From the award-winning author of The Senator's Daughter

AMAKA AZIE

# Against THE WIND

She'll stop him at any cost
Even if the price is her heart



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**Amaka Azie**

Against the Wind
By Amaka Azie

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Amaka Azie has asserted her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

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Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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*This is for women who see flaws instead of beauty when they look in the mirror. Please look harder. You're beautiful. Societal beauty standards are completely bogus.*

# BLURB

DEVASTATED by her best friend's fatal complications from a butt lift procedure, Uju Emordi is now on a mission. Her first target in the campaign to shut down all cosmetic surgery centres? Blossom Health, the country's largest. And her first problem? The plastic surgeon dedicated to stopping her.

Can she prevent the captivating Dr Njokwu, with his enigmatic charm, from throwing a monkey wrench into her plans? Or will she fall under his spell?

Blossom Health's newest partner, tasked with neutralising the podcaster stoking protests against his profession, has struck out scheduling a meeting with the obviously unhinged woman. Then, to his surprise, she struts into his office requesting a consultation.

Can David Njokwu leverage this golden opportunity and convince her plastic surgeons aren't the enemy? Or will he be blinded by her beauty and charisma and lose sight of his goal?

# A note to my readers

Against the Wind is the unplanned fourth book in the Lagos Plastic Surgery series. Each novel can be read as a standalone.

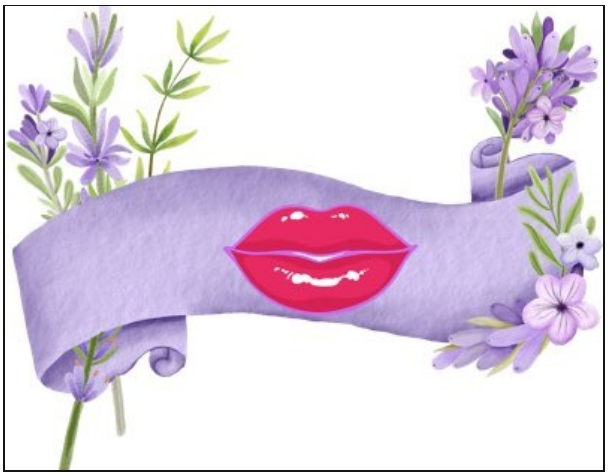
I wanted to write a lighthearted and fun love story centred around the booming plastic surgery culture in Nigeria. So, when an opportunity arose to collaborate with other authors promoting Black love, I jumped at it!

While I have no personal opposition to plastic surgery, I do believe it’s something that needs to be approached with caution—especially given the alarming rise in deaths on the operating tables of unqualified doctors.

I hope you enjoy reading this story, and I also hope its core message gives you something to think about.

Before the Storm, Through the Fire, and After the Rain are the first three books in the series.

# ONE



FEW THINGS INTIMIDATED DAVID NJOKWU. An adrenaline junkie thriving on daring escapades, his favourite pastimes included bungee-jumping, amateur wrestling and speed racing.

His thrill-seeking tendencies began in early childhood as the middle of three brothers who enjoyed playing rough, and occasionally risky pranks on one another. He always lived on the edge, seeking revenge with even higher stakes.

Once, his younger brother Felix pranked him with cockroaches in his pillowcase and he woke up in the

middle of the night with the insects crawling all over his bed. Freaked out, David fell off the bed in a fit of terror, twisting his ankle and needing crutches for an entire month.

No, the harm hadn't been catastrophic, but David's revenge upped the ante. For several weeks, he let his brother stew, wondering what the payback would be. Just when Felix relaxed his guard, David struck, slipping a rat into his brother's pyjamas bottoms while he slept.

Much to his parents' chagrin, Felix ended up in hospital with rat bites on his genitals. Still, despite his father's severe punishment and his own remorse over hurting his brother, David still smiled with a secret thrill and pride at besting his brother in the revenge game.

Even Felix couldn't help but be impressed. To this day, they still recalled it fondly whenever they got together.

"So, will you do it?"

David's eyes shifted to Dr Oke Amayo when her gentle inquiry cut through his reveries. He tensed his jaw, sweeping his gaze across his three partners seated around the boardroom table. Each gazed at him with hopeful eyes. Damn it! They were practically begging him to take on the challenge.

David let out a deep sigh. Too bad his pursuit of legendary risky stunts and passion for living on the edge preceded him. He relished the surge of adrenaline that came with the awareness of the possibility of death. So why on earth was he terrified of tangling with a woman half his size? Ridiculous.

He cleared his throat. "Why me?"

“Because you’re the newest and youngest partner at Blossom Health and we need a fresh face to sort this out,” Dr Oke Amayo said with a hint of a smile. In her mid-thirties, she was a petite and pretty woman who held a managing partner position at Blossom Health.

“Yes, my gee,” Dr Segun Akintola chimed in. “The public is already used to seeing our faces. Someone new could more effectively give this place a positive spin.”

David turned to his left to look at Segun with a smirk. In his mid-thirties, tall and athletic, his partner sported closely cropped hair and a shadow beard. People frequently commented on their resemblance, with their identical height of 6 feet 2 inches, similar build, and toffee brown complexion.

With his spectacles, slightly broader nose and a thicker beard covering his face, David liked to imagine himself as Segun’s geekier look-alike, whom he loved and respected the most amongst his senior partners at Blossom Health.

They’d attended the same University of Lagos, and although only two sets lower than Segun, David had looked up to him like he was a more senior colleague. In all honesty, Segun, the most esteemed plastic surgeon in Africa, influenced his career path.

David shook his head. “I don’t think I can do this, guys. I’m not good with confrontation,” he said, trying to wriggle out of the responsibility they seemed to have unanimously given him.

He wanted to be the hero, to sort out the problem facing the practice. But did he possess the persuasive skills needed for this?

A year after completing his residency in plastic surgery at NYU Presbyterian, he joined Blossom Health, filled with enthusiasm.

He was fully cognisant of the practice's stellar reputation and held the medical team of Nigeria's—and the whole of West Africa's—most popular reconstructive centre in high esteem.

As a recent board-certified plastic surgeon, he'd been eager to put his surgical skills to use and there was no better place to do it than Blossom Health.

When Segun contacted him asking him to join their practice as a junior partner, David jumped at the opportunity. He had admired Segun's work and dedication to reconstructive medicine since his residency days and felt honoured to be a part of the team.

Having worked at Blossom Health for a little over six months, David could say without a sliver of doubt that he'd found the perfect practice to develop his plastics skills. The doctors were not only highly skilled, but professional and friendly.

Moreover, he adored the substantial workload, the enthusiastic team he was surrounded by, and the potential for career development granted by his partners. They had trusted him as the chief surgeon to work on the reconstructive repair of the practice's first ever separation of conjoined twins.

Thrilled at the opportunity's challenge, David also revelled in the chance to showcase his skills to his peers. A complete success. The surgery was broadcasted on TV and social media pages, propelling him to the position of one of Africa's most esteemed plastic surgeons. His name

had become widely recognised among important names in the medical field.

Why did he have to be the one dealing with an unhinged woman hellbent on grinding their practice into dust?

A cough sounded from the end of the table, drawing his attention to Dr Tunde Edun, the most senior partner of the practice. In his late thirties, he was dark-skinned, with a shaved head and greying beard. Despite the touch of maturity lent by his facial hair, Tunde's muscular physique exuded a vibrant, youthful energy.

No matter how many times they teased him about dying his beard, Tunde remained steadfast. The salt-and-pepper look gave him an elder statesman credibility.

"Dave, all we're asking is for you to meet this woman and get a feel for her issue with Blossom Health," he said, fiddling with his wristwatch. "She's bashing us relentlessly on her podcast, and we need it to stop."

"So why not go through the courts? A cease-and-desist kinda thing?" David asked, still perplexed. He still didn't understand how he could help.

Tunde shrugged. "We may have to go down that road eventually," he said. "But the woman has said nothing incriminating to justify doing so. She just keeps advising people to stop coming here for cosmetic surgery because of the potential risks. She has never made direct claims of anyone being hurt here."

David sighed. He had heard about the woman vaguely from his ex-girlfriend Anita, who'd shown him a snippet of her podcast filled with criticism about cosmetic surgery.

Something about watching her talk had unnerved him at the time, but he'd quickly dismissed the feeling and gone back to reading his thriller fiction novel. Now, his practice needed him to solve the problem, and he was unnerved all over again.

"What makes you think I'll be able to get her to listen?" he asked.

"Because we believe in your persuasive power," Oke replied. "You were successful in persuading Mrs Ibeziako to avoid undergoing another unnecessary surgery."

David's lips twitched. Convincing the sixty-year-old, who had a cosmetic surgery addiction, not to get a cheekbone implant, hadn't been easy.

The other partners had tried. And failed. Instinctively, he'd used the most reliable tactic ever—flattery. Pretending to be attracted to her, he told her how beautiful she was and that he rated her a perfect 10. Before he knew it, the woman agreed she didn't need surgery and cancelled her appointment with the screening psychologist.

His persuasive skills had worked then, but that was far different from trying to calm down an irate woman with a hard-on for Blossom Health.

David knew how to flatter women, flirt, make women feel—and look—beautiful. But calming them down? Not so much.

"If you don't think it's as serious as we believe, just look at her last podcast," Oke continued, her tone imploring. She tapped her fingers on her phone and slid it towards him.

David picked it up and fixed his eyes on the woman on

YouTube. With an unwavering gaze, she spoke confidently, her tone evidencing complete commitment to her beliefs.

“Money is the only motivation for these plastic surgeons who destroy lives. They take advantage of vulnerable men and women, disfigure them, distort their natural beauty, and sometimes, even kill them. My name is Uju Emordi and I’m dedicated to stopping every single one of these quacks. I’ll not quit until every cosmetic surgery centre in Nigeria is closed down for good.”

His heart flip-flopped and his belly tumbled as he watched. Something about her intimidated him. She spoke with passion and determination, yes. But he also felt a strange pull to her through the phone screen—an indescribable magnetic tug towards her. One so powerful he worried she’d be the one convincing him instead of the other way round.

Although she was beautiful, David knew it had nothing to do with her smooth brown skin, her pretty oval-shaped face, the hazel hue of her eyes, or the mass of thick curls that cascaded from her head like flowers from a vase.

Just like the first time he’d seen her on Anita’s phone, the strange sensation overtook him anew. An eery sense of déjà vu, as if they had a shared history whose details he should remember but couldn’t.

“As you can see, she’s on a quest to close us down and we can’t let her think all we do here is give people fatter bums and bigger breasts,” Oke said when the catchy jingle that followed the video ended. “We need to show her there’s much more to reconstructive surgery. That we’re also a valid part of the medical team.”

“And if there’s anyone who can do it, it’s you,” Segun

added.

David swallowed nervously as he handed Oke back her phone, resisting the urge to peek at the woman on the screen again as she raged about plastic surgery destroying lives in another video.

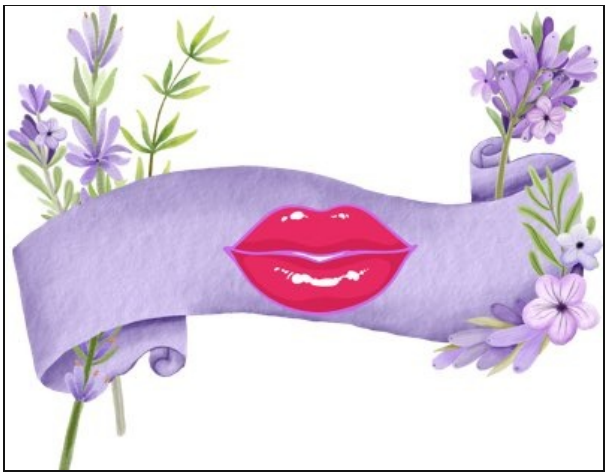
Man, that woman scared the crap out of him, and he couldn't figure out why. Still, he didn't believe in her cause. He'd witnessed the life-changing impact he and his colleagues made daily in correcting deformities. In a way, he had a duty to enlighten the woman and others who believed their work focused solely on BBLs, face lifts, and breast augmentations.

Day after day, they put in tireless effort to mend the damages inflicted by burns, knife injuries, botched cosmetic surgeries, and various other types of wounds. Dismissing them and attempting to trivialise the impact of plastic surgery seemed unfair.

Whoever this Uju Emordi was, she needed her eyes opened to a different perspective. Much as his nerves squirmed at him being the messenger, David knew he must. "Fine," he said, exhaling with a sense of resignation. "I'll do it."

The cheering from his fellow partners at Blossom Health made him smile. Although he felt a tad uncomfortable to be the one to put out this fire, he'd take one for the team.

# TWO



UJU CLOSED HER EYES, feeling the gentle touch of the makeup artist's brush dusting her face with powder.

She didn't bother checking her reflection in the mirror, indifferent to the outcome. She was here for a crucial television interview at Sunsets in Lagos, hosted by the queen of Nigerian talk shows, Adanna Ezenna. Her appearance ranked low on the list compared to the urgency she felt in delivering her important message to a larger audience than her own podcast audience.

While Uju thought of herself as attractive, she rarely focused on her looks. Many people said her tall, slender

physique, along with her rich cocoa-brown complexion, high cheekbones, and strikingly sharp hazel eyes, made her an ideal candidate to model.

No matter how flattering the compliments, she dismissed them, having no interest whatsoever in any career choice that centred on fashion or a woman's physical appearance. Not her cup of tea. Instead of glamorous attire and expensive wigs, she felt most at ease in jeans, t-shirts, sneakers, and her proudly flaunted afro.

Not that she criticised women who preferred to dress up or harboured feelings of superiority towards them. In fact, quite the opposite. She admired women who effortlessly chose clothes that flattered their figures, hairstyles that played up their facial features, and shoes that complemented their outfits.

Growing up with her only sibling, older brother Ozioma, Uju had simply embraced her tomboy nature. She enjoyed sports, outdoor activities, and could often be found climbing trees, chasing animals, and practicing martial arts with him.

No matter how hard she tried to blend in with the girls throughout primary and secondary school, she always found herself on the outskirts, left out. Not sharing their enthusiasm for fashion and other girly things that they effortlessly bonded over, Uju was the odd one out.

Similarly, her relationship with boys was equally tumultuous. Initially, she'd find them enjoyable company. But then, they'd develop a physical attraction towards her and harass her.

So, to blend in and avoid unwarranted attention, she simply downplayed her physical appearance, wearing

baggy clothes whenever she went to play basketball or football with the guys. Still, she felt different, never quite relaxed with them.

Things changed when she met Bisola Alade at the University of Lagos. A girl just like her who enjoyed sports, but was also into fashion and makeup. They became as close as sisters and inseparable, doing everything together.

Bisola took it upon herself to teach her the secrets of styling her afro, dressing in clothes that flattered her figure, and mastering the art of makeup. She helped her break out of her awkward shell and get better at socialising with other women.

Uju had to swallow hard to hold back the tears when she thought of her friend. Even after six months, the pain of losing Bisola stung her like an open wound. One minute, she was all set for a Christmas trip with Bisola, and then, bam! She got the news her friend had passed away.

Such a pointless tragedy. If only Bisola had told her about scheduling cosmetic surgery. Maybe she could have talked her out of it, convinced her not to let her philandering boyfriend make her insecure. Make her see she didn't need a bigger butt. She needed a bigger man.

Uju worried the inside of her mouth with her teeth, annoyed all over again. If Bisola didn't know any better, the plastic surgeon should have discouraged her. Instead, he'd taken her money and killed her on his operating table. Evil bastard. Just like the rest of them.

And now, to think that Dr David Njokwu had the audacity to email her podcast asking to meet. She would rather chew glass than sit in the same room with him—the same guy

who'd French-kissed her at a party years ago, and then, walked right past her the very next day without so much as a hello.

Now he wanted to talk? No bloody way!

Seeing his email had shocked her. At first, she was sceptical, but her doubts vanished when she saw his name boldly signed at the bottom of the email.

*Dr David Chinonso Njokwu*
*Consultant Plastic Surgeon*
*Blossom Health Reconstructive Centre*
*Lagos, Nigeria.*

A meeting to talk, my arse!

If he thought he could change her mind about destroying Blossom Health and every other cosmetic surgery centre in Nigeria, he would wait forever.

No one could divert her from her number one mission—to shut them all down. She would continue her public campaign until someone who could stop these money-hungry surgeons paid attention.

"Please close your eyes so I can use the setting spray," her makeup artist Louisa said, drawing Uju from her thoughts.

Nodding, she did as told and held her breath as the mist from the aerosol settled on her face.

"Okay, ma. You can open your eyes and take a look."

Uju's eyes fluttered open, and she gazed at her reflection

in the mirror. “Wow! You’ve done an amazing job, Louisa.”

“You like it?”

“Yes! It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Although she’d initially been reluctant to subject herself to the glam team for this interview, she was glad she’d listened to Adanna Ezenna and done it. The outcome left her speechless and gave her a surge of confidence.

Louisa had transformed her face into a movie-star worthy look using neutral make-up colours. She’d also arranged her hair into an intricate updo, accentuated by a bejewelled hair clip that mirrored the shimmer of her eyeshadow.

The foundation Louisa selected perfectly matched her skin tone and blended seamlessly, enhancing her facial features and highlighting her cheekbones. Her choice of lipstick, a blend of brown and peach, made her already full lips appear even more pouty. Indeed, Louisa had done a fantastic job.

“You’re welcome, ma,” Louisa said, packing her makeup kit into the massive bag on the dressing table. “I hope you have a great time on the show.”

“Fingers crossed. I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. I’m a fan of your podcast. I’m sure you’ll be amazing out there.”

“Oh,” Uju said, deeply touched by the kind words. “Thank you so much for your confidence in me.”

Hopefully, she wouldn’t let Louisa or anyone else down today. Despite feeling anxious about appearing on cable television and being viewed by people all over Africa, she

remained resolute in her mission to raise awareness on the perils of plastic surgery. Maybe if Bisola had heard such a message, she would still be alive today.

Several minutes later, Uju stood by the entrance of the Sunsets in Lagos studio, next to the producer, a lanky man in faded jeans and a white t-shirt. She could feel her heart pounding with nerves as she waited to be called in.

Taking slow breaths to calm her anxiety, she scanned the stage and observed the host, Adanna Ezenna, sitting on an orange cushioned seat behind a sleek glass table, her voice soothing and confident as she spoke to her audience.

Behind her, a vibrant backdrop screen showcased the picturesque Lagos skyline, with the words *Sunsets in Lagos* shimmering and flashing intermittently in bold letters. Uju dreamed of creating a platform like Adanna's, where she could have a strong presence and address important issues on a similar television program.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Uju Emordi, the chief anchor of the popular podcast *Against the Wind*," Adanna said with a broad smile.

"Now, it's action time," the producer whispered, gently patting her shoulder as she stepped onto the stage.

Uju held her breath, the deafening cheers from the live audience filling her ears as she made her way across the stage. She finally reached Adanna and embraced her, before finding her place in the orange seat beside her.

"Welcome to Sunsets in Lagos," Adanna said once the cheering died down.

“Thank you.” Uju flashed a bright smile. “I’m honoured to be here.”

Adanna turned to the audience, her flawlessly made-up oval face gleaming from the reflection of the bright lighting from the ceiling. “Ladies and gentlemen, our guest, Uju Emordi, has a master’s degree in journalism. She’s a human rights activist and someone whose podcast I’ve followed for quite some time. By selecting trending topics, she initiates passionate public discussions that compel the entire country to pay attention.” Adanna paused as a wave of cheering erupted in the studio.

The audience’s reception overwhelmed Uju, heating up her cheeks. She hadn’t expected this level of response at all.

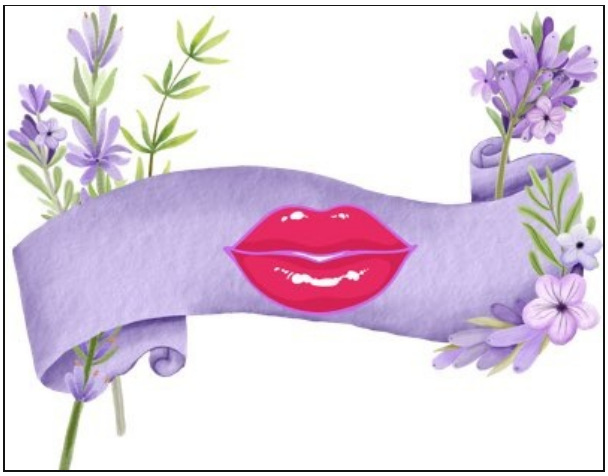
Once the room quieted, Adanna continued. “The latest focus of *Against the Wind* explores the rise of cosmetic surgery in the country and sheds light on the risks involved.”

Adanna subtly turned her body towards Uju, positioning her face halfway between looking at her and the audience. “So, Uju, please, can you tell us why this is so important to you?”

Uju inhaled deeply, trying to calm the wave of anxiety washing over her**.**

Here it was—the gigantic opportunity she’d been aching for. A chance to get it all off her chest, to speak her mind about the dangers of cosmetic surgery and the precious life it stole from her. She had to make this count and deliver her message to the millions of viewers with eloquence and persuasion. Convincing just one person to forego altering their natural body with plastic surgery would be a victory. For her, but most of all, for her best friend.

# THREE



THE JOYFUL BARKING of his fox terrier Chewy was always a welcome homecoming. The sound brought back memories of when he first brought her home two years ago.

Her previous owner, a neighbour who moved abroad, had left her behind. For days on end, David had endured the ceaseless barking echoing from the apartment below, prompting him to take matters into his own hands and investigate.

To his horror, he'd found a dog inside a cage in the empty apartment, looking deserted, miserable, and emaciated. With no one else in the multi-apartment complex willing to

claim her, David had taken her in and adopted her.

He named her Chewy because she had a tendency to sink her teeth into anything nearby whenever she felt anxious.

Adjusting to life as a dog owner was a challenge with the constant barking and endless shedding. Training an abandoned dog and helping her regain trust after being deserted had been a difficult and heartbreaking process.

It took a considerable amount of time, but David's patience and dedication had paid off. Now, he couldn't envision his life without Chewy. She was family, like his own flesh and blood, and she'd quickly turned his three-bedroom bachelor flat in Ibeju-Lekki into a home.

David grinned at the thought as he pressed the keycard against the sensor. The second he opened the door to his three-bedroom apartment, Chewy hurled herself at him.

Catching the furry bundle in his arms, David chuckled at the excited swipes of her tongue all over his face and ran his fingers through her short coat and sighed.

This dog had saved his life, given him a stability he hadn't experienced since leaving his family in Onitsha to pursue his dreams of being a plastic surgeon.

Only loneliness and isolation had accompanied him when he moved to Lagos for his medical degree, and then, the US for his residency. To fill the void, he'd resorted to drinking, womanising, and partying.

And when his father was killed in a car accident during his final year of medical school, he really spiralled. His family had kept the terrible news from him for a month, waiting until he finished his exams.

The weight of his grief pushed him further and further over the edge, his anger spilling over to his mother and brothers for keeping him in the dark. Yes, he understood their reasons intellectually, but not emotionally.

Guilt ate away at him for going away to the US to further his medical career, making him even more distant from his family. All the negative emotions swept him deeper into the nightlife where alcohol, drugs and fast women overtook him.

Then, came the gunshots in a club, taking the life of his friend and missing him by inches. Rather than waking him up, the experience catapulted him into fantasies of abandoning his dreams entirely and crawling back home to his family. But fate had other plans, and by some miracle, he pushed through and finished his residency before returning to Nigeria.

Still, his risky adventures persisted. He needed them to numb his mind, to camouflage the setbacks life threw at him, and so, he rebuffed his family's persistent appeals to curb his recklessness, to return to Onitsha, and rebuild his life there.

Instead, he'd moved to Lagos, moonlighting as a general surgeon in various hospitals instead of focusing on his speciality in plastic surgery.

Adopting Chewy had changed everything. He'd got a new lease on life, found a renewed sense of purpose that pulled him from the depths of darkness he'd sunken into.

Being responsible for another being gave him no choice but to turn his life around. And so he did, cutting off bad friends, ending his self-destructive risk-taking, and instead, building a stable and fulfilling life. No more club hopping,

no more alcohol binging, no more impulsive, risk-seeking holidays.

He also resurrected his dream of a career in plastic surgery, and within a few months, an offer from Blossom Health came his way. A sign from the universe that he was on the right track.

“I’m so glad to see you, my baby,” he cooed, pressing his lips on his dog’s fur and grinning as he made his way down the corridor.

At the sitting room entrance, his legs and his smile froze as his eyes collided with a woman reclining on the sofa. His heart sank.

Anita Udi.

What the hell? They’d broken up a month ago. What part of that didn’t she get?

She’d been his on-again, off-again girlfriend for four years until he’d decided to end ties completely. She was no good for him, nor he for her.

They’d met in New York and immediately bonded over sex and weed. With nothing else in common, they hardly ever did anything else.

Anita was a wannabe actress who returned to Nigeria with him to pursue her Nollywood dreams, since Hollywood hadn’t panned out.

She had used him for discounted cosmetic surgeries at Blossom Health, and he’d used her when loneliness overtook him and he needed a woman in his bed.

But weeks ago, a sense of dissatisfaction with the

arrangement had crept up on him. Thoughts of his future occupied his mind, one without meaningless relationships leading nowhere. A longing for more took root in his heart.

So, he'd ended it with Anita. He'd treated her to a lovely dinner date so they could discuss the unhealthiness of their relationship. She'd seemed to agree, and they'd agreed to end things. Had he missed something?

What on earth was she doing here uninvited on a Friday evening?

"Hey, babe, what's up?" she said, beaming as she stretched her feet across his pristine white sofa, lowering a fashion magazine to the tea table.

David suppressed a sigh, fighting the impulse to snap. First, he wasn't her 'babe'. And never had been, if he was being totally honest. He'd never really liked the endearment, and it certainly didn't fit now that they weren't together.

Second, he cringed seeing feet on his couch. The room was a monochromatic study with snowy white walls, plush carpeting, and furniture. His friends and family frequently joked about his hospital-like colour palette, but he didn't care. Whenever he walked into the room, a sense of serenity enveloped him.

Anita knew full well he despised her habit of resting her feet on the sofa, yet she'd never paid any heed. Like now.

God! He didn't need this shit after a gruelling day of back-to-back surgeries. His last, a breast reconstruction surgery had been a tricky correction of a botched job by another surgeon. It had taken him more time than usual to fix the mess, and he was exhausted from the effort.

He’d looked forward to relaxing with a drink while waiting the delivery of the fried chicken wings and coleslaw from Chicken Republic. So much for a quiet night.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, trying to stem the ire in his voice.

“What do you mean? I just wanted to hang out with you tonight,” Anita said, clearly oblivious to his irritation.

“Without calling first?” he muttered, setting Chewy down.

The dog dashed to her designated white cushion and settled herself, but kept a suspicious eye trained on Anita. Chewy had never really taken to her, which should’ve told him something long ago.

“Can’t I even visit you anymore? You’re being annoying right now.”

David expelled a rush of air from his lungs. “No, you can’t visit unannounced anymore, Anita. It’s over between us. Besides, you told me you lost the spare keycard to my apartment. Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t lie. I found it today, Dave. Chill out.”

He made a disbelieving sound, but she ignored him. “So, why don’t you want to see me? Are you already dating someone else? Just a month after breaking up with me? *Na wa o*. You move fast.”

“No, Anita. I’m not dating anyone else. And even if I was, it’s none of your business.”

“*Haba*. Why so harsh? Are you really telling me you’re not happy to see me here?”

Sitting up, she spread her legs, causing her short dress to

ride even higher and revealing her bare crotch to him. “Are you really going to turn this down?” She puckered her lips, giving him a come-hither look.

David shook his head, irritated by her antics. However, he didn’t entirely blame Anita for thinking sex might change his mind about their breakup. After all, the relationship had been a four-year rollercoaster of a ride—breakups, sex, and makeups. Over and over again.

Many times, he’d caved and given in to her guileless seduction, ignoring his resolution for a clean break, and taking Anita straight to bed for a romp between the sheets before ending their sexual tryst by sharing a blunt.

But no more. This time around, he wasn’t even remotely interested. He wanted a new life and Anita didn’t feature in it.

“Anita,” he began softly, hoping to drive the message home once and for all. “I don’t want you here. We agreed not to see each other any longer, remember?”

She frowned and let out a hiss. “You don’t get to end things with me. A whole Anita Udi.” She rose to her feet, sweeping her hands over her full hourglass figure. “Do you know how many men would die for a taste of this?”

David’s eyes followed the movement of her hands. Anita was absolutely right. She was beautiful, with smooth, light brown skin, a pretty face, and a gorgeous body perfected on his surgical table.

Many, he was certain. Since theirs had been a rocky, uncommitted relationship, he’d neither offered his, nor expected, her fidelity.

Despite routinely practising safe sex, there'd been a few slip-ups. He'd breathed heavy sighs of relief when the battery of STD tests he'd done after their breakup came back negative. That massive stroke of luck reinforced his determination to change his previous lifestyle of meaningless sexual encounters. The risks outweighed the benefits.

Consequently, he'd been celibate for an entire month now and vowed to be in a healthy monogamous relationship before becoming sexually active again. "Listen, I know … you're beautiful and deserve someone who loves you–"

Her mirthless laughter cut him off. "Who said anything about love?" She shook her head, a smirk on her lips. "You men *sef*. You can't stand a woman as sexually adventurous as you. Hypocrisy, that's what it is. Now, you're suddenly interested in love, eh?" She clapped her hands dramatically. "Well, not me. I don't want a relationship. My acting career is my focus right now."

"And I support that wholeheartedly, Anita. Your dreams are valid, and I'm sure you'll achieve them."

She stopped him with a wave of her hand. "I know, but can't I have fun in the meantime? I just want a man that's good in bed like you. Someone who knows how to have a great time." Her tone dropped an octave lower as she batted her eyelashes at him. "Why can't we continue what we have going on?"

David shook his head. "No, Anita. I'm thirty-four years old and have never been in love, which is pathetic."

She scoffed. "Love is overrated, Dave. I've been there, done that with nothing to show for it but a broken heart."

“Don’t say that, Anita. Lanre isn’t the only man in the world.”

“I know that. That’s why I’m here to see you.”

David smirked, twisting his lips. “Love never really featured in our relationship. Only sex.”

“So? What’s wrong with that? Can’t we do it one more time?” She eyed him sceptically for several seconds, her face filled with doubts. “One for the road, big guy. What do you say?”

Again, he couldn’t fault her persistence. He’d encouraged it with his repeated weakness at the slightest temptation. But that was over. He shook his head again. “Nope.”

“So, I drove all the way for absolutely nothing. Not even a proper goodbye,” she said with a scowl.

“Sorry, Anita. Not tonight. Or ever again. It’s over.”

She let out a harrumph, then snatched her purse off the sofa and swung it over her shoulder. Hips swaying side to side, she strutted towards him and halted right in front of him.

“Call me when you change your mind … like you usually do,” she said with a self-assuredness he totally understood given the merry-go-round that had been their relationship.

With a final icy glare, she sashayed past him and slipped into her red stilettos at the corner of the room. She reached for the door handle, her movement sluggish as if waiting for him to relent.

“Anita,” he called out.

She turned towards him, a triumphant smile on her face. “I

knew it," she burst out, snapping her fingers in victory. "Couldn't resist all this, could you?"

"My keycard," he said, walking toward her and holding out his hand.

Smile disappearing, Anita sucked her teeth loudly as she dug her hand into her purse and fished the keycard out. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she tossed it on the floor between them, then turned and slammed the door on her way out.

David sighed and released a ragged breath, praying she'd finally got the message. He'd hoped that things wouldn't end sour between them, but maybe that ship had sailed. Still, he wished her well. Anita needed to move on … for both their sakes.

She needed to find someone on the same uncommitted page as she. And he … well, he wanted to stop running away from life and embrace a more meaningful future.

After a relaxing shower, David slumped onto the sitting room sofa with a glass of water and an apple, ready to wind down for the weekend. He set Chewy on his knee, absentmindedly caressing the dog as he reached for the TV remote at the tea table by his side.

A quick glance at the wall clock told him his food would arrive in about twenty minutes, so he reclined the seat and switched on the TV, eager to catch up with the news.

Scrolling absently through the channels, his heart suddenly lurched. He blinked once, twice. But the image remained.

Uju Emordi. On the set of *Sunsets in Lagos*, being interviewed by the widely popular Adana Ezenna.

The breath trapped in his chest as he increased the volume, his eyes latched onto Blossom Health's nemesis. How could anyone so dangerous be so breathtakingly beautiful? God!

Her silver dress draped elegantly over her torso, drawing his attention to the alluring hint of cleavage. Even though concealed under the table, he could envision the dress hugging the rest of her just as enticingly.

Her make-up was flawless, highlighting the perfect angles of her cheekbones with her lips coated in a shade of brown and peach that showcased their plump fullness. And dear lord, her eyes—an arresting light brown that looked almost feline in its pale contrast to her dark brown skin. Her hair, styled intricately atop her head, exuded a regal vibe that inspired him to bow down in worship.

If he didn't know any better, he'd swear he had time travelled back to ancient Egypt to witness the exquisite beauty of Cleopatra herself.

Uju Emordi was undeniably drop-dead gorgeous. But so were many women. What about the mere sight of her completely enthralled and discombobulated him?

His reaction made zero sense. Especially as he didn't know her, and what he did know, he didn't like. The woman's life mission consisted of his and all cosmetic surgeons' extinction, for goodness' sake. As if on cue, she spoke.

"A very close friend of mine died from complications of a butt lift performed by a quack." Her voice came soft but husky, echoing through his sitting room and reminding David of his favourite musician, Simi. The sultry sound sizzled through him like an electric current. "She was only

twenty-eight and her life was cut short. Just like that," she continued, snapping a finger.

Something about her wavering tone and the sombre, almost empty look in her eyes struck David. His stomach clenched, imagining how devastating her loss must have been.

"She was a brilliant investment banker, great at basketball and badminton, a wonderful daughter, and sister." Uju drew in a sharp breath, her shoulders sagging and tears clouding her eyes. "And the best friend I could ever ask for."

Within seconds, her shoulders straightened and her jaw hardened. "Those murderers, known as plastic surgeons, took millions of Naira from her, cut her up and killed her right on the operating table. She … she didn't even come out of the hospital alive."

Adana Ezenna plucked a tissue from the table beside her and offered it to Uju. She kneaded the other woman's shoulder and shook her head. "My Lord, that must have been so hard for you and her family."

"Yes, devastating," Uju said, dabbing her eyes. "These cosmetic surgery centres are springing up at an alarming rate all over … Lagos, Abuja. They've even infiltrated non-cosmopolitan parts of the country, like Nsukka. Can you imagine? Ridiculous!" Her lips twisted in disgust. "And do you know what the most unfortunate thing about it is?"

"What?" David only realised he had spoken out loud when Chewy lifted her head at the sound.

"These centres are unregulated. No one is monitoring or evaluating their services to ensure they meet the required

standards. Just anyone can open up a cosmetic surgery clinic these days."

"Seriously? No oversight?" Adanna asked.

"None whatsoever. So if we want to save lives, we must stop them ourselves." Uju turned and stared directly into the camera. "In the coming weeks, I've organized several protests in front of their clinics to get the word out. The first one targets the largest in Lagos. Blossom Health."

As if struck by lightning, David's entire body calcified. He tried to look away, but his eyes refused to obey. The intensity of her gaze, the passion and determination in her voice, pierced through him. As if her words were for him. Only him.

Then, another strange, unsettling sensation washed over him. Something about Uju Emordi seemed oddly familiar. Like a memory tethered to the outer reaches of his consciousness that he couldn't quite access.

