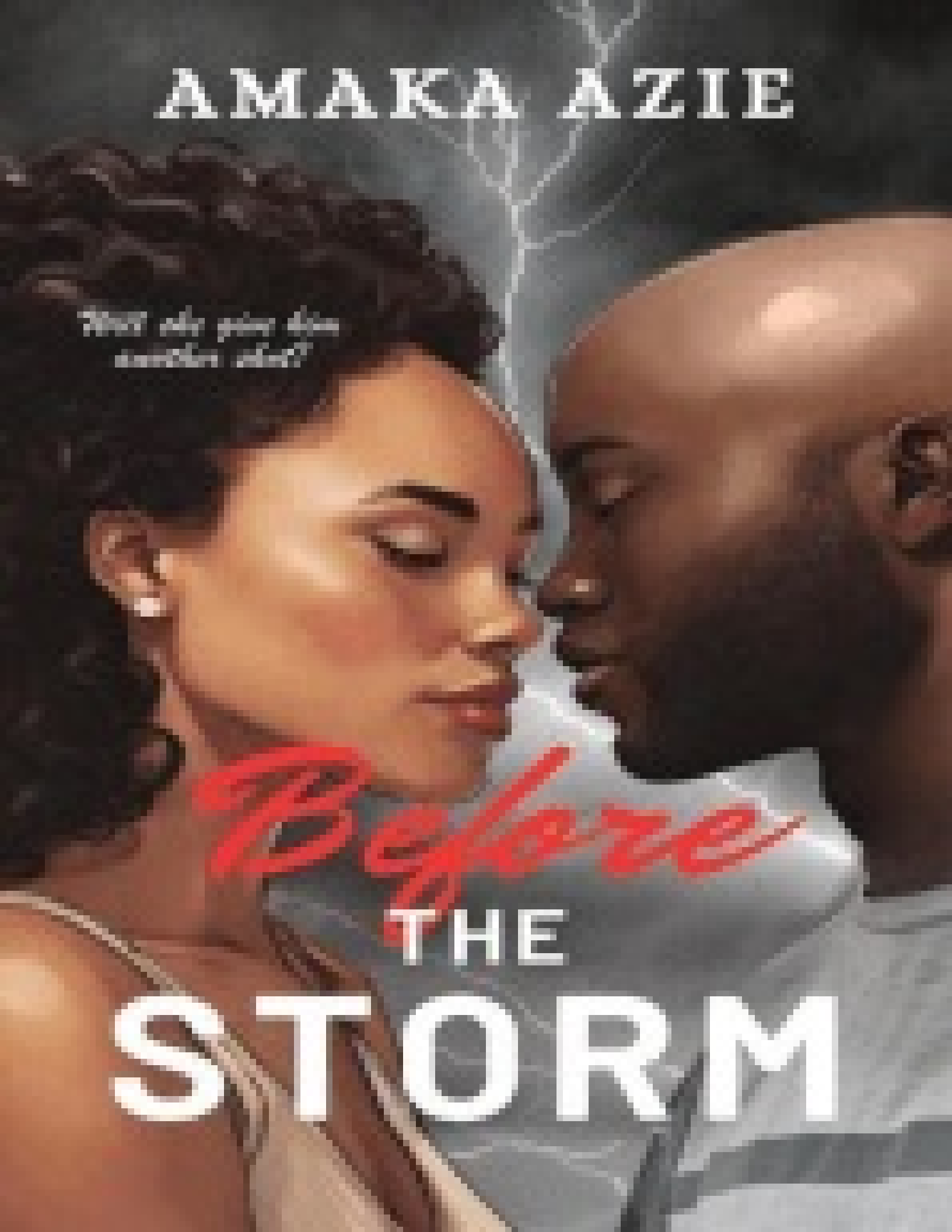
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"Will she give him another shot?"
Before
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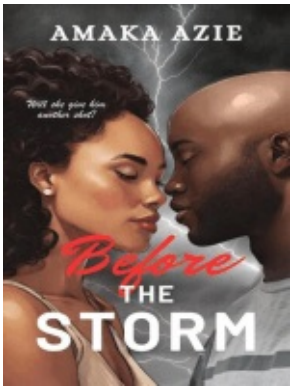
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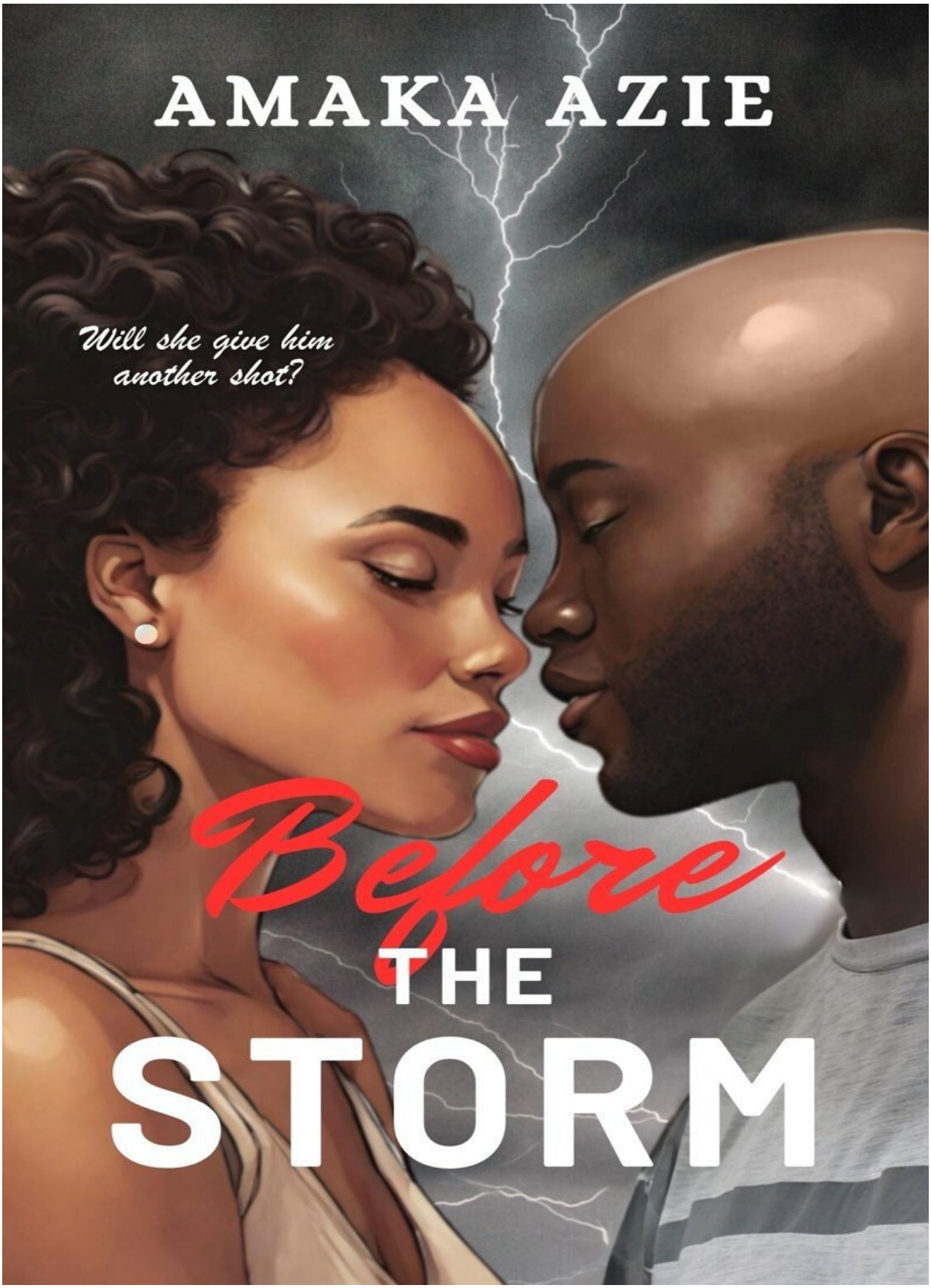
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Before The Storm

By Amaka Azie

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Note to readers

This story deals with the sensitive issue of infidelity, so I suggest steering clear if it is a trigger for you. Although, I'd like to think that I dealt with it delicately.

The idea came after I read a novel where a man repeatedly cheated on his wife without any remorse and still managed to get her to believe he'd changed in the last few chapters.

That narrative annoyed me so much that I had a conversation with a friend of mine, ranting about the story. During our heated debate, I told her that I could never forgive someone who strayed.

Without refuting my comment, she revealed that her husband had an affair in the first year of their marriage. That revelation startled me because they have a wonderful relationship now. She told me that while she understood my scepticism, she would never look down on the power of change. That conversation left me with many things to contemplate.

So, as a writer, I decided to turn the thoughts in my head into a storyline. Tunde and Nkem's journey towards reconciliation and redemption is the result of the many sleepless nights they conversed in my head. (Hahaha)

I hope you enjoy their love story as much as I enjoyed getting them out of my subconscious and bringing them to life. Your feedback would be highly appreciated on your purchase sites and/or on Goodreads.

Titbit: This is the first of a trilogy about plastic surgeons working at a private practice in Lagos.

Blurb

Just back from a delightful date, Nkem Edun gets a phone call. Her ex-husband is in hospital in critical condition. After four years apart, why hasn't he changed his next of kin? Regardless, Nkem rushes to his bedside. After all, he is the father of her son. But is that the only reason? As memories of their life together come flooding back, so do Nkem's doubts. Would forgiving him be so terrible? And more importantly, could she ever trust him again?

Shots. After waking up in hospital, Tunde has plenty of time to ponder the word. Like the shot fired at him point blank, lodging a bullet in his chest that almost killed him. A bullet that also makes him think. Then, there's Nkem. The first person he sees when he regains consciousness. Another shot. This one in the foot and self-inflicted. How on earth he was ever stupid enough to betray his beautiful Nkem and lose his family, he still doesn't know. But one thing Tunde does know— he wants his family back. Will Nkem give him another shot?

One



The woman beckoned him over with a sly smile and a flutter of feathery false lashes. Tunde grinned and gulped down the last of his drink. Setting the empty glass on the cabinet beside him, he made his way to the bed where she sat sporting a racy red bra and matching thong.

He pulled his shirt over his head and unfastened his belt. Reaching downwards, he hauled her soft, rounded body to him in an embrace, letting the warmth of her flesh soothe his aching muscles. It'd been a long day of work. Two women, two surgeries. Cutting into their bodies, filling and sculpting their curves with silicone. All, just to fulfil their visions of the perfect figure.

Afterwards, he'd needed to take the edge off and relax, which is how the lovely, uncomplicated Yemisi came to be on this bed half-dressed. Always available, she never asked questions, never wanted more, never blurred the lines between them. She simply showed up, did her thing whenever he needed tangle-free sexual release, and disappeared. Exactly what he needed tonight.

Her gaze dipped to the tenting in the front of his trousers, and her smile widened. "I can see you're quite ready," she cooed, her voice soft and sultry.

"Oh, yes," he drawled, slowly trailing his hands downwards over the silken skin of her back. He cupped and squeezed the round globes of her ass, then swatted them with his palms. The thwacking sound echoed in the room. Her butt was firm under his hands but didn't jiggle. Not the way he would have liked.

Packed with silicone inserted on his surgical table, Yemisi's backside was huge

and round. His masterpiece. Perfect to look at, even if he did say so himself, but not as pleasant to touch. Not as soft and fleshy as he usually preferred. Not like his Nkem's —

Tunde shook his head briskly, slamming the brakes on his thoughts. He would not venture into that territory tonight. He had no right to compare the two women. Besides, if he continued down that road, he would lose his erection. And he desperately needed a quick release.

"Okay, then, show me a good time," she murmured, reeling his mind back to the willing woman in his arms.

"As always."

Unhooking her bra from behind, Tunde peeled the lacy confection away and cupped her large breasts in his hands. Another sample of his handiwork. Perfect round spheres he'd created with his surgical tools and D-cup silicone implants. A fine work of art. A testament to his excellent skills as a plastic surgeon. He loved to look at them, give himself a mental pat on the back for a job well done.

"Still erect even after more than a year," he murmured with appreciation, rolling his thumbs over the turgid tips of her breasts.

"Yes. You're an excellent surgeon."

"Thank you."

"I have you to thank," she whispered, flinging her arms around his neck. "You made me feel good about myself after years of hating my body…"

"Now, you can walk about naked and proud any time. You deserve that."

"I certainly do."

Yemisi's soft giggle rose in the air, making him chuckle, too. Then, she suddenly stopped and fixed him with an intense look.

"I love when you laugh with me," she said in a hoarse voice. "Fills me with hope."

The gentle caress of her hands around his neck grew firmer, more purposed. She tugged his head downwards, puckering her lips and edging them closer to his own.

Tunde's neck stiffened, resisting the pull towards her. He didn't kiss women. Never. That was just too intimate an act, one reserved only for …

Damn it. He didn't need this. Tunde shook his head again, trying to shut down the invading image. No. He would not think about her, could not think about her. He needed sex tonight. Pure, easy, unemotional sex. The past two weeks had been gruelling, filled with long, back-to-back surgeries. Today, he'd vowed to let himself loose in the body of a willing woman. And nothing would destroy that aim more quickly than visions of Nkem.

Yemisi let out a harsh grunt of frustration and pulled away from him. Her lips twisted into a small frown. "Why won't you ever kiss me, Tunde?"

Startled by the sudden change in Yemisi's temperament, Tunde disentangled his body from her. He rose to his feet, and shook his head again … this time in confusion. Where was this coming from? This completely out-of-character neediness. And where was his easygoing, no-strings-attached Yemisi? The only woman he saw now for precisely that reason. She didn't want any more from their relationship—if you could even call it that—than he did.

For about eighteen months now, he'd abandoned other female companionship, only ringing up Yemisi. He thought she understood his need to distance their interactions from emotions and sentiments. She'd never talked about kissing him before, never questioned his lack of desire to kiss her. What on earth was up with her today?

"You know my feelings about that kind of intimacy."

"So, I'm good enough to fuck, but not to kiss?" She pouted, her eyes flashing angrily at him.

Tunde flinched at the ferocity in her tone. "Oh, come on, Yemi. Why are you acting this way today?" he said, with a smile he hoped calmed her down.

"Well, I'm tired," she murmured. "Tired of waiting for you to take me seriously. It's been more than a year. I'm beginning to feel used."

“Used? What the hell does that mean? Sex between us has always been consensual.”

She reached for the dressing gown on the bed and held it over her body, covering her naked chest from his view. “Well, maybe I’m tired of just having sex with you. Maybe I want more …”

Tunde sighed, brushing his palms down his face. “Where is all this coming from? I thought we had an arrangement that worked for us?”

“Arrangement?” She glared at him, her shoulders rising and falling rapidly as she breathed. “Is that what you call what we’ve been doing for a fucking year?”

“Keep your tone down, Yemi. The walls in this hotel room are not soundproof.”

“Fuck you, Tunde!” she snapped, springing to her feet, her eyes blazing with fury.

“Well, isn’t that why I’m here, Yemi? For you to do just that?”

She laughed out—a mirthless bellow that rumbled in the room. “Can’t believe how stupid I’ve been,” she muttered under her breath, shaking her head. “I saw the red flags from the start, but you kept calling. And I thought …”

Her breath hitched in her throat, and a film of unshed tears glistened in her dark brown eyes. “I thought you could want me one day… that I could change your mind.”

One tear fell and trailed down her cheek. Its sad path struck a chord in Tunde, and he dragged in a deep breath, regret flooding his chest. Never had he suspected Yemisi wanted more from him. She’d never given him a hint.

Why, just three weeks ago, they’d hooked up in this same hotel. And just like each time before, he’d got up immediately following their lusty romp, shrugged his body into his clothes, and gathered his belongings to leave. Never had she uttered a word of disappointment or dissatisfaction with the arrangement. No pleas that he spend the night, that they share breakfast in the morning, or spend the next day together.

No, she’d simply picked up the room service menu with a giggle and lain back

on the bed, a wide grin on her face as she told him she planned to take full advantage of the prepaid room for the weekend.

Tunde inhaled slowly, trying to gather himself together. “I’m sorry —”

“I don’t need your pity, asshole,” she snapped, cutting him off. “I want you to treat me with some dignity. To take me out on dates. I want to meet your family … your son …”

Tunde’s stomach clenched. He shook his head vehemently. “Come on, Yemi, we had an understanding. What you and I do is separate from my life. You agreed. We had a deal.”

“Well, fuck that deal! I’m not a whore. I want some respect.”

“I’ve never treated you like one … I respect you.” Even as he said it, Tunde knew he wasn’t being totally honest.

He had limited their interactions to sex. Had never taken her out or introduced her to his friends and family. But could he be blamed for keeping to his own end of their agreement?

When they’d met eighteen months ago at a fundraising event, he’d been completely transparent. He wasn’t looking for, and didn’t want, a relationship. Just a loose, tangle-free liaison. Perfect, she’d cooed. Between my acting career and being a single mom, I’ve no time for or interest in a relationship either.

So, what the hell had changed?

Her sigh of resignation cut through his musings. “No, you don’t have one iota of respect for me. Never have,” she said as she released the dressing gown from her body and put it on.

“Oh, come on, Yemi, you know that’s not true, I —”

“There’s only one woman who has ever had any chance to penetrate your heart of stone.” With her shoulders slouched and her face crestfallen, she tied her belt in the middle and raised her gaze to meet his. “Too bad you blew your chance with her.”

Her words struck him like a hard slap across his face. Tunde recoiled both emotionally and physically, his entire body going rigid. The only time he'd allowed himself to be vulnerable with Yemisi, he had opened up to her about his painful divorce. And now, she used it against him, saying the one thing she knew would cut him deep to the bone.

Letting out a low grunt, he turned away from her and grabbed his shirt off the floor. He dragged it over his head and shoved his arms through the sleeves.

"The room is paid for all weekend," he seethed, head down as he fastened his belt. "Feel free to stay if you want."

With that, he walked out, closing the door behind him.

Too bad you blew your chance with her.

The comment whirled in his head as he made his way to the elevator, marching in long hurried strides, determined to flee as far from her and her distressing accusation as possible.

Taking deep breaths in and out, he waited for the elevator, his chest heavy with regret. Yemisi was right. He could never love her, or anyone, except the woman who had captured his heart when he was only a young man of twenty-one. Now, even after more than fifteen years, that woman still held him captive.

A short elevator ride later, Tunde stalked through the hotel's lobby and stepped out into the night, his ears buzzing and his stomach churning.

He'd had the perfect life. A wonderful family with a loving son, and a wife who still made his heart beat in double time every time he set eyes on her. Yet, he'd thrown it all away.

He had destroyed the happiness he'd found with a woman who had loved him when he was a nobody. A woman who had quit her high-paying job in finance and followed him to New York for seven years, so that he could go through the rigorous training in plastic surgery and flourish in his career. The mother of his only child. The one person who had really understood him, cried with him at his lowest point, made him a somebody from nobody.

How could he ever expect another chance at happiness when he'd had

everything and tossed it all away? Heart laden with regret, he crossed the street to his car parked on the roadside adjacent to the hotel parking lot. He liked to be discreet whenever he hooked up with Yemisi here, so he preferred a less public parking place. Yes, he was single and free, but he never wanted anyone to know who he was sleeping with. Never wanted any of that to get back to his wife … ex-wife.

As Tunde opened the car door, a shadow blocked the street light's illumination. He whirled around, only to encounter the muzzle of a gun pointed at him.

"Make a sound and I'll end you here right now!"

Tunde froze, pressing his lips together to keep from gasping out in fear. Cold sweat trickled down his spine. His heart galloped as he looked up from the gun into the coldest eyes he'd ever seen.

"Get out your wallet and your car keys," the man ordered. "Slowly …"

"O-okay," Tunde said. "They're in my pocket," he said, before reaching for them. Fingers trembling, he inched his hand into his trouser pocket, trying not to make any sudden movements. He retrieved his wallet, his pulse jerking uncontrollably, his stomach quivering from dread.

"Hand it to me," the man said in a low, harsh voice.

Tunde did as he was told, fear stiffening his body. Parting his mouth, he gulped down breaths. He needed to stay calm, to keep himself from panicking.

"Now give me your car keys," the man instructed with a steady ease. For sure, this wasn't his first robbery.

The muscles in Tunde's stomach clenched as he obeyed, stretching his hand forward slowly.

The man snatched the keys from him, searching his face curiously. "Wait a minute. You're…" His eyes narrowed as though trying to recall something. "You're that plastic surgeon," he said with an uncertain lilt. Then, he smiled broadly and nodded. "Yes, The one on the billboard in Lekki."

His terror intensifying, Tunde became very still. He tried to think. Was being

recognized good or bad? He couldn't remember. Should he say yes or no, admit he was the guy on the advertisement or not? God, he couldn't think straight.

"That's too bad," the man said, tearing through Tunde's erratic thoughts. "I hate to do this to a doctor." With a regretful sigh, he raised the gun and aimed it directly at Tunde's chest, his finger curling around the trigger. "But you've seen my face, so I can't let you live even if I'd like to."

Tunde's feet quickened and he leapt backwards in a desperate bid to escape. He only managed a half-turn before a loud bang rang out, stopping him. Sharp pain tore through his chest as he fell sideways, landing on the pavement with a thud.

He lay on the ground, gasping for air, pain scorching every cell of his upper body like someone had set him on fire. He was vaguely aware of the sound of screeching of tyres speeding away … leaving him there alone. To die?

His lids were heavy, but he tried to keep his eyes open as images of his wife and son flashed in rapid succession before him like slides on a projector screen.

Nkem in her white gown smiling up at him on their wedding day.

Nkem, naked and in his arms, her eyes twinkling with pleasure and satisfaction.

Nkem's stomach swollen with his son.

Nkem holding Jide in her arms.

Jide skipping about and giggling in the garden while Nkem sprayed him with a water hose.

Nkem crying and walking away.

Jide holding his mother as she cried.

Nkem smiling at another man like she used to smile at him.

Slowly, his eyelids drooped, blocking out the images as he finally gave in to the darkness that claimed him.

Two



Lifting her glass of Merlot to her lips, Nkem smiled at the man seated opposite her. Her fourth date with the real estate mogul she met through a mutual friend three weeks ago was going well so far.

He had picked her up from her home and taken her to Alton Theatre for a surprisingly good pantomime adaptation of Chinua Achebe's book Things Fall Apart. Now here they were at a trendy eatery tucked away on a small street just a few miles from the theatre.

Like the previous times she'd gone out with Arinze, she was totally enjoying herself. Apart from being quite easy to look at, with a handsome face and an athletic build, he was witty, intelligent, and gentlemanly.

Since her divorce, she'd avoided dating like an incoming plague. She'd only accepted the setup to prove Oke wrong. She was not afraid to put herself out there again. Well, maybe she had been, but she wasn't about to admit it to her friend. So, colour her completely surprised that for the first time since her divorce, Nkem was feeling positive about dating again.

Was she ready to try for a serious relationship again? Arinze certainly had her mulling over the prospect. Lord knew it was time for her to move on.

"I like this place," Nkem said, sweeping her gaze around to take in the aqua-blue walls, the dome-shaped ceiling dotted with fanciful lights flickering in a way that reminded her of fireworks.

The restaurant's busy hours had come and gone. With only a few tables occupied, she soaked in the cosy, intimate ambience. "I've driven through Victoria Island, on this very road several times. And I've never even noticed this place."

"It's one of my favourite spots." Arinze chuckled, flashing her a brilliant, white-toothed grin. "And not just me. Ramona Restaurant and its celebrity chef have garnered rave reviews. I'm glad I could introduce you to it."

"Good choice. Love that it isn't too rowdy."

"Me too. I hate dining at over-popular, noisy places."

Nodding her head in agreement, Nkem took a sip of her wine and smiled again. "Nice …" she said as she lowered the glass. "Let's hope you're right and the food tastes as good as this drink."

"Fingers crossed. You won't be disappointed." He picked up the menu and perused it, his gaze intently fixed on the booklet.

Nkem took his momentary distraction to study him properly. Her stomach jumped in excitement. Arinze was really good-looking. About a head taller than her five-foot, eight inches height, he had a broad-shouldered and athletic build. His cocoa-brown complexion complimented his black kaftan attire.

She focused her attention on his face, and her stomach did a little flip-flop. Mehn! He was gorgeous. Almost too pretty. Thick nicely arched eyebrows, long eyelashes, and wonderfully groomed facial hair that surrounded fine facial features.

Oke hadn't exaggerated when she'd tried to sell him to Nkem like a Balogun Market stall owner hawking their finest goods. "I think you should meet him, Nkem. He's fine as hell, and may very well be the man to entice you to take risks again," she'd said.

Nkem lowered her glass and picked up her own menu, scanning the appetizers first, then the entrées, but nothing really registered. Could she do this? Open herself up to love. Was there any man on earth she could possibly fall for again? Let herself be vulnerable with again?

She’d done it with a man she thought would never hurt her. And he had. In a way she had not fully recovered from even after four years.

Nkem swallowed hard and shook her head. No, she wouldn’t think about him. Not today. Not when she was finally ready to move forward, take a chance with someone else.

“I think I’ll have the fried rice and turkey for the main course and the fish pepper soup starter,” Arinze said, cutting through her musings.

Nkem lowered the menu and looked at him. “We’ve had rice every time we’ve gone out,” she pointed out, flashing him a teasing smile. “Why don’t we take a risk ... try something else?”

“Ah, but rice is safe,” he said with a little shake of his head. “Difficult to get wrong. I like sticking to things that are familiar.”

Nkem glanced at the menu. “What about trying the banga soup and fried snails with starch. I’ve eaten it before at a party. It was awesome.”

“Banga soup? What’s that made of?”

“Palm kernel. It’s just like the soup we Igbo peeps call ofe akwu,” Nkem answered with a low chuckle, the incredulity on his face tickling her.

One thing she’d noticed about Arinze was his hesitance to explore the unknown. He’d even admitted it several times during their conversations. Divulging his preference for only Mercedes Benz cars, Samsung electronic products, and London holidays.

He even picked the same wine for all their meals. No, he never stopped her from making a different choice, but his own … extremely predictable. Like now, while she was savouring her 2012 De Trafford Merlot from South Africa, he had stuck to his ever faithful Veuve Clicquot Brut.

Nkem hadn’t yet decided whether this was a good or a bad thing. She liked his consistency, respected it even, but to never be willing to try something new … that had to be terribly restricting.

“No way,” he said with a cheeky smile. “There are only three soups I recognise.

Oha, egusi, and onugbu. Any other soup is just not for me."

"Oh, you're missing out, Arinze." She reached for her glass and took another sip from her wine, relishing the richness of the red berries, cherries, and spice-infused flavours. She would never have discovered this great taste if she hadn't tried it out for the first time tonight. "Variety is the spice of life. Ogbono, ewedu, edikaikong, black soup—they are all gorgeous creations. Different tastes for varying moods."

"You're free to choose any of that," he said, winking at her. "But they're just not for me."

His comment made sense, yet an uneasiness settled in her tummy. Why did it bother her that a grown man admitted that he preferred to eat what he liked? Why was she even attempting to convince him to venture out of his comfort zone?

Her stomach tumbled. Of course, she knew exactly why. Just like every other time she'd seriously considered taking a step forward in her personal life, she managed to find something wrong. Some small thing others would have shrugged off, but that she blew up to epic proportions, causing her to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Well, not this time. No way would she allow herself to destroy the best dating opportunity presented to her in years. Arinze was totally different. Not like the two creeps she had attempted to date after her divorce was finalised two years ago.

Rotimi, whom she'd met at a church event, thought he'd get all her goodies on the first date. When she had set him straight, he got downright pathetic, practically begging her to allow him to put "just the tip" in, like a bloody teenager instead of a forty-three-year-old man.

Round Two of her forays into the post-divorce dating scene had started a bit more optimistically. Uyi had been smart, funny, and a perfect gentleman. They'd even progressed to intimacy—an epic mistake. It wasn't that he didn't know where everything went. He just didn't know what to do with it once it got there.

Plus, he'd started bugging her to have his baby. At first, she'd taken it as a joke. But the man was serious. Nkem still looked back stupefied by it all. No

profession of love, no proposal, no talk of finances, no nothing. Just be my baby mama. He had seemed more interested in spreading his seed than having a meaningful relationship. Nkem had simply ended things, grateful she'd never introduced the idiot to her son.

Those failed attempts had made her give up entirely on men, so she'd closed her accounts on the dating sites she'd registered on. Another embarrassing dating disaster would be unbearable.

However, she'd decided to show Oke she wasn't afraid. Besides, if she gave it one last try, and it went south, no one could fault her for throwing in the towel on romance. When her university bestie and roommate brought up the subject of her brother-in-law's distant cousin, yet—describing him as a widower with no children wanting to settle down—Nkem gave in.

And to her surprise, after one date with Arinze, she'd been sold on the whole dating thing again. She'd enjoyed herself tremendously and found herself happily accepting another date. And he hadn't disappointed.

She loved the way he treated her, how he sent her texts in the mornings to wish her a lovely day, and didn't keep her guessing about his interest in her. He knew she was divorced and had a son, but unlike his silly predecessors, he treated her with respect, never thinking her desperate enough to accept any rubbish behaviour.

Arinze had even waited until their third date to lean in for a kiss. And glory be, she'd enjoyed it—sweet and gentle, not too insistent, not pressing for more. Which pleased Nkem, because she wasn't sure if she wanted to have sex with Arinze just yet.

A successful, well-respected businessman. Cultured and worldly. And a perfect gentleman, possessing the basic decency sorely lacking in many men these days. So, was she going to be foolish enough to torpedo a chance to move on and put her failed marriage in the rear view mirror—all because Arinze wasn't the most adventurous type? No way.

"Let's both have the fried rice and turkey," Nkem said, determined to push her unease away. She recognised the fear for what it was—a self-sabotage and maladaptive mechanism—her way of preventing herself from truly moving on from the man she'd loved with all her being. The man that had let her down and

broken her heart.

Arinze stretched his arm across the table and reached for her hand. “Are you sure? You don’t have to have what I’m having, you know.”

Nkem smiled at him, forcing back the negative thoughts buzzing in her head. She held Arinze’s gaze and brushed her thumb over the back of his hand. Such a true gentleman. She needed to get a grip and try to make this work. “Of course, I know,” she said. “I just want us to eat the same thing.”

He grinned. “I like that.” Squeezing her hand firmly before he picked up the menu again, he asked, “Ready to order?”

Nkem nodded, motioning for the waiter standing in the wings waiting to take their order. As they let the young man know their meal choices, Nkem found herself feeling less jittery about Arinze. Indeed, he might be dead set in his ways about a lot of things, but he never infringed on her own independence.

So bloody what if he was a bit stiff? So what that they didn’t share the same sizzling chemistry she’d had with Tunde? The kind that had swept her off her feet at eighteen years old and hadn’t let her toes touch the ground for a decade.

Maybe that was a good thing. No crashing down to earth like a meteor, leaving everything in her life scorched and burned. That kind of passionate love had almost destroyed her when Tunde broke her heart.

Did all that passion really matter now? Certainly not. Not at her grown age of thirty-five, a divorced mother of one. She needed to be more practical. This budding relationship was her best shot at getting married again. Arinze was a kind-hearted, dependable man. She could certainly see herself in this for the long haul.

~

His tongue darted into her mouth and began a slow tango with hers, his thick lips hot and wet as his fingers grazed the nape of her neck.

He let out a low groan. “You taste so nice, Nkem,” he rasped. “So nice …”

Nkem kissed him back, mentally forcing herself to muster the same enthusiasm, somewhat annoyed with herself that the rush of passion she wanted to feel right now refused to materialize.

She'd been the one to initiate the kiss when they both settled inside his sedan Mercedes-Benz S-class in the restaurant's carpark, and now, she found herself wishing she hadn't.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why couldn't she simply let go and enjoy this moment? Why couldn't she just sink into the sensual feeling like he seemed to have effortlessly done?

With a low hiss, she sank her fingers into Arinze's thick hair and angled her head for a deeper kiss, hoping that her aggressive move would also ignite her lust for him.

He moaned and pulled her closer, as close as the slanted positions of the car's front seats allowed. "God … you make me lose control," he said on a heavy breath, sweeping his tongue across her lower lip before dipping it into her mouth again.

Nkem squeezed her eyes shut and moaned, hoping it sounded like she was into the kiss, as into him as he was to her. Why on earth was she struggling with this? Arinze was a good kisser; he knew what to do with his mouth and tongue. Why couldn't she lose control, too?

As their mouths mated, she felt his hand slide from her neck, over her shoulder and then cup the side of her breast. He squeezed the soft flesh through her dress, and she jerked away.

He stiffened, his eyes popping open, his shoulders heaving as he breathed heavily. Pupils darkened with lust stared at her. Several beats of silence followed, only the sounds of breathing between them.

"I'm sorry," he rasped, swiping his tongue over his full lower lip, a motion that looked very sexy, yet did nothing to get her juices flowing. "Was I moving too fast?"

"N-no," she sputtered, not even entirely sure why she'd stopped him. This was what she'd wanted, had prepared for before he picked her up tonight. Damned if

she understood what was wrong with her. “I … I’m not yet ready for … I need more time.”

He remained still, his breathing shallow, a shadow of disappointment clouding his eyes. Several more seconds of silence ticked by. Nkem swallowed hard, wanting to say something, to pull him into her arms and tell him to ignore her and carry on kissing her, to urge him to take her back to his place and make love to her.

That was what she’d hoped for tonight, why she’d selected this skintight, siren-red dress that clung to her generous curves like a second skin—totally not her characteristic style by the way. She’d wanted to finally take their relationship to the next level, and just in case he hadn’t got the message with the dress, she’d kissed him first to pass on the message—that she wanted him sexually.

So, damned if she knew why she was stalling, struck mute instead of telling him all this.

Arinze cleared his throat and leaned back, increasing the distance between them. Regret clutched at her insides. This was not how she’d pictured tonight ending. Not at all.

“I understand,” he said.

“I’m sorry … I —”

“You don’t need to apologise, Nkem,” he said, cutting her off. “You have to be ready before more can happen between us. I totally get it.”

“I still want to see you again, Arinze. I enjoy spending time with you,” Nkem murmured. “I just want to take that aspect of our relationship slow for now.”

He nodded, leaned forward, and cupped her face in his hand. “I respect that,” he said. “I like you, Nkem, and I also want to see you again.” Brushing a thumb across her jaw, he stretched his lips into a half smile. “The fundraising gala for Butterfly Kids, my charity supporting orphans, is in two weeks. We could attend together if you’re free.”

Nkem smiled at him, covering his hand on her face with hers. “I would be delighted.”

He lowered his lips, planted a soft kiss on her mouth and then raised his head, gazing into her eyes. “Please try not to look as sexy as you do tonight for that event, my dear. You’re far too distracting.”

She giggled in a girly way, relaxing back onto her seat as relief flooded her senses. She’d not put him off by blowing hot and cold. Another positive indication of Arinze’s maturity. She really needed to get her head examined. Everything about this man screamed Husband Material. She had to make it up to him the next time they saw each other, make sure she didn’t chicken out at the last minute.

“I promise to tone it down that day,” she said, then with a playful wink, she added. “Only publicly though. Privately, it’s a different matter.”

His low chuckle rumbled inside the car as he switched on the engine. “Should I take you home?” he asked her.

“Yes, please,” she said.

He pulled out of the parking lot and steered the vehicle towards the main road. The ride home was smooth, with pleasant conversation flowing freely. They talked mostly about Nigerian politics, a topic Arinze particularly enjoyed because of his interest in joining a political party.

By the time she pushed open the front door to her four-bedroom home at the end of a cul-de-sac in one of Lekki’s quiet residential streets, Nkem was feeling more positive about a future for Arinze and her. They had a solid friendship emerging between them. With time, she could see herself also developing a passionate response to his touch.

Whistling softly, Nkem strolled down the corridor and into the sitting room.

“Na wa o, I didn’t expect you back tonight,” Oke said, seated on the sofa opposite the flat screen TV on the wall. An almost empty glass of wine dangled from her fingers.

Nkem laughed, tossing her purse onto the couch beside her friend, and then, plopping onto it herself. She bent forward and pulled off her four-inch stilettos.

“Change of plans, sis,” she replied, massaging her heels. Gosh, her feet ached

like mad. The black-and-red Louboutin shoes may have looked sexy on her feet, emphasising her strong, elegantly curved calves, but they had pinched the bottom of her feet all through the evening.

“But weren’t you supposed to, you know… spend the night with Arinze? Isn’t that why you asked me to babysit?”

“I know …” Nkem said on a soft sigh, casting a quick peek at her watch. A quarter past eleven. “Where is Jide sef?”

“Asleep. Over an hour ago.” Oke shook her head. “And don’t change the subject. I thought you wanted to have sex tonight. You even shaved your puna for this date. What happened nau?”

Nkem flung her head back and laughed. The confusion on her friend’s face was hilarious. The woman looked as if she’d just been duped by a clown. However, she couldn’t blame her friend for being surprised at all.

When she’d asked Oke over to babysit Jide, Nkem had been hyped up, telling her friend how much she wanted to have sex with Arinze, how she missed the intimacy of being with a man.

Excited her matchmaking might take wings, Oke had bustled around like Cinderella’s fairy godmother, orchestrating Nkem’s look right down to the shoes and shaved privates.

“In case he wants to eat your pussy,” she’d said, handing Nkem the shaving cream. “You don’t want him to be discouraged by a full bush down there.”

At the thought of enjoying oral sex, which she’d not had the pleasure of since leaving Tunde, Nkem grabbed the can and heeded her friend’s suggestion. After all, Oke always knew exactly what she was talking about when it came to sex.

Since their university days, while Nkem had clung solely to Tunde, her best friend had been playing the field, refusing to tie herself down to only one man. According to Oke, she wanted to explore her sexuality before getting hitched. At thirty-five, her explorations apparently still not quite finalised, she seemed in no hurry to settle down.

“Omo, I just couldn’t go through with it,” Nkem said with a shake of the head.

“But why? Don’t you find Arinze attractive?”

“I do o. The guy is hot. I wonder why you don’t want him for yourself sef.”

“Me?” Oke shuddered, frown lines wrinkling the skin between her eyes, as though even entertaining the idea was absurd. “He’s a hottie, but not for me. The man wants to settle down and have lots of babies. Marriage is not on my radar at all. He’s more your type than mine. So why didn’t you jump him?”

Nkem scrubbed her face with her palm, mildly exasperated with her own damn self. She’d asked herself the same thing, but no reasonable answer presented itself. “I don’t know ... I just … I’m not feeling…” she began, her words trailing off. She couldn’t explain even to herself how it was that she could want it to be so, but that Arinze just didn’t do it for her. Sure, she liked his kisses, but they didn’t turn her on, make her crave more.

Oke dragged in a deep breath. “For you to move on from Tunde, you need to let go and take risks.”

“I know. But this isn’t even about Tunde. I just don’t want to have meaningless sex. The first time I tried was horrible.”

“But it won’t be meaningless if you enjoy it.”

“I’m not like you, Oke. I need to feel passion before I have sex. It’s never been just a mechanical act for me.”

Oke stiffened. Her jaw tightening as she pressed her lips together. Nkem immediately regretted her comment. Yes, Oke was a free spirit who never minced words about her sexual escapades. Nkem loved her friend for her honesty, her bravery and realness. It was cowardly to use those same traits she admired to attack Oke, just because she couldn’t be the same way.

“I’m sorry, Oke, I didn’t mean to upset —”

“I know you didn’t. And I’m not upset.” She sighed. “I’m just saying you need to stop holding yourself back. Tunde is free, having a grand old time with other women. I’m his partner at work, so trust me, I know. You need to do the same.”

Nkem’s chest tightened at the thought of Tunde with other women. He had

strayed in their marriage, the reason for their divorce. Now that he was free of her, she could only imagine what he did released from the commitment of their relationship. He'd probably screwed countless women since they'd separated.

Although she'd never met any of his women, she knew he had them. She'd smelt a female perfume on him once when he came over to pick Jide up for the weekend.

She swallowed hard. "I'll try to move on with Arinze. He's a great guy, and I really like him," she said, knowing Oke had a point. "I just need a bit more time to take things further."

"Good. It's necess —"

The lyrical ringtone of Nkem's phone pierced the air, cutting Oke off. Pulling her bag onto her lap, Nkem shoved her hand inside and rooted around to retrieve the mobile device. An unknown number flashed on the screen. Scrunching up her face in confusion, she stared at it as it rang. Who the hell could be calling at this time of the night?

Releasing a soft sigh, she pressed the answer button and placed it against her ear. "Hello?" she said tentatively.

"Is this Mrs Nkem Edun?"

Still confused, Nkem confirmed her identity without bothering to correct the caller about no longer being a Mrs.

Although she didn't drop Tunde's last name after their divorce, it still felt odd being referred to as his wife.

"We are contacting you as the next of kin documented for Dr Tunde Edun."

"I … I don't understand," Nkem said. Tunde still had her as his next of kin? Weird. Immediately after their divorce, she'd changed hers back to her father. "What's this about?"

"Your husband is at Nissan Hospital in Ikoyi. He was shot in the chest, and is in surgery."

Tunde … shot? No, this must be some cruel joke. Still, her heart raced and her fingers trembled. As if under water, she vaguely heard Oke's voice … Is everything oke? Nkem tried to speak, but no words came.

"Mrs Edun are you there?" came the woman's voice, concern in her tone.

Nkem gasped. This was not a joke.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Is he going to be alright? How bad is it?"

"He's listed in critical condition, I'm afraid. He needed emergency surgery and several blood transfusions. He has still not regained consciousness. You'll want to get here as soon as possible."

"Okay, okay," Nkem managed to get out between gasps of air. "I'm coming right away."

She ended the call, hurled her bag over her shoulder and sprang to her feet. She turned to her friend whose forehead was crinkled with worry, unspoken questions in her eyes.

"Tunde is in hospital." She took a deep breath before continuing. "He's been shot and is in a coma. Please can you stay here with Jide while I go to the hospital?"

"Of course." Oke stood, too, and shooed her off. "Go, go. I'm here all night anyway."

Without another word, Nkem picked her shoes off the floor and rushed out of the room barefoot, without sparing a second to put them back on.

Three



Tunde tried to move his legs and arms, but they felt heavy and stiff. What the hell? He needed to get up and get ready for work. He had three surgeries to perform today.

The first, liposuction for Nike Jegede, a renowned Nollywood actress who continued to claim that her fantastic figure was the result of a strict diet and exercise regime. If he let her down, there would be hell to pay. He'd heard her social media followers rivalled the loyalty of Beyonce's Beehive. One disgruntled post on Instagram or Twitter, and the booming surgical practice he and his partners had built could go up in smoke.

After Nike's procedure, he had two butt lifts. The clients may not be as well known, but just as important. All his clients were to him.

No, he had to get out of here now … wherever here was. Why was the room so dark? And why couldn't he see anything? Maybe he was still asleep. He needed to wake up.

Tunde struggled to peel his eyelids apart. They wouldn't budge. He tried again, using all his concentration. Nothing. His world remained pitch black.

What the hell was wrong with him? He heard his heart take off in a gallop, beating harder and faster. Panicking wouldn't help right now. He needed to calm himself.

His heart … he'd heard it. Okay, he might not be able to see where he was or get

the hell out of here, but he could hear. Tunde forced himself to relax. And listen … letting his ears take in his surroundings.

A steady beeping sound filled the room … what was it? A clock ticking? No, too loud for a clock. No, it was more like a machine. Like a … like some sort of hospital monitor.

His heart leapt and began to pound fiercely again. The beeping echoed the increased rhythm of his heartbeat. Definitely a heart monitor. But on him? No, he must be dreaming. Except ...

It felt very real.

Where the hell am I? What the fuck is going on?

Questions buzzed like annoying flies at a picnic in his head. Again, he could feel panic rising in him. And again, he forced himself to calm down. To listen.

A sob rose to his ear. At first, it was quiet, barely audible. Like turning a satellite antenna this way and that, hoping to pick up a weak television station, Tunde focused all his attention on that sound, forcing his brain to edit out the blasted beeps of the machine.

Yes, there it was. That sobbing sound again. This time, accompanied by a muttered prayer. “Oh, God, please don’t let him die.”

His chest muscles tightened as a sharp pain tore through his torso. He knew that voice. Would know it anywhere. In a crowd of thousands, he could distinguish one voice always. Nkem’s. She was here. In a room with him. And crying. Why?

“Please don’t let Tunde die,” she prayed again. “Please, God.”

Die? Okay, maybe this was a dream. No way was he going to ...

And then, as if someone waved a magic wand, his memory came flooding back in vivid detail. The thief. The gun pointed at him. Being recognized. Trying to run. Falling like a felled tree. Lying on the ground, his chest burning like a wildfire.

