “But I was scared.”

“*Nnê*, love conquers fear. Oaths, curses… they have no power over love. Over our love.”

“Our love.”

“Yes, *Òmàlìchà m*.” His eyes softened. Helping her to a seating position, he leaned forward and kissed her hard on the lips. “I’ve missed you so much, my darling wife.”

“I'm here now, with you.”

“Yes. And I can’t wait for you to get better so I can punish you for what you did.” A naughty smile coloured his face.

“But—”

“Oh, shut up.” He drew her into his arms. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I'm insinuating. Silly girl.”

She laughed and buried her face in the softness of his neck. “This punishment, will it pain me?”

“You have to get better fast so you can find out yourself,” he whispered over her head. “*Òmàlìchà m*, there's a lot of things we’ve not done yet.”

“The wedding?”

“Favor and the wedding planner have that covered.”

“Then tell me.”

He slightly pulled away so he could look at her face. “The more you play ignorant to what I'm insinuating, the stronger the desire to fuck you until you beg me to stop becomes.”

“Mother Mary. Tobe, we are in the hospital, have small shame.”

“This is a hospital?” He was teasing her now, grinning widely. “I thought it was a hotel room. I was about pulling your dress up, *wèpútà ódògwù m wérè mèrùò gî èzìgbò ârù* now.”

“Tobe!”

“Yes, girl?”

Two weeks later

“Tobe?”

“Mm?” His jaw dropped immediately he turned and saw her, fresh out of the bath, having not a bathrobe but a wrapper tied around her chest! The piece of material was wet from the water on her body, hugging her skin—every curve, every fucking curve was visible. It ignited an overwhelming desire to roughly turn her around, bend her over and fuck her hard.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? Yes.” Fuck! He had been battling the desire to make love to her since the news of the death of her ex-husband reached them. He wanted to give her some time to mourn. The man was once her husband and if Akwaugo chose to shed a few tears for him, that was okay. “You... just had your bath?” Wasn’t that obvious? Running his hand over his head, he swallowed the carnal lust that flared up his throat.

“Yes,” she said. “I, uhm, left my things here in the afternoon.” His eyes followed her finger to a side stool where a bottle of cream and a comb were kept. “I didn’t hear you drive in.”

“It’s okay.” He didn’t know why she was sounding apologetic. This was their house. Her house. “Come hear how my day went.”

“Let me quickly go upstairs and dress properly—”

“Don’t.” He began walking towards her. A cunning smile played on his lips as he watched the innocent surprise on her face. “I like you like this,” he said, grabbing her waist and pulling her to himself.

“Tobe, I—”

Too early, he thought, letting go of her waist. It's obvious she wasn’t ready to resume sexual intercourse with him and that's fine for now. Two weeks wasn’t enough to mourn the man she dedicated most of her life to. “It’s okay if you need more time,” he said.

It had been difficult ignoring what just looking at her does to him, to have her lay beside him every night yet he couldn’t fuck her. But he understood, she needed the time to bid this man, Mezie, a final farewell.

“I don’t need more time, Tobe m. What I need is you.”

“What? You mean you don’t mind if I fuck you even though you’re still __”

“It’s a pity Mezie died, but I've mourned him enough, Tobe.” Her hand came up his face to stroke his cheek. “I thought you knew that.”

“How was I supposed to know when you never showed me you are ready to move on?”

“I did. You only didn’t get it.”

“*Òmàlìchà m*, I didn’t understand. I was ready to give you all the time you need to mourn him, hoping that you would be done with it before our wedding.”

“My Tobechukwu,” she whispered. “Maybe I don’t know how to come forward with my need for you, I'll have to learn.”

“Yes, *Òmàlìchà m*. You have to learn to invade me with your lust for my dick.” Her face flushed with shyness. “I’d love to have you ask me, to come for it—”

“That’s why I'm here dressed like this.”

Now she's confusing him. “But you said you just came to pick your comb and cream.”