No, he didn't recognise her, but he recognised the sensation her essence evoked. A sensation he had only ever experienced once before.

A drunken party. An unexpected encounter. The kiss.

And an unforgettable feeling of deep desire that he couldn't shake for weeks. Only … he couldn't remember who he'd kissed. He'd been drunk, not wearing his glasses.

David stared at Uju Emordi and shook his head. No way. It couldn't be.

She was the last person he could imagine at a drug and alcohol infested university party. She looked too uptight.

Besides, it was so long ago that he must be confusing things.

The lyrical ringing of his doorbell shattered his musings. His food.

David reluctantly turned away from the TV, the host's words floating past his ears as he rose from the seat.

"Wow, this is so inspiring, Uju Emordi. I and the entire staff at Sunsets in Lagos fully support you. Viewers moved by this can join the Against the Wind protest rally in front of Blossom Health on the…"

As David made his way out of the sitting room to open the door for the food vendor, Chewy's excited barking filled the air, drowning out the rest of the host's words.

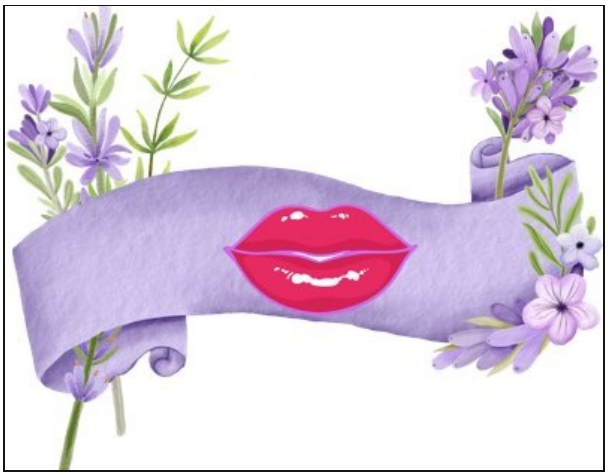
A protest rally? Would Uju Emordi actually go as far as camping out in front of Blossom Health, disrupting his colleagues and inconveniencing their clients?

Damn it! Things had gone from bad to worse. He needed to stop her before she did any actual damage to their business.

If she wouldn't respond to his emails, he would have to find another way.

ASAP.

# FOUR



“WHAT IF NOBODY SHOWS UP?”

Turning sideways, Uju locked eyes with Aminat Ibrahim. Her colleague, roommate, and friend had a point, but she didn’t care if anyone showed up.

“No problem, Aminat. My goal isn’t to create a circus, but to get my message across,” she explained, then turned back to focus on driving. “Which I can do even if I’m standing there by myself.”

Aminat snorted. “I may not agree with your approach, but I’m right here with you, so you won’t be alone.”

Uju peeked at the dashboard clock, then shifted her gaze back to the road, her fingers gripping the steering wheel a little tighter as she drove toward the protest site. With the Monday morning rush hour, the traffic was heavy, and they were on the brink of being tardy for the 9:00 gathering.

Time was ticking away, and with only thirteen minutes to spare before they would be officially late, Uju refused to entertain any more negativity. She knew Aminat didn't truly support this cause. Why punish the doctors instead of holding people accountable for their desire for plastic surgery, she always said.

To Aminat, cosmetic surgery did not differ from dyeing one's hair or piercing one's nose. They were changes made to one's body by a beautician at the request of the client. She thought it unreasonable to blame the beautician for a failed outcome. After all, the client sought out the beautician and asked for the procedure.

Instead of going after the doctors, Aminat felt they should direct their attention towards the men and women seeking such alterations.

Uju disagreed. Doctors should actively discourage and reject individuals interested in cosmetic surgery. Instead of perpetuating the existing culture, they should actively work to eliminate it.

"Aminat, thanks for being here." Uju smiled as she cast another sidelong glance at her friend of over four years. Despite not sharing her views, Aminat remained steadfast in her support. She'd not only backed highlighting the issue on their podcast, but had also helped pull together today's rally.

They'd met at work as editors at the popular Nigerian

*Mirror* newspaper. Uju had immediately liked the petite colleague with the outsized, bubbly personality. She loved Aminat's drive, her commitment to her job, and the way she stood up to their bosses when she believed in a story.

People often underestimated Aminat because of her small size and soft-spoken nature. Not Uju. From their first interaction, she knew that despite her demure dressing and the covering of her hair with a hijab for religious reasons, Aminat was no wallflower.

The woman was bold and brave. A feminist to the core. The type of woman Uju easily gravitated to.

Driven by their shared passion for advancing women's rights, they had started *Against the Wind* as a part time venture. After several years, they decided to leave their well-paid full-time jobs and concentrate solely on their podcast. A risky move considering they'd had only about thirty odd subscribers on their YouTube channel at the time.

Then, the pandemic hit and their subscription numbers took off, making *Against the Wind* one of the most popular podcasts in the country. Now, with over two million subscribers and with two added weekly slots on Mainland Radio, it'd become a financially buoyant venture. Their gamble had paid off. The podcast featured trending topics everyone was talking about … and celebrity interviews, which further increased their reach.

"I mean it, Aminat. I'm forever grateful for the support you always give me, even when you don't agree."

Aminat gave her a cheeky smile. "No *wahala*, girl." She glanced at the car's clock. "Let's just hope we get there on time."

Uju sighed as she looked at the sea of cars in front of them. “It’ll take a miracle.”

Twenty minutes later–a certified miracle given they were only twelve minutes late instead of an hour–Uju slid her Toyota Camry into a parking space at Blossom Health. She pushed open the door and stepped out of the car.

She cast her eyes to the front entrance of the white three-story building and a gasp escaped her lips. A few people had already assembled with protest placards and banners.

She had been promoting the protest rally on their podcast for a week, but she had her doubts that anyone would actually show up. What a pleasant surprise. Certainly better than standing there with only her reluctant partner holding the placard she’d made two nights ago.

“Wow, Uju, people believe in your cause for real,” Aminat said, jolting her mind back.

“I know,” she said, standing there, mouth wide open. “I can’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it. Now let’s get out there and get this party started.”

Uju nodded, swallowing past the lump of emotions wedged in her throat. Ever since Bisola’s death, she had been plagued by a vision of making a meaningful impact and liberating women from the wiles of money-hungry plastic surgeons.

Up to now, it had all been talk—on podcasts, radio and TV shows. But today would be more than mere talk. She’d be walking the walk.

She opened the car boot and pulled out the placard

sporting *Say No to Plastic Surgery* in bright, bold letters.

She nodded at Aminat. “Babe, let’s do this.”

To that, Aminat flashed a thumbs-up.

With a little more confidence, Uju joined the gathering at the entrance of the building, a grin spreading across her face. Looking at the men and women, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of gratitude for their selflessness and dedication. These people had joined the cause without requesting a single thing in return. Amazing!

A quick headcount revealed just over twenty people besides Aminat and her, the majority women, but quite a few men, too.

Uju flashed a big smile. “Ladies and gentlemen, I want to start by apologising for being late. I have no excuse whatsoever,” she began, trying to keep her voice from quivering. She didn’t want to sound as close to tears as she felt.

“No wahala,” one woman said. “We all know Lagos traffic.” To that, the others laughed and clapped, creating a sense of community and connection that warmed her heart.

“You guys astound me,” Uju continued, now a little bolder. “You’re here to make a difference, to protect young men and women from manipulative plastic surgeons out to pad their pockets with money.”

Uju lifted her placard. “We’re here to say *no* to them. To make it clear we will no longer stand by and watch them butcher Nigerian citizens in the name of plastic surgery. Are you with me?”

The air reverberated with the exclamations of *Yes* and the

sound of cheering erupting all around them.

“So, let’s spend the next hour making our voices heard.”

Another bout of applause followed and Uju smiled, bringing out the battery-operated microphone in her purse and switching it on.

“Let’s do this, people,” she said, relieved that the inbuilt speaker had enough volume to project her voice as she instructed the protesters to form lines on either side of the entrance, so they didn’t block the entrance.

With the microphone pressed to her lips and her placard held firmly in her other hand, she chanted, “Say no to plastic surgery!”

Following her lead, the crowd raised their voices in unison, while their synchronised footsteps created an imaginary beat.

Blossom Health was a hub of activity, with staff and clients bustling in and out, seemingly unaffected by protesters. However, a few curious onlookers stopped to observe and others joined in.

Soon, she spotted a man wearing pale blue scrubs marching out of the building, determination in every step he took towards them.

Her stomach spasmed, and her heart fluttered. Dr David Njokwu. The plastic surgeon who had emailed. And the same arsehole who had kissed her senseless at a house party, and then ignored her the next day as if she were invisible.

When she’d caught sight of him for the first time at a party a few years ago, she felt an instant attraction—fierce and

visceral. She spent a part of the night staring at him, unable to help herself. Those breathtaking looks were undeniable—his towering height, wide shoulders, richly toned brown skin, and the most handsome face she had ever laid eyes on.

Looking at him now, she reluctantly admitted he was as captivating as ever. Maybe even more so. He had traded his thick afro for a closely cropped hairstyle and now wore glasses. Sexy rimless glasses.

His fuller beard not only added character but also highlighted his fine facial features—full lips, a long, broad nose, and sparkling eyes that shone behind his sexy spectacles. Right now, they sparked with an intense fury that made her pulse skitter.

Dear God, David Njokwu was a hot surgeon who set her heart to racing and butterflies free-floating in her stomach. Unfortunately, his hotness didn't negate his participation in the social scourge she'd vowed to eradicate.

He stopped right in front of her, stance akimbo and a glare in his eyes directed straight at her. "If you don't stop this shit right now, I'll call the police," he said with gritted teeth.

Uju huffed. "The police? I'm not breaking any laws. It's my civic right to protest against anything I want."

He kissed his teeth, drawing her attention to his gorgeous full lips. Her mind and body flashed back to them moving sensuously against hers. The flush sliding up her neck angered her even more. She couldn't afford her heated reaction to him.

"In fact, it's my fundamental human duty to stop people like you from ruining more lives," she added.

“Ruining more lives? Lady, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I do.” She raised her placard. “I want you and the rest of your fellow plastic butchers to say no to plastic surgery!”

His jaw muscles clenched as he pointed an accusing finger at her. “You’re disturbing the peace with the noise here,” he spat out. “Our clients need peace and quiet while undergoing safe medical procedures they need and want.”

“You mean you want peace and quiet while butchering people in the name of giving them bigger bums and breasts?”

A ripple of laughter followed her comment, triggering a smile from her. David Njokwu, on the other hand, was not amused, tension growing around his eyes and lips.

“If you think plastic surgery is only about butt lifts and breast enlargements, you’re grossly mistaken.” His voice came in a low, angry tone. “There’s more to the profession than cosmetic enhancements. We perform surgery for serious birth defects, burns and other medical conditions.”

Uju snorted in disbelief. “Yet you only advertise BBLs and breast enlargements on your billboards and social media pages to deceive young men and women.”

He opened his mouth—surely to disagree—then clamped it shut.

“Hit a nerve there, didn’t I, doc?” she taunted.

He ground his jaw. “Listen, Miss Uju Emordi or whatever you call yourself. This is a place of business and you’re creating a nuisance here. If you don’t pack up and leave now, I’ll call the police.”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “And you think that’ll stop me? You can arrest me now if you want. It’ll never stop me or any of these fine people out here. We will never stop.” She turned to her supporters, lifted her hand, and balled it into a fist like a freedom fighter. “Right, fellows? What are we here to say?”

“Say no to plastic surgery!” they replied, then continued their chanting. “Say no to plastic surgery!”

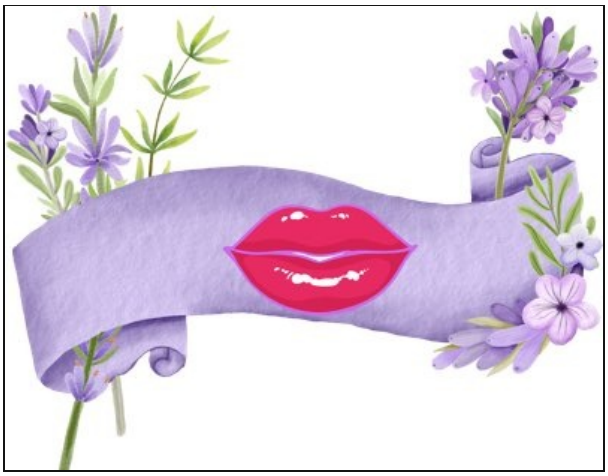
With a victorious smile, Uju held up her placard again and raised the microphone to her lips as she joined the chant. “Say no to plastic surgery!”

The doctor stood watching her for several terse seconds, his facial muscles tight with irritation and his eyes flashing daggers at her.

Without another word, he shook his head, turned and stormed away. Uju burst out a victorious chuckle before continuing the chant.

Yep. She’d make everyone who worked in Blossom Health miserable until they closed the facility down.

# FIVE



TEN. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five …

David gave up and exhaled sharply, unable to stem the fury billowing inside him. Clearly, counting backwards wasn't helping.

He leaned against the window on the top floor of Blossom Health's three-story building, glaring down at the subject of his anger.

She danced and chanted, holding that blasted placard for all to see. Her gleeful smile and synchronised movements, perfectly aligned with the rhythmic chants to form a

harmonious melody, aggravated him further.

Uju Emordi was enjoying this, almost like the gorgeous spitfire relished making his life hell. He dragged his palm across his face and kissed his teeth. God, how he ached to storm back down there, forcefully grab her by the arm and escort her out of the place, while reprimanding her for her childish behaviour.

Matter of fact, he wished he had magic powers to make her go poof. To disappear into thin air and take all his problems with her. He could get back to living his normal life before his partners tasked him with putting out the fire Uju Emordi had ignited.

Following his early morning surgery, he'd come to his office to relax for an hour before his scheduled rhinoplasty. That's when Dr Segun Akintola had called, telling him to deal with the pop-up protest.

In disbelief, he'd looked out his window to find Uju Emordi and her minions chanting and making a nuisance of themselves outside the building.

He'd considered ringing the police, but figured it would only make things worse. After all, peaceful protest was not a crime. So, he decided to isolate the leader and try to reason with her. He'd seek her out and arrange a candid conversation with her. Great idea, in theory.

Unfortunately, her enthusiasm as she led the chants and the smirk on her face had pissed him all the way off, shooting his civilised plan to hell. Instead of calmly reasoning with her, he'd rushed down to confront her, not entirely sure what he'd say. Like he suspected, she'd swatted away his threat of police like an annoying mosquito.

Clearly, Uju Emordi couldn’t be easily intimidated. She knew her rights.

Since last weekend when he’d watched her interview, he’d obsessively followed her podcast replays on YouTube. For the past three months, she’d dedicated every episode to the evils of plastic surgery, focusing on gruesome stories about botched surgeries.

Goodness, the woman had a hard-on for plastic surgeons. If her podcasts were any indication, he was up against a woman on a mission. Locked and loaded, she couldn’t be easily shooed away as he’d imagined when agreeing to take this on.

He fixed his gaze on her, and in that instant, she looked up at him. As if he’d been tasered, a shudder raced through him. Damn! Something about her unsettled the hell out of him, made him acutely aware of himself. Of her.

The way she’d squarely faced him—her eyes and body unwavering—had equally excited and irked him. It had been a long time since anything excited him.

When he quit his life of adventure, he’d become a little bored with everything, except his job. The thrill of using surgical tools to create and recreate had replaced his desire to seek dangerous sports. So he devoted himself to work, taking on more cases than any other partner and even scrambling for more.

His family back east had been begging him to take time off and come home. They spoke frequently by phone, but he hadn’t travelled back to Onitsha in over two years. His excuse–work. But it was a lot more than that.

He feared they would detect how isolated he felt, how

apathetic he'd been feeling about life. It would worry them, and he didn't want that.

Uju Emordi shifted her gaze away from him and leaned over to whisper a few words to a woman wearing a hijab. They both turned back towards him and tittered.

David bristled, his body tensing as he quickly spun away from the window. He trudged towards his executive seat and flopped down, letting out an exasperated sigh.

Unexpectedly, his lips stretched into a smile. Yep. Uju Emordi, the anti-plastic surgery activist, had got under his skin like an itch, and for the life of him, he couldn't explain why scratching that itch excited him.

Maybe because she was a challenge. He would get her to appreciate his job as a plastic surgeon. Before the end of the year, she'd be singing a new tune on her silly podcast.

It was only August. He had plenty of time to convince her. And by God, he would.

The lyrical ring of his phone fractured his thoughts. Pulling it from the breast pocket of his scrubs, he glanced at the screen. He smiled and pressed the green button.

"Mumsie, you call at the oddest times. It's 9:45 on a Monday morning. I could be in the middle of surgery," he said, his grin growing bigger.

His mother had a habit of calling without bothering to check the time. The rest of the world knew he was a busy plastic surgeon and respected his schedule. Not Mumsie. She called whenever the hell she felt like it. Even in the middle of the night.

"Is that any way to greet your mother? You're my son. I

can call whenever I like," his mother said matter-of-factly.

David chuckled. She was right. No matter when she called, he always answered. And if for some reason he couldn't, he called at the soonest opportunity.

He might not live in the east with his family, but his parents and two brothers meant the world to him.

"Of course you can, Mumsie. I'm always happy to hear from you." He leaned back in his seat. "So, *how far*? How is everyone back home?"

"Everyone's fine, thanks to God," his mother answered in their native Igbo language. "Your father's ten-year remembrance service is coming up soon. I hope you're preparing to attend."

"Of course, ma. I've taken a few days off work."

"Good. The *asoebi* material is ready. Do you want me to ship it to you or get my tailor here to sew a nice style for you?"

David shook his head and fiddled with the stem of his glasses. He wished he had time to find a tailor himself, but he didn't. Yet, trusting his mother with styles could be disastrous. The last time he did, he attended a wedding looking like an 80s rapper, with multiple colourful frills attached to what was supposed to be a simple kaftan outfit. The woman's sense of style was flamboyant, to say the least.

"Can you give it to Felix?" he asked, knowing his younger brother would be better at helping him find an excellent tailor.

"Yes, I'll do that. At least your two brothers are married,

and their wives can help them out with such stuff. Unlike you."

David suppressed a sigh. His mother was at it again. Reminding him of being single every chance she got.

"If you had a wife, she'd have found you a tailor."

He twisted his lips. "Mum, there's more to a wife than catering to a man's every need."

"Well, how would you know when you haven't brought any woman back home, eh?" She clucked her tongue. "At this rate, I may have to step in and find you a wife."

"No!" David shook his head vehemently. "Please don't even think about it."

"Why not? You're thirty-four. At your age, your father was already married with three children."

He let out the sigh he'd stifled. "Mum, those were different times. Now, marriage isn't the end goal for everyone."

She sucked in her breath. "So, are you saying you don't want to get married?" Her tone sounded pained, as if the very idea would break her heart.

"Not at all, Mum."

"Then what *are* you saying? Why the delay?"

"I'm saying I will wait until I find the right woman. No matter how long it takes."

In a sudden jolt, the clear image of the woman leading the rally downstairs materialised in his thoughts. David shook his head to dispel it.

Uju Emordi? His brain must have short-circuited. No bloody way. He didn't know her from Adam. And besides, she was more annoying than the devil.

Totally thrown by the idea of a romantic involvement with Uju Emordi, David rose and went back to the window. She and her cronies were still dancing and chanting.

He zeroed in on her and his pulse rate sped up. Damn! One glance and a rush of inexplicable excitement coursed through his veins.

Uju Emordi might be infuriating, but she certainly piqued his interest, fascinated him.

"You'd better hurry and find her soon," his mother said, shattering his fixation on the woman below. "Otherwise, I'll find a woman for you when you come back home this time around."

David chuckled. "That sounds like a threat."

"It's a promise, son. If you think I'm playing, ask your brothers how they met their wives."

A grin spread across his lips. Oh, he knew that already. Their mother arranged Felix's and Patrick's marriages. Fortunately, his brothers seemed pleased with her choices for them.

He had adamantly objected to her every attempt to find him a wife. But how long could he resist it? And should he? Maybe an arranged marriage wouldn't be the worst thing.

His brothers were happy, and he had to admit he longed for love and family. Just like he had growing up.

"Okay, Mum. If I haven't found someone in a year, I'll let

you go for it. Is that a deal?”

“Deal!” she echoed, the smile in her voice tunnelling through the phone line.

Glancing down at Uju Emordi again, he couldn’t help the smile unfurling his lips as she led her fellow protesters in a line dance as they chanted.

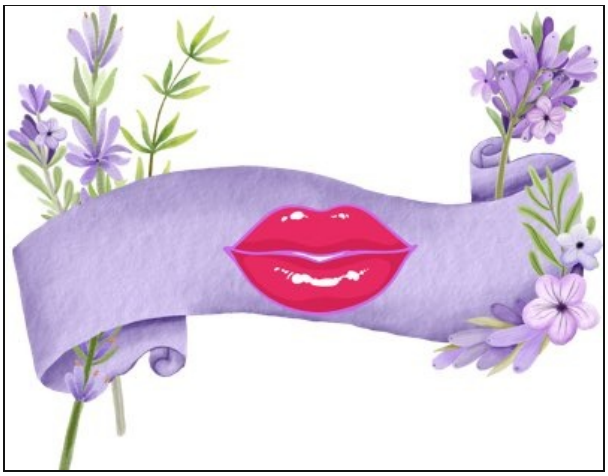
If she wasn’t such a pain in the arse, he would ask her on a date. She seemed like a really fun person to be around. Especially when she wasn’t complaining about his profession.

What a crazy notion. Dating Uju Emordi should be the last thing on his mind. Instead, he should focus on how to stop her siege on Blossom Health.

If she continued ignoring his emails, he would need an alternative method to grab her attention and put an end to her assault on Blossom Health and the plastic surgery industry.

That was his assignment. And to do that properly, he couldn’t afford to be distracted. Not even by the beauty of her sweet smile.

# SIX



NO MATTER how many times she'd done this, Uju always felt a flutter of nerves whenever she went on air.

The unpredictability of live radio kept everyone on their toes. Each week brought a different vibe from listeners. Sometimes, listeners flooded the show with responses, and other times, the flood became a trickle.

As she settled into her spot in the studio and donned her headphones, ready to start her one-hour program on Mainland radio, a familiar mix of excitement and nerves jolted her stomach.

Uju drew in a long breath and exhaled, trying to banish the negative energy still simmering inside her. She'd just had another argument with Aminat, and she didn't like how it ended.

Her friend, also the show's producer, was fed up of the constant discussions about plastic surgery and wanted a fresh topic for today's episode.

However, Uju strongly disagreed, believing they should ride on the wings of their successful protest three days ago and continue gathering support.

Their protest gained traction on multiple popular Nigerian blogs and even caught the attention of the international blog *The Shakeroom*. The local news even broadcasted it. If they let up now, they could lose their momentum.

Unable to agree, they'd flipped a coin. Uju had won, but it had resolved nothing. Aminat's gloomy demeanour showed her lack of enthusiasm.

Uju turned her head and smiled at her friend, who was seated at the producer's booth next to her.

"Sorry," she mouthed.

Aminat shrugged, and then nodded, but remained silent.

Uju easily deciphered her friend's gestures—*I disagree, but I've got your back.*

Uju swallowed hard. She hated carrying the burden of her best friend's senseless death from plastic surgery, but she couldn't just drop it. She had to do anything possible to prevent more deaths.

So unsettled feeling or not, she couldn't bring herself to

stop, even if it annoyed Aminat. What's more, she didn't want to. With a heavy sigh, she meticulously adjusted the buttons on the console, drawing her microphone closer to her lips before finally opening her mouth to speak.

"Hello, my wonderful people, on this lovely Thursday evening. Welcome to another episode of *Against the Wind* on Mainland 92.5 FM." She adjusted her headphone to a more comfortable position over her Afro. "Today, we again focus on the negative impact of plastic surgery. If you have anything to add to this topic, please don't hesitate to ring us at 08539759000 and share your thoughts. That's 08539759000."

Uju hit the button to play the podcast jingle.

"I appreciate all those who came to protest at Blossom Health cosmetic surgery centre three days ago," Uju continued in what she called her radio voice—upbeat and sultry. "I'm glad to see that many of you agree on the dangers of plastic surgery. These doctors that maim our men and women must be stopped."

The alert button silently flashed with a call coming through. Uju turned to Aminat who gave her a thumbs-up to answer.

"And we have our first caller of the evening," she said, pressing the accept button. "Hello, welcome to *Against the Wind* on Mainland Radio, 92.5 FM. What's your name and where are you calling from?"

"Hi, my name is Dr David Njokwu, and I'm calling from Blossom Health, Lekki."

Uju bolted upright. Her heart leapt in her chest, its rhythm erratic and frenzied. Sweat trickled down her body, despite the air conditioner running full blast.

His was the last voice she expected to hear. Following his confrontation as she protested in front of Blossom Health, he'd disappeared back into the building, sulking in defeat. And after she'd spotted him looking at her from the top floor window, he never reemerged or contacted her afterwards.

Uju thought he had given up, or maybe he was even working on legal documents to silence her.

Refusing to back down, she also contacted her lawyer for advice and reassurance on her legal footing. After several days of anxious waiting, Barrister Adenuga confirmed she had nothing to worry about.

How ironic that now, the man who had her fretting for the past few days was calling into her radio show. She cleared her throat. "Hello, Dr Njokwu. Nice to have you on *Against the Wind*," she said, trying her hardest to keep her voice steady.

God Almighty, the man unnerved her like nobody else ever—her emotions were running wild and out of control.

"We've been talking about the dangers of plastic surgery and the negative impact on our society. We welcome your perspective."

"You keep talking about the negative impact. What about the positive impact?" His tone was firm. "What about people who need reconstructive surgery to improve their mental and physical wellbeing? Huh? Is that negative?"

Uju huffed. "When have BBLs and breast augmentation ever saved anyone's life? Eh? Instead, many of our young people's bodies are being deformed and some are even dying in the name of having a big *yansh* or boobs."

He let out an exasperated breath, the sound thick with frustration. “It’s interesting that you hold strong opinions about plastic surgery, considering your limited understanding of that particular medical specialty.”

“I know enough.”

“No, you don’t! There’s more to reconstructive medicine than cosmetic enhancements,” he insisted, desperation seeping into his voice, as if determined to make her see it his way. “I have an offer. Come spend a week at Blossom Health and learn what really happens there. You may have a different perspective after that.”

Uju snickered. “I’ll pass. I have more important things to do than to watch people put themselves under the knife for a fatter bum or boobs.”

He sucked his teeth, the echo loud against her ears. “Some people need surgery to correct birth defects, some need reconstructive surgery after burns or accidents.”

“Oh, I know that. I’m not silly. What I want to know is how many of those surgeries you actually do? Why are your social media pages and advertisements filled with cosmetic surgical options instead of those?”

“Because there are a lot fewer people who know these surgeries are available to them.” He paused, as if pacing his thoughts. “Your negative portrayal of plastic surgery contributes to the stigma surrounding it, deterring people from exploring reconstructive procedures that have the potential to improve their self-confidence and health.”

His comment caused a flush of annoyance to her cheeks. Was this man holding her responsible for his own failure to reach people who genuinely needed plastic surgery?

“My point is that, as doctors, we must listen to patients’ reasons for seeking surgery, ensure their mental and physical readiness to make decisions, and then perform the surgeries in the safest manner.”

“So why is there an increase in the rate of botched surgeries and complications of cosmetic surgery? Why are more people dying from BBL operations?”

He cleared his throat. “I agree we need more regulation of reconstructive medical centres,” he admitted. “However, closing them all down would remove the options for people who actually need them and create backdoor channels which would be a lot less safe.”

Uju didn’t accept his argument completely. Her problem wasn’t with the surgeries per se. It was really with the vigorous manner in which plastic surgeons promoted cosmetic surgeries and how it affected young people’s body image.

Bisola was smart, kind, beautiful, and successful. How on earth had she ever considered herself not enough? What made her believe she needed surgery to make herself more appealing to her worthless boyfriend, who immediately found another girl with a fake butt after she passed away?

“I would prefer closing them all down if it would prevent one less surgically butchered man or woman,” Uju said, vehemence in her tone.

“And it would be a shame if you carry on spreading misinformation, Uju Emordi,” he countered. “Without truly experiencing the other side of reconstructive surgery, how will you ever know the reality of the situation?”

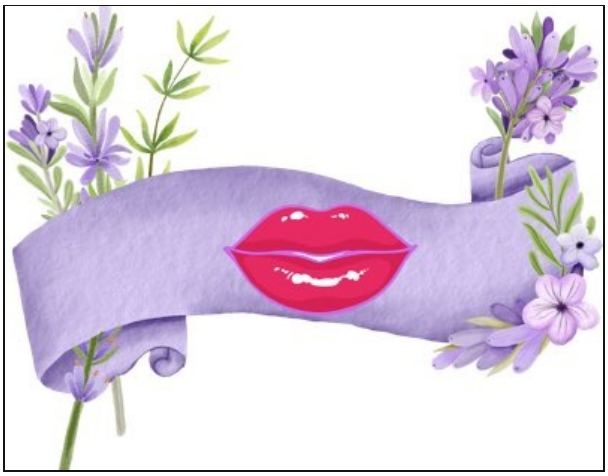
Uju parted her lips to answer but closed it when she noticed Aminat shaking her head rapidly, warning flashing in her eyes.

“My offer still stands, Ms Emordi. One week at Blossom Health, and if you’re not convinced we need proper reconstructive centres, I’ll keep clear of your mission to stop plastic surgeons.”

Uju fought the urge to say no, swallowing her refusal. She couldn’t afford to come across as argumentative and uncooperative in response to a reasonable request from a listener on air, could she?

“Let me consider it,” she said instead, knowing fully well she’d do no such thing. Hell would freeze over before she walked through the doors of a plastic surgery facility with a licence to kill.

# SEVEN



As Uju walked into the sitting room of her family home, the sound of laughter and chatter filled the air. It was a full house.

“Sorry I’m late,” she mumbled, her face burning from embarrassment.

“You’re always late, my girl,” her father said with a teasing smile. “I hope you make it to heaven on time.”

With a grin on her face, Uju strolled to where he sat in the corner, his recliner creaking under his weight as he sipped on his can of cider. No use arguing about it. Her father was

right. Tardiness was one of her major flaws. Despite living in Lagos for years, she always underestimated the city's notorious traffic when making plans.

"If I'm late to heaven, the angels will wait for me. Just like y'all are doing," she said, lowering her head to plant a kiss on her father's cheek.

The older man snorted, shaking his head in amusement. "You're lucky the food isn't yet ready, dear. We would have started eating without you."

"Yes, *o*!" her mother called out from the seat opposite her husband. "You think we'd wait for you? *Hian*! You must think you're Princess Diana!"

Uju tossed her head back and chortled. "I'm even higher than a princess, Mum. I'm a queen."

"Yes, you are. The queen of lateness," her mother said, causing a ripple of laughter throughout the room.

Uju laughed as she walked towards her mother and kissed her cheek. She exchanged greetings with her brother Ozioma and his wife, Trisha, before sitting herself.

Her eyes scanned the room, taking in the comforting sight of her beloved family and the genuine joy reflected in their smiles. She considered herself fortunate to have grown up surrounded by people she enjoyed being around.

Throughout her childhood, she believed everyone else had a happy family until she visited her mother's older sister, Aunty Uchechi, during a school break. Inside that enormous mansion in Enugu, she realised her fortune. Her parents didn't fight all the time and her only sibling loved and constantly protected her.

After seeing the chaos of her aunt's family life, she'd returned home from eastern Nigeria more appreciative of their simpler but happier life in Ikeja, Lagos. This three-bedroom duplex house she'd grown up in wasn't as glamourous as her aunt's estate, but love and happiness thrived here, and that was what really mattered.

Observing her aunt's tears following multiple arguments with her husband and three children, Uju learned wealth meant nothing without inner peace and happiness. The holiday had a profound impact on her relationship with her parents and brother, prompting her to make a lifelong commitment to cherish their bond.

She adored her parents for their devotion to their children. Both retired civil servants, they spent their free time traveling and visiting family.

Her father was in his late sixties, a little overweight, but still played active badminton. He had a round face that was almost completely hidden by his thick silver beard and moustache. The oversized spectacles he wore only added to his enigmatic appearance.

In contrast, his wife sported a close-cropped salt-and-pepper hairstyle that showcased her facial features. She was in her early sixties, but still slim and athletic.

People always said Uju looked like her mum, but had her dad's tough personality. She agreed.

"Shall we make our way to the dining room? I'm starving," said Ozioma, her older brother by four years, drawing her attention to him.

Like their father, he was tall with a heavy-set build, but his face was clean-shaven, and he had short dreadlocks.

He sat next to his wife, a petite woman with long braids and a pretty face. Married three years, her brother and Trisha had a six-month-old son.

“You *sef*. Always hungry,” Uju teased, giggling.

Her brother rolled his eyes, a playful smile tugging his lips. “Well … it’s way past one on a Saturday afternoon. What do you expect?”

Uju grinned as she glanced at her watch. “Oops! I apologise again for being late. *Sowie* my big *bwother.*”

Her imitation of a distressed toddler was so convincing that it sparked another round of laughter.

“So, big bro. Where’s my cute little nephew?” Uju asked, wishing her brother had brought his son, Igwebuike, like he did last month when they gathered for luncheon here.

“With my mum,” Trisha said, sounding relieved. “*Biko*, I need a few baby-free hours sometimes.”

Her brother reached out and squeezed his wife’s hand, and a wave of emotion welled up inside Uju. The sight of their genuine mutual love touched her. From the moment Ozioma met Trisha at university, he was smitten. He’d not looked twice at another woman since then.

“You do, babe. Just tell me whenever, and I’ll make sure it happens,” Ozioma murmured, caressing Trisha’s hand.

Just then, the sound of a buzzing phone interrupted the tender moment. Uju’s mother reached for her phone on the tea table beside her. “Charity just texted. Lunch is ready,” she said, rising to her feet.

Uju inhaled deeply, her mouth already watering at the

tantalising aroma coming from the kitchen. Charity, her parents' live-in housekeeper and chef, was a fantastic cook. Uju couldn't wait to dig in and stuff her face with the food.

Before long, they were all gathered around the table, feasting on fried rice, chicken, and coleslaw. Conversation flowed freely as they ate, their voices rising and falling with passion as they debated politics and the recent elections.

"Not voting because you believe your vote never counts is the most illogical excuse," Uju said, shaking her head disapprovingly. "I don't care how many times our politicians rig the elections; I'll still show up and perform my civic duty."

"Uju, you're too pragmatic. Some people lose confidence in the system. You can't blame them for that," her brother said.

"Yes, I *do* blame them." Uju lifted her glass of wine for a sip. "The only way to gain confidence in a broken system is to stay in the game. Giving up means nothing changes."

"Oh, come on, Uju. Not everyone has the tenacity to be an activist like you," Trisha said. "It's understandable for people to feel overwhelmed and exhausted, to contemplate giving up."

"Well, I don't agree. Giving up is never an option for me. I like to fight for what I believe, to make sure people hear what I have to say." Uju sipped from her drink and swallowed. "Just like the way I keep fighting to stop the plastic surgeons from ruining more lives. If we all give up, who does the dirty work, eh?"

Ozioma let out an exaggerated sigh. "Here we go again.

You’re obsessed. Plastic surgery and surgeons have taken over your life these past few months.”

“Because I lost my best friend thanks to one of those quacks. Plastic surgeons are evil! We should strip them all of their licenses and close their centres.”