He’d been shot, and obviously, taken to hospital. And that’s why Nkem was

here. Of course, they called her. She was still his next of kin. Would always be. He trusted nobody like he did his ex-wife.

Focusing all his mental energy on the muscles of his eyes and legs, he tried again to open his eyes and to move his limbs. But like before, his body was a block of ice. Or a mummy. Whatever ... he was dead weight.

His frustration built as Nkem's soft sobs intensified. They tore at his heart. Once before, he'd made her cry. The day he'd admitted being unfaithful. Admitted stepping out on their marriage and having sex with a nameless, faceless woman. A woman who couldn't hold a candle to Nkem. With each word of admission, she fell back as if he'd shot her. The tears flowed from her pained eyes. And he'd cursed himself and his selfishness.

The seven-year itch. He'd always laughed at the notion. Until it happened to him. Sure, his had come a year later, on their eight wedding anniversary. But the restlessness had come. Even now, he could still pinpoint the exact moment it had crept up inside him … their anniversary holiday in the Bahamas.

Lying on the beach beside his gorgeous Nkem, and yet, surrounded by other beautiful half-naked women strutting around. Suddenly, he'd had an epiphany. He didn't want to die without ever having sex with another woman.

He'd laughed at the crazy notion when it popped into his head. Stupid. So what that Nkem had been his first and only lover. Sex with her still made his body explode with undiluted pleasure, fuelled by his endless devotion to her.

He'd caught his first glimpse of her on the line for registration at the University of Benin sixteen years ago, when he was in the third-year of medical school, and she a jambite ... a naïve first-year accounting student. He'd been captivated by her instantly, couldn't take his eyes off her … her tall stature, her smooth light-brown skin, her sexy curves.

Then, she saw him, and when he said hello, she smiled. Oh, that smile. He could still see it now, and it melted his heart now as it had then. And when she spoke back to him, he'd known that she would be his forever.

His wish had come true after several failed attempts at asking her out. And when she'd accepted his proposal, he knew he was the luckiest man on God's green earth. Nkem had been a wonderful wife and mother.

How the hell he'd let one absurd thought on a beach in the Bahamas grow and morph into him actually acting on it, he would never know. He still couldn't believe he'd let the restlessness gain hold and eat at him. That he'd actually cheated on his Nkem.

And for what? Meaningless sex that left his body physically fulfilled, but his soul empty and bleak.

"Please God, if you let him live, I'll stop hating him, stop being so angry with him … Please…"

Her heartfelt prayer brought his mind back from its troubled journey into the past. His chest tightened with another bout of pain. After all he'd put her through, Tunde had vowed never to cause another tear to fall from her beautiful brown eyes. And yet, here she was at his bedside, sobbing over him and praying to God. He didn't deserve it.

He tried to move his hand, to comfort her. Tell her he'd be alright. Ouch! Another sharp pain in his chest.

Why was he so sore there? It hurt so much. But he deserved the excruciating ache slicing through his body and soul, deserved her hatred, her anger.

It was bad enough he'd gone out one random evening and hooked up with a stranger he met in a bar, but he'd also been stupid enough not to use protection. Scared shitless that he'd contracted a disease and even more terrified of passing it on to Nkem, he'd had to come clean, to explain his jittery behaviour and strange avoidance of her.

The relief of finding out that he'd not contracted an STD, and the guilt that tortured his soul after his deceit, had scared him straight. His restless itch to explore other women had vanished instantaneously. But it had been too late. He'd lost the only woman he cared about. He'd broken her trust and she'd been unable to move past it.

Maybe he should just remain in this darkness, never come back to the land of the living. Maybe it would be best for everyone if he just faded away.

The image of his bright, funny twelve-year-old son floated in his head.

Jide! No, I can’t leave Jide.

Again, he was being selfish. Wishing to die to avoid the agony he brought upon himself. How could he even think of leaving his son without a father?

With everything in his power, Tunde tried again to open his eyes and move, willing himself to blast out of this limbo between death and life.

His lids lifted, and light flooded his eyes. His eyelids blinked like fluttering butterfly wings, and he tried to adjust his vision. At first, everything was hazy, like a filmy curtain obstructing his view. But slowly, the foggy layers dispersed, and things came into focus.

The first thing he saw was her backside, enticingly round and curvy, facing him as she knelt at a chair in the corner of the room, sobbing and muttering under her breath. Though he couldn’t catch all her words, he knew she was praying.

A surge of blood rushed downwards, causing a sharp stiffening of his dick. Shit. Even in pain and half dead, his body responded to her so viscerally. As always. But could he be blamed for reacting to such an appealing view when roused from unconsciousness?

Her tight red dress moulded nicely over her plump derriere. And he knew from years of touching her, how soft and juicy those mounds felt in his hands. Such a shame that he had lost the right to reach out and squeeze them. He had no right to even think about her that way. None at all.

Tunde parted his lips to speak, to let Nkem know he was awake … that she need not cry or pray any longer. But his throat was parched and prickly, like someone had pressed a hot iron on his tonsils and voice box. No words came out.

He tried again, but all he could manage was a low groan. Enough to capture her attention. Nkem jumped up and turned to face him, her eyes wide with surprise. She let out a gasp.

“Oh, God!” she cried out, rushing towards his bedside. “You’re awake! Thank you … oh, thank you, Jesus!”

She reached down and spread her arms around him. “God, Tunde, you scared me,” she said, and then broke into another round of sobs. “Thank God you are

alive … God is good … God is good …”

Tunde’s heart swelled with all the love he had for her. He loved this woman. With his whole being. Plain and simple. From the first day he met her, he’d become captive to this love. Her graciousness, her kindness, her propensity to always put others first. Okay, and her sexiness. Hell, everything about Nkem drew him to her.

Tears formed in his eyes and spilled from their corners. Although his body was weak and intense pain rippled through his chest, everything was right in the world again. Having Nkem hold him like this, with joy instead of coldness in her eyes, released pure pleasure into every atom of his body.

Tunde cleared his throat and tried to speak again. “Thank you, Nkem, for being here,” he managed, his voice hoarse and cracked. He opened his mouth to say more, but she stopped him.

“Please don’t try and talk too much. You’ve been out for a few hours,” she said, straightening her back. “Let me call the doctor or nurse to examine you and make sure you’re fine.”

Bloody hell, no. He didn’t want anyone else in the room. He just wanted to savour her being here like this with him. Without her guard up, or that deadly air of indifference she put up whenever they were in the same room since their separation. However, she was out of the room like a shot before he could make his mouth work again.

Moments later, she came back flanked by a young female doctor and an older female nurse. Nkem looked more composed, her face now set in a blasé but hopeful expression, like a banker speaking to a client about opening an account. His stomach roiled with disappointment. She’d already retreated behind the wall she’d built against him.

“Dr Edun, welcome back. It’s good to see that you’ve regained consciousness,” the young doctor said. “I’m Dr Lara Benson, the on-call SR, and this is Sister Aziz.”

Reluctantly, Tunde turned his gaze from Nkem to the unwanted new arrivals.

“So, do you remember what happened?” the doctor asked, walking over to his

bedside and peeking at the monitor.

Tunde nodded in response, still finding speech difficult. He didn't want to waste his energy talking to anybody but Nkem. If only he could get these two out of here, so they could be alone together like they were moments ago.

"You're a lucky man," the doctor said as she scribbled something on his case file. She was a petite, dark-skinned woman likely in her late twenties or early thirties. Dark circles under her eyes spoke of a busy night on call. "The bullet missed your heart and lungs by fragments of an inch. It literally missed all your vital organs."

She slid the stethoscope hanging around her neck into her hands and adjusted it in her ears. She moved the chest piece to different points of his upper body to listen, her eyes narrowed in concentration. When she was done, she smiled. "Normal breath and heart sounds, Dr Tunde. Thank God that stranger found you and called an ambulance. If not, you would have bled to death."

"God must be on your side, Doctor," the nurse said. "He's given you a second chance at life. There must be a reason."

Second chance at life.

Tunde swallowed hard, slowly turning his attention to Nkem. A film of tears clouded her eyes as she locked gazes with him. He knew her too well. The details of his close brush with death seemed to have shocked her out of the aloof air she'd adopted just moments ago. Of course, he understood why she always put up an emotional barrier between them since their split. It was her way of remaining resolute in her decision to keep him at bay and heal. He'd never fought it. He'd been the one that had messed up, so he had no right to disturb her healing process.

There must be a reason.

Tunde usually despised medics who spoke like this to patients, who tried to explain away natural unfortunate incidents as the plan of a mystical being beyond the control of humans.

He believed that sometimes, shitty things happened without any rhyme or reason. People were born, and people died. Simple. Nothing spectacular about

either occurrence. Except that now, he clung to those words like a lifeline. He'd almost died without another chance to try and bring his family back together, to hold and kiss Nkem again, to get her to love and trust him like she used to. He could have left this world without another chance to fix his mistake, repair the most important thing in the world to him. The thing he'd destroyed with his own selfishness. His family.

Dragging a slow breath in as he held Nkem's gaze, mechanically following the nurse's instructions to wriggle his toes and move his fingers, Tunde made an instant promise to himself.

It was time to heal his family. Time to bring them back together again.

Four



The sweet, floral scent of her perfume wafted up his nostrils seconds before she appeared in his hospital room, filling him with instant warmth. She'd come back.

His stomach lurched, and his heart began to pound in his chest. Damn, Nkem was beautiful. Dressed in a navy-blue skirt suit that complemented her fair skin tone, black high-heel pumps and her straightened hair packed in a severe bun, she looked elegant and business-like. Still, an undertone of sensuality oozed from her as she strolled into the room.

Pure joy flooded his senses at the sight of her, so much that his throat closed up, making speech difficult. Tunde swallowed hard, and brought his focus to her face. His stomach flipped again. Stunning full lips coated with nude lip gloss, that cute straight nose he'd loved to kiss right on its very tip, and the most arresting brown eyes he'd ever seen. Such a beautiful, intelligent, and kind woman. How had he managed to fuck things up so badly and lose her?

Warring emotions—love for her, sadness for the life he'd lost, anger at himself—clutched at his chest, causing him to inhale deeply. Such a sight for sore eyes.

Until this very moment, he hadn't realised how much he'd wanted her to visit him today. Of course, he'd wondered the entire evening last night whether she'd come back—knowing he had no right to expect it—but today, seeing her, he knew it was more than just a want. He needed Nkem.

She didn't need to do anything for him. He'd lost the privilege of her care and

affection, and yet, somewhere deep down, he'd hoped and prayed for her to come. And here she was, her handbag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other, a bright smile on her face. Lord above! Maybe all hope wasn't lost. Maybe he still had a fighting chance to get her back.

"Hey, Tunde," Nkem said, strolling over to his bed. "I brought you some fried plantain and eggs." She looked flustered, avoiding direct eye contact with him as she placed the black food container on the cabinet beside him. "Just in case you don't want to eat hospital food."

She retrieved a clear bottle from her bag and held it up. "I know you like chilled water. So, I kept this bottle of water in the freezer overnight. Should last you a few hours."

Tunde grinned, pleased by her thoughtfulness. "Thank you so much."

"No wahala." Still averting her gaze, she retrieved a bouquet of fresh roses from the shopping bag. "To brighten up the room," she announced.

He watched as she placed the flowers in the flowerpot on the windowsill, and busied herself arranging the petals, all the while whistling a sweet, soft tune.

And again, a surge of conflicting emotions erupted in his chest. Nkem's kindness even though he'd hurt her, her avoidance of him when all he wanted to do was haul her into his arms, and the thick air of uncertainty between them—it all added to a simmering cauldron of pain and hope that scorched him a witch's boiling brew.

He just couldn't take it any longer. He needed to talk to her. To tell her how he felt, tell her about everything he'd been thinking since he regained consciousness. He desperately wanted to open the door of candid communication between them again.

"Nkem …" he began, dragging himself more upright. Sharp pain halted his progress, and he let out a low groan, clutching the bandage across his bare chest.

She darted her gaze to him. "Careful, Tunde, don't move too fast," she said, leaning down and clutching his left arm to help him up.

Her touch sent a jolt of electricity over his skin, spreading goosebumps on his

bare flesh. A sudden, heightened sensual energy charged his entire body. As if she experienced that same spark, Nkem snatched her hand away, wide eyes locking with his.

Time stood still as they gazed at each other. Tunde could barely breathe, his heart skittering wildly like the flapping wings of a bird attempting to escape the clutches of a hungry cat. This is what he had wanted from the moment he'd woken up in the hospital to find her kneeling on the hard floor and praying for him. Nkem's undivided attention. A chance to talk to her, address what his near-death experience had created between them—an awareness of finality.

If he had died yesterday, that would have been it for them. No second chance to mend fences. No resolution of the uncertainties between them. They'd divorced two years ago, having separated two years earlier. Four long years apart that would never have happened if he hadn't hurt her. For the deep love they once had for each other, he needed to try and make things right between them.

"Nkem," he repeated. He cleared his throat, and then continued. "I … I want to talk about us —"

"Us???" she said, cutting him off and shaking her head. "Listen, Tunde. I'm here solely as your ex-wife and mother of your son. Nothing more. You're the one who left me as your next of kin."

He flinched inwardly, her flippant words piercing him deep to his soul. Clenching his jaw, he fought against the pain of her dismissal which transcended any physical pain he felt from the bullet hole in his chest.

"You should probably change it to someone else," she carried on. "I changed mine to my family. You should follow suit."

He didn't know which held more deadpan energy—her facial expression or her tone. She might as well have been an end-of-life consultant advising a new client. Except ...

Yes, there it was … in the slight tremor of her fingers, the fast-beating pulse at the base of her neck. Without them, he would have bought her detached act completely. Still, this wouldn't be easy.

Tunde sucked in a sharp breath, squeezed his eyes tightly together. Then, opened

them again. “You are my family,” he gritted, unable to contain his ire from her dismissive comment. “Nothing will ever change that.”

“Well, something did change, Tunde,” she snapped, her tone low but firm. “We’re divorced because you wanted to screw other women. Maybe you should ask one of them to be your next of kin.”

Oddly, her sharp words sliced through the tension in his body and calmed him. If he were being honest with himself, he deserved it all. Every bit of anger she’d dished out from the moment he’d confessed … he deserved it all. And more.

There were even moments he’d wanted her to hit him, to hurt him physically. Maybe if she caused him pain, it would help her forgive him.

But he knew Nkem would never lower herself that way. She embodied grace and class. No matter her anger, she always remained cool, calm, and collected. Neither of them had ever been violent. That never solved anything.

Besides, this was neither the time nor the place to hash things out. And that would give him time to think.

There had to be another way to win her over, another approach to convince her to at least consider reconciling. In the first two years of their separation, he’d tried everything … from begging, to buying expensive gifts, even enlisting mutual friends to plead his case. Nothing had worked.

Finally, she’d filed for divorce, and that’s when things got bad. He’d been gutted, cast into a pit of despair. And he’d let it paralyse him. He’d stopped fighting her wishes. Fighting for her. Instead, he’d agreed to give Nkem a healthy space to heal away from him. After all, he’d been the one to destroy their happy marriage. He couldn’t blame her for wanting out.

But now, after almost losing his life, he realised he had been a fool twice. First, for hurting her. Secondly, for just letting her go. Well, he was done with that. No, he wouldn’t get all stalkerish or creepy, or anything like that. But he had to give it one last shot.

He needed a strategy, a plan to build her trust again. Until he devised one, he had to play it safe, not push her away by aggravating her further.

“I’m sorry for —”

“Listen, Tunde, let’s not dredge up the past. It won’t do either of us any good.” She drew a long breath in, and then, smoothed her palms down her skirt. “It’s a miracle that you’re alive. Let’s celebrate it. I want you to try and rest and get better. For Jide. He needs you.”

At the mention of his son, Tunde relaxed even more. This wasn’t only about him and Nkem. There was one other person involved. Whatever he did to try and win Nkem’s trust again, he had to also make sure his son didn’t experience the toxicity of anger or pain between his parents.

“Will you bring him later to see me?”

She smiled—a genuine one that lit her face and touched her eyes, flooding him with optimism. “Of course. I’ll bring him this weekend. He’s been asking about you. He thinks that surviving a gunshot attack makes you Superman.”

Tunde chuckled. Typical of Jide to romanticise every situation. The boy would make a good writer. “Yeah, right, Superman that’s in a lot of pain and can barely move his left arm without crying like a baby.”

Nkem’s eyes softened with concern as she perused his bandaged chest. His abdominal muscles contracted. Her scrutiny of his bare skin sent a ripple of awareness through his body. Although there was nothing sensual about the way she looked at him, he could almost feel the scorching heat of her gaze.

“Does it hurt a lot? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he croaked out, clearing his throat.

He curled his fingers around the bed railing, squeezing tightly to keep himself from reaching out to touch her, to feel her soft skin in his hands once again, like he would have done if they were still married.

God! He missed her. This woman could turn him into a bundle of charged nerves with just one look. She could also make him laugh, feel pure happiness, and fill him with a sense of purpose. No other woman could ever compete.

After their separation, he’d remained celibate, shunning other women like they

were enemy combatants. He knew his cheating wasn't on them, but all owing to his own selfishness. Still, he couldn't stomach even thinking about being with another woman.

But finally, he admitted to himself, unless he planned on entering a monastery, he needed to develop a healthier attitude. Because Nkem was done with him. So, six months after they finalised their divorce, he'd started dating again … if one could call it that.

In all that time, he had never been able to connect emotionally with another woman. And it was plain as the nose on his face, he never would again.

And that's when Yemisi and the perfect arrangement came along. Or so he thought. Maybe he'd been naive, but she knew the deal. And he knew it was pointless searching for anything deeper than the physical. Only one woman could meet all his needs—only Nkem.

"Take things easy today and make sure you take the pain medications the doctors prescribed, Tunde," she advised, pulling his mind back to the present. "There's no prize for suffering in silence."

Tunde's lips twisted into a snicker. Nkem knew him too well. He hadn't touched the tramadol he'd been prescribed today. Instead, he'd resigned himself to the pain from his wound, his way of constantly reminding himself that he could have lost it all, died without reconciling with Nkem, bringing his family back together.

"I'll try to," he said.

She huffed. "Ha, I know lip service when I hear it. Remember, I know you."

Tunde curved his lips into a half-smile, revelling in the easy familiarity her remark produced within him. Indeed, they'd known each other for over fifteen years. "You're right. I hate medication."

"Says the doctor who prescribes them for others."

He laughed, a heartfelt laugh that came from deep inside his belly, the type he'd not experienced for years, borne of the sheer pleasure of her teasing. Like when they were a couple

Not so for Nkem apparently. She stiffened and took a step away from his bed, her face plastered over with that neutral mask. Peeking at her silver, chain wristwatch, she shook her head. “I have to leave for work now, or I’ll be late.”

And just like that, she was gone. Oh, still standing there, but gone. Nkem had retreated into her shell. Most likely, she’d reminded herself not to get too caught up with him. To keep her distance emotionally.

Guilt and disappointment clawed at his insides. God, how stupid he’d been.

He wanted her to stay, wanted to talk and hash all this out. They belonged together. And he longed to tell her he intended to scale the wall between them.

But that might only push her further away. No, he needed a plan, more than mere words. Besides, Nkem should leave before the traffic built up. As a manager in the Lagos Ministry of Finance, she had an example to set.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “And for everything.”

She nodded, folding the shopping bag into her tote before swinging it over her elegant shoulder. “I’ll drop by on my way back from work.”

Excitement flooded his senses. She would be back again today. He couldn’t wait.

Five



Nkem stared at the desktop's bright display screen, but it was no use. The words of the opened document jumbled together through the cloud of tears.

Grunting in annoyance at herself, she snatched a tissue from the box on her desk and dabbed at her eyes. God, she needed to focus. She'd barely managed to get to her office on time, and had bustled up the stairway and through the corridor to find her boss, Mr Olumide, standing at her office door. A frown tugged his lips downwards.

"Yes, yes, good morning," he'd replied to her greeting, waving his hand like he had no time for pleasantries. "I've emailed a financial report to you that needs to be approved by Monday. Just wanted to make sure you received it."

If the man spent more time doing real work than he did kissing the asses of higher ups, he might have been able to do this himself. He pushed too much work off on her. But what could she do about it? Regardless of the unfairness of it all, she needed to finalise this report by the end of the day. If not, there went her weekend. And one thing she didn't want to ever do was infringe on quality time with Jide.

Blowing out a sigh, she tossed the tissue into the dustbin and leaned forward, reaching for the desktop mouse. Nkem scrolled through the first page, spotting three discrepancies in the document. She clicked on the database to search for the accurate information, then made the necessary corrections.

Before long, the image of Tunde in the hospital popped into her mind, distracting

her once more. Tears gathered in her eyes again, blocking her view.

“Shit!” Nkem muttered, reaching for another tissue.

Since the moment she’d rushed into the hospital to find Tunde lying helpless on the bed, a heavy bandage draped around his chest and looking frail and lifeless, the waterworks had started and wouldn’t stop. And her concentration on anything other than him had been shot to hell.

He could have died yesterday. The man she’d adored almost half her life, the father of her only child, could have passed away while she held so much resentment in her heart. She could have lost him, never having a chance to truly forgive him. Could she have lived with herself if that had happened?

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Nkem swatted them away, not caring that her foundation was being swiped away with each stroke of the tissue on her face. Seeing Tunde so weak, so vulnerable, had cracked the armour she’d carefully welded around her heart since that dreadful day he’d come into the kitchen, head bowed, eyes bleak with shame and regret.

Four years ago, and yet, like yesterday. She could still feel the shock spiralling down her body when he’d said the words that had shattered her heart into pieces.

“Nkem, I’m so sorry … so sorry but I need to tell you. I had sex with another woman and I —”

She’d not heard much after his opening line. Her heart galloped like a touted horse on its way to the win, her head buzzed, and her ears rang. She’d sunk into a heap on the floor, covering her face as a howl of pain broke free from her chest and tore through the air.

Something inside Nkem broke that day. Not just her heart. Something more. She just didn’t know what.

Several days later, she was still broken. And numb. Lifeless even. Like a doll without a will of her own. She remembered allowing Tunde to embrace her, kiss her, murmur words of reassurance. Some of which still got a rise out of her whenever she remembered them.

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“I’m so stupid. I love you. She didn’t mean anything.”

“It was just sex. Nothing like what we have together. I love you forever.”

Then, she knew what else he’d broken. Her sense of self.

Self-doubt had consumed her. Why had Tunde strayed? Hadn’t she been good enough? Did he find her lacking sexually? Emotionally?

Finally, came suspicion. Was it the first time? Had there been others? Did he have other secrets he was keeping from her? Maybe another family stashed away somewhere …

Even then, she fought her doubts, letting herself be reassured by his constant fawning over her, believing his assurance that it had been a one-time thing, that he would never stray again … until the final results of the STD tests he’d taken cleared him of any disease.

That very night, he’d tried to make love to her for the first time after his sickening revelation. As they lay in bed, his fingers grazed her upper thigh. And in that exact moment, every emotion bottled up inside flew out like a vengeful genie whose urn had been opened. Raging fury consumed her—body and soul—all numbness and lifelessness vanishing.

His touch had been like the extra plug that short circuited her entire system and sparked a conflagration. Her insides squirming at the thought of him ever touching her again, Nkem sprang up from the bed and ran out of the room.

That was the night Tunde moved out. And now, so many years later, the betrayal still burned bright—fresh, raw, painful.

She loved Tunde.

She hated him, too.

How could her feelings about a man who’d betrayed her still be so strong? She should have moved on by now, shouldn’t she?

Her phone shimmied with a call in silent mode, breaking into her reverie. Nkem glanced at it and her heart jerked at the text that flashed on the screen.

Arinze: Hello Sunshine, I have two front row tickets to Basket Mouth's comedy show for this Sunday. Are you free?

God. She'd completely forgotten about Arinze. Her boyfriend. The man she should be thinking about instead of Tunde.

Nkem picked up her phone, staring at the message for several seconds as if she could reply with her eyes. She wanted to type yes. It would be a fun outing, sitting with a handsome man interested in her, laughing as Basket Mouth cracked jokes to an intimate audience. She enjoyed spending time with Arinze, liked how thoughtful he was. Why did she feel a rumble churning in her tummy with emotions uncomfortably akin to guilt?

It seemed as if she was cheating herself of something wonderful by wanting a broken replacement. Like a little girl with a perfect birthday cake on the table in front of her, longing instead for a crumbled cookie that had fallen on the floor.

Nkem breathed in and out slowly and began to tap on the screen, pressing send immediately after.

Nkem: Oh, how amazing, Arinze, but I won't be free. I'm working this weekend. Rain check?

Nkem swallowed back the bile of guilt that surged to her throat. Why had she lied to Arinze? Why couldn't she tell this nice man that her ex-husband was in hospital, and that she wanted—no, needed—to spend the weekend there with him and their son? Arinze was a considerate man. He would understand that it didn't mean anything, that she was simply being there for her ex, the father of her son and nothing more. Wouldn't he?

She twisted her lips, silently berating herself for not being completely honest

with Arinze, for allowing the situation with Tunde's near death to turn her inside out, shake the foundation she'd built in her quest to move on from him.

Her phone vibrated in her hand, snagging back her attention.

▪

Arinze: Oh, how disappointing. I would have loved to see you this weekend. I miss you.

▪

Her mouth went dry. She used to love hearing Arinze say that, whether in person or through texts. He was a man she could see herself moving on with, someone who could help her forget Tunde. She'd blushed with pleasure when she'd woken up yesterday with a text from him telling her he missed her and wanted to have dinner with her. Now, just a day later, the same words filled her with worry, confused her. Should she slow down? Take a step back from their relationship? Maybe call it off entirely?

A jolt ran through her at that last thought. Nkem shook her head. No way! She had a right to move on too. To find a new husband, and build a new family. She didn't need to keep clinging onto the past with a man who hurt her deeply.

Grinding her jaw with determination, Nkem drummed her recently manicured fingernails on the phone screen, typing rapidly. She would not jeopardise this relationship with Arinze. Not when it could be her one true chance of finding happiness again.

▪

Nkem: I miss you too. FaceTime this evening? I'm at work now and the boss is riding my ass.

▪

▪

Arinze: You want me to use my connections to get him fired?

▪

▪

Nkem: What? You would do that for me?

-

-

Arinze: Yep. I'd do anything for you.

-

-

Nkem: Awww … Such a powerful man, yet so sweet. I love that. But abeg ooo, don't fire my boss because of me. I don't want wahala.

-

-

Arinze: Okay. But tell him to treat you well or there'll be hell to pay.

-

-

Nkem: Oh, how sexy. And romantic. *Kiss emoji*.

-

-

Arinze: Can't wait to FaceTime. You've made me finally buy an iPhone when I prefer Samsung. The power of love.

-

Nkem's heart sank. The L word. This was Arinze's first time using it with her. Love? He couldn't possibly love her already. Could he? Nkem wasn't sure she was ready for such deep emotions between them. Or maybe she was sure. She wasn't anywhere near there yet.

Part of her wanted to address this, talk about the discrepancy in the intensity of emotions they felt for each other, but another part of her worried about pushing Arinze away. She really liked him. No, she didn't love him now, but that didn't mean she couldn't fall in love with him later.

-

Arinze: I have to go now. Important meeting. I'll invite Oke to the comedy show

instead. Hope you don’t mind.

-

She blew out a puff of relief as she typed her reply. Thank God Arinze changed the subject. No need to dwell on his tossing around the L word willy nilly. At least not yet.

-

Nkem: Of course not. She’ll enjoy it for me and tell me all about it. Thanks for thinking of me.

-

-

Arinze: Anytime. See you at the fundraising anyway.

-

-

Nkem: Can’t wait.

-

-

Arinze: *Heart emoji*

-

-

Nkem: *Kiss emoji*

-

Holding the phone, Nkem stared at her and Arinze’s last replies. Without a doubt, she knew he’d fallen for her. Something didn’t feel right about continuing to date him when she didn’t feel the same way yet.

Heaving her shoulders in dismay she forced her attention back to the computer. She needed to focus on her work and keep both Tunde and Arinze out of her mind biko.

Without this job, she would have imploded during her divorce. The distraction of work had been a lifesaver then, and in a way, still was. She loved sorting out the finances of the Lagos state government and balancing the books. Nothing like numbers to keep the mind busy and help to forget personal problems.

She clicked open the document again, this time determined to keep her mind where it belonged.

Six



“Daddy!”

The minute he saw his father, Jide took off like a shot from a cannon. He hurled himself onto the bed and flung his arms around Tunde. Nkem couldn’t help but smile at her son’s excitement. And give a silent sigh of relief. Thank God her son still had his father.

“Careful, Jide,” she said, laughing. “Your dad is still in bandages.”

“Oh, I don’t mind a little pain from hugging my little man,” Tunde quipped, embracing his son tightly.

Nkem stood at the corner of the room watching their tender exchange. She loved seeing her son bonding with his father. It didn’t matter how furious she’d been with Tunde during the early stages of their separation, she’d vowed never to interfere with their father-son relationship. She loved her boy too much to deny him something so important.

Worried about Jide’s reaction to seeing his father in the hospital for the first time, Nkem had initiated a conversation on the drive over, trying to prepare him. Looks like she had worried herself for nothing. Jide hadn’t missed a beat. Wasn’t at all reticent with the situation or his dad.

Although Tunde still had a bandage over his bare chest, he looked a lot brighter than he had yesterday. His glossy mahogany skin had regained its lustre. He’d shaved his head bald—as he usually did because of its early greying—but had

left the stubble on his jaw. The combination lent him a sexy, virile look. Sitting upright on his bed, his unbandaged arm around his son and a wide grin on his face, Tunde looked well on his way to recovery.

He jerked his head in her direction, locking gazes with hers. Nkem's heart careened into her chest. Damn. How could it still be so? Whenever he looked at her like that, adrenaline flooded her nerves, raising her pulse rate to at least double time. Tunde had piercing dark eyes the shade of black opal, and his focus on her right now was so intense that it seemed to strip her of her ability to breathe. Her lips parted involuntarily to gather more air into her lungs.

"Thank you," he mouthed.

Nkem took a long breath in, trying to steady her nerves as she nodded. She knew exactly what he was thanking her for—bringing Jide to spend time with him on a perfectly lovely Saturday afternoon when she could have been doing something else. But really, it wasn't a huge deal. She wanted her son to be with his father.

You also want to be here.

Nkem ignored the voice in her head. This wasn't about her, but about her son and his father. Despite the undercurrents between them, she and Tunde had developed an excellent co-parenting relationship. Not once had they been on different pages when it came to their son. Today, she knew bringing Jide here was just what the doctor ordered for both father and son. That it would make each of them happy. So, she'd kept the weekend free to do just that.

Thank God she'd never listened to her two aunties and their horrible advice.

"He hurt you. Now you hurt him. Deny him access to Jide," her father's younger sister Aunty Cynthia had advised. "You want to destroy a man? Take their money and their children."

Nkem hadn't even bothered to respond. She didn't want to hurt Tunde. Never had, never would. She just couldn't move past his betrayal, couldn't believe that he would break her heart after all the years they'd spent together. That was why she filed for a divorce. She didn't want her son living in a home were his parents only endured each other. She'd lived with parents who loved and were loyal and faithful to each other. She didn't want any less for her son. But that didn't mean she wanted her son's father out of the picture either.

“Daddy, did you get to keep the bullet?” Jide asked with wide eyes.

Kids … little experts at breaking up a moment.

Tunde’s eyes flared one more time with an unbroken, steady gaze. An almost electric spark flowed from the gaze, and Nkem’s cheeks heated up from its intensity. Just when she didn’t think she could bear it any more, Tunde broke the connection and turned his attention to their son. She wondered what he’d been thinking in those moments. Memories, like her, maybe?

“God, no,” Tunde said, grimacing in mock horror. “Why would I ever want to keep something that reminds me of such terror?”

“For investigation, Dad. So the police can match it with other victims.”

“Ah! So clever, my son. Didn’t even consider that. You should be a detective.”

“Yes, I want to be the IG of police when I grow up, and solve all the crimes in Nigeria.”

“I’m sure you will be great at it, Son.” Tunde ruffled Jide’s bushy ’fro. “The doctors did give the bullet to the police. So, hopefully, they’ll get the evil man who tried to hurt your daddy.”

“I hope so, too. And the judge should sentence him to a hundred years in jail without parole.”

Nkem caught and held Tunde’s gaze above their son’s head. Then, as if a twin switch flipped in both of them, they burst into simultaneous laughter.

“Biko, where did you learn the word parole?” she asked Jide, still shaking with amusement.

“There’s a new crime show on YouTube. With teenage undercover investigators. Those guys are so brave, solving crime and helping the police.”

“You watch too much TV.” Tunde wiped away the tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes.

“Not TV, Dad. YouTube.” Jide shook his head. “There’s a difference, you know.”

She and Tunde locked eyes and burst out into a new round of laughter. She knew they were commiserating over the same thing.

And so it's begun. To our son, we're old farts.

When the laughter finally died down, Nkem felt a flutter in her belly. It came from sheer joy enveloping every fibre of her. It had been a long time since the three of them laughed together like this.

After she and Tunde split, Nkem had limited their interactions whenever he came to pick up Jide for her own sanity, her own survival. She'd remained aloof, maintaining a safe distance—physically and emotionally. She couldn't relax around him, worried her resolve to follow through with the divorce might crumble. He'd been persistent in his apologies, trying frantically to win her forgiveness. But she willed herself not to cave in, still too devastated by his betrayal.

Even when they attended Jide's school functions, she made sure to sit as far away from Tunde as possible. She knew how crazy it seemed—avoiding him like he actually had contracted an STD—but she also knew her own body and mind's susceptibility to him. Every time she saw him, she longed for him, wanted him, but she fought it with everything she had.

Because no way was she going to end up a statistic. Another weak woman forgiving a cheating spouse. She'd vowed never to be like her sister, Lotanna, who looked the other way while her husband constantly disrespected her with lies and infidelity. Never.

A movement by the door snagged Nkem's attention, and she cast her gaze sideways to find a doctor in blue scrubs and a white-gowned nurse entering the room.

"Hey, Dr Silas," Tunde said, clearly pleased to see the surgeon who had saved his life.

Nkem had come to learn that Dr Silas's swift response in the operating room had been what saved Tunde from bleeding to death.

"Hope you're coming to discharge me today," Tunde continued.

The robust surgeon with a thick ’fro and a protruding belly grinned. “Why are you in such a hurry to leave us?”

His moustache moved over his lips, reminding Nkem of Hercule Poirot, a recurring character in Agatha Christie’s detective novels. She’d devoured those books as a teenager.

“Apparently, you’ve never been a patient here, Doctor. Otherwise, you’d know the answer.” Tunde leaned towards Dr Silas and cupped his lips as if about to reveal a big secret. Then, he spoke loudly. “The food here sucks.”

Dr Silas and the nurse bellowed out laughter at Tunde’s candour. Nkem smiled. She missed seeing this side of Tunde. The relaxed, unperturbed swag that she’d fallen in love with from the moment she’s spied him on registration day in Uni. He’d strutted up to her in faded jeans and a red t-shirt looking all tall, chocolatey-delicious dark, and ruggedly handsome. She’d been captivated by his swagger, enthralled by his intelligence. Of course, she’d played hard to get for a few weeks when he’d asked her to be his girlfriend, but she’d known on that first day just how things stood. She wanted him.

“Well, then. I guess I come bearing good news,” Dr Silas said as he approached Tunde’s bedside. “Your blood test results are back. Your HB is back to normal. The physiotherapists are also happy with your progress. So, you can be discharged very soon. Possibly tomorrow or the day after. Still waiting on the results of a few more tests and the final police report.”

Nkem sighed. What a relief. Tunde was going to be okay. She’d been worried sick about him, praying constantly for a complete recovery. He’d lost so much blood, he needed four blood transfusions during surgery. That had really brought home how dangerously close to death he had been. Nkem couldn’t thank everyone in the hospital enough for all they had done.

“So how soon can I get back to work? Perform surgeries?” Tunde asked.

“Slow down, bro,” the doctor replied with a wry smile. “I’m sure you’re eager to get back to business as usual, but you’ll need at-home physiotherapy for at least four weeks before being cleared to work again.”

“No, I can’t sit idly at home that long. I’m a surgeon.”

Nkem bit back an annoyed grunt. “Tunde abeg, listen to Dr Silas. You have to slow things down ’til you’re completely healed. It’s only been three days o. Hian!”

“Listen to your wife, Tunde,” Dr Silas said, tossing a commiserating smile and nod her way. He looked back at Tunde. “When you get home, no doing too much, especially heavy lifting. No need for any machismo. Let Madam take care of you, okay?”

Nkem tensed, opening her mouth to quickly correct the doctor, to say she wasn’t still married to Tunde. But the man continued talking, squashing any chance. She pressed her lips back shut again.

A quick peek at Tunde and she found his gaze on her, searching her face for a response. Her pulse jerked, and her mouth suddenly went dry. The doctor’s assumption that they were still married had also caught him off guard. She saw it in the tightening of his jaw muscles. Had he wanted her to refute the doctor’s statement? Should she have? Nkem had no clue what he was thinking.

“When we discharge you, you have to take things easy. Daily physio for two weeks. No work until you are cleared, okay?”

Slowly, Tunde shifted his gaze back to the doctor and nodded his agreement. “Okay. Whatever you say, Doc.”

Nkem’s stomach roiled as she watched the nurse check Tunde’s blood pressure and the doctor pull off his stethoscope and listen to his breathing.

The doctor’s advice was sensible, but could Tunde cope alone at home? He lived on the top floor of a penthouse apartment building, and although it sported a functioning elevator, what would he do once there? Tunde was still bedridden. No way he could take care of himself.

He’d lived there since he’d moved out, leaving Jide and her in the four-bedroom home they’d shared for several years. Having been to Tunde’s place once, she knew he would struggle doing things for himself. For sure, the two-bedroom apartment was modern and high tech, but all those amenities couldn’t take care of a man recovering from a gunshot wound.

Fragments from the bullet had also pierced his forearm, so his arm was

bandaged, and in a sling, leaving him with less dexterity. Plus, he was weak. Nkem just didn't see how he could take care of himself and heal properly on his own.

"Your vital signs are all normal, as well as your temperature. Your ECG this morning was also normal."

The doctor's booming voice filled the room, but Nkem barely heard him. Her mind whirled in circles as she considered alternatives to Tunde staying at home alone. His mother lived in Ibadan, and cared for an ailing husband. His only sibling Busola lived in London with her family, so that was out of the question.

"I'm feeling very positive that you'll be ready for release tomorrow, Tunde," Dr Silas remarked, scribbling on the file in his hand. "I'll start getting your discharge paperwork ready."

"Thank you, Doctor," Tunde said, extending his hand to Dr Silas.

"Thanks for looking after my dad," Jide said.

"Don't mention." Dr Silas patted Jide's shoulder, as he simultaneously shook Tunde's hand. "A big miracle you survived this, Doctor Edun. Please ensure you take time to rest and heal."

"I'll make sure he does," Nkem said.

Tunde darted his gaze to hers, a quizzical arch of his eyebrow. Nkem ignored the look and focused on the doctor. "Thank you for looking after him, Dr Silas," she said.

"You're most welcome," he replied.

With a final nod and wave, he exited the room, the nurse following silently after him. Nkem turned her attention from the door to find Tunde and Jide studying her curiously.

"Why are you both looking at me like I have two heads?" she asked with a shrug and a cheeky smile. She pointed at Tunde's torso. "Of course, I can't let you stay alone in your tiny apartment with that heavy bandage on your chest and arm."

She strolled closer to his bedside. “You can come home and stay with us until you heal.”

Tunde’s eyes widened in shock.

Jide leapt up from the bed clapping his hands eagerly. “Do you mean it, Mummy? Is Daddy really coming home to stay with us?”

Nkem’s cheeks warmed. Her son’s excitement at the prospect of his father coming to live with them—even if only for a time—was apparent. God, she’d not realised how much he wanted that until this exact moment. The back of her throat prickled from the surge of emotions that rose from her belly. Although she loved the sheer pleasure on Jide and Tunde’s faces at the news, she needed to clarify the details.

“Only until he is better, Son,” she said, stroking Jide’s cheek with her thumb.

Nkem switched her focus to Tunde. “Are you okay with staying with us for a short while?” she asked him.

Myriad emotions flitted in his eyes in rapid succession as he gazed at her. Surprise, elation, disbelief, and then, concern. He brushed his palm over his face and shook his head as if still unsure he’d heard her suggestion correctly.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose. I think I can manage on my —”

Nkem cut him off with a wave of her hand. “I don’t mind at all. And why the hell not? Shebi I’m still your next of kin?” She gave him a playful wink. “I’d be doing a bad job of it if I didn’t make sure you get better.”

His face split into a bright grin. “That’s awesome, Nkem. Thank you.”

Seven



Too many people in the room with too many opinions. Tunde squeezed his eyes shut, trying to fight a headache gathering steam at his temples.

Today was a good day. Discharge Day.

Now, he stood in his bedroom. His best friends laughed, talked, and busied themselves helping him pack so he could move back home.

Home. With Nkem. And Jide.

That's where he really belonged, instead of living in this tiny apartment. He'd endured the place for four years. Sure, it was small, but that wasn't the real problem. Buckingham Palace would have been no different. Anywhere apart from the only woman he'd ever loved, and the precious child they had created together, would be excruciating. And it could never be home.

Home. She was waiting for him there, preparing the guest room for him.

Sure, he wished for different circumstances—for a more romantic return to the family home—but right now, Tunde would take what he could get and be grateful for it. No, not just grateful … thrilled with it all.

For now, why she'd invited him didn't really matter. A second chance had fallen in his lap—the time and space to get closer to Nkem and win her over. That's what truly mattered to him. Why did his friends find it so difficult to understand?

“Do you really think this is a good idea, Tunde?” Segun asked.

Tunde let out a sigh. Of course, Segun had only his best interests at heart, but the question still frustrated him. His friend and business partner stood, leaning against the door frame, a can of cider in his hand.

“Damn it, my guy,” Tunde said as he dragged his shirt from a hanger in the wardrobe and walked slowly to the bed where his open suitcase lay. He threw the shirt in. “I thought you came here to help me pack, not act as my goddamn shrink.”

“But Segun’s right, Tunde,” Oke chimed in. His other partner and friend retrieved the shirt he’d thrown into the suitcase and folded it neatly before placing it back.

Blowing out another irate sigh, Tunde turned to Oke and twisted his lips into a snicker. He shook his head as he looked between his friends. He loved Segun and Oke like family, but sometimes, they were too much in each other’s and his business for his liking.

The three of them were the only Nigerians in the plastic surgery training program at NY-Presbyterian over a decade ago and had formed a fast friendship. They trusted each other so much that upon their return to Nigeria, they’d agreed to set up Blossom Health, a private cosmetic surgery centre in Lagos.

At first, it had been tough navigating the business aspect of their practice; however, as time went on, they’d employed a crackerjack team of clinical and non-clinical staff that had boosted their reputation as one of the best in the country. Over time, they’d even gradually increased their recognition throughout West Africa.

Despite their mounting success, the three partners had managed to remain close, making sure to be involved in one another’s lives outside of work. But sometimes, their different personalities challenged their friendship.

Segun was the youngest of the three. He was also a genius. His year’s top graduate from University of Lagos’s medical school, he’d achieved so much in the medical field at just thirty-four years old, including being awarded the medical council’s Outstanding Surgeon of the Year for two years running.

Still, the young, successful, and single plastic surgeon lived a reclusive life. Though the man was a definite catch—tall, athletic and handsome—Tunde had never known him to have a girlfriend. Which was odd because the women were always in hot pursuit. Segun just never let himself be caught.

In contrast, Oke played the field. Beautiful, petite, and in her mid-thirties, she enjoyed variety, saying she never wanted to settle down with just one man. According to her, love was a dangerous emotion for women. He and Segun had dubbed her the female Casanova. She'd broken many a heart with her free-wheeling attitude toward relationships.

The last fellow who'd had the misfortune of falling in love with Oke had been so devastated when she'd turned down his marriage proposal that he'd actually left the country. Tunde might not understand Oke's personal life, but he accepted it. Besides, the girl had mad surgical skills.

Yep, his partners were excellent at their jobs. Great friends, too. Tunde would forever be grateful he'd met them. But right now, as they eyed him with concern etched deep in their faces, he felt like a Petri dish specimen. Given half a chance, he would like to konk both their heads with his knuckles. After all, he was a grown man of thirty-seven, older than both of them. They had no business giving him any advice about his personal life.

He snickered as his gaze rested on Oke. "You too? Why don't you think I should move back home?"

"It's just a bad idea, if you ask me," Oke quipped, snagging another shirt from the hanger in his wardrobe and folding it. "Nkem's my friend, too, Tunde. Don't you think she deserves to move on from you?"

