
Hurricane December
A ROMANCE NOVEL
MOSUNMOLA K. ROSE

Hurricane December

A Romance Trilogy

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Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thanks for purchasing this book. Happy reading and kindly encourage me with a review.

Hugs, kisses and lap dances.

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Hurricane December

1

Chapter One

I sigh when I glance at my ringing Motorola phone to see it's my primary benefactor, Mr. A, calling again. For the past two months, I've been avoiding him. I've told him lies and even gone as far as sending him a fake exam schedule, yet he keeps calling me. He is beginning to tire me out with calls and make me wonder why I ever agreed to this entire arrangement with him. I needed to get out of Nigeria, and he had been willing to help. Though my family owns the credit for my blue passport, Mr. A pays my tuition and still sends me a $1000 monthly allowance. He's done a lot for me financially. I am currently doing my B.Sc. at NYU because of his generosity.

The last time we spoke, he told me about his plans to bring his family from Lagos to New York City for the Christmas holidays. The problem with dating married men is that they always want you to be at their beck and call. If he shows up in NYC, I'd be cutting shows and spending almost all my time with him. Besides, I intend on travelling back to Lagos to spend the holidays with my family, so this mess wasn't just it.

Mr. A is obsessed with me. He's never been with a *Blasian* before. You see, I am a half-Asian, half-Nigerian, 5ft 10, twenty-year-old woman with mid-back length curly hair. When I was a little girl, people admired the thickness, length and general beauty of my hair. They would reach out to touch it with utmost admiration and longing in their eyes. "Wow, your hair is absolutely stunning", some would exclaim. Some of my school friends were envious of the attention my hair garnered: "it's because you're half-caste", one of them said all the time, almost accusatorially. Hairdressers charged twice as much the regular amount to braid my hair. It was so thick and required multiple cups of relaxers; it would take hours to dry under the hooded dryer and when finally released from the plastic rollers used to curl it, spring would it freely and so fully, cascading its way down my back.

My size 6 body attracts him so much, he wants me to have a child for him. He must really think I am stupid. I turned his request down- I am just twenty, I can't afford to end my life before it starts. Ignoring the ringing phone, I made a mental note to return his call the next day. Sometimes, I wonder if his wife isn't aware of our affair. He had often returned home to her, wearing my scent and perfume. Sometimes, I would intentionally leave lipstick stains on his shirt and neck. I worry that she might have known but is just bidding her time to attack me.

I read stories about wives beating up side chicks on Nigerian blogs all the time

and I often imagine that one day she'll ask her friends or pay some thugs to beat me up. I imagine her tearing my clothes, screaming, calling me a 'home-wrecker' just like those other women in the videos I've seen on Facebook. *Home-wrecker*. I roll the phrase around on my tongue. Its grievous weight makes me feel like I am doing more than just fucking an older married man for tuition money. She may even scream at me to leave her husband alone not knowing that I've been looking for a way to rid myself of Mr. A for a while now.

Still lying-in bed, I suddenly remembered a movie date I'd agreed to with a few friends. I've been in New York for about three months and have been desperately trying to make new friends. Hurriedly, I slipped on my jeans and white t-shirt; I threw on sweater and jacket before deciding to wear my nude pumps instead of a pair of boots. I was almost out of the door when I remembered my bare face. Even though I don't wear much make-up, I still insist on applying some, especially lipstick. Lipsticks intrigue me. The different brands, colors and shades fascinate me. I remember constantly sneaking into my mother's bedroom as a little girl just to try on the different colors of lipstick neatly stacked on her dressing table. I liked the way my face transformed with each color I tried on. Purple made me look older, bolder, and scarier. Red is more my color; it coordinates my facial structure and makes me look like the actresses I watch in movies. The day my mother caught me, I had decided to apply the eyebrow pencil, too. My shaky hands made the drawing unsteady and ugly. I didn't like the way the drawing covered my lush eyebrows.

Now, I quickly applied the eye pencil and lipstick and then helped myself with mascara before heading out of my apartment on Fulton Street in Brooklyn to catch the three-train going to 14th street in the city. I found my four new friends already waiting at the cinema. We bought movie tickets and some popcorn before settling down to enjoy the nice movie. After the movie, everyone suggested going to *Ginny's,* a bar just around the corner. Though my ID showed I was 20, I was not one for the NYC nightlife, so I gently declined. Saying goodbye, I returned home by train.

My phone rang almost as soon as I got home, it was my dad. Though I had made up my mind to return to Lagos for the holidays, I still haven't informed anyone in my family about my decision. I have been saving up my allowance and working two jobs just to afford this trip, I wanted to surprise my family.

"Hi, daddy" I greeted when I hit the answer button on my phone, wondering why my father wakes up so early in the day.

"Hi, baby girl", his cheerful voice, clear as dawn filled my ears. I smiled. I am

the first of his three children and the only daughter. My dad always calls me baby girl and even though my first name is Simone. He only calls me that when he's upset with me.