“They’re not all quacks. Sometimes, people need their services,” Trisha snapped, her tone sharp enough to cause immediate silence in the room.

Uju gasped, watching her brother and his wife exchange a strange look before shaking their heads in unison, an unspoken agreement passing between them.

This gave Uju pause. Why did their faces instantly turn gloomy? And were those tears glistening in Trisha’s eyes?

A wave of panic erupted inside Uju’s body like a volcano. What the hell was going on? Was her sister-in-law considering cosmetic surgery? Why? Would Trisha also fall victim to the quacks like Bisola? Unable to let the moment pass, Uju blurted out, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Ozioma muttered under his breath.

His wife reached for his hand and squeezed it. “We’ve got to tell them at some point, Ozi. What better time than now?”

From the corner of her eye, Uju noticed her mother’s body go still. “*Ogini*?” the older woman asked, worry saturating face. “Tell us what’s going on, my son. *Biko*.”

Trisha and Ozioma glanced at each other, a silent moment passing between them, then he nodded.

Trisha exhaled sharply. “I’ve been diagnosed with stage

one breast cancer, and I've chosen to have a mastectomy," she said.

Gasps reverberated in the room, followed by a thick silence, all eyes glued on Trisha.

"Thankfully, the doctors caught it early. It hasn't spread to my lymph nodes or anywhere else," she added. "I'm scheduled for surgery in three weeks."

Trisha turned to Uju and gave her a knowing look. "I've opted for immediate reconstructive surgery. So, I've been searching for a good plastic surgeon because I'll need one."

Uju's breath caught in her throat as her pulse rate went into overdrive. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her thirty-six-year-old sister-in-law diagnosed with breast cancer? How? She was so young.

Tears flooded her eyes, but she blinked them back, fighting to keep it together.

"A breast augmentation may not save my life like a mastectomy would, but it would give me a quality of life," Trisha said. "Do you think that's wrong, Uju? Do you?"

Rendered speechless, Uju merely gaped at her sister-in-law, her mind whirling all over the place. As shame consumed her, she could feel her skin growing warm and prickly.

Had she let her anger and grief over losing her friend to cosmetic surgery consume her so much that she couldn't see any potential benefits of the practice? Had she totally lost the plot?

"Oh, God." Overwhelmed with emotion, Uju buried her face

in her hands.

She uncovered her face again and pinned her gaze on her sister-in-law, tears falling down her eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with that whatsoever, Trish. Absolutely nothing. And I’m so sorry for … for being insensitive.”

Trisha reached across and covered her hand with hers. “Please don’t apologise, Uju. You didn’t know.”

“So, when did you find out? How?” Uju turned to her father, who asked the questions, immediately noticing the crease of worry on his forehead.

“Nearly three months ago. I went for a routine mammogram in the US.”

“Three months! Why didn’t you say anything?” Uju heard her mother ask.

“I … we wanted to be sure about the prognosis before involving the rest of the family,” Trisha answered.

Uju sank into deep thought, still trembling from shock, only half listening to her parents asking more about Trisha’s breast cancer diagnosis.

Her sister-in-law’s revelation had completely taken her off guard, and in a way, produced an epiphany that made her sick to her stomach. All this while she’d been badmouthing plastic surgeons, she’d never really thought someone she loved dearly would need one.

How could she have let grief overtake sound reasoning? When had she transitioned from journalist to vindictive woman, driven by revenge rather than clear thinking?

She sorely needed to take a step back and reevaluate her

motivation for going after plastic surgeons. Time to take off the boxing gloves and put her investigative hat back on.

Drawing a deep breath in and releasing it in a sharp exhale, she turned her attention to Trisha. “Trish, have you found a plastic surgeon yet?”

Trisha shook her head. “Not yet. We’re still searching.” She shrugged. “There are so many in Nigeria these days, and I’m not sure who to trust. I don’t want to leave our young son and travel abroad for the procedure, but we may have to if I don’t find a talented surgeon in *Naija*.”

Uju swallowed hard. “I think I may know someone that could be helpful,” she said. “I’ll reach out to him for you.”

“Really? Who?” Trisha asked.

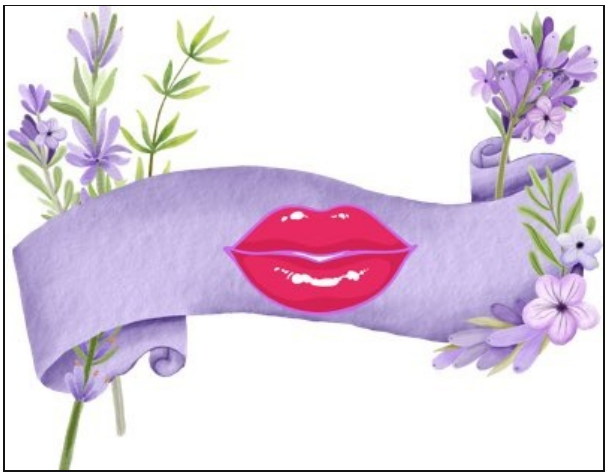
“Dr David Njokwu from Blossom Health.”

“Ah! He’s on our top list to check out,” her brother announced with a pleased smile. “If you can arrange an appointment with him, I’d be grateful.”

Uju nodded. “I’ll get right on it, I promise,” she said.

Even if it meant eating crow and crawling back to the man that she vowed never to have anything to do with.

# EIGHT



DESPITE SIX MONTHS as a plastic surgeon, David still couldn't figure out why anyone would toy with their life in this manner.

As he glanced at the anaesthetised woman on the surgical table, pity mixed with concern. A web of scars and deformities marred her gluteal region, resembling the aftermath of a brutal crush injury from a vehicle. Only no accident had caused it, but a quack surgeon.

David turned his attention to Dr Segun Akintola, who stood opposite him, assisting in rectifying the botched Brazilian butt lift.

“Honestly, the surgeon who did this should be jailed,” David said, shaking his head as he separated the superficial facia from the deep tissue with forceps.

Segun paused, keeping his surgical tools steady against the exposed skin of the client on the table. He heaved a sigh and shrugged. “It’s unconscionable that these quacks have licences and operate unchecked in this country.”

“I know. And sad that people think cutting corners and paying less will get them excellent service. There’s a reason for the amount we charge.” David frowned, the surgical mask covering his nose and mouth brushing against his lips. “If only she had taken the time to find skilled surgeons in the beginning, this struggling twenty-three-year-old actress wouldn’t have to bear the exorbitant costs of fixing this mess.”

“I agree,” said Segun, continuing with his task. “And that’s why part of me agrees with that activist … what’s her name? Uloma …”

“Uju Emordi,” David supplied.

“Yes, Uju Emordi. She’s not all wrong. She may come on too strongly, but she’s right about one thing. We need more regulation of plastic surgery centres in Nigeria.”

Hearing this from Segun caused his stomach to lurch. For the past few days, David had thought constantly about Uju Emordi.

Their conversation on the radio had sparked something inside him. Maybe a newfound self-awareness, urging him to re-evaluate his motives for a career in plastic surgery.

Yes, he loved the concept of fixing people’s insecurities,

making them whole on the outside so that they could focus on healing inside. However, he mainly wanted to make a difference.

His father had been badly burned in a car accident that took his life. The horrific sight of his charred body in the casket lingered in his thoughts, tormenting him with nightmares for weeks. Although the mortician had worked diligently to make him seem less ghastly, the sight of his father resembling a figure from a horror movie had remained etched in his mind.

He’d ruminated on what would have happened if his father had survived. How would his handsome father have coped with his face so badly scarred?

Not very well, David suspected. The man spent overtime on grooming. From meticulously choosing his outfits right down to the polished shoes, keeping his body in shape with exercise, stocking enough skincare and hair products to run a salon, and practically having a seat with his name on it at the barber. The scarring from the accident would have devastated his father.

That realisation had motivated David to pursue plastic surgery. Had spurred his desire to help victims of such horrific accidents. His goal was to remove the physical markers of tragedy, allowing victims to gaze into a mirror without seeing the external signs of their suffering.

David took another peep at the client on the surgical table and swallowed hard. Who was he kidding?

In actuality, he encountered fewer patients seeking plastic surgery for medical reasons and more patients seeking superficial enhancements. His clientele were mostly men and women after cosmetic surgery, and it was beginning to

irk him.

Every year, Blossom Health performed two reconstructive surgeries for two individuals who could otherwise not afford such a procedure. But maybe they should be doing more.

“By the way, have you arranged a meeting with her?”

Segun’s question snatched him from his musing. David scrunched up his forehead. “Who? Uju Emordi?”

“Yes,” Segun said with a nod. “I listened to your conversation with her on the radio. She doesn’t seem like she will back down anytime soon.”

“No kidding. She didn’t give me the time of day … then or since.” David let out a rueful laugh. “I’ve emailed, called the show, even called her partner. Complete radio silence.”

“Geez! The woman has a massive bone to pick with us.” A hint of amusement danced in Segun’s eyes. “What’s your next play? Another protest in front of Blossom Health would be bad for business. We need to stop her.”

David used sterile gauze to stem the blood oozing from the surgical site. He continued removing the hypertrophied tissue marring the client’s otherwise smooth skin. “I’m investigating legal options. Maybe the court system can stop her.”

“I hope it doesn’t go that far,” Segun said, then let out a sigh. “With us, she’s definitely barking up the wrong tree, but I see her point. She just needs to find the actual quacks, like the one whose mess we’re cleaning up right now.”

David nodded. He loathed the idea of taking Uju Emordi to

court. Like Segun, he understood her disgust with the surge in cosmetic surgeries and the alarming rates of subpar surgeries and client disfigurement. Her heart was in the right place, but her methods were faulty.

Maybe if he could get her to join forces, they could tackle the fundamental problem—the Nigerian medical council's laissez faire attitude regarding fake plastic surgeons.

If only he could get her to stop her attack against Blossom Health and see they were really on the same side.



Hours later, David slumped onto his office chair and blew out a weary sigh. Rolling his neck from side to side, he massaged the edge of first one shoulder, then the other.

Bloody hell, he was tired. Having spent the past four hours on his feet, he just wanted to sit here and unwind before his next surgery. Another BBL. Thankfully, not a repair job.

He removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose before putting them back on. Leaning forward, he switched on his desktop and typed his password. Time for what he hated most as a surgeon—paperwork.

Adding to his workload, he now had to document his notes on both paper and the computer, since the new office software prohibited surgeons from using paper-only notes.

He hated the double work, but understood the shift to digital documentation.

While all his partners relied on their secretaries for their surgical notes, David did his own. He refused to take the

chance of a mistake that could land him in legal trouble.

Just as he finished typing the last sentence confirming the success of his latest corrective surgery, his intercom buzzer blared. He glanced at the time on the desktop screen and frowned. He'd asked his secretary to make sure nobody disturbed him until he was done with his next scheduled surgery.

Still frowning, he pressed down the intercom button. "Hey, Azuka, what's up?"

"There's someone here to see you—"

"Can the person come back later? I'm writing up my notes."

"I think you'll want to see her, Dave. It's Uju Emordi from *Against the Wind*."

David's breath caught in his chest, and his pulse took off. He sat upright, all his previous muscle fatigue vanishing.

Damn! He'd not expected her to show up today. Or ever. In fact, he'd anticipated their only future contact being through barristers.

What did she want? To give him more grief or to bury the hatchet? His money was on the former.

He Inhaled deeply, trying to calm the nerves firing in his system, and then cleared his throat. "Send her in," he said, hoping his voice sounded even.

Keeping still as he waited, David fought the urge to reach for his phone and check his reflection on his camera. For goodness' sake, his looks should be far from his mind now. He was a serious surgeon wearing his typical blue scrubs.

He didn’t need to look like a GQ cover model to see Uju Emordi. Why did he even care about his appearance?

The door opened, and she strolled in. Goodness, the woman was beautiful. A wine-coloured dress flattered her tall, slender figure, gracefully flowing over the curves of her hips. With her Afro combed out into a halo, her pretty oval face and high cheekbones became the centre of attention.

Their eyes met, and David’s heart skipped a beat.

*Stand up, silly!*

Embarrassed by his social gaffe, David jumped to his feet, but he blamed her. For her arresting beauty. Something primal and almost tangible in the way her long-lashed, hazel eyes, with their captivating hazel hue, drew him in, making him forget his manners. He could almost see into her soul. And he knew instinctively that something was wrong.

His entire body grew rigid. “Uju, is everything okay?” he asked.

Her eyes widened, as if his astuteness surprised her. “Yes … No … eh … thank you for seeing me with no notice.”

David waved her gratitude off. He was feeling more concerned than magnanimous. “Of course, no *wahala*.” He indicated a chair opposite him. “Please take a seat.”

She nodded slightly. “Thank you,” she said, as she pulled out the leather chair and sank into it.

David reclaimed his own, a slight quiver in his lower belly. He hated seeing Uju looking so subdued. Her feistiness may have irritated him to no end, but he missed the fire in her eyes.

He knew he shouldn’t care, but her sagging shoulders and gloomy countenance worried him. Something must be very wrong for her to put aside her hate for Blossom Health and come here.

“Welcome to Blossom Health,” he said, keeping his tone breezy. “Can I get you anything to drink? Tea, coffee?”

“No, thanks.” She shook her head, lowered her gaze to the floor, and then raised it back to his. “I … I came here because I need your help.”

David remained silent, fighting the urge to wade in and get all the information out of her as fast as possible. He really hoped she wasn’t here to inquire about getting plastic surgery. It was ironic, he knew, given his profession, but he couldn’t help the strong aversion he felt at the thought of her desiring to change her physical appearance.

Not only because it would make her a hypocrite, but also because she was perfect in his eyes. She didn’t need to change a single thing.

“I … eh … I wouldn’t blame you if you kicked me out after everything I’ve done…” She fidgeted with the strap of her wristwatch, clearly uncomfortable needing him for anything.

“Uju, I’m a doctor. Our oath is to do no harm, so please just ask.” He let his lips spread into a slight smile, hoping to set her mind at ease. “I’ll not bite your head off. I promise.”

“My sister-in-law Trish has breast cancer,” she blurted out. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them, she looked straight at him. “She needs a topnotch plastic surgeon for breast reconstruction immediately after her mastectomy.”

David suppressed the sigh of relief that almost made it past his lips. Thank God Uju wasn't here needing cosmetic surgery herself.

"I know you're one of the best in the country, and I wouldn't blame you if you said no, but could you take her as a patient ASAP? Her surgery is in three weeks."

David nodded. "Of course, I'd be delighted to," he said. "I'll even do it free of charge."

Uju shook her head vigorously. "That's not necessary. She's more than able to pay."

"But I'd like to," David said, eager to jump in and help Uju in any way possible. "In fact, I'm honoured that you came to me despite our … our conflict of interest."

"Doing it for free for my sister-in-law won't make a difference. My views on plastic surgeons in this country remain unchanged."

"It's obvious, and I expect nothing less." He sank back into his seat and swerved it from side to side, fighting the twitch of his lips threatening to break into a smile. "I know it was hard for you to come here to ask me, but I see it as an excellent opportunity."

"For what?"

"For you to do exactly what I requested on your podcast."

"Which is?"

"To spend a week at Blossom Health and see the other side of reconstructive surgery." David leaned forward. "If you don't feel differently after, I'll accept that your opinion is set in stone."

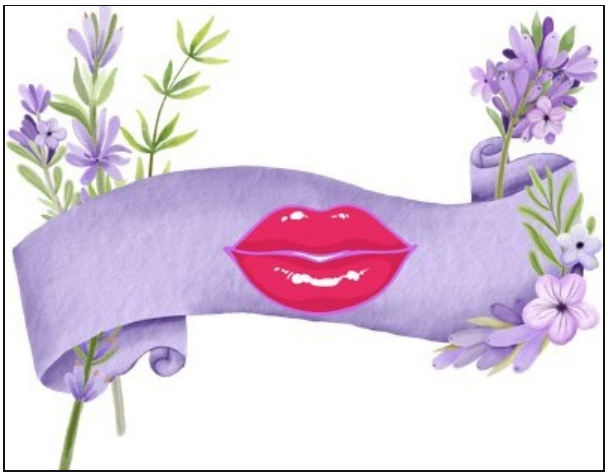
She pinned her eyes on him, a pensive look on her face, and then nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal.”

Now, David let the smile spread its wings. “Thank you. And I’ll make sure your sister-in-law receives excellent medical care here. Just like I do for every client who walks into this centre.”

As he spoke, he noticed her facial features relaxing and a soft smile forming on her lips. His heart melted. Not only had he persuaded Uju to cooperate with him, but now, he’d get to spend some time with her. The cherry on top.

Why did the thought of spending time with her make him more excited than he’d been in a long time?

# NINE



NOT SURE WHY she was nervous, Uju waited for Trisha to sit down before she sank into the seat beside her.

Despite the cool air in Blossom Health's waiting room, her underarms felt damp and her skin hot and tight.

She let her eyes sweep the room, taking in its minimalist yet welcoming decor. Comfortable chairs, lush plants, a coffee and tea bar, and a television. A comforting ambience likely kept nervous patients from backing out of surgery.

Trisha's appointment was set for 8 AM on Monday, and

with no one else in the waiting room, Uju suspected her sister-in-law was Dr David Njokwu's first patient of the day. She cast a sidelong glance at Trisha, who appeared at ease as she scrolled through Instagram on her phone.

Suppressing a sigh, Uju squeezed the armrest of her chair, hoping to calm her nerves. Funny that she was a bundle of nerves and the actual patient looked calm as a cucumber. Though Uju and Trisha had meticulously planned every aspect of this appointment, the closer the day crept, the more on edge Uju felt.

The door swung open, and Dr Njokwu walked in looking dapper in a fitted black suit with a red-and-white tie. There might be a young woman in blue scrubs beside him, but Uju's eyes zeroed in on him. Her heart bumped into her chest and took off beating erratically.

She released a breath. She didn't need a crystal ball to tell her this man was the reason for her frayed nerves. Just the thought of seeing him again had made her body go haywire.

His effect on her was unsettling, lingering, and completely unwelcome. His predominance in her thoughts were out of control, and she hated not being in full control.

"Good morning, ladies," he greeted, a smile spreading across his handsome face. "This is Susan Onoh, one of our medical students. She'll be sitting in today solely for observation, if you don't mind?"

Uju cast an uncertain glare Trisha's way, but she needn't have worried. With a smile, Trisha nodded her agreement. "Good morning, Doctor," she said. "Of course, it's okay. I'm so grateful you took my case on such short notice."

David Njokwu grinned. “My absolute pleasure.” He moved towards the adjacent room and opened the door. “Please come in and take a seat.”

Uju stayed put, not sure what to do. Trisha rose, walked a few steps, and halted. She turned back. “Aren’t you coming, Uju?”

With a nod, Uju got to her feet and followed the trio. She and Trisha settled on the sofa opposite Dr Njokwu’s mahogany desk. After a short exchange of small talk to break the ice, Dr Njokwu turned to his computer and scrolled for what felt like an eternity.

He finally raised his head and turned to Trisha. “Mrs Emordi, after reviewing the clinical notes and scans, I agree with your oncologist. Your prognosis is very optimistic,” he confirmed with a reassuring smile. “I’ve already been in contact with your breast surgeon, Dr Owolabi, to coordinate a date for the joint surgery. Is this Friday still okay for you?”

Trisha cleared her throat. “Yes, thanks. I prefer it before the weekend, so my family can be around me.”

“Good. You’re scheduled for 9:00 a.m.” Dr Njokwu leaned forward, his eyes brimming with compassion. “This can’t be an easy time for you, and it may seem trivial given your cancer diagnosis …” He hesitated for a few seconds. “But I’d like to find out more about what you want from your breast reconstruction.”

Uju swept her gaze from David to her sister-in-law. Confusion clouded in Trisha’s eyes and she understood why. She, too, didn’t understand his question, but she refrained from inserting herself into the situation.

“What do you mean?” Trisha asked.

“Well … my job is to give you the best care and to make sure you’re satisfied with the outcome.” He paused, his eyes darting around as if trying to capture the perfect words. “So, I’d like to know what kind of breast you want? The cup size and shape.”

“Oh!” Trisha and Uju blurted out in unison as understanding dawned on them.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead,” Trisha said, turning to look at Uju with embarrassed eyes.

Uju reached sideways and gently squeezed her hand. “Me neither, Trish,” she said. Who could ever prepare to have a body part removed and replaced because of a disease?

“I suspected as much,” Dr Njokwu said, grabbing a pen and opening a folder on his desk. “And that’s why I thought it was important to have this clinic appointment in person, for a more personal and detailed discussion.”

Trisha released a sigh of relief as she relaxed into her seat. “Thank you, because I felt a little overwhelmed seconds ago.”

David Njokwu gave Trisha a reassuring smile that lit his face. “Don’t worry, I’ll be here to help you every step of the way.”

Uju felt a wave of emotions rush over her at David’s gentle candour. As she watched him interacting with Trisha, answering her questions with patience and guiding her through a very complex decision, she found herself wavering regarding his career. He not only put Trisha at ease with his knowledgeable responses, but also

displayed immense compassion.

As the clinic appointment concluded, she felt confident that David Njokwu would go above and beyond to ensure her sister-in-law received exceptional care.

Obviously, she'd been wrong about him. The man wasn't an arrogant jackass. He really did have a caring side to him. A side of him that she found herself drawn to.



He couldn't keep still. His body felt like a tightly wound ball of yarn as he anxiously awaited Uju Emordi's arrival for today's clinical rounds. He wanted her first day as an observer in Blossom Health to go smoothly.

To begin, he would take her on a post-operative round to see patients recovering from surgery. She would hear their stories and get their perspectives on choosing to have reconstructive surgeries.

In preparation, the practice had gained consent from most of the patients, with four out of six agreeing to have an independent observer on rounds.

David hoped seeing the patients after surgery and hearing them talk about reconstructive medicine changing their lives for the better would move the needle on her preconceived notions.

He'd tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep as he replayed yesterday's clinic appointment with Uju Emordi's sister-in-law.

The way she supported Trisha, holding her hand and

asking follow-up questions, evidenced a heart of gold beneath the icy persona Uju projected.

It might sound out there, but he'd felt a deep connection to Uju that transcended the physical realm. Like something beyond his control, a strange magnetism that made him itch to know more about her, to ask her on a date, to spend more time with her.

Since the clinic appointment, his perspective on Uju had transformed completely. She was no longer his nemesis, but an alluring woman he yearned to connect with.

The realisation hit like a punch to the gut, so hard that he'd lain awake worrying about seeing her again. He needed to be professional, to make his partners proud by succeeding in the first major non-clinical task they'd given him.

He couldn't afford to let his attraction to Uju scuttle his objectives. So, he'd risen early in the morning with a newfound determination to maintain his focus. He would hold back on exploring a personal relationship with her, at least for the time being.

She was here to explore the beneficial aspects of plastic surgery. For now, he'd keep things strictly professional until he was sure that a relationship between them wouldn't jeopardise things for Blossom Health.

A movement at the door caused his heart to jump. Turning, he watched Uju strut into the entrance of Vitality Lodge, the mini-hotel where surgical patients stayed for their recovery.

The multi-room facility had a dedicated team of nurses and clinical assistants to ensure the well-being of clients during the healing process. The partnership between Blossom

Health and Vitality Lodge, a mere one-minute drive away, proved to be mutually beneficial, increasing revenue and savings for both parties.

As David pinned his gaze on Uju, his pulse rate sped up, and his stomach somersaulted. God, she looked so pretty in a simple knee-length blue dress and black pumps. Her hair's tight bun accentuated her face, especially her lips coated in a dazzling crimson hue and drawing his gaze to their full lusciousness. He longed to move in for a kiss, see if they tasted as sweet and succulent as they looked.

He swallowed hard, fighting the desire to rush towards her and pull her into his arms. His visceral reaction was crazy. Completely discombobulating. He'd never felt like this before. Not since his teenage hormones controlled his brain.

"Hey, Doctor Njokwu," she greeted as she came closer.

"Hi, Uju. And please, call me Dave. Now that we've called a truce, I think we can drop the formalities."

She beamed. "Okay, Dave, I agree." She peeked at the watch on her wrist and shook her head. "I'm sorry I'm late."

He tore his gaze away and glanced at his own watch. A smile unfurled his lips. "Only by fifteen minutes. Not too bad."

In truth, he'd wait for hours just to see her look at him with that radiant smile. He'd wait a lifetime to be near her.

"I'd blame it on the traffic, but that would be a lie." She raised her hand in mock surrender. "Call me an addict because my name is Uju Emordi and I'm a perpetual late comer." Flashing him a remorseful smile, she added, "But

I’m working on it.”

He grinned, glad that they were on friendly terms. “And I’m sure you’ll succeed.”

“So, what’s the plan today?” she asked, tugging on the visitor badge hanging around her neck.

“Today, I’ll show you around as we check on our post-op patients,” he replied, gesturing towards the wards. “We have their consent and you’re free to ask them questions.”

Uju nodded. “Okay, cool. Where do we start?”

“Right there,” David said, turning and pointing to Room 4B. “The client is a twenty-two-year-old woman who came to us for a Brazilian butt lift repair originally done by a quack.”

Uju looked pensive for several seconds, and he could see the storm of questions flooding her eyes. He could tell her inner journalist had awakened, ready to gather information to tell a compelling story.

“Why did she choose to have the surgery in the first place?” she asked a few minutes later, proving him right.

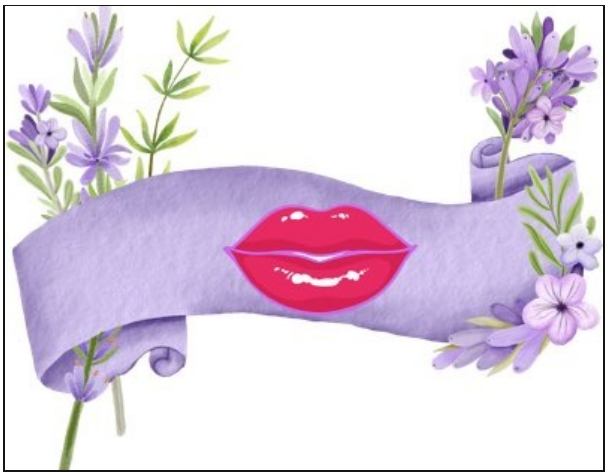
He curved his lips in a wry smile. Gosh, this woman was inquisitive. Just like she’d bombarded him with questions during her sister-in-law’s appointment, she clearly couldn’t help her curiosity.

“Better you talk to her and get the answer straight from the horse’s mouth,” he said, moving toward the room.

“What, you did two surgeries … she wanted a horse’s mouth, too?” Uju asked playfully as she trotted behind him.

He laughed out, already feeling positive about today.

# TEN



STEPPING INTO THE ROOM, her eyes landed on the young woman holding onto a trolley and walking towards a chair. Her lower body was tightly bandaged, and her legs encased in what appeared to be casts.

With the support of the walking aid, the woman made it to her seat and gently lowered herself onto the specially cushioned chair.

“Good morning, doc,” the woman greeted with a cheerful smile when she was comfortably seated.

“Hey, Esther, how are you?” David moved farther into the

room and picked up the file by her bedside.

“Fine, doc. Much better this morning now that I’m seeing a friendly face.” Esther clicked her tongue. With a tilt of her head, she directed her attention towards the middle-aged nurse in the room. “Nurse Ajoke is so annoying. She’s been telling me off for sleeping without my special pillows.”

David chuckled. “Nurse Ajoke is right, Esther. Sleeping without those pillows can delay your healing.”

“Please, tell her, Doctor,” said Nurse Ajoke with a weary smile. “I had to come in here a few times at night to adjust the pillows because she kept flinging them off the bed.”

The woman twisted her lips. “It’s a little uncomfortable to sleep on my stomach or at that ridiculous angle you insist on.”

“Well, that’s what the pillows are for. If you leave them the way I placed them on the bed, you’ll get used to it,” Nurse Ajoke said with an exasperated look in her eyes.

“Please listen to our able nurse. She has over seven years of experience,” David said, his tone taking on a sterner note.

Esther blew out a sharp breath. “Okay, doc. I’ll do whatever you say. Because it’s coming from you.”

Uju watched the exchange with mild amusement. She enjoyed seeing David’s playful interaction with his patients.

During the clinic appointment with her sister-in-law yesterday, he’d impressed her with his ability to provide clinical guidance without being patronising. Like he’d just done, passing on the message firmly without reprimanding Esther like a child.

“Good,” David said. He pointed at Uju and then turned back to Esther. “This is Uju Emordi, the independent observer I told you about. Are you still okay with her being here?”

Esther beamed as she regarded Uju. “Of course.”

“Great. She’ll be asking you several questions about your surgery after the clinical review,” David continued. “You may choose whatever questions you wish to answer. Whatever information you’re willing to share is fine.”

“No *wahala*, doc. This is something I’m completely open about,” Esther said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll tell her everything she wants to know. It’s important for people to hear my story.”

David nodded in agreement. “Thank you.”

“I really appreciate this. Thanks,” Uju said. She had worried that the patients would suddenly change their minds.

She’d been reluctant to associate herself with Blossom Health, but her sister-in-law’s upcoming procedure had changed everything, sparking a newfound curiosity. Now, she was invested in this interview a little more than she let David know.

David turned to Nurse Ajoke. “Please, can you give me an update on Esther’s recovery?”

The nurse flipped open the patient file. “Three days post-op. Pain score 2. Now on oral opiates …”

Uju half-heartedly listened to the medical conversation, the words falling on her ears like the gentle rustle of leaves. She focussed on Esther, who seemed equally

disinterested as her long, manicured nails tapped her phone screen.

Surreptitiously taking her in, Uju found Esther very pretty, with smooth dark brown skin, a short haircut that fit her perfectly shaped oval face, and lovely facial features. What in the world had made her so insecure that she subjected her body twice to plastic surgery?

According to David, Esther had this second surgery to repair a botched job, but why have the first surgery at all? Uju's failure to understand fuelled her desire to hear the woman's story, to push aside any misgivings she harboured against plastic surgery and dive deeper.

Perhaps by unravelling the motivations behind Esther's decision to undergo plastic surgery, she could gain insight into what had compelled her friend Bisola to do the same.

Uju watched as David examined Esther. Even with his complete self-assurance as a doctor, he displayed an unexpected gentleness that signalled a drive born of passion rather than money. The kindness in his eyes, the soft tones as he spoke—they couldn't be faked. He genuinely cared for his clients and wanted to make a difference in their lives.

When the nurse left the room, David turned his attention to her and Uju's heart fluttered. He'd been so engrossed in his job that his sudden shift of focus made her belly quiver.

"The ball is now in your court, Uju," he said, flashing a disarming smile. "What would you like to know about Esther and her quest for plastic surgery?"

Feeling somewhat put on the spot, Uju turned her attention to Esther. "May I sit?" she asked, stalling for time.

Esther nodded, gesturing towards the chair at the end of the bed. “Be my guest,” she said.

With a grateful smile, Uju pulled the seat closer to Esther and flicked open her notepad. Clicking her pen, she positioned it over the blank paper, acutely aware of David settling on a seat in the corner to observe them.

“I’d like to kick things off by asking about your emotional and physical state. How are you feeling?” Uju said, a little embarrassed to find her voice unsteady. She had prepared her questions confidently, but now, her insides squirmed under David’s intense scrutiny.

“Fine. A bit of discomfort, but generally fine,” Esther replied. “Emotionally, I’m satisfied with my decision to do this. So, I’m great.”

“Good. I’m glad …” Uju hesitated, unsure how to put her next question delicately, considering Esther was just recovering from surgery.

Deciding on a direct approach, she let out a sharp breath. “You’re an incredibly beautiful woman, Esther. Why did you choose to have plastic surgery to get a bigger butt?”

Esther sighed, her face suddenly solemn. “I can’t honestly say I have a straightforward answer for you,” she said. “But it wasn’t a decision I made whimsically. Instead, the decision seemed inevitable.”

Uju scrunched up her face in confusion. “Inevitable … why?”

Esther shifted herself to sit up straighter. “Imagine being born into a family with everyone tall and you’re the only short person, or the only fat sister of a family full of slender,

model-like women, or the dumbest out of bright siblings…" She trailed off, ran her fingers through the short blond curls on her head, and then, settled her hand back on her lap. "That was me. I was the only one in my family with a flat bum. My mother, my three sisters, even my only brother all have *yansh*. All of them but me."

Esther shook her head bitterly. "I hated myself growing up, used to get teased a lot by people, including family and friends," she continued, her tone taking on a distant lilt filled with self-derision. "With no breasts, no ass, I was constantly called a straw. Madam *kpelenge*. *Lekpa shandy*. You name it. I was called that and every other derogatory name you could call a woman with a flat arse."

Uju's stomach spasmed. Although she didn't have the biggest arse in the world or the largest breasts, she had enough curves to fit her slender frame. In all her life, she'd never been mocked for her physical appearance, however, she could relate to Esther's feelings. As a child, she had been bullied and teased for loving sports and being a tomboy, and as a result had been somewhat socially isolated, with only a handful of friends.

"Imagine hearing people tell you that you must be adopted because all your siblings have shapely figures while you're just a stick," Esther said, her voice piercing through Uju's thoughts. "This guy I used to have a crush on had the audacity to call me 'the pencil amongst sharpeners' before inviting my younger sister to the school dance."

"Oh, that's cruel," Uju muttered, shaking her head. Goodness. Kids could be really lethal to each other sometimes.

"You don't know the half of it." Esther dragged in a harsh

breath and expelled it just as harshly. Uju sensed the memories of the incident triggered a rush of negative emotions.

“My ex-fiancé left me for my friend Morenike after I stumbled on a voice note he sent her …” Esther paused and swallowed hard.

Tears clouded Uju’s eyes, but she fought the instinct to step in and speak. As a journalist, she knew that opening up like this to a total stranger had therapeutic value, and interrupting could block the communication channels.

“Do you know what the arsehole told her in that voice message?”

Uju shook her head, saying nothing.

“The idiot I spent a year dating said he would never have settled for a Volvo if …” Esther’s voice cracked with emotion. She wiped away the tears that had escaped her eyes. “If he’d known a Range Rover was within reach.”

Moved by the pain in the other woman’s voice, Uju reached into her purse and pulled out a pack of tissues. She handed it to Esther, who muttered a thanks, opened it and slipped one out.

“I heard him laughing at the end of the message … a laugh I will never forget. I was a joke to him … a joke to them. All because Morenike had a perfect, curvy bum, and I had no *yansh*.”

Uju swallowed back the immediate rebuttal that rose to her throat. It was pointless to point out that Esther’s ex-fiancé was an idiot, and so was her friend. Of course, it had nothing to do with the size of Esther’s bum, but everything

to do with the shallow man who prioritised a woman's looks over her inner qualities.

"And before you tell me that it had nothing to do with my *yansh*, I already know this," Esther said as if reading Uju's mind. "I'm not a fool. I know Kayode is an idiot. And Morenike is a traitor. But it doesn't change the fact that years of hearing that your flat bum makes you unattractive would finally get into your head. No matter how confident you are."

Uju swallowed hard. She understood this. Her own insecurities about not finding love stemmed from years of hearing friends and family criticise her for being too outspoken, too opinionated, too much for men to handle.

That had made her recoil into herself many times whenever she was out on a date, doing everything she could not to come off too strongly. Lot of good it had done her. The only two men she'd been in a serious relationship with had ended things, citing her strong-willed nature as the cause.

Kelechi, her last boyfriend, whom she dated for a year before he bolted, told her that she should remain single. "Men want feminine women, and that you're not," he'd said before marching out of the door and out of her life. Two months later, he married a woman he'd been seeing all along.