"Move on?" Tunde's heart skipped a beat. "Is she seeing someone serious?"

"Oh, no you don't. Nope. Not happening." Oke shook her head—any harder and it might do a complete 360 like in that movie … The Exorcist. She raised her hand in protest, like a lawyer about to yell Objection in a dramatic courtroom movie. "You will not put me in the middle or wheedle any gist out of me about Nkem. Never! I'm loyal to you both."

"And yet, here you are, advising me to stay away from Nkem. You're too much in the damn middle as it is already."

“Boo hoo hoo. Cry me a river. You both are my dear friends, whom I love equally. Besides, I don’t give relationship advice, as I can hardly call myself an expert on the topic.” She lifted her slender shoulders in a nonchalant half shrug. “I’m only saying, there might be a better option than moving back home with Nkem and disrupting her life.”

“Disrupting her life?” Tunde shook his head at Oke’s comment. “That’s not what I’m trying to do at all. Nkem extended the offer, and I couldn’t turn her down. Not when I wanted to agree wholeheartedly. And besides, what other options do I have? Eh? Moving in with my parents?”

“Yes, what’s wrong with going home to Ibadan to stay with your parents until you recover?” She gazed at him with incredulity. “According to the doctors, you should be better in only about four weeks.”

“You mean apart from the fact that my mother is sixty-seven years old and looking after a frail seventy-two-year-old husband? I can’t do that to them.”

Segun cleared his throat loudly, drawing their attention to him. “And what about your sister? Can’t she fly in from London for a short while?” he asked, his voice low and reflective.

Shaking his head, Tunde sucked his teeth. “An even worse suggestion. She has four kids. And her husband is lazy as hell. She can’t leave them with him. Plus, I don’t want to be a burden to her.”

“So, being a burden to Nkem is preferable?” asked Oke in the no-nonsense lilt she usually adopted whenever talking to a difficult patient.

Tunde stiffened at her question. His stomach plummeted as he met Oke’s gaze. “Did Nkem say that I would be a burden?”

“No, she did not, and don’t put words in my mouth, Tunde,” Oke said with a swift shake of her head. She took a step closer and pinned him with her eyes. “You should have seen Nkem this morning, whistling in excitement as she skittered about getting the downstairs guest room ready for you. The babe was vacuuming the carpet and changing bedsheets and pillows like a happy housewife …” Oke rolled her eyes. “You are setting her back when she should be moving on.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Tunde blew out an exasperated breath. “What the hell is wrong with you, Oke? Why are you so desperate to split up my family?”

“You did that yourself when you decided to fuck someone else, Tunde,” she spat out. “Don’t put that on me.”

Hearing the anger in Oke’s voice as she reminded him of his role—and his role alone—in his marriage’s demise, took Tunde aback. He drew a slow breath in, held it a few seconds, and let it out. He needed to calm down. Oke didn’t have a thing to do with his failed marriage. It was all on him. In fact, he owed her a debt of gratitude for supporting Nkem through the devastation of his betrayal while remaining his friend. His bad decision had put Oke in a difficult position and she’d navigated it all with aplomb and grace.

“Yeah, you’re right. I messed up. It’s my fault that I’m begging for crumbs of affection from Nkem when I had the privilege of eating out of the palm of her hand.” Tunde slumped on the bed, his shoulders drooping in defeat. “I … I … I want her back, Oke. Am I a selfish bastard for wanting to patch things up with my wife?”

“Ex-wife,” she muttered, folding a pair of jeans and tucking it into the suitcase. “And yes, you’re selfish.”

“Oke, that’s harsh—” Segun began in protest.

“No, let her finish,” Tunde cut in.

He wanted to hear Oke’s honest perspective on this. Although she’d never minced words about her distaste for his cheating, she’d never really confronted him as Nkem’s friend. He needed to hear a woman’s point of view. Or at least, any woman apart from his mother and sister who had all but called Nkem a witch for leaving him. Neither of them had ever called him out for cheating on his wife.

He’d expected his mother’s response. Raised in a polygamous family and a different era, plus her own husband having strayed several times and fathered ten children outside his marriage, his mother could be somewhat excused. But his younger sister Busola, who usually spoke vehemently against infidelity, hadn’t issued a word of reproach to him either. Yesterday, she’d even had the nerve to twist her mind and somehow blame Nkem for his gunshot wound.

“What would you be doing in a hotel in the first place if your wife hadn’t divorced you and forced you out of your own house?” Busola had said on the phone. “If you’d been at home with your family, you wouldn’t have been out at night being attacked by robbers.”

“Too bad your theory has a gaping hole in it, dear sister,” he’d countered. “I was also out whoring with another woman at night when I was still with Nkem. So, don’t you dare blame her for this, or you and I ...”

He’d let the threat hang in the air. She knew what he’d been about to say.

Indeed, some selfish part of him appreciated his family’s support despite his error of judgment. But deep down, they’d disappointed him. That not one of them had taken him to task for breaking his marriage vows, and instead, saved their anger for Nkem … well, what was wrong with them?

Standing here listening to his friend speak without sugar-coating the situation only increased his desire to fix things. Instead of making himself out to be the victim, when in reality, he’d been the aggressor, he just wanted … no needed … to fix things.

“Nkem offered her home to you because she’s a sweet, caring person, Tunde” Oke said, walking over to the shoe rack by his bed and lifting his brown loafers from the rails. She placed them neatly inside the shoe box beside his suitcase. “That doesn’t mean she wants to get back together with you. Don’t use it as an opportunity for your own selfish gain.”

“So, what’s your point, Oke? That I’d be wrong for trying to get Nkem back, plead for her forgiveness, and mend the rift between us?”

“Nope, that’s not what I’m saying at all.”

Tunde shrugged, still unsure of his friend’s bottom line message. “Then what exactly do you mean? I see this as an opportunity to try and bring my family back together again. Shouldn’t I take it? Wouldn’t you if you were in my position?”

Segun cleared his throat again, his usual way of diffusing any of the turbulent arguments that frequently rose between his friends. Still holding his can of beer, he strolled over and sank onto the bed beside Tunde.

“What our lovely friend Oke is trying to say, albeit tactlessly, is that…” Hearing Oke’s grunt of protest, he stopped for a second and gave her a look. Then he turned back to Tunde, patted his shoulder and continued. “… is that you should not assume just because Nkem is being her usual lovely self by asking you to move back home, that she wants to reconcile and rekindle her relationship with you.”

“Amen!” Oke flung her hands upwards like a zealous worshipper in a Pentecostal church. “That’s all I’m saying. You hurt her badly. This should never be about you, but about HER. Does she want you back? Make sure she does first before you make any move on her.”

Tunde swallowed hard, silently mulling Oke’s last piece of advice. His friend was absolutely correct. He needed to be certain that Nkem wanted the same thing as he did. For them to get back together.

Eight



Surely, a thousand needles piercing the lining of her stomach couldn't possibly be worse than the acid eroding her insides right now. Anxiety knotted Nkem's gut as she sat beside her son on the sitting room sofa.

She pressed her palm over her lower abdomen, trying to quell some of the anxiety burning her gut. How utterly nerve wracking to think of Tunde moving back here again after his four-year absence.

Swallowing hard, she swept her gaze around the spacious sitting room. The walls were now painted a pale shade of yellow rather than the off-white colour they'd been when he had lived here. Brown leather sofas replaced the previous white upholstered furniture, and she'd got rid of the marble centre table, replacing it with the oval pine wood that sat at the centre of the room.

She'd pretty much done everything to erase Tunde's presence from this house, including taking down all his pictures, leaving only the massive portrait of her and Jide on the wall opposite where they now sat.

However, despite all her efforts to remove any essence of Tunde, his presence lingered everywhere in this house like the persistent smell of smoke after a fire. Bizarre, but in the four years of his absence, she had on many occasions wandered onto the upstairs balcony, subconsciously hoping to find him in his favourite corner, comfortably ensconced in his recliner, reading a book.

Nkem sighed, and crossed her ankles. For the hundredth time, she wondered what the hell had possessed her to invite Tunde to stay with her when she knew

she hadn’t completely exorcised him from her heart. Why on earth offer to bring him closer, and mess with the fragile wall she’d built to protect herself from her misguided, yet persistent and unquenchable, thirst for him?

Dragging in a calming breath, Nkem peeked at her watch … 5:30 p.m. Soon, Tunde would walk through the door and back into her world again, her personal space.

Could she really do this? Stay in the same house with Tunde for four weeks without all her pent-up emotions bursting to the surface? It was bad enough when he wasn’t here. Despite her carefully erected facade, the pain of his betrayal and the devastation he’d wrought hadn’t erased him from her head or her heart.

Their divorce and the distance between them hadn’t done a thing to lessen the extremes of emotions that thoughts of him always conjured up. Time had neither tamed her lust for his body, nor dampened her longing for his presence. How on earth could she cope seeing him every day and having him within reach without totally crumbling?

“When is Daddy getting here?” Jide asked, his squeaky voice evidence of his enthusiasm.

“Any moment now,” Nkem murmured, lowering her head to peck his forehead.

“Ewww, Mum, your red lipstick,” her son protested, wiping his forehead in horror. “I hope there’s no stain on my face.”

Nkem chuckled at her son’s antics. “No, dear. You’ve wiped it all off.”

“But why are you all dressed up on a Sunday evening, Mum? Is it because Dad is coming?”

Nkem’s cheeks heated up at her son’s perceptiveness. How accurate. As soon as she and Jide returned from the morning church service, she’d rushed to her bedroom for another shower, and then rummaged her wardrobe until she found the perfect outfit—a blue-and-white, knee-length gown that flaunted her generous curves to advantage. She’d also taken extra time with her hair and makeup, including making sure to apply her Mac ruby-red matte lipstick—Tunde’s absolute favourite.

She couldn’t even deny it to herself. Her outfit choice had been strategically made with Tunde in mind. She knew his taste—what made his eyes widen in helpless admiration—and had used the knowledge to her advantage. Silly? Probably, but she couldn’t help it. She’d been doing so since their separation, ensuring she always looked good whenever she saw him. No way would she let him know how insecure his cheating had made her feel, how much it had knocked her confidence.

“No, it’s not because of your dad coming,” Nkem murmured, averting her gaze from Jide’s inquisitive face. God, the boy was too emotionally clever for someone his age. “It’s always nice to look good for any guest.”

“But Dad isn’t a guest. We see him all the time, and you always dress up for him.”

Nkem burst out in laughter. “What? Do I really?”

“Yes, Mummy, I see you rushing to the mirror to fix your hair and apply lip gloss whenever he comes to pick me up. Even early in the mornings.”

“I … I …” Nkem trailed off, left speechless by her son’s remark.

“Well, don’t worry. Dad does the same thing.”

Her heart lurched wildly, and then, began to thud. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“He always looks in the car mirror to adjust his clothes, then sprays his mouth with something, and finally splashes perfume on his neck whenever he brings me back home.”

Nkem choked on her saliva and began coughing. “R-really?” she croaked, tapping on her neck to ease the prickly sensation in her throat.

“Yes, Mummy…” Jide paused, regarding her with concern. “Are you alright? Do you want some water?”

“No … No … I’m fine,” Nkem said, clearing her throat. “D-does your father talk about me when he’s with you?” she asked Jide, giving in for the first time to the curiosity that had consumed her for ages.

She'd often wondered whenever her son spent the weekend with his father, but she'd never asked. It just hadn't seemed right to intrude on private discussions between father and son. But now, she couldn't help herself. It was like some demon inside her needed to know.

"No, not really." Jide shrugged. "But sometimes he asks if there's anyone staying over in the house."

Nkem's pulse skipped a beat. "Anyone? Like Aunty Oke?"

Jide chuckled. "Not Aunty Oke, Mummy. Daddy already knows she stays here to look after me sometimes when you go out." He shrugged. "Dad asks me if there's any 'Uncle' who stays here sometimes."

"Oh …"

"I know he wants to find out if you have a boyfriend, so I always tell him no."

"Wh-what?" Nkem could hardly say more, her mind spiking in haphazard tangents that jumbled her thought process.

After their separation, Nkem had cocooned herself in blissful ignorance, avoiding any research into Tunde's dating life. She'd been unwilling to traumatise herself with the discovery of what she imagined would be a sexual free-for-all once his commitment to her ended. With every ounce of strength she could muster, she'd fought the constant instinct to go searching for other women in his life.

The Saturday morning she'd sniffed a distinctly feminine scent on him when he'd come over to pick up Jide for football practice, she'd spent the entire day down in the dumps, imagining Tunde having wild sex with women who smelled like Ellie Saab's eau de parfum.

Having used the fragrance herself, Nkem recognized it immediately. She'd been sick to her stomach imagining she shared perfume preferences with a faceless woman who had been with Tunde. The misery she'd experienced that day had completely quenched her curiosity about his other women. What one doesn't know never hurts, right?

But now, to hear that Tunde had been asking about her own dating life annoyed

and thrilled her all at once. So confusing—her feelings towards him. The utter audacity to inquire about her personal life when he'd been the one to step out on their marriage … it irked her. And yet, somewhere deep down, it had her doing a happy dance inside.

"So why did you divorce Daddy when you're still dressing up for him?"

Damn! Nkem's stomach churned. How on earth to tackle this? She didn't have a simple answer. Being hurt by the one man she'd trusted implicitly had completely devastated her, but that had not stopped her from loving him. She'd tried to forgive Tunde, believed that she had, but she had doubts which she couldn't live with. Certainly not while continuing as his wife.

By mutual agreement, she and Tunde had decided not to give their son the fine details about their divorce. How could she tell a boy that the man he idolised had broken his marriage vows and been unfaithful with a random woman without any thought for his wife and mother of his son? No way! She simply couldn't break Jide's heart with that appalling fact.

"I told you before that we decided to be friends instead of husband and wife because we don't want to hurt each other."

Jide's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Doesn't make any sense, and never did, Mummy," he said. "Mayowa from my school said Daddy must have had a side chick like his own Daddy. He said that's why his parents divorced."

"Ehm, I —"

The sound of a car horn blaring at the gate interrupted her. Nkem jumped up. Saved by the bell. No need to respond. At least not now. If anyone were to tell Jide the whole truth, it had to be Tunde, not her. That was the least he could do for tearing their family apart.

Drawing in a deep breath, she turned to her son. "We'll talk about this another time, Jide. Daddy is here."

"Yay!" he cried, jumping to his feet and rushing to the door.

With a smile spreading across her lips, Nkem dashed after her son. For some odd reason, Jide's enthusiasm soothed her anxiety about living with her ex-husband.

Tunde's return home made the boy happy. It didn't matter that it was temporary, or that it could be heartbreaking for Jide to see him leave again. She resolved to enjoy their family reunion for as long as it lasted.

Heart fluttering with excitement, Nkem followed her son outside and waited by the front door for the taxi to come to a halt.

She kept very still, holding onto Jide's hand a bit too tightly, waiting in anticipation as the car engine switched off. The taxi driver jumped out of the driver's side and dashed around the car to open the back door.

Holding her breath, Nkem watched as Tunde stepped out of the Toyota Camry slowly, a grimace on his face as he placed his feet heavily on the ground one after the other.

Her stomach muscles clenched. He must still be in a lot of pain. Yet, he stood tall and sturdy, like a strong, wounded warrior in a fierce battle. Virile and sexy as hell.

She'd always found Tunde insanely attractive, even from the first moment she'd set her eyes on him. Six-feet-four inches, broad-shouldered and with an athletic build, he looked like a professional basketball player. His dark skin, clean shaven head, and the scruffy facial hair that surrounded his full lips lent him an edgy look that did her in.

Clad in black jeans and a brown t-shirt that draped over the expanse of his broad shoulders and taut stomach muscles, Tunde's swag was undeniable. Magnetic. God, she missed running her palms down his body and watching him squirm under her touch.

"Daddy!"

Jide's excited shriek as he rushed towards his father fractured her sensual thoughts. Nkem blushed. Damn it. Only a few seconds with Tunde and she was already reminiscing about sexual moments between them. She needed to get a grip.

"Careful, your daddy still has a bandage!" she called out, watching in trepidation as Jide hurled himself into his father's outstretched arms.

“Oh, my boy!” Tunde cried, embracing Jide tightly, a blend of delight and slight discomfort etched in his face. “No pain from the wound in my chest can ever dampen the joy of seeing you. I love you.”

Nkem’s breath hitched as Tunde’s gaze jumped to hers. Goodness. His eyes. Intense and earnest. Lord above… Are those tears in his eyes?

Her throat tightened with tears as she fixed her gaze to his. Clearly, both Tunde and Jide were thrilled about this arrangement, and for the life of her, she was happy to have him back home. But could this be a mistake? Could his temporary stay do more harm than good?

Nine



“Hi, Tunde, lovely to see you.”

Tunde’s chest flooded with warmth at Nkem’s soft greeting as she strolled towards him, a welcoming smile on her face.

God, she looked so beautiful. Her light-brown skin glowed in the setting sun, smooth as butter. Her usually straight, jet-black hair had been set into loose curls and packed into a messy bun, with soft tendrils hanging at the sides of her heart-shaped face. And Lord … that dress! The way it caressed her ample curves filled him with jealousy. If only he could replace the material so lucky to be sliding over her skin.

Focusing on her lips, his stomach did a little flip-flop. The sensual curve of their soft fullness as she smiled at him sent a shiver down his spine. Would she slap him across the face if he leaned in for a long-overdue taste of her lips? Suddenly, the need to find out overwhelmed him. Tunde ground his teeth together to push back the urge. He could not afford to mess things up. Not when he’d been given another opportunity to try and win her back.

He’d dreamt of this moment for months on end, imagining what it would feel like to be welcomed back home, back into Nkem’s orbit. He wanted to savour this moment, drink it all in, even if she wasn’t inviting him back into her heart, and her hospitality had an expiration date.

“Thank you, Nkem, for doing this,” he said. “I’m ever so grateful.”

“It’s really nothing. It only makes sense for you to have a bigger space to recuperate and someone nearby if something goes wrong, that’s all.”

Tunde smiled, immediately picking up her subtle reminder that he not get too comfortable. He knew this was temporary all too well, had spent hours ruminating about how much he wished it wasn’t so.

He couldn’t fault her for trying to create boundaries from the outset. If anything, he appreciated her honesty about her feelings. His talk with his friends had made one thing clear. Nkem had to want a reconciliation for it to happen. Nothing less would do, and no matter how hard it was for him to digest, he would have to accept whatever she chose.

However, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try again. Nope. He would keep trying until she told him in no uncertain terms that he shouldn’t. He gave up too easily last time. One of his greatest regrets, second only to being stupid enough to cheat on his wife.

“Still, I want to thank you for being here for me … for everything.”

“No wahala, Tunde. Like I said, it’s not a big deal.”

Not a big deal? If only he could say the same. For him, it was a gigantic deal of indisputable proportions. If he couldn’t convince her to give their relationship another go when they stayed under the same roof, what chance did he have when he moved out again?

All last night, he’d tossed and turned in bed, thinking about what it would mean living with Nkem again, enjoying the privilege of sharing her space, being so close to her physically, yet so far away emotionally.

Excitement at the thought of seeing her every morning blossomed in his chest, but somewhere inside, anxiety also simmered.

Yes, they’d shared a wonderful life as husband and wife, easily complementing each other in their daily living. Even during their arguments, boundaries were never crossed, apologies freely given, and reconciliation swift. Their home had been peaceful, filled with love and affection for each other and for Jide

Touching Nkem, talking late into the night, making love—they’d always been

reflex actions for him. No need to second-guess the moment. But living with her would be different now because they weren't a couple.

Could he handle being in the same house with Nkem when she put a barricade up between them? He knew it would be damn hard. Just like now, he itched to haul her into his arms the way he had Jide, but she was standing at arms-length from him, uncertainty in her eyes.

Uneasiness prickled his skin. Nkem's aloofness whenever she encountered him after their separation always filled him with despair. And that was just for the few minutes he picked up and dropped off Jide. Would he crack being constantly exposed to the stiff air between them?

"Dad, where are your things? Did you bring your guitar?" Jide asked, tearing Tunde's attention from Nkem and back to the boy tugging his arm.

"Of course, I did." Tunde turned towards the rear of the car, pointing to the brown guitar case the taxi driver was lifting from the boot. "It's in there."

"Yay! Can I play?" Jide rushed over to tug on the case's handle.

"Of course—" Tunde began.

"But not today," Nkem interjected with a little laugh. "Your dad needs to rest. He must be tired."

"Oh, Mum!" Jide protested.

"Your mother is right, my boy. Tomorrow, we'll practice the tune I've been working on."

"Cool." Jide seemed pacified, and this made Tunde smile. He'd won the lottery with his son. The boy was the easiest child to raise. Calm and polite. Just like his mother.

"Well then, let's go in," Nkem said, strolling to the rear end of the car. She grabbed the handle of a suitcase from the taxi driver and tugged on a second suitcase's handle.

Tunde rushed over to help her, but she stopped him with a wave of her hand.

“Come on, Tunde, you’re injured. Don’t worry, I can do this. Jide’ll bring in your guitar.”

Before he could protest further, she began rolling his two medium-sized suitcases towards the front door. “Sort out the cab fare, and then, I’ll show you your room,” she said.

Swallowing hard, Tunde watched as Nkem disappeared into the house, his throat tight with emotion. It was bittersweet being back here. Yes, he wanted this, considered it the opportunity of a lifetime, but every cell in his body screamed in despair at the circumstances surrounding his return.

If he could be granted one wish, it would be to change the moment he entertained the crazy notion that he needed more than Nkem. His entire world belonged to her and their son. He would do anything in his power to convince her that he would never repeat such an atrocity. But to achieve that, he had to take one step at a time.

He settled the taxi bill and reached for his son’s hand. “Time to go in,” he said to Jide.

“Yes, Daddy, welcome back home.”

~

Tunde’s eyes fluttered open. Streaking through the transparent drapes, rays of sunlight on his face warmed his skin and blurred his vision. He blinked rapidly to regain his focus.

He scanned his surroundings, and a slow smile stretched his lips. Nkem had done amazingly well preparing this guest room for him. The king-sized bed was comfortable and smelt wonderful, with the floral fragrance of clean white sheets assuaging his senses. He took a slow, deep breath in and savoured the freshness of the scent. He was so well rested that it felt like he’d literally slept on a bed of roses.

Exhaling slowly, he stretched his arms. He winced at the sharp pain piercing at the centre of his chest and stopped dead in his tracks. Damn. He’d forgotten all about his gunshot wound. He glanced down at the large dressing over the left

side of his torso. A reminder that he could have died five days ago, could have lost it all.

With a soft sigh, he swung his legs over the bed and planted them on the ground. His first night in the house had gone smoothly.

Yesterday, after sharing a lovely dinner of yam pottage and grilled fish with Nkem and Jide, he'd been so exhausted that he'd gone straight to bed. Good thing he had, because he felt refreshed and ready to start the day.

Reaching across, he picked up his phone from the bedside table and glanced at the screen. Several WhatsApp message notifications from his various medical groups flashed on the small display.

Tunde shook his head. Nope. He had no time to read all that. Most of them would be uselessly forwarded messages adding no value to his life whatsoever. What he needed was to see Nkem and Jide before they left the house.

Rising, he slipped his feet into his flip-flops and leaned forward to make the bed. Task completed, he strolled out of the room to find Nkem and Jide already seated in the dining room.

"Good morning, Daddy!" Jide called out cheerily. He was in his blue-and-grey school uniform, helping himself to the toast and scrambled eggs on his plate.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Nkem greeted at the same time. She was also already dressed for work in a red-and-white pant suit that complimented her toffee brown skin-tone.

Tunde's chest constricted at the image before him. Lord, he'd missed this—waking up to find the two people he loved the most in the world in the same room with him.

Everything about this moment felt right … meant to be. If it wouldn't come off as weird, he would pull out his phone from his pyjama shorts and take a snapshot.

"Hey guys!" he said, moving over to join them at the table. "I'm so sorry I overslept. I guess I was really tired yesterday.

Nkem waved off his apology. “Don’t apologise, it’s expected. You’ve had a difficult week.”

“It’s not that late, Dad,” Jide said through a full mouth of food. “It’s only 8:30. And besides, you’re not going to work today.”

Tunde chuckled as he pulled out a chair and sank into the seat beside Jide and opposite Nkem. “True. For an entire month, I’m jobless. I can’t imagine how I’ll handle the boredom while everyone is away.”

“Well, you have your physio,” Nkem said. “You have to focus on getting the full strength back in your arm. Your healing is very important, Tunde. More important than your job.”

Tunde turned to Nkem, and his heart bumped into his ribcage. There was earnest concern in her eyes.

What a fool he’d been to let such a wonderful woman go. His well-being had always come first for her. Never in all the years when he was struggling to reach the peak of his career had she complained about his absence during his vigorous residency training. Instead, she’d always made sure to encourage him to rest, to keep hydrated and nourished. Even now, despite how he’d hurt her, she still cared for his health. He didn’t deserve her, and he knew it. He also knew now that if he ever had another chance with her, he’d be damned if he let anything destroy it.

“Yes, Nkem. You’re right. I need to take my physio seriously. Thanks for caring, you’re an amazing woman.” His voice came out hoarse even to his own ears.

As if sensing the change in his mood, her warm brown eyes met his. Their gazes held for several beats, tension saturating the air between them. He knew he’d taken a risk complimenting her so soon after he’d moved back in, but damn it, he couldn’t hold back the truth. His wife—ex-wife—was simply the most amazing woman he’d ever met. Their divorce hadn’t changed that fact.

Nkem looked away first, shaky fingers clutching the gold chain around her neck. It was new and beautiful, with a heart-shaped pendant dangling from the centre. Did she get it for herself, or did a man buy it for her? Tunde’s gut plummeted at that last possibility. He swallowed hard. No, he would not think about his Nkem with another man. It would only bring him misery.

“Are you hungry? Should I get you breakfast?” Nkem asked, cutting through his uneasy thoughts.

“You don’t need to, I can whip up some eggs myself,” Tunde said.

“No. You’re a guest,” Nkem said as she rose to her feet. “Let me do that for you.”

“Dad’s not a guest, Mum,” Jide said. “He comes here all the time. Let him make his own eggs.”

Tunde stiffened, his jaw dropping at his son’s comment. He slowly raised his gaze to Nkem and found her also still, her eyes bulging, and her mouth parted. Within seconds, they both burst into laughter.

“You know what,” Nkem said with a thumb-up sign at Jide who appeared baffled by his parents’ amusement. “You’re correct, my boy. Oya, Tunde, follow me to the kitchen to help me with your breakfast joor.”

Tunde spread his lips into a wide smile as he stood up. He tapped his son’s shoulder. “Yes, my good boy. I’m glad you know that boys and girls BOTH belong in the kitchen.”

As he followed Nkem to the kitchen, admiring the way her pants fit snugly over her round ass, and the switch of her ample bottom with each step she took, pleasure flooded his senses. Good God, he loved his family.

Ten



Tunde had moved back in six days ago, and the time had flown by, luckily completely tension-free. Better than expected to be honest. Nkem wasn't exactly sure what she'd imagined, but it certainly wasn't the seamless way Tunde had fit into Jide's and her schedule—like he'd never left at all.

Every morning, the three of them shared breakfast, exchanging stimulating and enjoyable conversations, after which she set off to drop her son at school before driving to work. In the evenings when she returned, Tunde always welcomed her with a cup of coffee, and then, joined her in the kitchen to help with dinner preparations. He also helped Jide with homework—an extreme help to her—before they all settled at the table to have their dinner.

Things between Tunde and her had sailed along smoothly, too. Their conversations and sometimes debates about various topics were lively and fun, just the way it used to be. Even his attention to his health had improved. She'd seen him working on his recovery with his physiotherapist a few times instead of displaying his usual nonchalance about his health.

During their marriage, Tunde's casual outlook about his physical health had been a recurring theme in their disagreements. Back then, he worked long hours, sometimes went days without a proper meal … surviving on snacks and water and losing weight at intervals because of his laser focus on his job. For a doctor, she'd found it odd that she needed to nag him to get yearly health checks. But these days, he seemed to have turned a new leaf, making healthier food choices which included the fruits and vegetables she'd previously had to beg him to eat.

All this both pleased and worried her because every second that she spent with him made her anxious about the time when he would need to leave. She didn't want to get used to having him around.

Blowing out a soft sigh, Nkem smoothed her palms down the smooth material of her dress and turned to her side to check the fit of her gown over her bottom.

"Good," she murmured with a smile of satisfaction.

Clara, her ever-efficient tailor, had done a great job altering the gown she'd purchased from an online vendor nine days ago. The single sleeve black-and-silver gown had arrived looking quite different from the online store's picture—completely shapeless and baggy around her waist. Because she loved the material, Nkem had decided to adjust the style and fit of the dress.

Turning back to the mirror, she shifted the pin that secured her bun to a central position, showcasing the dazzling sparkle of the rhinestone on it. The early morning trip to the saloon to get her hair fixed into this intricate and stylish updo had been so worth it. She smiled at her reflection in appreciation again. The sparkly three-inch heeled pumps perfected the look she needed to portray tonight. Arinze would love it.

Tunde would, too.

That unexpected thought spread a rush of heat across her face, burning her cheeks. Had she gone through all this trouble to get her ex-husband's attention, too? Would she have taken the extra time with her appearance today if Tunde wasn't here?

The vibration of her mobile phone drew Nkem's mind back from her pondering. She leaned forward and picked it up from the dressing table. An involuntary smile tugged at her lips when she saw the message notification on the screen.

▪

Arinze: Can't wait to see you tonight. I'm sure you'll look fantastic.

▪

Nkem placed her palm on her tummy to quell the quivering of her nerves. This

evening, she would be attending a charity ball with Arinze. He was already on his way to pick her up.

When she'd accepted the invitation, she'd not anticipated that Tunde would be living with her. Since their separation and subsequent divorce, she and Tunde had never talked about their dating or personal lives, so she hadn't felt the need to tell him about Arinze. Neither had she clued him in on tonight's date. It simply hadn't come up in any of their conversations.

Another rumble coursed through her gut. Nkem took a breath in. Why on earth did she feel guilty about this? She had no reason to be. As a single woman, she had every right to date whomever she desired.

Inhaling deeply, she typed her response on her mobile phone's screen.

▪

Nkem: Can't wait to see you either. And yes, trust and believe, I look hot like fire.

▪

Reading over her message, she corrected two typos before pressing Send. She tapped on the fire emoji three times and sent that, too.

Dots danced under her message, indicating that Arinze was typing a response. Nkem held her breath, equal parts troubled and excited. Lately, Arinze had been ending his phone calls and text messages with clear declarations of love. And although she liked seeing him express his feelings for her so freely, she loathed that she could not honestly return the sentiments. No matter how much she tried, she just couldn't feel what wasn't there.

She gave herself a little head shake. Hopefully, Arinze wouldn't lose interest while she was still trying to figure things out. He really was a great catch.

Her phone beeped with his reply.

▪

Arinze: I will be the envy of every man there with you by my side, dear. See you

soon, my love.

▪

Nkem's lips stretched into a wide grin. Lord, this man was good for her ego. Why wasn't she falling all over him like she should? She really needed to have her head examined.

The doorbell sounded, crashing through her musings. Nkem started as she glanced at the clock on the wall opposite her. 5:15 p.m. Time to get moving.

Snatching her handbag from the bed, she cast one more glance at the mirror to check her reflection and nodded. Excellent. Everything seemed to be in place. With a sigh of satisfaction, she headed out of the room.

~

"I won! I won!" Jide yelled, jumping off the sofa and doing a shuffle dance.

"I let you win," Tunde said with a snicker, gathering together the playing cards on the tea table. "Let's do a rematch and this time, I'll show you no mercy."

"Loser o, o, o, loser, loser o, o, o, loser. Daddy, you done lose o, loser. Daddy, you go lose again o, loser!" Jide sang as he moved his feet in tune with his victory song.

"Sharrap there! This game is just luck, no rhyme or reason to it, jare," Tunde grunted out, slight frustration bubbling up inside him. He was as competitive as his son and hated losing in anything, including card games. It grated his nerves that Jide had won effortlessly three times in a row.

"If you think I'm simply lucky, let's play one more time," Jide said settling back onto his seat. "If I win, you buy me the new Apple watch."

"Apple watch ke? Do you know how much that costs? No, son. If you win, ice cream is all you'll get."

"Only ice cream? No ooo … I need better incentive to continue this game."

“Incentive? How do you know such big words at your age?”

Jide twisted his lips into a snicker and rolled his eyes. “Duh! I read a lot and watch TV a lot. I’m the best in English in my class … need I say more?”

Tunde threw back his head and bellowed out a laugh. His son was quite clever. He’d won four awards in English and verbal reasoning at school, and he was never humble about his achievements. He’d grown into a young boy his parents were proud of.

After his residency training in plastic surgery six years ago, Tunde had moved his family back from America to Lagos to partner with his friends in their surgical practice.

He’d worried about Jide coping in a new school and adjusting to life in Nigeria. He’d done everything he could to prepare his son for the new experience. If he’d known back then how easy it would be for Jide to blend in, it would have saved Nkem and him many sleepless nights and days torturing themselves with worry.

In less than a month of their return, the boy had adapted to the routine of his private school, making friends and doing well both socially and academically. It had taken less than a year for his American accent to fade, and now, Jide could speak both Igbo and Yoruba quite fluently. Such a clever boy.

“Okay, son, if you win again, I’ll buy you another game on your iPad.”

“Deal!” Jide chirped, clapping his hands in excitement, clearly pleased about the prospect of having yet another video game to get lost in. “Let’s play again.”

As Tunde began to shuffle the cards, the doorbell rang. He froze, his hands suspended mid-flip, his gaze darting to the clock on the wall opposite him.

Who on earth could be visiting at 5:23 p.m. on Saturday? He wasn’t expecting anyone, and Nkem hadn’t told him she was either. In fact, she’d been upstairs in her room getting ready to go out. He wasn’t sure where. She’d not divulged more information and he hadn’t asked.

“Let me get the door,” he said to Jide, rising from his seat.

Tunde dashed out of the sitting room and into the corridor. He came to an abrupt

halt when he spotted Nkem at the top landing of the bottom stairway.

His breath caught in his chest. Mighty God! She looked like a movie star on her way to a red-carpet event. Stunning. Simply divine. The way her black-and-silver gown hugged her narrow waist and clung to her curvy hips would entice a monk. Her hair was done up in a sophisticated style that suited her striking heart-shaped face. This morning when he'd first seen her hairstyle, he'd loved it, but right now, the sparkly pin attached to it, looking very much like a bejewelled crown, floored him. Simply put, Nkem looked like royalty, a gorgeous queen.

Blood seeped from his brain and rushed to his groin as his gaze slid to her face. His dick jumped. Goddamn! Was he awake or lost in one of his recurring erotic dreams starring Nkem? How could anyone look so effortlessly elegant and sinfully sexy at the same time?

Her gaze locked on his and his abdominal muscles contracted in response. Goodness. Her eyes—adorned with smoky eyeshadow. Her lips—coated with a shimmery rouge shade that always made his blood boil with need. Her skin—a smooth, buttery shine. Everything about her look tonight filled him with an overwhelming desire to bound up the stairs, sweep her into his arms, kiss her senseless and carry her to a room where they wouldn't be disturbed for hours.

The bell rang again, shattering his transfixed fascination. Tunde started, peeved at the intrusion. He could stare at Nkem all day. "Who on earth is that?" he muttered under his breath.

"Let me get it," Nkem said, rushing down the steps, the click-click of her high heels on the terrazzo floor echoing in the hallway. "It must be my date for the outing I told you about earlier."

Date?

Tunde's gut plummeted. Had he heard correctly? Was Nkem seeing someone serious? Who the hell was he? He wasn't proud of it, but during the periods when he was alone in the house, he'd done a little snooping around for clues of her involvement with another man and had found none. She'd certainly not mentioned dating anyone during their numerous conversations during the week either.

Hope had been building inside him because of how well he and Nkem had been

getting along, chatting and exchanging friendly banter. When she'd mentioned earlier that she would be going out for the evening, he had not given it much thought, assuming she would be attending her usual church activities. It hadn't crossed his mind that her evening included a man.

Who the fuck was the guy? How long had they been going out? Did he love her? Did she love him? So many rapid-fire questions ricocheted in his head, but before he could voice even one, Nkem breezed past him and unlocked the front door.

Heart pounding erratically in his chest, his breathing shallow and every single muscle in his body tense with dread, Tunde watched as the door slid open to reveal a good-looking, brown-skinned man wearing a smart black tuxedo, his eyes shining with adoration, and a wide smile on his face.

"Goodness me, Nkem, you look fantastic," the man said, kissing Nkem on both cheeks. "Absolutely stunning. I'm a very lucky man to have you —"

He halted mid-sentence as he noticed Tunde standing in the hallway. A quizzical look replaced his initially smitten facial expression. He darted questioning eyes to Nkem.

"Thank you, Arinze, you look great yourself," she said with a nervous chuckle. "Please come in, meet my … my ex-husband, Tunde Edun."

Still frozen in shock, Tunde stood immobilised, his eyes trained on the stranger walking into the house with an air of uncertainty and confusion furrowing his forehead.

"He is staying with me and Jide for a few weeks," Nkem continued in an unsteady tone, the fingers clutching her purse trembling slightly. "Tunde, meet Arinze Ibeh, we are attending a fundraising gala which he chairs tonight."

"Nice to meet you, Tunde," Arinze said, offering him a handshake.

Tunde gritted his teeth as a surge of jealousy burned inside him. All he could see was a red haze in his line of vision.

Who the hell was this man with the audacity to stroll into his house and take his wife out on a date right in his presence?

For a split second, Tunde envisioned himself lunging at the man and wringing his neck. He wanted to punch the smile off the bastard's face and twist his bloody outstretched arm. To hell with a handshake, the man deserved a broken humerus.

Drawing in a steadying breath and blowing it out from his nostrils, Tunde fought the violent impulses spiking in his blood and allowed his wound-up muscles to relax. He couldn't afford to act like a jealous idiot and risk alienating Nkem. They both hated any form of physical aggression. Besides, that wasn't his style. He was more of a brain than brawn kind of man. He needed to play it cool until he gathered more intel on the idiot who felt he could walk in here and take his wife away from him. Only then could he devise a strategy to take him down.

"Nice to meet you," Tunde said in a low tone, accepting the man's gesture of a handshake reluctantly.

He released his hand almost immediately after their palms touched. Several seconds of silence ticked by. Awkward tension filled the air. With his gaze averted from the man and fixed on Nkem, Tunde breathed in and out slowly, trying to calm the flood of brooding emotions saturating his senses. He wanted to scream, to yank Nkem away from the man beside her, but he remained still. He couldn't afford to lose his shit and jeopardise any chance of getting his wife back.

"Okay, we'll be leaving now," Nkem said, shattering the uncomfortable silence. She heaved in a sigh and lifted her gaze to face Tunde squarely. "Oke would be coming over soon to babysit … just in case I'm home late."

Tunde clenched his jaw as he struggled to push back the intense annoyance that rushed up his spine. He folded his thumb into his palm and pressed down firmly. "Jide doesn't need a babysitter, I'm here," he said through his teeth.

"I know that, but you're still recovering, and I don't want you to stress yourself too much."

"Looking after Jide isn't stressful for me."

"I'm not saying that it is, I'm just…" She trailed off, sucked her teeth and shrugged. "It doesn't really matter now, Oke is already on her way, Tunde. You can send her back home if you want to."

With that, Nkem tugged on Arinze's arm. "Okay, let's head off or we'll be late. One can never trust Lagos traffic."

Tunde's stomach roiled as the man's chuckle rose to the air, a warm and pleasant sound that showed no indication of anxiety. The man looked comfortable around Nkem, obviously didn't feel threatened to find her ex-husband living with her. For some inexplicable reason, this pissed Tunde off even more than his existence in her life at all.

"Yes, o, I'm giving the opening speech," quipped the man in a jovial tone. "It would be a disaster if I'm not there on time."

"A real disaster," Nkem echoed with a soft giggle, hooking her arm around the man's. She turned to Tunde. "Kisses to Jide from me. I'll see you both later."

Biting back the question, 'What time will you be back?', Tunde simply nodded.

"Again, nice to meet you, Tunde," the man said, taking a step backward as if eager to escape the animosity oozing from him.

With a barely inaudible, 'Same here', Tunde turned away abruptly, stalking back to the sitting room. No way could he stomach standing there and watching Nkem walk out of the house in the arms of another man. No bloody way!

Eleven



“Wow, that was tense,” Arinze muttered as soon as he secured his seatbelt. “I didn’t know your ex-husband was staying with you.”

Nkem turned her head sideways to look at him. His lips were slanted in a wonky smile.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but everything happened so fast,” she said. “Tunde was shot by a robber, and needed somewhere to stay to recuperate, so I invited him to stay with us for a while.”

“Oh, so sorry. He didn’t look injured at all. Is he okay?”

“Yes, he’s lucky. The bullet missed major organs by mere inches.”

“Wow …” Arinze drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, clearly contemplating more to say.

Nkem could tell he’d found the encounter with Tunde uncomfortable. Just like she’d never enquired about his late wife, she’d not shared much about Tunde with him. She didn’t feel he needed to know the details of their marriage or the reason for their divorce. Her relationship with Arinze was quite new, and she wanted the past kept exactly where it should be—in the past.

However, now, seeing the uncertainty in Arinze’s eyes, she wanted to say something to clarify things. If she had any chance of moving forward with her life and finding a new man, she had to give Arinze a chance. He was the best

suitor to come her way in a long time.

“Tunde is staying in the guest room, Arinze. I’m helping him out, that’s all. Nothing is going on between us.”

Arinze made a disbelieving sound. “Not according to him, Nkem. He looked like he would murder me when I stepped into your house. I know jealousy when I see it.”

“Well, he has no right to be jealous,” Nkem countered.

“If he still wants you, he does.”

“He can want me all he likes. I don’t care. He had me and let me go. Now, I’m free as a bird.”

A slow smile spread across Arinze’s lips. “A beautiful free bird,” he said with a soft chuckle. “A damn beautiful free bird.”

Several seconds of silence ensued as they gazed at each other. Nkem could tell from the crease of the skin between Arinze’s eyes that she hadn’t reassured him about Tunde, but what else could she honestly say?

Everyone, including her parents and best friend Oke had pretty much told her that allowing Tunde to move in, no matter how temporarily, would certainly cause conflict between the past she was trying to escape and the future she wanted to have.

“Listen, Arinze, Tunde and I are divorced. You and I are here together in this car, about to go out for a wonderful evening together. Let’s forget the past and enjoy the future together. Can we do that?”

He leaned forward and pressed a firm kiss to her lips. “Of course. Let’s start with having a wonderful evening together,” he said.

“And night, if you’re lucky,” she added with a wink.

“Don’t tease me, woman.”

“I’m not teasing, I’m predicting.”

Arinze barked out a laugh. “Biko, predict when we’ll get to the event first,” he said, switching on the engine. “I swear, I’ll have to drive like a madman for us to get there on time.”

As they pulled out of the driveway and towards the remote-controlled gate, Nkem allowed herself to relax.

Phew. For days, she’d dreaded the two men meeting each other, but they had finally done so, and all hell hadn’t broken lose. Nothing untoward had happened. No clenched fist thrown, no angry words, no need for her to separate a fight. Maybe this was a sign that she could finally move on, truly fall in love with another man that wasn’t Tunde.

The first step would be making sure that this evening ended up as superb and satisfying as she hoped it would.

~

The charity’s fundraising ball was a brilliant success. They had arrived just in time, and everything had gone swimmingly. All through the evening, Nkem felt like a queen sitting beside a king.

Arinze had been so attentive, introducing her to several dignities and celebrities as his woman. Nkem loved the attention he showered on her, making sure she was comfortable and looking out for her.

She relaxed on her seat, watching him give the closing speech with eloquence. He looked smart and handsome in the black tuxedo that was likely custom-made for him.

“We surpassed our goal of fifty million this year by almost eight million. You all are amazing,” he said with a satisfied smile lighting his face. Loud applause followed, and Nkem clapped vigorously, proud to be dating a man who raised funds for the underprivileged. She had also written a cheque of a hundred thousand to support the cause and hoped to do more in the future.

“We have a lot of work to do to assist orphaned children who have nobody else to look after them. Thank you all for digging deep into your pockets, even at a time when the economy is tanking. Without you, we wouldn’t have achieved this

goal.”

Another round of applause reverberated in the room. Nkem glanced around as she clapped. Everyone seemed so enamoured of Arinze, genuinely focused on his speech. He truly was a well-respected member of the community. The kind of man her father would have wanted her to bring home. From the same Igbo tribe as she, a philanthropist and raised Catholic, her parents would be ecstatic if she brought him home. Why was she still holding back?