“Did I say that?”

“And you didn't hear me drive in.”

“I lied.” Her smile spread slowly as she inched even closer.

“Fuck!” he muttered under his breath. “Aren’t you simply naughty?” And he was loving it.

“I'm learning from you.”

“*Òmàlìchà m*.” He lowered his head and took her lips in a long kiss. “I’m proud to be your teacher.”

“I wasn’t sure city men like their women on wrappers, but I thought I should try.”

“This man is different.” His hands stroked her neck down to her shoulders.

“Oh,” she managed to say between shivers. He loved the effect his touch had on her and how unclouded her responses were.

“That day you came to me in the village, the very first time I made love to you.” He kissed her neck, she let out a soft moan. “You came to me with just a wrapper tied around your chest.” He ran his tongue around her ear lobe. “Seeing you now reminds me of that day.” He lifted her off the floor, carried her to the sofa, and made her sit astride him.

Her laughter was like a ripple in a still pond after a stone has been thrown in. The more he watched her laugh, the more his lips twitched until he dissolved into a puddle of laughter himself. He loved the sound of their joy, the feelings that twirled around them, the brilliant happiness in her eyes.

When they were calm, he looked her in the eyes and asked, “Do you regret anything about our meeting? Me, walking into your shop and

everything that happened after?”

“No. Never.”

His hands skimmed up to her back and into her hair. Then he began to massage her scalp the way he knew she loved.

“You know we are not alone here, Tobe. Any of the staff may walk in on us.”

“Doesn’t it add to the excitement? The knowledge that someone may stumble on us making out.” He tightened his arms around her buttocks and shifted her closer. “Anyway, you already know they don’t come here by this time of the day unless they are summoned.” He lossened the wrapper, a bit, he lowered his head to brush his lips on the bulge of her breast, one after the other.

“We should go to the room.” But her body said otherwise. He could feel her heat, her desire...

“Eunice went with Òlá to Abuja today.” His uncle and his wife had demanded that she come stay with them for a while. “And the door is locked. What else are you bothered about?” He freed a breast, his thumb and forefinger gave her nipple a gentle pinch and she whimpered.

“Do you want me to stop now?” he asked.

“*Mbá nú*.”

“Good.” Bending his head, he took her hardened peak in his mouth. Oh, the feel of that. “Everything about you intoxicates me.” Drawing her nipple deeper into his mouth, he grabbed her ass again and squeezed hard. Then he pulled his mouth away from her breast and lowered her head so he could give her a full kiss on the lips. The need to be with her, to join body to body was so overpowering. “I want to fuck you here,” he said.

“On this chair?”

“Yes, *Òmàlìchà m*.”

“Let me remove the wrapper.” Her voice was heavy with her hunger.

“It doesn’t prevent anything.”

Holding her firmly, he struggled with his zipper, cursing when it wouldn’t give way. Maybe she should have done it for him. That would have been hot as hell. But he doubted if her finger brushing over his dick wouldn’t make him cum instantly. Fuck. “Can you stand a little? No... no... don’t leave completely.” She heaved her weight up and he succeeded in rolling his pant down and taking out his hard, eager dick. “Sit on it,” he ordered. She only stared at him for a brief second and then did as she was

told. “That’s it, that’s it, my darling.” He was sure she had not done it like this, and he was glad he would be the first and only man she would be riding. “Relax on it, *Òmàlìchà m*.” With his hands on her ass, he moved her closer, shuddering when her wet and ready pussy took his length in.

“I want you to move now.”

“I don’t think I can—”

“You can, my love. You can.”

And she did. Slowly at first. As if she wasn’t sure if she was doing it right.

“Good girl.” Stroking and squeezing her ass under the wrapper. “My sweet girl.”

“Tobe?”

“Mm?”