"How is everyone at home? How is Nigeria?" I ask him.

"Everyone is fine baby girl. How is school? Aren't you almost done with your finals?"

I pause for a second. My dad thinks I am on a full scholarship at NYU. He doesn't know that I forged the scholarship letter I showed them, and, since I didn't have to apply for a visa in Lagos, no one thought of questioning the authenticity of my story. I have one of those very trustworthy, *can't- hurt- a-fly* faces; nobody would suspect I'd ever lie. Growing up, I got away with a lot of childish pranks. I got my little brothers into a lot of trouble. Dad punished them a lot for the things I did.

Every time daddy asks about school, I wish I can tell him the truth. It hurts me so much to lie to him. The fact that I have to sleep with Mr. A for money because daddy cannot afford to sponsor my education hurts me. Maybe I am greedy but oh well. My dad is a professor in the Agriculture Department at one of the local Universities. He met my mother in Malaysia where he was studying for his PhD in the 70s.

My mother was a cafeteria lady who spoke little English but somehow their love blossomed. She learnt English and they got married. When daddy returned to Nigeria, he secured a "good job" at the University. He was able to travel to the United States and many other places with my mom. They had all their three children stateside and got us passports. The year before I graduated from secondary school, my family's finances took a horrendous nosedive. My parents became flat broke. I remember everything that happened afterwards. I remember the arguments about money and food that ensued between my parents. In the evenings, I could hear their loud voices arguing in their bedroom, the chilly evening breeze carried their sometimes-vicious words through their wooden door until it reverberated throughout the entire house, we lived in. I'd cover my ears with pillows and yet I could still hear them. I remember huddling close to my brothers, hugging our knees, scared when they started arguing.

I remember how our kitchen store that was always filled with foodstuff became almost empty and filled up instead with rats and cockroaches scuttling into crevices in the store. I remember our school principal sending us out of the class for late school fees payment. I remember the tight, grim lines etched onto my

father's face, his frustrations mapping out territories on his skin and voice. He'd snap at us and scold us for wasting food. He no longer even watered and cared for the plants he loved so much. They shriveled and died. Their sweet scent no longer filled our house. I could no longer breathe in deeply to savor the clean, sweet scent because the air tightened, threatening to choke me. My parents could not even afford my flight ticket to NY. I had to lie about everything to get away. Maybe one day I'll summon the courage to tell them the truth.

To distract myself after the call with daddy, I started packing everything I'd need for the trip home. I had bought my mom a lot of kitschy stuff from Brooklyn. She likes shiny things. I also bought a lot of outfits and Nike sneakers for my 11 and 13-year-old brothers. My phone rang breaking my thoughts. It was Mr. A again. I had returned his call earlier, but his wife was probably around because he called me Simon, our little code he often used to subtly let me know that his wife was near him and he was unable to talk. "Your line is breaking, I'll call you back", he'd said before ending that call. Now, he's returning my call.

"Hello, Mr. A" I greeted him, trying hard to sound cheerful and excited to hear from my benefactor.

"Don't be so formal with me", he chides me softly.

"Hello, dear", I corrected myself. I try not to get my feelings involved with him. I constantly remind myself that I am just sleeping with him for my tuition money. I am not stupid, just broke. Already, my roommate has promised to help me file for financial aid and also get loans for my next academic year since I am American. I won't need Mr. A as soon as I am done with my freshman year in May. I've started plotting the excuse I'll use to discard him as soon as I'm done with him. Perhaps, I'll tell him I have HIV.

"My wife wants to go shopping and spend Christmas in NY," he informs me.

"Okay, no problem. When will you guys be coming to town?" I asked through clenched teeth. I was trying hard not to scoff.

"On the 23rd of December," he answered.

"I am not going to be in town by then," I said calmly. I still haven't told him about my intention to return to Nigeria; I didn't want to piss him off.

"Why not?" he asked. In his voice, I could detect notes of anger or disappointment or probably a mixture of both.

"My dad called me. He said my grandma is seriously ill and that I have to return to Nigeria as soon as possible. I'm trying to book flights for next Saturday." I

forced some notes of sadness into my voice to sound believable. I had to make him feel as if I was sad about not getting to see him before leaving; I wanted to convince him that if I had my way, I would have chosen to stay with him instead of rushing back to Nigeria, but I had no choice.

I know him too well- I know the tricks that work on him. I met Mr. A when I was working the front desk of a gym in Ikoyi. I was almost done with secondary school and I wanted to start saving for university. He was a regular at the gym, a 50-year-old man with a 30-year old's body and he was 6ft tall. He did not have a single strand of grey hair on his head. He was not like other older men who visited the gym once in a blue moon trying to lose their big pot bellies, but who were too lazy to stick to the work out routines. They would come in and leave with even bigger pot bellies. Mr. A was dedicated to building his physique. He boasted a lot about being healthier than an ox and definitely out living his other lazy agemates.