For a long time after, Uju had pondered his comment, let it suck the life from her self-confidence. Perhaps people were right. She lacked the level-headedness for a relationship.

So, yes, she knew firsthand how people's opinions could make someone doubt themselves. She was living proof of

it. For two years now, she'd sworn off dating.

"I think that mean-spirited laugh of his was the last straw. I played it over and over again," Esther said, folding the tissue she'd used to wipe her tears neatly into a square as she spoke. "That's when thoughts of cosmetic surgery crept up."

Esther shifted in her pillow-cushioned seat and blew out a breath. "Unfortunately, because I was so charged with emotions, I didn't do proper research. I spent millions of Naira on a quack doctor."

Uju swallowed hard, taking it all in, having abandoned any attempt to take notes. The rawness of Esther's story and emotions made it impossible to focus on anything else.

She had hoped coming here would provide concrete support for her stance against cosmetic surgery, but just a few minutes into Esther's story revealed motivations weren't as straightforward as she'd thought. Indeed, the motivations were more nuanced than simply altering one's physical appearance. The decision to undergo these kinds of procedures was not simply a matter of choice, but a complex web of emotions.

"Instead of sympathy from my friends and family for the botched job, they teased and criticised me for resorting to plastic surgery." Esther half snorted, half chuckled at that. "Imagine *o*. The same people who constantly tortured me about my flat *yansh* mocked me for having a Brazilian butt lift. The utter irony."

Uju had to agree. She'd also come to realise that trying to please people was futile. It never worked, which was why she stopped trying to stifle her true self and remained outspoken about her beliefs. She'd finally accepted that

the only way to true happiness was by finding it in oneself.

Esther tipped her head to the corner at David, reminding Uju for the first time since she started the interview, that he was in the room. Completely engrossed in Esther's story, she'd forgotten that David was there, which wasn't a challenge because he had remained as silent as a mouse throughout.

"Thanks to Dr Njokwu, who was so understanding, he fixed a date to repair the damage at no extra cost," Esther said, a smile flickering across her lips. "By doing this surgery, he not only gave me back my dignity, but also restored my faith in humanity."

Esther's eyes softened with tenderness as she gazed at David. It was obvious she held him in high regard.

"Dr Njokwu didn't judge me or mock me. He listened to my story with kindness and took me on as a client at just the standard amount without adding the extra repair charges," said Esther.

Uju looked at David. Just like her, he appeared overwhelmed with emotion. Hearing Esther talk about her life had touched him, too.

"I know many people find plastic surgery to be unnecessary and frivolous," Esther carried on. "And for the most part, they're right. But sometimes, society creates these necessary evils. And we have to make sure that doctors like David Njokwu exist to reduce the number of people ready to exploit other people's desperation, like that quack doctor did to me."

Uju mulled over Esther's words, her entire body flooding with a newfound respect for David Njokwu. Even though

she still wouldn’t recommend plastic surgery to anyone who did it for purely cosmetic reasons, she’d now come to understand that it wasn’t as black and white as she’d thought.

People sought to change how they looked for a multitude of intricate reasons. While she may not agree with their thinking processes, she couldn’t dismiss them either.

Obviously, she’d been too judgemental, too rigid about situations and circumstances she hadn’t fully understood.

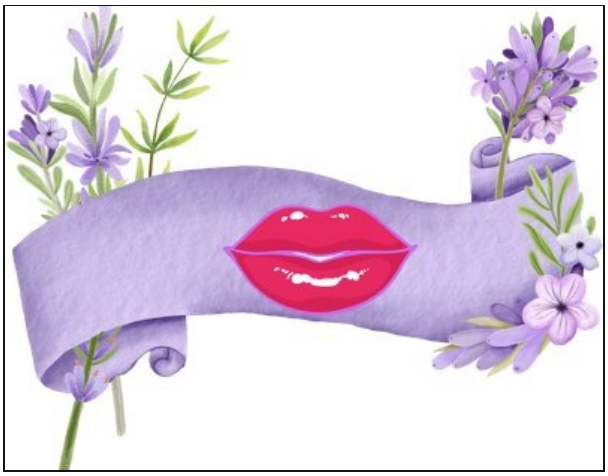
Was that why her best friend had kept her in the dark? Maybe Bisola would have opened up about her desire for plastic surgery if Uju hadn’t been so judgemental. She cringed, remembering things she’d said—blatantly disparaging people who performed BBLs, calling them dimwits, airheads, dumb. Could that have been why Bisola shut her out of her decision-making process?

Uju swallowed back the heavy regret sitting in her chest.

Maybe Bisola would have had her support during the last few days of her life. Heck, maybe she could have prevented the tragic ending if she’d directed Bisola to proper surgeons like Dr Njokwu … if her friend had trusted her enough to tell her about it.

Sitting across from the woman who had just bared her soul, Uju made a silent promise to be more open-minded regarding cosmetic surgery and plastic surgeons.

# ELEVEN



A SHARP, stabbing anxiety pricked at his gut, like a thousand tiny needles. He'd woken up with such frayed nerves that he almost called to ask a partner to take over the surgery today. But why? Why was he so anxious?

He'd performed breast reconstruction several times. So far, he'd never had a single complication. Not even his first time doing the surgery under the critical gaze of Professor Lawrence, his residency mentor in New York.

He drew in a sharp breath and exhaled slowly, fighting the sudden desire to turn tail and flee. Even his first surgery hadn't been this nerve racking. What the hell was going

on?

He cast a glance at the anaesthetised patient on his surgical table and then looked up to the podium to find Uju peering down at him from the transparent wall. Other medical students sat in the observation room above the theatre, but his eyes immediately collided with hers.

His heart flip-flopped and launched into a double beat. Her luminous eyes on him sparked with myriad emotions, one of which he recognised as trust.

*That's why my nerves are going berserk*.

Uju's complete trust in him to help her sister-in-law mattered … a lot. David was hyperaware of the gravity of this operation. He couldn't make a single mistake. Not when it came to Tasha Emordi, the wife of Uju's only sibling.

All week, she'd shadowed him alongside the medical students, curiously observing his medical practice. She'd posed several questions, interviewed a few clients, and eagerly soaked up everything she wanted to know about reconstructive surgery. While she'd been lost in the world of her research, he'd been silently studying her, taking in every detail.

The more he observed, the more she intrigued him, igniting a burning desire to know even more.

She had a habit of tapping her collar bone whenever she was unsure. He loved the gesture, fascinated by her pulse beating at the base of her neck. And her slightly bowed legs. Very sexy. As was the birthmark at the corner of her left wrist. How he longed to kiss it.

He noticed everything about her. Like how incredibly inquisitive she was, her upbeat attitude and easy laughter that filled a room with joy. Even in serious situations, she remained optimistic, jovial. Like today, as she told humorous stories that engaged Trisha and her brother and stemmed the tide of anxiety about the surgery.

She loved them fiercely. Had given up her time to be here for her sister-in-law, knowing that her brother had to be with their son. David loved her big heart.

So much so that he'd resolved to ask her out after she finished her observation week at Blossom Health. Because as much as he knew about her, he wanted to know more, everything. On a personal level.

His attraction to her was growing by the minute, and not just physically, but also emotionally. He fantasised about seeing more of her, looked forward to her being around him.

That would be impossible if he fucked this surgery up. Everything he'd done to improve her impression of cosmetic surgery done right would go up in smoke if he failed today. He couldn't let that happen.

For him, this was the most important surgery so far. One that he needed to give more than a hundred percent for. God willing, he'd do just that.

Witnessing the hope and confidence in her eyes as she looked down on him, he would rather walk away than let her down.

Since he had no plans of walking out of the theatre room and leaving Uju's sister-in-law in someone else's hands, someone less invested than he, he would damn well do his

best work today.

Stretching his lips into a smile he hoped reached his eyes since he wore a surgical mask, he tipped his head to Uju. With a sweet smile, she flashed a thumbs-up. And just like that, his heart swelled with joy and his self-confidence got the boost he needed to begin this surgery.

David turned and glanced at Dr Momoh, the anaesthetist. “Are we good to go?”

The middle-aged man answered with a slight tilt of his head. “Yep. Full steam ahead, Dave.”

“Then, let’s do this, team.” David stretched out his arm to Nurse Bisi. “15 blade, please.”



She grinned the second she spotted David seated by the window at Bibby’s Cafe. A plate with a half-eaten muffin was on the table in front of him. While he drank from his coffee mug, his full attention was on his mobile phone’s screen.

After a full morning of surgery, she couldn’t fault him for sneaking away for lunch outside the clinical centre. He’d done a phenomenal job today. He deserved this break.

Her heart burst with gratitude, and her body tingled with an indescribable, fiery emotion so powerful, she ached to rush over to him, pull him into her arms and kiss him senseless … until he remembered their kiss at the party so many years ago.

The intense heat coursing through her body went beyond

mere physical desire; it was an almost tangible longing. She yearned to reach inside him and pull out his very essence so that she could press it against her heart and lock it there forever.

Uju took a deep breath, her gaze fixed on David as he remained engrossed in whatever he was reading on his phone.

He looked so handsome in his blue scrubs, his thick hair a little dishevelled as he ran his fingers through it absentmindedly. A touch of weariness pulled at his eyes and the corners of his mouth, yet he still possessed an irresistible charm that made him the most attractive man she had ever laid eyes on. She loved his perfectly groomed facial hair, his long, broad nose and his full, slightly pink-tinted lips.

No use denying it—she was falling for him. Hard. Not just for his looks, but for his intelligence, his quirky sense of humour, his gentle care for his patients.

Even a lay person like herself could see the impeccable precision in his hands as he performed Trisha's surgery today. Not to mention his attentive post-op care.

At Trisha's bedside, he spoke like a trusted friend instead of her doctor, giving Uju and her family a boost of confidence that the recovery process would go smoothly.

At first, when Uju started shadowing David around the hospital, she'd doubted the authenticity of his fantastic bedside manner. However, she soon observed his patients joking and feeling at ease in his presence, confirming it wasn't just an act, but his authentic self.

Today marked her last day at Blossom Health, and she

could confidently attest to David Njokwu's excellence as a doctor. One with a heart. With him, you got exactly what you saw. No pretence, no arrogance like she'd initially thought. He was real. And humble. She liked that about him.

He glanced up suddenly and caught her gaze. Uju's heart bumped into her chest and thumped heavily.

Damn! Such gorgeous dark eyes.

And then he smiled. Her stomach felt like butterflies had taken residence. Lord in heaven! His smile could wake the dead. Damn near electrifying.

Goodness. She was a goner. David Njokwu had burrowed himself deep under her skin. She had to decide between cutting him off or figuring out what she wanted to do with him.

He waved her over, and Uju couldn't suppress an answering smile as she made her way towards him like a puppet on strings.

She'd only come to the cafe opposite the hospital to grab a takeout lunch, but she couldn't resist sitting together and enjoying a meal. Anything to spend more time with him.

"So, you eat here?" she asked as he rose to give her a hug. "I wouldn't have guessed."

He pulled out the seat opposite him with an eyebrow arched. "Why not?"

Uju snickered, settling on her chair. "They serve only burgers, chicken wings, fries, decadent desserts, and unhealthy food." She gave him a once over. "The way you look … I would have thought you're a strict healthy eater."

He flung his head back and laughed, running a palm over his taut stomach, provoking a tiny tremor to course through her nether region. That rich laughter, combined with the largeness of his hand pressing against his firm body, sent her senses into overdrive.

Damn! Talk about a hot doctor. McDreamy had nothing on David Njokwu.

“If you ever heard of my legendary sweet tooth, eh, you’d report me to the medical licensing board for setting such a bad example.”

It was her turn to raise a brow. “You? A sweet tooth?”

He nodded as he reclaimed his seat opposite her. “Yep. My dentist hates me.”

Uju smiled, thrilled she had this in common with him. “Me too. Because of all the sugar I consume, I’ve already had two molars filled.”

His lips twisted. “What? I’m lucky not to have had tooth problems yet. But it’s only a matter of time.”

“So, Mr Sweet Tooth, what’s your favourite treat?” she asked.

“Cake. I can wolf down an entire cake if nobody stops me.”

Uju laughed. “I love cake, too. Especially chocolate cake.”

“Oh … chocolate cake.” He kissed the tips of his fingers. “My downfall. The triple chocolate cake from Cake Haven in Ikeja is to die for.”

Uju clapped her hands in delight. She must own stock in Cake Haven by now. “They’re yummy. Have you tried their velvet cake?”

“Not yet.”

“Gorgeous and succulent. And their lemon cake … Heaven!”

He grinned. “We should go there together and test taste every flavour. It would be an awesome cake-date.”

Uju stilled, her heart skipping a beat. The word *date* echoed in her ears, resonating like the aftermath of a gong strike.

Had he made a Freudian slip, or was he truly interested in taking her on a date?

His own words struck him, and he stiffened, meeting her gaze with intensity. For a second, they said nothing, gazes locked, both stock still. Then David exhaled sharply.

“Uju,” he murmured softly, his tone unwavering. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

Uju expelled the air that had seemed trapped in her lungs seconds ago. Her pulse skittered, and she felt a little lightheaded.

She wanted to say yes, but fear seized her. Her past relationships had always ended in disaster. She liked David too much to make him a casualty of dating someone like her. Someone who sucked at relationships.

Could she risk driving him away—just like she had done with her previous partners—because of her strong-willed personality?

Heck, she’d already pushed him away after that fateful kiss years ago. She’d allowed him to smooch her almost all evening, believing they’d made a connection, only to

realise the next day that he had no recollection of her whatsoever. Wouldn't it be better if they just remained acquaintances, maybe even just friends?

She parted her lips, not sure what her response would be. Suddenly, she blurted out, "Yes."

David let out a relieved breath as his lips unfurled into a disarming smile, setting her body to tingle once again. God! She could pay millions to have that smile immortalised.

His eyes twinkled. "God, I'm glad to hear that."

Uju giggled like a schoolgirl at his enthusiasm, but behind the laughter was fear.

For the first time in her life, she wanted to be someone else—a woman whose strong opinions and personality didn't repel men. But she just wasn't wired that way. She couldn't morph into people's idea of a woman who could keep a man. Honestly, even if she acted like she'd changed, she couldn't keep it up for more than a few minutes. Would this end in disaster?

"We could start by having lunch here today together, a mini-date kinda thing," he said, pulling her from her thoughts.

Uju lowered her gaze to the muffin on his plate. "You've nearly finished eating … I don't want to keep you."

He peeked at his watch and shook his head. "My next surgery is in an hour, so we can chill." Leaning forward, he winked at her. "We could plan our main date while we lunch."

Uju nodded. "Let me go order—"

He shot up from his seat, stopping her. “Lunch is on me. I’ll go order and come right back.”

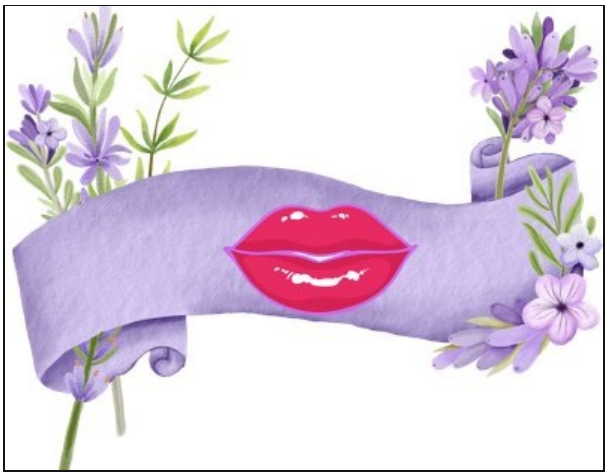
She beamed at him. “Thank you. In that case, I’ll have a chocolate muffin and a chilled Diet Coke.”

His lips spread into a captivating smile and raised a hand in mock salute. “Coming right up.”

Uju couldn’t help but grin as he strode towards the serving counter. His walk had an irresistible swagger to it. Anticipation coursed through her veins, her pulse already quickening at the prospect of spending time together.

“God, please don’t let me screw this up,” she muttered, praying from the depths of her soul.

# TWELVE



DAVID'S HEART beat in double time as he stepped out of his shiny black Mercedes E Class. He leaned forward for the delicately wrapped bouquet of roses lying on the passenger seat. Closing the door, he enabled the lock.

With sweaty palms, he clutched the bouquet against his chest and hurried towards Cake Haven.

Goodness! Why was he freaking out about this date? Having already spent time with Uju at Bibby's Cafe a few days ago, his nervousness made no sense. Yet, it existed.

He'd decided to show up here thirty minutes early to make

sure everything was set before Uju's arrival.

Drawing in a deep breath, he tapped on the door. A young man opened it, saying, "Welcome, sir. I'll let *oga* know you're here."

"Thanks, IK," David said to the teenager just as he hurried away and disappeared into the kitchen.

As soon as he stepped into the bakery, a sigh of relief escaped David's lips. Even though the interior decorator had provided him with photos of the room he'd had redecorated, he'd still felt anxious.

He swept his gaze around the room. Perfect. Gbenga Adeyemo had transformed the bakery's dining into an intimate dining space. He'd done a phenomenal job.

The plastic tables and chairs had disappeared in favour of a glass-top table on a carved wood base and two matching carved wood chairs with cushioned seats. A floral centrepiece and heart-shaped candle, along with porcelain place settings and crystal flutes, lent a romantic touch. A silver ice bucket stood beside the table, chilling a bottle of the finest champagne.

Soft-glow lamps cast a warm, inviting glow, while the gentle sounds of instrumental music created a romantic ambiance. Just perfect.

He wished Gbenga was still here so he could thank him again. And apologise for giving the poor guy so much grief about everything being just so.

A sound at the corner drew David's attention. The bakery's owner, Ejike Okonkwo, stepped out from the kitchen, a wide smile lighting his face.

“Hey, Dave, what do you think?” Ejike greeted.

David grinned at the heavy-set man sporting a blue apron and a white baker’s hat.

“My guy,” David said, shaking Ejike’s hand. “Everything’s fantastic. Thanks for staying open late for my private date.”

“My pleasure. And it’s just seven in the evening, not midnight. Besides, I should be the one thanking you not just for the booking, but for paying double for my time.” He winked. “Whoever this woman is, she must be special.”

David’s lips twitched. He couldn’t even argue with Ejike. Uju was special. The hour he’d spent with her during lunch at Bibby’s had solidified his interest.

There was no going back. He wanted her in his life. As his woman. He’d move heaven and earth to convince her to give a romantic relationship with him a go. Starting with today’s date. Nothing was too grand for her. Not even paying to rent out the bakery or for the expertise of one of Lagos’ renowned bakers.

He aimed for a first date so incredible that Uju would say yes to another date. He was willing to go to great lengths to ensure it.

“I’m not embarrassed to admit it, bro. She’s very special,” David said with a grin. “So, please, I want everything to go perfectly today.”

“Don’t worry, my man, I’ve baked all the cakes ready for her to try, and added several new options, too. You’ll both have a wonderful cake-tasting date.”

“Thanks, Ejike. You’re the best.”

“No *wahala*.” Ejike patted him on the back, then headed back to the kitchen.

David swept his gaze around a final time and nodded in satisfaction before making his way outside, bouquet in hand, to wait for Uju.

For their first date, she had opted to meet him at the bakery instead of him picking her up. He totally understood. In this current climate of increased crime against women, women needed to be overly cautious.

A smile curved his lips as he reclined against the wall and adjusted his spectacles. Uju meant business, even refusing to give him her home address at Bibby’s Cafe.

“Nope. I don’t know you like that. You could be an axe murderer for all I know,” she’d said with a cheeky smile.

“An axe murderer surgeon?”

“Ha! You clearly don’t watch Crime Network. Murderers come from all occupations. Doctors included.” She’d given a slight headshake, a hint of amusement glistening in her eyes, but also with an undertone of seriousness. “I need to know you more before you can trace me to my house.”

He’d tossed his head back and bellowed out a laugh. “Geez! Your mind is so dark.”

“Better a dark mind than a dead mind.”

Although her comment tickled him, he loved her standing her ground. So, he’d let it go. Besides, he intended they get to know each other. It didn’t matter how long gaining her trust took. He’d wait.

For the first time in his life, he could see a future with a

woman, and he'd let her set the pace.

A few minutes later, when he spotted her stepping out of her car in the parking lot, he knew he would wait forever to have her as his woman.

She looked enchanting in an emerald-green, knee-length dress that draped her slender curves. Her hair was packed into a neat bun and silver hoop earrings dangled from her ears.

Her lovely rouge-coated lips stretched into a warm smile directed at him, and his heart beat so fast he thought it would break free of his chest.

With bated breath and a grin so wide his cheeks ached, David watched Uju walk towards him. Her silver high heels tapped against the granite floor with a distinctive *koi koi* sound, making her gait even sexier to him.

Yep, he would do anything to keep her smiling at him this way, even if it meant waiting for an eternity for her trust.



Uju's stomach twisted into knots of nerves and excitement as she strolled towards David, her mind buzzing with anticipation. It felt as if this was her first time going out with a man. Which was not the case at all.

All day, while she taped her podcast with Aminat, she could hardly concentrate. Her mind had been all over the place thinking about her first date with David Njokwu, the same man she'd vowed to have nothing to do with.

Now, she couldn't stop thinking about him, even when she

tried to distract herself with work. She'd replayed their luncheon at the cafe several times, reliving their animated conversation, his absentminded fiddling with his spectacles, and his rich warm laughter.

Last night, he'd starred in a racy dream which involved vivid images of naked skin and tangled bodies in bed.

Seeing him standing by the entrance of Cake Haven, looking all shades of handsome in blue jeans and a red-and-white fitted shirt that hugged the expanse of his broad chest and taut abs, her heart skipped a gear and went straight into overdrive.

With his white trainers and thick gold chain, he oozed sex appeal, igniting a heightened sense of awareness within her. God, he looked good enough to eat. Butterflies fluttered in her tummy, and she placed a palm over her lower abdomen, attempting to quell the sensations rumbling inside.

How could one man make her so nervous, and yet so excited to see him?

"Hey, you're on time," he said with a wry twist of his lips when she reached him. "I'm finally rubbing off on you, eh?"

Uju grinned. "Maybe a little. Didn't want to give a bad impression on our first date, so I set multiple alarms."

"Well, that's a great start to what I hope will be the best date you've ever had." He handed her the bouquet he was holding. "For the beautiful lady in green."

Uju blushed—actually felt her cheeks on fire at the cheesy line. Yet, she couldn't help it. He made her giddy. Like a schoolgirl.

Holding the roses against her chest, she inhaled. “Thanks, they’re gorgeous,” she breathed, her throat a little tight. No man except her father had ever given her flowers.

“You’re welcome.” He held out his hand to her. “Shall we?”

With a shaky smile, Uju slipped her hand in his and followed him into the bakery.

Her heart expanded with a flood of warm emotions when she stepped inside. David had redecorated Cake Haven into an intimate dining room. It took her breath away. With only one table and two chairs, a candle glowing on the table and the floral arrangements on the wall, he’d made the place look magical.

In awe, she glanced up and found him looking at her with uncertainty in his eyes.

“You like?” he asked, a slight tremor in his voice.

“Like? I love it.” She stretched herself and kissed his cheek. “This is … awesome. Thanks for putting in all this effort. It’s fabulous.”

He heaved out a relieved breath. “I’m glad you like it. I was a little worried I was doing too much.”

She gave him a playful elbow jab on his side. “Please feel free to go out of your way to impress me anytime you want. Trust me, it’s never too much.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. So be prepared for more.”

Positively giddy, Uju followed him towards the table and settled in the seat opposite him.

As if conjured by magic, a towering, rotund man in an apron and chef’s hat appeared from the kitchen

accompanied by a lanky teenager in a neatly tucked blue shirt and black slacks.

“Hello, Madam, welcome to Cake Haven,” the older man said. “I’m Chef Ejike and this is my nephew, IK.”

Uju beamed at them. “Hi. I’m Uju. I’ve been here a few times and love your cakes.”

“Thank you.” Ejike patted David’s shoulder. “My man here told me that, and he wanted to make your day special. I’ve carefully prepared a variety of mouthwatering cakes for you to indulge in, each one perfectly complementing your chosen drink. There’s also a variety of small chops for you if you like. Order anything on the menu you’d like.”

Uju cast a glance David’s way. He looked pleased with himself for making this happen, and she felt a jolt of pleasure rush through her. No man had ever done anything so elaborate for her, and it thrilled her immensely.

Turning back to Chef Ejike, she curved her lips into a smile. “Thank you. I’m about to go wild, because I can never get enough of cakes and small chops.”

Chef Ejike laughed. “Please feel free. I hope you enjoy every bite.”

“I’m sure I will.”

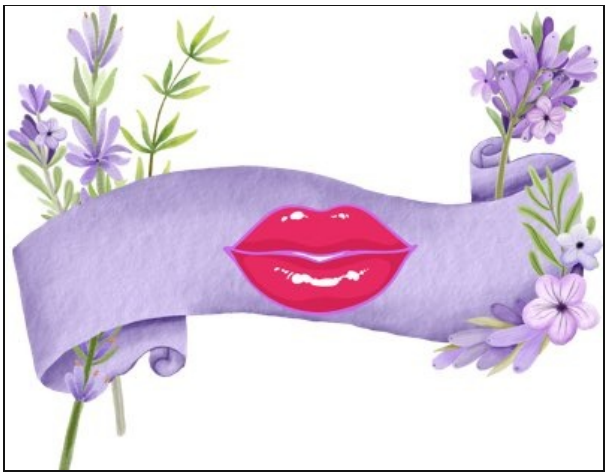
Chef Ejike left shortly after, his companion trailing behind in silence, leaving her alone with David once more.

Uju fixed her gaze on him, and every cell in her body came alive with excitement. She reached across and took his hand in hers. “I never thought a cake-tasting date could be this romantic,” she said. “Thank you for planning this.”

A shy smile grazed his lips. “Thank you for agreeing to go out with me. I hope this is just the beginning for us.”

With each word he spoke, her heart melted even more, turning her insides into mush. If he kept this up, she would fall at his feet and beg him to never leave her. She was already falling head over heels only a few minutes into their first date.

# THIRTEEN



HE DOUBLED OVER, slapping his thigh in uncontrollable laughter. “You’re joking, right?” he said, swiping tears of laughter from his eyes with his thumb.

She shook her head, eyes twinkling with amusement. “Nope. I’m dead serious. Till today, my brother believes he saw a ghost that night. He still doesn’t believe it was me that slipped out of his closet wearing a costume.”

David barked out a short laugh. “Damn! I’m impressed. I’ve finally met someone who can out-prank me. And believe me, I’ve pulled some really horrid pranks on my brothers.”

She leaned forward, interest sparking in her eyes. “Really? Like what?”

David’s lips twisted into a small smile as he picked up his fork again. Less than thirty minutes into their date and he already wished it would never end.

He was having such a great time with Uju as they sampled Ejike’s freshly baked cakes and pastries, chasing them down with champagne.

They’d been chatting about life, dreams, and everything in between, and he was relishing every moment, cherishing the sound of her laughter filling the air. She was easy to talk to, free with her opinion on a wide range of topics. He appreciated her outspokenness, that she didn’t leave you guessing how she felt about a situation.

While sampling bite-sized portions of Ejike’s latest walnut cake, they found themselves discussing their childhoods, reminiscing as they ate.

“It’s like we’re kindred spirits,” David said, totally blown away at her penchant for pranking her brother. “You actually had him believing he saw a ghost?

“Totally. And I wasn’t a friendly ghost. Scared him to death,” Uju said with a hearty laugh. “But what do you mean kindred spirits?”

“Ah … where to start? Right from childhood, me and my two brothers tried to out-prank each other. One time, I …”

Just then, Uju’s fork sliced into the moist velvet cake and she lifted it to her mouth, drawing his attention to those full, luscious lips. And short circuiting his train of thought.

Damn! A double delight—a tasty cake against succulent

lips. Talk about a sensory overload of sweetness.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Uju said, wagging a finger at him. “I told you my deep, dark secret. Your turn.”

David gave his head a tiny shake. “Sorry. I was just trying to decide which of my many pranks to tell you about first.”

“How about the most impressive,” she suggested, then slipped the fork between her lips.

David had to drag his eyes away to gather his thoughts. He took a quick sip of champagne to soothe the sudden dryness of his throat.

“Okay, how about this,” he began, setting his glass down. “I once sent a text to my brother’s girlfriend, now wife, pretending to be a woman he had a one-night stand with.”

Uju’s mouth fell open as a gasp escaped her lips. “What? That’s cruel!”

David laughed, remembering how pissed off his brother had been. He held his hands out in mock surrender. “In my defence, it was payback for him tearing pages from my assignment in uni. I almost failed that test.”

Uju shook her head. “God! You and your brothers are next level. Those aren’t pranks. They border on criminal.”

“I know. My parents didn’t know what to do with us. Once, they threatened to call the police.”

“I don’t blame them. There’s a fine line between playing and hurting someone.”

He nodded. “True, and we eventually realised we were taking things too far. When my father passed, we all agreed to stop.”

“Oh,” Uju said with down-turned lips. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

David shrugged. “Thanks. It was nearly a decade ago. A car accident. He was badly burnt. Almost unrecognisable at his funeral. I was so traumatised, wishing I could repair his face, make him as handsome as before the accident.”

Uju picked up her champagne flute and swirled the bubbly for seconds, compassion etched in her face. “Is that why you became a plastic surgeon?”

He nodded, a knot forming in his stomach. So far, his conversations with Uju had been light-hearted and fun, free of personal or emotional depth. But now, it had ventured into uncharted territory, and despite his apprehension, he embraced the opportunity to reveal more of himself. He knew that to establish a deeper connection with her, he had to be open and vulnerable.

“Yep. But it took me a while to accept it … that it was the reason for my career choice.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” He idly trailed his finger along the chilled condensation clinging to his champagne glass. “Maybe it’s because the idea of me becoming a skilled gynaecologist and joining in his family practice had been a silent, hopeful dream of my father for years. It might seem irrational, but I refused to connect my decision to abandon his dream for me with his passing.”

“Oh, it’s not irrational. I totally get it. Sometimes, it’s hard linking a positive change in your life to a negative event.”

“Exactly. I was torn about it for a while.”

“Awww. So, what changed your mind? What made you finally confident in your decision to become a plastic surgeon?”

“I think I finally understood that my father would have wanted me to do whatever made me happy. Even if it meant breaking away from the family business.”

David could still remember the exact moment he decided to embrace his career choice. He’d been alone going through the boxes his mother had packed of his father’s belongings months after the funeral.

Still grieving profoundly, he’d wanted to connect with his father again, try to hold on to a little more of him.

Unearthing a box of his father’s home-made educational DVDs for medical students at Awka’s Nnamdi Azikiwe University led to a surprising emotional breakthrough.

“I watched a video of him addressing the graduating medical class as guest of honour,” David began, eager to share this with Uju. “His powerful message that day, urging them to challenge conventions and pursue their passions fearlessly, even if it meant breaking away from the expectations of others, liberated me, helped me with my decision. That day, I vowed to be one of the best plastic surgeons in Nigeria.”

“And now you are. Well done.”

“Thank you.”

She pinned him with an intense look. “Are you finding it fulfilling so far?”

David hesitated. He knew anything he said could be misinterpreted and revealed to the public, considering Uju was a journalist with her own podcast. And she'd also been interviewed on television shows. She could quote his response and use it in her campaign against plastic surgeons.

Yet, as he looked at her, saw the earnest interest in her eyes, he sensed he could confide in her and share his genuine emotions.

"Not as much as I thought," he replied, deciding to be honest. He heaved out a sigh. "When I started, I hoped I would see more patients who needed reconstructive surgeries for medical conditions. I hoped to fix people with birth defects, burn victims and other disfigurements."

David looked down and toyed with his fork, finally prepared to convey his disappointment with his own expectations.

"However, I quickly realised that most people booking surgeries I perform do it solely for aesthetic reasons. And the majority of people needing reconstructive surgery can't afford it."

He risked a quick upward glance, half-expecting to meet repulsion or condescension in her eyes, as if he'd just justified her opinion of him.

But that's not what he found at all. Instead, the warmth of her eyes cloaked him like a blanket on a cold and rainy day. Uju's empathetic gaze suggested she, too, had known the feeling of expectations falling short of reality.

"Have you considered doing something about it?" she asked, her tone soothing, just like a feathery caress.

He swallowed past the lump that seemed to have suddenly wedged in his throat. “Yes, I have. Blossom Health donates two surgeries a year for people who can’t afford them. It’s awesome, but not nearly enough,” he said. “I want to do more. But I’m not yet sure what to do or how to go about it.”

She leaned forward and placed her hand over his. “You’re a smart man, Dave. I’m pretty sure you’ll discover the answer.”

The warmth from her hand crept up his neck and heated his cheeks. Her belief in him bolstered his confidence—made him feel as if he were Moses and could part the sea. “You’re right. There must be a solution, and I will find it.”

She smiled as she removed her hand, immediately chilling his skin. “Looking forward to hearing what you come up with.”

“So, what about you?” David asked, reaching for his fork again to distract himself from the powerful urge to reach for her hand again. “What made you go into journalism?”

“I’ve always been curious and opinionated.” She laughed, a rich, infectious sound. “And *very* sceptical. From a child, I questioned everything other people took for granted. I was even kicked out of Bible study a few times for asking too many questions.”

David gasped. “No way!”

“Yes way,” she joked. “I think I shocked the teacher when I asked why God didn’t forgive Satan if he claimed to be so forgiving. Another time, I asked why Jesus was white instead of African like me.”

“Ha!” David snorted, unable to control the laughter bubbling up from inside him. “How old were you when this happened?”

“Only six. The sister called me a demon child and reported me to my parents. Although my dad found it funny, my mother made me apologise.”

David’s lips twisted into a small smile. “Well, you never need to apologise to me for being inquisitive, Uju. It’s one of the many things I love about you.”

As soon as the words left his lips, David’s body went rigid. Uju’s posture also stiffened, and her breath hitched. Damn. He’d said too much, too soon.

She fixed her gaze on him, the silence between them saturating the room like a fog of charged emotions.

Yes. He meant it. He loved her interest in life, her desire to learn, her confidence in her beliefs. He knew he was falling for her within minutes of their first date. But he also knew that he couldn’t scare her off, couldn’t push her away by beings so intense.

Uju was the first woman to make him feel so deeply so quickly, and he really didn’t want to mess things up. With her, he had to get things right, move at her pace, slow his bloody roll.

He parted his lips, ready to retract the statement, make light of his remark, and ease the mood between them again. Before he could speak, her face broke into a bright smile that made his stomach lurch in excitement.

“Well, then, the feeling’s mutual, because I find a lot to love about you, too,” she said.

With that, David’s entire body relaxed as a wave of relief washed over him. Revealing she liked him too without making a big deal of his remark was just perfect. Another reason he’d fallen for Uju—her emotional intelligence. She knew just how to go with the flow.

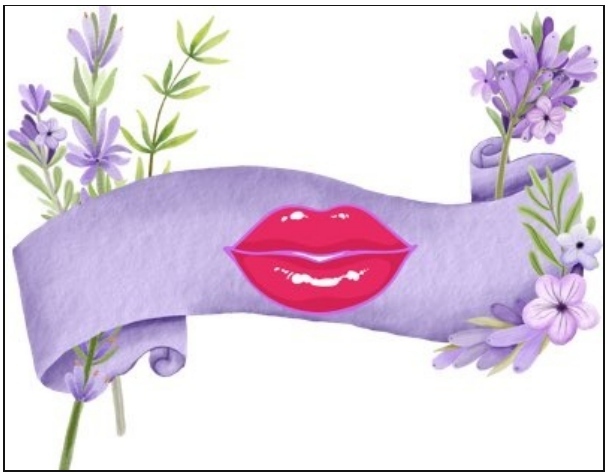
David clasped her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You’re a breath of fresh air, Uju Emordi.”