“Now that you’ve allowed me to empty your pockets for a good cause, please let me fill your stomachs to compensate.” Arinze’s voice from the speakers crashed through her thoughts. “Please, eat, drink, and be merry. The party is on ’til midnight.”

A drum roll sounded and a cheer rose up. Nkem smiled as Arinze handed the microphone back to the emcee and stepped down from the podium. She watched him walk towards her, beaming from molar to molar.

“How was my speech?” he asked as soon as he sank onto the cushioned seat beside her.

“Awesome,” she said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m so proud of you, Dimpka. my Igbo warrior.”

A spark of awareness lit his eyes, and his lips parted in a soft gasp. Suddenly, a surge of adrenaline spiked in her veins. This handsome, vibrant man wanted her, a divorced single mother. He hadn’t played any games with her, had always showed her exactly how he felt about her. She needed to wake up and take the bull by the horns, make a bold move before he lost interest.

Leaning forward, she pressed her mouth close to his ear. “Do we have to stay ’til the end?” she whispered.

His breath hitched. “No.”

“Great. Because we can spend some time alone at your place if you like.”

“Oh, I like,” he murmured in a hoarse tone. “I like very much.”

“Excellent, because I’d like that, too.”

Clearing his throat, Arinze sprang to his feet. “Let me say my farewells to a few guests, and we’ll get the hell out of here.”

Nkem chuckled at his eagerness. “Can’t wait.”

In less than thirty minutes, they were walking towards the front door of Arinze’s home, their fingers entwined. Nkem’s heart was beating at breakneck speed, anxiety causing her stomach to spin like the drum of a dryer. She wanted to have sex with him tonight … needed to. For her sanity. To take a step into the future. She was horny. Plain and simple. It had been way too long since she felt the pressure of a naked man on top of her, inside her.

Throughout the almost silent drive to Arinze’s estate on Banana Island, Nkem had been lost in thought, casting sidelong glances at Arinze, trying to picture herself making love to him, wondering what kind of lover he was. Gentle or rough? Reserved or explorative?

Well, tonight, she hoped to find out. As soon as he pushed opened the front door, Nkem flung her arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

He groaned as he wrapped his arms around her, kissing her back with ardour. “Oh, Nkem,” he said between heated kisses. “This is your first time visiting … I wanted to treat you to dinner first —”

“No,” she cut him off, meshing her lips with his, determined not to break the momentum. If there was ever a time to do this, it would be now. “Let’s make love.”

“Oh, God,” he groaned, dragging his palms to the small of her back and slamming her pelvis against his. “I know you can feel how much I want you. But … are you sure?”

Nkem felt the hard bulge of his erection pressed on her stomach, a firm reminder that he was a red-blooded male, aroused and ready to go. She had a narrow window of opportunity to change her mind without it being awkward.

Was she sure about this? She couldn’t honestly say. Yes, she wanted sex. Of that, she was absolutely certain. But with him? She couldn’t really tell. Not right now. Her body was responding to his caresses better than the time he’d kissed her last week, but her mind was far away. Using him to satiate her physical need when

he was obviously more into her than she into him would be terribly wrong, wouldn't it?

Not willing to second-guess herself any longer, she leaned in and began kissing him again, thrusting her tongue into his opened mouth. This time, Arinze relaxed against her, kissing her back passionately.

Their lips locked for several more minutes before he broke off again. "Let's go to my bedroom," he murmured.

Nkem nodded, then followed him silently as he led her up the stairway and into his large room. A quick glance around revealed Arinze's immaculate taste. The teal-green walls, gorgeous lighting, embroidered curtains, pristine white bedding, and a dramatic, concave ceiling. It all gave the impression of a man with an attention to detail.

Would this night mean more to him if they had sex? Before she could contemplate this further, he gathered her to him and captured her lips again. Blocking her mind from further thought, Nkem followed his lead, letting him kiss and caress her. She didn't want to give herself any more room to reconsider. She'd already let it go too far. It would be horrible to stop now. Stop? Did she want to? Oh, God, she did … she wanted to … needed to.

Slowly, Arinze began to undress her, planting kisses on her neck, moving his lips and tongue along the exposed skin of her shoulder, deep groans of satisfaction escaping from him. Cool air danced against her bare flesh when he pulled down the top of her dress, revealing the sheer lace of her bra.

Suddenly, overwhelming sorrow flooded her senses as a realisation struck her. She wanted this, to be touched, to be held and kissed and loved … she wanted everything Arinze was offering her, but with another man.

Oh, Lord, what had she done? Why had she led on a kind-hearted man like Arinze for so long, tried to force a relationship with him when her heart really wasn't in it? Now, here she was, accepting his caresses with feigned enthusiasm when she really wanted someone else.

Before she could stop herself, a loud sob erupted from deep inside her belly. Arinze stiffened and pulled back, a worried gaze furrowing his forehead.

He gasped when his eyes met hers. “Are you crying?” he queried in a ragged tone.

Nkem shook her head rapidly, even though tears flowed freely down her eyes. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Do you not want to do this?” he asked, confusion in his eyes.

“I … I want to …” Nkem lied. “Just ignore me and continue …” She made a move to draw him back into her arms, but he resisted.

Pulling her dress back up to cover her chest, he gazed intently at her. “Tell me what’s going on, Nkem,” he said, cupping her face in his palms gently. “You aren’t happy to be here with me. I can sense there’s something holding you back.”

His kind tone and the gentleness of his manner made her feel even worse. She’d expected him to be irritated by her constant indecision, blowing hot and cold like a broken air conditioner. She had even resigned herself to having sex with him tonight when she really didn’t want to. Instead of showing any frustration, he displayed understanding and compassion. Such a wonderful man. What the hell was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she just fall in love with him?

“I … Can we sit down and talk?” she asked.

Arinze nodded and pointed to the bed. Silently, Nkem sauntered towards it and sank onto the plush mattress. She waited for Arinze to do the same. Silence ensued as they both looked at each other, Arinze’s eyes trained on her with concern, like someone regarding a lost cat.

Nkem dragged in a deep breath. “I’m sorry about tonight, about making you leave your event with a promise of … and then flaking out …”

“Don’t apologise, Nkem. You have to want to be with me for us to work. Consent is very important to me.”

“I want to be with you, I really do, but …” she broke off, unsure how to explain her mixed emotions.

“You’re still in love with your ex-husband,” he offered.

Nkem stilled herself. The certainty of Arinze's tone surprised her. He seemed resigned to that explanation.

"I'm not even sure that's the reason, Arinze. I loved Tunde deeply once. And yes, there are many times I think I still do. I just … I've not moved on from him yet … and I'm not sure I want to."

Arinze nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean."

"I don't think you do. This isn't about you at all," Nkem said, tears forming in her eyes again. She averted her gaze from him. "I want you to know that you are a wonderful man. A handsome, sexy, and interesting man. I'm angry with myself for not feeling what I should for you."

Arinze chuckled. "Don't be," he said. "I think I'm also trying to create something from nothing, too. I have myself to blame."

Confused by his comment, Nkem turned back to face him. "What … what do you mean?"

His lips curved into a half-smile as he rose to his feet. He moved towards the door and yanked his tuxedo jacket from the terrazzo floor. Shoving his hand into the inner pocket, he retrieved a brown wallet and fished out a photograph.

Puzzled, Nkem kept still as he strolled back to the bed and handed it to her. With questioning eyes, she took it from him. Her entire body seemed to go into lockdown mode as she stared at the picture in her hand.

If ever there was a doppelganger of her in this world, it would be the woman staring back at her. "Who?" Nkem broke off, swallowed hard, and scrutinised the photograph in detail, astonished to see a woman in a picture who resembled her considerably.

"That's my late wife Mary," he said, settling back onto the bed. "She died of stomach cancer."

"Oh, no, I'm so sorry…"

"I met her when I was eighteen. Fell in love with her in my early twenties. We were married for almost ten years. She died two years ago, less than six months

after her diagnosis."

"Oh, no." Nkem's heart felt heavy. The pain in Arinze's eyes when he spoke renewed her annoyance with herself for toying with him, leading him on.

"My life lost all meaning when she passed away. We had no children because neither of us wanted any. So, I felt truly alone without her." Arinze blew out a harsh breath. "Every day, I regret that decision, because maybe if we'd had kids, I would have someone that reminded me of her, a piece of her to hang on to." He brushed his palm over his face and sighed. "When Oke showed me your picture … well, it felt like God had answered my prayers." His lips curved into a semblance of a smile. "You look like my Mary so very much, Nkem. The same complexion, the same jet-black hair, your face and eyes ... almost a clone of her."

Nkem glanced at the photo again and goosebumps spread across her skin. Indeed, it seemed like she was looking at a picture of herself. How bizarre.

"And when you smiled at me the day we met ..." Arinze continued. "It was as if I was catapulted to the first day I saw Mary smiling. I just needed to hang on to you so I could have more of her."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed it. "What I'm saying is that I should never have rushed you into a relationship, Nkem. The truth is, you deserve to be loved for who you are, and not who I want you to be."

"Oh, Arinze," Nkem rasped, completely blown away by his earnestness, by the wonderful man sitting beside her. How unfair that life brought them together when they were both still stuck in the past. "You are an amazing man. I hope that we can remain friends, even if we stop dating."

He shook his head. "I want to, I really do, Nkem, but I can't be your friend just yet. Not when you remind me so much of Mary. I think I need to work on healing … moving forward with my life first."

Although it broke her heart to cut off abruptly from a man she had come to admire so much, Nkem understood his reluctance to maintain a platonic relationship with her. As long as he still wanted Mary, he would also want her as a substitute. Being around her would make it even harder for him to move on.

She nodded. "Okay. I get it."

“Right.” He clapped his palms together. “So, now that we’ve come to an understanding, can I drive you back home so that your ex-husband doesn’t have a heart attack imagining you here having sex with me?”

Nkem blew out a chuckle. “I don’t think he even cares that much.”

“Trust me, he does. He is probably restless, waiting by the window for you to come back home.”

Nkem peeked at her wristwatch. “Let’s keep him waiting longer,” she said. “It’s only 11:00 p.m. We can have a late dinner and enjoy each other’s company, if this is the last time we hang out, can’t we?”

Arinze grinned and winked at her. “Hmmm … trying to make him jealous, are we?”

She laughed out. “Well, I hope it works.”

He guffawed, slapping his thigh in amusement. “Damn, have mercy on him nau. Women eh!”

As they laughed, Nkem felt a heavy weight lift from her shoulders. Now that she wasn’t trying to force herself into a romantic relationship with Arinze, she could take some time to sort out her jumbled emotions. Hopefully, sometime in the future, they would end up as friends.

Twelve



Tunde moved over to the window for the hundredth time and pulled aside the curtain. Apart from the street lights and the half moon hanging in the starry skies, it was pitch dark outside. Dark and bloody quiet.

His stomach churned, and his chest felt hot and tight. “She’s still not back,” he groaned, raking his fingers over his clean-shaven scalp. “Oh, my God, Oke … she’s not yet back.”

“Calm down, Tunde. You’ll soon give yourself a heart attack with the way you’re carrying on.”

“I’m dying … God,” Tunde growled. “It’s past midnight, and she’s not yet back. They must be having sex. That bastard is fucking my wife.”

“Ex-wife,” Oke corrected in an exasperated tone.

He whirled back angrily. “I don’t give a fuck if we’re divorced. Nkem is my wife!”

“Listen to yourself, Tunde. You sound deranged,” Oke said. “Nkem is nobody’s property. She’s free to date and have sex with whomever she wants. Just like you’ve been dating Yemisi Ayomide.”

Tunde became very still, immobilised by the shock of Oke’s remark. He’d kept Yemisi a secret, never told a soul about her or introduced her to any of his friends. He’d pretty much done everything he could to ensure that nobody would

ever find out about their liaison, including always paying with cash for their hotel accommodations. How the hell did Oke know about her?

“Who told you about Yemisi?” he asked, moving away from the window to join Oke on the large sofa in the sitting room.”

“Lagos is not such a big city, Tunde. And she is one of our patients. She likes to boast all over town about dating the plastic surgeon who augmented her body.”

“Dating?” Tunde let out a sigh of frustration. “Yemisi and I aren’t dating at all. Never have.”

“Really? Is that why you did all her surgeries for free?”

Tunde’s heart sank. Double damn. He should have known better than to trust Yemisi to keep her bloody mouth shut.

He’d performed plastic surgery worth more than fifteen million Naira on her for free with the understanding that their sexual interactions would remain hush-hush. He’d been upfront with her about that from the beginning. He’d never lied or misrepresented his intentions.

She’d willingly accepted, even signed a contract to that effect. Finding out now that she’d been running her mouth all over town and spinning romantic tales about their relationship pissed him off.

A horrific thought jumped to his head, and his body stiffened. “Oh, my God. Does Nkem know about her?”

“Yes.”

A precise response that caused Tunde’s skin to prickle. He pressed his fingers firmly on the sides of his head, trying to stem the sharp pain suddenly striking at his temples.

“H-how did she find out about … about her?”

“We ran into Yemisi at a charity event organised by Amazing Grace Ministries.”

“Oh, my God.” Tunde felt faint. He covered his face with both palms, taking

short, rapid breaths in and out, attempting to gather enough air into his lungs to keep his brain oxygenated. Otherwise, he risked blacking out from the despair snuffing the life out of him.

Bloody hell. After all he did to keep Nkem from finding out about Yemisi, all the precautions he took to ensure Nkem never crossed paths with any woman that he'd even looked twice at, much less had sex with.

He squeezed his eyes shut, annoyed at his idiocy, his complete ineptitude at being two-faced about anything. Apparently, he sucked at duplicity. He couldn't manage to keep anything from Nkem. Would he ever learn his lesson … that he shouldn't even want to deceive her?

"Yes, Tunde. Nkem and I attended the event together, and Yemisi strutted around the venue in a tight, black gown leaving little to the imagination, making sure everyone heard that her boyfriend, Tunde Edun, was the skilled surgeon who perfected her breasts and ass."

Tunde muttered a low curse. "And you never said a fucking word to me, Oke. You're my friend. My business partner for goodness' sake."

Oke held her hands up like a traffic warden halting vehicles at a junction. "Hold the fuck up, Tunde. I told you before, don't put me in the middle of this shit. Nkem is my friend, too. I love you both. And frankly, it's none of my business."

Tunde swallowed hard and began tapping his foot on the floor. Oke was right. He had no call to fault her. He appreciated how she'd managed to stay in both his and Nkem's lives even when she knew what he'd done. Her willingness to just listen and not judge, to be supportive while keeping it a hundred percent real, had been good for their friendship.

He pressed his lips tightly together. No point in dwelling on how Nkem had found out about Yemisi. The cat was out of the bag. She knew he hadn't been celibate now, and that was that.

But, God, he'd wanted to remain true, and had been for the entire two years of their separation. Hadn't even looked at another woman.

Then, their divorce was finalised, and it devastated him. Despair and loneliness overtook him, so he'd decided to seek comfort in the arms of other women.

Except that didn’t really work either. They wanted dates. A relationship. Love. A future. Things he couldn’t give them, and wouldn’t lie about just to have sex. So, he’d got more clinical about his sex life, which led to his proposition to Yemisi —she’d be his regular partner, but their interactions would be strictly sexual. Nothing more.

Although there were moments when he felt embarrassed by the transactional nature of their relationship, that was exactly what he needed. He’d been safe about it, ensuring they used condoms and tested for sexually transmitted infections every month whenever they hooked up. He never arranged a meeting with Yemisi without a confirmed negative STI result from the trusted lab they both used.

Had Nkem ever had a similar arrangement to take care of her sexual needs? He shook his head rapidly. No. The Nkem he knew couldn’t even kiss him when she was angry with him. She wasn’t the kind to detach her emotions from sex. His insides twisted in horror as unpleasant questions spun in his head.

Is Nkem emotionally involved with the man she went out with tonight? Is she happy? In love?

A sharp pang hit him square in the chest, and he clenched his jaw against the onslaught of pain tearing through him at the thought of Nkem being with another man.

“Who is this Arinze fellow?” he asked Oke in a barely audible whisper. “Tell me everything you know about him.”

“I don’t think it’s my place to say —”

“Start talking, Oke, or I swear to God, you’ll not leave this house tonight.” His tone was several octaves higher this time.

Oke hissed. “Like you can keep me here against my will.” She sprang to her feet and snatched her purse from the sofa. “Jide is already fast asleep, so my job here is done. I can leave whenever I want.”

“Please!” Tunde heard the desperation in his plea. He hoped she did too.

Oke paused, inhaled sharply and sank back onto the sofa. She lifted her opened

bottle of water from the tea table beside her, took a swig and turned to face him.

“Arinze Ibeh is a businessman who also deals in real estate. He’s the CEO of Solid Constructions, a widower from Anambra state, Catholic, and a philanthropist. He is a good man, Tunde. Don’t worry. Nkem is in great hands.”

“Shit.” Tunde scrubbed his scalp with his palm again in frustration. “Shit … shit … shit.”

From what he knew about Nkem’s family, her parents and siblings would all be thrilled about this Arinze fellow. It wasn’t a secret that Nkem’s parents had been reluctant about their union. Mostly for superficial reasons. They’d wanted her to marry an Igbo and a Catholic. He was neither.

Baptised Protestant and born Yoruba from Oyo State, he wasn’t their first choice for Nkem, and they had been less than subtle about letting him know that. Nonetheless, Nkem had worked hard to show her family how much she loved him, and over the years, they’d come to accept their relationship.

God! How the hell had he allowed himself to fuck up so badly and prove that her family’s concerns were valid. Bile rose up in his throat, and he pressed his hand over his neck to keep from retching. Her family would welcome this new guy with open arms, making it even harder for him to win Nkem back.

“How the hell did they even meet?” he grunted out his question in irritation.

“Well …” Oke shifted her eyes about uncomfortably like a thief caught redhanded. “I introduced them. He’s my brother in law’s distant cousin whom I met two years ago.”

“Nkem met that bastard through you?”

Oke rolled her eyes. “He’s not a bastard, Tunde. He’s a very nice man. A widower with a kind heart and loads of money. A great catch.”

“So why didn’t you catch him for yourself?” Tunde sucked in a harsh breath, anger at Oke erupting inside his veins. “Why did you introduce my wife to another man? Are you trying to hurt me? Do you hate me so much?”

“Ex-wife, Tunde. Nkem is your ex-wife. She was miserable after she found out

about Yemisi. She wanted to try dating again." Oke blew out a harsh breath. "She was desperate to meet someone and joined a dating site. Do you know that she dated two jerks … both of whom I had serious qualms about?"

Oke's question gave him pause. Tunde's stomach rumbled. Terrified of hearing about Nkem's personal life after their separation, he'd tiptoed around the subject. Every once in a while, he would ask his son vague questions … like if he'd met any uncles. Relief had flooded him each time Jide told him no.

He should have known better. Nkem was a sensible mother. She wouldn't introduce just anybody to Jide, so just because he didn't have a new uncle didn't mean she wasn't dating.

"When a nice man like Arinze, eager to settle down and get married, wanted to meet her, I seized that opportunity. Anything to keep her from using that horrible dating site again."

"Oh…"

"Yes, oh! That's the problem with you, Tunde. You think everything I do for Nkem is about you. I neither hate nor want to hurt you. I love you and Nkem both. Equally. But Nkem is my girl. I want to see her move on and be happy, too. You've obviously done so with your new girl."

"No. No. No. Yemisi is not my girlfriend. Never was, and never will be."

"But can you deny that you were involved with her? What else would give her the audacity to throw your name around town as her man."

"I have no clue, Oke. I made it perfectly clear we weren't serious. She even signed a contract to keep our … our hook-ups confidential." Tunde pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. He sighed when he turned back to Oke. "Did I ever introduce her to you or Segun? Or talk about her? I kept her hush-hush because I didn't want Nkem to find out about her."

"So you're back to the secrets again? Why did Yemisi even exist if you wanted Nkem back?"

The question threw him off balance. He had no other answer but the simple truth. He was lonely without Nkem, and Yemisi was a willing substitute. Not a

clever way to go about reconciling with his ex-wife, for sure. But he'd tried like hell during their separation, and failed miserably. And then, she'd filed for divorce. That's when he gave up, felt completely defeated. What else could he do but wait and hope? He certainly could not force Nkem to forgive him, could he?

"I know I have never really shared my opinion with you about your marital breakdown, but have you ever asked yourself how badly your cheating affected Nkem?" Oke asked, pulling him from his thoughts. "Do you have the slightest clue what that did to her"

She answered her own question without waiting for his response. "You broke her."

"Yes, I hurt her … I know —"

"Not just hurt, Tunde. You broke her. She lost her self-confidence." Oke's lips twisted into a frown as she drew closer to him, lowering her tone in a conspiratorial way as if about to share something she'd promised herself she wouldn't. "Nkem lost her spark, began to worry about her figure, thinking you strayed because her breasts and ass had become saggy."

As he listened to Oke revealing harsh realities and the brutal aftermath of his stupid actions, Tunde's head began to throb … like someone had his brain in a tight grasp and wouldn't ease up even a little bit.

Nkem had never talked about her pain during that horrible time after he'd come clean. She'd completely withdrawn from him, refusing to talk to him or a therapist. The only emotion she'd expressed throughout their separation had been anger. Mostly telling him how much he'd disappointed her, failed their family because of his disloyalty.

Indeed, her anger was justified, but he wished he'd also seen her vulnerability. Maybe he would have tried harder to prevent their divorce, fought for them to seek counselling together. Would that have made a difference?

Oke's sharp sigh reeled his attention back to her. "Do you know that after Nkem found out about Yemisi, she visited the practice to see Segun and me to enquire about having breast implants and a Brazilian butt lift?"

“Huh?” Shock spiralled down Tunde’s spine. How could Nkem, the most gorgeous woman he’d ever known, doubt her beauty?

“Yes, she did. And it took me and Segun several weeks to talk her out of altering her body because we both knew she would regret it.”

“Oh, my God.” Tunde sucked in a breath and dragged his palm across his face. “I … I didn’t know. Why didn’t you or Segun tell me?”

“Because she asked us not to. I shouldn’t even be telling you this now.”

“But why? You both know how much she means to me …”

“Well, it’s not our place to talk to you about stuff like that. Besides, she worried that finding out about her plastic surgery request would give you another reason to gloat.”

“Gloat?” Tunde shook his head bitterly, angry with himself all over again for his stupidity, for his actions that led a beautiful woman like Nkem to doubt herself.

He couldn’t even remember what the woman he’d cheated with looked like. It had never been about the other woman, but his selfish desire to explore, find out what else was out there for him.

Tunde exhaled slowly and sat upright. “To me, Nkem is the most beautiful woman in the world. Nobody could ever compare or hold a candle to her. The fact that she doubts that wounds me deeply.”

“Well, for a long time, she doubted herself. I witnessed the fallout first hand, Tunde.” Oke shook her head sadly. “I saw how desperate she’d become, spending long hours in the gym, wearing support bras even to sleep to hold up her breasts, joining a dating site … she completely lost it.”

God. Intense sorrow gripped him, making him shudder. “I wish I knew all this … I wish she told me all this…”

“I’m telling you now… not for you to use this information against her, but for you to make up your mind what you want,” Oke said. “Arinze is a great man, a caring, kind-hearted and generous man. He’ll make a great choice for Nkem.”

Each word pierced his heart like a finely-tuned dart, but he kept very still, all his attention trained on her, knowing her message was imperative for him to hear.

“If she falls for him, it will make everyone happy to see her find a man worthy of her,” she concluded.

“Oh, God.” Tunde’s chest burned with sorrow, hearing his friend and partner talk about his Nkem being better loved by another man.

“Is …” Tunde swallowed saliva and cleared his throat, fear of the answer to his next question gripping him, but unwilling to stop himself from asking anyway. “Has Nkem fallen for him? Is she in love with this man?”

“No. But I think he’s already in love with her.”

A woosh of air gushed from him as hope surged inside his chest. He had to keep his eye on the prize. The goal was to get his wife back. He couldn’t care less about that Arinze fellow or how he felt about Nkem.

Oke reached out and tapped him on his knee to get his attention.

“Tunde,” she called in a gentle voice. “You know how you’re feeling now, the devastation and anguish that squeezes your chest thinking about Nkem with another man, touching him, kissing him, having his body thrusting inside and —”

“Okay … okay … I get it,” Tunde said, cutting Oke off. He clenched his jaw muscles until it hurt, trying to block out the images her words conjured up in his mind.

“Well … Nkem felt that pain when you stepped out on her.” She tapped him again on his knee even though he was looking at her. “If she’s crazy enough to forgive your ass, because I know I wouldn’t if I were in her shoes, I hope you remember this feeling next time you think about cheating on her.”

“I’ll never ever —”

Oke hissed in disbelief, waving her hand dismissively. “You expect me to believe that? C’mon, we all know the saying … once a cheat, always a cheat.”

Tunde drew in a deep breath. He completely understood Oke's scepticism. Hell, he'd have said the same thing if he wasn't the cheat in this situation.

He hated infidelity, had despised his own father's reckless, serial womanising. Same for his mother's response—Tunde hated how she always forgave him. His respect for her took a hit each time.

When he made the awful decision to cheat, he hated himself for doing the same thing he'd sworn never to do—cheat like his father. He'd lived up to the meaning of his full name. Babatunde—Father's incarnate.

It nauseated him every time he remembered that he'd behaved like his father, and in a way, he'd accepted the agony of his divorce as his punishment for his vile actions.

Four years of living without Nkem—having to see her almost weekly, but being unable to touch and kiss her, seeing the disappointment in her eyes, trying to crack the wall she'd put up between them—had been pure torture.

He wasn't sure about many things in his life, but one thing he could be a hundred percent certain of. If he had the privilege of another shot with Nkem, he would never be unfaithful again. He would spend every moment rebuilding her trust in him, cherishing and loving her like he should have continued to do before he'd given in to the crazy idea that he needed more.

Noticing the smirk of doubt on Oke's lips, Tunde swallowed back his rebuttal. He didn't have to convince her of his intentions. Only one person needed convincing. Only Nkem.

Thirteen



Darting her gaze towards the house as Arinze pulled the car to a stop, Nkem sighed in disappointment. All the lights were off, and the curtains drawn. So much for the hope that Tunde would be awake and restless, waiting for her to come back home. The man just didn't care. She should have come back sooner instead of trying to make Tunde jealous by staying at Arinze's house until way past midnight. One can only get a reaction from someone who gives a damn. Apparently, Tunde didn't. He was probably fast asleep, dreaming about screwing other women.

"You're disappointed he isn't waiting up for you?"

Arinze's deep voice crashed through her troubled thoughts. Nkem turned her attention to the man beside her—a very perceptive man who could read her well.

"I hoped he would be bothered, but I guess he doesn't care." She hated how disappointed she sounded, how close to tears she was.

"Don't be sad, Nkem. People express emotions differently. The fact that he's sleeping now doesn't mean he isn't upset."

"I've known Tunde for a long time. If it bothered him that I was out with you so late, he would not be sleeping."

"You've been apart for four years, Nkem. A lot of things change in that time."

She shrugged. "I guess so."

Silence fell between them as she glanced at the house again. Back to square one. Single and in love with a man who'd hurt her, unable to move on with a man that wanted her. What a total screw-up her life had become.

She redirected her attention to Arinze. She would really miss him. He was the first man that made her feel positive about trying for a relationship again. She had enjoyed the time she spent talking with Arinze tonight.

When they'd established that they wouldn't be dating anymore, they had become less guarded and talked more earnestly. She'd told him about her marriage to Tunde, including the reason for their divorce, and he'd shared his story about his wife and her struggle with cancer. He'd been a good host with a patient, listening ear, and she loathed that he didn't want to see her again after tonight.

"Are you sure we can't remain friends?" she asked him.

He hesitated, averting his gaze from hers. "Nkem, I still want you. I don't think it would be fair to you or me if I have to pretend that I don't."

She swallowed past the lump of emotion in her throat. If only she could want him the same way that he wanted her. If only life were that simple.

"I understand," she said. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too." He leaned forward and brushed a kiss to her cheek. "I wish you all the best."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "And you, too. I hope you find what you're searching for."

Unwilling to cry in front of Arinze, she opened the car door and stepped out. Nkem walked towards her home and pressed the remote control in her hand. The black metal gate slid open, and she stepped into the compound.

As Arinze's car engine roared to life, she swung her head around and waved him goodbye before shutting the gate.

Blowing out a regretful sigh, she walked towards the house and unlocked the front door. Not bothering to turn on the light once inside, she took off her high-heel shoes. No need to wake everybody else in the house. All she needed was to

head off to bed and fall asleep.

As she approached the stairway, light suddenly flooded the room. Nkem emitted a shocked gasp. She whirled around to find Tunde standing at the other end of the hallway.

“Wh-what … You’re awake …” she sputtered, trembling from shock.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

His response was barely audible, his facial expression grim. Nkem’s heart began to pound heavily inside her chest, and her breathing came in ragged spurts. The intense spark in Tunde’s eyes caused her stomach to flip. He looked almost feline, like a dangerous tiger about to pounce on its prey. She dragged in a long, steadying breath. No, she wouldn’t let him unsettle her.

“When did Oke leave?” she asked, hoping her voice conveyed the casual air of indifference she always aimed for in Tunde’s presence.

“Twenty minutes ago.”

“Typical Oke. Always on the move.” Nkem’s lips twitched. “She should have spent the night here. No matter how often I tell her it’s dangerous driving so late —”

“How was your date?” he cut her off in a gruff tone.

Nkem paused, not sure she had heard him correctly. Was Tunde really expecting her to talk about her personal life? He’d never shown any interest before. She searched his face, trying to gauge his mood. His bleak expression had shifted to indignation. Faint lines appeared at the corners of his tightly pinched lips. His demeanour came off as repressed and caged in, like gas bubbling up inside a bottle of Coke, waiting to explode.

“Well, it was fun,” she replied, deciding to be gracious. Maybe she was seeing what wasn’t there, and Tunde just wanted a harmless conversation. “Arinze’s charity ball was an absolute success. Fifty-seven million Naira raised for orphans. How amaz —”

“Did you fuck him?”

“Wh-what?”

Her mouth popped wide open. The utter crassness of his question and tone floored her. So uncharacteristic, so raw. Nkem’s stomach spasmed from a mixture of revulsion and something else … something primal that shot straight to her clit, tightening the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“I said, did you fuck him?”

Nkem recovered from her shock, and fury took over. “That’s none of your business,” she spat out.

“Oh, it is my business,” he rasped, taking a step towards her. “It’s my business if any asshole thinks he can walk into my house and fuck my wife.”

“Your house? Your wife?” Nkem burst out, her anger intensifying into a surging rage that made her chest hurt. “This is my house. And I’m no longer your wife. I can fuck whomever I want in my house.”

She spun around, prepared to bound up the stairs, then whirled back to face Tunde. “As a matter of fact, I can do it in his house, too, any bloody time I want. It’s a mansion on Banana Island with a massive jacuzzi. You know how horny I get when I’m immersed in water.”

A low growl tore from Tunde as he surged towards her, lifting her into his arms. Nkem gasped in shock from the unexpected contact of her body with his firm, broad chest. Closer and more intimate than she’d been with him in years.

Her heart jackhammered inside her ribcage, her breathing becoming shallow and fast. Their eyes locked in a battle of wills. His, dark and fierce, pierced into her very soul. His chest heaved as he took rapid breaths in and out.

“Yes, I know,” he growled. “I’ve made you scream out in pleasure several times in the bath as you came against my mouth. Could he manage that in the Jacuzzi?”

His words and the recollection of her quivering in ecstasy as she shuddered her orgasm in the bathtub, her legs anchored over Tunde’s shoulders, with his face buried between her thighs, caused an intense jolt of arousal downwards. A flood of moisture dampened her panties.

“Did he know exactly where to touch you? Did he find the place inside your pussy that makes you helpless, makes you weak with pleasure?”

Unable to answer, Nkem gaped at Tunde, fighting the almost overwhelming urge to fling her arms around his broad shoulders and pull his head down for a taste of his mouth. It had been way too long since she had been enfolded in his strong arms like this. His fuller bottom lip called out to her. Irresistibly, like moth to flame. Nkem had to clench her teeth together to fight the desire.

“Does he know that you get wild whenever there’s pressure on your neck as you’re fucked with long and slow strokes?”

Vivid images of her thrashing on the bed as Tunde pinned her down, his hips moving with precision as he thrust in and out of her flashed through her mind in rapid succession … oh, God … the hypoxia, the pleasure … pure bliss.

“Did you cry out? Scratch his back? Did you even come?”

Unable to contain herself any longer, Nkem swung her palm and slapped him across the face.

“You can’t talk to me like that,” she hissed.

Without flinching, he pressed her closer to him. “Why not? Does it turn you on to remember how it was between me and you, eh?”

Nkem slapped him again, but this time, it was a weak meeting of her palm against his cheek. Before she could stop herself, she let out a whimper and captured his lips with hers.

A guttural moan ripped from his being as he kissed her back, his mouth moving over hers hungrily, his hands roaming over her back, gripping and squeezing her flesh.

Nkem shuddered as pure pleasure rippled through her entire body at the expert way his tongue mated with hers. It wasn’t a gentle kiss, but one filled with a violent need to make up for years of depravation. Teeth clashed, tongues duelled, mouths fused fervently. Nkem could taste blood, but it was sweet and hot and wonderful.

“Oh … I’ve missed you … I’ve missed you,” Tunde growled between kisses, curving her upwards and anchoring her legs astride his slender hips.

Nkem moved her pelvis, searching for the bulge pushing against his shorts. A sigh of relief gushed from her when her crotch came flush against his erection. She moaned, a low, throaty whimper that sounded alien. “Oh … Tunde …”

His dick had always been the only one she craved. So hard, thick and long … so perfect. Dildos, vibrators … none of the toys locked up in her closet could make her feel the way he did. Fully possessed, thoroughly aroused.

She began to move, rotating her hips against his crotch, squeezing his shoulders as she relished the pleasure of his mouth plundering hers.

A strong climax began to build from deep inside her core, cresting rapidly towards the surface. Nkem squeezed her eyes tightly shut, concentrating on the sensations that swamped all her senses.

The sweet friction with each movement pushed her further and further, each rub brought her closer to the pinnacle. Faster, faster. Suddenly, a wave of intense pleasure hit her. Her body stiffened, and then, disintegrated into violent spasms as she climaxed.

“Oh … oh … Tunde…” she said on a gasp of helpless surrender as she clung to him, quivering in ecstasy.

Just as she crashed back to earth, a flood of shame hit her. Goodness. Still in her clothes and Tunde had managed to give her an intense orgasm. Anger and frustration at herself for being so weak, so needy for him, snaked inside her, replacing the peace from the pleasure of her climax.

“Put me down,” she muttered.

Tunde froze, his hold on her slacking. Nkem slid down his body. As she did, her thigh glided over the still hard bulge in his shorts, reminding her of Tunde’s virility.

“Nkem, I’m sorry —”

“I … I’m going to bed,” she cut in. “Good night.”

Without waiting for his response, she pulled down her gown to cover her exposed thighs and began to climb up the stairs.

She slid into bed as soon as she got to her bedroom, too exhausted to think. How could she crumble within seconds of being in Tunde's arms?

Four years apart and her body had betrayed her without even putting up a fight, reacted immediately to his touch like she was a wilted flower waiting for him to bring her to life.

She pounded her pillow in irritation. She'd become putty in his hands after a simple kiss.

Why couldn't I feel like this with Arinze earlier?

Why does Tunde have this much hold over me?

Angry with herself for her easy capitulation, Nkem pulled her quilt higher to cover her shoulders. She squeezed her eyes shut, reliving the ecstatic sensations of his mouth and tongue meshed with hers, his fingers grazing and squeezing her skin, the contact of his arousal against the quivering flesh covered by the flimsy material of her panties … the intense and easy orgasm she'd just experienced.

She'd been deprived of it for far too long ... the effortless sexual chemistry they shared. His damn fault for throwing it all away. How dare he question her about another man? The audacity of him to be jealous when he was the one who had slept with another woman. She should have lied to him, told him she'd had mind-blowing sex with Arinze, and walked away victorious instead of allowing herself to succumb to her need for him.

Groaning again, she flipped herself to her back. The fleshy mound between her thighs still throbbed with desire. She wanted more of Tunde, needed more of him.

Her orgasm had been just a teaser, a blaze in an inferno, a mere flicker of the fire of fulfilment she craved.

"Oh, God, please …"

Nkem covered her face with her palms, a silent prayer on her lips. She needed

supernatural help to resist the temptation to crawl out of her bed and sneak back down to the only man who could relieve her pent-up sexual tension.

Fourteen



What the hell just happened? How had things escalated from a civil conversation to the guttural exchange ending with Nkem kissing and dry humping him until she climaxed with total abandon. And the regret in her eyes as she walked away. Damn. That cut deep to his soul.

With a low groan of annoyance at himself, Tunde fell onto his bed. He'd not expected any of that. Neither had he intended to confront Nkem when she walked in earlier. Not at all.

After Oke left, he'd warned himself repeatedly to handle his jealousy like a mature man, not act like a damn fool. After all, he had no right to be jealous, considering he and Nkem were divorced.

He'd stood in the hallway, pacing in the darkness as he waited for her to return from her date, telling himself to calm down, to act like a rational human being and show her he could be civil. What better way to catch a fly than with honey?

He'd planned to simply ask her about her outing, listen attentively to her response, and then tell her he'd missed her. He'd even envisaged his smooth exit after that, leaving her to marinate on his proper comportment and his kind words. What had he done instead? Acted like a territorial caveman with no finesse.

Tunde tapped his forehead multiple times with his knuckles to keep himself from flattening his palm and striking himself across his face like Nkem had. What a mess-up, behaving like a pig head, marking his territory when he hadn't yet

secured it. Nkem was no longer his, and he needed to focus on changing that. Not push her further away by acting crazy.

He groaned. Had he made things worse? He knew Nkem well enough to know that she was upstairs in her room, regretting their intense encounter. She was the kind of woman who needed to be emotionally in tune with a man to attempt any further sexual exploration. Her coldness seconds after her orgasm proved just that. She'd be upset that she'd done something contrary to her nature.

He curled his fingers into his palms and grunted. He should never have approached her knowing how fragile his ego was, how ill equipped he was to handle the idea of her with another man. A double standard, and frankly, quite silly of him, because he wanted her forgiveness, hoped she could overcome the knowledge that he'd been with another woman while they were still married.

He should have left well enough alone, but he'd been powerless to do so. Seeing her creep back into the house in the dark, not even bothering to switch on the light … well, he'd just snapped like a flimsy, brittle twig.

Something about Nkem taking off her shoes and tiptoeing towards the staircase, as if she didn't want to wake him or anyone else up, had pushed him over the edge.

How on earth had she expected him to be asleep and unbothered about her being out so late with another man? Did she not know him at all?

He closed his eyes, taking slow breaths in and out to calm himself. He couldn't carry on like this— living in a limbo, waiting for Nkem to make the next move towards reconciliation. That seemed to be doing more harm than good, driving her further and further away. If she could no longer predict his behaviour like she used to do easily, they'd been apart for far too long. It was time for him to put his big-boy pants on, stop feeling sorry for himself. and fix the family he broke.

Yes, he'd messed up. He deserved to be punished, would accept whatever penalty was necessary so that he could heal their home. But whatever the penalty, living apart and avoiding the uphill battle of trying to gain back Nkem's trust wouldn't do. He had to let her know that he had every intention of fighting to get her back. No more hiding behind his guilt.

Their passionate encounter moments ago—kissing her, touching and hearing her

call out his name as her body came apart in his arms—had made one thing clear. They still had profound chemistry. He had to use that to his advantage. Play dirty and use her physical response to him to try and lure back her emotional connection to him.

Mind made up, Tunde pulled his t-shirt over his head and tossed it in the laundry basket at the corner. He swept back the bed cover and crawled under it. He pressed his hand on the square dressing covering the bullet wound on his chest and then touched the smaller one over his arm where a bullet fragment had passed through his skin. The pain from his injuries had diminished significantly, but the hollow in his heart from Nkem's absence hurt like hell.

Tunde ground his jaw, determined to fight the past and move forward. He could do it. He had survived a near-death experience. He was strong enough to get his wife back. And he would do just that.

Shutting his eyes, he let his imagination run wild with a preview of their future together, one that resembled the wonderful life they'd shared before the storm that had upended it all. In no time, he drifted into dreamland.

~

The door to his room creaked, crashing through his sleep. Startled awake, Tunde peeled his eyes open to a shadowy figure at the entrance to his bedroom.

Confused and still groggy from sleep, he sat upright in bed, blinking rapidly to try and focus his vision. An almost impossible task because the only sources of light in the room were the faint streaks through the curtain from the street lights.

"Nkem?"

He swiped his thumb and forefinger across his eyes as if that would help him see better. Was he still sleeping, having another one of his erotic dreams, or was it really Nkem standing by the door in her nightgown with her hour-glass silhouette looking all shades of sexy?

"How is the pain from your wound?" she asked in a gentle whisper.

Still perplexed at her unexpected appearance in his room, and not entirely sure

he wasn’t hallucinating, Tunde didn’t respond.

“Is it still bad? Does it hurt when you move?”

“No,” he said, finally finding his voice. “It’s much better. Almost now like a dull ache.”

“Good.” She moved farther into the room. “Can I turn on the light?”

Tunde nodded, then realising that she probably couldn’t see him properly, he croaked out a yes.

Within seconds, the room flooded with light. Tunde’s heart crashed into his chest and began a thunderous beat.

Good God. Nkem was really in his room, wearing a lacy red nightgown that hugged her figure, the silky material against her smooth buttery skin as enticing as a bottle of wine to a thirsty man with a drinking problem. Tunde’s blood heated up, surging into his groin and hardening his dick.

What the hell is going on?

He still couldn’t believe it … couldn’t understand it. Why was Nkem here? What did she want?

Her eyes moved downwards to his crotch and focused on the tent his erection made of the quilt. He swallowed hard as his face flooded with warmth, embarrassed by how easily she turned him on.

“I’m glad to see that,” she murmured, not taking her gaze away from his groin. Her words and the intense way she scrutinised him made his dick even harder, stretching the thick material over it further.

Nkem cleared her throat and shifted her gaze to his face. “I … I’m not sure how to say this…” She trailed off, smoothed her palms over the sides of her gown, drawing his attention to the perfect curve of her hips. His dick twitched in response.

“I … I’m … I’ll just —”

“Why are you here, Nkem?” he interjected, a slight edge to his tone.

Her awkwardness around him was beginning to piss him off. They had known each other so well before, had been thick as thieves at one point. They’d been so close that they’d been almost able to read each other’s minds. Much to the chagrin of their friends and family, they’d been able to guess each other’s actions, to the point of ruining planned surprise parties. Now, she tiptoed around him like he was a stranger. He hated that.

“I’m horny and I need you.”

There. She’d said it. Blunt. Direct. And oh, so sexy.

Tunde’s head began to spin. On some level, he’d expected her answer. The uninhibited way she’d responded to him by the stairway had been telling. She’d unravelled so fast in his arms that it seemed like she was starved, hungry for passion. Just like the way she used to respond to him whenever he came home from a medical conference when they were still married, almost ripping his clothes off in her eagerness to make love to him.

Nkem had a healthy sexual appetite. She never shied away from seeking her sexual pleasure and fulfilment when they were together. During their separation, he’d tortured himself with thoughts of her having the same experience with faceless men.

Now, looking at Nkem, her eyes sparking with a cocktail of lust and uncertainty, her full lips parted slightly in anticipation, a jolt of guilt hit him. Had she been unable to find a man capable of satisfying her needs? Could the jerks Oke told him about not even summon the decency and ability to please her sexually? Had his absence really left her starving?

Oh, God. He clenched his jaw, annoyed with himself. What a bloody selfish bastard he’d been, getting his rocks off with Yemisi and leaving the woman he loved alone and sexually frustrated.

Her soft voice broke the silence, slicing through his musings.

“Do you feel strong enough to help me with that … or is it too soon after your injury?”

“I’m strong enough,” he said quickly, determined not to fail her any longer. He would give her the pleasure she needed even if it killed him.

“Are you sure? I can use my toys if —”

“Come here,” he commanded with a wolfish grin, patting the side of the bed.

“Yes, sir,” she said, a sly smile curving her lips as she sashayed towards him, her hips moving from side to side like a runway model.

Heart pounding in excitement, Tunde pulled himself up to his knees, spreading his arms wide in invitation. Nkem joined him on the bed and enclosed herself in his warm embrace. A harsh sigh of relief burst out from him as he crushed her body to his, her fast heartbeat vibrating over his chest.

It had been way too long since he held her like this. His woman. His wife. A divorce decree could never change his feelings. She belonged here in his arms, belonged with him.

“Oh, God,” he moaned, dragging his palms across her back and pressing her closer to him. “I’ve missed you.”