He started showing his interest in me right from the very first day he met me. He'd smile at me, ask about my day, family and try to give me neat rolls of cash each time. I thought about it a lot. I really thought about it before the day I agreed to his proposal and right there in a bathroom at the gym, sucked his dick. I knew he'd be my ticket out of Nigeria. He told me his story in bits and pieces when we started our little affair. He'd lie in bed after sex, mapping out territories on my skin, drawing circles on my nipples and in a low, husky voice tell me stories about his childhood and growing up.

He told me about his mother's small kiosk in front of the *face-me-I-slap-you* old house they had lived in and how he trekked to school without shoes. He was able to secure a scholarship to go to a University in the United Kingdom, where he met his wife who was from one of the wealthiest families in Nigeria. Mr. A was an opportunist as he wasted no time in proposing to her before completing his MBA. Her father got him started in the banking sector. He quickly rose through the ranks, eventually buying a large enough portion of a private bank which he later sold when it went public. He now dabbles in oil & gas and is very close to Nigeria's current Minister of Petroleum.

Mr. A offered me $2000 for my flight ticket back to Lagos but I quickly turned it down. I like *awoof*[11] money but like I said, I am trying to dis-entangle myself from him. Accepting the money will further rope me in with him. I know he's still with me because he's still hoping I'd agree to birth a mixed-race child for him. After we ended the call, I continued packing my bags for my trip back home.

I remember to print out my ticket for the upcoming Saturday for my trip to Lagos. I am flying Virgin Atlantic from JFK to LHR to LOS. I quickly recalled that I have no one to meet from JFK to LHR, so I booked an economy seat on that leg of the trip. I decided to buy a business class ticket for the London to Lagos leg.

I am going home. *Home*. I wonder if I'd still remember everything and everyone, if I'd still belong, if so much or so little has changed. I can't wait to find out.

Chapter Two

Before leaving, I decided to work for the rest of the week. I started working extra hours at my waitressing job and also took on the night shift at the group home on weekends. I wanted to make extra money before my trip to cushion any fallout. My brothers were calling me often, disturbing me with reminders of the many things they wanted me to buy for them from America and send through someone coming.

On Wednesday, my mum called me shortly after I had arrived at the group home to start my shift.

“Good evening, mum,” I greeted.

“Ah, is it evening already over there?” she asked jokingly.

“Yes mummy. How are you all doing?” I asked stretching down the hem of my uniform.

“We are fine. You know that Staff Union is on strike again? Your father is no longer working at the moment”, her voice took on a sad lilt.

“Why are they on strike?”

“What else but non-payment of their salaries. Your dad has not been paid his salary for over three months now?”

“Oh God. Why am I just hearing this now? How have you guys been surviving?”

“We’ve been managing. We took your brothers out of that expensive private school. They are now in the university staff school. We rented out the house to a company and moved to campus”, my mother’s voice was breaking due to emotions.

She started crying. I was heartbroken; I hate it when she cries. I dropped my head and felt my world crashing into tiny pieces around my feet. I wondered why God had forsaken my family like this. This would mean I would become my family’s messiah. Even though she didn’t say it directly, the tone of my mother’s voice implied that I was their only hope.

I knew my father would be too proud to beg or ask for assistance from his wealthy brother who made a fortune through mining. Uncle Biodun is the wealthiest family member and yet the stingiest among all my father’s family members. Growing up, I remember constantly begging him for money for my computer lessons in secondary school. He’d promise to send the money but

always ‘forgot’ to. When it finally dawned on me that he’d never help me, I had to turn to other family members. Then again maybe everybody was hanging on the man’s neck.

After the call with mum, I opened my bank website on my laptop to check my balance. I heaved a sigh of relief when I saw the $6250.29 balance. Through my frugality, I was able to save up enough for my trip and have some money left. I was smart enough to share an apartment with a 2nd party – so I lived entirely on my allowance from Mr. A – I was broke, not stupid. This week I’ll be making about $1,000 from my two jobs which meant I could take $3,000 to Lagos with me to help my family sort out a few issues.

On Friday night, I checked in online to confirm my flight. Looking at the London to Lagos leg of my ticket, I started wondering what I was thinking when I paid an extra $2,000 pretend to be a rich chic. Pretending was expensive and stupid I thought, but quickly shook it off. I reviewed the seating chart to make sure I picked an aisle seat on the last row. I like the last row aisle seat because from that strategic position I can see everyone board and they would likely see me too. Sometimes I imagine Mr. A would replace me with a younger, single hot babe he meets on some random flight.

By Saturday afternoon, I couldn’t contain my joy and excitement. Earlier, I called my best friend Sade to come get me from the airport. Sade had returned to Lagos from London about a week prior. She was squealing with joy when I told her I’d be coming back for the holidays. I’ve missed Sade so much. We went to the same secondary school. Her parents were wealthy, and they really doted on her, but she is the humblest girl I’ve ever met. In secondary school, she often brought and even shared her own provisions with those who needed them most. We’ve always been there for each other. We protect each other’s secrets; I know the first boy Sade kissed and I know how much she hated it. I also know when she lost her virginity to Peter, her first boyfriend. When Peter broke up with her, I was her shoulder to cry on, and boy did she cry.