“Ditto, David Njokwu.”

The tenderness in her eyes and the warmth of her gentle touch gave him a sense of peace. He really could envision a future with Uju filled with love and happiness. Too bad he couldn’t speed up time.

Still, he should embrace the slow pace, relish every second as they got to know each other. If only he could send the memo to his racing heart and the pulse of arousal thrumming in his bloodstream and through his entire body.

# FOURTEEN



“THANK you for walking me to my car, but you really didn’t have to. I parked far from you,” Uju said, brimming with delight.

They’d spent a fantastic three hours together, enjoying stimulating conversation and Chef Ejike’s addictive goodies. After leaving Cake Haven, they’d walked along John Isaac’s Street in the quiet residential Government Reserved Area of Ikeja.

The gentle evening breeze and full moon provided a romantic atmosphere, but not as romantic as David’s attentiveness—shielding her from the traffic, holding her

hand, and protecting her from the motorcycles snaking on and off the street.

Now back to her car, she missed his touch and didn't want the night to end. She needed to go home and edit the podcast due tomorrow, but she was tempted to stay a little longer and spend more time together.

With him, laughter and intellectual discussions went hand in hand, leaving her amused and intellectually stimulated. When they delved into politics and religion, his intuitive insights surprised her, because it contrasted with his laid-back personality.

For sure, she wanted to see him again, and she had to stop herself from asking him on a date. She would have done so in the past. With her ex-boyfriend, she consistently arranged their dates. Kelechi rarely made any effort. This time, she yearned for the rush of being pursued, being desired instead of being the pursuer.

"No way I'd let you walk alone in the dark," he said, his deep voice sending shivers down her spine, spreading goosebumps over her skin. "Not on my watch."

Damn, just his voice made her go simultaneously hot and cold, a mix of sensations that aroused yet soothed.

Uju folded her arms across her chest, fighting the impulse to wrap them around him. "Why? Because you think I'm a frail woman unable to fend for myself?" she asked, eyebrows arched high.

His expression turned serious, and he gave her an intense look. "No, because even though I know you can fend for yourself, I want to fend for you."

Her breath caught, and her pulse quickened. God! This man could say things that made her head spin.

Although she had a black belt in Taekwondo and was fully capable of self-defence, the idea of David protecting her made her blush. “Well, then, thank you for being my bodyguard tonight,” she said with a smile.

“I could be your bodyguard forever if you let me,” he said, his tone deep and husky.

Uju’s heart bumped into her chest and pounded rapidly against her ribcage as a wave of excitement shot through her.

Just a few other cars dotted the parking lot, so they were alone. On a starry and breezy night, with the streetlights shining down on them, Uju felt like she starred in a romantic movie as she stared into David’s eyes. Their dark intensity were an inky pool, sucking her in. She could get lost in their depths forever.

“What I’m saying is that I had an amazing time with you, and I’d love to go out with you again,” he said, ensnaring her even further with the sincerity of his voice.

Uju’s heart soared. This was exactly what she wanted. To have another opportunity to see him again. Why did she also feel anxious?

“I … I’d love that. But don’t you think it’s a conflict of interest?” she asked, trying to think of a reason to justify her anxiety.

“Why?”

“Well, because I’ve spent a lot of time protesting against plastic surgeons. What would people think if I suddenly

start dating one?”

He shrugged. “I don’t care. Neither should you.”

“But …”

“Did you enjoy tonight?”

Uju nodded. No hesitation.

“Do you want to see me again?”

She nodded again. “Yes.”

“Then we have only one conflict.”

Uju’s eyes widened. “What?”

He leaned in a little closer, filling her nostrils with the scent of his intoxicating cologne and sending a flood of arousal between her thighs.

“Should we share our first kiss now, or should we wait until our second date?”

His question was like a splash of ice water on her face, shattering her sensual haze. *First kiss indeed!*

Uju took a step back, suddenly feeling self-conscious. David still didn’t remember their kiss years ago. He’d completely forgot how, even after playing spin the bottle, they’d spent the entire night kissing each other until she had to leave with the friends who brought her.

Was the kiss that shook her to the core that unmemorable to him? Was she that forgettable, that unremarkable?

Swivelling back to her car, she clutched the door handle. “I have to go.”

“What?” David held her arm to stop her. “Did I say something wrong? We don’t have to kiss now or ever if you don’t want to … I was just joking…”

Uju spun back to face him in a puff of irritation, but the uncertainty in his eyes gave her pause.

“Do you really not remember me?” she asked him, confused herself.

“Should I? Where from? I don’t—”

Without giving herself a moment to reconsider, she slid her hand around his neck, pulled his head down, and brought his lips to hers for a kiss.

Fireworks exploding in her body. A consternation of stars, bright and dizzying, dancing in her brain. A storm of volcanic pleasure erupting in her veins. No words could capture the exquisite feeling—the soft press of his lips, the electric spark of his touch, and the lingering taste of his mouth on hers again.

Uju whimpered, parting her lips for the intrusion of his hot, hungry tongue, ravenously twirling with hers in a fiery waltz as she wrapped her arms around him to draw him closer.

How could David forget this? How could he forget this powerful sensation? The intense sensations that consumed them when they kissed back then? The wave of heat and longing consuming her now.

How could he?



A deep groan erupted from David at the shock and

pleasure from the sudden contact of their lips.

He curved his arms around Uju and pulled her flush against him as he deepened the kiss, relishing the intoxicating sweetness of her mouth against his, her tongue tangling with his.

A soft moan escaped her lips, igniting his senses and flooding him with a heat that made his body burn with a desire he'd not felt for a long time. The desire to invade, to take, to consume.

God! He wanted to drink every last drop of her, to melt into her until they became completely one and he could be with her forever.

"Oh, Uju," he rasped, angling his head and stroking his tongue across her lower lip before dipping it inside her mouth again.

He could drown in this pleasure, kiss her forever. She tasted of sugary icing and wine, of everything sweet and syrupy, of fire and steam, and of something else … something tugging on the recesses of his memory … something he'd tasted before. Something that had consumed him and lingered in his mind long after.

*"Do you really not remember me?"*

Her question echoed in his brain as they kissed, as her body clung to him, as her hands roamed over him, as she hauled him closer, as her soft whimpers reached his ears.

An epiphany struck him with full force. David pulled back abruptly and gazed into Uju's dazed eyes, his breath coming in short spurts as he watched her struggling to catch her own.

“I can’t believe this,” he murmured, shaking his head.

“C-can’t …” She cleared her throat, then swiped her tongue across her plump lower lip, causing his dick to jump. “Can’t believe what?”

“It’s you … the kiss-of-my-life girl.”

“Wh–what?” Her forehead furrowed in confusion.

“UniLag 2010. Chigozie Ozumba’s campus party. Were you the one I spent the entire night kissing after the spin the bottle game?” He gulped, still finding it hard to believe he was with the same woman who had given him the best kiss of his life.

Only twenty-two at the time, the experience—an almost supernatural connection and from just a kiss—had unravelled him. Of course, he’d locked lips with other girls, yet this had felt so novel, almost unreal. Kissing Uju had been all-encompassing, way beyond just physical contact of mouths and tongues.

He’d spent weeks searching for her, but no one knew who she was. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have believed she was a figment of his drunken mind. Only he hadn’t been drunk. A little tipsy, yes, but not so much he didn’t remember being enchanted by the first kiss after the Goulder bottle landed on her while playing spin the bottle. He still remembered her sexy red mini dress and red stilettos making her as tall as he.

After that first tentative meeting of their lips, they’d slipped away from the group to a quiet corner and continued to snog, letting their obvious chemistry ignite and consume them.

“Yes. It was me,” she whispered.

“Oh, my God.” David dragged his palm over his face. “I looked for you for weeks, but came up empty.”

Her eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Huh? You walked past me the very next day and didn’t even acknowledge my presence.”

He shook his head. “Impossible.”

“Yep, you did.” Uju’s lips curved into a snicker. “To be honest, I felt humiliated after, and berated myself for weeks.”

He massaged his temple and let out a groan. “No … no… I didn’t see you … didn’t recognise you. I’m almost blind without my glasses. That night, I wasn’t wearing them. And it was dark, so I didn’t see you properly. And stupid me, I forgot to ask your name.”

Her chuckle filled the air, instantly easing the tension between them as her shoulders relaxed. “Not stupid. Just as horny as I was. We spent the entire time kissing instead of talking. We may have even gone all the way if the room wasn’t so crowded.”

The recollection made him laugh. “Indeed, we were both so charged that it seemed like we were the only ones there.”

Her lips curved into a reminiscent smile. “That’s why I felt so embarrassed when you walked past me the next day without even so much as a smile in my direction.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t intentional.” He tilted her face upward with his thumb and forefinger. “Uju, the kisses we shared left a mark on me that lasted for weeks. I searched for you

for several days and eventually had to give up."

Her breathing stalled, and her mouth parted as if she hung on his every word and any respiratory effort would make her miss a moment. This gave him more courage to continue speaking.

"It's a miracle that fate somehow brought you back into my life." Brushing her jaw with his thumb, he added, "I may have lost contact with you years ago, but I'm determined not to make that mistake again. My glasses are on now and I see you clearly, Uju Emordi. I see you and I want to see more of you. Can I?"

Uju raised her hand to her face and held his palm against her cheek. "Okay, Dave," she breathed. "Yes, let's see more of each other."

With a loud sigh of relief, David pulled her into his arms and embraced her tightly, thrilled at the prospect of dating the woman who gave him the best kiss of his life.

# FIFTEEN

UJU'S EYES widened with appreciation as soon as she walked into the foyer of Chilax Spa. Such a gorgeous space. A dome-shaped light fixture bathed the brown leather sofas in a soft glow, warmed by the yellow walls. Stunning potted plants at the corners added splashes of green and the scent of earth to the room. Several serene artworks hung on the walls, and a sleek reception desk sat at the far end. The entire place had a Zen vibe, right down to the café music playing in the background and the scent of lavender oils wafting in the air.

Her eyes fell on the man at the other end of the room reading what appeared to be a health magazine, and her stomach lurched. Dr David Njokwu. This man, once her arch-nemesis, now consumed her thoughts—all day, while she worked on her podcast, and even at night in her dreams. He had managed to etch himself deep into her subconscious without even trying.

Their twelfth outing in the past month and she couldn't get over how excited she was to see him, how the sight of him made her insides turn to mush.

They’d been out several times for fancy dinners, twice to hip nightclubs where they danced until midnight, and then gone bowling three days ago. All wonderful dates. Each goodbye felt like a physical wrench, ripping through her, each kiss a fiery brand searing a need for him into her very being—a need that escalated from mere desire to something essential, like the air to a drowning person gasping for breath.

She smoothed her hands down the sides of her ocean blue summer gown, trying to wipe off the film of perspiration making her palms sticky.

The heat burning inside her wasn’t from stepping out of her fully air-conditioned car and into the Saturday afternoon sunshine, but from the surge of emotions that exploded inside her at the sight of him.

Taking advantage of his distraction, she let her gaze linger on his handsome face, memorising every detail.

With his glasses perched on his nose and his intense concentration as he read his magazine, he looked like a professor of science—serious and focused. But the young, handsome kind, the one female and even male students, aspired to be around.

His casual outfit of denim trousers and a fitting black t-shirt lent him a suave look, showcasing fine muscles and an athletic physique that she could appreciate even while he sat, long legs stretched out in front of him.

He looked up and leaped to his feet as soon as he saw her, an expression of sheer delight on his face, his eagerness mirroring hers. His lips parted into a grin that made her heart do jumping jacks inside her chest.

Lord! *I'm in trouble*.

How lucky could any woman be to have a gorgeous man like David Njokwu smile at her that way?

She smiled back. Automatically. Because how could anyone not respond to such a beautiful and welcoming smile?

"Hey, babe," he greeted, kissing her softly on the lips.

Uju inhaled the intoxicating woodsy scent of him mixed with a visceral maleness that made the V between her thighs tingle.

God! *Why are we in public?*

If she weren't so intent on slowing things down, she would tell him to scrap the dates, take her home, and end the throbbing, insistent desire that pulsed in her veins.

"Sorry I'm late," Uju said instead, crushing her libido to a pulp.

*Goodness*! *I need to get a grip*. *I'm not a hormonal teenager with a crush*.

She tapped her collarbone, desperately trying to quell the overwhelming sensations, the cold metal of her necklace a stark contrast to the heat radiating through her.

As a full-blown adult woman with her share of failed relationships, she'd vowed to take a different approach this time—ask questions a lot and find out about the man before catching feelings.

Her new motto: Don't let your heart get carried away before your brain.

So, she'd written questions to ask David today at this relaxing spa date, things about his beliefs and values, to see if they aligned with hers. Her journalist hat put on now, she would approach dating with more intention.

But looking at him now, his dark eyes on hers as if the moon hung on her head, made her want to forgo all the hard questions, and fast forward to the future with him lying beside her on a bed—scratch that—lying on top of her on a bed.

David rolled his eyes. "Girl, quit with that fake apology. We both know you'll be late next time."

She tossed her head back and tittered. "I'm only fifteen minutes late," she said, glancing at her watch.

He tsked. "Yep. Lucky for you, I anticipated that and booked for two hours. Which should be more than enough for us."

Heat flooded her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

He leaned forward to kiss her lips again. "I don't mind waiting for you," he murmured. "Seeing you walking into any room always brightens my mood."

Her lower abdomen spasmed. God! This man could melt gold with just his words. Her heart was already like molten lava. Gone! A finished woman! Yep. He had her in the palm of his gigantic hand. Could crush her easily.

Uju took a deep breath in and exhaled. The reason she had to focus on her questions. She won't let her heart take over her head this time, wouldn't allow him to break her heart.

"It's always lovely to walk in and see you, too," she said,

her face on fire, butterflies free-floating in her tummy.

Clutching her purse to distract herself from the sudden desire to reach for him and pull him in for another kiss, she turned toward the reception desk. “So what’s next?” she asked.

Although a first-timer here, the breathtaking decor promised an amazing experience. She couldn’t wait.

“We go to the reception and book in,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “Shall we?”

Nodding, Uju took his hand and followed him to where a uniformed woman sat behind the reception desk, a welcoming smile on her face as they approached.

“Welcome to Chilax Spa, sir and ma,” she said.

“Thank you,” Uju said.

David nodded. “We’re ready to book in now.”

“Okay,” said the receptionist, looking at the desktop in front of her. “I see you’re here for the full couples’ treatment.”

David nodded again, squeezing Uju’s hand. “And please, can you confirm that the room I reserved is the one we’ll be using?”

The receptionist bobbed her head as she glanced at the computer. “Of course,” she said, pressing a button on the table. “That’s all set for you. If you wait a moment, I’ll get someone to lead you to your spa room.”

Just as she finished speaking, a young woman wearing a white and red uniform emerged from the hallway and walked up to them. “Welcome Dr Njokwu and Miss Emordi. I’m Fisayo, your host for today.” She handed them

individual fobs. “Please follow me and I’ll take you to your spa room for your treatment. Press the fob anytime you need my attention for anything.”

Uju nodded, still holding David’s hand as they followed their guide down a corridor to the room at the end. The neon lettering on the door said, “Couple therapy”.

Fisayo pushed open the door and let them in. “Please don’t forget to let me know if you need anything. Your masseuses will be with you shortly. I hope you both have an amazing time,” she said, then slipped away and shut the door.

Uju’s breath trapped in her chest as she took in her environment. *Wow! Breathtaking*!

Two massage tables sat side-by-side, bathed in the soft glow of several candles, their light dancing on flower petals scattered around a steaming hot tub. Soft piano music filled the room from hidden speakers while a bucket of chilled champagne sat in the corner next to a snack table.

She turned to David and gave his shoulder a playful shove. “Oh, my God,” she gushed, truly impressed by the aesthetics of the room. “This is so … stunning. How on earth do you know a place like this?”

David chuckled. “I’m a busy surgeon who likes to relax. Chilax is the perfect place for me.”

Jealousy struck her with the force of a physical blow, its bitterness coating her tongue. How many women had David brought here? How many women had he brought to share this experience with?

Uju swallowed hard. God! Why was she suddenly feeling

territorial? Less than a month into their relationship, and already the image of him with someone else was enough to make her heart pound and her head spin.

“I usually go for single rooms, but when I found out about the romantic couples’ package deal, I had to book it for us. To share this with you.”

With a contented sigh, Uju let the tension between her shoulder blades ease with the air expelled from her lungs. Talk about a crash-land from her frantic thoughts.

His remark, with a grin so sexy Uju’s nipples tightened behind her bra, calmed her instantaneously. As if he’d read her thoughts.

Without a word, she rose to her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his mouth. “You’re amazing,” she murmured against his lips. “Simply amazing.”

David grinned, pulling her closer, his lips finding hers again and again in a flurry of kisses before a hesitant tap interrupted them.

They broke apart, chuckling like guilty teenagers discovered making out behind the library, both stammering a hasty “come in” to the intruder.

Two masseuses stepped in, both women wearing white uniforms, transparent gloves, and a scarf over their heads.

Uju smiled. Wrong timing. But also, right timing. Because she’d been seconds away from risking it all and jumping David’s bones right in the middle of this spa room.



Face down with his head in the hole of the massage table, he could see the plain white sneakers of his masseuse, but his entire body was attuned to the woman lying on the massage table beside him.

Damn. His dick was hard. Not from Linda's hands kneading the muscles of his upper back, but from the soft sounds coming from Uju as Sade massaged hers.

The sound—a cross between moans and heavy breaths—awakened his libido like a horny teenage boy looking at pictures from Ikebe Super magazine.

It stormed his brain with images of his hands on Uju's body, producing that same suppressed sound until she lost the battle and screamed out her pleasure.

Blood flowed downward, making his penis harder. *Lord have mercy*. This was supposed to be a relaxing time for them both, but Uju's presence sent a jolt through him, igniting every nerve ending.

It was clear he wanted her physically. But more than that, he yearned to understand the complexities of what lay underneath her tough exterior—the things that made her laugh until her sides ached, weep silently, or flare up in righteous anger.

With that in mind, he'd planned tonight, in this serene spa, where the gentle scent of lavender filled the air, for them to spend time alone, to be free to talk, and really connect. To move their relationship from comfortable dating to the next level.

He clenched his jaw, fighting the arousal that Uju so easily provoked, a frustrated flush warming his cheeks. His second head had better cooperate so he could focus on

getting his first head to function while he worked on getting to know Uju better.

“This feels so good,” Uju breathed, her voice a low hum that vibrated through his very being, sending shivers down his spine. A far more exciting sensation than the massage he was getting.

“Yep. Very relaxing,” he said, his tone a little hoarse, even to his own ears. A half-truth. He didn’t need to tell Uju that being beside her, sharing this very intimate couples’ massage treatment with her, had both relaxed and aroused him with equal force.

“Oh, Dave, you’ve spoiled me. I’ll want to come here every time now.”

He laughed. “I could book a weekly session for both of us.”

“That would be fantastic. It’s heaven here on earth.”

Silence fell between them, the sweet, melancholic piano melody filling the room, a shared serenity settling over them. Then he heard her soft voice. “Dave, speaking of heaven, are you religious?” she asked.

He stiffened, her unexpected question, a bolt from the blue, throwing him for a loop. Yet, he welcomed it. Among the many things he wanted to know about her, this detail prominently featured on his list.

“Not really. But I believe in God. Was born Catholic. Attended church regularly when I was a child. However, as I got older, I lost my confidence in religion. But never God. I know he … or she exists. You?”

“Same for me. I feel just like you about losing confidence in religion. It’s filled with so much division. Yet, it’s supposed

to unify.” She paused, as if contemplating her next words. “Though I believe in God, I don’t believe there’s only one religion that leads people to him … or her. I attend church sometimes because I was raised Anglican, but I don’t believe a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or anyone who chooses any other religion, isn’t worshiping God.”

David exhaled deeply, lifting his head from the hole in his massage table. He turned to Uju to see her lying sideways, her gaze fixed on him. His entire body flooded with relief and a surge of joy. She’d given the exact response he wanted.

He shied away from religiously rigid people who refused to listen to anyone else’s point of view.

*Check one*. He could check this off his list of her qualities he hoped matched his own values.

“Soul mates? Do you believe in that?” he asked, wanting to dig deeper, find out more about her.

“Nope. I believe committed relationships result from effort and making a conscious choice. Love isn’t something beyond our control. There’s not just one person made for another person. Relationships require effort to succeed.”

He gave an excited nod as she spoke. Another tick off for him. Gosh. He loved Uju’s perspective on life. “I believe that too. That’s why I don’t get people who say they can’t help themselves when they cheat. Nope. Cheating is a choice. A cruel decision to hurt another person. Not a helpless act.”

Uju lowered her gaze, then darted it back to him, an anxious flash in her eyes. “Have you ever cheated?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never been in a monogamous relationship, so no. I was in an … open relationship with my ex, so we either invited third parties or … simply did our own thing sometimes.”

From the way her eyes shuttered, he could tell that his reply displeased her. He desperately wanted to add more, clarify, or even take back his response, but he couldn’t bring himself to lie. He wanted to be as open with Uju as possible. His relationship with Anita had been complex and unhealthy, but it was sufficient for him then. Not anymore.

A light, apprehensive breath burst from her lips. “Do you believe in open relationships? Is that what you want?”

He shook his head vehemently. “No. Not anymore. Then, I was … reckless with life, so I couldn’t commit to anyone. Now, it’s not for me. I’m all for a committed relationship with love and mutual respect. Infidelity on either part is out of the question for me.”

That seemed to put her at ease. “Marriage? Do you believe in that?” she asked.

A straightforward question for him. Easy to answer. He loved the idea of marriage, of family. Having grown up with parents who adored each other and their children, he always wanted that for himself. Even after his father’s death, his mother’s love for her late husband didn’t waver.

“Yes,” he answered. “I’ve always wanted a wife … kids … a happy home … all of it. I just wish I didn’t spend years of my life running away from myself, from everyone. Finally, I’m ready to embrace it, go for that dream. What about you? Do you see marriage in your future?”

Her lips twisted at the corners, an uncertain look crossing

her eyes. “Me … I’m so scared of marriage, of leaving my heart in the hands of someone else, letting myself be vulnerable. It’s … frightening.”

“Why?”

“Because I like to be in control of my happiness. I trusted someone before and he hurt me, left me for another woman he’d been seeing. I’m terrified of putting myself through that again.”

David mulled over Uju’s response as Linda’s rhythmic massage worked the tension from his muscles.

He totally got Uju’s fears. As a trained medic for several years, he had observed the unfortunate disadvantage faced by women when they married a man. He’d encountered women whose marriages led to premature ends to their personal aspirations, who contracted sexually transmitted diseases from unfaithful spouses, became victims of domestic violence, and in some tragic cases, died.

Of course, he expected any woman—or man—going into marriage to be cautious, but he also knew the beautiful side of the institution, and that a union between two people who loved and valued each other could be a wonderful thing.

It would be easier to tell Uju he’d never hurt her, to promise his fidelity forever, but empty words felt cheap; actions held far more weight. He’d rather show her just how much she meant to him; how highly he valued her.

“Is marriage out of the question for you?” he asked, needing to know this information, so that he could evaluate what kind of relationship they could have.

While he didn’t believe marriage was the only path to a meaningful relationship, he still wanted to get married. If Uju didn’t, he would have to confront the harsh reality of altering his dreams of their life together.

“Not at all. I do want to get married someday,” she replied, causing his insides to slump with relief. “But the thought frightens me, that’s all.”

“I get it,” he said. “I totally get it, and I hope we work on alleviating your fears together.”

A smile touched her lips. “A herculean task, but I hope so too.”

“Children? Is that something you see in your future?” he asked, another box he wanted to tick off.

“Yes. I definitely want to be a mother.”

“To how many children?”

“Two. Or three. You? Is fatherhood in your future?”

“I pray so. I want two kids. But three is also okay.”

A wide, delighted grin spread across David’s face. Only a month in their relationship and he could already picture her as his wife, the mother of his two … or three kids. But he didn’t want to rush things. Best to take things nice and slow until they were both sure they wanted the same things.

“Phew! I feel like I’ve just been in a job interview,” she said with a wry twist of her mouth. “Imagine coming here to relax and having my brain activated instead of dead to the world.”

He bellowed out a laugh, his head falling back. “You

started it," he said.

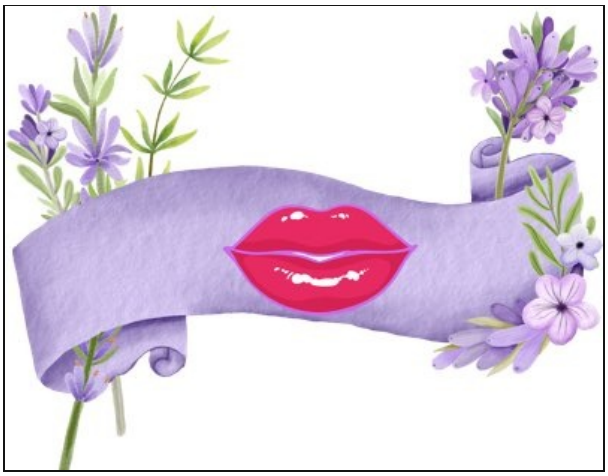
"And I'm not yet done," she huffed. "I've got another one for you. A very important question. Now, tell me, APC, PDP or Labour party, which one did you vote for?"

David laughed out. "LP! I cannot speak for the rest of Nigeria, but as far as I'm concerned, Peter Obi is my president."

She beamed, her eyes twinkling with delight. "Now, that's a perfect answer! You've got the job."

David's heart soared as he shook with laughter. Everything he'd learnt about Uju today only made him fall deeper for her. She'd more than got the job, he'd just promoted her to executive of his heart.

# SIXTEEN



ADJUSTING THE HEADPHONE'S MOUTHPIECE, Uju leaned forward and clicked on the desktop mouse to connect the call.

"Welcome back, everyone, to the Against the Wind Podcast," she said, smiling at the camera Aminat directed at her. "Today, joining us on a call is a woman who emailed the show claiming to be a victim of plastic surgery. Hello Nina, please can you introduce yourself and tell us why you contacted us?"

"I'm Nina Igoh, a fashion designer calling from Gbagada." Her voice boomed through the speakers connected to the

computer. “I contacted you to share my horror story about botched BBLs so that I can discourage any young girl thinking about it.”

“Thank you for reaching out,” Uju said, adjusting the volume to remove the echo sound. She cast a surreptitious glance at Aminat, who was standing opposite her recording the podcast. Seeing Aminat’s thumbs-up sign, Uju felt more confident about continuing.

Usually posted on their online platforms Mondays and Wednesdays, their twice weekly podcast required careful planning and preparation, with videos shot ahead of time to ensure flawless edits.

Today, being Friday afternoon, they were in the extra room of the rented three-bedroom apartment they shared, recording their Monday evening podcast.

When they moved in together, Aminat suggested transforming this room into a mini studio, saving them the additional expense of renting a separate studio.

They had taken the time to decorate the medium-sized space, adding an executive chair and a round table equipped with additional seats for the guests. A huge sign with the words “Against the Wind” sat on the wall behind the executive seat, completing the set with perfection.

At first, Uju was hesitant about the home studio because she was worried about strangers coming to their house. But she soon realised that most guests preferred telephone or video interviews. So far, they had only entertained one guest in here. Which was just perfect.

“So, Nina, please tell us why you opted to have plastic surgery in the first place,” Uju said.

“I’m not even sure. I guess it was just peer pressure. All my friends were having them done. Afterwards, men showered them with gifts—cars, holidays, jewellery, you name it. One of my girlfriends snagged a wealthy man just three weeks after doing her *bumbum*,” replied Nina. “Seeing her jet-setting all over the world with her husband made me feel a little envious. I wanted to have what she had, and I believe it was her big *bumbum* that got her noticed by the man.”

“And why did you automatically assume it was her *bumbum* that made the man notice her?”

“I … I don’t know, I …” Nina trailed off, sounding a little hesitant. “To be fair, I’m not sure why I assumed that.”

“Before your friend had plastic surgery, did she not receive any attention from men?”

“Well … she did. But her first wealthy boyfriend came after her surgery.”

“So, it was about snagging a wealthy man, not just any man?”

“Well, if a flat bum got her only broke men, and her bigger bum got her a rich husband, there’s a direct correlation.”

“In other words, one needs a Brazilian butt lift to get a wealthy man. Is that it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. What I mean is…” Nina heaved in a breath, which sounded a little sharp over the speakers. “Why do I feel you’re blaming me instead of focusing on the plastic surgeons who destroyed my life?”

Uju exhaled just as sharply. Since her interview with the clients at Blossom Health reconstructive centre, and after

her own sister-in-law's surgery, she realised she had been looking for a scapegoat for her friend Bisola's tragic passing from complications of plastic surgery.

Rather than delving into the multifaceted superficial culture that contributed to the demand for cosmetic surgery, she took an easier route—pile the blame on the surgeons.

Bisola didn't have to go under the knife to be beautiful. She already was. However, she'd convinced herself that she wasn't. For some reason, her friend had allowed her insecurities to get the best of her.

There was a much bigger problem that involved a lot of factors rather than simply blaming the plastic surgeons for doing their jobs, or even the clients who sought their services.

From now on, Uju wanted to focus on that, to draw attention to the frivolities that led people to alter their bodies surgically.

Her own sister-in-law needed a plastic surgeon for reconstruction after a mastectomy. Without skilled surgeons, she wouldn't have had the option.

Vilifying plastic surgeons instead of addressing the main issue was a wrong approach, and she had to admit it to herself that she'd been wrong.

"I'm not blaming you or anyone, Nina," Uju said gently. "My intention is to start a discussion that involves in-depth analysis, beginning with the underlying motivations behind seeking plastic surgery."

"Hmmm. Just a few weeks ago, you were singing another tune, marching in front of a cosmetic surgery centre and

condemning plastic surgery. Why the sudden change of heart?”

“It’s not a change of heart, but a change in perspective.” Uju crossed her legs at the ankle and picked up her coffee mug. “Pointing fingers is easy. Looking for someone to blame is simple, but the reality is that things are more complex and nuanced. The plastic surgery surge in our country stems from more than just wanting to alter one’s body to look more beautiful. Are there other reasons? For financial gain? For political power? Peer pressure? Body dimorphism, social media influence? So many factors.”

She tilted her head towards the camera, ensuring that the ring light captured her reflection perfectly. “I want to stop trying to pin the blame on anyone. Instead, I believe it’s time to focus on tackling the multiple issues leading to the rise in cosmetic surgery in our country.” Directing a smile towards the camera, she added, “Nina, I believe that sharing your story can help me and our listeners gain a better understanding of your own unique journey. And that’s why I started with the whys first.”

She sipped her lukewarm coffee. “Would you like to tell us more? How did you hear about the surgeons you used? Did you do any personal research before using their services?”

A moment of silence ensued, and for a split second, Uju thought the caller had hung up, but then she heard a deep inhale before Nina’s next words. “Yes, I’m willing to talk about it all. That’s why I contacted Against the Wind. To let people know how the search for the perfect *bumbum* ruined my life.”

Leaning back in her seat, Uju sipped from her mug again

before placing it back on the table. She was now prepared to continue with the rest of the telephone interview for the podcast with a more honest and vulnerable approach.

Several hours later, Uju plonked on the sitting room sofa beside Aminat and picked up the remote.

“Want to watch something on TV?” she asked, taking a bite of the green apple in her hand.

Aminat shook her head while positioning her MacBook on her knee and stretching her legs across the recliner. “I want to edit the podcast now so that I’ll have the weekend free,” she said. “It was a great discussion with our caller, Uju. I loved it.”

Uju nodded. “It was indeed. Thanks, Aminat.”

“I must confess, I’m glad you’re no longer on a warpath with plastic surgeons.”

Uju chuckled as she switched on the TV. “I finally realised it was pointless. They’re just doing their jobs.”

“Exactly. They can’t be blamed for providing a service that people clearly want,” said Aminat, placing her headphones over her ears. “We need to be asking why people want those services.”

Uju had to agree with her friend, business partner and roommate. After a wonderful hour talking to Nina on the podcast, she was happy with the conclusion they’d drawn about Nina’s cosmetic surgery journey. The quack doctor who messed up had to be held accountable, but Nina also admitted that her search for cheap surgery had led her into the hands of an incompetent surgeon.

Nina took some responsibility for allowing the notion that

she needed to look a certain way to attract wealthy men to control her mindset. They concluded the conversation by imparting some nuggets of wisdom to the other listeners.

“Love your body, dear men and women,” Nina had said in response to Uju’s question about her final thoughts. “Don’t make the mistake I did, trying to change yourself for anyone else. If you have to, do it because you want to, and make sure you do proper research before making a decision.”

Uju was pleased with how a tough conversation ended on a positive note.

Flicking through the channels, she searched for what to watch as she munched on her apple. Just as she settled on the reality show, ‘Love is Blind’ on Netflix, her phone buzzed with a text message.

She reached across the brown cushioned sofa and picked it up from the wooden tea-table beside her. A smile spread across her lips as soon as she saw who it was.

> Dave the hot surgeon: What’s up? Just finished my second surgery and wanted to say hi before things get busy again.

Placing her half-eaten apple on the plate beside her, she tapped her fingers rapidly against the screen, a grin plastered on her face as she typed a reply.

> Uju: I’m good, thanks. Just finished a fantastic podcast taping and now relaxing watching TV

> Dave the hot surgeon: Lucky you. I have two more scheduled surgeries. Will probably get home late at night 😫

Uju: Ndo o. 🥹 Life of a busy plastic surgeon. How are you though?

Dave the hot surgeon: I'm good. Missing you😌

Heat suffused her cheeks as she read his last text. The third month in a relationship with him and she could already say without a sliver of doubt that she'd started catching feelings.

Because of their busy schedules, mostly his, they didn't get to see each other as often as she liked, but whenever they did, she always had such a great time that she counted down to seeing him again as she said her goodbyes.

Not only did she enjoy spending time with him during their dinner dates and long walks, she also loved kissing and touching him.

The more time she spent with him, the more she longed to be with him. Talking for hours on end on the phone and video calls were no longer sufficient. She craved to see him again.

Uju: Missing you too. Can't wait to see you next week for our dinner date ☺️

Dave the hot surgeon: Awww. Don't think I can wait that long. Can we see tomorrow? We could have dinner at my place. I'll cook

Uju: You? Cook? 😳 Hard to believe

Dave the hot surgeon: Why? I may not be Gordon Ramsey, but I know my way around the kitchen

Uju: I still find it hard to believe

Dave the hot surgeon: Then come and see for yourself. How about I cook fried rice and roast chicken tomorrow, and we could watch a movie as we eat?

Uju: Tempting…🤔

Dave the hot surgeon: You can pick the movie.

Uju: Almost sold…

Dave the hot surgeon: And you get to meet Chewy. That dog has been longing to meet the person who is making his owner so happy these days 😉

Uju: Sold! You should have started with that. Dog lover here! 💃

Dave the hot surgeon: For real? Ah! That's my girl! I'd marry you tomorrow if I could 🥺

Uju's heart skipped a beat and her fingers shook. She knew David was only joking, but for her, his casual remark chipped away at her resistance, breaking her deep-rooted fear of nesting with someone she loved. For the first time in a long time, she'd begun to see a man as part of her future. As her husband.