“Please kiss me,” she pleaded. “Make love to me, touch me…”

Tunde leaned back and gazed into her eyes to find them shining with a film of tears. This moment also carried a weighty significance for her, too. It seemed like they were two lost souls finally finding the light at the end of a tunnel.

He cupped her beautiful face in his hands and pinned her with an intense gaze. “You never need to ask me for anything … I’ll do anything for you. Whatever you want, however you want it.”

“I need you …” she whimpered.

“I know … I know.” He lowered his mouth to hers for a firm kiss. First, a teasing touch of his lips to hers, then he swept his tongue across her lower lip, tasting the sweet softness of the plump flesh. Her throaty gasp gave room for the intrusion of his tongue, and he delved in without hesitation, tangling with hers in a delicious dance as their mouths fused.

“Awwww, Tunde,” she moaned, flinging her arms around his neck, returning his kiss with fervour. “I need you …”

He pulled back, his gaze fixed on hers, his shoulders heaving as he breathed fast. “How do you need me, my darling. Nice and slow? Or do you need to be fucked fast and rough … please tell me exactly what you need … tell me.”

“Fuck me rough, please.”

Letting out a growl from deep inside his belly, Tunde pulled her back into his arms and captured her mouth with his in a fierce kiss. “I’ll do my very best.”

Fifteen



A helpless cry—sharp and involuntary—tore from her lips as Tunde's mouth covered the tip of her sensitive breast. She arched her back on the bed, shoving her chest into his face and offering him more, anything to prolong the ecstasy of having her breast suckled by the only man who knew how to make her weak with desire.

His tongue stroked, circled, flicked across the turgid nub, sending wave after wave of pleasure down her spine. His fingers fondled her other breast, rubbing the soft globe and tweaking the swollen nipple, driving her nearly insane with need. Moisture flooded between her thighs, dampening her already soaked panties.

Damn! She should never have worn any underwear. They were completely useless whenever she was intimate with Tunde. He always had a way of making her thoroughly aroused and her panties drenched and sticky. She'd considered going commando but had changed her mind because she'd needed somewhere to hide the condoms that she'd brought along.

"Oh, God," she whimpered, dragging her nails down his back as his teeth grazed her nipple, and then bit down gently. A shudder passed through her at the intense pleasure. Her breasts were the most erogenous part of her body, and Tunde knew too well what to do with them. He'd given her orgasms many times simply by sucking them.

"Please …" A helpless plea that she couldn't quite understand what for. For him to stop? To continue? She wasn't sure exactly what she needed at this point. The

pleasure was too intense and all consuming. She wanted more and less at the same time.

Canting her hips upwards and moving her pelvis towards the bulge in his shorts, Nkem ached for his possession. She needed him inside her, filling her up and bringing her to quick completion.

He groaned deeply, rocking his hips against hers as if to pacify her. “I know …” His hoarse voice was barely audible. “I’m sorry, but I just missed your breasts so much, Nkem baby. They’re so round ... so soft … so sweet.” He cupped the sensitive globes of her breasts in his palms and pushed them together, his lust-darkened gaze trained on them. “The best tits in the world. I can never get enough of them.”

Tremors rocked her body at the earnestness of his words and the rawness of his tone, although somewhere inside her, doubts simmered.

Did Tunde really mean what he said? Or was he lying to please her. His new girlfriend had perfect, surgically enhanced tits, whereas hers slanted downwards slightly, her nipples no longer pointing nearly to the sky like they used to.

As though sensing her scepticism, Tunde lowered his head and tugged a nipple with his teeth. “Don’t ever change anything about you,” he said in a passion infused lilt. “You’re perfect, Nkem. Absolutely perfect.”

Lowering himself again to her, he sucked each breast hungrily, murmuring words of affirmation as he treated them with equal adoration.

Completely overwhelmed with her lust, Nkem thrashed about on the bed, arching her body into him, silently pleading for more … for him to possess her, to fill her up, to take her to the heights of heaven the way he used to.

When his mouth finally left her breasts and began a descent down her body, she nearly lost it. She knew where he was headed, and she’d longed for it for years —his excellent ability to eat her pussy until she quivered like a leaf in the wind.

“Oh … I’m not sure I can…” she moaned, somewhat frightened of the pleasure she knew awaited her. He was so good at head that she’d passed out once after coming against his mouth.

“Please, Nkem, let me eat you…”

His raw request drove straight into her core, producing another flood of arousal between her thighs. Defenceless against her sensual desire, Nkem spread her legs wide and closed her eyes.

She felt a hand clutching at her left hip, and heard the ripping sound of her underwear being torn from her body.

Tunde’s fingers stilled suddenly, and she knew exactly why he’d hesitated. He’d noticed the two packets of condoms she’d placed in her underwear. They’d never used them with each other because they had waited until after marriage to become sexually active, relying on oral and intrauterine contraceptives thereafter.

But now, things were different. She couldn’t have sex with him without protecting herself. She didn’t know who else he’d been with. Couldn’t trust that Yemisi woman, or whomever else Tunde was sleeping with.

Keeping her eyes shut and her legs wide apart, she waited, hoping he wouldn’t stop, that it hadn’t killed the moment between them. Seconds ticked by as she waited, her stomach churning with trepidation, and then, she felt his tongue swipe across the plump mound of her fleshy pussy. Nkem let out a soft sigh of relief, placing her hand on the back of his shaved scalp and curving her back towards his face.

Soon, she was gritting her teeth to keep from screaming, writhing helplessly on the bed, moaning, and speaking in tongues as he licked, sucked, and made love to her nether region.

“Oh, my God,” she cried out when he pulled her clit into his mouth, fingering her wet core. A strong climax began to accumulate deep inside her vagina as he stroked her g-spot with his index and forefinger repeatedly and sucked her swollen nub with ardour. The rhythm was perfect, building a thrilling crescendo.

Stroke.

Suck.

Stroke.

Suck.

Lick.

Faster, faster, faster.

“Tunde!” she cried out, bolting up from the bed and clutching the back of his head as her body tensed up. Suddenly, she exploded into tiny fragments of overwhelming pleasure that shook her entire being, making her toes curl and her eyes roll to the back of her head.

He didn’t relent his fervent feasting between her thighs until her shudders quelled, leaving her weak and thoroughly satisfied. Nkem blew out a long sigh of contentment as she fell back on the bed.

“God, Tunde,” she murmured. “I’ve missed you.”

His arrogant chuckle rose to the air. “We’ve only just started, Baby. I’ve not fucked you roughly like you wanted yet, have I?”

Sixteen



Tunde sheathed himself with the condom, a mixture of regret and anticipation rumbling inside him. It hurt him a little bit that Nkem didn't trust him yet. No fault of hers. They'd been apart for four years. Way too long for her to have unprotected sex with him.

And anyway, a part of him was excited by this new adventure. He and Nkem had been together for years. Not that sex had ever been dull or pro forma with her, but years together brought familiarity, which had its own beauty. Years apart obscured that familiarity, not quite wiping it away completely, but almost like wrapping it in gift paper, so that it couldn't be seen or touched. Not to mention, they'd both been changed by all that had happened.

So, while he was making love to a woman he'd been with for years, in some ways, they were exploring love with a perfect stranger. Akin to doing it for the first time. Trying to catch a stolen moment of passion. Untying the bow and unwrapping the gift paper to behold the familiar, but very new, gift. And that sent chills through him.

He leaned downward and kissed her on the mouth, savouring the sweetness of her soft lips, tasting the juice of her pussy in the kiss. God, he loved her with all his heart. This woman that made his world go round, filled his life with purpose and meaning.

Her throaty moan fuelled his passion as she clung to him, pulling his weight on top of her and wrapping her legs around him.

“Ahhh, Tunde,” she whimpered, grinding the lower half of her body against his erection, making him impossibly harder. “I need you.”

He let out a sharp hiss as he hauled her into his arms and lifted her from the bed. Lord, have mercy. He was powerless against the onslaught of lust flooding every nerve in his body. He could never get enough of kissing her, of touching her.

Holding her astride him as they locked lips, he carried her across the room and stopped in front of the dressing table’s long mirror.

With one final firm kiss on her mouth, he withdrew from her slightly, sliding her gently down his body until her feet touched the floor.

“Turn to the mirror,” he instructed in a low, firm voice.

Nkem hesitated for a fraction of a second before doing as he asked. Her eyes widened as she fixed her gaze on the image of them standing naked in front of the mirror.

Lord, what a sexy sight to behold—Nkem’s perfectly curved, full-figured body right in front of him, the striking contrast of her light complexion to his mahogany skintone, her full breasts and hardened nipples, the transfixed fascination in her eyes—everything he saw in that mirror appeased his senses, aroused him beyond endurance.

“I want you to look at our reflection, Nkem. See how good we look together,” he said, kissing her neck. He slid his hands to the front of her body and cupped her breasts. “See how well they fit, how soft and juicy …” Massaging the soft globes, he added, “They’re perfect, and I love them.”

“Oh, Tunde,” she moaned, her eyes fluttering closed as he rubbed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples repeatedly.

“Keep your eyes open and look,” he commanded, not relenting in his sensual caress. He never—not even for one damn second—wanted her to doubt her beauty. Not ever.

Nkem moaned again, peeling her eyes open slowly as if her eyelids had become heavy.

“Yes, that’s it, keep looking,” he murmured, sliding his hands down her body and over the curve of her hips, relishing the softness of her flesh against his palms.

“You’re so soft and beautiful, Nkem. Just perfect. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He moved his hand over the slight pouch of her stomach and trailed his finger over the thin line of her c-section scar. “You’re a real woman, and I love every curve of your body, each faint scar, every stretch mark, every blemish …”

He turned her sideways and clutched her ass, squeezing the juicy flesh in his hand. “Look at that, Nkem. Such a perfectly round ass. Soft and fleshy. A natural black woman’s ass.”

Flicking his tongue across her earlobe, he swatted her ample butt with his palm and watched in fascination as it jiggled effortlessly.

“Yep, yep, see what that ass does,” he enthused, thwacking her ass gently again.

Nkem blew out a soft laugh, curving her back and gyrating her hips like she was twerking in a club.

Tunde grinned as he watched her ass bounce with each movement. “That’s it, Baby” he said in encouragement. “Dip low and make it clap. I love it. I love it.”

He laughed when she stopped suddenly and covered her face with her palms. “I’m being silly,” she mumbled.

“Oh, come on, don’t be shy,” he said, peeling her hands away from her face gently. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be … easy and fun.”

He turned Nkem back to face the mirror and positioned her body until he had her bent over in front of him, her hands clutching each corner of the dressing table for support.

“Perfect,” Tunde said, satisfied with the final curve of her back and the way her round bottom sloped upwards in invitation for his possession. He pointed to the mirror. “Now watch me fuck you, and remember, keep your eyes open.”

As if transfixed, she glued her gaze on their reflection, her eyes wild with lust. A surge of blood rushed to his dick, making his erection nearly painful.

To Tunde, nobody ever looked more beautiful than Nkem looked at this exact moment. The epitome of what all erotic dreams should be made of.

Grinding his jaw to maintain some control so that he didn't explode too soon, Tunde held his hardened shaft in his hand and guided it to the entrance of her welcoming pussy.

His attention focused on the mirror, Tunde watched Nkem's mouth pop wide open as she released a startled gasp when he rammed into her in one sure thrust.

Almost his undoing. Such a sexy sight. His balls tightened with the threat to expel all their contents prematurely. Damn! He pressed his lips tightly together. No way will I go down like this. Come without making her come.

Dragging a harsh breath in, he stilled himself, savouring the intense pleasure of Nkem's warm pussy clutching his penis, tight and wet. He'd not been prepared for this. The overwhelming ecstasy of joining his body with hers again. Home. It felt like he'd finally come home after a prolonged period away from the centre of his happiness. Her warm, welcoming heat. His resting place.

Their eyes locked in the mirror, hers wide and shining with desire and awareness, reflecting the significance of their first union after years apart. They remained still as Tunde waited, allowing her body to get accustomed to him again. From the tightness of her vaginal walls on his dick, he could tell it had been a long time since she'd had sex.

God! Tunde pressed a soft kiss to her neck. What a heel he'd just been, pounding into her like a raging bull. He should have been gentler when he'd entered her.

"Fuck me. Now, Tunde," she ordered, breaking into his thoughts. Her tone was raspy from the urgency of her need, transmitting impulses directly into his dick and fuelling his own desire.

"Ahh," he groaned as he began to move his hips, first a slow grind, sliding in and out of her with long strokes, watching as she threw her ass at him with each thrust, receiving the full length of his dick and giving him all of her pussy.

"Please …" she moaned out in a helpless plea.

Knowing exactly what she needed from him, Tunde began pumping his hips

faster, thrusting into her in the wild rhythm he knew would drive her insane with pleasure.

“You like that?” he rasped, loving the vision in the mirror of her breasts jiggling as he fucked her. “Is this how you like it? Is this what you need from me?”

“Yes, Tunde, please, harder, faster,” she whimpered, her mouth agape, her lust-filled eyes locked on their reflection in the mirror.

Like a crazed beast, Tunde put in the work, pumping harder and faster, uncaring of the dull ache from the wound in his chest. Even a gun to his head couldn’t make him stop now.

With fervent piston-like thrusts, he drove in and out of her, rotating his hips and watching her response in the mirror.

Sounds of flesh slapping flesh, groans and moans filled the room, igniting his senses until he felt the pressure from his orgasm building up rapidly.

Needing to speed things up for her, too, Tunde dragged his hand downward to the juncture between her thighs and searched her feminine folds with his finger until he found her clit. Using his thumb and forefinger, he began to massage the sensitive nub while maintaining the speed of his thrusts. He reached up and spanned her neck with his other hand.

“Oh, God … Oh, God!” she whimpered as he squeezed down on the muscles of her neck gently.

Without relenting, Tunde continued his powerful thrusts in and out of her dripping core, keeping the pressure on her neck, stroking her clit, and giving his woman the loving that she deserved, that she needed.

“Tuuuunde,” she suddenly cried out, her pussy walls gripping and releasing his dick in a tight suction as she shuddered her climax.

Three frenzied thrusts later, he joined her in sweet heaven, a string of guttural expletives escaping his lips as he found his own release.



Lying on his side, totally exhausted but also rejuvenated, Tunde watched Nkem sleep. She looked so beautiful with her face relaxed in slumber and her mouth parted slightly as she snored. Her bonnet had slipped from her head, so the tresses of her thick, jet-black hair were splayed across the pillow.

A smile tugged his lips. Knowing Nkem, she'd be pissed when she woke up to her frizzy hair that the colourful bonnet at the edge of the bed had done a poor job protecting.

Although he wanted to reach for it and cover her head again, he worried it would wake her up. And she needed sleep. Since the early hours of the morning when she'd appeared in his room like a phantom in a Nollywood movie scene—unexpectedly and theatrically—they'd made love like recently released inmates determined to make up for lost time, until she'd flatlined and fallen into deep slumber.

Another smile stretched his lips. Nkem had been insatiable, reaching for him four more times. Good he also had condoms with him, or she would have been frustrated after the second time. He'd given her five orgasms in the space of three hours. What an amazing feat, and a new record for him. His ego had inflated like a balloon when she'd burst into tears of joy the final time she'd climaxed.

And she'd pleased him, too, making him come three exhilarating times. He shook his head in embarrassment, recalling his final orgasm before they'd drifted into sleep. Nkem had unexpectedly dropped to her knees in the shower, sucking him off with determination until he'd erupted into her mouth, whimpering helplessly like a teenager receiving his first head job.

Unable to resist, Tunde reached out and caressed her bare shoulder. She stirred, but continued sleeping soundly.

Releasing a soft sigh, Tunde pulled the quilt higher to cover her properly. What did this mean for them? Was this a reconciliation? To him, making love to her again after several years felt monumental, like they'd finally broken the barrier that held them apart, but was it the same for Nkem? Did she want to try again?

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Jide's voice pierced the air as his heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway behind

the closed door.

Nkem bolted upright, startling Tunde. “Oh, my God,” she shrieked, jumping out of the bed. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

Rendered speechless by the sheer terror in her eyes, Tunde simply gaped at her. What the hell was going on? Why did Nkem look like she was fleeing the apocalypse?

“Oh, Jesus, where are my clothes?” she muttered, frantically darting her gaze around like a deer trapped in headlights.

“Oh, there,” she gushed out in relief, leaping forward as soon as she spotted her nightgown at the edge of the bed. Snatching it, she shoved it over her head in haste.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Jide’s voice was closer, making Nkem more jittery.

“I need to hide,” Nkem murmured, her eyes wildly scanning the room as she ran her fingers through her scattered hair.

“Why?” Tunde finally found his voice, scratching his scalp in confusion.

“I don’t want Jide to get the wrong impression seeing me here.”

“What impression?”

“That we are getting back together,” Nkem choked out seconds before she slid under the bed to hide.

At that instant, Jide burst into the room.

“Daddy,” he called out, rushing to the bed. “Good morning. Arise and shine.”

Tunde enfolded him in a bear hug. “Hey there, Slugger,” he said, rubbing his palm down his son’s back. “Good morning to you too. I hope you had a wonderful sleep.”

“Yes, I did, thank you. Did you?”

Tunde shook his head. “I didn’t really sleep much.”

“Why not?”

Tunde’s lips twitched. “I had to do some … some work.”

“Oh, okay.” Jide turned his attention to the edge of the bed and pointed to the bonnet lying at the edge of the pillow. “That’s Mummy’s cap.”

“Oh.” Tunde couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his lips. His son really could be the best detective Nigeria ever produced with his sharp observation skills.

“Where is she? I went to her room first, but she isn’t there.”

Tunde scratched his scalp, searching his brain for a believable lie.

“Didn’t she come back home last night? Aren’t we going to church today?”

“Too many questions, Son,” Tunde said, fighting his growing amusement.

Bursting into laughter now would be a mistake, certainly create suspicion. Besides, before he let the cat out of the bag, he needed to speak to Nkem about why she wanted to keep their reunion from Jide. “Let me try to answer them one by one. Your mother came back home last night, but went out again to … to buy bread this morning. And I don’t think we can go to church today because she may be very tired.”

“Okay. But why do you have her cap?”

“I … eh … I borrowed it to cover my head for sleep.”

Jide laughed out. “Why? You don’t have any hair. I hope I don’t grow up to have no hair like you.”

“What? I have lots of hair. I just shave it because it’s coming out all white from my head.”

“Well, I hope I don’t have Father Christmas hair, too, when I grow up.”

Tunde threw his head back and bellowed out a laugh. “I pray so, too, my boy. Premature greying isn’t all fun and games.”

“What are we having for breakfast?” Jide asked.

Tunde patted his shoulder. “Let’s have fried plantains and eggs,” he said. “Can you go to the kitchen and bring out your plate? I’ll join you in a second.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Jide said, springing to his feet. He dashed out of the room with as much vigour as he’d burst in. Phew! The boy had too much energy.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Nkem slid out of her hiding spot and shook her head. “That boy is too clever for his own good,” she said with a proud smile.

Evading his gaze, she slipped her bonnet back on her head. “Thank you for … for …” Her voice trailed off, and she took a deep breath before parting her lips again. “I had an amazing time.”

“Me, too,” Tunde said, dozens of questions storming his head. He wanted to have a proper conversation with Nkem, talk about what they shared together a few hours ago.

“I … eh … better sneak out before Jide catches me here,” she muttered, ambling across the room.

She turned back to him when she got to the door. “I hope we can have a repeat of … you know…”

Well, there was the answer to his unspoken questions, leaving a decidedly sour taste in his mouth. Nkem wasn’t interested in a relationship with him or a reconciliation. She needed him for sex only. She wanted him as her personal live-in booty call, her walking dildo.

Unsatisfied with that, yet unable to deny her anything, Tunde nodded. “Sure,” he said. “But you have to break it off with that Arinze bastard.”

Nkem smiled. “Already done. And you with that Yemisi bitch.”

“We never even—” Tunde halted, stopping himself from a challenging attempt to convince Nkem that he’d never dated Yemisi. No point. It would be tricky trying to explain the transactional nature of that relationship. Best to let sleeping dogs lie. “Sure. She’s history,” he said instead.

Seventeen



Nkem twisted the tap on, an impish grin spread across her lips. She'd been doing that a lot for the past week, smiling for no reason whatsoever.

Placing the soapy plate under the runny water, she sighed with pleasure. She'd just shared a delicious dinner of spaghetti and meatballs with Tunde and Jide, and from the looks Tunde had been giving her all evening, pretty safe to say she would be having another earth-shaking night in his bedroom.

Almost every evening, she'd sneak off to Tunde's room as soon as Jide went to bed. And boy oh boy. A few times there, she'd almost had her back blown out from his adventurous lovemaking.

Her face heated up, recalling last night. Tunde had given her the best vulval massage using a tingly oil he'd purchased from an online pleasure store. At a certain point, her vaginal muscles experienced a rush of involuntary spasms, rendering her helpless as sensations fired through every fibre of her body. The orgasm that followed left her damn near comatose.

Good Lord, that man would be the death of her. Sometimes, Nkem imagined herself as his bedtime guitar. His beautiful fingers strummed along her body, just like he plucked the strings of his guitar. Playing her—sometimes soft and sweet, other times fast and furious—until she let out the tune he intended. No doubt about it. He knew just what to do to make her hopelessly addicted to him.

Placing the rinsed plate on the drying rack, Nkem shook her head. Addiction. Tunde was like a drug to her now, which defeated the purpose of trying to move

on from him. The more they had sex, the more they talked and shared deep feelings. The more that happened, the less she found herself able to separate her physical needs from her emotional needs. Tunde was beginning to fulfil both again. He was beginning to restore her optimism, give her a reason to hope once more.

She picked a plate from the dirty pile on the counter top and scrubbed the grease away with a sponge. After rinsing it, she put it on the dish rack. Automatically, she continued. Wash, rinse, and repeat. Wash, rinse, repeat. Did she want this same routine in her personal life? To get back together with Tunde only to go through the pain of infidelity again?

She'd seen it happen too many times. Her sister's husband cheating over and over despite promising never to do it again. She'd pushed Lotanna to leave him. How many times had she told her sister, once a cheat, always a cheat? Yet Lotanna repeatedly forgave the good-for-nothing man, only to be heartbroken again. How could she reconcile with Tunde knowing he might do the same thing to her? Was she prepared to live a life worrying about him cheating?

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Nkem started at the intrusion. She angled her head sideways and gave Tunde a sultry smile. "Just thinking about what I'm planning to do to you tonight. All the ways I plan to make you come."

"Ah … now you've got me excited," he murmured, moving over to stand behind her.

"Oooh … I can feel that," she cooed, wriggling her hips and grinding her butt against the bulge in his shorts.

"It doesn't take much for that to happen when I'm around you," he said, swiping his tongue across her neck.

Nkem giggled. "Stop," she quipped. "Jide could walk in any moment."

Tunde dragged his palms upwards to cup her breasts through her multi-coloured boubou. "And so what if he does? Is it the worst thing in the world for him to see his father loving on his mother?"

Nkem stiffened. “Tunde,” she warned. “I told you before that —”

He withdrew from her and sighed. “Yeah, yeah, I know what you told me. But I don’t understand.”

“What’s not to understand? I thought we agreed we should leave things the way they are without trying to define things between us.”

“Well, I’m not happy with that. I want us back together. As husband and wife.”

Nkem drew in a deep breath. Just four days ago, two nights after she’d appeared in his room asking him to make love to her, they had a conversation about what having sex had meant for each of them. She’d told him in clear terms that she didn’t want to rush things or make any decisions. During that talk, he’d agreed to take it one day at a time and continue enjoying their moments together without the pressure of labelling what they were doing.

So, where was all this coming from?

Nkem massaged the bridge of her nose, a tad exasperated. She was in no mood to talk about this. “What do I do the next time you cheat on me? Divorce you again?”

“How many times do I have to apologise, Nkem? What do I have to do to prove to you that I’ll never do it again?”

“Nothing. Because it’s impossible for me to believe.”

“Impossible?” He brushed his palm over his face and sucked his teeth. “Maybe I should never have admitted what I’d done in the first place? Was I wrong for telling you the truth?”

“No, Tunde. You were wrong for cheating. Trust me, it would have been worse if I found out myself.”

“Worse? Nothing is worse than living without you, Nkem. Absolutely nothing.”

His earnest admission gave her pause. She tossed the sponge into the sink and dried her hands with the kitchen towel. She agreed with Tunde. It was hell without him. The three weeks he’d been back had been the happiest she’d been

in years.

She enjoyed coming back home to him relaxing in the sitting room, strumming on his guitar, or in the kitchen cooking dinner. The house bloomed again with life and with chaos. Seeing Jide and Tunde playing hide and seek, arguing about who won a card or board game, or just generally making a ruckus doing boy things, always made her happy.

Sometimes, she joined them in their games; other times, she simply watched them, thrilled to have the family back as one. Everything seemed livelier, better with Tunde around. She had to admit that she loved him being back here with her and Jide, and wasn't looking forward to him leaving next week now that his physio was over.

But what did that mean? Did she want him back as her husband?

"So what are we doing here, Nkem? Are we friends with benefits? Fuck buddies?"

She gasped. "Shhh … Jide may hear you."

Tunde's exasperated question had been in a low tone, but Nkem worried about her son finding out about the changed dynamics between his parents. She wasn't sure what it all meant and didn't want to give Jide false hopes.

Deciding to be totally honest, Nkem raised her shoulders in a resigned shrug. "I don't know. I don't know."

She sighed, tears burning the back of her eyes. She wished things were different, that she could easily forget how much Tunde's betrayal had hurt her. But she couldn't.

She'd gone to Church to seek the priest's advice, prayed for God's help to move past it, had even gone to a seminar for people dealing with betrayal, but nothing helped. Every time she considered a reconciliation with Tunde, all she could think about was how devastated she'd been. And her fear of allowing herself to return to that pain by letting him in again paralysed her.

Nobody she knew had ever had a positive outcome by forgiving a cheating spouse. Not her sister, not one of her friends, not even Tunde's mother who was

now caring for the sick husband who had cheated repeatedly … even having other children. What if Tunde was like his father? She couldn't—she wouldn't—put herself through that hell again. Never.

"Do you want us to stop … stop…" She broke off, unwilling to finish her question, terrified that he may want to terminate their current arrangement.

"No." His answer was immediate and firm. "This is the happiest I've been in years."

Nkem's heart leapt with joy at his solemn remark. "Me, too," she admitted softly.

"Then why can't we try again?"

"I … I don't know." She blew out a long breath.

"Promise me you'll think about it. Just consider us being a couple again."

Nkem hesitated for several seconds. "Okay."

Tunde reached out and pulled her into his arms. "I love you. Always have. Always will," he said.

Nkem rose onto her toes and kissed him on his cheek. "I know."

She believed him. But was love enough? It certainly hadn't stopped him from hurting her before.

Although she wanted to say his words back to him because she felt the same way, she knew she shouldn't. It would only give him false hope, and she wasn't prepared to provide any answers yet.

"Why are you guys taking so long?" Jide's voice boomed from the dining room. "I'm still waiting for my dessert."

Nkem broke away from Tunde and moved back to the sink. "Hey, don't be cheeky. I'll be there with your ice cream in a minute."

"Okay, thanks, Mum," Jide hollered back. "Remember, three scoops of strawberry ice cream, not two and not chocolate."

She twisted her lips into an amused snicker. “Yes on the strawberry. Two and a half on the scoops.”

“Oh, Mum …”

“Grumble again and it’s back to two.”

“Alright. Alright. But please bring it soon. I’ve been waiting for ages.”

Nkem smiled at Tunde as she strolled towards the deep freezer. “Your son is something else,” she said. “Too damn bossy.”

Tunde laughed out, opening the kitchen cabinet and retrieving three ice cream bowls. “I wonder where he gets it from.”

Nkem rolled her eyes. “I’m not that bossy.”

“Hmmmm. I’ll not fall into an argument that I’ll never win.”

Nkem barked out a laugh. She knew Tunde was right, but she loved bossing her boys about. As they chuckled together, she realised that for the first time since their separation, she thought of Tunde as part of her team again.

Eighteen



His first day back to work. Tunde couldn't contain his excitement as he steered his Range Rover to a stop in front of the white, two-story building where he had practiced plastic surgery for the last five years.

He stepped out of his vehicle with a huge grin on his face as his gaze caught the large banner with Blossom Health written in bold letters. The italicised tagline We can help you look the part never failed to make him smile. Clever.

This place … his pride and joy. The evidence of all his hard work in medical school, and his gruelling surgical training in America. He stood still and took a deep breath in, savouring the pleasure of seeing his name engraved on the wall indicating his allocated parking spot.

Dr Babatunde O Edun, Consultant Plastic Surgeon.

He'd come so far, sacrificed so much to get here. All the sleepless nights studying, the endless hours learning the craft, relocating to another country for his residency training with Nkem and a toddler, and all the difficulties that they'd encountered adjusting to a different way of life. Everything he'd been through had brought him to this point of professional and financial success. And Nkem had been with him through it all. From the very beginning.

Exhaling in gratitude, Tunde took a step forward. His joy returning to work after a near death experience knew no bounds, but what filled him with total satisfaction was his conversation with Nkem three days ago.

His lips curved into a half-smile as he recalled her sprawled against him languidly as she whispered in his ear, “You don’t have to move back to your flat.”

He’d been so happy that he’d jumped off the bed, hauled her in his arms and twirled her around. He couldn’t describe the relief he felt. Even now. He’d been terrified that leaving would destroy the rapport they’d built, give room for someone else to step in to fill the void.

With eagerness, he’d taken a cab the next day to his apartment, packed the rest of his stuff and driven back … home.

Although he and Nkem still had not clearly defined things between them, he was glad to be back with his family, staying there without the fear of a looming expiry date.

Nkem had taken another big step—telling their son about the decision for him to remain at home. Yes, she’d evaded the boy’s question about the duration of his stay, but still, things were looking up.

It didn’t matter that she’d not yet revealed the nature of their changed relationship to Jide or anyone else. What truly mattered to him was that in these past four weeks, they’d moved closer to a reconciliation than they had in all their years apart. He would savour the pleasant moments. Take one exhilarating day at a time, including arriving to work for his first scheduled surgery since his gunshot injury.

“Welcome back!”

Tunde started at the loud cheering as soon as he stepped into the ground floor lobby of the building.

Heart pounding in his chest, he scanned the room to find all the Blossom Health employees, including his partners, clapping for him.

Colourful balloons festooned the lobby and a massive, welcome-back banner marked his return.

Tunde grinned as he pointed an accusing finger at Oke and Segun. “You guys! I never suspected this,” he said, touched by their thoughtfulness. “Thank you.

Thank you, everyone."

Oke stepped forward, holding a tempting chocolate cake and a bottle of wine. "For the celebration at lunch time," she said. "But first, we have to scrub in. Our first joint surgery is a liposuction, and then, you and Segun have a breast augmentation afterward."

Segun laughed, curving his hands over his chest. "I love this job, fellows. Nothing like creating bigger breasts for women who want them."

Tunde shook his head in jest. "You too like breast, my guy," he teased in broken English.

Laughter rippled in the room, and Tunde's chest swelled with joy. He was being reunited with his work family after a reunion with his real family. Life couldn't get any better than this. In many ways, his brush with death had been the beginning of incredible blessings for him.

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All scrubbed and ready to go, Tunde glanced down at the anaesthetised woman on his surgical table. Mrs Alohan, a fifty-five-year-old senator's wife who'd already had several surgeries, including a butt lift, breast implants, cheek bone implants, a nose job, and removal of two ribs.

This time, she'd contacted the practice to arrange an emergency liposuction. Her third one in the space of three years.

For the life of him, he couldn't understand why a woman would put herself through so many surgeries to look almost lifeless and unreal. And for what?

There were times that he'd felt compelled to advise her to stop, that she didn't need any more surgery. But each time he'd done so, she'd shut him down, almost angrily. So here he was, standing in his scrubs and ready to suck fat from her stomach while she lay unconscious. If he couldn't stop Mrs Alohan from trying to chase physical perfection, he could at least make sure it was done safely. A win-win for everyone involved because she always paid in full and in cash for the perfect body she sought.

“Ready?” Oke asked, drawing him from his thoughts.

Tunde stared down at his gloved hands. Despite the anxiety clawing at his gut, his hands were steady. His physiotherapist had cleared him more than a week ago, so he’d been signed back to work. An entire month of not performing surgery was quite a lot, and Tunde was eager to get back into the swing of things.

“More than ready,” he said with a wink. “Let’s suck some fat away.”

Several hours later, after two successful surgeries, Tunde sat in the boardroom with his two partners, celebrating his first day back.

“You did good, my guy,” Segun said, scooping some cake from his plate. “Welcome back again.”

“Thank you. I worried it would be awkward after several weeks of not performing surgery, but it wasn’t at all.” Tunde took a sip of his coffee. “It really is like riding a bike. Hard to forget once you know how.”

“Yep,” Oke agreed. “Once a surgeon, always a surgeon.”

They lapsed into silence, and Tunde nursed his drink, pleased about his successful first day back to work. The mini return party the entire staff had thrown for him had ended a few minutes ago, and with no more surgeries scheduled today, he decided to hang back and relax with his partners.

Such a rewarding day. And to think he’d almost lost it all. Just a few more inches and the bullet could have maimed or killed him. How lucky he was. And to top it all off, he would be driving home to his family tonight. Not to his lonely small apartment. What a blessing.

“Nkem told me you’re still living at home. Are you guys back together now?”

Oke’s soft voice cut through his thoughts as if she’d read his mind. Tunde turned his attention to her, surprised by the sudden change of topic. “I think so,” he replied hesitantly. He knew that Oke and Nkem talked almost every day, but he wasn’t sure how much Nkem had divulged about their changed situation to her friend. “She asked me not to move out, so I guess we’re living together now.”

“Hmm. Okay o.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. “Has she said anything to you about us?”

“C’mon, Tunde, stop being paranoid,” Oke said with a wry twist of her lips. “Nkem has suddenly become mute about you. She’s been acting all mysterious these days, but I can tell being with you has made a difference in her life.” She gave him a thumbs-up. “Whatever you’re doing, keep it up. Baby girl has been smiling sheepishly at odd times and zoning out as if she’s in a world of her own. I mean, the girl’s been acting like a schoolgirl who has been asked to the dance by her crush.”

Joy flooded his senses as Oke chronicled the changes she’d noticed in Nkem. He, too, had flourished in the past few weeks. It felt like his world had suddenly come alive again.

“And you look happy, too, Tunde,” Oke carried on, licking off some icing from her finger. “You’re more relaxed, less apprehensive about stuff. Nkem has always been good for you.”

“Yep, I agree,” Segun chimed in. “Great to have my real partner back”

Tunde raised a brow as he turned to him. “Was I fake before?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded. “Your misery was quite obvious the last four years. Please tell Nkem to never leave you again, she’s —”

Oke hissed, cutting Segun off. “You men and putting all the pressure of relationships on women.” She shook her head. “Nope. Not today. Instead, tell Tunde not to fuck things up this time.”

Segun rolled his eyes. “I was going to say that too before you jumped in, girl.”

“Okay, okay, guys,” Tunde said, forced to butt in. Otherwise, they’d be going at each other, which he didn’t want, especially not over him. His friends had opposing personalities and often clashed. Although he knew they loved and respected each other, Oke’s outgoing, bossy nature and Segun’s laid-back, docile temperament were a bad mix sometimes. He’d often found himself the mediator in their disagreements.

“I plan never to fuck things up, so rest assured that your real partner is here to stay.”

“Great, man. And for the thousandth time, welcome back. And I mean, the real you.”

Tunde shook his head as he chuckled. Being here with his friends and celebrating his return to work with the people who started this practice with him, he couldn’t be happier. Nothing would ever tempt him to sabotage the joy this second chance had gifted him … either at home or at work.

Nineteen



“What an excellent presentation, Nkem, well done,” Mr Olumide said as they strolled out of the conference room. “Your research went above and beyond on this project.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said, shifting a bit to put some distance between them. Since she’d started work here, she couldn’t help noticing his sometimes inappropriate remarks. Or the way he got a little too close for comfort, infringing on her personal space.

Certainly, her boss had never touched her. Nor had he ever propositioned her. But the man had a lecherous way about him that irritated her.

“You are doing well. The way you’re going, you’ll soon have my position.”

She laughed in mock protest. “I’m not trying to take over o. I’m just doing my job.”

Even though she’d brushed off his remark, Nkem knew for a fact that her name had been floated as a candidate for his impending replacement. Human Resources had received too many employee complaints regarding Mr Olumide’s inappropriate behaviour towards female staff not to take it seriously. It was an open secret that the ministry was gathering evidence with the aim to sack him.

After several unsatisfactory inquiries, his case had been put forward to a review panel. Yet, that didn’t stop him from his lewd ways. He felt invincible, possibly because of his strong connections with politicians. He would soon receive the

shock of his life.

A representative of the Commissioner had approached her last week, in a roundabout way promising her the position if she played her part … meaning keep her mouth shut until they concluded their investigation, and then, assist with the transition.

“So, are you still single? Even divorcees need someone to help with their loneliness once in a while.”

Biting back her irritation, Nkem ignored the comment. From her experience, engaging Mr Olumide increased his inappropriate behaviour rather than deter it.

Once, during a staff meeting, he told a nursing mother who had just returned from maternity leave, that he liked the way breastfeeding filled out her breasts. Appalled by the comment, Mima told Mr Olumide off, trying to explain to him how inappropriate his comment had been. Instead of apologising, he doubled down, insisting it was a compliment.

Mima was so distressed after the public incident that she’d taken the rest of the day off. Remorseless about what he said even after others tried to explain it to him, Mr Olumide still hadn’t apologised to this day.

“You know, I can help you with that any time,” he said. “My wife doesn’t mind sharing me.”

Completely ignoring his silly comment, Nkem held onto the handle of her office door. “I have to finalise the details of the presentation and send it off to the Commissioner’s office,” she said, pushing her office door open.

With an arrogant chuckle, Mr Olumide nodded. “Do that, my dear. And don’t forget to add my name at the end o. I helped with the research, too.”

Nkem suppressed an irritated hiss. Helped? The man did nothing but approve all the work she’d done. He’d never even tried to give her any pointers. Sometimes, it seemed she was here to do his work while he schmoozed with the big boys in government. Mtcheew!

“No problem, sir,” she said, pushing into her office and closing the door swiftly. Best to escape the man’s presence as quickly as possible before she gave in to

the desire to curse him out.

Now alone in her office, Nkem blew out a long sigh and glanced at her watch. Twelve forty-five. What a busy Monday—the morning had flown by. After dropping Jide at school, she'd made it just in time to gather all her bits and bobs for the presentation on next quarter's proposed Lagos state budget to the state finance board.

She'd not even had a chance to text Tunde and ask him how his first day back to work had gone. A half-smile curved her lips as she set her laptop on her desk and slumped into the plush executive seat behind it. Hopefully, his surprise welcome party had gone smoothly. She'd been part of the planning, but regrettably, today's presentation had prevented her from being there.

Reaching across for her handbag, Nkem fished out her phone and unlocked it. Her face broke into a broad grin as she glanced at the notification from Tunde.

Staring back at her was a picture of him with his partners in front of the large wall banner welcoming him back to work.

Under the photo, he'd texted, Oke and Segun told me you made sure this happened today. Thank you, Babe.

Still grinning from molar to molar, she typed back, You're most welcome. Hope you had an amazing first day back.

Her phone began to chime. Nkem shook her head as she chuckled. Tunde wasn't one for back-and-forth texts. He preferred making calls. Especially video calls.

Quickly darting her gaze to the mirror at the corner of her office, she surveyed her reflection and flipped back the wayward strand of hair that had escaped her messy bun, tucking it behind her ear before pressing the answer button.

Waiting as the line connected, she adjusted her necklace as she stared at herself on the screen. Within seconds, Tunde's face popped on the display.

"Hey, Babe," he greeted cheerily. "How was your presentation? I'm sure you killed it."

"It was absolutely fine. As always, I made it without any input from the boss."

“You are fire! I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled sheepishly at the screen, ecstatic to hear from him, to be talking to him as freely as they used to.

“So, how was your first day back? Your scheduled surgeries. Were they okay?”

“Yes, thanks,” he said. “Even though I was nervous at first, I managed to pull through.”

“Well done, Tunde. I’m so pleased. We need to pop open a bottle of champagne when we get home.”

Home. Funny how she’d started thinking of the house as their home again. During their divorce, she’d been surprised that Tunde had transferred the deed over to her. She’d not expected that, given that he’d purchased it and she’d been the one to file for the divorce.

Of course, she’d expected some form of settlement for her role as his wife for many years, and monthly child support payments for Jide’s upkeep, but he had gone above and beyond, his generosity exceeding her expectations.

For a long time, she’d felt guilty and uncomfortable having so much of what he’d purchased for their family, but as the years went on, she came to appreciate her role in his success. She’d been there when he had nothing, been his support system as he’d gathered wealth. She did deserve everything he’d given her.

“We should,” he said, reeling her mind back to the present. “I have one more scheduled surgery with Segun and nothing else planned for the day. Is it okay with you if I pick Jide up from school? I miss doing that.”

“Absolutely. That would be awesome. I still have some work to do sef.”

“Brilliant. I wanted to eh … ask you if … eh …” He paused, took a deep breath and stroked his finger over his jaw as if considering how to phrase his question properly. He parted his lips, but then pressed his mouth shut again.

“What is it, Tunde?” she asked.

He exhaled sharply. “It’s my mother. She wants to visit me … us … And she wants to stay the weekend.”

Nkem held her breath. It wasn’t a secret that her mother in-law had beef with her. For years, she and Mama Ibadan—her nickname because she lived in Ibadan—had gotten along quite well. However, when Nkem had filed for divorce, the woman had done a 180, turning into someone Nkem didn’t recognise.

She’d become hostile, making snide comments during family gatherings, telling everyone who cared to hear that her son’s wife had driven him out of his house. She’d never bothered to share Tunde’s role in the breakdown of the relationship. Instead, Mama Ibadan continued to spread false rumours about her, including criticising her parenting skills any opportunity she got.

At first, Nkem had tried to be civil about it, and continued to ensure Jide maintained contact with his father’s family, but when the woman began to speak evil of her to her own son, Nkem had stopped all contact between Jide and his grandmother.

That seemed to have made Mama Ibadan even angrier, propelling her into a full-blown smear campaign to ruin Nkem’s reputation, calling her ashewo behind her back all the time. The woman didn’t know it, but Nkem had heard everything from Tunde’s many half siblings with whom she was still friendly.

“I’ll tell her not to come if that’s what you want,” Tunde said quickly, noticing her immediate discomfort. “Or I could move back to the flat for the weekend so she can stay with me there.”

Nkem sighed. “Let me think about it.”

“I’m really sorry to ruin your day with this.” He scrubbed his scalp with his palm and then massaged his temple. “I know my mum has been out of line many times, but she’s my mother.”

“I know,” she murmured.

“I’ve warned her countless times about disrespecting you, but I know she does it behind my back.”

Nkem pressed her lips together to keep from blurting out her disdain for his

mother's behaviour. It wasn't Tunde's fault that he couldn't control his loose cannon of a mother.

"I'll make sure she's on her best behaviour, Nkem, I swear. She's eager to see me because she hasn't done so since my gunshot injury."

Nkem worried the inside of her lower lip with her teeth as she thought about Tunde's request. He had a right to see his mother, but she also had good reason to want nothing to do with this reunion.

Apart from the thought of facing Mama Ibadan again after the horrible way she'd treated her, Nkem worried about explaining Tunde's presence in her home to the woman who had insisted that leaving her son had been a stupid decision.

"All men cheat," she'd told her when trying to convince her not to file for a divorce. "You'll regret leaving my son because he loves you."

Nkem had been so disturbed by her mother-in-law trivialising her pain that she'd sworn to prove her wrong. How embarrassing that she'd allowed Tunde back, knowing his mother would gloat about it.

"What are you going to tell her about … about us still living together if she stays with us?"

Although she'd asked the question, Nkem held her breath, awaiting his response, not sure what it would be. A part of her wanted to hear him say that he'd tell her they were back together, but she wasn't sure if she was ready for anyone to know.

"Whatever you want me to say," he said.

Nkem exhaled slowly, keeping still for several seconds. The ball was in her court. She had to make up her mind what she wanted from Tunde.

She nodded. "Okay."

~

Pushing the house door open, Nkem took a long and slow breath in, savouring

the aroma of cooked food saturating the air. She had excellent culinary skills and could appreciate well prepared meals. If the gorgeous smell emanating from the kitchen was any indication, the food would taste amazing too.

Tunde couldn't cook much, but he could make a mean pot of yam pottage. Her mouth was already watering.

As she strolled farther into the hallway, the melodious sounds from the strings of his guitar stopped her in her tracts.

Tunde was playing her favourite Tracy Chapman tune—Talking About a Revolution.