I decided to leave for the airport by taxi instead of train. After working for an entire week, I deserved a little treat. The taxi driver placed my three, heavy suitcases in the trunk of the cab. The suitcases were filled with all the things I had bought for my family. I shopped so much it was almost ridiculous. I wanted to give my family the best gifts and make sure they enjoyed the holidays. I want to see my mother dance around excitedly when she opens the presents, I got for her. I want to see my brothers scream excitedly and hug me tight too.

Checking in was easy because I had already chosen my seat. The Virgin desk

attendant was also pleasant. We chatted briefly – she was trying to convince me to become a flight attendant. I told her I wasn't interested in being a flight attendant. She gave me her number in case I wanted to hang out when I returned. I make friends relatively easily, so I wasn't surprised. I went through the mandatory security checks and then bought a burger and fries from McDonalds' in duty free before boarding the flight to London.

The flight had some interesting looking faces. I slid into my seat at the back of the plane. A hippie-looking white guy was sitting in the seat next to me. Saying a quick hello, I started rummaging through my bag in pretense. Due to my upbringing in a pre-dominantly black culture, I am biased against white boys, I liked my coffee black and strong if you know what I mean.

The white guy tried making small talk with me. He told me he was headed to Amsterdam to meet some friends for Christmas. Talking to him exhausted me so I pretended to fall asleep. The problem with friendly people is their unintended nose-poking into people's affairs. This dude 'woke' me up to eat. I devoured the food despite the burger and fries I had earlier. I actually fell asleep after the meal only to wake up when the announcement for our landing was made.

I've never been to London before. I was planning to visit Sade here one day. Growing up, London had always fascinated me. Everyone I knew as a girl spent their school break in London and came back with this foreign accent that made them sound so funny and incomprehensible. I wanted to speak just like them, I spent long hours in front of the mirror mimicking them.

As soon as we landed, I gathered my hand luggage and headed for the connecting gates. Since I had a 4-hour layover, I headed to the Virgin lounge bathroom to freshen up. The reflection that glanced back at me in the mirror displeased me a lot. I had forgotten to twist my hair into a bun. It looked so wild, disheveled and tossed all over my face. I looked around the bathroom for refresher kits, picked up one and brushed my teeth, moisturized my face and washed my face. I did my business quickly in one of the stalls and pulled on a new white t-shirt. I washed my hands and ran them through my hair, applied a bit of the hand lotion to my hair and pulled it off my face and into a quick ponytail with the hair elastic. I quickly lined my eyes, applied some mascara and light pink lip-gloss. My face shone brightly.

As I was stepping out of the bathroom hurriedly, I accidentally bumped into a gentleman leaving the men's bathroom. I watched my handbag crash to the floor with some of its contents landing on the floor. I scrambled around picking my things up apologetically. The man helped me and tried sparking up a

conversation with me afterwards. He was Nigerian so I responded with my American accent to keep him at bay. I wished him a good flight and headed over to the buffet station to pick up something to eat. A waiter came over to offer a drink where I sat eating my meal. I asked for a virgin pina colada.

Two hours to flight time, an older Nigerian woman came into the lounge area and dropped into a chair beside me. She had gleaming hair and a demeanor that exuded opulence. I thought she might be one of the matriarchs of a wealthy Nigerian family. I wondered if she was a widow or had a retired yet too busy husband. I pondered why she was traveling alone.

“Your hair is really nice,” she turned to me smiling. Her voice was as soft and as free of creases as a TV presenter’s.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“So where are you heading to?” she asked ignoring my obvious disinterest in conversing.

“Lagos”, I answered, giving her a brief, curt reply to discourage her from talking to me any further. But she wasn’t deterred as she continued speaking.

“Oh, I’m heading to Lagos too with my son.”

“Son?” I asked.

“Yes, he’ll be with us soon. He is picking up a few things in duty free.”

As if on cue, a deep, masculine voice emerged from behind us, I turned to find an average-looking guy clutching shopping bags. His gait was full of ease as he strode towards us.

“Mum, they didn’t have the handbag, but I reserved it for you at their Oxford Street Store. They had your pearls though,” he said to his mother.

The woman smiled at him, collecting some of the bags from him to go through them. “I’m Mrs. Bimbo Fowosere and this is my son, Soji,” She said while offering me her jeweled hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Simone”. I shook her hand briefly and thought about escaping from her before she starts talking about matching me up with her son who looked like he was old enough to be married.

“So why are you heading to Lagos?”

“I’ll be spending the holidays with my family there.”

“Your family lives in Lagos?” her eyebrows raised in curious query.

“Yes, my dad’s Nigerian and my mother is Malaysian, we live in Lagos.”