“Oh, God.” Gripping his shoulders tight, she threw her head backward and began to go faster. Moaning shamelessly to his delight. She had learned how not to be ashamed of letting herself lose to the throes of sexual pleasure and had even grown bolder and open to tell him what she wanted and how she wanted it in clear terms.

“Yes girl, fuck this dick hard. Fuck it good.” The wrapper had loosened, and her breasts bounced with abandonment as she rode him.

“Damn!” He could feel his orgasm building, the intensity of it increasing with her every pump, hitting him like an over-stoked furnace. Grunting his helplessness, he grabbed her waist and began to ram her hard and fast. She was wet, so wet that he could hear the slippery sounds every time he drove into her. Her skin had become hot and damp, not from the bath she took earlier but from the heat they both were generating. “*Òmàlìchà*—My darling. You are fucking sweet.”

She was moaning and gasping, her pussy pulsating that way that told him that she was close.

“You want to feel that thing again?” *That thing*, that’s what she chose to be calling her orgasm, and that’s okay by him. It turned him on whenever she said it.

“Yes.”

“Beg me.” She wasn’t controlling the ride anymore, he was.

“*Bìkô nû*.”

That was enough. With three more thrusts, he brought her to a long, glorious orgasm that poured all over his dick. Stunned and helpless, she

collapsed on his body while he continued thrusting until he exploded beneath her.

They stayed in that position for a while catching their breaths and stroking each other. Then, she spoke.

“I was so loud.”

“You were.” He laughed.

“Oh, Mother Mary. What if someone heard me?”

“You are so innocent. And I like that about you.”

She slapped his chest and slid down, the wrapper falling to the floor.

“Let me take care of that.” He picked both her wrapper and his briefs up. “Come.” He took her hand and began leading her upstairs, into the bathroom where he would give her a very long sensual bath while his hands stray here and there.

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Chapter 44

“…With this ring, I thee wed. with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow…”

It was a garden wedding, held upon a day of blue skies and sweetly rising breeze. Love and flowers formed a backdrop and a canopy over their heads. At the end of each pew, a scented candle hung on top of a decorated long base. Spread down the aisle was a thick white rug with silken layers of rose petals, bright and soft, creating a rainbow of steppingstones for Tobe and his bride while the wind carried the delicate perfume into the air.

It was nothing like the multi-million naira wedding he’d planned earlier, but it didn’t matter. This was what Akwaugo wanted: to be wedded in this village church’s garden, with Father Theo as the officiating minister.

Sliding the ring on her finger, his heart swelled with pride.

She was his at last, this evasive, long-sought Akwaugo, won after years of patient waiting. Not that she hadn’t been his, especially after he paid her bride price, but only a white wedding would convince Akwaugo that she was truly his wife.

Watching her face beam, he was glad he did the right thing. She was his wife in all aspects, their union not restricted by tradition or oath sworn to another man. Was he worthy of her? Could he make her as happy as she deserved? As far as he was concerned, Akwaugo deserved unending happiness and he had always feared that he might not give her enough.

Then, she slid the ring onto his finger amidst cheers, camera clicks, and thunderous claps. Their eyes met and all doubt was swept away in a glad

certainty. They belonged to each other and no matter what life might hold for them, nothing would alter their love. Their happiness was in each other's keeping.

"*Òmàlìchà m*," he muttered with every warmth in him, reaching for her cheeks to wipe away tears. "You are mine. Nobody will take you away from me."

"Tobechukwu *nkém*." She giggled and lowered her gaze as shyness coloured her cheeks. "I'm your wife now—*nwùnyé gì*." She giggled some more, making him burst into laughter.

Unthinkingly, he reached for her hand and pulled, she landed on his chest with a shocking gasp. "You are so beautiful," he said, ignoring the priest's laughter and their guests' *awws* as he became conscious of her bosom pressing on his chest from the thick fabric of her dress. Her uneven breath hinted him of her feelings at the moment and he felt heat pooled in him again, ebbing lower.

"Are we still going to have this wedding or not?" There was humor in Father Theo's voice.