The strains of the music as he strummed the guitar wafted into the hallway, where Nkem came to a dead stop and listened to his spellbinding rendition. Wow, it really took her way back.

Goosebumps spread over her skin. Damn. He'd played this song for her on their first date—as they picniked on the gardens in front of the university's main library. That warm, breezy evening he'd serenaded her, she'd fallen in love.

Walking quiet as a mouse so she didn't interrupt his flow, she moved closer to the sitting room and peered through the open door, making sure to remain unobserved.

Pleasure flooded her chest at the scene before her. Tunde sat on the recliner with his guitar resting across his knee, while Jide sat at his feet, bobbing his head to the music.

Tears choked her throat as she watched father and son. She loved them both with all her heart. This was what she'd always wanted. To have a family with a man she loved, one who loved her back.

As if now conscious of her presence, Tunde darted his gaze towards the door and fell still. The sudden silence rang in her head as his gaze fixed on hers, his eyes sparking with joy.

Nkem's heart flipped in her chest and beat faster as his lips spread into a warm smile. She would give everything she owned to always be welcomed home like this.

“Mummy!” Jide yelled, jumping to his feet and rushing towards her.

“Hey, my love,” she called out, catching her son in a bear hug and squeezing him to her. “I’m so glad to be home. How was your day?”

“Fantastic. Daddy picked me up from school and took me to get some ice cream.”

“That’s wonderful. What flavour did you get?”

“Vanilla and toffee.”

“Yummy. Did you get any for me?”

A guilty expression crossed his face. “No, Mum. It would have melted. But Daddy made dinner. Yam pottage.”

“Yes, I know. I could smell it as soon as I walked in. I can’t wait to dig in.”

Nkem turned her attention to Tunde, who gaze was glued on them. She sensed the same nostalgia she’d felt warming his dark brown eyes. His mind had gone on the same pleasant trip down memory lane as hers.

Without another thought, Nkem disengaged from Jide’s embrace and rushed towards Tunde. She plucked the guitar from his hands and settled onto his lap. Lowering her head, she captured his mouth in a firm kiss.

Barely aware of her son’s shriek of protest and Tunde’s deep throaty growl, Nkem deepened the kiss, slipping her tongue into his parted lips.

Seconds later, she raised her head and pressed her lips to his ear. “Your mother can visit,” she whispered. “And when she asks about us, tell her we’re back together.”

Twenty



“No space to put my clothes in here,” Tunde grumbled as he stared at the closet filled with Nkem’s hanging clothes.

She giggled, wrapping her arms around him from behind. “There is … look.”

“Where? I can’t fit more than five shirts in there.”

“Well … Some people deal with heartbreak by eating ice cream and cakes. I went clothes shopping.”

Tunde’s heart slammed into his chest at her remark. He stiffened, worried that her vibrant mood had changed.

Turning slowly to face her, he held her close, searching her face anxiously. “I’m sorry —”

Nkem burst out into laughter. “Oh, stop apologising, Tunde. It’s in the past. We’re moving forward, remember?”

A slow warmth spread across his chest. These past two weeks had been blissful. Since the evening Nkem had walked in from work and all but announced their reconciliation to their son, he’d been floating on cloud nine.

Things had gone back to the way they were before their separation, maybe even better. She’d become relaxed around him, kissing and touching him spontaneously, even in public.

Maybe she really had buried the past and was now ready to move on with the future. Hearing her confirm it now, made his throat tighten with gratitude.

He lowered his head and pressed a firm kiss to her mouth. “Here’s to forever with you,” he murmured.”

Flinging her arms around him, Nkem meshed her lips with his, a throaty moan emanating from her lips. “Forever and ever,” she murmured between kisses.

Turned on by her eagerness and commitment, Tunde lifted her in his arms and carried her towards the bed, dumping her right in the centre.

The gasp from her parted lips as her back hit the mattress, the way her breasts bounced in her tank top, and her slightly parted legs clad with black leggings fitting snugly over her thick thighs, appealed to all his senses, making his dick instantly hard.

“I’m so glad Jide is out visiting his friend today,” he said, eyeing her with lust. “’Cos I’m about to make you scream the house down as you come.”

Her eyes lit up in excitement as she flashed him a demure smile. “What about your plans to move your things in here? I thought you wanted to do that before Jide returns?”

“Fuck that.” He pulled his shirt over his head and jumped onto the bed beside her. “I have more urgent things to attend to first,” he said, pulling Nkem into his arms.

Her soft giggle echoed in the room as she fell on top of him, and filled him with profound joy.

~

Tunde adjusted Jide’s seatbelt before he pulled his own across his chest and secured it. He switched on the engine and turned sideways to his son.

“Are you ready to bring the cup home?” he asked.

“Yes! Super Tigers, here we come!”

Chest bursting with pride at how far his son's team had come in the football tournament, Tunde backed up the car and steered it out of the opened gate.

Jide was his school football team's goalkeeper and had done exceptionally well in the inter-academy league where various private secondary schools competed for the Champion's Cup. The Super Tigers had made it to the finals, and he couldn't be prouder of Jide and his teammates.

"Dad," Jide called, drawing him from his musings. "Are you and Mum now married again?"

Tunde sucked in a breath. He'd not expected to deal with this topic with Jide so soon. Certainly not today. Although for the past two weeks, Nkem had stopped hiding their displays of affection from their son, they hadn't yet talked to him about their relationship status.

"Not yet," he replied honestly. "But we're now working towards it."

He nodded. "So, you've been demoted from husband to boyfriend?"

"Ha!" Tunde's jaw dropped as shock sliced through him. What a perfect roast from his son. Caught unawares by the unexpected humour, he flung his head back and barked out a laugh.

"I guess so," he said, still laughing. "God … you kids these days are hilarious."

Jide, also amused by his own dig at his father, laughed along.

Silence ensued as their laughter trailed off. Tunde hit the left turn signal and made his way onto the country lane leading away from their housing estate.

"Please don't hurt Mum again," Jide muttered.

Tunde's gut twisted. Another unexpected remark from Jide. Goodness.

Does Jide know the details of the divorce? Who told him? Did Nkem?

"What do you mean?" he asked tentatively, feeling out just how much Jide knew before attempting to plunge into explanations.

“I overheard Grandma telling Uncle Tayo that Mum was foolish to leave you for cheating on her.”

Taken aback by this revelation, Tunde ground his jaw. His mother’s amebo was getting out of hand. He loved her, but she was beginning to make things awkward for him and Nkem. How dare she divulge his personal affairs to his half-brother?

As the first of two children from his mother, he’d grown up with random strangers popping into the family home, introducing themselves as his sibling. When he was younger, it had all confused him, until he found out that his father had several other children … Tayo among them.

This had to stop. If his mother couldn’t zip her mouth regarding Nkem, he would have to ice her out of his life. Anything jeopardising his relationship with Nkem was a threat. Including his mother.

“Grandma is wrong, Jide,” Tunde said on the wings of a sigh. “Your mother is not foolish. She’s one of the smartest and bravest women I know.” He sucked his teeth, anxious about how to discuss his past infidelity with his son. However, it had to be done at some point, and this was the perfect opportunity for the father-son talk and for him to take responsibility for his past behaviour. “I did something horrible to your mum by destroying her trust in me and that’s why she divorced me.”

“Did you cheat on Mum?”

Tunde’s chest tightened. He hated the disappointment in his son’s voice. Not in a million years had he ever anticipated that he would be in this position, the subject of disapproval from a boy he loved so much. The same way he’d felt about his own father when he’d realised what the man had been doing to his wife.

“What do you understand about cheating?”

Jide blew out a low chuckle. “I’m twelve years old. Not a baby, Dad,” he said shaking his head. “Cheating is having side chicks, other girlfriends not your wife, duh!”

Tunde nodded, surprised and impressed by the confident way his son had

answered the question. “Yes … I … went with another woman when I should never have.” He paused, pressing on the break to stop the car at a red light. “Listen to me, son. I was wrong for hurting your mother. I’ve apologised, and I promise never to do it again, so your mother and I are trying to move forward from that.”

Silence followed as they waited for the light to turn green. Tunde wondered what his son was thinking, worried he’d lost the young boy’s respect.

“Mum says apologies don’t mean much if people don’t change their behaviour,” Jide said finally, his tone low and direct, his attention focused ahead. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Lifting the hand break and pressing down on the throttle, Tunde resumed driving as the traffic light changed again. “You’re right, my son. I’ll spend every day of the rest of my life making sure I stick to my promise.”

Jide nodded and angled his head sideways. “Cool,” he said. “Because Mum has been so happy with you around.”

“She has?”

“Yep. She’s been smiling more, singing and dancing again.”

Tunde’s chest flooded with pure joy. “Really?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded. “Let’s just hope Grandma’s visit doesn’t ruin it all.”

Tunde sighed. He hoped so too. His mother had come in last night from Ibadan, and so far, things had gone smoothly. She’d behaved herself, being cordial to Nkem and generally friendly to everyone. Immediately after the pleasant dinner they’d all shared, his mother had retired to bed. He’d been so relieved that her first day with them had gone well.

This morning had also been uneventful too, with his mother and Nkem exchanging polite conversation. Although the tension between them was tangible, their efforts at cordiality relieved him. Still, he couldn’t wait for the weekend to be over and for his mum to be on her way back to Ibadan.

Yes, he loved her, but he also loved Nkem. He never wanted to choose between

them, but if it ever came down to it, Nkem would win hands down. His future lay with her.

“Let’s hope so, Jide,” he answered his son with a wry twist of his mouth.

Leaving them alone at the house today while he took his son to the game was a massive risk, but he couldn’t worry about that now. He was here to support Jide. Hopefully, the civility between his mother and Nkem would hold for the rest of the weekend.

“Okay, my boy, we’re here,” Tunde said, switching off the engine. “Let’s bring the cup back home.

Jide clapped his hands in glee. “Yes! We Super Tigers are champions, and we know it.”

Twenty-One



Nkem stuffed the last of the clothes from the basket into the washing machine and switched it on. She heaved a sigh of relief as it rumbled to life. After a three-hour power outage, the electricity had finally come on. Best to strike while the iron was hot … or in this case, the washing machine.

Although they had a solar panel on the roof, the power wasn't sufficient to run the washing machine.

Leaning back, she watched as the drum rotated, the swooshing sound relaxing to her senses. Better to stand here and listen to this, than in the sitting room forcing a polite conversation with Mama Ibadan. All so phony.

So far, she'd managed to keep out of the woman's way. Mostly because she'd avoided being alone with her since she arrived yesterday.

Curses that today Tunde needed to take Jide to his football tournament final. And curses that his mother hadn't wanted to go. So, here they were, alone together for the first time.

Nkem had planned on going with them herself, but when she'd learned Mama Ibadan had no interest, she'd changed her mind. No way would she leave Tunde's mother alone in the house. Who knew what the woman was capable of? Poisoning her food? Snooping around for anything she could use against her? Voodoo and juju? She wouldn't put anything past her ex-mother-in-law and didn't trust her as far as she could throw her.

Now, here she was, hiding in the kitchen and staring at the washing machine to keep away from the woman whose hostility was a living creature. Maybe if she remained here until Tunde and Jide returned, she could avoid her altogether.

“Are you cooking?”

Nkem jumped, emitting a shocked gasp at Mama Ibadan’s sudden appearance. So much for avoiding her. Goodness, the woman walked as quiet as a cat burglar.

“Why are you scared? You aren’t alone in the house nau,” Mama Ibadan said with the familiar smirk on her lips she seemed to reserve for Nkem.

“I know, Ma,” she said. “I just didn’t hear you coming.”

“I had to find you o,” said Mama Ibadan, shrugging. “Since you are avoiding me like I’m a leper.”

“I’m not avoiding you,” Nkem lied. “I wanted to use this opportunity to wash clothes before NEPA cuts the electricity.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured in disbelief, strolling farther into the kitchen.

Nkem fought the desire to turn around and flee. She stood there instead, grinding her teeth, trying to suppress her irritation as Mama Ibadan swept past her like she owned the place and made her way to the fridge.

Whistling softly, Mama Ibadan yanked the fridge open and peered inside. “Too many snacks in here,” she murmured, shaking her head. “Not a healthy choice for my son and grandson. I prefer fruits in the fridge.”

Nkem pressed her lips together to keep from spewing out an annoyed retort. The gall of the woman. She’d not taught her son a damn thing about healthy eating. If anything, Tunde had learnt everything about a balanced diet during his marriage to her.

When she’d met Tunde, he’d preferred sweets to fruits. Nkem had been the one to encourage better food choices which included a vast array of fruits and veggies.

Nkem shook her head. Mama Ibadan had an uncanny ability to say things that

riled her. Well, she would not let the woman win. Not today.

Funny how she didn't look like the loudmouth, bitter woman she was. Petite, barely above five feet tall and likely less than seventy kilograms, with a back that curved downward when she walked … the woman looked almost defenceless. Until she opened her mouth.

Slamming the fridge shut, she turned back to face Nkem with a mango in her hand. Of course, far be it from her ex-mother-in-law to apologise for insinuating that fruits weren't available in the fridge. Wasn't she holding a fruit from that same fridge? Or did Ibadan people have another classification for mangoes? Nkem twisted her lips at the thought.

Pick your battles, girl, she admonished herself with an eye roll. No need to say anything that would cause a quarrel.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

Nkem choked on her saliva and coughed twice. "Hate you?" she burst out in a squeaky tone, coughing one more time to clear her throat. "I should be asking you that question, Ma."

Mama Ibadan rested her back against the fridge's door and bit into the mango. She chewed slowly and swallowed before she spoke again. "I'm a mother. My son is my priority. If you hurt him, I'll come for you. It's simple. You of all people should understand that."

"Understand what, Ma?" Nkem had wanted not to respond, better to walk away. There simply was no point engaging Tunde's mother. She seemed unable to reason rationally. But hearing the flippant reason for treating her like shit had been too much. "You've insulted me countless times, went around damaging my reputation, calling me a prostitute —"

"I never called you that."

"Please …" Nkem shook her head and kissed her teeth. "You did. Countless times, but of course, never to my face, because that's not your style. You prefer to gossip. And unfortunately for you, so do others."

"Speaking the truth isn't gossiping, is it? Didn't you have a boyfriend after

driving my son away?"

"I didn't drive your son away. He cheated on me, and I filed for a divorce. He was the one who wronged me. Not the other way around."

"So, because of a simple lapse of judgement, you drove him away and took his house? The one he bought with his money. Ko dara o." Mama Ibadan pointed an accusing finger her way, switching to her native Yoruba language. "That is pure wickedness."

Nkem wasn't fazed by the language switch. It happened all the time. Although she couldn't speak Yoruba fluently, she understood the language well enough.

"For your information, I did not take Tunde's house," she retorted in English. "He insisted I get it. I even tried to fight it, pleaded with him not to, but he wouldn't budge. It was a condition he gave before he would sign the divorce papers." Nkem pressed her lips together, annoyed that she had to explain this to his mother. It was none of her business. "If you think I'm lying, ask him yourself."

Now that she was on a roll, Nkem seemed unable to stop her flow. "You may be able to easily forgive a man who disrespects you by cheating, but it's not easy for me. I mean, see how you ended up? Looking after the same man who treated you like trash." Even as she uttered those words, Nkem knew she had hit below the belt, but as if on autopilot, she kept going. "You may call me all kinds of names, ashewo, witch, gold digger. Yes, I know every vile thing you've said behind my back, but I'd rather be all those things than be left catering hand and foot, washing and wiping the bum bum of a cheating man who fathered a litter of children outside his marriage."

Still full of steam, Nkem carried on like a train run amok. "I mean, who is having the last laugh? Eh? Your cheating husband or you who's stuck looking after him after all the disrespect? Did forgiving him help you in any way? Certainly not. So, please, don't chook your mouth in anybody's marriage wahala."

Spent after her outburst, Nkem exhaled deeply, slightly dizzy as she tried to gather herself together. Lord, she'd come unhinged like a hip-hop dancer's trousers bursting loose at the seams during a split move on the floor.

In horror, she watched as Mama Ibadan's face crumpled before her hoarse sob rose to the air.

Nkem became very still, shame suffusing her entire body. Her cheeks burned from embarrassment. Her outburst had been rude and classless. What had got into her?

Regret simmered inside as she stared at her mother in-law who was sobbing quite uncontrollably. Uh-oh. She'd gone too far. But in her defence, she'd tried to avoid a confrontation, had done all she could to prevent getting to the point where she would lose her cool and respond to Mama Ibadan's constant digs. For years, she'd suppressed the urge to fight back, allowing the resentment to fester. Today, all that pent up anger got detonated.

Taking a deep breath in and out, Nkem moved over to Mama Ibadan and drew her into her arms. "I'm sorry," she said, rubbing the older woman's back gently. "I didn't mean any of the things I —"

Mama Ibadan pulled back and shook her head. "You did, and you're right, Nkem. Everything you said is true."

"No, it's —"

"Yes, it is," she cut her off again. "I've been so bitter. For many years, I've been in pain, angry with my husband, hating him for his constant disregard for me, the lies, the cheating … the many children he produced outside our marriage. Ten of them, Nkem, ten!" she broke off, sniffled, and lowered the mango onto the kitchen table. "You did something I couldn't. You walked away from that disrespect, and to be honest, even though your leaving hurt my son, I admire your strength for doing that."

Nkem parted her lips in a shocked gasp. She'd not expected this at all. For days, she'd dreaded Mama Ibadan's visit, worrying about the nightmare of trying to stay away from her. Fretting about an encounter that could escalate into a full-blown altercation.

The idea of tiptoeing around anyone in her own home hadn't appealed to her, but she'd prepared herself mentally for the task. After all, it was only a weekend. She could do it for Tunde. Never in a million years did she expect to be listening to this astonishing emotional breakdown of the woman who appeared to have all

the answers. And for the life of her, she'd have bet every Naira she had that Mama Ibadan had nothing but disdain for her.

And now, here she was admitting her admiration. Wonders never ceased.

"Ma, I'm sorry for what I said earlier," Nkem said solemnly. No matter what, being rude to her senior was uncalled for. "There's no excuse for my behaviour."

Mama Ibadan nodded. "Apology accepted." She pointed towards the kitchen door. "Can we go to the sitting room … maybe sit and talk?"

Nkem hesitated, not sure she could trust Mama Ibadan just yet. The woman had been malicious and slanderous towards her for years. Could changes of conduct occur in such a short space of time? Nkem was sceptical, but it couldn't hurt listening to her talk, could it?

"Okay, Ma," she said, nodding her approval.

Without another word, they left the kitchen and headed into the sitting room. Unwilling to put herself in a vulnerable situation again, Nkem settled in the seat opposite Mama Ibadan and close to the door. Best to have a quick exit route if the woman said anything to provoke her. By the power of Almighty God, she would avoid further verbal strife by any means necessary, including standing up and walking away.

No matter how peeving Mama Ibadan could be, she was still Tunde's mother. They would have to deal with each other every now and again.

"Nkem," Mama Ibadan began in a soft reflective tone. "I know I've said a lot of terrible things to and about you, crossed the line by even involving Jide in that nonsense. I'm wrong for all of that, and I want to apologise."

Although she seemed genuinely remorseful, Nkem remained silent, not yet able to accept the apology. Mama Ibadan had done so many hurtful things to her besides blaming her for the divorce. The lies and rumours had been terrible, but talking shit about her to Jide? That had been gut wrenching. A simple apology, albeit welcome, couldn't just erase the damage.

"To be honest, even though I know it isn't an excuse, I wanted to hurt you because I saw how miserable Tunde was when you left him, and it broke my

heart," she said. "At the time, I just didn't understand why you couldn't forgive him. He showed a lot more remorse than I ever got from my husband who I forgave for doing a lot worse."

Nkem clamped her jaw together, swallowing back a retort. The woman still didn't get it. Her focus was solely on Tunde's pain, not anyone else's, and that was selfish.

"It never crossed my mind to think about you. What you were feeling, how hurt you were by his actions."

At this, Nkem's ears perked up. It was as if Mama Ibadan had just read her mind.

"I lashed out because of my own story. I stayed, even when my husband was completely unrepentant, blatantly declaring it was natural for him. He even blamed me, calling me a pitiful woman for only producing two children. The man even told me that he needed to spread his seed and multiply as God commanded him to." She sniffled, using the lower edge of her red-and-black Ankara wrapper to wipe her face.

Nkem crossed her legs tightly at the ankles as she struggled with the desire to rise and get her a tissue from somewhere in the house. Interrupting the sober moment would be a foolish move.

"I didn't understand why you couldn't forgive a repentant man who pleaded with you earnestly." Mama Ibadan brushed her palms down her face. "But three weeks ago, it suddenly dawned on me."

Keen to hear more, Nkem leaned forward and fixed her attention on Mama Ibadan, wondering what could have caused her epiphany.

"Three weeks ago, my husband had the audacity to shout at me because his bath water wasn't warm enough." She shook her head and wiped her face once more with her wrapper. "Imagine o. The man I've been slaving for in my own frail state … bathing, feeding, wiping his yansh when he poops … he sat on his wheelchair, shouting on me, and calling me a useless woman."

The lines at the corners of her lips grew more pronounced as her frown deepened, making her look much older than her sixty-seven years.

“I couldn’t believe how angry he was with me for that simple mistake. After all I put up with for years, everything I gave up and am still giving up to remain his wife—my happiness, my self-worth, my freedom to live life on my terms …”

Nkem’s throat choked with tears. The pain in the older woman’s voice tugged at her heart strings. Another bout of regret for her earlier outburst surged inside her. Nkem swallowed hard.

“Suddenly, something came over me that day as I stared at him. I had so much rage inside, so much anger that I rushed to the kitchen, lifted the kettle of boiling water from the stove and walked back to the room where he was, ready to empty it on him.” She took harsh breaths in and out, as if reliving that moment again. “In that instant, I wanted to kill him, wanted to hurt him for all the years he caused me pain.”

Nkem could identify with that feeling. Maybe not hurting Tunde physically, but certainly in an emotional way. At the height of her anger, she’d plotted revenge, something that would have torn him to shreds.

She’d thought of pretending she was okay with a reconciliation until Tunde felt comfortable with her, so that she could sleep with someone he cared about. She’d imagined seducing Segun, his partner, or one of his half-brothers, and making sure he found out about it in a very public, very humiliating way.

When her mind had gone down that alleyway, she’d realised it was time to walk away. That was the main reason she’d filed for a divorce. She never wanted to hurt him the way he’d hurt her.

“Only God knows how I stopped myself from going through with it.”

Mama Ibadan’s voice reeled Nkem’s mind back to the present.

“But I managed to put the kettle on the floor and walked out of the house. I realised then and there that it was better to leave than turn into a monster.”

She fiddled with her wrapper, her gaze distant and tormented. “That morning, I called his closest family members and asked them to remove him from my house. Told them they had to care for him now.”

Nkem blew out a gasp, her eyes wide in shock at this bombshell of a revelation.

She'd had no idea. Tunde hadn't even hinted this. Lord. Who knew Mama Ibadan would finally develop a backbone against the man who had constantly disrespected and hurt her?

"For many years, his sisters knew how badly he treated me and said nothing, even knowing that he was living in my house and depending on me financially." Mama Ibadan raked her fingers through her cropped silver curls and hissed. "I was so foolish that I gave him money regularly to provide for the children he'd fathered. Can you imagine?"

Nkem's eyes bulged. Hian. Can open, worms everywhere!

She had no idea that Mama Ibadan had been the one with the financial power in the relationship. Nkem had always assumed Tunde's mother stayed in the horrible marriage because she'd been dependent on her husband.

Although, thinking about it now, she should have known better. Tunde's mother's family came from old money. Her father owned two successful textile mills in Ibadan, and though the man had three wives, Mama Ibadan was the only child of her mother. Per the typical sharing of assets, she had likely inherited all her mother had acquired after the death of her husband.

"But why did you stay with him so long when you could afford to kick him out?" Nkem blurted out the question before she could stop herself.

Mama Ibadan lifted her shoulders and dropped them in a helpless shrug. "I have no idea. Fear of what people would think? Fear of the unknown? Low self-confidence, you name it …"

She folded her hands over her knees, and Nkem noticed the slight tremor in her fingers.

"When you walked away from my son, I was upset, but somewhere deep inside, I was envious of your bravery. Maybe that's why I kept lashing out. And for all the things I said and did, I apologise."

Nkem remained silent, mulling over Mama Ibadan's entire revelation, and considering the sincerity of her apology. Could she let her guard down and believe this woman who had been so malicious? Would letting her in be another mistake? She seemed earnest enough now, yet she'd hurt her badly before.

Nkem nodded. “Yes, Ma. I accept your apology.”

It would take time to trust her again, if ever, but she had to start from forgiveness. She would wait until she could see the signs of real change before letting her in like she’d done before.

“So, my son says you’re back together,” she said. “What changed?”

Nkem shrugged, thinking about the question. Had anything dramatic happened to change her mind? Probably Tunde’s near-death experience. The thought of an abrupt ending to their story with no possibility of a second chance had jarred her out of her state of inertness. She’d been floating on the sidelines emotionally for a long time, not really ready to let him go despite their divorce.

In hindsight, she knew the underlying reason she’d invited him back to live with her after his gunshot injury. To test the waters of a possible reconciliation, see if proximity would help her get some form of closure. After all, the four years they’d been apart hadn’t done the trick. What harm could there be to giving their relationship another go?

“I’m not sure,” she admitted honestly. “But I’m willing to try again.”

Mama Ibadan nodded. “That’s good. But before things go much deeper between you two, it’s better to make sure you really forgive and forget. Leave the resentment behind, because it can poison the future if it follows you there.”

Nkem contemplated Mama Ibadan’s advice as she gazed at the landscape painting on the wall opposite her.

Had she really forgiven Tunde? Yes. She no longer looked at him with bitterness or anger. Could she completely forget what he’d done and trust him unwaveringly like she used to? That, she wasn’t quite sure of yet.

Twenty-Two



The house was eerily quiet as he walked through the front door. Tunde's heart galloped. Had Nkem and his mother finally blown each other to bits?

"Mummy!" Jide called out, possibly sensing the unusualness of the situation. His mother usually ran to the front door to welcome him after any football tournament. Jide darted towards the sitting room. "Mummy?"

Rushing back out with his forehead crinkled in confusion, Jide announced, "She's not there."

Tunde's gut plummeted as he made a beeline for the kitchen. Nobody there. "Nkem? Mama?" he called out, dashing towards the guest room downstairs where his mother slept.

He tapped on the door and opened it when he didn't get an answer. The room was unoccupied, but the bed was made. A quick look inside the closet showed his mother's suitcase was still there, so she hadn't ended her visit abruptly.

"Where's Mummy? I want to show her my medal."

Tunde turned towards the door to find his son standing there, still looking perplexed.

"I'm not sure where your mother or grandmother are. Did you check upstairs?"

Jide nodded. "Mummy is not in her room."

“Hmm.”

Tunde’s pulse rate began to beat in double time. Oh, lord … thinking about it now, he hadn’t noticed Nkem’s car in the compound either.

He dragged his palm over his scalp in frustration, trying to breathe evenly and make sense of his mother and Nkem’s sudden absence from the house. They got along as much as a cat would with a mouse, and the idea that either of them would willingly be in the same vehicle for a leisurely outing seemed extremely preposterous to him.

Tunde pressed his lips into thin lines, still putting all effort into keeping calm and not frightening his son. God, he should never have let his mother come. What had happened between Nkem and his mother in his absence? Had there been an altercation?

Oh, no. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them wide. What if they’d fought and people called the police? Were they at a nearby police station now?

He shook his head as he glanced around. Everything in the house seemed in place. Nothing to indicate a struggle had occurred in here. And besides, Nkem wasn’t a violent person. She would never fight his mother. No matter how provoked, she would not lower herself to that level. Unless, of course, in self-defence.

Had his mother finally carried out her threats to slap Nkem? He gritted his teeth at the thought. No way. Trust and believe, if his mum did anything to hurt Nkem physically eh…

Tunde shook off the thought, unwilling to complete it. He dragged in a calming breath and shoved his hand into his jeans pocket to pull out his phone. Unlocking it, he scrolled quickly to Nkem’s number and dialled it, conscious of Jide’s curious stares as he stood beside him.

After the second ring, it cut off abruptly. Oh no! Something is definitely wrong. Just as Tunde dashed back towards the front door of the building, he heard the metal of the main gate outside scraping the granite ground and quickened his feet.

He pushed open the wooden door and the burglary-proof railing just in time to

see Nkem’s black Rolls Royce driving into the compound.

Tunde stopped dead in his tracks when the vehicle came to a stop. Was that his mother in the passenger’s seat with a bright smile on her face? Couldn’t be. But it was. Mama Ibadan in the same car with Nkem, grinning. No blood flowing to the floor. No tears. No frowns.

Jide rushed towards them, but Tunde couldn’t move. He remained frozen to the spot, gaping at the vehicle, his heart rate drumming wildly in his chest as he watched Nkem alight from the Rolls Royce and rush to the other side to open the door for his mother.

“Thank you, my daughter,” he heard his mother say before planting her feet on the granite driveway one after the other.

Tunde could barely breathe, his gaze immediately finding and fixing on Nkem who was now hugging Jide, her beautiful face bright with joy.

“Congratulations to the Super Tigers, my dear son,” she was saying, stroking Jide’s back and kissing him on his cheeks. “A well-deserved win … and look at that medal … the best goalkeeper in the world.”

Tunde’s heart flooded with love so profound, his entire body began to tremble all over. Tears burned the back of his eyes. How could he have been so stupid that he’d almost fucked up the best thing in his life? How had he ever been idiotic enough to jeopardise his marriage to a wonderful woman with a heart of gold, able to tolerate a woman who slandered her relentlessly just because she was his mother?

The fact that Nkem could even look at him the way she did right now, with love lighting her eyes after he’d hurt her so badly, floored him. God, he loved her so much. So much that he would rather drive a sword through his own heart than ever hurt her again.

“Hey, Tunde,” she greeted, offering him a warm smile and a wave. “Sorry I didn’t pick up your call. We were just about to drive through the gate, so there wasn’t any point.”

Tunde swallowed back the lump of emotion that clogged his throat but still couldn’t manage to get a word past his lips.

“I went to the market with Mama to buy some palm kernel,” she continued in her usual cheerful voice. As if the past four years had never happened, almost as if things between Nkem and his mother were back to the way they were before they’d split. “It was only supposed to be for a few minutes, but you know us women.” She gave a little laugh.

“Yes, o, the prices of goods have gone up o. One has to haggle with these traders for a long time to get a good bargain these days,” his mother chimed in.

Tunde nodded in agreement to his mother’s remark, but kept his gaze on Nkem, still unable to look away.

She was dressed in a simple, sleeveless Ankara gown and silver slippers. A scarf covered her hair, and her face had no makeup, and yet at that moment, she captivated him, like a diamond glistening in the darkness.

Without another thought, he rushed towards Nkem and lifted her to him. “I love you, Nkemjika Chinwe Edun,” he choked out, swirling her around. “I love you. I love you. I love you,” he chanted, planting kisses all over her face.

Barely paying attention to the oohs and ahs from his mother and son, he set Nkem down, still pressing her body to his. “Thank you,” he whispered in her ear, sure she knew exactly what he was talking about. “Thank you. Thank you.”

She giggled like a happy schoolgirl. Pleasing to all his senses. “I love you, too, Babatunde Oluseyi Edun,” she whispered back into his ear.

“Okay, stoooop,” Jide shouted with a loud clap, shattering their euphoric fog. He tugged on his mother’s arm, trying to drag her away. “Stop all that rubbish. Today is about me winning the Champion’s Cup, not kissy kissy Mum and Dad.”

Laughing at his son’s antics, Tunde pulled away from Nkem and turned to him. “Yes,” he said, his chest bursting with joy. “Let’s all go into the house and have a family party to celebrate your victory, Jide.” He tossed his gaze to his mother. “Mama, maybe you can teach us how to dance the 60s Twist you always say is the best.”

~

“Finally, time for bed. Tunde where—”

Nkem halted as she opened the door to her bedroom. “Oh my God,” she gasped, her mouth popping wide open.

The room was in semi darkness, illuminated solely by the three candles arranged on the floor. There were rose petals delicately scattered on the bed, and soft jazz music filtered through the Bluetooth speakers on the bedside table.

Tunde stood at the door of the bathroom, wearing only a pair of white shorts with a bouquet of lilies in his hand.

“What the … how did …?” Nkem palmed her cheeks as she swept her gaze around one more time. She had no clue how Tunde managed to get the flowers and candles within the few hours of being back home.

“When you order online for same day delivery, anything is possible,” Tunde said with a self-assured smile.

“Oh, that’s what was in the box that came in earlier,” Nkem said, recalling the doorbell and the package that was delivered just thirty minutes ago.

“Yep.” Tunde strolled towards her and handed her the bouquet. “Thank you for being the most wonderful woman in the world. For calling a truce with my mother. I know it must have been hard.”

Pleased, Nkem sniffed the flowers and beamed. “Smells lovely, thanks. And it’s really a joint effort between me and Mama. We’ll try to respect each other moving forward.”

Still grinning from ear to ear, Nkem pulled out the envelope tucked in the delicately wrapped lilies. She opened it quickly and gasped when she saw the card inside. A ten million Naira gift certificate to Jumia, her favourite online store. A truly thoughtful gift because she loved shopping online.

“Oh, my, Tunde … thank you, thank you,” she said, flinging her arms around him. After a few seconds, Nkem loosened the hug, leaned back, and looked him in the eye. “But this is a lot. Why? What for?”

“What for?” He shook his head as if he couldn’t understand her question. “I wish

I could give you this every day. I'm working on doing all I can to show you how much you mean to me." He cupped her face in his hands. "Nkem, you are everything to me. Everything."

"Oh, Tunde." She raised herself on her toes, leaned in and planted a kiss to his lips. "And you to me."

Their lips met again, in a deeper kiss this time, holding each other until the bouquet slipped from her hand. Blowing out a chuckle, Nkem bent down and scooped it up. "Let me go to the kitchen and get a vase to put them —"

"Nope." Tunde grabbed her arm. "Leave it on the table for now. I have more planned for you tonight," he said, his eyes flashing with mischief.

"More?"

"Uh-huh."

Tunde turned and strolled towards the bathroom. He opened the door. "Come here." He beckoned with a wave of his hand.

Excited, Nkem tossed the bouquet on the dressing table and rushed over to him. Her face split into a smile so wide that her jaw ached.

What greeted her eyes looked like a scene straight out of a romance movie. Impossibly high bubbles practically spilled over the filled bathtub. An expensive bottle of wine with a cut crystal glass sat on a tray anchored at the tub's edge. And at each corner of the bathroom stood four scented candles filling the room with a romantic glow.

Nkem took a slow breath in, savouring the pleasant fragrance of cinnamon and lavender. Spice and leisure. The perfect blend to get her juices flowing. Combined with water caressing her skin … well, right here were all the makings of her favourite aphrodisiac.

"Now, have a relaxing soak, and then call me when you're done, because I plan to eat you 'til you pass out," Tunde said in a husky drawl. He winked at her and slanted his lips into a wolfish half-smile. "I know how horny you get when you're immersed in water."

With a delighted squeal, Nkem pulled her gown over her head and rid herself of her bra and panties. “Your wish is my command.”

~

Less than an hour later, Nkem moaned deep in her throat as she threw her head back, savouring the sensual pleasure from Tunde’s determination to fulfil his promise.

“Oh … please don’t stop … please…” she begged, thrashing against the now tepid bath water, her legs spread wide and hanging over the edge of the tub, with Tunde’s face buried between her thighs, doing delicious things to her pussy with his tongue and mouth.

Deep, guttural moans of his own pleasure at delivering this excellent service tangled with her helpless whimpers, bouncing off the tiled walls of the bathroom.

His tongue twirled round and round her clit, and then up and down her feminine folds in persistent succession, driving her closer and closer to the edge.

As if in a trance, Nkem closed her eyes, giving in to the ecstasy, concentrating on the impending explosion hovering on the horizon.

The combined attack on her sensory nerves was just too much. Tunde’s fingers stroking inside her heated core, his hurricane tongue circling her clit with a vibrating intensity, the cool air dancing around her wet skin and the water surrounding her body as the blended aroma from the candles assuaged her senses. Everything felt, oh, so good.

An unexpectedly, intense climax sliced through Nkem, causing her body to stiffen. “Oh … Oh … I’m … Oh…” she cried out, falling back into the water as strong spasms shook her entire being in a convulsion that knocked the wind out of her lungs.

Air snuffed out of her, Nkem quickly jerked her head back out, breathing in and out rapidly, trying to catch her breath. Her dazed gaze locked on Tunde’s for several seconds, then she held onto the bathtub rim and hurled herself to her shaky feet, heart thumping inside her chest.

“Stand up,” she commanded, finally able to speak coherently.

No way. She couldn’t give him all this power, wouldn’t let him reduce her into a woman willing to drown for an orgasm. “Payback time.”

He laughed; a hoarse sound filled with male arrogance. “Nope.”

“So, you’re turning down head from me?” She quirked a brow. Pointing to the erection tenting the front of his shorts, she added. “Do you know how much pleasure I can give you if I put that in my mouth?”

“Yep.” He grinned as he stood up and hurled her into his arms without any care of the mess her dripping body made on the floor or on him. “But it’s all about you tonight, Babe. And besides, I want to be inside your sweet pussy when you come again.”

“Ohhh …” she crooned, a strong wave of excitement rushing up her spine. She couldn’t wait for another pleasurable ride. “And this time, without a condom. I’m sick of those…”

His body stiffened against hers just as she felt his dick jump, poking her on her thigh. “Are …” He swallowed hard. “Are you sure? I can show you my recent STD test results if you prefer to wait —”

“I’ve seen them already.”

“How?” His eyes widened in shock.

“Snooping around your apartment when I went over there to help you clean it up.”

Nkem blushed. She’d done a bit more than snooping, rummaging his entire flat like a madwoman as she hunted for any indication he had other women hovering in his life. She’d been embarrassed at the end of her futile search, but somewhere deep down, her heart had soared at the discovery that all the time they were apart, he’d had no serious relationship.

Yemisi really had been a mere fling. Nobody with their heart in a relationship insisted a partner regularly test for STIs. It just didn’t seem normal to Nkem.

“Oh … And what else did you find?”

“That I’m ready to have all of you inside me.” She flashed him a sly smile, before continuing. “Every. Single. Naked. Inch. Of. You.” With each word, she planted another kiss on his lips.

“God, Nkem,” Tunde rasped in an almost unrecognisable voice. His eyes blazed with sheer lust. “You kill me, you know that?”

She gave a little shrug. “I can’t help it, Babe. I miss you raw fucking me.”

“Okay, that’s it,” he grunted as he marched out of the bathroom with her in his arms.

With a low growl, Tunde tossed her onto the mattress and flipped her on her stomach in one smooth move. Not letting her catch her breath, he dragged her onto the edge of the bed.

“Curve your back for me, Babe,” he ordered in a gruff voice saturated with promises of overwhelming pleasure if she obeyed.

“Like this?” Nkem purred in an innocent tone, even though there was nothing innocent about the way she arched her lower back, angling her ass up high in the air and pressing her face onto the mattress.

“God help me.”

She heard Tunde’s helpless prayer as he clutched her waist.

Nkem closed her eyes, her heart racing in anticipation, and her wet centre awaiting his possession. She sighed with unbridled longing as she felt the thickness of his penis nudging at her entrance, teasing, circling around the opening of her pussy.

“Don’t play,” she hissed in frustration. “Now!”

“Okay, okay.”

Tunde thrust into her, pushing inside her throbbing pussy inch by sweet inch, filling her up with the thick hardness of his manhood until he was buried to the

hilt.

They both exhaled in relief.

“Nkem, my wife,” Tunde moaned.

“Oh, Tunde,” she whimpered in unison, the sheer pleasure of his bare flesh joining with hers, almost unbearable.

Her mouth slackened as he began to move, silently, intensely, pounding in and out of her with firm, confident strokes that hit her right at the perfect spot inside the most sensitive area of her vagina.

Tears filled her eyes as overwhelming pleasure flooded her senses. He was the only man who knew exactly how to fuck her … the only one who could find her weak spot and make her a helpless bundle of nerves.

“Whose pussy is this?” he grunted, not relenting in his powerful thrusts. “Tell me who owns this pussy.”

Nkem squeezed her eyes shut as tears poured down her cheeks. There was no denying it. He owned her. Possessed her body and soul.

“You, Tunde,” she moaned into the plush coverings on the bed.

He slapped her ass. “Say it louder, Nkem, I didn’t hear you.”

The blending of pain and pleasure from the sting of his palm smacking her flesh and the strokes of his penis in her vagina, shot straight to her clit, making her wild with a frenzied need for swift release.

“You, Tunde! You own my pussy. It’s yours.”

“Yes.” He swatted her bottom again and again. “Yes, Nkem. Yes. Your name is Nkem. In Igbo, it means you belong to me. Mine only.”

His guttural words, hissed into her ear with a raw intensity, unravelled her. Nkem came. Hard, fast and blinding.

Blowing out his name multiple times in a helpless chant, she collapsed onto the

bed, shuddering her climax and pressing her face on the mattress to muffle her cries.

“Yes, Nkem. Mine.”

His muttered declaration as he fell onto her back, releasing spurts of liquid pleasure into her, caused another spasm to rock her core.

Completely spent, Nkem lay on the bed, languid and thoroughly satisfied, savouring the sweet pressure of Tunde’s weight on her.

“You know you’re heavy, right,” she murmured with a small smile.

“Sorry, but I can’t move just yet, woman, you’ve sapped all my energy.”

Nkem let out a long, satisfied sigh, happy to remain under his weight. That’s where she always longed to be since the first time that she fell in love with him. Surrounded by his powerful arms.

Twenty-Three



Nkem sighed in relief when she spotted her sister walk through the door of the restaurant. Until this exact moment, she hadn't believed she would really show up.

For the past seven years, Nkem had felt the strain of her relationship with her only sister Lotanna.

As the only girls in a family with three boys as siblings, Nkem and Lotanna had been thick as thieves once. That was until Nkem had found out about Lotanna's husband's serial cheating. She'd been livid, telling her sister to leave Ebube, that she deserved better. But Lotanna hadn't listened. She'd remained in the marriage, instead, alienating herself from Nkem.

The straw that had finally broken the camel's back for Nkem had occurred three years ago when Lotanna had ordered her gateman to throw her out, smirking beside her husband as the burly man obeyed.

Since then, Nkem had not seen her sister. Even though they both lived in Lagos, unlike the rest of the family who resided in eastern Nigeria, they'd never run into each other either.

Of course, they'd exchanged a few polite text messages on important days … birthdays and holidays. But that was it. Family members had tried several times to broker a reconciliation, but nothing worked. So they finally gave up.

All Nkem had wanted was to help her sister, protect her. She couldn't believe

Lotanna’s disrespectful dismissal of her. The entire episode was devastating. And infuriating.

Deciding from then on to mind her business, she’d cut Lotanna off, not sharing anything about her life with her sister. She even kept her divorce and recent reconciliation from her.

However, after the heart-to-heart conversation with her mother-in-law, Nkem had decided to also talk to her sister. She wanted to clear the air between them. To start on a clean slate in all her relationships.

Rising to her feet, she waved her hand to get Lotanna’s attention. Her sister turned in her direction and immediately broke into a grin.

Nkem smiled back, joy lifting her spirits. No matter what had transpired between them, she loved Lotanna with all her heart. They were only three years apart, and their parent’s last two children. Nothing but that special bond should really matter.

“Hey, big sis,” Lotanna greeted as soon as she reached her. “It’s so nice to see you after such a long time.”

Nkem embraced her sister tightly. “I feel the same way, Sis,” she said, blinking back the tears threatening to fall from her eyes. Why had she turned her back on her sister simply because she didn’t agree with her decisions? Big sisters were supposed to support their younger ones, not push them away.

Regret clutched at her chest as she continued to hug Lotanna. So much time lost between them because of a stupid disagreement? One that didn’t make any sense at all now. Seeing her sister, holding her in this moment, Nkem realised just how much she missed her, needed her.

“Thank you for reaching out and inviting me to lunch,” Lotanna said, disengaging from the embrace.

Nkem noticed the tears at the corners of her sister’s eyes and swiped at her own cheeks to dry hers.

“You’re welcome, Sis,” she said, reclaiming her seat. “I needed to see you, have a conversation with you. About us.”

A weary look crossed Lotanna's eyes as she settled in her chair. Nkem quickly reached out to touch her hand. "I promise, it's not to fight with you. I want to clear the air."

Lotanna nodded. "Me too. I've been meaning to call you. I just wasn't sure you would want to speak to me after … after …"

"I'm sorry for intruding in your life, Lota," Nkem said, wading right in. "You had every right to throw me out for coming into your house to insist that you leave your husband. It wasn't my place."