“Now is that right?” her eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Yes, ma”

“In that case, you must come visit me in Lagos. Here’s my card”. She fumbled in her bag until she dug up the complimentary card and handed it to me. I accepted it and made to get away, but she called me back to ask for my number. I told her I didn’t have one, but would call her when I got in.

I headed towards the duty-free shop to pick up some final gifts for my family. I got a Hermes perfume with a scarf for mum and a Giorgio Armani fragrance for my dad. I doubt that he’d recognize the brand, unlike mum he never bothered with the difference between brands. I crossed over to the candy section to pick up two mixed bags for my brothers. I quickly dashed back to the book section where I picked up a chic lit novel for Sade. She loved reading those silly Mills and Boons romance novels back in secondary school. She’d curl up on her bed and get lost within the pages of each book. I hope she’d like the book I got for her. I also got one of those “best friends” charm bracelets. Before I left for NY, Sade gave me an identical necklace, she clasped it around my neck and made me promise to never lose it. “This way we’ll be close to each other’s hearts no matter how far away we are,” she’d said.

I walked towards the cashiers and stood in line waiting for my turn to pay for all the stuff I had picked out. The gentleman from the lounge bathroom earlier was also standing in line behind me. He cleared his throat and greeted me. While he spoke, I studied his face. He was much taller than I thought, I figured about 6ft 5. His clean-shaven head gleamed under the light; his well-groomed beard made him very attractive. His Adam’s apple danced around inside his throat as he spoke. The cashier calculated my bill at about $700. I exclaimed, “*ha gbese re*”[2] in my mind. My money had drastically reduced. But as I was about to pay, the gentleman stepped up and told the cashier: “please add it to my bill”. He smiled at me revealing his perfect white dentition. “Thank you but I think I can pay for my items,” I said to him feigning offense and pride. “It’s fine, I insist,” he said. I let him pay for my items and quickly left the shop before he could start talking to me again.

I got on our flight early so I could watch the other passengers get onboard. I hope to scrutinize everyone who gets on the flight to find out the ones I could connect with. On getting to my seat in the back row, I pulled off my Nike sneakers and sank into the seat, putting my socked feet under me like a yogi. The

gentleman from the bathroom/ duty free got on the plane, I smiled at him. I also saw Mrs. Bimbo Fowosere with her son, Soji, trudging behind her with all the bags. I prayed they would not sit next to me and I heaved a sigh of relief when they walked four rows past me and over to the aisle to the other end of business class.

Chapter Three

After the Captain announced that we were just waiting for two more passengers before taking off, I decided to go through the inflight entertainment system. I noticed the internet access. I quickly logged into my Yahoo account and sent Sade a message, requesting her to call my mom and tell her that she would be coming to see her in the morning. Sade was the daughter my mother secretly prayed for. She wished I would be more like the non-rebellious, sweet and obedient Sade. Back then, she'd scold me a lot, admonishing me to be more like Sade. "Why can't you be just like Sade? Can't you see how obedient she is? Have you ever seen Sade talk back to her mother?" she'd shout at me. I hated it when she spoke to me like that because it made me feel less dignified on the one hand and then, on the other hand, enraged that I couldn't be as pretentious as Sade.

Having sent the email, I logged into my university portal to check my grades. I had two notifications – the first one was from the registrar notifying me of the posted grades. I click on the transcript icon and waited while it loaded. I click on Fall 2000, my just completed semester. I glanced at my grades, avoiding the last class, Mr. Robert's English Literature class which was absolutely the worst for me. Quickly, I glanced at my GPA - I saw 3.7/4.0 and let out a shriek of joy. I've never considered myself exceptionally brilliant, but perhaps I really am. Moving on to the second notice, a mail from the office of the Dean of Academics, I read that I've made the Dean's list, qualifying me for a half scholarship. I saw that as a sign from God. Perhaps I will be dropping Mr. A after all. In Nigeria, we say 'Fake it till you make it'. I may have faked my way through.

Still feeling happy and satisfied with myself, I initially did not notice the man who wearing an outfit that looked like pajamas with a Gucci belt. For a while, I debated whether it was Fendi or Gucci as he approached me from the aisle clutching a laptop bag. His voice jerked me out of my euphoric subconscious.

"Hi, looks like I'm in the middle row, a couple of seats from you. Hello, I'm Timi. You are?" he said.

"Lillian," I lied, shaking his callused hand. I had no idea how I came up with that name, something about him didn't feel right enough for me to tell him my real name. I made a mental note to ignore him for the rest of the flight. Soon, the plane doors closed, and we were Lagos bound. Thirty minutes later, I picked up the menu to order food. I chose roasted chicken served on a bed of couscous with a side of asparagus. Knowing Nigerians well, I am sure they'd all go for the

beef and rice. I settled down comfortably with my food, plugged in my headphones to enjoy my movie. Timi started waving frantically at me shortly after the movie began. He wanted to know the title of the movie I was watching and after telling him I resolutely refused looking in his direction. He might be wealthy or influential but his poor taste in fashion was just a major turn off for me. I was completely disinterested in him and the little antics he kept on employing to get my attention.