Dave the hot surgeon: Don't panic, I'm only joking. I know it's too soon to propose

Dave the hot surgeon: I didn't scare you off by being too forward, did I? Oh, no. Someone shoot me now

As she read the frantic message he sent, a smile slowly formed on her lips. She loved seeing how worried he was about losing her. Because she felt the same way too.

Seeing the dots dancing on the screen indicating he was typing something likely as desperate as his earlier message, she decided to end his misery.

Uju: Nope. You did the opposite of scaring me off, Dave. I'm now more than eager to see you tomorrow. Nothing wrong with a little Netflix and Chill 😜

The dots stopped as soon as she saw the blue ticks on her screen, indicating that he'd read the message. Uju bit her lower lip, anxious she'd been too forward. Would he see the sexual undertone of her message as a turnoff? Had she scared him away herself?

Dave the hot surgeon: Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow, Uju. I may be too excited to sleep tonight 🫣

Uju let out a relieved sigh and typed,

Me too.

Dave the hot surgeon: 7:00 p.m. okay?

Uju: Yep 👍🏽

Dave the hot surgeon: Excellent. Counting down already 🥹

Uju: Ditto 😘

Uju glanced up after sending her reply to find Aminat's

curious gaze on her.

“What?” she asked, unable to stop the smile still blooming on her face.

“Who were you texting while blushing?” Aminat tilted her headphone away from her ears, a knowing look in her eyes.

“No one.”

Uju wasn’t entirely sure why she denied it. Frankly, she wasn’t sure why she was keeping her relationship with David a secret from Aminat and her family.

At first, she’d chucked it up to being cautious. After all, she wasn’t certain about David’s intentions. He could be a player, an unserious fellow toying with her emotions. No need to let anyone know yet until she knew for sure what his intentions were. He had been proving his commitment to her by making time to see her and regularly checking in on her for the past few weeks. And after that spa date, her gut feeling told her that David wasn’t playing her at all.

However, she remained hesitant, unable to fully relax and embrace what was unfolding between them. Her past relationships had left her wary. She couldn’t put her guard down yet.

A deep sense of unease settled in the pit of her stomach whenever she thought about the rapid and intense nature of her feelings for him. It felt too good to be true—the constant high she had whenever she was around him, and Uju was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Until she could trust the intensity of her feelings for David, she would keep their relationship to herself. Another failed

relationship would provide her friends and family with ammunition to reinforce the belief that she wasn't cut out for long-term commitments. She couldn't bear the thought of that happening. Especially with David.

Aminat cleared her throat, interrupting her train of thought. "Hmm, Uju, I don't believe you," she said with a smirk on her face. "You think I don't hear you on the phone talking with whoever-he-is late at night? And all the mysterious outings you've been having?"

Uju's eyes bulged. Damn it. She'd done a poor job covering her tracks.

"Yes, I know *ooo*," Aminat said shaking her head, amusement dancing in her eyes. "You have a new man, and I'm happy for you. It's been years since you dated."

Uju smiled coyly. Her friend knew her too well. No point denying it. It didn't mean she was ready to admit it, either. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, averting her gaze and picking up her apple.

"Yes, you do, Uju. I'll wait until you're ready to let me know who he is. Just make sure you're careful. These Lagos men are crazy."

"Who said he's a Lagos man?"

"Aha! So you're admitting there's a man."

Uju threw her head back and laughed. "I admit no such thing."

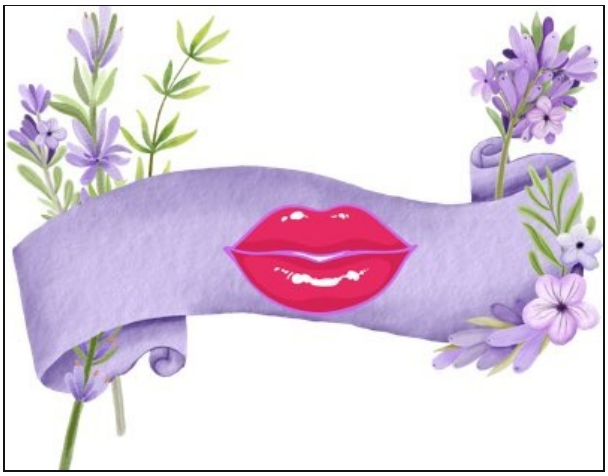
"Okay *o*. Enjoy. Just be careful."

She nodded. "Thanks, Aminat. I will."

Her friend was right about being careful dating in Lagos.

The horror stories she’d heard from Bisola and Aminat, plus her own horrific dating experience, were enough warning. Hopefully, her heart won’t get swept up in David Njokwu’s charm and become another casualty of Lagos’ tumultuous dating scene.

# SEVENTEEN



SINGING along to Tems's *Me and You* while Chewy barked in perfect harmony, David stirred the pot on the kitchen stove, mixing the shrimp sauce with the basmati rice.

He was almost finished cooking, and the delicious aroma and food texture showed he had done pretty well. With a wooden spoon, he scooped some fried rice from the pot, tapped it on his palm, and tasted it.

"Mmm. Pretty good. Even if I do say so myself," he murmured, pleased with the outcome of nearly an hour of bustling about the kitchen to get this meal perfect for Uju. Satisfied, he covered the pot and reduced the heat.

A quick glance at the clock showed he had about twenty minutes before she arrived. Time was ticking fast, and he couldn’t wait to see her.

Bending over, he pulled open the oven door and the mouthwatering aroma of the dish inside wafted into the open air, teasing his senses. Pulling out the rack, he examined the baked whole turkey—the skin golden brown and crisp, the exact texture he wanted.

“Now, for the inside,” he muttered to himself, reaching for the meat fork on the kitchen table. He pierced the turkey and whistled with pride as the sharp steel went through the skin easily.

“Perfect,” he said, switching off the oven and giving his dog a thumbs-up. “I hope she likes it.”

Chewy barked and wagged his tail, a confused look in his eyes, as if puzzled by his owner’s sudden enthusiasm about cooking.

“I can’t wait for you to meet her, Chewy.” He wagged his finger at the dog. “Please be on your best behaviour, okay? We want to impress this woman. I think she’s the one.”

Chewy shot him a side-eye and barked before strolling away.

David laughed, raising both hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. I know you’re always well behaved, Chewy. My bad,” he called after the dog, who didn’t bother turning back.

With a wry smile, David redirected his focus back to his cooking. When the timer beeped, he switched off the stove

and moved the pot lid to release the steam from the cooked fried rice.

He glanced at the clock again and gasped. Fifteen more minutes. In a frantic rush, he dashed back to his room, quickly showered, and threw on jeans and a plain brown t-shirt.

David stared at his reflection in the mirror as he ran the comb through his hair, methodically working from the back to the front, ensuring every strand was free of knots. After patting his tight curls down, he applied a spritz of his favourite Jean Paul Gautier perfume to his neck.

Standing back to admire himself, he shook his head. “You’re doing too much, Dave. Calm down,” he muttered to his reflection. “She’s just coming over to eat and watch a movie, that’s all.”

He twisted his lips and grunted. If only he would listen to himself. Just like he had predicted on the phone yesterday with Uju, he’d been unable to sleep properly because he knew he would see her today. In his house. His territory.

Since waking up this morning, he’d been on full alert, bursting with enthusiasm as he prepared. He’d done a complete spring clean of his entire apartment, which was always spotless, anyway. He’d changed his sheets and pillowcases—but not because he hoped they’d have sex tonight. After all, that’s not why he invited her over.

Okay, lies. Of course, he wanted her. He’d wanted her since the first day he met her, even when he didn’t know her name. She was beautiful, sexy, funny, charming and the best kisser in the world.

However, beyond his physical desire for her, he longed to

have her in his life, by his side, as a companion to talk to and listen to, to navigate life's journey together. Sex was just a fraction of his desire for her, and he would never rush or push her to be intimate with him.

Chewy started barking seconds before the doorbell rang, crashing through his thoughts. David's heart catapulted to his throat and his pulse rate sped up.

Uju was here. He drew in a calming breath and let it out through parted lips, hoping to tamp down the surge of adrenaline in his system. God! He seriously needed to chill before he had a stroke from being so excited.

Pacing his steps to keep from running, he made his way to the front door, an excited Chewy barking as he trotted beside him.

His heart stopped as soon as he opened the door and saw Uju standing there. She was gorgeous. Completely breathtaking.

Wearing a pair of denim shorts that revealed her long, toned legs and a short-sleeved silk top in a vibrant yellow that complemented her beautiful brown skin, she exuded an air of chic sophistication and undeniable sex appeal.

Her sneakers completed the look, giving off a laid-back girl-next-door vibe—the total outfit, a thrilling mix of class and approachability. She styled her natural hair into tiny twists, gathering them into a casually elegant messy bun, and used nude colours for her makeup. Everything about the way she looked appealed to his senses.

"Hey," she said, flashing him a shy smile.

Before he could respond, Chewy rushed towards her,

sniffing her legs, with her tail wagging in excitement.

“No, Chewy, don’t—”

Uju crouched down, her sudden movement interrupting him. She stroked Chewy on her head and tickled her ears.

“Hey Chewy, nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you,” she said in a soft voice that soothed him, and obviously Chewy, given the dog’s affectionate tongue swipes across her hand.

As he watched the woman he was falling for interact with the dog he adored, a wave of emotion tightened his chest. This very moment meant the world to him—a meeting of the two beings he saw in his future.

Uju straightened up and looked at him. “Chewy’s a sweetheart. I can already tell we’ll be besties.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, David had to clear his throat to speak properly. “I certainly hope so.” He leaned in and planted a kiss on Uju’s cheeks, inhaling the pleasant scent of her floral perfume.

Tilting back a bit, he gave her a thorough look from head to toe. “I’m thrilled you’re here. You look fabulous, as usual.”

She beamed. “Thank you. And so do you,” she returned after giving him the once over. “I love seeing you in casual clothes. Makes you look less like the formidable surgeon I imagined you’d be.”

He chuckled, moving aside for her to enter. “Trust me, most surgeons are nerds and far from formidable.”

“Good to know.” She lifted the bottle of wine in her hand. “For you, Mr Nerd.”

Amused, he accepted her offering and glanced at it. “A Tinta Barroca from South Africa? Great choice. Should go perfectly with our dinner tonight. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Least I could do, since you’re feeding me.”

Uju stepped into his apartment, glancing around curiously as she moved. “Oh … all white… wow. And immaculate. You must be a neat freak,” she said, taking in the furnishing of his sitting room.

He laughed out. “Not really. It’s ironic, but I think maintaining white furniture is easier. Just bleach out stains and they remain white.”

Uju nodded. “You may be right about that. I find my white clothes easier to maintain.”

David pointed to the sitting room sofas. “Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable.”

Uju moved over and settled into the seat opposite the TV. “Thanks.”

“Can I get you something to drink before dinner?”

“Nope. I want to keep my stomach ready for whatever amazing aroma is coming from your kitchen.” She inhaled deeply. “It smells fantastic. Are you sure you cooked it? Or is a private chef hiding somewhere?”

David grinned. “Yep. I prepared the fried rice and roast turkey from scratch to finish,” he said, placing the wine bottle in the cooling bucket. “My brothers and I learnt how to cook young. So, I’m pretty confident in the kitchen.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Just wait until you taste my food. You’ll be so impressed, you’ll be begging to move in with me.”

She winked at him. “Ah! So confident. Okay *o*. Can’t wait.”

Several minutes later, they settled in the sitting room, both on the loveseat opposite the TV, ready to dig into the tray of fried rice and roast turkey on the tea tables in front of them.

With bated breath, David fixed his eyes on Uju as she scooped up the first forkful of rice, his stomach churning with nerves. It really mattered to him that she liked his cooking, because he planned to cook more for her in the future.

The sexy way her full, nude glossed lips curved over the fork brought a flood of arousal down south, filling his penis. Who knew watching a woman eat his cooking could be so hot?

“What do you think?” he asked, not bothering to hide his eagerness for her opinion.

“Oh, it’s fantastic, Dave.” Her eyes twinkled as she took another forkful of the shrimp fried rice with mixed chopped vegetables. “Well seasoned and the perfect rice texture. Not too hard or soft. Just right.”

David relaxed, glad she liked it. He picked up his fork and dug into his food.

“So, what are we watching?” Uju asked.

David reached for the remote beside him and switched on the TV. “You pick. It’s your night. Anything you want.”

“K-Drama?”

David groaned. “Not you, too? My brothers’ wives are addicted to that shit. I mean, how can anyone enjoy subtitled shows? Boring!”

Uju burst into laughter. “Ha! You’re missing *o*. K-Dramas are the best. Just watch one with me, and I’m sure you’ll change your mind.”

He huffed. “Unlikely. But I’ll give it a try, Uju. Anything for you, love. You’re special to me.”

His admission caused immediate silence, which echoed around them. The weightiness of his declaration, heavy in the air. Even Chewy raised his head, seemingly caught up in the moment.

David had not planned for that to slip out, nor had he expected the intensity of his emotions, but he couldn’t help himself. The feelings had been bubbling up inside him like molten lava until they had no other option but to erupt.

For seconds, he couldn’t move a muscle, unwilling to take back his words. They were genuine. No point denying it. In this moment, he’d finally acknowledged it. He was in love.

Many might think just a few weeks was too early to feel this strongly about someone, but he was different. His eagerness to hear Uju’s voice, to see her face, the rush of pleasure from her in his home, laughing and sharing a meal together, could only mean one thing—he had fallen in love with her.

“I’m being for real, Uju,” David said again, this time with deliberate clarity. “I’m in love with you.”

The slow smile that turned her lips upwards as she leaned sideways and kissed him on his lips melted his heart. “I’m

falling for you, too, Dave," she said, pecking his cheek. "I'm 90 percent there."

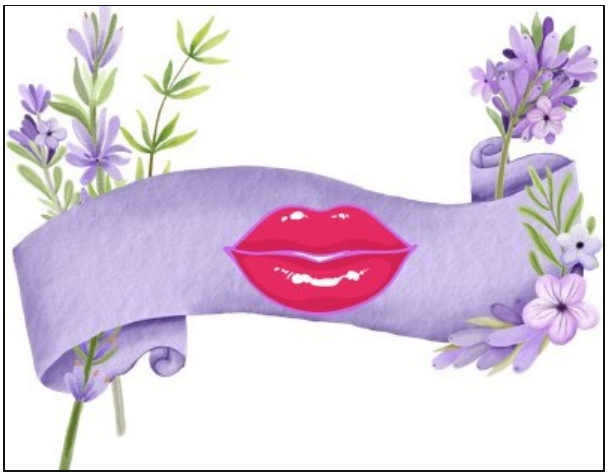
The tension in his muscles relaxed. "And what will it take to get you to 100?" he asked teasingly, glad his feelings for her weren't one-sided.

She turned to the TV. "Maybe getting you to fall in love with K-Drama."

He broke into a fit of laughter. "*Kai*! Woman! You've given me a hard task *o*. I may just have to settle for the 90 percent love."

As she joined his laughter, David felt like his universe was spinning in the right orbit with Uju by his side.

# EIGHTEEN



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for David to get completely sucked into the Korean drama *Our Love is So Beautiful*.

By the time they reached the middle of the movie, he and Uju had settled into a comfortable position on the sofa, enjoying a glass of wine, their attention fully focused on the TV.

The intimacy of the moment pleased him so much that he draped his arm around her and drew her closer, revelling in the warmth of her nearness.

Damn, he loved this—peaceful moments with a woman he

cherished. Pure perfection. Nothing could beat this feeling of bliss. Not even the admittedly entertaining drama enfolding on the TV.

He cast a sidelong glance Uju's way, and his heart swelled with all the newfound feelings he'd developed for her. Her eyes were fixed on the TV, her fingers absentmindedly combing through Chewy's soft fur as she perched on her lap.

David swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. Such a heartwarming image. One he wished he could capture on camera to have the luxury of watching over and over again. Yet, he didn't want to take his eyes off her.

"They're about to kiss. Finally," she said, shattering his entranced perusal of her.

David tore his gaze from Uju and turned his attention back to the TV. Indeed, the couple who had been arguing just moments ago now locked eyes with intense passion as the intoxicating music continued to fill the air.

"About time," he said, his investment in the film surprising himself. Long seconds ticked by as the K-Drama pair ever so slowly drew closer and closer.

With his own breath trapped in his throat, Uju's shallow, rapid breaths heightened the tension. Finally, the man and woman's bodies met in an erotic tangle of hungry lips and seeking arms.

A sudden rush of sensual awareness raced throughout David's body and goosebumps speckled his skin.

Damn, between the romantic music, Uju's warm body beside him, and the erotic scene unfolding before him,

David was on sensory overload. Warm blood flowed south, filling and hardening his dick. His brain felt light, his body on full alert.

A sharp gasp pierced the air, and Uju bolted upright. “Oh, no! My blouse.”

Pulled from his own emergency, David sat up and saw a large red splotch saturating Uju’s silk blouse. Wine. Quickly grabbing his napkin, he began dabbing her chest, trying to soak up the spill.

Then, in a sudden realisation, he froze. A flaming heat of embarrassment spread across his cheeks and he jerked his hand from her breast.

“I’m sorry … I didn’t mean to … I wasn’t trying to grope or…”

She let out a little chuckle, placed her hand over his, and rested it back on her chest. “It’s okay, Dave. I’m wet. And you’re only trying to help.”

His dick jumped, his erection straining against the front zipper of his trousers.

*I’m wet.* Words his penis didn’t need to hear right now. Not when he was trying to control his raging hormones.

“I …” He cleared his throat, which felt strangely tight. “I can get you a change of clothes. Let me—”

He made a move to rise, but she grabbed his arm.

“I actually have a change of clothes in my bag,” she murmured, her voice low and sultry.

Completely lost for words, David sat frozen in place, struggling to make sense of her words. Did she mean…

“I also packed my toothbrush,” Uju said, her hand still on his arm.

Speechless and afraid to misinterpret her intentions, David could only stare, his brain a fog.

“Would you like to know what else I have in my purse?”

“Wh—”

“Condoms, Dave. If you don’t already get what I’m saying, let me spell it out.” She leaned closer to him and tugged his earlobe with her teeth before whispering, “I want to spend the night with you, Dave. Rolling around buck naked on your bed with you. Can I?”

“Ahhh!” A wave of lust sliced into him, charging his entire body with electricity.

Emitting a low groan, David cupped Uju’s face roughly in his hands and brought their mouths together for a hungry, wet kiss.



Uju couldn’t suppress a sharp moan, consumed by the intoxicating pleasure.

They’d kissed passionately after their dates the past few weeks, but this kiss was different—ferocious, visceral, and so arousing.

David’s lips were soft and sweet, yet firm and demanding. His arm curved around her, drawing her closer as he devoured her mouth.

Uju whimpered as his tongue stroked the inside of her

lower lip while his hand slid up and cupped one breast through her clothes.

“Oh, Dave,” she moaned, the bud between her thighs tightening with need. “Please …” she trailed off, overwhelmed by the intense desire overtaking her.

Three long years since she’d had sex. And good sex, even longer. But now, all she could think about was spreading her legs wide and begging David to take her. Right here on his couch. Roughly. Powerfully. Anything to ease the arousal burning inside her.

Driven solely by her base instincts, Uju slid her palm down David’s taut abdomen, halting on the front of his jeans. She gave his bulge a gentle squeeze as their mouths mated.

“Uju! Fuck,” David groaned, angling his head and deepening the kiss, uttering low curses as she fondled his erection through his jeans.

The carnal sounds he made drove her so wild she took his lower lip between her teeth and bit down gently as she straddled him.

“Oh, God!” he grunted out, grabbing her ass in his hands and pressing her flush against his erection.

She broke off the kiss and leaned back slightly. “Too rough? Did I hurt you?”

Eyes darkened with sheer lust gazed back at her as he shook his head. “I want you now, Uju.”

“Then take me,” she murmured in a sultry voice as she lowered her head and swiped her tongue across his beard-carpeted jaw. “Take all of me, Dave. My body is yours for

the taking. Every. Single. Inch.” She punctuated the last three words with wet kisses on his face.

Releasing a guttural groan, David shot up from the seat, keeping her body astride his. “That’s it. You’re in big trouble. Serious *wahala* …”

Uju blew out a chuckle, her legs wrapped around his narrow waist and her arms around his neck. “Good. Because I like *wahala*.” She pulled his earlobe into her mouth and sucked. “I also like cassava. *You get big cassava*?”

David burst into laughter. “Okay, it’s on! We’re definitely going to fuck to Tekno’s *Pana*.”

“On fast play. I need to be pounded tonight. It’s been a while.”

“Oh, Uju, you are playing with fire,” he growled, rushing from the sitting room with her in his arms as if she weighed no more than a feather.

Uju burst into laughter again as he navigated the corridor with such speed that he almost tripped over Chewy, who was happily tagging along.

She loved David’s playful side. The fact that he didn’t take himself too seriously made her fall even harder for him.

He opened the door to a spacious room dominated by a king-sized bed covered with simple white linens. Just like the living room, all the furniture was white, including the wardrobes and the dressing mirror table.

“So, this is where the magic happens with women?” Uju asked, looking around.

Without responding, David lowered her gently on the bed and lay beside her. He shifted closer, his dark piercing eyes setting her lower belly afire.

“No. This is where the magic begins with us, Uju,” he said, his tone raw and feral. “You’re the first person in my bed that I pray never leaves.”

Her heart bumped into her chest and began beating wildly. The sincere intensity of his words nearly snatched her breath away.

“Tonight, I plain to give you so many orgasms you never think about another man.” He brushed a strand of her twisted curl that had fallen from the messy bun. “I’ll mark myself in every cell of your body so deeply that you’ll always associate being with me with pure pleasure.”

Uju gasped, a flood of moisture gushing from her core at the determined look in his eyes and his declaration. Reaching for him, she pressed an open-mouthed kiss on his lips. “You’d better fulfil your promise.”

“Oh, I intend to,” he said as he began undressing her and kissing her naked skin from head to toe.

Then, his lips slid upwards, and he buried his face between her thighs, using his mouth and tongue to fuck her until she screamed out her orgasm in tongues.

By the time he spread her legs and sank into her with a determined slowness that both stretched and filled her up, she was quivering with a violent desire that left her thrashing and moaning on the bed.

“Oh, Uju,” he groaned, thrusting in and out of her with long, deep strokes. “Your pussy is so good … so sweet …”

“Dave … God!” Uju clung to him, receiving his powerful thrusts, savouring the hard heat of his long and thick shaft stroking the most sensitive part of her vagina with the perfect rhythm.

Another climax started building up from deep inside her womb, racing towards its pinnacle with every movement of his hips. Just when she couldn’t take the pleasure anymore, his thumb massaged her clit, driving her into mind-bending ecstasy.

Uju let out a sharp cry as her orgasm came in an explosion so intense her body convulsed. Seconds later, she clasped her arms around David as he came, calling out her name in a helpless whimper before he collapsed on top of her.

Spent, they held on to each other’s sweat-sleeked bodies, panting as their passions slowly eased.

He rose from the bed to discard the condom, and when he lay back down beside her, he pulled her against him. “Did you enjoy my *wahala*?” he asked with a slight upward tilt of his lips.

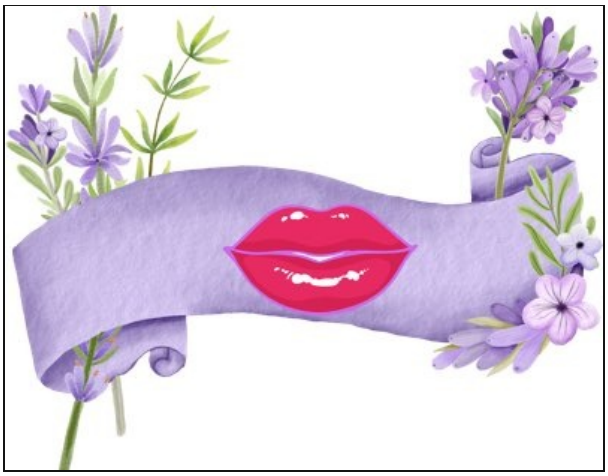
Uju laughed as she dragged the white duvet over their naked bodies. “Yes. But I love your big cassava more.”

David’s cocky grin spread from ear to ear as he reached for the remote and increased the volume of the song playing through the bedside speakers.

“Baby pana!” he belted out, singing along to Tekno’s song, which he’d had on repeat while they had sex.

“Baby pana!” Uju echoed in tune with the music, happier than she’d been in a long time.

# NINETEEN



TWO WEEKS LATER, after a swim, David and Uju sat together on the indoor pool lounger in his apartment complex, relishing the evening breeze against their damp skin.

He leaned sideways and planted a kiss on her lips. “Want to go up now?” he asked.

Uju shook her head, stretched her legs and sipped from her bottle of Smirnoff Ice. “Not yet. We’re alone by the poolside for the first time in days. Let’s enjoy it.”

He chuckled, kissing her again before resting his head

back against the cushioned lounger. “True, it’s a lovely, quiet evening. Best time to relax with my favourite person.”

Uju’s bashful smile made him feel like a poet who could effortlessly elicit deep emotions through mere words, although that wasn’t his intention. He was just being honest. She was his favourite person in the world right now, and he loved spending time with her.

Even after a tiring workday, he looked forward to seeing her, hoping she felt the same level of anticipation he did.

“You say the sweetest things, Dave. Honestly, you know just how to make a girl blush.”

“I mean it, though, Uju. I wish we could see each other every day.”

Her body stretched towards his and she leaned in to press a gentle kiss to his lips. “The feeling is mutual, Dave.” As she leaned back and settled into her seat, the sincerity in her eyes melted his heart.

His pulse rate amped up. He’d been ruminating on something for days since their first night together, and now might be the perfect time to broach the subject. When she left that first morning after, a sharp, almost physical ache in his chest sent him into a panic. At that moment, he knew he wanted to marry Uju Emordi. But first, he needed to introduce her to his family.

Although he didn’t need their approval, he wanted his mother and brothers to see he was serious about a woman for the first time in his life.

“Uju,” he called softly. “I’d like to ask you something.”

She stiffened, turning towards him with her forehead

creased up in confusion. “What? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” he said with a wave of his hand to calm her worry. “I just … my father’s ten-year memorial is the end of this month. Would you want to go to Onitsha with me and meet my family?”

She remained still. Her hand tightening on her bottle and her eyes widening in surprise. David’s stomach churned. Was he moving too fast? Had he scared her off? He was afraid of doing or saying anything that might push her away, but this year, he didn’t want to be alone for his father’s remembrance ceremony. He wanted Uju by his side.

So, he swallowed his anxieties and pressed on. “It’s just a few days. Can you take time off?” Knots formed in his gut, waiting for her response as several emotions filtered through her eyes. Surprise. Hesitation. Panic. Possibilities. Acquiescence.

She swigged from her drink and then nodded. “Of course. I’d love to go with you.”

A burst of joy exploded in his chest. “Really?”

“Oh, yeah, it’ll be fun meeting the people you grew up with and seeing how you became Dr David Njokwu.”

“Awesome. I’ll buy the tickets and arrange everything. We can look online together for hotels. Whatever you want. Wherever you want.”

She winked at him again in the playful way that always excited him. “Oh, I like the sound of that.”

He chuckled. “And I mean it about everything. Not just our hotel room.”

“Okay, sir. Whatever you say.”

Silence settled between them, a peaceful stillness that spoke volumes with no words. He admired Uju’s embrace of quiet moments, how they enjoyed each other’s company without the need for constant chatter.

Relaxing by the pool, a refreshing evening breeze caressed his damp skin as he sipped from his can of cider and sat next to the woman who’d captured his heart. Paradise couldn’t possibly offer more.

He turned his head to admire her. She looked so pretty with no makeup on, her natural hair packed into a tight bun, and wearing a stunning yellow one-piece bathing suit that accentuated her slender curves.

A pensiveness filled her eyes as she gazed into the distance while nursing her drink. While he wanted her to relish the tranquil silence enveloping them, he also yearned to unravel the mystery behind her furrowed brow.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, feeling a little embarrassed by his overwhelming desire to know Uju’s every thought, to share her deepest and darkest secrets.

“Nothing …”

“There’s something.”

“How do you know?”

Leaning to the side, he reached out and tenderly ran his thumb along the faint crease above her eyebrow. “You do this thing with your eyebrow when you’re contemplating something, but are hesitant to reveal it.”

She twisted her lips. “You’re getting to know me a little too

well.”

“Well, yes, babe. I want to know everything about you. Your deepest thoughts, regrets, fears … everything.” He kissed her lips. “And I intend to.”

“Oh …”

“Yep. So, babe, tell me what was on your mind moments ago.”

“I was just … I don’t know … wondering … why do you want me to meet your family?”

“That’s easy.” He didn’t need to think about it even. “Because I’m committed to our relationship. I want you to be a part of my future, and I want them to meet you because they play a significant role in my future as well.”

“B-but … isn’t it too soon? How can you be so sure that … that…” Her voice faded, and she averted her eyes, staring into the distance before returning her gaze to him. “What if something happens between us? I would hate to meet them and then everything turns sour. I met my ex’s family, and now they can’t stand me. What if—”

He cupped her face, ending her uncertain voyage into the future. “Listen to me, Uju. You’re the first woman I’ve ever wanted to introduce to them. That’s how invested I am in you. In us.” Caressing the angle of her jaw, he added. “Are you invested, too? Do you want to see us work as a couple?”

She pinned her gaze on his, a film of tears clouding her eyes. “I do, Dave. I really do.” She blinked back the tears and gave him a crooked smile. “But please be patient with me. A man I trusted before hurt me, and it’s hard for me to

completely let go.”

He nodded in understanding. Uju had told him all about Kelechi. How he’d cheated on her the entire year they were together and ended up marrying his side piece. It had broken Uju’s confidence.

For someone so confident during her podcasts, comfortable interviewing even the toughest subject, that confidence didn’t extend to Uju’s personal relationships. Although they’d been dating for several weeks now, he still saw the uncertainty in her eyes. The way she insisted on packing up all her stuff from his apartment without leaving a single thing behind, almost as if she worried she wouldn’t see him again. It broke him inside, because he was completely into her.

Meeting his family would be a big deal for her, and he knew it. But he wanted to show her he was in this for the long haul. Maybe she also needed to hear the words. Hopefully, she’d finally realise he was nothing like her ex.

“I’m not him, Uju. I’ll never hurt you,” he said, fixing his gaze on her, trying to communicate the sincerity with his eyes.

She nodded as a tear drop slipped down her cheeks. “I know it in my heart. It’ll take a while for my head to catch up.”

“I’ll wait.”

She smiled through her tears. “Thank you.”

Her eyes lit up with an idea. “Trisha is doing a special thanksgiving service in church for her successful breast cancer treatment next Sunday. Maybe you can be my date

for the occasion," she said. "That way, I can break the ice by introducing you to my family first. As my man."

"Oh, is that what I am now? Your man?"

She giggled, slapping his shoulder playfully. "Ha! Who else do you belong to? I better know right now."

He grinned and kissed her soft lips. "Nobody else, babe. I'm your man. Yours only, and it's time we let our families know that."

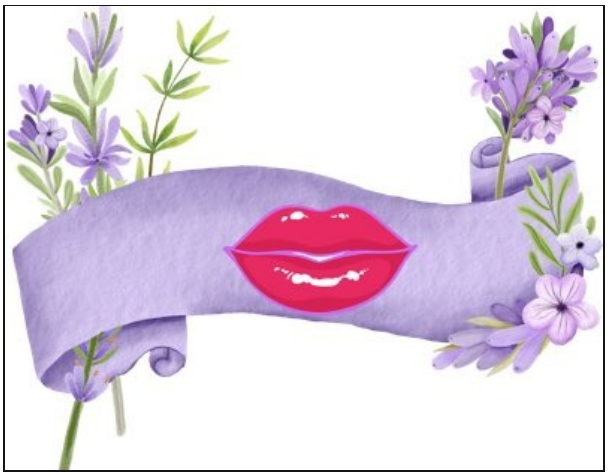
Her face lit up with the same brilliance as fireworks bursting in the sky. "I guess you'll be seeing the Emordi clan in full action soon. If anyone refers to you as *this one*, please kindly ignore them."

He raised a brow. "What?"

"Don't worry. You'll find out what I mean soon enough."

He laughed out at her response. Indeed, he couldn't wait to find out what she meant by that. He was eager to discover every detail about the woman who had effortlessly wrapped him around her pretty, manicured finger.

# TWENTY



AMINAT'S EYES grew wide as she released a gasp. "You can't be serious, Uju. Are you really dating that plastic surgeon?"

"You sound like I just detonated a bomb." Uju slipped on her shoes and rose from the sitting room couch. She needed to touch up her makeup before David showed up, so she didn't have time for Aminat's inquiry.

Why on earth was her friend looking and sounding so shocked about David being her boyfriend?

"Well, it's a little strange that you're dating a plastic

surgeon," Aminat said, shaking her head.

"Why?"

"Come on, Uju. Just a few weeks ago, you were literally calling them the devil on the podcast." Aminat rested her hand on her hip and pointed a finger at her like she was telling off a student for misbehaving. "You organized and staged a protest at the man's place of employment. And now turn around and date him?"

"So what? I really don't get the big deal."

"Really?" Aminat raised her eyebrows. "I've been wondering why your attitude changed so swiftly about plastic surgery. Is he the reason?"

Uju gasped. "Now you're insulting me, Aminat. You think I'm the kind of woman who'd let good dick change her principles?"

"Aha! So, you *are* sleeping with him." Aminat tapped her forehead and snickered. "This is more serious than I thought. Because I know you don't sleep with just anyone. No wonder you were keeping him a secret."

Uju sucked her teeth. "I'm not. And I don't like what you're implying."

Aminat released an exasperated sigh. "What I imply doesn't matter. It's what our audience will imply if they find out you're dating a plastic surgeon after all your rigid campaigns against them. Especially since you're no longer going after them. Don't you see what it would do to your credibility … *our* credibility?"

Silence ensued. Because Uju had no response. In truth, she'd thought about it several times since her first night

with David, wondering whether she'd let their relationship affect her ideologies.

However, each time her mind wandered down that path, she re-read her notes from her observation week at Blossom Health. She remembered her sister-in-law's breast reconstructive journey after her mastectomy.

So, no. David didn't influence her change of heart. She had come to see the positive sides of reconstructive surgery and felt duty bound to look at the bigger picture.

Aminat's heavy sigh shattered the silence, bringing her mind back to the moment.

"See, I'm not judging you at all," she said, her tone gentler. "I know we can't help who we fall for sometimes. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dated my crazy ex."

Uju's lips twitched with the hint of a smile. Indeed, Aminat's ex-boyfriend, Folarin, was a bloody piece of work. He'd stalked her for several months after their relationship ended, once dressing like a woman just to go undetected. So traumatized by it all, Aminat subsequently vowed to remain celibate until marriage and rededicated her commitment to Islam.

"Your relationship with David Njokwu will definitely raise questions from our audience, and it could have repercussions," Aminat said, drawing a little closer to her.

Uju swallowed hard. She'd known her reputation could be in question if word got out. After all, she'd been vocal about her disdain for plastic surgeons on social media and all her platforms.

"I just hope you're being honest with yourself about it,

that’s all,” Aminat concluded.

Uju nodded, tears suddenly stinging the back of her eyes. “I know, sis. Thank you for being frank with me. It’s just that …” She dabbed at the corner of her eyes, swiping the errant tear that slipped out. “I … I’ve fallen for him, Aminat. I love him. It’s the first time in my life I want things to work out with a man so badly … I don’t want to lose him.”