Lotanna twisted her lips but said nothing. Instead, she fidgeted with the top button of her pink gown.

For a woman in her early thirties, Lotanna had too many wrinkles. Especially around the sides of her mouth and neck. She'd lost a great deal of weight and most of her youthful curves in the last eight years. Today, even though she'd worn a baggy knee-length dress, her sharp collar bone and thin arms and legs made her look a tad sickly.

Nkem swallowed hard. Each time she set eyes on her sister, it seemed like Lotanna was losing more and more of herself to her marriage. But she'd made up her mind, no matter how hard it was for her to look the other way, she would leave it to Lotanna to make her own decisions from now on. She needed to support her, not make her feel even more inadequate than her husband did.

"Water under the bridge," Lotanna said. "I should never have thrown you out that way. I apologise, too."

"Cool, Sis," Nkem said with a small smile. "Let's order and eat, biko, I'm starving."

Waving to get the attention of a nearby waitress, Lotanna wriggled her eyebrows. "A woman after my heart."

As the waitress took their orders, Nkem noticed for the first time since her sister had come in, that she wasn't wearing her wedding ring.

Goosebumps spread all over her skin. Had Lotanna finally left Ebube? Was she separated from her husband now? Why hadn't she said anything?

The questions stuck in her throat, itching to come out, but Nkem resisted every instinct to ask. Her sister would open up about her personal life if and when she felt comfortable with her again. For now, Nkem would focus on rebuilding their relationship, not fishing for information about Lotanna's private life.

"So, I heard through the grapevine that you're back together with Tunde," Lotanna said as soon as the waitress walked away.

Nkem smiled. Apparently, her sister didn't have the same reservations. Baby girl plunged all the way in, delving into her amebo ways.

"Yep," Nkem said, lifting the bottle of wine from the table and twisting it open. She tilted it and filled her glass halfway.

"You want some?" she asked Lotanna.

"Nope. I'll drink water instead, thanks."

Nkem arched her eyebrow. "Surprising that Lota, the fish would turn down a good ol' drink."

"Times have changed, Sis. This chick right here can't drink because of her cocktail of medications."

Nkem's heart leapt to her throat and began to pound. "Medications? What medications?" she asked in a shaky voice, lowering the bottle of Merlot to the table.

"HIV meds, Sis."

"Wh-what?"

Nkem's jaw dropped. What on earth had she said? And how could her sister flippantly announce something this serious like she was cracking a joke on a comedy show? "Are you for real? Are you being serious right now?"

"Close your mouth, dear. It's absolutely true," she said with a small laugh. "I was diagnosed with HIV six months ago after an admission to hospital with pneumonia."

“Pneumonia?” Nkem shook her head in disbelief, still finding it hard to fully digest the news. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you call me?”

“I don’t know … I just didn’t want anyone’s opinion, telling me it was my fault for staying with Ebube.”

“Did he give you HIV?” Anger burst inside her like an erupting volcano from the top of a mountain, spilling heated lava that seemed to burn her skin all over. “Did your husband do this to you?”

“No.” Lotanna shook her head. “I did it to myself, Nkem. I was so angry with him that I wanted to get back at him for all the years of cheating, so I had sex with a random stranger for revenge, not smart enough to use a condom. One time. And boom—infected.”

“Oh, my God.” Nkem couldn’t believe her ears. She totally understood the desire for revenge. She’d been there before, had contemplated it many times until it almost snatched the soul out of her. How cruel that her sister’s only attempt at payback had backfired.

“The worst thing is that Ebube found out last year about my revenge sex and filed for divorce immediately.” Lotanna curved her lips into a snicker. “One time I cheated, and I’m a whore, a useless woman. Yet, I’d been forgiving his serial adultery for years.” She grabbed her bottle of water from the table and took a quick gulp. “How is it that I get punished with a disease for my one stupid move, and the man who has done it like a wild rabbit for years is walking around disease free?”

“So he doesn’t have it?”

“No. We rarely had sex, Nkem. My husband was busy fucking other women, leaving me sexually starved.”

“Oh, God …” Nkem lifted her glass and to a sip, needing the burn of the alcohol to warm her chest. This was just horrible.

Her stomach churned as anger, mixed with guilt, exploded inside her. She despised Ebube for what he’d done to her sister all these years—breaking her heart repeatedly, causing a rift between Lotanna and her—but she also blamed herself for letting him achieve it. She’d not been there to support Lotanna when

she needed her the most. And that, she would always regret.

Nkem took another sip of wine and swallowed hard, struggling with the lump of guilt that seemed to choke her. She needed to do better, needed to stop burning bridges with loved ones. Taking a deep breath in to steady her frayed nerves, she glanced up at her sister.

“How is your health now?” she asked, hoping for a silver lining somewhere in Lotanna’s life.

“Great. My viral load is down to almost undetectable levels and my CD4 count has recently risen to normal levels. The doctors are very optimistic that I’m on my way to a full recovery.”

Nkem nodded, still worried. Her sister looked much thinner than usual. “Is that why you’ve lost all this weight?”

“Well, I was sick the whole of last year, not knowing why,” she answered, taking another gulp from her bottle. “Recurrent diarrhoea, loss of appetite, urinary tract infections, shingles … you name it, I had it. It was only when I collapsed at work with pneumonia that the doctors decided to run an HIV test.”

“Is your appetite back to normal?” Nkem asked tentatively.

The waitress interrupted them at that moment, placing their hot meals on the table. They thanked the young woman, and Nkem waited impatiently for her to leave so she could continue the conversation.

She couldn’t believe Lotanna had suffered through a major illness and the end of her marriage without saying a word to her. Even though it hurt, Nkem knew she had herself to blame. If she hadn’t shut the door of communication between them due to her bruised ego, she would have been there to support her sister in her time of need.

“Yes, big sis, my appetite is back to normal,” Lotanna responded as soon as they were alone again. “And I can’t wait to dig into this jollof rice and fried chicken.”

Trying to be as cheerful as her sister about the seriousness of the situation, Nkem blew out a chuckle. “I know how much you like to eat,” she said.

“I’ve gained a bit of weight, Nkem, and it’s improving each month, so don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Okay, you’re right, but you have to admit this is a lot to digest.”

Lotanna nodded and scooped rice from her plate. “I know. And I’m sorry for not telling you sooner.”

“Does anyone else know? Mum and Dad? Any of our brothers?”

Lotanna shook her head. “No. So, please keep it to yourself.”

“Okay, Sis.” Nkem nodded. This was her time to do exactly as her sister asked. Whatever she needed, even if it meant being her confidant and keeping her family in the dark, she would do it. “Just let me know what you need from me.”

“I’m fine, Nkem, seriously,” Lotanna said. “I’m now the general manager at work, divorced from the prick who made my life miserable. I’m in a loving relationship with a man I met at the HIV treatment centre.”

Nkem raised her brow in surprise, happy to hear this. She’d not anticipated that her sister who had stuck with a disrespectful, emotionally abusive man for years would even want to date again.

“Yes, Sis.” Lotanna nodded, flashing her a playful smile. “He’s a banker who spoils me and treats me like a queen. But my kids … they are what make me happiest. Jordan and Jada are healthy and doing well in a private boarding school paid for by their father who is actively involved in their lives. Life is great. Better than it has been for years.”

“That’s wonderful to hear, Lotanna,” Nkem said. “I’m so glad you’re happy.”

“Thanks. Now, if I can only put my weight back on …”

“Girl, tell me how to give you some of mine.” Nkem squeezed the slight bulge of her lower abdomen through her red blouse. “I swear, I’d gladly cut this fat off

and donate it to you."

"I don't think Tunde would like that o. The man likes a woman with fleshy meat on her bones."

"Sis …" Nkem quipped with a chuckle. "This is too much meat. I miss my flat-before-baby stomach."

"Me, too, girl. I may be a skinny bitch, but I still have a big belly and big tits. I'm like the freaking capital letter B."

Nkem flung her head back and guffawed. "Oh, hell no! You're wrong for that."

"I know. Make fun of yourself before others do. That's how I've survived this mess."

Silence followed her sister's comment. Nkem sensed that underneath all the jokes, Lotanna's weight loss was still a sensitive issue for her. She shoved a forkful of rice into her mouth and chewed slowly, vowing to never abandon her sister again.

"Thank you for not saying, 'I told you so'," Lotanna murmured, ending the silence between them.

Nkem swallowed her food and took a sip of Merlot. "I would never —"

"You could have, because you told me to leave Ebube many times. You even predicted that he might give me a disease." Lotanna twisted the fork in her hand idly. "You were right. Even though he didn't actually give me HIV, I got it because he reduced me to a sexually starved, angry woman who was driven to do something I would never have done otherwise."

Nkem nodded in agreement. Indeed, her sister was a sensible woman well aware of the dangers of STDs. Sleeping with a stranger without protection was totally out of character. Just like Tunde. Unexpected and inexplicable behaviour.

"Tunde cheated on me," she blurted out, wanting to get her own secret off her chest. She'd acted so superior, repeatedly trying to force her sister to leave Ebube, and did all but call her stupid for refusing to. Now, here she was, back together with someone who had done the same thing as Ebube.

Her sister's eyes widened with shock as she lowered her fork to her plate. "I'm sorry to hear that. That's actually unbelievable. I never ever took Tunde for the cheating kind."

"Me neither. But he confessed four years ago. And that's why I divorced him," Nkem explained. "He said it was a one-time thing, a silly decision he made on a whim."

"There's never a good enough excuse for infidelity," Lotanna said, rolling her eyes.

"I agree. Absolutely none. I can't believe that I've been able to move past it and reconcile with him after how much he hurt me." Nkem sighed as she sliced into her chicken. "I feel so embarrassed about it all, especially because I'm the first one to say, 'once a cheat, always a cheat'. Everybody must be laughing at me."

"Trust me, nobody is. Everyone has their own problems."

Silence fell as they continued to eat. Nkem wondered what her sister was thinking. Was she judging her for going back to a cheater? Think she was a hypocrite?

"Listen, Nkem, every situation is different. There's no one-size-fits-all in relationships," Lotanna said, lifting her fork again. "How do you feel about your reconciliation with Tunde? That's the most important thing. Not anyone's opinion."

Nkem pondered her sister's question, but not for long. It was simple. She'd never been happier. Her time away from Tunde had been the most depressing four years of her life.

"I feel amazing, Lota. I was miserable without him."

Lotanna chuckled. "He always did make you happy. I envied your relationship a lot."

Nkem blushed. She'd had a good marriage, enjoyed years of emotional and physical bliss, until what Tunde and she now referred to as The Storm had destroyed it.

During one of their late-night conversations in bed last week, he'd tried again to explain his decision to look outside their marriage for another sexual experience. According to him, he'd simply been curious, worried about missing out on life because he'd never had sex with another woman.

A pretty flimsy excuse as far as she was concerned. After all, she'd been content with him as her only lover. Still, she could tell he deeply regretted his decision. So, for now, that was enough reason to try again.

"Do you think I'm dumb for taking him back?" she asked her sister. "Or worse still, a hypocrite."

"Hell no," Lotanna said. "I'm the last person to call anyone dumb. I caught HIV by having unprotected sex with a bricklayer I met in Agege." She rolled her eyes in self-mockery. "Trust me, Sis. You're a lot smarter than I am. And certainly not a hypocrite. You divorced Tunde's ass. That should tell him that you're not afraid to do a repeat if he fucks up again."

Nkem slapped her jean-clad thigh and laughed. God, she'd missed her sister. Shoving a forkful of chicken with rice into her mouth, she vowed never to lose contact with Lotanna again.

Twenty-Four



The moment of truth had arrived. Time to show each other what they had been up to for the past hour.

“Show me yours first,” Tunde said as soon as he closed the bedroom door. “I’m dying to see it.”

“Why do I have to go first?” Nkem lowered her handbag onto the bed and turned to face him. “I want to see yours, too.”

“No way!” Tunde shook his head. “Ladies first.”

Nkem’s lips curved into a snicker. “I’ll hold you to that rule when it’s time to reach for the last piece of suya o.”

“Ladies first implies gentlemen last. I’m still entitled to that last piece of barbecued meat, sweetheart.”

“Mtcheww!” she hissed. “Okay … okay. I’ll go first.”

Nkem began to unbutton her red chiffon blouse, slowly unfastening one after the other.

“Ooooh … exciting … I’m dying to see it,” Tunde enthused, keeping his gaze on the movements of her hands.

To celebrate their six-month reunion anniversary, they had decided to do

something they'd never done before. Inspired by the episode of Friends where Phoebe and Rachel got tattoos together, they agreed to do the same. Except neither had seen the other's ink job yet. Now, was the big reveal.

After two hours with the tattooist, Tunde was excited to show off his, but he also couldn't wait to see Nkem's. Whatever it was, he knew it would be sexy as hell. She dripped sex appeal effortlessly. The classy fashion sense and demeanour belied her freaky personality behind closed doors. He loved that about her, that she could showcase her very different sides at the appropriate time.

"Is it on your breast?" His curiosity was getting the best of him, and he had to tuck his thumbs in his palms to keep from reaching out and yanking her clothes from her body. This slow strip tease would definitely kill him in the next second or two.

"Nope." She laughed as she pulled the ends of the blouse apart and turned to her side. "It's on my back."

"Oh … Fuck. That's sexy." Tunde feasted his eyes on the gorgeous multi-coloured rosebush inked on her lower back, just above her ass. Inscribed just under it, the words … I'm yours.

"God," he groaned as he trailed his finger lightly over the inscription. "All I can picture right now is glancing down at it while giving you powerful back shots. Pure bliss …"

Nkem giggled. "That's why it's strategically placed there, Babe," she murmured. "So anytime you call me Nkem, remember what it means in Igbo. I'm yours. And remember I'm yours and you're mine."

"Oh, my darling," Tunde rasped in a hoarse voice that carried all his heartfelt emotions. He loved this woman with his heart and soul. She would always belong to him, just as he belonged to her. Nothing in this world would ever make him screw up again. "We really do think alike because, I got something quite similar."

"What? Show me." Nkem turned back to face him, her eyes wide with both curiosity and excitement.

Tunde chuckled as he unbuttoned his shirt slowly, trying to torture her the same

as she did him.

“Hurry,” she urged. “Don’t tease.”

“Why does it sound like you’re bent over in bed begging to be fucked.”

“Gerrout! Be quick joor.”

“Okay … okay …” He peeled his shirt away from his body and smiled with uncertainty.

“Oh, my God!”

“Do you like it?”

“You actually did this?” She shook her head, eyes wide in disbelief. “Wrote in bold letters, Nkem’s husband on your lower belly close to your … your …”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded vigorously. “Now, it’s a clear statement. I’m yours. Always and forever,” Tunde said, tracing his own inked tattoo with his finger. It was still slightly bruised and tender, but he loved it.

At first, he worried it would be tacky to engrave that on his body, but when he made up his mind to go through with it, he’d been unwilling to rethink it. If anything, this was a perfect way to let Nkem know that he intended to fix their relationship to the point where she could trust him enough to become his wife again. That was his main aim right now, and he would do anything to ensure that their relationship led to that ultimate commitment again.

“So, what do you think?” he asked her, now concerned that he’d put her off by this bold external display of his intent.

Without responding, she lowered herself to her knees, unbuckled his belt and pulled out his semi-erect penis from his boxers.

She lifted her gaze to his and swiped her pink tongue over her lower lip. “I love it,” she said in a husky whisper.

Blood rushed downward, hardening his shaft in her hand. Tunde almost doubled over from the desire that sliced through him. Damn! This woman would be the

death of him.

“That’s right, Tunde. You belong to me,” she murmured just before she opened her mouth and swallowed his dick.

“Oh, God, have mercy,” he whimpered, throwing his head back as she sucked him deep into her throat. If his heart stopped beating at this moment, he would die a happy man.

~

As a child, Tunde had hated living at home with his parents. There was hardly ever a moment of peace. It always seemed that even during the few instances when his mother and father put their differences aside to have a good time, something always popped out of nowhere to ruin it. If it wasn’t one of his father’s side kids showing up at the doorstep, it was a side woman claiming she was pregnant. One thing or another always kicked off to create a toxic environment that made him loathe his family.

And so, he’d vowed that he would create a different kind of home. A place where love and peace thrived, where respect and family mattered. So, for many years while growing up, he’d avoided interacting with the opposite sex. He went through primary and secondary school without much communication with girls. Even his first few years in Uni were all the same. The fear of falling in love with the wrong woman, of making the same mistakes as his parents, made him extra cautious.

However, from the moment he met Nkem in university, his fear about relationships dissipated like a puff of smoke in the wind. She’d made it so easy for him to love and respect her. In a short space of time, they developed a deep connection that filled him with the peace he’d been searching for all his life.

He’d known within a month of meeting her that he wanted to be her husband, and it had taken all his strength to be patient and wait until he graduated from university to marry her.

They’d been very young when they tied the knot. He’d been twenty-five, fresh out of school with the world to conquer. It had not been an easy feat balancing a young family with their individual career pursuits, but they had worked together

to achieve it.

Stretching his legs as he reclined on the sofa in the sitting room, he let out a long sigh of satisfaction as he opened the small box in his hand. The shiny eight-carat single stone diamond twinkling up at him filled him with hope. He couldn't believe it, but he was about to do this for a second time. Propose to Nkem again. But this time, with a bigger ring and a more definite promise that he would always cherish her.

The first time he'd proposed to her, he'd been terrified of not being there in her final year of university, worried that someone else would swoop in and take her away from him in his absence. Now, his concerns were different. What if she still had reservations about committing to him after he'd betrayed her trust? What if she was content with their current arrangement that didn't involve marriage? Could he learn to accept that?

With no definite answer about how he would feel if she turned down his proposal, Tunde closed the box. He would focus on one day at a time, deal with each hurdle as it came his way and not try to be in his head so much. That's the least he could do. Enjoy his love for her and the miracle of her ability to love him back despite the obstacle that his past action had created in their journey together.

Exhaling sharply, he reached across and lifted the guitar case beside him. He opened it and inserted the box into the inner pocket before zipping it back shut. No chance of Nkem finding the ring in there. She never went near his guitar. According to her, it was taboo for anyone but a talented player to hold the instrument.

Tunde placed the guitar case where it had been resting and picked up the TV remote. He pressed the button to switch it on and waited silently for the cable stations to load.

Alone in the house on a Sunday morning as usual, he could indulge in the sports channel without interruption. A quick peek at the clock on the wall told him he only had about twenty minutes before Nkem and Jide returned from church. He needed to make the most of his rare alone time.

Even though he occasionally accompanied Nkem and Jide to St. Peter's Catholic Church, he didn't really enjoy it. Religion wasn't his cup of tea. He'd dabbled in

it during his teenage years, but quickly found there were too many unanswered questions for him to commit to Christianity or any other religion, so he'd simply given up and allowed his conscience to guide his life.

After selecting a channel, he picked up his coffee mug and took a sip of the lukewarm drink, already focused on the football match.

Nearly fifteen minutes into the game, his phone vibrated on the tea table beside him. Tunde hissed, annoyed with the interruption. A corner kick from the losing team was about to go down, and he was loath to miss the excitement.

He snatched his phone and peeped the screen. An unknown number. His stomach roiled. He should ignore it. For the past three weeks now, Yemisi had been trying to get in touch with him, calling relentlessly and dropping by unannounced to his workplace.

Several attempts to elude her, including blocking her number, and instructing the security team at Blossom Health to deny her access, hadn't worked. Now, she'd started badgering him with phone calls using withheld numbers.

Gritting his teeth, Tunde muted the TV and pressed the phone's answer button, determined to put an end to it once and for all.

"Who is this?" he said tersely as soon as the line connected.

"Tunde, I miss you." Yemisi's voice in his ear made his stomach churn. She sounded inebriated. So early in the morning?

See what having sex with yeye women has done to my life? he mused in irritation. Never again.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Yemisi? I told you never to contact me again."

"Do you think it's easy for me? I fell in love with you. I love you, Baby."

Any time she said this, it annoyed the hell out of him. Love? Nothing they had done had any deep emotions attached to it. He'd made it clear to her from the onset. Why couldn't she get it?

“Well, I’m not in love with you,” he said in a grated voice through clenched teeth. He needed to drive that point home in the plainest and cruellest of ways. With Yemisi, being tactful had not helped his cause. He had no other option.

“I don’t care. I miss what we shared. I have no one.”

“We didn’t share anything but sex, Yemisi. S. E. X.” He brushed a palm down his face in frustration. “Why are you acting like it was more than that?”

“Can we meet up? I need to see you.”

“No. We can’t meet up. We can’t see each other ever again.”

“Why not? I don’t care that you’re back with your wife. I just want you any way I can get you.”

Tunde shook his head and kissed his teeth. “Don’t call me again, do you hear me? If you bother me by phone, texts, or any other way, I’ll get the police involved and file a restraining order against you. You may not care about my wife, but I do. Bye.”

He hung up and tossed the phone back on the table. “Some women, eh!” he grunted out as he picked the remote again.

“What women?”

Tunde’s heart crashed into his chest. He froze, a cold sweat suddenly dampening the skin of his back.

Wahala! Nkem stood in the sitting room doorway. He’d been so caught up in this mess that he’d not realised she was back home.

How much had she heard? Where the hell was Jide? He usually rushed into the house, making enough noise to raise the dead. If his son had behaved as usual, he would have been alerted to their presence and ended the call much sooner.

Damn. Talk about bad luck. What to do now …?

Should he be forthright and honest? Or would lying be better in this situation?

Tunde exhaled slowly. “Yemisi called,” he said, deciding to be upfront. “She’s been trying to contact me for weeks even though I’ve blocked her number and told her never to call me.” He shrugged. “It’s very frustrating that she’s using unknown numbers to call now. It’s a catch twenty-two for me, because if I don’t answer, I may miss important clients.”

“Okay,” Nkem said with a slight nod. She brushed her palms over the sides of her pale blue gown and offered him a small smile. “Let me get changed and then head for the kitchen to start lunch.”

“Okay. I’ve already spiced the chicken and parboiled the rice like you requested,” he said.

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.”

She scurried away before he could say more. Tunde’s gut plummeted. Nkem’s response seemed strange. Her eyes shuttered immediately after hearing about Yemisi’s call. For some odd reason, he’d wanted her to show more emotion, ask more questions, say something other than a simple “okay”, with a swift change in topic. The good Lord knows that he would want to punch the wall if he discovered Arinze or any other man, for that matter, trying to contact Nkem for personal reasons.

Should he go after her? Try to explain more? Wouldn’t that make him appear guilty? Tunde shook his head, confused. He wasn’t used to all the self-doubt and second-guessing himself when it came to his relationship with Nkem. Before their separation, things had been so easy, so straightforward. The fact that he had no clue what to do in the situation pissed him off. He needed to decide quickly and restore the peace in his home.

Just as he made a move to rise, Jide stormed into the sitting room with an apple in his hand. “God, I was so hungry that I had to rush to the kitchen to find something to eat,” he said, slumping onto the sofa beside him. “The communion service was very boring and long. Do I have to keep going to church with Mum?”

Tunde laughed, settling back onto his seat. Where was all this noise earlier to warn him they were home? This would have been more helpful minutes ago. Now, he had to wait for a private moment between him and Nkem to explain things further.

“Yes, Jide. We are Christians in this family.”

“But you don’t go to church, Dad. Why do I have to?”

“Good point, Jide.” Tunde smiled. His son really had the mind of a person working in law enforcement. “You have to because your Mum says so.”

“But she’s not the boss.”

“She is. I went to church as a young boy because my mum wanted me to.” He leaned forward and patted his son’s shoulder. “When you grow up, you can stop going to church if you no longer find it helpful.”

“But what if it still is?”

“Then don’t stop. Let your conscience be your guide.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Jide nodded and bit into the apple again. Watching his son chewing the fruit in his mouth happily, Tunde allowed himself to relax. He’d done nothing wrong by picking up Yemisi’s call and asking her to stop contacting him. His conscience was clear. He had to trust that Nkem would have faith in him.

~

He felt the mattress underneath him shift multiple times as Nkem tossed and turned on the bed beside him. She was restless and awake, even several hours after he’d reassured her about the telephone call from Yemisi.

Tunde clamped his jaw tightly together, fighting every instinct within him to roll over to her side of the bed and draw her into his arms. He could try to explain again. Except, what else would he say that he hadn’t already said in what seemed like a hundred times tonight?

Still keeping himself in the same position on the bed, feigning sleep. He’d deliberately placed his phone on the dressing table close to Nkem tonight, just to show her that he had nothing to hide.

Since she'd walked in on him after he'd abruptly ended his telephone conversation with Yemisi, Nkem had become slightly detached. Not in a way that Jide or a stranger would notice, but in the subtle manner he recognised all too well after years of loving her. She'd been a tad too breezy, too syrupy, when it was obvious she was still bothered by it all. Her restlessness in bed tonight confirmed it.

The mattress shifted as she changed position, then she lay still again. Tunde didn't move. He continued breathing slowly, in and out, even adding a light snore here and there as he waited.

He wasn't sure what he expected to happen with his phone, but he wanted more than this superficial nonchalant attitude Nkem had adopted. Maybe if she confronted him, demanding that she never wanted Yemisi or any other woman to contact him, tapped him on his shoulder to wake him up and talk about it, he'd possibly feel better. He couldn't really tell.

However, he knew exactly what he didn't want. For her to pick up his phone, snoop around for information and prove exactly what he feared. That his word didn't count for much.

The bed squeaked, and the mattress dipped. Tunde shut his eyes tightly, still trying to keep up the charade of deep slumber. He heard the soft patter of bare feet on the terrazzo floor, and then the bathroom door closing.

Suppressing a sigh, he raised himself slightly from the bed and turned towards the dressing mirror. The room was slightly dark, but the street lights streaked in through the curtains, shedding some light inside. His phone was gone.

Damn. Disappointment twisted his insides, and pain rippled through him. If she needed to search his phone even after their conversations, his fears were justified. Nkem didn't trust him. It shouldn't hurt him the way it did, should it? He'd been the one to cause her mistrust. Yet, he couldn't stop the despair engulfing him.

Blowing out a soft sigh, Tunde settled back on the bed, closed his eyes, and waited until Nkem returned to the room. He kept up the pretence of sleep until he was sure she'd fallen asleep, then he relaxed and allowed himself to join her in the land of dreams.

Twenty-Five



Nkem hated the way she'd been feeling this past week. A mild unsettling that she couldn't quite name simmered in her stomach. She knew exactly when she'd begun to feel this way. It had started the moment Tunde informed her that Yemisi had been trying to contact him.

Swinging her executive seat side to side, she fixed her attention on the computer screen in front of her for the what … hundredth time? The noisy air conditioner droned on from above. Normally, she never even noticed, but today, it sounded like a plane about to take off. Or was that just her?

It was a slow day at work, so Nkem didn't have much to occupy her mind. No reports to get out. No numbers to reconcile. No end-of-year audit.

Just Tunde. And Yemisi. And Tunde's disclosure.

Yes, she believed everything he'd told her. He had no reason to lie. However, a little part of her still fretted about it all. And it had dampened her mood, made her out of sorts.

Before Tunde came home that day to confess his infidelity, Nkem had never even considered the possibility of her Tunde being a cheat. She'd have likely had a good laugh if anyone even suggested it. They'd had a completely transparent relationship, free of even the slightest suspicion.

She still couldn't quite describe the shock to her system—her psyche, her entire being. And not just because he'd lied about being at work the day he'd had sex

with a stranger he met at a bar, but that she'd never suspected a blessed thing when he'd stood there lying to her face.

So yes, she did believe his account of Yemisi's calls. But she couldn't lie to herself. Some sliver of doubt pricked at her like a thorn in the flesh.

What if he stepped out on her again? What if Yemisi managed to wear down his resistance, or some other random chick in the future? Could she let her guard down completely, trust him like she had before The Storm?

All this and more whirred in her mind relentlessly since the day Yemisi called. She'd told herself countless times that Tunde had been transparent since their reconciliation, but it didn't matter. Worry still ate at her insides.

Checking his phone last week had been impossible to resist. In her defence, the damn thing lay right there by her bedside, practically staring at her. And Tunde was fast asleep. She'd fought the instinct for a long time.

You mean a couple of minutes?

Whatever … eventually, she caved like a house of cards.

While in the bathroom searching through Tunde's emails, WhatsApp messages, deleted files and pictures, her heart had been in her throat. The fear of finding something even the least bit compromising almost snatched her breath away. Not to mention, what if he woke up and caught her?

After nearly an hour of playing Nancy Drew, she'd found nothing except evidence of his love for her. His screensaver and WhatsApp profile pictures were the same image of her hugging Jide. Although not active on social media, his Instagram and Facebook pages displayed multiple family photos featuring her and Jide. There were no suspicious DMs, texts, phone logs, emails, or bank statement receipts. Absolutely nothing.

Still, the sigh of relief she'd let out that evening had been short lived. Was this how it would be from now on? The very idea of stooping so low—like a snitch looking to condemn someone—turned her stomach.

Can I continue like this? Scooping up his phone while he sleeps, skulking to some hidden corner of the house to allay my fears? Or confirm my worst

nightmare?

Nkem sighed as she clicked on the computer mouse and scrolled through her emails. For a Monday morning, her schedule was unusually wide open. She had no planned meetings and had already completed her tasks for the day.

Two more hours left, and she would be free for her lunch date with Oke. She couldn't wait to see her bestie. It had been nearly two weeks since they last saw each other. And that had been for a quick mani-pedi visit to a nail saloon together.

To ensure that nothing interfered with her plans, Nkem wanted to clear her unread emails. Her boss had a sneaky way of sending highly important emails with no heads-up.

She swiped her thumb and forefinger across her forehead in annoyance as she clicked on an unread message in her inbox. She was right.

Na wa for Mr Olumide o, Nkem mused, twisting her lips into a snicker. Still up to his old tricks.

Buried inside the long, basically pointless email he'd sent late Friday, he'd included a new task for her. Nkem sighed. So much for an early lunch.

She reached for her phone and sent a quick text to Oke asking to postpone lunch for an hour. Nkem smiled at her friend's immediate no wahala reply, and set about verifying the accounts staring back from her screen.

A bit of work to distract her—no thoughts of Tunde and cheating—and she'd be ready to leave the office for lunch.

Perfect.

~

"Girl, you're really thirsty o," Oke murmured with a little laugh.

Nkem swallowed the chilled Coke she'd gulped down like a thirsty shark. They'd chosen Tokunbo, an eatery specialising in delicious traditional meals on

plates made of calabash. Both women loved the restaurant's vast variety of soups from the diverse regions of Nigeria. Seated across from Oke, she laughed at herself.

"Biko, I need this drink. It's boiling outside." Nkem took another swig, thinking she might need to order another.

"My dear, I agree," Oke said. "Sometimes, I believe Nigeria is the hell fire preachers warn sinners to avoid."

Nkem laughed, making a sign of the cross on her chest. "Biko, I'm not in hell in Jesus' name."

"Amen!"

"Girl, you be fool," Nkem teased, winking at her friend. "But I've missed you so."

"Missed me? I don't believe it." Oke placed her palm on her chest and opened her mouth wide in mock surprise. "Since you and Tunde reunited, I'm old news."

Nkem laughed. "No nau. It's not like that. I've just been very busy these few weeks."

"Busy doing what? Fucking abi? Abegi."

"Girl, not everything is about sex."

"Says who?"

Nkem snorted and thrust her tongue out at her friend. "You will never change."

The waitress approached with two trays. Nkem inhaled the aromas swirling in the air, already anticipating the bitterleaf soup with pounded yam she'd ordered. Oke had ordered banga soup with starch.

With a cheerful smile, the woman placed their trays on the table. "Enjoy your meal, ladies."

Nkem leaned over her dish and inhaled deeply, savouring the aroma of spices that rose to her nose. “I know I will,” she said, returning the waitress’ smile.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Oke looked at Nkem, then at the waitress. “No, I think we’re good,” she answered. She looked at her banga soup and starch. “This looks delicious. I just want to dig in with my hands.”

“I can understand that,” the waitress said. She pointed across the room. “There’s a sink to wash your hands, if you like.”

Both women took her up on the offer, walking to the sink and air dryer attached to the wall specifically for this purpose.

Back at their table, while the friends ate in silence, Nkem wondered how to broach the topic weighing heavily on her mind.

She’d asked Oke out to lunch to seek her advice about Tunde, yet she didn’t know how to precisely put her feelings into words. She could have spoken with Lotanna about it all, but Nkem didn’t want to burden her sister. She had enough worries with her illness. Besides, Oke had a knack for cutting straight to the chase. And brutal honesty was exactly what she needed right now.

“How are things with Tunde?”

Nkem glanced up at Oke in surprise. Oke might also have a knack for mind reading.

“Fine.” She rolled the ball of pounded yam in her fingers and stared at it idly. “Yemisi has been calling him on the phone trying to get back together with him.”

“I know. She dropped by unannounced twice at Blossom Health asking for him.”

Nkem’s jaw dropped as she let out a shocked gasp. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. Tunde had to call security on her both times. She made a scene.”

“Lord.” Nkem dipped the ball of pounded yam in the soup and raised it to her lips, but didn’t put it into her mouth, feeling a bit betrayed by the information her

friend just dropped. Why hadn't Oke or Tunde told her about Yemisi's visit to their workplace?

"I think you should have let me know about that," she muttered, taking a deep breath in as she tried to suppress her annoyance.

"Why?"

"Well, you're my friend, and if another woman is stepping to my man, and you know about it…" She trailed off, hating the way she sounded even to her own ears. She'd never been one to worry about infidelity, let alone try to recruit another woman to spy or give her feedback on Tunde's activities.

Oke sighed. "Girl, I don't want to be in the middle of you and Tunde's life. Why should I be the one to tell you and not him?"

Nkem inserted the ball of pounded yam mixed with soup into her mouth and swallowed. Her friend was right. It wasn't her duty to tell her anything about Tunde or Yemisi. Not at all. The person who should have told her hadn't. For some inexplicable reason, Tunde had kept the information to himself.

Nkem nicked her inner lip with her teeth as an epiphany hit her. Why she'd had this simmering discomfort this past week became clear as crystal. Tunde had told her that Yemisi had been contacting him for three weeks, yet he hadn't divulged it until she'd walked in on him. Finding out that the woman had not only been phoning him, but also showing up at his office made it all worse. Would he have ever told her?

"Listen, Sis," Oke said. "I love you, and I'm always honest with you, right?"

Nkem nodded. No matter how much Oke's not telling her about Yemisi upset her, she knew her friend didn't have malicious intentions and would always have her back.

"You have to ask yourself what's more important. Your love for Tunde or the fear of him hurting you again," Oke said. "You have to choose one or the other for you to move forward."

Oke fished out a piece of meat from her soup, popped it into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. "You can't keep living like this, Nkem … half in, half out." She

reached for her bottle of Coke and took a gulp. “You either forgive Tunde and trust him again or break up with him and move on. I mean, how many women out there can you worry about? How many Yemisis out there can you possibly let drive you mad?”

Nkem swallowed hard. Her friend was right. She’d been in a mental limbo since reuniting with Tunde. Zigzagging between deep feelings of love for him and fear of him hurting her again. Which kept her from fully committing to her emotions. And that was interfering with her happiness. She really had to take a leap of faith and plunge in fully … or walk away from it all.

“Your husband …” Oke paused, then twisted her lips into a wry smile. “Ex-husband, turned boyfriend, is a handsome, rich plastic surgeon living in Lagos, where many women and even some men, are aggressively on the hunt for sugar daddies.” She licked her oil-stained fingers. “Girl, there are beautiful women everywhere. Tall, short, slim, round, young, old ... temptation left, right and centre. You can’t stop Tunde if he wants to cheat on you.”

Nkem’s stomach roiled. Because she’d loved Tunde since she was eighteen and for so long, she’d lived in a bubble of trust that kept her protected from thoughts like this. But when Tunde burst that bubble, all she could see was competition everywhere. She started comparing random women with herself, wondering if Tunde would find them more attractive, more sexually exciting. Sometimes, she despised herself for allowing his act of cheating to shake her self-confidence, to damage her ability to trust unreservedly.

“So, it boils down to the question of what kind of man he is,” Oke continued, snagging back her attention. “Is he the kind of man to disrespect you? To hurt you? If so … bounce. If not, stay and enjoy the ride.”

“But that’s the thing, Oke, he isn’t a disrespectful man or the type to cheat, but he did … he did …” Nkem’s voice broke. This was the crux of what bothered her. How a man so wonderful to her could hurt her like he did? What guarantee did she have that he wouldn’t again?

“Then, if you decide to continue with your relationship with Tunde, find out what type of man he is now. Is he sorry for what he did? I mean, truly remorseful and repentant. Has he owned up to his misdeeds? Have you guys talked honestly about the whys?”

Nkem nodded. “Yes, we’ve talked about it all. I told you he said he was just curious, that he felt he was missing out.” She shrugged. “To be honest, even though I know he is deeply remorseful, I still don’t get it.”

“Reasons are not always understandable to everyone, but have you talked about how he can convince you it won’t happen again?”

Nkem stiffened as the question rang in her head. They hadn’t really talked about that, about the future of their relationship in depth. And that was her main concern. How could she trust that he wouldn’t suddenly feel the need to give in to the curiosity like he did last time and cheat again?

She shook her head. “No, we haven’t.”

“My dear, if you love Tunde and want to make it work, put all effort in your relationship. Forgiving means starting with a clean slate, not bringing up the past whenever it’s convenient for you.” Oke drew in a long breath. “Life is too short, Sis. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. It’s too short not to be happy.”

Something about Oke’s last words gave Nkem pause. Her voice sounded shaky, and a film of tears clouded her eyes. Nkem’s insides twisted. Did Oke’s lips just quiver?

“Is everything okay?” she asked, now really concerned.

Oke hesitated, dipped her gaze to the table, and then, slowly raised it again to meet hers. “I’ve been diagnosed with breast cancer, Nkem,” she said in a low tone.

“Oh, no.” Nkem gasped. Her heart skipped a beat, and then, took off in a gallop. Her skin suddenly felt hot and tight. She’d had no idea her friend was going through something so traumatic. God. Heat suffused her cheeks as shame hit her. Here she was, talking about her silly relationship problems and her friend was a woman dealing with a major health issue. She needed to get a grip. There was life outside her orbit with Tunde. “Is ...” She swallowed spit which seemed to suddenly clog her throat. “Is it terminal? Are you okay?”

“No … I mean, yes, I’m fine.” Oke waved a dismissive hand. “It’s only Stage One. It’s still localised to my right breast and hasn’t spread at all. Still, I need a mastectomy and chemotherapy, then medication I’ll have to take about ten years.

The cancer specialist is very optimistic about complete remission if I commit to treatment immediately."

"So, have you? What are your treatment plans?"

Oke nodded. "I'll have the mastectomy in three weeks."

"Three weeks? God…" Tears prickled Nkem's eyes, but she blinked them back, unwilling to cry and upset her friend who seemed to be dealing with the diagnosis much better than she ever could. "That's so soon … It all seems so rushed. Did you get a second opinion? Must you have surgery?"

"Yes, Nkem. The sooner I do it, the more reduced the risk of spread. I've spoken to the best cancer specialist in Ibadan and another colleague in London, and they both agree that immediate surgery is the safest option." She lifted her shoulders in a resigned shrug. "So, it is what it is. My beautiful right boob has to go."

"Oh, God … I'm so sorry." Nkem didn't know what else to say.

How could life change so much in just a few months? First, her sister contracting HIV, and now, her best friend developing cancer. It all seemed too much to handle. While she'd been lost in her own blissful reunion with Tunde, she'd missed out on the lives of her other loved ones. Not good enough. She needed to do better.

"When did you find out about the lump in the first place? And why didn't you tell me sooner. I could have been there for you," she asked Oke.

"I felt the lump about two months ago, but the diagnosis was confirmed three weeks ago." Oke wiped her hands on the napkin beside her and tossed it back on the table. "You've been so happy, living on cloud nine with Tunde." She hesitated, and then smiled. The first bit of brightness since she revealed her illness. "I didn't want to bother you. Besides, Arinze has been there to support me through it all."

"Arinze?" Nkem raised a brow, not sure she'd heard correctly. "Arinze Ibeh?"

Oke laughed out. "Why do you look so shocked? Are you still interested in him?"

“No. Never was. Never will be.”

“Good. Because he’s going to be my baby daddy.”

“Wait …what?” Nkem dragged her seat closer to the table and leaned in. This conversation was getting weirder by the second. She needed clarification. “Okay, tell me what the hell is going on, and start from the beginning. I need details. Every single detail.”

“Nothing o…” Oke lowered her lashes coyly, which further intrigued Nkem.

Was her bestie blushing over a man? The same friend who constantly insisted she would never tie herself to any man? The one who swore she’d never fall in love or have a family? No way.

“Start talking,” Nkem demanded.

“Okay, okay,” she murmured. “After my clinic appointment and biopsy, all I could think about was the fact that I could die without ever feeling the love of a child. The only thing that scared me more than the possibility of cancer, of dying.” She scooped a small blob of starch in her fingers and dipped it into the oily soup in her calabash bowl. “I decided that if my diagnosis wasn’t terminal, I would go for it, try to have a baby.”

Nkem remained silent, still not sure how Arinze fit into the picture. Although she had no feelings whatsoever for him, he didn’t come off as Oke’s type either. The man was predictable, straight as an arrow, and to put it mildly, a bit too nice for Oke.

“Arinze has been a strong, dependable friend since I met him years ago, a man who also wants a family desperately,” Oke said. “He would make the perfect sperm donor.”

“What?” Nkem felt her eyes turn into saucers. Had her friend really thought this through, or was this a passing whim. “Have you asked him yet?”

“No,” Oke quipped, rolling her eyes as if she’d just been asked a silly question. “But I am testing the waters, slowly trying to gain his confidence. Hopefully, when I do ask him, he won’t think I’m completely bonkers.”

Nkem smiled at her friend, still not sure what to make of the entire news or her plans. Regardless, she would always support her. Plus, she trusted her friend's instincts. Oke was a resilient woman with a medical degree who knew what was best for herself. She should be fine. "Well, darling, I'm excited for you and your future baby daddy," Nkem said, and she meant it.

Indeed, she was thrilled that the cancer diagnosis hadn't broken Oke's spirit, even if she couldn't help but worry about her. "Oke, please don't keep me in the dark about your health," she said. "I love you. And I want to be there for you every step of the way. Please promise me that you'll let me in, okay?"

Oke's gaze connected with hers and held. "I promise."

Nkem relaxed again. Their friendship meant the world to her. Just as Oke had been there during her rough patches, she would make it a point of duty to do the same. To freely give her full time, attention, and support.

Twenty-Six



“We need to talk.”

Even as he said the words, Tunde knew they sounded contrived and mechanical, like a bad actor on a stage. Yet he felt cornered, and no better way to start such a serious conversation presented itself.

He’d agonised for days, worried about his decision and how Nkem would interpret it. But he couldn’t put it off any longer. For the next phase of their relationship to survive, whether as a couple or not, this had to be done.

“About what?” she asked, an eyebrow quirked, and worry creasing her forehead.

Tunde took a deep breath in, blew it out, and reached across the dining table to hold Nkem’s hand in his. He’d arranged a sleepover for Jide, so they were alone in the house. He wanted no distractions. He and Nkem needed to have an honest conversation without having to censor themselves.

“I love you with all my heart,” he began. He cleared his throat and caressed her palm. “From the first day I saw you standing at the registration office in Uni, I knew that I wanted you in my life.”

A reminiscent smile flickered across her lips, momentarily distracting Tunde. A sudden urge to lean forward and kiss her overwhelmed him, but he clamped his jaw tightly to retain his focus. One kiss would lead to more, and they would end up displacing the problem between them. Broken trust.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, her eyes bright with pleasure. “Thanks for the delicious meal, and for this lovely evening alone.”

He tried to smile back at her, but a stiffness in his jaw muscles prevented it. Buying dinner and setting the table for a romantic night at home seemed the least he could do at this point, especially since his next move could potentially hurt her deeply … if she didn’t see things his way.

“You’re welcome, Nkem,” he murmured.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” Uncertainty danced in her eyes as she gazed at him.

Tunde’s heart bumped into his chest and began a crazed beat. This was it. Time to do the right thing. Even though it would break his heart in two, it needed to be done. Nkem deserved to be with someone she didn’t have to worry about, someone she trusted without question.

It was clear as the nose on his face, she still had concerns about him. It wasn’t fair for him to keep pushing for more. Not until she healed completely from the damage he’d done to their relationship.

“I think we should halt things between us for now, take a step back from our relationship and re-evaluate things —”

She snatched her hand away from his, cutting him off. “What exactly are you saying?” Her eyes widened, and in the next second, narrowed … as if her ears played tricks on her. “Are you ending things with me?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No. I’m saying we should put our relationship on pause.”