A flight attendant came around to hand me a note from seat 4A. The note was brief and the handwriting neat, almost calligraphic. “Hello, there. I was wondering if I could speak with you over the inflight call system. This is the guy from the lounge you collided with and duty free. Please call seat 4A if this is ok with you, Lare”.

The note made me smile. I like that he was not pushy at all, it felt nice. I pocketed the note and headed towards the restroom. I’d call him when I got back from using the loo. After using the restroom, I walked right into an older man. I apologized for bumping into him. Waving my apologies aside, he handed me his business card. The man was old enough to be my grandfather and his native outfit could barely cover his big potbelly. The grey hairs strewn all over his head looked unkempt. I nicknamed him uncle *Agbaya*[3]. A quick glance at the card revealed that he was a Deputy Minister. I didn’t like his appearance, but his status might help me someday. So, I stored the complimentary card in my handbag.

I called Lare after I left uncle *Agbaya*.

“So, your name is Lare. It’s a nice name,” I said when he answered the call. He laughed. His throaty laughter warmed my heart.

“I guess it is”.

“Thank you for the kindness earlier. That was very nice of you,” I said worrying I might be sounding a little flirty.

“Oh no, it’s no big deal. You know I still don’t know your name,” he said softly.

I hesitated.

“Are you really thinking about your name right now?” he said laughing. I joined him.

“Seriously, I know you are Simone Osasanya. Before you ask me how I know, I am not a stalker or anything, I saw it on your boarding pass”. He said hurriedly.

“So, you are observant huh?”

“Only about people that interest me”. His low pitched, husky voice was so sexy.

“You are interested in me?” I asked.

“You could say that. So, what do you do?” he asked.

“I’m a student at NYU”. I intentionally left out my level. Sometimes, the lesser one reveals the better.

“Will it be okay with you if I come over and talk with you for a while?”

Something about the politeness of his request melted my heart. “Yes, you can,” I replied feeling special. Many other men haven’t been as polite with me. They demand from me always, expecting that I’d acquiesce to their demand. Lare came over to my seat and we talked for the remaining hours of the flight. He made me laugh a lot. It felt so real, like there was a deep connection. It felt as if I’ve known him all my life. He told me about his university days in the UK and how he’d failed so badly he had to convince his parents to enroll him in a community college in Maryland. His parents agreed and he went on to finish his degree in information Technology at Morgan State. He also told me he graduated as the valedictorian of his class and went on to M.I.T for his masters. His accomplishments intimidated me. I couldn’t tell him that I was just a freshman.

I learnt so many other things about him – like how much he liked yoga and Sudoku, he enjoyed outings and varied foods, he was a light drinker and loved plays and movies a lot. He was also a good listener. Unlike Timi, he seemed to care about his appearance. Timi kept glancing over us while we spoke, jealousy glinting in his eyes. Whenever I feel him staring at us, I’d intentionally stroke Lare’s arm gently. Soon, the pilot made the landing announcement. We had been so engrossed in getting to know each other that we didn’t even notice how much time had flown by.

“I don’t want to go back to my seat,” Lare said to me after the announcement, plea hidden in layers inside his eyes. I understood, I didn’t want him to leave but he had to.

“I know but you left your things there,” I reminded him.

“I guess. Oh, before I forget, I got this from duty-free shop for you. I really like you; it’ll mean a lot to me if you accept it,” he said handing me a bag.

“Why are you spending so much money when you barely know me?”

“But over these few hours, I’ve learnt a lot about you. We can stop being

strangers to each other if you want. I want that too". His eyes pulled me in, gently.

"I'd like that too, but this is too much, I can't accept it," I said, returning the bag. He ignored me and pulled out a card from his wallet.

"Here's my card. Can I have your number?"

It dawned on me again that I didn't have a Lagos phone number, so I gave him my email address instead. After the exchange, I stood up to let Lare out of the seat. As he was passing, he pulled me into his arms and hugged me tight. Then, he pressed his lips on mine and kissed me. His soft lips worked its way around and over mine; it made my heart melt. After the initial shock, I opened my mouth and kissed him back. Time stopped. I forgot momentarily where we were. Nothing else but that moment mattered. I wanted to experience it, to live through it, to clasp it in my palms forever so that I won't ever forget it. Suddenly, he pulled back. I apologized but he just smiled and walked back to his seat. Dropping my head into my palms, I groaned painfully feeling embarrassed. I wondered if one could get herpes from just a 30-second kiss.

Soon I heard the rubber tyres hitting the tar, we had just touched down. I am back to my beautiful, dirty, congested and interesting Lagos. As I was gathering my things, I realized that Lare left the duty-free gift bag he gave me in my seat pocket. I liked our kiss. I wondered why he pulled back. Did he not like it as much as I did? Did he not feel the connection and butterflies I felt in my stomach? Was it too salivary? Did my breath smell? I wondered in a panic as I stepped off the plane into the noise and chaos of Lagos. I was home, finally.