Aminat’s eyes softened as she moved over to embrace Uju. “Awww, girl. Don’t cry,” she cooed. “It’ll work out. If he’s meant for you, nothing can destroy your relationship. Inshallah.”

Uju smiled through her tears, wrapping her arms around the one woman who had become the sister she never had.

The doorbell rang, piercing the comforting silence between the two embracing friends. Uju jerked back in a panic. “Oh, he’s here!” she exclaimed, pulling out her makeup bag from her handbag and unzipping it. She retrieved the compact mirror and opened it, anxiously checking her reflection.

Aminat’s laughter rippled through the air, stopping her. Uju darted her eyes to her friend. “What?” she asked.

“Girl! You really like this man *ooo*! I can’t believe you’re checking your appearance for him. This is not the Uju I know.”

Uju twisted her lips into a snicker as she slammed the compact mirror shut and hurried towards the front door. “Girl, love makes you do crazy shit!” she said, tossing the words over her shoulder at her friend, whose gaze she felt boring into her back.

She opened the door, and David's gorgeous smile greeted her. "Hey, babe! You look so fine," he said. "Are you sure we're going to a church?"

Uju giggled like an infatuated teenager, twirling around for him to admire her multicoloured one shoulder silk gown that floated down to her ankle. "You like?"

"Like is an understatement. I love it. The colours are a perfect match for your skin tone and bring out your hazel eyes."

Uju beamed in response, taking in his well-fitting black kaftan shirt and trousers with silver embroidery at the neckline. Perfecting his dreamy, good looks, he wore a shiny black traditional hat and silver shoes that gleamed in the sunlight.

"You look mighty handsome, too," she said, lifting her head to peck his lips, careful not to transfer her lipstick.

A cough in the background captured their attention. Uju turned to Aminat and chuckled. "Oh, sorry," she muttered, her cheeks hot and a shy smile on her face as she clung to David. "Time for introductions."

She broke away from David, took his hand, and led him into the hallway towards her friend. "This is Aminat, my flatmate, business partner, and bestie," Uju said to David. She turned to Aminat. "Dave. My boyfriend."

"The mystery man in the flesh," Aminat said, shaking David's hand. "Nice to finally meet you."

David laughed. "Not such a mystery man. I saw you during the protests. I'm glad we're meeting again under more friendly circumstances."

Aminat cackled. “Ah, the protest! You were so pissed off at us, I thought you’d actually call the police. It was a little funny *sha*.”

“I know,” agreed David with an amused curve of his lips. “Thinking about that day still makes me laugh. You ladies annoyed the hell out of me.” He tsked, shaking his head. “Who’d have ever thought I’d wind up dating the very orchestrator of that protest?”

A snort escaped Aminat’s lips. “Indeed! Life is strange like that.”

Uju leaned back, watching her best friend interacting with her man, and her heart bubbled up with joy. She couldn’t wait for David to meet her family, too.



The church service lasted over an hour, and Uju was glad to finally walk out the door of the auditorium with David by her side. Proudly standing beside him, she itched to find her parents, brother, and sister-in-law to show him off to them.

Throughout the church service, she couldn’t help noticing the curious glances her parents shot towards David from their spot on the left side of the pew.

As they danced towards the altar for the thanksgiving offering, David stood beside her, and Uju could practically see the eagerness in her mother’s expression, her mouth foaming with questions. Typical.

Later, the woman would grill David to death—her mother’s preferred method of assessing any man dating her fiercely

expressive and assertive daughter. If he could handle it, he just might get her mother's seal of approval.

Sadly, neither of her two exes had passed the maternal screening. In fact, her first serious boyfriend, Tochi, had bailed halfway through dinner with her parents, citing an emergency.

"This one can't cope," her mother had decreed. "He won't last with a woman like you."

Unfortunately, her mother was right. As she was about Kelechi. "He has shifty eyes. He'll jump into the arms of other women."

Her mother's accurate predictions had shaken Uju. Which was why she'd not told her family about David or that he'd be her date at Trisha's thanksgiving church service. Though now, she couldn't care less. She had a handsome man by her side who treated her with respect. To hell with anyone with something negative to say. She would flaunt him.

Uju spotted her parents standing by the open gate of the church's compound, probably waiting for the driver to come with the car. The plan was for everyone to meet at the family home and have a small party to celebrate Trisha.

Seeing this as the best opportunity to introduce David to her dad and mum, Uju clutched his hand tightly. It would be a lot easier if they met him here before she took him to the house.

Drawing in a steadying breath, she leaned over and whispered softly in David's ear. "My parents are over there. Let's go say hi."

“I’m a little nervous,” David muttered as she led him through the crowd socialising after the service.

“Don’t be. They’re cool. Especially when they like someone.”

“Well, I hope they like me.”

She grinned and kissed his cheek. “I like you. That’s what matters.”

As they approached, her mother turned in their direction and her face instantly lit up with a warm, welcoming smile. “Ha! Finally, we get to see my daughter in church.”

Uju shook her head and laughed, kissing her mother on the cheek and embracing her. “I attend church sometimes.”

“Not as often as you should,” the older woman said with a smirk. Her eyes immediately landed on David. “And who is this young man with you?”

“Mum!” Uju exclaimed, heat suffusing her cheeks.

“Yes, tell us, Uju,” her father chimed in, his eyes sizing David up. “We were all curious when we saw you two entering church together.”

Uju smiled, squeezing David’s hand. “Mum, Dad, meet David Njokwu, my boyfriend. He’s the plastic surgeon who treated Trisha.”

“Good afternoon, sir and ma,” David said, extending his hand to her father for a handshake and leaning for a side-hug with her mother. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Ah!” Uju could see the admiration growing in her father’s eyes. “Good to meet you, too. Trisha has only positive things to say about you. Thanks for looking after her for

us.”

Her mother nodded in agreement. “Yes … yes. Trisha couldn’t sing your praises enough. God bless you.”

“Thank you, ma.” David’s voice exuded charm as he spoke of his commitment to Trisha’s well-being. “I knew how important it was for her to be healthy and for the surgery to have a satisfactory outcome, so I put a hundred-ten percent.”

“Well, we’re all grateful.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed as she swept them back and forth between Uju and David. “So, how long have you been dating?”

David hesitated, his fingers tightening around hers, and Uju waded in to release him from his discomfort. She knew her mother’s curiosity would only increase if she found out they had been dating for a little over four months. No need to rock the boat. Best to downplay their relationship for now. “Just a few weeks, Mum. We’re taking things one step at a time.”

David draped his arm around Uju’s shoulders and kissed her temple. “But I can assure you both, they are deliberate steps towards a future together,” he said.

“Oh, I like that. I feel he’s the one for you, Uju,” her mother said, clapping her hands in delight. “I hope you keep this one.”

“Mum!” Uju cried in dismay, but David laughed, hugging her closer to him.

“Ma, I’m the one earnestly praying never to lose your wonderful daughter.”

“Amen!” her mother exclaimed, her palms rubbing together

fervently as she looked up at the sky.

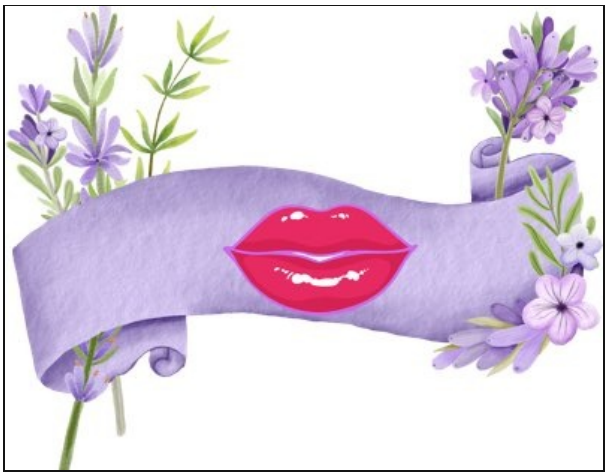
Uju couldn’t corral the smile that broke on her face at the genuine optimism in her mother’s eyes. For once, the woman wasn’t seeing future relationship doom for her. Shocker.

“Are you coming to the house for the celebration?” her father asked David. “We would love to have you there.”

“Of course, sir,” said David. “I’d be honoured.”

Uju’s heart flooded with relief at how well the introductions had gone. For the first time in her life, she believed her parents genuinely approved of the man she was dating, and it filled her with joy.

# TWENTY-ONE



He smiled as he reread the text message from Uju for the umpteenth time, savouring each word again.

> Uju my queen: Happy birthday, Dave! Hope you have a wonderful day. Can't wait to see you tonight. Be prepared for a surprise 😉😘

Grinning like a Cheshire cat as he set his phone on the conference room table, he wondered what the surprise would be.

It was a Monday morning, and he was the first to arrive for the partners' weekly clinical meeting. He'd made himself a

coffee and settled to wait for the others, but couldn’t resist one more opportunity to read Uju’s message.

Hers was his first birthday greeting of the day, even beating his mother, who was known for always being the first to do so. It touched his heart beyond measure.

Since the first day she visited him, she’d spent most nights at his place, and each morning when they left for work, he had to suppress the desire to beg her to come back.

Their conversations were fun, even their debates. Uju’s outspoken personality excited him, and he loved hearing her opinions about life, especially when they differed from his.

It was such a novelty for him to be with a strong-minded woman with a will of her own. Back in the day, when he was all about the fast life, her assertive nature would have put him off. Not now. He wanted a woman who could go toe-to-toe with him and stimulate his mind.

Of course, it helped that they shared outstanding sexual chemistry. Now that he’d had a taste of her, he couldn’t get enough.

A naughty smile unfurled on his lips as he recalled making love to her two nights ago, after their return from Fizzy, a jazz club in Victoria Island. They’d been so caught up they hadn’t even made it to the bedroom, instead, making love against the living room wall. It had been hot and thrilling, yet tender and sweet.

He couldn’t wait to see her today. His gut told him whatever surprise she had in store would fill him with delight. Hopefully, she would be just as excited about his own surprise. Tonight, he planned to give her the spare

key card to his apartment so she could come and go as she pleased.

It didn't matter that they'd been dating for just a few months. She was the one. He wanted her in his life permanently, and he already knew it.

Meeting her family last week had gone well. Everyone was friendly and accommodating, including him in their conversations. He'd felt like he belonged, like part of the family, which he genuinely appreciated.

Especially when he found out what *this one* meant. Even now, the term amused him.

Being a tomboy as a child, Uju had a constant stream of male friends coming over, making it hard to remember all their names. So, whenever anyone in her family saw her with a guy, they referred to him as *this one*.

It didn't bother him at all that he wasn't the first man Uju had introduced to her family. He intended to be the last … *the one*.

In two weeks, he'd be introducing Uju to his mother and brothers. He hoped it would go just as well.

Seeing the love Uju's family shared for one another made him realise how much he wanted to be a part of her life. In fact, if he didn't think she'd freak out, he'd pop the question tonight. He'd already started shopping around for engagement rings online.

David's lips curved into a wry smile as he logged onto his laptop. Asking Uju to marry him now would be a total disaster. He knew her. She was still a little apprehensive about trusting him completely.

Thanks to her cheating ex-boyfriend, she was very guarded. The idiot's excuse? She wasn't *wife material*.

What a buffoon. If the man only knew how eager he was to propose to Uju, eh …

David released a sigh. Thank goodness her ex hadn't seen what he saw in Uju. Otherwise, Uju would have been unavailable, and he would have missed out on the most intelligent, fascinating and exciting woman he'd ever met.

With almost heart stopping enthusiasm, he looked forward to celebrating his first birthday with her. And he prayed that by today's end, she would feel secure in his unwavering commitment to her.

The door squeaked open, and his three partners filed into the conference room, hurling his mind back from his thoughts. Oke, the only female partner, was holding a cake while Tunde and Segun were beside her. Before he could speak, they broke into a discordant and off-key rendition of the birthday song.

David threw his head back and laughed, both amused and pleased. He loved working with these amazing people. They were not only brilliant plastic surgeons but also had hearts of gold.

"Hey, man! Happy birthday," Tunde said, patting him on the back. "Thirty-five years old *no be beans o*. Soon, your hair will become grey like mine."

"God forbid!" David exclaimed in jest, eliciting laughter from everyone. "And look at you … you don't even have any hair, so your curse *no go work*."

Tunde ran his palm over his clean-shaven scalp. "If not

because my wife likes me bald, I would allow my white hair to grow out freely like Wole Soyinka. Gives off Nobel prize winner vibes."

"Win the Nobel Prize first before wanting to look like the brilliant writer," Segun teased Tunde. He turned to David and fist bumped him. "Happy birthday, my man!"

David grinned. "Thanks, chief!"

Oke carefully placed the chocolate cake on the table, showcasing the message, "5 more years to 40", written in delicate italics with white icing.

"Happy birthday, Dave," she said. "And I want to point out that I had nothing to do with the inscription on the cake. Blame it on Segun, who thinks it's funny."

Segun put a palm over his chest in mock horror. "It is not supposed to be a joke *o*. It's a warning," he said, a teasing smile on his face. "We are waiting to dance at your wedding soon. You can't be the only *Single Pringle* partner here *o*."

A chuckle burst out of David, and Oke huffed. "Let him rest *abeg*. You only married Miriam a year ago," she said. "Before that, you swore to never marry, so please leave Dave alone. Marriage is not by force or for everyone."

David's lips twitched. He opened his mouth to tell them about Uju, but quickly closed it again. Too soon. His partners didn't need to know he was no longer a *Single Pringle* yet.

Until he told his mother and brothers, he'd hold on to the information. No need to go broadcasting his personal life at work.

Shortly after, they settled for the clinical meeting and prioritised discussing the latest clinical updates before organising the following week's surgical timetable.

"Anything we haven't discussed?" Tunde asked nearly half an hour later.

As they all shook their heads, Tunde closed his laptop, a look of contentment on his face. "If there's nothing else, let's head back to work to start—"

"Actually, there's something," Segun said, interrupting Tunde.

All eyes, including David's turned to Segun who was at the head of the table.

"I want us to congratulate Dave for doing a fantastic job with the assignment we gave him," Segun said. "He finally got that irritating podcaster pest off our backs."

David's stomach tumbled as a surge of annoyance rose in him. "She is neither irritating nor a pest," he muttered.

"Oh, she was," Oke chimed in. "She gave us hell. And her silly protest in front of Blossom Health cost us two clients. I'm glad she has finally ended her obsessive witch hunt targeting plastic surgeons."

"Yes, *o*," Segun rubbed his palms together in delight. "I listened to her latest podcast, and she was pretty much singing a different tune. The sudden change surprised even the caller."

"As in! My sister sent me the clip. It was a complete 180 from her demonization of plastic surgeons and plastic surgery." Oke raised her hands and gave him a double thumbs-up. "Dave, whatever you did to change her mind

worked like magic.”

David’s face heated up and his gaze shifted about uncomfortably. “I didn’t do anything,” he said, hearing his defensiveness. “Uju came for a personal tour of Blossom Health and did her research. That’s what changed her mind.”

Silence followed his reply, and he swept his gaze around to find three pairs of curious gazes on him.

“What?” he asked, confused.

“Oh, my goodness. You’re sleeping with her!” Oke exclaimed.

David gasped, his entire face on fire from embarrassment. “What? No.”

“You are. You’re blushing. Like a man caught with his pants down.”

“I’m not blushing.”

“Yes, you are,” Tunde said with a conviction that irritated David. “Are you sleeping with her?”

David huffed, his ire increasing by the second. “It’s none of your business.”

“Oke sighed. “Welp. Your answer confirms it. Was that the reason she changed her mind?”

David exhaled sharply, grinding his jaw. It annoyed him that his colleagues would think so lowly of Uju without even knowing her. “No,” he said tersely. “Like I said earlier, Uju did her research with Blossom Health and has a newfound understanding of the nuances that reconstructive surgery involves.”

He slammed his laptop shut angrily. “Plus, I’d be grateful if you all treat her with respect because she’s not only intelligent, but she’s also funny, compassionate, wonderful, and now my girlfriend. Be prepared to see more of her.”

With that, he rose from his seat and grabbed his phone and laptop from the table. “Now, if you’ll all excuse me. I need to get back to work.”

Oke and Segun shot up from their seats and reached for his arm at the same time.

“Hey, my guy, don’t go,” Segun said.

“Dave, I apologise,” said Oke, a shadow of remorse in her eyes.

Trying to regain his composure, David held himself rigid, taking a deep, ragged breath and then releasing it slowly, feeling a sense of calm wash over him.

He wasn’t usually so defensive, but something about his partners’ derogatory impressions of Uju had grated on his nerves.

“Listen, Dave, we’re all sorry,” Tunde said calmly. “We didn’t mean to upset you. Especially not on your birthday.”

“Yes, my man.” Segun patted his shoulder. “Truce?”

David looked at each of his partners and swallowed hard. Remorse filled three pairs of eyes. Maybe he had overreacted. After all, he’d had the same impression before he’d got to know Uju.

“Apologies accepted,” he said, settling back onto his seat.

Oke and Segun sat back down.

“Congratulations on your relationship with Uju,” Segun said.

David smiled. “Thanks.”

“Man! You’re a legend *o*,” said Segun, flashing him a teasing smile.

David raised a brow. “Why do you say so?”

“Only David Njokwu could solve a critical problem with such ease. He gets a new girlfriend and boom—problem solved.” Segun snapped his fingers. “Just like that. Talk about killing two birds with a stone.”

Tittering, David tossed a file of documents Segun’s way. “Fuck you,” he grunted out, still laughing.

Dodging the papers effortlessly as they flew past him, Segun raised both hands in surrender. “I couldn’t resist,” he said with mischievous eyes.

Laughter filled the conference room, and the partners immediately let go of the tension.

At the end of another busy day, David drove back home, the anticipation of seeing Uju making the drive feel shorter. She’d texted him a few minutes ago, telling him she was in an Uber on her way to his apartment.

Eager to see her, he sped through the Lagos roads, snaking through the traffic like a maniac with no regard for his life.

He couldn’t wait to hold her in his arms and spend the night in hers. Just as he made it to his front door, his heart sank.

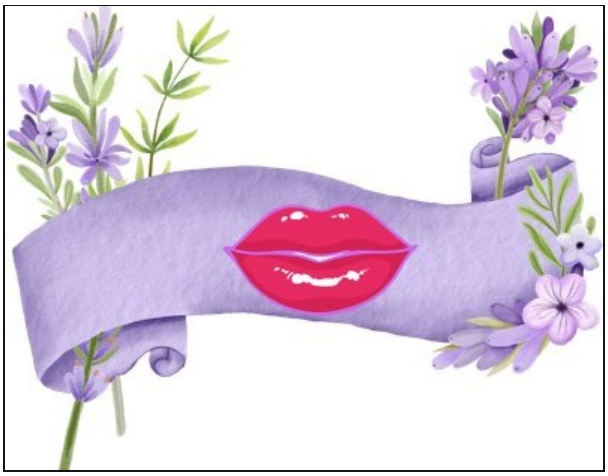
Anita stood there, confidently flaunting her surgically

enhanced curves in a skimpy dress that left little to the imagination.

“Happy birthday, baby!” she greeted cheerily, a bottle of wine in her hand and a sultry smile spread across her lips. “Miss me as much as I missed you?”

*Bloody hell!*

# TWENTY-TWO



UJU SLID into the backseat of her Uber feeling like a million bucks as she secured her seatbelt. She knew she looked good in her silver-and-red mini gown, her low-heeled pumps and her braided hair falling to her shoulders.

Leaning back with a soft sigh, she cradled her large purse in her lap.

“Good evening, ma. Still going to Ibeju?” the middle-aged man at the wheel asked, a smile on his face.

Uju smiled back. “Good evening. Yes, please.”

She pulled out her Air Pods from the case and inserted

them in her ears. Normally, she didn't mind talking—she was a journalist, after all—but she wanted to concentrate on tonight with Dave.

Simi's melodic voice enveloped her with the ballad, *Jolomi*, instantly soothing her. Perfect. She needed to focus her energy on good vibes. Her top priority was giving David the best birthday ever. If everything worked out as planned, he would go to bed with a huge smile on his face.

Reaching into her purse, she fished out her gift for him and inspected it. A grin spread across her face as she recalled the moment the idea came to her … something that would combine his love for music with spending quality time together. Oh, he would be over the moon. She just knew it and couldn't wait to be the source of his happiness. Just like he was for her.

Uju adjusted the hem of her dress and crossed her legs at the ankles, still beaming from ear to ear.

Her joy knew no bounds since beginning her relationship journey with David. The anticipation of seeing him or hearing from him, even through a simple text message, kept her going through the day.

Being with him made her happy. Having sex with him fulfilled her body and soul. He made love to her so intently, ensuring her pleasure, learning every erotic curve of her body until he played it like a perfect symphony. Her craving for him had become as irresistible as a sweet tooth's longing for sugary treats. She was, in every sense of the colloquial word, *dickmatised*.

The only thing keeping her from spending every night at his place was the incessant voice in her head telling her to give him some space for her own self-preservation. She

feared that suffocating him would make him realise she wasn't good enough for him. Just like her exes had kicked her to the curb after finding the women they believed suited them more.

For her, it wasn't about lack of self-esteem. Not in the least. She was confident in her exceptional qualities that made her unique in the world. Her determination, passion for life, and love of adventure were all key factors that propelled her towards achieving financial success in her business endeavours.

However, when it came to relationships, she feared she lacked what it took to make it last. Her anxiety made her jittery and constantly fearing the worst.

The idea of losing David terrified her so much because, despite her claim of being only 90 percent in love with him, she knew it wasn't entirely true. Hell, she had blown past 100 percent long ago, and easily approaching 1000 by now. She was now immersed in *delulu* land. She had sunken so far down that only a well-digging crane could retrieve her. And even if rescued, she'd gladly dive back in.

In less than thirty minutes, the taxi pulled up in front of David's apartment complex. Uju settled her fare and stepped out, her heart beating in excitement.

The scent of rain filled the air as a soft drizzle fell from the sky, and a gentle evening breeze brushed against her face, tousling her braided hair.

She dashed across the pavement to the building's entrance and pressed the bell for the doorkeeper, who let her in seconds later.

After exchanging a few words with the friendly older man,

she eagerly bounded up the stairs to the second floor.

Right as Uju reached the stairwell landing, a female voice said something that she didn't fully comprehend until she witnessed David swiftly turn around, freeze in place, and stare wide-eyed, resembling a deer caught in headlights.

*"Happy birthday, baby. Miss me as much as I missed you?"*

The woman's words echoed in Uju's head, tearing her heart into tiny shreds, searing her soul.

*What the hell?*

Every muscle in Uju's body seemed to have turned to stone, rendering her unable to move. She just stood there, blood pounding at her temples, bringing with it a sudden migraine.

Then, as if someone hit the play button, David and the woman spoke simultaneously, causing a cacophony of overlapping words.

"Who the hell is this chick, babe? Replaced me already?" the woman said, her voice sharp and angry.

"Uju … this isn't what it looks like!" David said, his tone thick with panic.

Uju quickly recovered, honing her gaze on David. "What on earth is going on, Dave?" she asked, already in full defensive mode. "You told me you were single."

"I am." David made a move towards her, but she took a step back, still processing the scene.

"So why is there a woman at your front door calling you *babe*?"

“Because he’s my babe,” the woman responded, her tone laced with irritation.

David spun towards the woman and glared at her. “That’s a lie, Anita, and you know it!”

“Lie? So why did you invite me for a private birthday bash? I have the text message you sent telling me to come over for a wild night.”

David frowned. “Invite you? I did no such thing!”

The woman rolled her eyes and dug into her purse. She fished out her phone, tapped on the screen, and held it up for him to see. “Here you go!”

David scrutinised the phone’s screen and shook his head vehemently. “There’s no way I sent that message, Anita. I blocked you.”

“Yeah! Isn’t that how we’ve been for years? How many times have you blocked and unblocked me, eh?! That’s our love. A rollercoaster. Stop acting brand new.”

David looked a tad embarrassed as he turned away from the woman to face her. “Uju … please, listen. There is some sort of confusion, I swear. I didn’t send those texts …” He dragged his palm down his face and released a muttered curse, looking harassed.

Uju briefly fell for his words, momentarily convinced that the woman in front of her was lying, until she met her gaze.

Something about the smugness of the woman’s smile made Uju unsure—the look of a woman who knew she had won. Just like Kelechi’s new wife the first time they met. Her ex-boyfriend’s side piece had walked up to introduce herself in a hair saloon, the same smug smile this woman

wore on her face now.

Uju shook her head and took another step back. She rummaged through her purse until her fingers closed around the neatly wrapped gift she had for David.

“Happy birthday, Dave,” she said, placing it on the floor beside her. “I hope you have a nice life.”

With that, she turned around and fled, flying down the stairs two at a time.

“Uju!” she heard David call as he rushed after her. “Uju! Wait! I can explain!”

Not slowing down for a second, Uju ran towards the building’s entrance, heart pounding at a manic rate.

Aware David was closing in on her, she increased her pace, thankful she’d not worn her stilettos today, instead choosing comfortable low heels.

Needing to be as far away from David as possible, she moved with a speed she didn’t know she possessed, past the startled doorman, and pressed the round *open* button by the door.

The drizzling night enveloped her as she dashed out of the door, but before she could escape, David’s hand clasped around her arm, halting her movement.

“Let go of me!” she screeched, turning around in a puff of anger, her chest heaving.

“No!”

David’s sharp response caught the attention of a man walking by with eyes filled with curiosity as he paused to observe. “Madam, is this man troubling you?”

Uju swept her gaze from David to the man, noticing his stance broadening as if ready to protect her if needed.

She drew in a calming breath and shook her head. “No.”

With a sceptical expression, the man remained standing, unconvinced by her words. “Sure?”

“She’s fine!” David snapped, glaring at the man.

The man didn’t move, his gaze fixed on her.

Uju nodded. “I’m fine, thanks. He’s my boyfriend.”

After a few strained seconds, the man scrutinised David from head to toe, his gaze lingering on where David held her arm. Finally, he nodded and continued his walk.

Alone again with David, Uju turned to him. “Who was that woman?” she asked in a low, calm voice.

He exhaled in relief and let go of her arm. “An ex,” he replied. “And I swear, I didn’t know she was coming.”

“Did you send her the text asking her to come over?”

“No! I swear.” David’s forehead crinkled in confusion. “Although it’s my number, I swear I didn’t send it. I don’t know how that happened.”

Uju’s throat tightened as her thoughts spiralled in various directions. She wanted to believe David, wanted to trust him, but fear gripped her insides. She’d been down this road before, trusted a man so completely, only to find out he lied to her, didn’t even want her.

“I don’t know, Dave … she’s claiming you sent it and—”

“Forget her! This is about me and you!” David fell to the

ground, desperately reaching out for her and pulling her into a tight embrace from her waist. “I swear, Uju! I love you. You can trust me. I would never hurt you. I’m telling you the truth. Months ago, I ended my relationship with Anita, and I didn’t invite her here tonight.”

Tears and raindrops from the light showers mingled on her face as she looked down at him with blurry eyes.

With every passing second, her resolve waned, sucked in by the pools of his sincere eyes, their reflection dancing in the glow of the streetlights and the full moon.

Maybe David was telling the truth. The invitation text the woman received might have a logical explanation. Perhaps he meant to send it to her, but accidentally sent it to the wrong person.

“Dave, are you coming in or what? We need to get our party for two started like we did last year!”

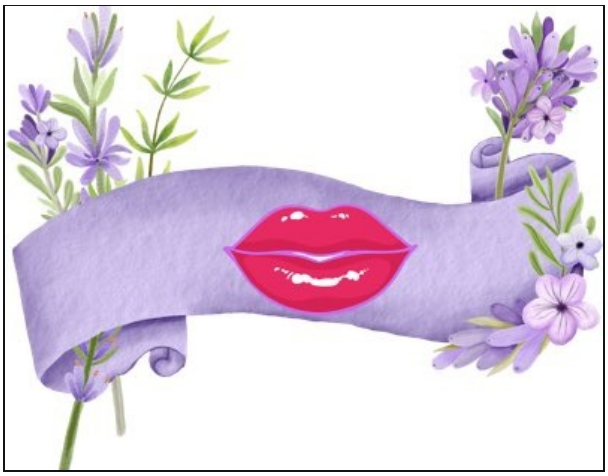
The woman’s voice cut through the air, abruptly bringing Uju back from delusion-land. Uju turned towards the building to find her at the front door, a cocky smile on her face and her hand on her hip.

*Like we did last year.*

Oh, hell nah!

She broke away from David and swiftly dashed off, running across the street and leaving him kneeling on the wet pavement in the drizzling rain.

# TWENTY-THREE



DAVID PUSHED the door to his apartment open with a heavy sigh. He was tired after a whole day of surgery and looked forward to relaxing at home.

Scooping up Chewy in his arms, he caressed the barking dog's fur, happy to see the only thing that brought him some joy these past few days.

As he stepped inside the sitting room, a heavy sense of gloom enveloped him, filling him with a desire to turn around and go back to work. No matter how exhausted he was, he would rather perform more surgeries than be back in this empty apartment that reminded him of Uju.

He slumped onto the sofa and released a ragged breath, still holding his dog close, savouring the little comfort the furry animal's warm body provided.

It had been five days since Uju fled this apartment into the street as if hounds nipped at her heels and he still couldn't believe how much it hurt, how raw it felt that she didn't trust him the very moment he needed her to.

He still found it difficult to believe that in just an instant, the first woman with whom he'd envisioned a future cut him out of her life so abruptly. So surgically.

The day after she ran off, he'd gone to her apartment, hoping to convince her that he'd not invited Anita and wasn't involved with her in any way.

David shook his head, his mind replaying Uju's rejection. She had adamantly refused to see him, choosing to sever all ties through her friend Aminat instead.

Aminat had stood defiantly at the door, blocking his entrance, while he desperately called out Uju's name, begging her to come out of hiding and speak to him. He hadn't cared that he probably looked like a lunatic shouting at the front door of an apartment complex building.

When she'd finally come out to face him, she'd simply said, "Stop harassing me, Dave." Then she shut the door in his face.

Harassing? That was a punch to the gut. He was a well-known surgeon, a respectable professional, and the idea of being accused of harassing a woman jolted him to reality.

Stepping back, he created a physical and emotional space

between himself and the scene, allowing him to gather his thoughts before he walked away.

At that moment, he knew he couldn’t come back to her apartment unless she invited him over. His behaviour could be classified as harassment, causing potential harm to both her emotional well-being and his.

David decided to stay away and put all his efforts into trying to contact her through the telephone. Unfortunately, she blocked him after ignoring him a few times, essentially destroying any avenue he could use to communicate with her. Game over. Kicked to the curb.

Realising that Uju was so willing to cut him off as if he didn’t matter, as if the weeks they’d been together meant nothing to her, sliced him to the white meat.

That night, he finally accepted that he didn’t mean as much to her as she did to him. He gave up on any further effort to contact her and decided to let her go. If only it were that easy.

For the past few days, he’d been unable to concentrate on anything except his job. He put in overtime, stepping in to help his colleagues with their workload. He wanted to come home exhausted so he would be too tired to do anything but eat and sleep.

However, it rarely worked. One step into his apartment reminded him of Uju. Like now, sitting on the sofa, his mind kept transporting him to the many times they’d kissed right here.

On more than one occasion, they’d started the night watching a movie and quickly progressed into *Netflix and Chill* territory, making mind-altering love.

One evening, they'd been so caught up in the passion between them that they had forgotten to use any protection. Afterwards, when common sense returned, they'd spoken candidly. That week, they'd visited a sexual health clinic together for health checks and contraception.

Their negative STD screens, and Uju's period, which came two days later, was a massive relief. However, her decision to use an IUD, so they could make love without physical barriers, had clinched their exclusivity for him. At that moment, he was filled with immense joy, especially because he knew she made the choice herself. They'd celebrated that night making love several times without a care in the world.

He groaned at the recollection, a bittersweet sound that caught Chewy's attention. David noticed the sombre expression on Chewy's face and caressed the fur between his ears. "You miss her too, don't you?" he said in a broken voice.

The dog's melancholic bark was answer enough for him. Uju always brought him treats, cared for him like he was hers.

Following their breakup, he would sometimes spot Chewy near the door, alert and watchful, almost as if anticipating her arrival.

David sighed and stretched his hand to the table to pick up his birthday gift from her. With conflicting emotions swirling inside him, he fiddled with the small package, pulling at the untied bow strings.

When he'd opened the delicately wrapped gift box, he had expected to find a gift card, but was pleasantly surprised to discover something more meaningful inside. Two front row

tickets to see Simi live.

He sucked his teeth, a fresh bout of pain erupting inside him. Uju was well aware of his deep love for Simi's music and his desire to attend one of her live concerts. What a tragedy that he didn't go because he couldn't see himself there without Uju by his side, enjoying the moment with him.

Instead of attending alone, he gifted the tickets to his neighbours, a newlywed couple who had recently moved into the apartment below.

Now, he held the tiny box which had contained the tickets with a frown. How had things unexpectedly gone downhill? How on earth did Anita manage to upend his life by simply showing up uninvited?

That night, after Uju ran off, he'd gone back up to his apartment to have a serious conversation with Anita. His intention was to uncover the true purpose of her visit and to bid her a final farewell, hoping to get through to her for good.

As expected, she offered sex to seal the deal. He had refused but had offered her a large cheque with the condition that she sign a document preventing her from making unexpected visits.

When she came back for the cheque a few days later with the signed legal papers, he'd given her a hug.

"Please, Anita, let me go. I want to move on."

She nodded, her eyes glossy with tears. "I do, too, Dave. I really thought you sent me the text. That's why I came over."

David shook his head, still puzzled. “I didn’t, and I still don’t understand what happened. Maybe MTN would have an explanation.”

Even now, after calling his network provider, he had no idea how Anita got a text supposedly sent by him.

He pulled out the recliner of the sitting room sofa, gazing aimlessly at the abstract painting on the opposite wall as he turned every possibility over in his head.

Had he typed the message by accident, unblocked Anita’s number and sent the text? It seemed incredibly unlikely, but unless someone hacked into his WhatsApp account, what other plausible explanation was there?

With a resigned sigh, he set the box back on the tea table. No point draining his energy trying to decipher how Anita got that message. The worst had already happened. He’d lost Uju. No need to carry on being a detective about it.

The sudden buzzing of his phone startled him, abruptly interrupting his train of thought. David dug into his trouser pocket and fished out the vibrating phone, hoping to see Uju’s number flashing on the screen.

Disappointment twisted his gut as he slid the green answer button and rested it against his ear.

“Hey, Felix, *ke kwanu*?” he greeted his younger brother in Igbo.

“Hey, bro. I’m good. *How far*?” His brother’s voice sounded cheery, a massive contrast to the gloom pressing against his chest.

“I *dey o*. Just finished a busy day at work.”

David longed to confide in his brother about Uju, to express the depth of his pain caused by her absence, but he couldn't. For several reasons. First, he'd not told any member of his family about his relationship with Uju, hoping to surprise them when they showed up for his father's remembrance service.

Second, he had never been in a relationship serious enough to introduce her to his family. It was new territory for him, so he'd wanted to do it face to face so they'd have no preconceived ideas about Uju. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be possible anymore.

"So, are you ready to fly in next week?" Felix asked.

"Yes, bro. Got my plane ticket yesterday. Can't wait to see everybody."

"Yep. Looking forward to seeing you, too, my guy. I'll be constantly boasting about my successful prank to everyone."

David's brow furrowed. "Successful prank?"

"Yep, Dave, I finally got you back," Felix chuckled. "Were you happy to see your ex at your front door? Or did it piss you off?"

David sat up, his stomach churning. "What?"