“Why? Because of Yemisi? Do you want to go back to her? Is that it?”

Tunde’s entire body tensed as Nkem’s accusation exploded in his brain. How could Nkem even think that? How could she believe another woman had anything to do with this? He took in a deep breath, now convinced he’d chosen the right path.

“No, Nkem,” he said in a low, defeated tone. “This has nothing to do with Yemisi or any other woman.” He pulled his chair back to increase the distance

between them. Nkem's closeness distracted him, the sweet fragrance of her flowery scent made it almost impossible for him to think straight, to stand firm in his convictions. "It's about the broken trust between us, that my word isn't good enough for you anymore."

"And whose fault is that?" Her question came out in a raspy whisper.

"Mine. I own it. I have myself to blame, and I want to fix it." He scrubbed his scalp with his palm. "We got back together without talking about things in honest detail. We went straight to sex, living together, and playing family without really repairing what was broken."

Nkem's eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing, just gazed at him with a shuttered expression, as if trying to distance herself from the scene.

"I know you may not want to hear it, but deep down inside, you agree with me," Tunde continued, his chest burning with sadness. "We can't carry on like this, Nkem. I can't be with a woman that doesn't trust me."

"So, you're leaving me?" She sniffled, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her palm. "You're walking away from the relationship?"

"No. I love you. I want you. But I won't be satisfied with parts of you, I need all of you."

"And that's what I've been giving you, Tunde. I've given all that I can give in this relationship." Nkem folded her arms across her chest in a defensive posture. "You're the one who decided to cheat years ago, you're the one demanding forgiveness on your terms. And now, you're the one leaving because I can't trust you like I used to? How can you even expect that after what you did?"

"And that's the entire point, Nkem. Without trust, we have nothing." He sucked his teeth. "I made a horrible decision years ago. I regret it. I'll never do it again, but I can't seem to convince you otherwise."

Nkem shrugged, but remained silent. Her tears fell freely down her face.

"Would you want to be with someone whose phone you have to keep searching late at night for confirmation of his loyalty? Do you want to keep worrying about where your man is? I know I can't live with a woman I don't trust. Can you live

happily with me, knowing you don't trust me?"

"So why didn't you tell me that Yemisi had been calling for three weeks before I found out? Why did you keep that she had been to your office twice looking for you?" She blew out a harsh breath. "You want trust? Let's start with complete honesty."

Tunde sucked his breath. He'd not expected her to bring that up, but now that she had, he needed to address it. "Because I was worried, Nkem," he admitted honestly. "Somewhere deep inside me, I knew this would happen, that telling you about her would cause you to worry about us. And I was right."

"You should have told me."

"I should have. But the thing is, because you no longer trust me, I can no longer trust the stability of our relationship, and that's bad."

"So, you want to just give up?"

"No, I want to fight for us," he countered. "I want us to go for counselling, start afresh like we did in university." He leaned closer to her again, desperate to convince her. "We were together for four whole years before we had sex for the first time. We talked for hours getting to know each other, went on dates, enjoyed each other romantically before we plunged into deeper commitment. You trusted me first with your heart before your body."

He paused, thinking back to the days when they would spend their evenings in the front yard of his off-campus apartment at Osasogie, conversing for hours, kissing and holding hands. Back to the many times they opened up to each other about their dreams, their worries, the future. He wanted all of that back.

"Nkem, I have decided to move back to my flat, so —"

Her shocked gasp sliced him like a sword to his flesh, but he remained resolute. "I need to have some distance from you physically so we can start afresh."

She sprang up from her seat. "Don't do this, Tunde," she said, her eyes flashing with warning.

"I have to, Nkem," he said firmly. "It's the only way we can survive."

“You think that leaving me, breaking my heart again is the only way?”

“I’m not leaving you, Nkem,” he said, remaining seated, trying to keep calm so that he delivered his message exactly as he intended. “I have arranged couples counselling sessions with Professor Akin from The Mind Project every Tuesday at six thirty p.m.” He heaved a slow breath in and out. “We can try him first to see if he can help us, but we need to do more than what we’re doing now to heal properly.”

“Don’t leave.” Her tone remained low and broken. “If you do, it’s over between us.”

“I’m really sorry, Nkem, I don’t want to leave, but we have to do more, and I can’t live here while we attempt that. It’s too distracting, too confusing,” he muttered in frustration. “Please try to understand, I’m not trying to end things between us. I need us to talk to a trained therapist who deals with this kind of thing. I want us to start afresh.”

“And what about what I need? Doesn’t that count?”

“Tell me what you want? Whatever it is, I’ll do. What can I do to make you trust me again? What can I do to fix us?”

Nkem didn’t respond. She simply stared at him, long and hard, her breaths jagged and uneven. Suddenly, she burst into tears. “I don’t know, Tunde. I don’t know.”

With that, she turned and fled the room, leaving him sitting there, his eyes clouding with the tears that filled them.

His entire world was crashing around him. It felt like a giant had reached into his chest, pulled out his heart and crushed it under its foot.

Nothing hurt as much as seeing Nkem in pain, pain that he caused. He’d done it once before, and here he was, doing it again. This time, however, it wasn’t for his own selfish needs. Selfishness would be remaining in this relationship, knowing he’d not done enough to rectify the damage he’d caused. Selfishness would be avoiding the pain that squeezed his chest at this moment so that he could have more moments with Nkem.

His life as a medic had taught him that simply covering a deep wound with a bandaid, and not cleaning it properly, caused an infection to fester instead of healing.

He and Nkem got back together without first dealing properly with what broke them apart. He would leave tonight and come back later to get the rest of his stuff. Maybe when she cooled off and had time to think, she would be open to counselling sessions to help rebuild the trust between them.

He hoped so, but even if not, he would attend the sessions on his own and keep an open invitation for her to join.

~

She couldn't stop crying. Even several days after Tunde's departure, her heart still hurt. She saw him everywhere in the house, still smelt the woodsy fragrance of his cologne in every room.

Every time she walked into her home after work, she felt like falling into a heap on the floor and giving up. But because of her son, she put on a brave face and fought the tears until she was alone. Just like now, driving Jide back from school, she tried to keep upbeat, asking him about his day, yet not really assimilating his responses.

"Mum, why did Daddy leave this time? Did he cheat on you again?"

Nkem gasped, turning sideways to glance at her son. He was smartly dressed in a plain blue shirt and grey trouser school uniform. His thick hair was neatly cropped. He looked as handsome as his father. The worry furrowing the bridge between his eyes tugged at her heart.

"No," she replied. "No, he didn't. And what do you mean by cheating? What do you know about that?"

Jide chuckled. "You and Dad are funny. I'm not a baby, you know. I know he had another girlfriend, and that's why you divorced him."

Nkem swiped her tongue over her suddenly dry lips. She really didn't want to lie to her son, but wasn't sure how to explain the truth delicately.

“Your father didn’t have a girlfriend, Jide,” she said. “He … he had, he met up with another woman and … and —”

“Had sex.” Jide interjected. “Mum, I’m in JSS2 and we’ve had sex education in school already.”

“Oh, God.” Nkem swallowed hard, not sure if she should be proud or apprehensive. She’d not expected to have this conversation with Jide so soon. Yes, she was aware it was in the school curriculum, and had been told what to expect in the lessons. But she’d never planned for actually being involved in the discussions. Frankly, she’d hoped to leave this conversation between father and son.

“Don’t worry, Mum, I know the important stuff. The teachers in school explained it.”

“Well, I hope you know that having sex is a very adult decision. There are a lot of risks involved when two people decide to have sex. Do you know them?”

“Yep. Unwanted pregnancies and diseases.”

“Good. So, it’s best to wait until you are much older, when you are able to manage the risks.”

“Like how old?”

“Sixty years old…”

“What?”

Nkem laughed, happy to have her wonderful son to distract her from the hollowness in her chest from Tunde’s absence.

“I’m just kidding,” she said, still laughing. Her son’s incredulous facial expression was comical. “When you’re married would be ideal.”

“Ewww ... I don’t want to get married.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I don’t want to be sad when my wife divorces me.”

Nkem sighed. “Not all marriages lead to divorce, Jide. Look at your grandpa and grandma. They are still together after so many years.”

Using her parents instead of herself and Tunde as an example of a lasting marriage crushed her heart. She had grown up in a home where love and commitment mattered above everything. She’d hoped for the same with Tunde when they’d stood at the alter and exchanged their vows. Now, here she was alone, and without the man she loved.

“So why did Dad really leave this time?”

Nkem glanced at her son, and her gut twisted in knots. She saw the pain and uncertainty in his eyes, a reflection of the agony and doubts in her heart. The despair of his father leaving, also extended to him.

“We haven’t really healed from the last time, Jide,” Nkem answered truthfully. “And to be honest, I’m not sure we can.”

She steered the vehicle into the road leading to their home, her mind deep in thought. Admitting that she and Tunde may never get to the place where they once were, felt liberating as well as agonising.

However, it was a good start. And she needed to restructure her mind from scratch. What better way than going back to the beginning?

An idea came to her as she approached the front gate of her home. It gained momentum speedily until it blossomed into an inferno.

She had annual leave days that she needed to take as soon as possible. Jide’s school was breaking off for the half term in two days.

Travelling back home to Enugu to see her parents, whose marriage had lasted over thirty years, and whose love only waxed stronger and stronger over time, would certainly boost her confidence. And provide her with the support she needed to make a decision.

If nothing else, a change of scenery from the hustle and bustle of Lagos would do her body and soul some good.

“Jide,” Nkem said, bringing the vehicle to a stop at her usual parking spot inside the compound. “What do you think about spending the half term with Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Yay!” Jide clapped in response, clearly delighted. “I’d love that. It’s been more than two years since we visited.”

“I know, I miss them,” she said, gliding her palm across her son’s shoulder affectionately. “And there’s nothing like time away from this busy city to bring some clarity to the mind.”

Now that she’d decided to spend some time at home with her family, Nkem couldn’t wait. She’d found the perfect distraction from her pain.

Twenty-Seven



Tunde sighed in disappointment as Professor Akin settled onto the couch opposite him. He glanced sideways at the empty seat beside him and folded his thumbs into his palms, trying to curtail the gloomy cloud falling over him.

He'd texted Nkem last week and yesterday to remind her about their first scheduled therapy session. She'd not responded to either message. Neither had she replied any of his texts just asking how she was doing. All of them had the double checks indicating they'd been read, so he knew her lack of response was deliberate.

Several times in the last week, he'd mustered enough courage to call Nkem, but ended the call abruptly as soon as it rang once. He was afraid of hearing her voice, scared that he would abandon his convictions if he did.

They needed the guidance of a trained professional therapist to navigate the journey of repairing their broken relationship. They'd tried themselves and failed. Just a little test, and boom, the foundation of their relationship cracked wide open.

The night he'd left her had hurt him to the bone, and the pain had intensified when he'd gathered his belongings and moved out the next day. Explaining to Jide had been its own particular hell, because he knew he was also breaking his son's heart. Yet, he saw no other viable choice. The overarching issue of broken trust between Nkem and him still loomed large. It needed to be fixed. Otherwise, how could they have a healthy relationship?

“I see you are alone today,” Professor Akin said, drawing Tunde from his thoughts. “I thought your partner was supposed to meet you here.”

“I don’t think she will be coming today,” Tunde admitted with regret. “But I would like to carry on with the session. I’ll keep trying to get her to join me.”

“Okay, but do you know why she’s reluctant to be here?”

Tunde shrugged. “I think it’s because she’s upset with me.”

“And why do you think that?”

“Because … Because I walked away, told her we needed to slow things down between us.”

The professor jotted down something in his notes, then looked up again. “And you did that why?”

Tunde hesitated, twisting the button on his shirt. Where to start? How could he explain his deepest fears? Could he articulate properly how he would rather have his heart ripped out whole now by ending things with Nkem, than live with her, knowing she didn’t trust him, didn’t believe in him … and have his heart torn to pieces bit by bit?

“It’s a long story,” Tunde said finally, knowing he couldn’t properly explain without starting from the beginning.

Professor Akin reclined back onto his seat. “You’ve paid for an hour thirty minutes every week. I have time, so, shoot.”

Tunde smiled. “I’m not armed,” he said with a wink.

The professor didn’t blink or crack a smile at his dry attempt at humour. Tunde cleared his throat and sat up. This was a serious matter. He needed to go right back to the root of the problem, the reasons for that fateful decision that torpedoed his life. Maybe if he spoke openly and honestly today, he would understand himself better, and hopefully, that would be the first step to healing. He opened his mouth and the words came tumbling out.

~

Nkem loved the early morning walks with her father. She enjoyed the quiet strolls along the hilly roads of Enugu's residential area, Independence Layout. It was one of the few places in the eastern Nigerian state that maintained its roads and beautiful architectural structures.

The sun shone bright, but not biting on the skin. A fresh breeze occasionally came with the swishing of the tall palm trees lining the streets, and the earthy smell of shrubs and rainfall, made today's walk even more appealing.

For the past five days since they'd arrived, she'd not missed one day of this exercise routine with her father, whose recent diabetes diagnosis called for him to lose weight.

Jide was still asleep in the five-bedroom duplex house she'd grown up in, while his grandmother had gone to the home chapel, a separate building on the compound. She spent time praying there every morning while her husband took his daily walks.

Nkem cast a sidelong glance at her father who had slowed down, breathing a lot faster than he had earlier.

He was tall but overweight, with a head full of grey hair, and a thick, salt-and-pepper beard covering the lower half of his face. When she was younger, she thought he resembled Father Christmas not just because of his weight and beard. Her father also had one of the jolliest dispositions known to humankind. She adored him. He had been the perfect husband and father who loved his family, always going above and beyond to care for his wife and children.

"Are you tired?" she asked him. "Do you want to go back now?"

He nodded. "Let's sit on the pavement and rest a bit first. Your old man is not as active as he used to be."

Nkem chuckled as she and her father headed towards the pavement at the side of the road. "Dad, you're stronger than you think. You've walked two miles already today. See …" She thrust her wrist towards him to show him the screen of her smart watch.

“I need to get a watch like that to help me with my exercise.”

Nkem nodded, helping her father settle down on the pavement’s slab. “Leave that with me,” she said. “I’ll get you one that syncs to your phone. It will also monitor your heart rate and keep track of how many calories you burn during exercise.”

“Really?” Her father’s eyebrows shot skyward, making Nkem laugh out as she settled herself on the slab beside him.

“Yes o. Technology is so advanced. Though I’m no expert like Tunde and Jide. They know every new gadget out there.”

Mentioning Tunde’s name unexpectedly caused Nkem’s cheeks to heat up. She’d been doing that for the past week, bringing his name up during almost every conversation with her parents, yet failing to actually muster enough courage to talk about their broken relationship.

Her father cleared his throat, drawing Nkem’s attention to him. “How are things between you and Tunde?” he asked. “The last time we spoke on WhatsApp, I saw him in the background … wearing only a towel.”

Nkem’s mouth parted in a shocked gasp. Her face felt like it had been set ablaze as embarrassment flushed her skin.

“Don’t act so surprised, Nkem, my dear, I have the eyes of an eagle,” her father snorted with a slight head shake. “You children think you can keep everything from your parents. Trust me, we only try to respect your privacy by not being nosey when we suspect things, but that doesn’t mean we don’t see anything.” He curved his lips into a wry smile. “Are you now back together again?”

Nkem sighed. “We were,” she said. “But he left me again.”

Seeing the questions in her father’s eyes, she turned sideways to face him. “Dad, I’m so confused,” she admitted, her voice cracking as the pressures from the past week suddenly hit her square in the chest. She wanted to cry, scream, to break down, knowing that the one person who she could do all that in front of without the fear of being judged or ridiculed sat right beside her. Her father.

“Tell me what’s going on, my Nkem. Please, don’t suffer in silence, I’m alive

and here for you. I may not be able to fix all your problems like when you were a little girl, but I'm here for you, whatever it is."

Tears spilled from her eyes as her father spoke. She would forever cherish this man. His devotion to his family was unparalleled. Looking at him right now, she knew it'd been a good decision to come home and talk to him about her problems.

"What is it?" Her father pressed. "Do you feel unsafe with Tunde? Does he hit you? Abuse you in any way?"

"No, no … it's not that at all."

"Then tell me what's going on. You seem so worried, so unsure."

"That's because I am, Dad. I'm worried that I'll never trust Tunde again, that he will hurt me again like he did when he cheated on me," Nkem finally admitted, swiping the tears from her cheeks with her thumb. "I love him so much … so much. But I don't think I'll survive it if he does that again to me."

Her father took in a deep breath, keeping his attention on her, concern in his eyes. This gave Nkem more courage to continue.

"I thought I had completely forgiven him when we reunited months ago. I was so happy, beginning to let my guard down, enjoy our reconciliation," she explained, stopping to gather her thoughts. Talking about this was just too hard for her. "But just a phone call from his ex-girlfriend or a woman he admits that he had a fling with during our years apart, and I'm back to where I was before our divorce, flooded with doubts."

Nkem shook her head and sucked her teeth. "I hid in the bathroom and searched his phone like a thief, looking for proof that he'd lied to me, even though I believed him when he told me that he'd turned down the woman's advances."

Even now, remembering how fast her heart was beating, the anxiety that saturated her senses as she stood in the dark, scrolling through Tunde's phone, made her stomach churn from shame and self-derision.

"The next day after that call from his ex, I arranged an STD test, unable to have sex with him, avoiding him even though I didn't find anything on his phone.

Dad, how can I live like that? How can I?" Her body shook as she sobbed.

"Oh, my dear," her father reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Please stop crying."

Nkem sniffled and withdrew from her father's arms. "I know I should be over it. It's been more than four years —"

"Nobody can tell anyone how long to react to anything, Nkem, so don't beat yourself up." He rubbed her back gently. "You are the only one who knows how to handle your emotions. Nobody else."

"But, Dad, I wish I could let go." Nkem sniffled. "I love him so much. But what if he does it again? Breaks my heart again. And I know there's a good chance he will. Once a cheat, always a cheat."

Nkem's father pulled back abruptly and lifted her teary face with his thumb and forefinger, forcing her to look at him. "Nkem, that's not always true," he said, his voice resolute with conviction. "I know I supported your divorce wholeheartedly because I believed Tunde had hurt you so much and I wanted to be there the way you needed me to."

He inhaled deeply and brushed her tears away. "But I won't have you unhappy and miserable because you are unwilling to trust in the ability of anyone to change, Nkem, I won't, because if I'd done that, I wouldn't have the wonderful years I've enjoyed with your mother."

Nkem stiffened, not sure if she'd heard her father correctly. Had he cheated on his wife, too? Was there no man she could boast of who didn't stray? God. What the hell? "Did you …?" she swallowed saliva to clear her throat.

"Never," her father answered with a vigorous head shake. "Your mother is everything to me, I've never wanted any other woman."

Nkem sighed in relief. She didn't know how she would feel if she found out that her father, the man she constantly used as an example of integrity, also cheated on his wife.

"So, what did you mean about you and Mum?" Nkem asked, still puzzled.

He leaned back, pressed the bridge of his broad nose, and then sighed. “I’m not sure if I should tell you this, but I think you need to hear it. It might help you with your decision.” He hesitated, shifting his eyes about, clearly uncomfortable with what he was about to reveal.

“You don’t need to say anything you’re not comfortable with, Dad” she said.

“I know, but it’s important you know that people can change,” he said. “Your mother did. We had a similar challenge during the early years of our marriage.”

Nkem’s stomach tightened, suddenly afraid of hearing more, but unable to stem her curiosity either.

“When we were newly married, your mother had an affair with the man who lived next door.”

Nkem gasped as her eyes widened. She shook her head in disbelief, but her father only laughed it off.

“Difficult to believe, huh?” he said. “But it’s true, Nkem.”

“Mum? No way. It’s … you … you two are so close. Plus, she’s not the kind to …” Nkem’s voice trailed off. She shook her head in denial.

“Oh, yes,” her father said. “I never saw it coming either, until I found a love letter the idiot wrote to your mother. When I confronted her, she broke down and admitted that she’d been having an affair for over six months.”

“No!” Nkem gasped, mouth wide open. She knew her father would never lie about something like this, yet she found it hard to picture her upright, religious mother capable of it. She just couldn’t reconcile the woman she knew now as her mother with a woman who would cheat on her husband.

Growing up, she admired her parents’ relationship. Their love and devotion for each other had been unmistakable, exemplary, and frankly, enviable to everyone in the community. Nkem used them as the gold standard for relationships.

When she’d met Tunde, she’d immediately fallen for him because he had similar ideologies with her father about family. He’d shared stories about his childhood with her, repeatedly telling her that coming from a tumultuous, unhappy family

had made him long for better. It had been so easy to fall in love with Tunde, because in a way, he reminded her of her father. Now, realising that her parents' perfect marriage was a sort of myth jarred her.

"At first, I was enraged. I made her leave the house without your brother Izu, who was only three years old at the time. I filed for a divorce immediately, unwilling to listen to any of her explanations," her father continued in a solemn voice, his eyes distant as if transported back in time. "I couldn't forgive her betrayal, even though she apologised and pleaded with me. I just couldn't comprehend how the woman I loved with all my heart, worked hard to provide for, could hurt me that way."

Nkem held her breath, listening with rapt attention, hanging on her father's every word. She'd never once suspected this. Not once.

"I even became paranoid, insisted that Izu wasn't mine, shamed her in every way I could, in front of her family and friends, calling her a whore, a good-for-nothing witch," he said. His eyes misted over, yet still held a faraway look. "It was the lowest point of my life. I hated myself for what I had become, a horrid man willing to hurt a woman I loved just for revenge."

Her father shook his head as if dispersing the painful memory. "However, after a year of separation, my pain began to lessen, particularly because of how your mother never wavered in her responsibility as a mother. She still came around to visit Izu regularly, making sure he did his homework, being there during his school activities. She didn't let my angry behaviour towards her keep her from her responsibilities."

He coughed to clear his throat, which had become raspy from emotion.

"I knew your mother was a good person who had just done a bad thing. I wanted to connect with that person again." A weak smile curved his lips. "Of course, another simpler reason had me wanting a reconciliation. Nkem, I just couldn't stop loving her. No matter how betrayed I felt by her actions, I still loved her."

"So, did she say why?" Nkem asked, keen to get to the meat of the story. Although she knew no reason would ever be good enough for infidelity, she couldn't help wanting to delve deeper for explanations.

"Boredom," her father said. "At the time, it sounded like such a frivolous

excuse. But over the years, I began to understand her reason. It helped me with forgiving her and moving on."

Nkem snorted in disbelief. It was a frivolous excuse, if you asked her. But she wanted to hear more from her father, so she kept quiet.

"You see, your mother was the most intelligent woman in her class at university, stunning and clever. A potent combination. You've seen her pictures back in the day … oh my." Her father whistled. "When I met her, I fell hard and fast, became determined to make her mine, marry her quickly at all costs. And I did." He pulled his lips into his mouth and shrugged. "She got pregnant and boom … her education came to an abrupt end."

Nkem blew out a sigh. The story of many women in this part of the world. Giving up their personal growth for marriage and children. A typical recipe for disaster.

"Soon, she was alone in the house as a mother for most hours of the day, all her hope for her own future wasting away just because she fell in love with me, too. She had to choose between her own dreams and her love for me, but I didn't have that problem whatsoever. I had both love and my career."

"Oh…"

"Uh-huh." Her father nodded. "She didn't know it then, but your mother began to resent me for it. And, of course, the stupid, jobless neighbour soon appeared more interesting than her mundane life of staying at home and looking after a toddler while I was at work, exploring the world and people in it, and advancing in my career."

Nkem exhaled slowly. Her father's tale stunned her, but his narrative of their marriage challenges—so matter-of-fact, so accepting of his role, and so completely devoid of resentment—wow, that impressed her tremendously.

"The more I spoke to your mother without all the external factors, going back to the intelligent and beautiful woman I fell in love with, the more I realised that even though her actions hurt me badly, she wasn't malicious or deliberately trying to do so."

That instant, Nkem's mind transported to the evening Tunde had broken down

and confessed what he'd done. The way he'd cried and what he'd said. "I was wrong, so terribly selfish, only thinking about myself, but I didn't mean to hurt you."

"When we reconciled, I made sure that your mother went back to finish her education." Her father's deep voice reeled her back to the present. "Our lives turned around for the better. It wasn't always easy in the early years after we got back together, because there were times I became anxious whenever I had to travel for work, or when she was studying for examinations with her friends late at night. But she made extra effort to show me every day where her loyalty lay."

Her father's lips curved into a content smile. "Thirty-nine years and four children later, we've never faced a similar challenge."

"Oh, Dad …" Nkem loved hearing this. So sweet. So touching. And so very relevant … like heaven sent. Her chest flooded with warmth as hope filled her.

"Do we argue or disagree? Yes. Were there times back in those days where I was tempted to cheat for revenge? Yes. But I knew that we'd both evolved from that, and I valued our relationship far more than anything else." He reached out and covered her palm with his. "Nkem, I know I didn't like Tunde at first. Mainly because he is Yoruba, from the same tribe as the man your mother cheated with."

"Ha!" Nkem burst out in shock.

"True. True. And guess what the idiot's name was?"

"Please don't say Tunde."

"Nope, it was Tunji. And that's close enough for the nightmarish flashback." He snickered. "I remember how much it tickled your mother when I told her the reason that I disliked Tunde."

"I don't blame her, it's hilarious. I assumed it was because he wasn't Catholic and Igbo, but now I see there's more to it."

"Absolutely." He squeezed her hand in his. "But now, after years of getting to know Tunde, I've come to respect him. In many ways, he's a lot like me. A family-oriented man who is devoted to you and Jide. I know without question that he loves you both."

Nkem swallowed hard. She agreed with her father. Never once doubted Tunde's love for her. Not even during their separation.

"So, if you love him back, and you're sure he is truly repentant, why don't you give him another chance?" He pinned her with his gaze. "Just like your mother and I have proven, it's possible for a broken relationship to be fixed from inside out."

Nkem's eyes flooded with tears. She leaned forward and brushed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you so much, Dad. Thank you for talking honestly with me about this. Will Mum be upset that I know?"

Her father shook his head. "She was the one who told me to tell you," he replied. "But you don't have to go sharing it with your siblings."

She nodded. Knowing that her mother cheated on her husband didn't change how she felt about her, it didn't alter the respect she had for her in any way. If anything, she was in awe of the way her parents hadn't let that period define their relationship. If her father hadn't revealed this to her, she would never have known.

Maybe if she put in every effort with Tunde to repair the broken trust, their own future would end up just as happy.

Twenty-Eight



“What are the possible complications of the surgery?”

Tunde leaned back in his executive seat, turned, and reached up for the top drawer of the cabinet behind him. Pulling the drawer open, he retrieved a folder from the pile inside and placed it on his desk. He swung his chair back and turned to face the woman opposite him.

“As you may already know, the surgery involves transferring fat from parts of your body to your bottom to give it a larger, fuller appearance,” Tunde replied. Mrs Onuoha was a forty-eight-year-old banker who had booked an appointment this morning to discuss a Brazilian butt lift.

“So, it involves liposuction, and then injection of the sucked-out fat to your gluteal region. It’s usually done under anaesthesia.”

The woman nodded, her facial expression tight with concentration. If Tunde had his say in the matter, he would discourage her.

When he’d decided to go into plastic surgery training, he’d had a vastly different idea of what he would be doing. He’d hoped to help people in need, like burn victims, patients with congenital deformities, or those ailments requiring reconstructive surgery like breast cancer.

His dreams had been altruistic in nature, where he would care for patients needing to physically mend their broken bodies for medical reasons. However, his reality had turned out quite different.

Although Blossom Health occasionally encountered a few such patients, it happened only now and again. The majority of their clients were rich bored men and women looking for cosmetic enhancements—bigger tits, butts and penises, fuller lips, nose jobs, cheekbone implants—all endlessly consumed with vanity.

He was beginning to get bored with it all. For months now, he'd been trying to get his partners to agree to at least one pro bono case a year, where they helped patients who needed corrective surgery for serious conditions, but couldn't afford it.

Unfortunately, with the economic downturn, they had to shelve that idea for the moment. To keep the practice running while maintaining their own lifestyles, they needed clients like Mrs Onuoha who would willingly part with loads of cash just to have a bigger butt.

"The risks, although dangerous, are rare. They include those from anaesthesia, like a coma, seizures, sudden death," he said. "The anaesthetist will talk to you in detail about all of that before surgery. Others are from liposuction, which include infection and sepsis. Also scarring, keloid formation, and possibly a failure of procedure."

Tunde opened the folder in front of him. "It's all written in the leaflets we give to patients to take home and read in detail."

He slid it across the table towards her and smiled. "Before any surgery is agreed upon, we need you to book a session with our in-house psychologist or have a letter from a psychologist reporting that you are mentally fit for surgery."

"Haba!" Mrs Onuoha's mouth flew open. "Even if I'm paying for the surgery? Isn't it my choice what I do with my own body?"

"It's your choice, but we want to be sure that you are of sound mind to make it," Tunde answered, picking up his pen from the table and opening his diary. "You'd be surprised how many people regret plastic surgery once it's done."

"Well, I won't regret mine. I've been longing to do it for a long time now."

"Why?" He blurted out the question before he could stop himself.

Oke and Segun would be pissed off if they heard him now. Thankfully, they

were both busy with scheduled surgeries this morning and couldn't sit in on the consultation clinic.

"Why? That's an odd question for a plastic surgeon to ask. Aren't you supposed to be convincing me to go ahead?"

"That's not my job, Mrs Onuoha. My job is to make sure you are safe and healthy while meeting your surgical needs."

"I see," she said with a shrug. "My reasons are valid, Doctor. I'm not a foolish or vain twenty-year-old. I'm a grown woman who simply wants to feel better about her naked figure."

"That's a valid reason," he agreed.

"Since my husband left me six years ago for a woman half his age, I've been stuck in my head, feeling sorry for myself, wallowing in self-hate," Mrs Onuoha said with a smile that didn't turn her lips upwards at all. "Now, I'm looking to date again. And I want to be more confident about myself before I do." She stood up, turned to her side, then back to face him before resuming her seat. "As you can see, I'm shaped like a letter P. Big breasts like watermelons and the flattest ass in the world. If I can't stand the way I look naked, how can I expect someone else to want me?"

Tunde nodded. He needed to get off his high horse and put an end to his increasing aversion to vanity cosmetic surgery. Good health involved not just physical, but also, mental well-being. If a good butt lift would give this woman a new lease on life, who was he to look down on that?

"Excellent point," Tunde said. "We are sure to meet your needs here at Blossom Health. We'll make you proud to show off your new butt."

Her resultant smile flooded his chest with the much needed joy eluding him since he moved out of the family home.

~

Tunde checked his phone for the umpteenth time. Still no text message from Nkem. Twelve days since he paused their relationship, and everything between

them seemed to have gone downhill. Even worse than when they were actually separated.

She replied to his messages like it hurt her fingers to type. Curt and icy responses, sticking only to discussions about Jide. She had travelled to the East without even telling him. He wouldn't have known where they were if he hadn't stumbled on Nkem's Instagram story showing a photo of her and Jide in front of her family home in Enugu. The caption revealed she was there just yesterday morning.

A knock sounded at the door, jarring Tunde. He darted his gaze to his office entrance. "Come in," he called out.

Seconds later, Segun walked in, still in his scrubs. "Man, today has been busy o. Three surgeries back to back. I need to relax this evening in a banging strip club with a good drink. Want to come?"

Tunde laughed, shaking his head. "Not my cup of tea, partner. I'll never understand how watching women shaking their tits and asses in your face helps you relax. A constant hard-on is stressful as fuck."

"Prude," Segun teased, sticking his tongue out in jest. "It's not the tits and asses that relax me. It's the freedom to look at nudity, enjoy women in their natural state, being proud to strut their stuff as God intended in the Garden of Eden."

"Please don't involve God in that bull," Tunde muttered with a wave of one hand. "I'm certain none of those women would resort to that if they had a choice."

"You'd be surprised how many enjoy it."

"Hmm. I seriously doubt it."

"Come on," Segun pressed. "Just come with me tonight. It's only women dancing. It would help you take away the stress of the past week."

Tunde shook his head. "I have a counselling session this evening. Besides, there's only one woman whose naked body I want shaking in my face. Too bad I seem to have blown my chance with her."

“Don’t be like that,” Segun said, his forehead furrowed in concern. “I believe in you and Nkem. You two will pull through whatever rough patch you’re experiencing and be stronger together.”

“Thank you, my guy. I hope so.”

Tunde sighed, letting his friend’s goodwill wash over him. His first therapy session had been very helpful, especially reflecting on his background and the decisions he had made all his life, like avoiding the opposite sex because he was afraid of ending up like his father.

Meeting Nkem had been wonderful, but he’d also used her as an emotional crutch, suffocating himself with only her, until he drowned. He now understood where that sudden feeling of discontentment had come from years ago.

Perhaps, if he had explored more as a young man, interacted with more women before he committed to one, he may have better appreciated his decision to be with Nkem. She brought light to his life, gave him peace and joy, made him truly happy.

Now, he knew at a painful cost, after dating and hooking up with a few women, including Yemisi, that nothing mattered except contentment with the woman he loved. Not excitement, not sex, not strip clubs, not anything of that sort. Only Nkem mattered.

Tunde rose from his seat and lifted his briefcase from the floor beside him. He plucked his suit jacket hanging from the back of his leather executive chair and folded it over his arm. “I have to get going, or I’ll be late. Enjoy the women’s tits and asses in your face, while I try to survive another week of getting my head shrunk.”

Segun’s laughter echoed in the room as they strolled out together.

In less than an hour, Tunde opened the door of his vehicle and stepped out. He unlocked his phone and searched his notifications. Again, no response from Nkem. She hadn’t replied his text asking her if she would be joining their couples therapy today.

Disappointment flooded his senses, and he swallowed hard, trying to squash it. Sitting through another session alone with the psychologist didn’t appeal to him

at all, especially when the subject of their conversations wasn't there to hear what he had to say.

As he strolled towards the entrance of the white two-storey building which housed The Mind Project on the top floor, Tunde wondered if he should just call Nkem. She could ignore a text message, but would she ignore his calls?

He shook his head. He was running late as it was already. Keeping the psychologist waiting for ten minutes was bad enough, but prolonging his delay calling Nkem wasn't fair.

No. He would have to try to convince her to show up for the next session, maybe even have a word when he went over to pick Jide for football practice next Saturday. School resumed next Monday, so Nkem would definitely be back home then. One way or another, he would have to convince her to get involved in these therapy sessions. Saving their relationship mattered more than anything.

The healing from his gunshot injury had taught him one deep truth, even when the pain was long gone, a scar remained to remind you of the wound. He and Nkem could come out stronger if they healed properly. The scarring from his actions and their time apart could exist without any more pain if they truly fixed the problem between them.

Tunde opened the front door of the building and dashed up the stairs, hoping to appease the professor for his tardiness.

He greeted the receptionist, confirming his arrival before taking the seat at the waiting area. The door to the adjacent room opened almost immediately, and Tunde sprang up when he saw Professor Akin standing at the entrance of his office.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to rush from work," Tunde sputtered, embarrassed that he hadn't shown up on time. He didn't want the older man to think he wasn't taking his therapy seriously.

"No worries," the professor said. "I already started."

"Started?" Tunde scrunched up his face in confusion as he stepped into the office. "What do you me —?"

He froze. Nkem was seated on the sofa, looking like a ray of sunshine piercing through the dark clouds. His heart careened into his chest and beat like a wacky clock, threatening to burst out of the confines of his ribcage. He couldn't believe his eyes. His Nkem was here in the flesh, her bright eyes sparkling with hope and determination, her lips parted into the most welcoming smile he'd ever seen.

"You're late," she murmured, her lips still curved upwards, exposing brilliant white teeth.

"Oh, God, I love you, Nkem," Tunde rasped.

Without another word, he rushed towards her and plucked her from the seat and into his arms. "Thank you for being here, thank you. Thank you."

Her soft giggle rang out in his ears as she flung her arms around him. "I love you, too, Tunde," she whispered, kissing him on his cheeks. "I want to do everything I can to make us a team again. I want to try. I'm sorry for not understanding earlier … I'm sorry for not try —"

"Shh …" He hushed her with a kiss on her lips. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Absolutely nothing. I'm just so glad you're here. So glad …" He lowered his head and meshed their lips together in a kiss that quickly became passionate.

"Ehm …" Professor Akin cleared his throat, crashing through their euphoric fog. "There's only forty-three minutes left for this session. Best to use that time wisely. You have the rest of the day for kissing."

Tunde and Nkem burst into uncontrollable laughter. When they quieted down again, he lowered her back onto her seat and settled down on the sofa beside her.

Turning his head, he fixed his gaze on hers, thrilled beyond measure to find her here, willing to try again. "You ready?" he asked.

She smiled at him and nodded. "Absolutely."

Epilogue



Tunde sucked his teeth. “No, Prof, I don’t believe I have to do that to keep the country safe. That’s not my job. It’s the job of the police.”

“No way,” Nkem countered, twisting her lips. She crossed her legs as she leaned forward. “Please, Professor Akin, make him understand. If Tunde doesn’t testify against the man who shot him, he could walk free. Free to do the same thing. And God help the next victim.”

The professor tapped his pen on his pad once and shook his head. “Now, Nkem, you know my role here is to help guide your conversations with each other, not tell either of you to do anything.”

Nkem nodded, then turned to Tunde. “I think you should work with the justice system to put that animal away. He almost killed you.” She drew in a sharp breath. “I don’t know what I would have done if he had succeeded. I can’t bear the thought of my life without you, and I don’t want another person to go through the agony I went through when you were in a coma.”

Tunde’s heart galloped. God, this really meant a lot to her. And now, he knew why. He’d been flippant about the proceedings after the police apprehended the guy months ago. He’d already identified the man in a line-up. That, coupled with ballistics matching the bullet from his chest with the gun found in the man’s possession, made a pretty airtight case. So, why did he need to be further involved?

Truthfully, he’d never expected the man to be caught in the first place. One could

hardly trust the Nigerian justice system. His nonchalant attitude towards the prosecutor's request stemmed from his typical mistrust of the police.

Now, hearing Nkem explain her reasoning gave him a new perspective. He needed to take this more seriously.

He nodded. "I'll ring the prosecutor tomorrow and tell him I'm ready to co-operate."

"Thank you," Nkem mouthed to him.

He winked in response. "Anything for you."

Silence ensued. As Professor Akin scribbled onto his notes, joy flooded Tunde's chest. Here they were, seven months into therapy, and already arguing like an old married couple. He loved it. The fact that their discussions had gone back to what it used to be, plain dialogue about mundane things, nothing heavy or serious, pleased him.

The first few months of therapy had been rough. They'd had serious conversations about the past and future of their relationship, sometimes with either or both breaking down in tears as they dissected and analysed the root of their problems and the way to move forward.

Tunde had learnt a lot from simply listening to Nkem's point of view about how his decision to cheat had affected her, how even though she wanted to move forward, she still had fears about their future together.

He'd finally come to accept that just like the jagged, hyper-atrophied scar on his chest and upper arm, her fear was a valid scar he would have to live with. And that was okay.

His role now, as a man who loved her endlessly, was to prove that she had no reason to worry about his commitment or loyalty to her. He would do it unreservedly, answer all her questions, alleviate her doubts, be as transparent as possible, ensuring that he demolished every wall of mistrust between them.

"Excellent," Professor Akin said, drawing Tunde's mind back. "See how well dialogue and sharing perspectives helps with communication?"

They both nodded.

“Yes, Prof,” Nkem said with a proud smile. “Communication is key.”

“It is indeed,” the professor affirmed. He beamed at them. “So, about last week’s take-home assignment of facing a mutual fear and overcoming it together. How did it go? Care to share?”

Tunde turned towards Nkem and locked his gaze with hers, a slow flush creeping up his cheeks. She averted her gaze first, darting her eyes everywhere but at him and Professor Akin, clearly embarrassed, too.

Throughout their counselling sessions, they had decided to cut out sex completely so that they could focus on the non-physical aspects of their relationship.

However, while attempting to face their mutual fear of heights together, they had arranged to go rock climbing in the nearby state of Abeokuta. The euphoria from successfully reaching the top of the hill had been so intense that they’d pounced on each other as soon as they found themselves back in the hotel room, having wild sex like tomorrow would never come. It had been exhilarating and passionate, and he’d enjoyed every second of it.

“Hmm, why do I feel like there’s a private joke between you two at the moment?” Professor Akin teased.

Nkem giggled, a girly sound that warmed his heart. Hearing her laugh of sheer pleasure always filled him with joy. “Ehm … because there is,” she murmured, her eyes dancing with amusement. “Well, it was the most fun assignment you’ve given us.”

“Let me answer your question first,” Tunde said, twisting his lips to curtail his own amusement. “While trying to face our shared fear of heights by climbing Olumo Rock last Saturday, I learnt a valuable lesson about communication.” He pinned his gaze on Nkem. “When we are honest with each other, we can move as one. The moment I missed my step and you held onto me, I realised something about broken trust. If I had fallen, you would have tumbled with me. I promise to never tumble and drag you down with me.”

Nkem’s eyes glistened with tears. She suddenly dropped onto her knees before

him. “Me, too. I promise, too.”

Tunde gasped, clutching her arm to pull her back to her feet, but she resisted, so he joined her, kneeling on the floor in front of her.

“Tunde, I learnt from that experience that I can face my fears, climb any mountain on my own, but it’s much more fun and gratifying with you by my side,” Nkem continued, her voice low and hoarse. “I want to be your wife again, to face the future with you, to overcome all the uncertainties of life with you.”

His heart began to drum heavily in his chest, his breathing became laboured as he listened to Nkem.

I want to be your wife again.

The words rang in his head like the resounding bang of a gong in a music festival. Sweet and pleasing to his ears.

Nkem reached into the side pocket of her colourful Ankara dress and pulled out a box. “I got my promotion at work today, and all I could think of was sharing my joy with you.”

“Oh, my, Nkem, congratulations. I’m so proud of you … so proud —”

She laughed, cutting him off with a dismissive wave. “Thank you, but even though I’m proud of myself because I worked hard for that position, what thrilled me more than anything was finding this in your hotel room in Abeokuta.” She opened the box.

Tunde stared at the engagement ring he had hidden inside his guitar case, his brows arching and his eyes widening in surprise. “Where did you … how did you find it? I thought you never touched my guitar?” he sputtered, still shocked about her discovery.

He’d been so confident of his hiding spot that he’d never thought to move it. Though his desire to ask Nkem to marry him again had never changed, he worried that she wasn’t ready yet. He’d wanted to take his time, not rush things until he was sure they were on the same page about marriage.

“Funny how finally wanting to play your precious guitar led me to this gorgeous

ring with the inscription, Nkem and Tunde together forever, engraved inside. It made me realise that's what I want. To be with you forever."

Lifting his hand, she placed the opened box in his palm. "Since we decided to start our journey of healing in this same room, I feel it's the perfect place to let you know that if you ask me to marry you again, I'll say yes." The corner of her lips turned up into a half-smile. "I would have asked you myself, but I'm an Igbo woman, and where I come from, a man has to be the one to ask. No be woman dey marry man."

Tunde threw his head back and bellowed out a laugh, his entire body shaking with sheer joy. God, he loved this woman with every single fibre of his being. He would do anything to protect her, honour and cherish her for as long as he lived.

He pulled out the single-stone diamond ring from the box and took her left hand in his. "Nkemjika Chinwe Edun, the only woman who makes my world spin right, the mother of my only child, will you make me the happiest man alive by being my wife again?"

Nkem nodded. "I'd be honoured."

Chest bursting with delight, Tunde placed the ring on her finger and pulled her into his arms. "I love you. I love you," he murmured, holding her tight.

"Aww, congratulations," Professor Akin called out clapping his hands cheerfully. "This is certainly the first time I've had a couple get engaged during my therapy sessions. I should get a trophy for this."

Tunde withdrew from Nkem as they both erupted into laughter. Indeed, the quiet professor with a typically straight face and austere disposition, deserved much credit for being a worthy player in their reconciliation.

"Yes," Tunde said. "Thank you for guiding us through this rough patch in our journey together."

"Thank you," Nkem said to the professor.

She flung her arms around Tunde again, planting a firm kiss to his lips. "I'm so glad that I decided to do this with you."

“Me, too.” Tunde kissed her again, and then again, and then again.

“Only ten more minutes until your session is over, please use it wisely. You can kiss each other later.”

The professor’s teasing remark boomed in the air, popping Nkem and Tunde’s bubble of sheer bliss. They broke apart laughing.

Tunde didn’t mind one bit. He could spend the rest of the time here, and forever, kissing Nkem, the love of his life.

*** The end ***

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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. Her interest in writing began in secondary school when she joined the press club. 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.

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