Chapter Four

As I shuffled off the flight, I braced myself for the unprofessionalism of the immigration and customs officers who I'm very sure will try to search through all my bags and ask for illegal payments. I walked right into the chaos of Murtala Muhammad Airport, navigating and weaving my way through. I made my way towards the immigration area. A uniformed officer directed me towards the foreigners' queue, I waved my Nigerian passport at him and I could see the surprise on his face. I noticed the minister being whisked away and I momentarily wondered why I didn't attach myself to him, maybe I would have been able to skip the entire immigration charade. Suddenly, a deep darkness descended on the entire airport as if a big black veil was thrown over the entire building. Five minutes later, the power came back on. The immigration officials waited a few minutes for their computers to boot. The line behind me kept growing, about fifty people were now waiting behind me.

I got through immigration without answering any questions. I walked over to the luggage carousel to claim my bags. As soon as I stepped out of the airport into the cool December morning, a gust of breeze hit my face. Sade was outside waiting for me. She screamed my name, rushed towards me and jumped all over me. I've missed her so much. Her dad's security detail was trailing behind her. While we were hugging, the security detail took my luggage. They stuffed my bags into the boot, we headed off to Yaba.

On the drive to my parents, I told Sade about my encounter with Lare but intentionally left out the kissing part. I didn't want her to start judging me. Sade told me to call him with her phone, but I didn't want to sound desperate, so I declined politely. She smirked at me before returning her phone into her handbag. Soon we arrived at my parents' gate. The driver honked loudly. Adamu, the gateman, came out to interrogate us. When he saw me, he started screaming "Aunty Simone, welcome welcome". He opened the gate hurriedly. His excitement warmed my heart. I didn't think I had been away so long; I've almost forgotten about him but apparently, he didn't forget about me. "How is *Amirika*?" he asked, his local Hausa accent makes it almost interesting when he pronounces certain words.

"America is fine, Adamu. You look good oh. I can see madam has been feeding you very well *abi*?[4]' I teased him.

"Yes oh, madam *dey* try well well". He smiled broadly revealing a set of teeth yellowed from too much kolanut-chewing and nibbling. My mom rushed out of

the kitchen dressed in her blue t-shirt that had “Good Morning” scribbled across it. She started yelling: “*Anak perempaun*[5]. Simone is that you I am really seeing?” She kept saying, surprised, we hugged. She held onto me, I dropped my head onto her shoulder and stayed there for a while. I’ve missed my mother. I’ve missed hugging her and letting her rock me. Sometimes in New York when life becomes overwhelming, I wish she was there with me. I wish she could hold me like this and tell me it’d be okay. I buried my face into the hollow of her neck, taking in the clean, sweet scent of her skin.

All the noise brought my dad downstairs rubbing his eyes. He was stunned when he saw me. I simply yelled, “surprise!” We all burst out laughing. Sade hugged my parents too. My brothers, Paul and Michael were still fast asleep in their rooms. I didn’t want to wake them. Adamu and Sade helped me drag my bags to my room. I handed my parents the presents I got them. My dad started interrogating me about my sudden return. He was slightly angry that I had not informed him. “It was supposed to be a surprise, dad. You know, surprise!’ I said dismissively.

Sade stayed behind to help me unpack. She called her mum to let her know she’d be at my place for a little while. We chatted and gossiped like the old days. She told me all about the men she’d met and dated in London. She told me about the cheap ones and how she’d been coping in London. We talked, laughed, gasped together and made plans about the holidays turn-up and parties. While we still spoke, my brothers woke from sleep and rushed into my room screaming my name. We all got our screaming genes from our mother. I handed them all the gifts and goodies I got for them and sent them off because I wasn’t done chatting with my friend.

Four hours later, Sade left for home. Unpacking, I saw the duty-free gift bag from Lare. The gift was a perfume with the same exact fragrance I was wearing on the plane. I was stunned and touched. How did he figure it out? I wondered.

On Monday, I headed out to the phone center to get a new phone and Sim card. I stopped by the cybercafé where I paid N200 for 10 minutes internet time. An email from Lare was already in my inbox, the notification brought a smile to my face. He was asking me for my new number which I sent to him. I logged off and left the café. My phone rang almost as soon as I got back into the car.

“Hello”, I said.

“Hello, darling. This is Lare”

That was very fast, was he sitting by his computer waiting for my email all

along? We spoke for over an hour. He invited me to his house, but I refused.

“My parents are really strict. They won’t let me go to a man’s house,” I said jovially. He laughed; his throaty laughter made my heart skip a little.

“Well then, can I come over to your house?” he asked.

“Umm, no. You can’t. I’ll let you know when I can make out time to see you,” I quickly deflected. I wish I had the kind of parents who will act cool around their kid’s guests, especially those who are of the opposite gender to the visited child. My mother would freak out when she sees him, the crazy streak in her will manifest fully and I didn’t want that happening at all.