Felix's laughter filtered through the phone's speaker, prickling David's ear. "I've been waiting for you to connect the dots. I hacked into your phone and used it to send Anita a text pretending to be you." His brother cackled some more, clearly oblivious to the anger surging inside him. "I couldn't believe how simple it was to pull it off. Just had to shell out 20k. But in the end, I successfully

executed the most epic revenge prank."

David swallowed hard, unable to speak past the storm tightening his throat. His brother had done this? Planted and detonated the time bomb that ended the most important relationship he'd ever had with a woman? How could Felix find this funny? How?

"Remember when you did it to me? I vowed payback. And I got it. I can't wait to tell everyone—"

"Stop!" David erupted in a voice so loud it startled Chewy, who jumped up with wide eyes.

Felix immediately fell silent, likely shocked himself. David drew in a sharp breath, struggled to calm himself, but nothing worked.

He sprang from his seat and began pacing, his phone pressed firmly against his ear as he blasted his brother.

"Felix, you don't know what the fuck you've just done! You messed up big time. Not everything is a joke … my life isn't a joke. You fucked things up for me. Royally!" He paused, let out a breath to release the air that seemed trapped in his chest. "Uju left me because of this, and I will never forgive you. Do you hear me, bro? Never!"

"Uju? Who is she?"

"My girlfriend, you arsehole!" David fumed, spittle flying past his lips. "The first woman I've ever loved. The woman I was supposed to bring home to introduce to you and the family next weekend. The only woman that reached into my frozen heart and thawed it. The woman that brought joy and laughter back into my life. She was my only chance of settling down, of marriage, of a future with a wife and

family. You can tell Mum that your silly little prank destroyed any chance of me walking down the aisle, you piece of shit!”

Silence followed his tirade, but David still couldn’t stop the tremors coursing through his body. He couldn’t believe that, of all people, his brother had been the one to sabotage his relationship with Uju. Anita had been an innocent pawn in his game.

Felix’s heavy sigh pierced the silence. “Dave, I’m sorry. You have to believe me. I didn’t know you were seeing anyone seriously. I thought … I thought it would be funny … that you’d either laugh, or worst-case scenario, be a little annoyed.” Another moment of silence, then his brother continued. “I never knew it would hurt you this way. It was just a prank.”

“But we vowed to stop doing this shit years ago! We made a pact.”

“I know! That was just me trying to goof around. I’m truly sorry, Dave.” His brother sounded remorseful.

David sighed, strolled across the room, and slumped back onto the sofa. “It’s okay. The worst has happened already. It’s over between me and Uju.”

“Oh, no, Dave. What can I do to sort this out? I’ll do anything … I could call Uju and tell her that it was a prank.”

David shook his head. “No need. She’d think I’m harassing her. Which I really don’t want to do.” He raked his fingers roughly through his cropped hair. “Besides, there’s no point in trying to convince a woman who doesn’t trust me. Maybe this was the wake-up call I needed to realise how crazy I was to fall so deeply in love so fast.”

“You really love her, huh?”

David swallowed hard, his throat feeling strangely prickly. “Yes. A little more than I should after only a few months.”

“Oh, Dave, I feel just awful. If I’d had any idea, I never would have done it.”

David grimaced. “Since I’ve done the same to you, I can’t act high and mighty, bro.”

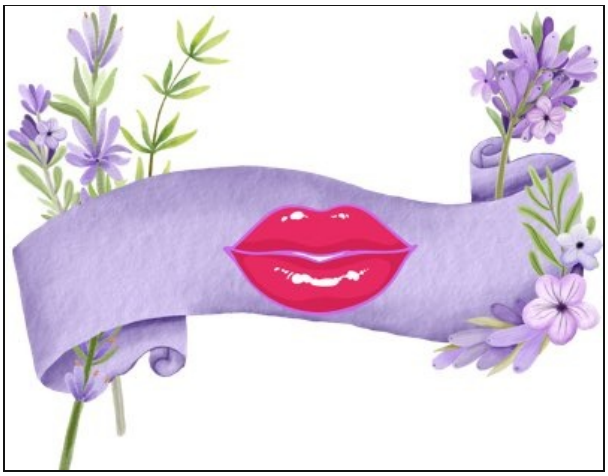
He could still remember the strain his prank put on Felix’s relationship with his girlfriend—now wife—for a prolonged period. That had been a mean thing to do, and now, after being on the receiving end, he fully understood how upset his brother had been.

“Let’s call a truce, bro. No more pranks. And this time, I mean it for real,” David said.

“Truce. No more pranks. For real this time,” agreed Felix in a solemn tone.

David smiled, his first genuine smile in days. If the unfortunate and devastating ending of his relationship could finally bring an end to the nasty pranks he and his brothers played on each other, he’d take the only good thing to come out of it.

# TWENTY-FOUR



“I THINK you need some time off, Uju.”

Uju shook her head, her eyes pleading with the chubby, light-skinned woman sitting opposite her in the chilly office on a Monday morning.

“No, ma, I don’t. Believe me, I’m up to the task,” Uju protested, her voice a broken plea.

“I know you’re up to the task, but right now, the negative publicity about you on social media is distracting.”

Uju suppressed a sigh. Her manager was right. There’d been a steady uptick of negativity thrown her way these

past few days.

Ever since *Blogville* released a picture of her and David holding hands in church, the social media outlets were having a field day at her at *Against the Wind's* expense.

The blasted blog's caption read: In unexpected twist, avowed enemy of plastic surgery now dating well-known plastic surgeon.

People in the comment section didn't hold back, calling her and David everything but a child of God—confused, gold digger, traitor, unprofessional, corrupt. And those were just the monikers fit for print.

But the absolute worst accusation alleged David had bribed her.

The truth didn't matter. The lies and innuendo kept on coming. With the popularity of that post, other blogs jumped on the bandwagon. Soon, Uju found her life being dissected by strangers on social media.

With each new article came a surge of people attacking her integrity. At first, she tried to brush it off, but the exponential growth of negative comments finally got to her, especially when angry listeners started flooding the *Against the Wind's* telephone line and comment section.

Finally, Aminat took the unprecedented, but necessary, step of disabling the comment section.

However, for Uju, it wasn't that simple. After reading what people wrote about her, she couldn't simply delete the vileness from her memory. It hurt. So much that they kept instant replaying in her head until she would break down in tears.

And now, she might be suspended from her job? It was all too much. Her job was all that kept her somewhat stable after splitting with Dave. Without work, she'd have more free time to dwell on her broken heart.

She loved this twice weekly gig at Mainland FM. Apart from additional income, Uju got a real rush from sharing her views on politics, culture, and other trending topics on the radio show anonymously. She could let off steam, and right now, she had a lot to unload.

Sudden anxiety engulfed her. What if it turned into more than a suspension? What if they wanted to fire her?

"Please, ma. I don't want to stop working at all. I enjoy working here," Uju pleaded, tears forming in her eyes. "I love this job."

"I'm not firing you, Uju. I just think taking some time off until the backlash subsides would do us all some good."

"But I didn't do anything wrong!"

"I'm not saying you did. But we've been getting audience emails questioning your integrity."

"Because I dated a plastic surgeon?"

"No. Because you campaigned so vehemently against plastic surgery, and now, seem to have done an about-face *because* you're dating a plastic surgeon. It's wishy-washy for you to change your mind like that."

Uju remained silent for several seconds, stunned at her manager's vehemence. How dare she judge her for having a personal life? It was nobody's business who she dated. How dare anyone judge her?

“But I didn’t change my mind about everything, ma. I remain convinced the plastic surgery field desperately needs regulation. We have an epidermic of unnecessary BBLs and other reconstructive surgeries.” Uju blinked back the tears in her eyes, refusing to cry. She would no longer allow people’s distortion of the truth bring her to tears. “But due to the personal experience of a family member who needed reconstructive surgery following breast cancer, I’ve realised I hadn’t considered all sides of the issue. The problem is multifaceted, and simply vilifying qualified professionals doing their jobs isn’t the answer. I promise you, my present stance has nothing to do with dating a plastic surgeon.”

Mrs Oladele nodded, but said nothing, so Uju continued. “I’ve broken up with Dr David Njokwu, but even if I hadn’t, my romantic relationship with him had nothing to do with my work. I do a good job here, have been for four years, with my ratings and audience growing each year. If we give in to bullies online and offline, we’ll never be able to do our jobs properly.”

Mrs Oladele ran her hands over her clean-shaven scalp and let out a sigh. “You’re right, Uju. You’ve done an excellent job. I see no reason to let this derail us. Let me talk to the board again. I’ll call you soon with a decision.”

Uju nodded, relief sloshing through her. “Thank you, ma.”

“You’re welcome, Uju.” Mrs Oladele suddenly reached across and covered her hand in hers. “Don’t beat yourself up for living your life. No matter the board’s decision, never forget to fix your crown, keep your head up and keep pushing forward.”

Uju stretched her lips into a strained smile, thanking her

manager before leaving her office and heading back to her car.

*Pushing forward*. If only she could rid herself of the heavy melancholy that kept her rooted in grief and find the strength to move on.

Discovering that David had only been playing her while she'd invested her full emotions in their relationship tore her heart in two. As she drove home, the tears she'd suppressed in Mrs Oladele's office finally broke free.

She missed David so much. No matter how angry she was at him for lying and cheating on her, she still loved him, still longed to see him, to hear his voice.

Her conflicting emotions baffled her—furious at him one moment, but longing to be near him the next, to feel his touch and his lips on hers, to hold him, to simply be with him.

They were so good together, shared many fun times, both in and out of the bedroom. He was the only man who appreciated her strong will and outspoken nature, never attempting to stifle her. While with him, she never felt the need to pretend to be anyone else or try to curtail her independent streak.

Unlike her exes, David listened to her point of view about any topic, no matter how controversial. He didn't tell her to be quiet or less argumentative. He just heard her out, gave his opinions, and they both mastered the art of agreeing to disagree.

He instilled a sense of safety in her without diminishing her autonomy. Her decisions were always hers, never pressured or manipulated. Indeed, David knew exactly

how to love her, both body and soul.

How could he hurt her like this? Turn her into a constantly sobbing mess and rip her heart into tiny shreds?

It all seemed so overwhelming—the emotional rollercoaster she'd been on since walking in on David and his ex about to have a party for two on his birthday.

Why had he invited her over if he knew he was going to be entertaining another woman? Did he take her for a fool? Or did he think he could trick her into a threesome?

Open relationships—he'd had those in the past. Did he think he could somehow lure her into one with him and his ex?

How in the world did David expect her to believe him when the woman showed a text from him inviting her over? No. It didn't matter how many times he called her on the phone or tried to convince her otherwise, she couldn't allow herself to fall victim to deceit from a man ever again.

Which was why she blocked him. His persistent phone calls had begun weakening her resolve to stay away from him. She'd needed to cut off any possible avenue of contact.

God! How foolish of her to trust another man after her previous experience with a deceitful ex. All men were the same—untrustworthy and cruel. Their specialty was deceiving women and shattering their hearts. She was better off single. No point putting herself in the position to be hurt again.

Uju steered her Toyota into the compound of her apartment building and parked in her usual spot. She

switched off the engine but remained in the seat, sobbing without making any effort to wipe away her tears.

Why on earth did she let herself believe in love again? Why did she let her guard down again? Would she ever learn?

Maybe her family was right. She wasn't built for relationships. Something about her must drive men into the arms of other women or make them abandon her.

She sniffled, then reached for the glove compartment to grab a tissue. She swiped the snort from her nose and then tossed it into the nylon bag of groceries on the passenger side of the car.

It was time for her to stop crying and try to get her life back together. Pointless to wallow or grieve over a relationship with a dishonest man.

Uju's phone beeped with a text, jarring her thoughts. She glanced at the screen and let out a gasp as she read the message.

> Mrs O: The board has decided that you may carry on with your radio sessions. They even want you to consider an extra day. We can negotiate the details next time you come in. God bless you. And remember to keep pushing.

Exhaling deeply and letting the relief she felt flood through her, she typed and sent a thank you text.

Feeling a little less gloomy, Uju pushed open the door of her car and stepped out. She would try her damnedest to shake off the sadness threatening to bury her and record her next podcast with an upbeat attitude.

As she approached the front door, she noticed a man trotting towards her from the other side of the compound.

Apprehensive, Uju clutched her bag tighter to her chest, her pulse beating faster as she quickened her footsteps.

“Uju? Uju Emordi?” the man called out. Uju stopped dead in her tracks and turned to give the stranger a better look. Something about his face and build looked familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. Did she know him? From where? Why was he looking for her?

“Who are you and what do you want?” she said curtly, not in the mood to be bothered by anyone.

He stopped just at arm’s length away from her, gazing at her with the same curiosity she did him.

“Hi. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’d like to speak with you,” he said, breathing a little heavier from his fast walk.

“Why? I don’t even know who you are.” Uju couldn’t help the rudeness in her tone. It was way too hot out here with the sun searing her skin, and she was itching to go inside to collapse on her bed and work on healing her broken heart.

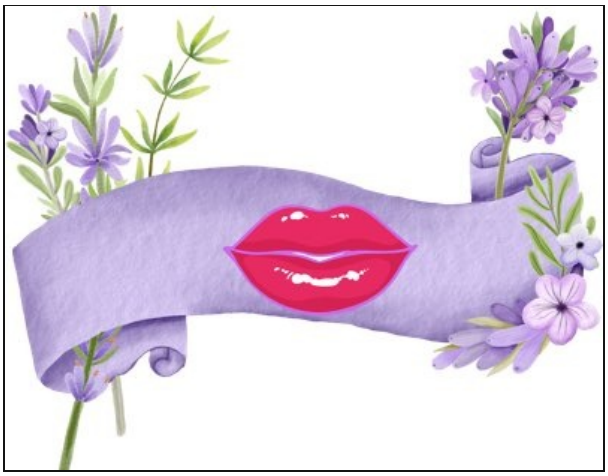
A hint of a smile touched his lips. “Feisty … I like that. Just the type of woman my brother needs to keep him on his toes.”

“Huh?” Uju gaped at the stranger, completely bewildered. What in the world was the man talking about?

“I’m Felix Njokwu. And I’m here to fix the mess I caused between you and David.”

Uju’s mouth fell open. What the hell?

# TWENTY-FIVE



DAVID STEPPED out of the Uber and settled his fare. He stood still, studying the six-bedroom mansion where he'd spent most of his teenage years before he left for the University of Lagos.

The magenta walls appeared newly painted, with the gable style roofing looking freshly cleaned, making the aluminium gleam in the sunlight. All set up for the many guests expected to arrive for his late father's 10th death anniversary in just two days.

However, today's luncheon was a cosy affair with only immediate family, a setting that suited David just fine. The

thought of being in a crowd did not appeal to him at the moment. Not when he still hurt from the end of his relationship with Uju.

Sweeping his gaze around the residential neighbourhood of GRA Onitsha, David appreciated the roads free of potholes, the freshly mowed lawns and stately houses lining the street. Still well maintained, unlike other parts of the commercial hub of the capital city of Anambra.

He inhaled deeply, savouring the comfort of being back home after over two years.

The journey from Lagos to Onitsha by air took merely an hour, yet he'd avoided returning to his hometown for multiple reasons, the strongest being his sense of not belonging. His two older brothers, practicing gynaecologists, had taken over the family-owned maternity unit started by their father. As a plastic surgeon, he was the odd one out. Also, his siblings were both happily married with children, leaving him the only single one in the family who hadn't met his mother's expectations.

Every time he came home, he felt as if he didn't measure up to the family standards, so he stayed away. He'd managed to beg off successfully for a few years now, giving various excuses why he couldn't make it home for family functions.

But this time was different. He longed for the comfort of his mother's cooking, the banter with his brothers, and the laughter of his energetic nieces and nephews. Anything to shake off the gloomy feeling of coming home without the one woman he'd wanted by his side today.

Bringing Uju here to meet his family would have been a beautiful moment. Walking hand-in-hand with her as a

couple to his childhood home would have thrilled him immeasurably. But here he was, alone and about to attend another family event single as always.

Normally, it wouldn't bother him, but after tasting what it felt like to be in a relationship with a woman he cherished, he now felt a void in his life.

God! He missed her. More than a week without seeing or hearing from Uju had made him realise that no matter how hard he tried, getting over her wouldn't be as simple as he'd imagined.

He'd been watching her YouTube channel incessantly, soaking up every little detail he could of her through the screen, studying her keenly to see if anything in her demeanour showed that she missed him as much as he missed her.

Every time he saw her cheerfully interviewing someone on *Against the Wind* or listened to her upbeat voice on the radio, his heart sank. She looked like her life had gone on as normal without him, like his absence meant nothing, as if he'd been inconsequential.

It hurt that she moved on so easily while he couldn't even sleep without clinging to the one pillow in his room that still held her scent, a piece of her he refused to wash away despite his cleaning obsession.

David shook his head to push back his melancholy as he pressed the bell by the gate. He needed to put on a cheerful face for his family so that they wouldn't worry about him. It would make things worse for him if his mother started asking him questions. The woman would go into full-blown *amebo* mode, being nosey and trying to insert herself into his love life like she constantly tried to do. Best

to pretend he was the happy-go-lucky bachelor he'd always been.

The sound of metal scraping the floor as the gate slid open revealed a man dressed in a navy-blue security guard uniform with a wide grin on his face. "Doc! Welcome home!"

"Mr Akachi, afternoon," David responded cheerily, giving the gateman a hug. "Long time no see."

"Yes *o*. You've finally remembered your family, *okwa ya*?"

David chuckled. "I never forgot. I've just been busy at work."

"Don't ever be too busy for your family, Doc. Family is everything," the older man said, patting David's back.

David nodded, absorbing the message with a contrite heart. Mr Akachi was right. He needed to stop running away from home and get back to feeling like a part of the family he loved.

As soon as he entered the building, the familiar chaos of his family gatherings greeted him in the hallway. He could hear his mother's infectious laughter, his nephews and nieces singing at the top of their lungs, and his brothers' animated conversations.

A smile touched his lips. The Njokwu family could be too much to handle all at once, but he loved them all.

He stepped into the sitting room and received immediate cheering.

"Welcome back home, my son. Thank God for journey mercies," said his mother as she rose from her seat and

rushed to enfold him in her arms.

David hugged her back heartily, holding her for several seconds more. “Thanks, Mum.”

“I hope you’re staying here *o*. I don’t want to hear about any hotel business.”

David shook his head. “No, Mum. You know this house would soon be filled with relatives arriving from all over the country for the occasion. There’ll be no space for me to sleep.”

“So, where are you staying?”

“Soprom Hotel. It’s close by.”

His mother huffed but didn’t put up any more argument. “Okay *o*. Would you like me to get you anything to drink before we head to the dining room for lunch?”

He shook his head again. “No thanks, Mum. I’ll wait until I’m feasting on the food that smells like a feast for the gods.”

“You and food eh!” she snorted. “Let me go to the kitchen to supervise things and make sure everything is ready on time.”

“Thanks, Mum.” David kissed her cheek, beaming as she strolled away.

Before he could take a step farther into the sitting room, his four nephews and two nieces—all under the age of ten—ran to him and embraced him.

Delving into the shopping bag in his hand, David retrieved multiple chocolate boxes and passed them out meticulously amongst them so that each person had an

equal amount. The last time he'd made the mistake of giving his youngest niece more sweets, the five others read him the riot act. Never again.

He made his way over to the corner of the room to say hello to his brothers' wives, who were engaged in a hushed and intimate discussion. Both women were welcoming, striking up a casual conversation with him. While speaking to them, he couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness at the thought of Uju never meeting them. Given that all three women were accomplished in their careers, they probably would have got along.

David pushed aside the depressing thought and leisurely made his way over to where his brothers were sitting. After they exchanged warm greetings, he settled on the comfortable sofa next to them.

"How was your trip, Dave?" asked Patrick, the oldest of the three. He was also the tallest and slimmest, unlike David and Felix, who were just over six feet tall with the same athletic physique.

"Except for the one-hour delay at the airport, everything else was smooth, thank God."

"Good to have you here," Patrick said. "When do you leave?"

"In four days," David answered. "I would have liked to stay longer, but I have—"

A ping from a mobile phone interrupted him. Felix jumped up from his seat, startling both David and Patrick.

"I have to pick this call," he muttered as he bolted out of the sitting room, leaving his brothers glancing at each

other curiously.

“What’s up with him?” David asked, his forehead furrowed in concern.

Patrick shrugged. “I don’t know *o*. Felix has been distracted since morning. He’s been acting all fidgety and constantly checking his phone as if he’s expecting someone.”

Seconds after Patrick’s remark, David’s nostrils picked up a dizzyingly familiar floral scent that sent a surge of awareness through his sensory nerves.

The hairs on David’s neck stood on end before he even turned his head towards the sitting room entrance to see his brother walking in with Uju beside him, a nervous smile on her face.

David jumped from his seat, a rush of surprise and excitement coursing through him.

“Guess who’s here?” Felix said with the knowing smile of a man about to announce the winner of a raffle draw.

“Uju!” David exclaimed, tearing across the sitting room towards her. He lifted her into his arms and swung her around, exhilarated to hold her again. “Oh, God! I can’t believe my eyes! I can’t believe it’s you. I missed you so much. So much.”

“Oh, Dave!” she called out, wrapping her arms around him. “I missed you, too. I’m so sorry for coming here without telling you, but your brother said it would be a delightful surprise for you, and I—”

Pulling back slightly, David lowered her gently to the ground. He cupped her face in his hands and gazed

deeply into her eyes. “This is the best surprise of my life,” he exclaimed, filled with indescribable joy at her presence. “The absolute best.”

“I’m so sorry for everything … for doubting you. Felix explained it all. He told me about his prank and I apologise for jumping to conclusions. I’m sorry for—”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he cut in, ready to move forward with no need for apologies. “I completely understand how you would misinterpret what you saw. It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re here. I never want to lose you ever again, Uju. Please God, never.”

Tears clouded her eyes. “Me neither. I was so miserable without you. It was so hard.”

“Oh, it was even worse for me. I couldn’t concentrate. Couldn’t think about anything else but you.” He brushed away the teardrop that fell down her left cheek. “Please understand this. You’re the only woman I want. You’re the perfect woman for me, and I pray to God that I’m the one for you, too.”

Overcome by a wave of emotion, David paused briefly to compose himself before resuming his speech. “Falling in love with you is like closing the final page of an inspirational book and being motivated to put its lessons into action. You are my last bus stop, Uju. I don’t and will never want anyone else. I love you.”

“Oh, Dave.” She threw her arms around him and pulled him into another hearty embrace. “That’s the most touching thing anyone has ever said to me. I love you, too! So much my heart feels like it’s ready to explode with the weight of my love for you.”

David’s heart brimmed with joy as he leaned in to kiss her tenderly on the lips, again and again, until the boisterous cheers from the room shattered the moment.

David pulled away from Uju but held her close to his side as he faced his family, acutely aware of their curious looks boring into him. His mother was the most comical of all, her eyes bulging so much he thought they might pop from their sockets as she stood staring at them with her mouth agape.

“Okay, yes, people! I have a girlfriend, and her name is Uju Emordi,” he announced. “Please welcome her into the family because you’ll be seeing a lot more of her.”

“Thank you, Jesus!” his mother erupted, embracing Uju in excitement. “Please marry him, my darling daughter. I beg you. He’s been a bachelor for too long.”

“Mumsie! *Haba*!” David protested laughingly as he took Uju’s hand in his. “Don’t scare my woman away *nau*!”

Uju chuckled. “Don’t worry about it at all, ma. If David continues being good to me, I’ll definitely marry him and put an end to his bachelorhood,” she said, eliciting a ripple of laughter in the room.

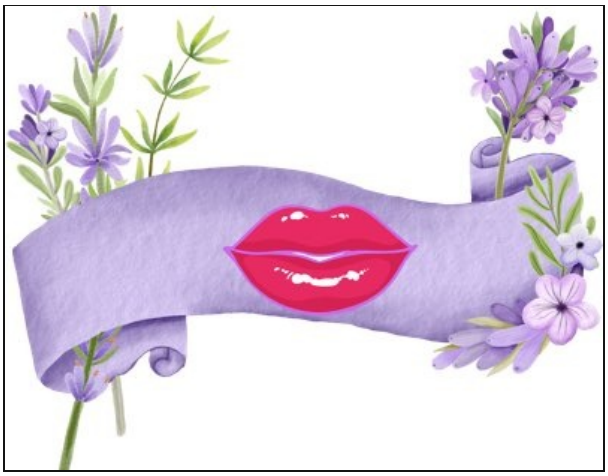
Grinning so wide his cheeks hurt, David leaned in and kissed Uju’s temple. “I’m counting on that promise, my love,” he whispered in her ear. “Because I promise to be nothing but good to you.”

The sound of Uju’s soft giggle as she draped her arm around him was a beautiful melody that lifted his spirits and soothed his soul.

With a little more pep in his step, David guided Uju into the

room, eager to introduce her properly to the important people in his life, knowing she would always hold a special place among them.

# EPILOGUE



“HEY, babe. Are you set for the podcast interview?” Uju inquired while leaning on the bedroom door frame.

David turned towards her and grinned. “Almost. Just putting on my tie.”

“Let me help with that,” Uju said as she pushed away from the door and walked over to where David stood in front of the mirror, adjusting a red tie.

She positioned herself in front of him, held on to both ends of his tie, and pulled his head down until their faces were inches apart.

“Did I ever tell you how incredibly sexy it is for me to watch my husband get dressed in our bedroom?” she whispered seductively, sending a surge of desire through him.

Dear God! This woman turned him on effortlessly. It didn’t matter how many times he’d had her, he always wanted more.

Only this morning, they’d made love in the bathroom spontaneously when he’d walked in on her in the shower. She’d pulled aside the shower curtain, pressed her back against the wet tiled walls and spread her legs with an unspoken invitation. Wild with excitement, he’d rushed in and clumsily peeled off his clothes in a swift motion.

Their intense lovemaking had left him clinging to her for several moments afterward, savouring their closeness as the warm water cascaded over their naked bodies.

How could just one touch from her arouse him so much that he was raring to go again? Could he ever get enough of her? Not likely. Besides, he never wanted to.

Their marriage was nearing the one-year mark, yet his passion for her showed no signs of fading. He enjoyed her company, loved their debates, and found her presence in his life a constant joy.

It had been initially challenging adjusting to living with her when they moved in together. Especially because he’d lived alone for so long. He was accustomed to his possessions always being organised, but he’d quickly realised that Uju preferred to rearrange items in the house depending on her needs.

It had been tough for him, but he’d eventually learnt how to let go and live in the moment. All thanks to the woman

tugging on his tie right now.

“Yes. And I will never tire of you calling me your husband,” he murmured. “Say it again.”

“My husband.”

“Again.”

“My husband.” Her hand glided down from his neck, over his toned stomach, until it settled in front of his crotch. She cupped his erection through his black trousers and squeezed gently. “My husband.”

Letting out a groan that sounded alien to his own ears, David pulled her to him, slammed her body against his, and covered her mouth with his.

With an almost violent need, he kissed her deeply, pressing her impossibly closer as he plundered her mouth.

Her throaty whimpers ignited him the more, fuelled his deep hunger for her. “Oh, Uju … my wife,” he rasped, sweeping his tongue into her mouth for the familiar dance of passion that always blazed like an inferno between them.

“God. Dave. I want you so much,” she moaned as she ground the lower half of her body against his erection, communicating her need in a carnal way he couldn’t misinterpret even if he was deaf and blind.

He suddenly pulled away and turned her to face the mirror. “Bend over,” he commanded in a gruff tone.

She obeyed him, her hazel eyes wild with lust as she gazed at their reflection.

“Girl.”

He tugged the hem of her dress up to expose her round arse. Heavens above! So beautiful. Natural and soft. Even with his expertise as a plastic surgeon, he would feel disappointed if she ever expressed a desire to change how she looked. She was perfect.

He groaned in satisfaction at the arousing sight of her in this position. Vulnerable and sexy. Her desire-filled eyes were fixed on the mirror, her mouth slightly parted and her breaths quickening with anticipation. The epitome of eroticism. God!

With eagerness, David unzipped his trousers and freed his painfully hard dick. He shifted her panties to the side and entered her.

“Shit!” he grunted out as her slick pussy tightened around him, welcoming him into her wet heat.

“Oh, Dave,” she moaned. “Please …”

David knew exactly what she was asking for, what she needed from him. So, he gave it to her. He made love to his wife just the way he knew she liked it, driving in and out of her with the same intensity as the strength of their spiritual bond. He poured all of himself into the moment, honouring the commitment he made to her at the altar that his body and everything he owned belonged to her.

Even when she came, her body shuddering in a climax that wrenched his name from her lips, he didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop loving her. Not in this life or in the life to come.



Uju arrived fifteen minutes late with David, and despite Aminat's peeved snicker, she didn't feel as guilty as she should have. The delay with her handsome husband had been thoroughly enjoyable for her.

"You're lucky I love you, Uju," Aminat grumbled as she set up the equipment ready for recording. "*Abeg,* don't corrupt your husband by making him adopt your habit of lateness."

"I'm sorry, girl. You're right," Uju said sheepishly as she settled on the red sofa. "Blame this all on me. David was ready. I'm the reason for the delay, and I assure you I won't be corrupting my husband. Except in *za oza* room."

David chuckled. "Blame it on both of us. We're sorry for being late," he said, sitting beside Uju on the sofa. "We'll do better next time."

"Awww … see them. Bonny and Clyde," Aminat teased, shaking her head in amusement. "How sweet." She rolled her eyes and huffed. "*Abeg*, let the single people breathe!"

Uju laughed out. "Sorry *o*. *Chai*! Are we now one of those annoying couples I used to hate?"

"Yes," Aminat snickered, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "But I'm so happy for you. You both have the best love connection. Plus, your union has generated a lot of positive impact for *Against the Wind* and the foundation that'll be the focus of today's conversation."

Uju's face lit up with delight as she surveyed the modern studio that David had gifted them for their podcast production. It was a soundproof, well-equipped room on the ground floor of a three-story shop complex at Ikoyi. He had taken care of the entire payment for the property and aided them in installing all the necessary equipment.

In the past year, *Against the Wind* had become even more popular, amassing over three million views per episode on YouTube and several listeners online, too. They were currently in talks with Afrocam, a cable TV station willing to air them every week. Such a blessing.

Uju stole a glance at David, who sat beside her in a perfectly fitted business suit, feeling her heart swell with love for him.

David's unwavering encouragement and financial assistance were instrumental in inspiring her and Aminat to set their sights higher. She would be forever grateful to him.

"Ready?" Aminat asked, drawing her from her thoughts.

Uju nodded, took a deep breath in and exhaled. "Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of *Against the Wind*," she said, smiling at the camera Aminat directed at the sofa.

She angled her head sideways and smiled. "I have a special guest today. Dr David Chinonso Njokwu. Thanks for being here."

David smiled back at her. "Thanks for having me. It's an honour to be on the widely acclaimed podcast I enjoy listening to."

Uju couldn't help the flutter in her heart at the pride she saw brimming in his eyes as he spoke. She knew he wasn't bullshitting her or the audience.

David was her number one cheerleader. He listened to her podcast and radio show repeatedly, took part in debates sparked by the topics she addressed, and eagerly

promoted *Against the Wind* to anyone who would listen.

His eager acceptance of her invitation to be a guest filled her with joy.

“It’s a pleasure,” she said, a warm smile spreading across her face at his praise. She took a deep breath to compose herself, resisting the temptation to kiss her man on his succulent lips, before turning back to the camera. “Dr Njokwu is a renowned plastic surgeon and a partner at Blossom Health Reconstructive Centre. He is also the founder of Beauty from Ashes, a recently commissioned charity aimed at helping underprivileged individuals with correctable birth deformities to access plastic surgery.”

Skilfully positioning her body at an incline between facing David and the camera, she turned to look at him. “So, Dr Njokwu, tell us more about Beauty from Ashes. How did it come about?”

“The idea began two years ago when I met a spirited activist who opposed plastic surgery.” He winked at her. “Her unique perspective made me reflect on the plight of those who require plastic surgery but lack the financial means to access it. I thought about how to bridge that gap and eventually found a way to do it.”

Uju nodded at him in encouragement, recalling the multiple meetings he had with the staff he hired to plan and plot. As a member of the board of directors, she knew how gruelling it had all been. Thankfully, his dream had finally come to fruition.

“Selected individuals can receive free services from Beauty from Ashes each year, including corrective surgeries for birth defects, injuries, or illnesses such as cancer.”

Uju's chest filled with pride. "Fantastic. And how do people apply?"

"We've launched a website which is live already. www.beautyfromashes.com. People can apply there."

"And how many surgeries will you perform each year?"

"It all depends on the funding. For now, we'll start with two per year. We're hoping that as more people get involved, we could go as high as ten or even more. The sky is our limit."

"Oh, that's superb. Such an amazing feat. How do you hope to fund this very elaborate scheme?"

David looked at the camera. "Great question. It's a non-profit organisation that generous donors like you out there will fund. There'll be donation links on the website for anyone moved to be a part of this. We've already had an outstanding response and can fund two surgeries this year."

"That's great news. It's so touching that so many people are rallying to donate and help people who need access to these surgeries."

"Yes. We're so grateful for all the support we received," David said. "We make the funding info public, so we'll share reports each year on how we've spent the donations."

"Good. Transparency is key. Especially in a country where it is rare," Uju said.

"I agree. That's why every person who signs up to be a regular donor will receive an annual account statement via email."

“Dr Njokwu, could you share with us the inspiration behind naming your incredible project Beauty from Ashes?”

He nodded. “Yes, of course. My father sustained severe burns from a car accident. I was so shaken seeing his body at the funeral home that I wished I had a magic wand to make him look as handsome as he used to be. To create beauty from his ashes.”

“Ah! I get it.” Although Uju already knew this, she had to act like she didn’t for the audience. “That’s clever.”

“It might sound like cleverly playing with words, but it’s a lot more meaningful. These surgeries could really make a tremendous difference in the lives of some people and their loved ones.”

“I agree with you 100%, Dr Njokwu. When can we expect the first surgery?”

“We have one scheduled in three months. A patient born with a cleft palate. We’ll be working with a team of surgeons to make his smile beautiful.”

Uju clapped her hands in delight. “Exceptional! We are excited for you, and *Against the Wind* would gladly be a part of such a positive endeavour in our community.”

She meant every word. Her campaign against plastic surgeons was fuelled by a passion that lacked a deep understanding of the complexities at play. She’d been on a blind mission to take David and all his peers down.

However, now that she understood him and his motivations, she was glad that she’d allowed her heart to open up to him. He was not only a driven surgeon with excellent skills, but also generous. She knew without a

doubt that the Beauty from Ashes foundation would be successful and bring about a positive change in the country.

She was thankful to be the wife and life partner of such a remarkable man who courageously pursued an exceptional initiative against popular opinion. She would always love and fully support him for as long as she lived.

***The end***

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*xoxo*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amaka Azie is an award-winning writer of romance fiction set in tropical West Africa. She explores the beauty and intricacies of the continent in her sweet and sensual love stories.

Born and raised in Nigeria, West Africa, she developed a passion for reading at the age of twelve. Joining the press club in secondary school sparked her interest in writing. Her active imagination has captured the interests of many.

Her books showcase bold and exciting female and male main characters with compelling storylines

She was named one of the most influential authors under Forty by the Nigerian Writers Awards (NWA) for the years 2017 and 2018.

Apart from getting lost in creating fascinating fictional characters, Amaka enjoys reading, painting and travelling with her family.

She lives in the United Kingdom with her husband and daughters where she also practices as a part-time family doctor.

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