Tobe would have released Akwaugo so the ceremony would continue, but she wouldn't stop looking at him in that manner that always made him think of nothing else but covering her lips with his. He wasn't going to do that now, maybe he was, just for a brief minute because her lips were even more irresistible with the subtle wash of glossy red over them.

He leaned forward, his lips lingered on hers. A terrible decision, he thought while enjoying the taste of strawberry from her lipstick. He needed to stop this instant so Father Theo would continue with the wedding rituals. But then she made a sound and parted her lips beneath his and immediately, he stopped listening to the voices around them and deepened the kiss.

He had known happiness, but with her, he was experiencing a whole new level of it. The knowledge that they were now bonded legally, even though he was convinced that they were two souls already betrothed before now, gave him a sense of satisfaction.

"*Dìm òmà*," she whispered when he finally released her.

Dìm òmà—my good husband. Tobe loved the sound of that.

"Tobechukwu. Please, allow me to finish the nuptial prayers. She is all yours for the rest of your life to do as you please." The Priest mused, bringing the couple back to the present.

"Not as I please, father," Tobe respectfully corrected. "As we please."

The ceremony was concluded with a cheerful song and the couple recessed back, waving at guests, shaking friends, families, and business partners.

“You have less than forty minutes to bid all the farewells,” he whispered into her ears.

“Why?”

“We are getting out of here.”

“How, to where?”

“To show you the world—a little of it, at least.”

“I have to get Òlá ready then…”

“That wouldn’t be necessary. Eunice and Favor will take care of her while we are away.”

“But we can’t leave her all alone.”

He picked a petal off her face and planted a quick kiss on her lips. “*Òmàlichà*, you worry so much. Can you trust me now as *Dì gî òmâ*? When I tell you that I have everything under control, can you not doubt?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’ll trust you.”

“Good,” he said, then looked over her shoulder and began to smile. “Okorie approaches, with your father,” he said. “I doubt if we will be leaving here in forty minutes.”

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Glossary

Àgbárá Ókìjá: A dreaded deity in Okija village
Ágúlèrí and Ùmúlèrí war: A historical war between the two villages in Anambra state
Ákárá: Bean balls
Ákwúná: Prostitute
Ámàdìóhá: A deity in Igbo land
Àmú: Penis
Ànùmpámá: Animal
Ànùòfîá: Animal
Bíà: Come
Bìkô: Please
Chì: God
Dìm: My husband.
Éké Àmàngwú: One of the markets in the community
Ígbá mmânwû: Masquerade dance
Ítíbòlìbô: An academic dunce
kpùkpùkpû ôgênê: A moonlight play song
Machin: Machine/bike
Mbá nú: No, nau
Ndì òjòôr: Bad people
Ndò: Sorry
Nkwù enû: Up-wine. A local sweet, alcoholic drink
Nnê ânyí dî âsô: Blessed mother Mary
Nwànnáà: My brother
Nwòkêm: My man
Nwùrióm: A sickly bird
Ódògwù: Strong man
Ófò: A traditional sacred staff
Ógà: Boss
Ógbànjê: An evil child
ògwú êgõ: blood money
Òkè ènyím: My great friend
Ònyè íbéríbré: Stupid person
Òrìá ìbá: Malaria
Ósèbúlùwá: God the creator of the world
Ósù: Outcast
Òtú: Vagina
Ózò ébúnú: A popular masquerade in Nnewi
Òzúgô nû: It’s enough
Túfìàkwá: God forbid
Ùdàlá: A Nigerian seasonal tart fruit
Ukwa: Breadfruit—A local delicacy in Igbo land
Ùmûâdâ: All females born in an Igbo community
Ùmúnná: Kinsmen

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About Rosemary Okafor

Rosemary Okafor is an international bestselling author who tells compelling stories ranging from cheesy romance, Fate-based romance, Romantic suspense, and romantic psychological and thrillers.

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