After the call with Lare, I called Sade to ask her about our hangout. She told me to meet her at the nearby cinema to see a movie and maybe hang out later at one of the outdoor cafes. I thought about inviting Lare, but it might portray me as desperate.

For days, I thought about Lare. My feelings for him confused and exhilarated me all at once. While I liked him a lot, I worried about the intent behind his spending so much on me while we were yet total strangers. I wondered if he was a ritualist of some sort. Sade scolded me for even harboring such crazy, retarded ideas. “Call the dude and get to know him. You obviously like each other, why fight it? It won’t hurt to give it a try,” she chided me until I called Lare and agreed to a meet-up with him on Thursday afternoon at a café in Victoria Island.

For the date on Thursday, I dressed nicely. I didn’t want to over-dress but also didn’t want to be under-dressed. I pulled on a nice, sheath dress and flat sandals so I didn’t look over-dressed. At the café, Lare was already sitting down sipping a cold drink. He looked handsome in his designer shirt and jeans. His spectacles, phone and a book were laid out on the table. I watched him gasp with mild shock when he saw me approaching. Whenever guys gasp mildly like that, I know that I am well-dressed and looking the part, which is very beautiful. He stood up, kissed my cheeks lovingly and pulled a chair out for me. We ordered our food and settled down to getting to know each other better.

“So, do you have a girlfriend or not?” I asked him bluntly. He laughed, shaking his head slightly.

“Ah, you don’t mince words now do you?”

“No, I sure don’t. Answer me”

“I had a white girlfriend. I wanted to move back to Nigeria to live out my dreams, but she refused to come with me. We couldn’t agree on doing the long-

distance relationship thing. So here I am trying to move on and live out all those dreams". He spoke with a vivid honesty.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Yeah, so why are you still single?" the measured directness of his question shook me.

"That is a very unfair assumption" I protested mildly. He laughed some more. I liked that I could make him laugh. Something in me enjoyed that laughter, it was exciting.

"Just tell me more about yourself; maybe by the end of this date I'll let you know my relationship status. Perhaps," I told him, smiling. We continued talking for close to three hours, I enjoyed every second of it. Before the date ended, I told him that I was a 20-year-old freshman. I kept my eyes on him to observe even the nuances of his reactions. He was a bit taken aback but didn't say much about it. I also learnt so much about Lare. I knew that he was from one of the most prominent families in Nigeria, Sade had provided that lowdown. His dad was a simple man despite all the wealth he has amassed. I worried that if I were to date Lare officially I would never fit in with his family. I figured it was better to come out clean and tell him everything about myself now, but I lacked the courage to that – I didn't want to push him away.

After the date, he ordered his driver to drop me off and offered to take the taxi I had tried getting for myself back to his office. We hugged and before either of us could stop ourselves, our lips found each other. We kissed. I held my breath, leaned into him, threw my hands over his neck and savored the kiss. I pulled back when I remembered that we were still in public. I was so embarrassed my whole face was beet red. His driver was at the entrance of the café.

Chapter Five

On Friday, my darling *Ibu*[6] made me her famous *Nasi Goreng*[7]. My mother loves cooking; she cooks so much that cooking seems like her fulltime job. The smell of the delicious delicacies that she makes always wafts out of the kitchen, filling the other rooms in the house. Sometimes I wonder why she never started an Asian fusion restaurant. Instead, she ran the family fishery and butchery business till it went bankrupt a few years ago. The business bankruptcy was the beginning of my family's financial woes.

As I was eating the food prepared by my mother, a call from Sade came through my phone. I ignored her momentarily, I wanted to relax and enjoy this meal that I've missed for such a long time. Paul made me *welcome-back-home* lemonade that I was enjoying as well. He had poured me some in a mason jar and placed it next to my plate of food on the table. Knowing my brother, the lemonade was probably a bribe for a favor he might ask of me later. After I'd wolfed down the food, I settled back on the couch to return Sade's call. I had called her earlier, after my date with Lare, to help me find out more about him. She was calling to inform me that her mum knows Lare's mother.

"How did you get such information out of your mother?" I asked surprised.

"I may have lied about a possible summer internship at Lare's firm," she replied giggling excitedly. I genuinely felt skeptical about the involvement of mothers in my business. Sade proceeded to tell me everything she gathered about Lare. He was an only son with one sister from his mother. His father was a mega philanderer who had kids with two other mistresses. I don't know why I am interested in getting to know Lare: it's not as if I am trying to marry him anyway. So, I changed the topic quickly. I told Sade about my plane encounter with Mrs. Fowosere.

"Do you think I should call her?" I asked Sade. There was a short pause from the other end.

"She's influential. You do not want her as your enemy, so you might as well become her friend," Sade advised me after a moment of consideration. I trust her judgment. She's always been the most sensible one. She went ahead to tell me about her 27-year-old cousin, Jaiye who'd be taking us to a club on Awolowo Road in Ikoyi for the night. I informed my mother about my night-out with Sade before heading upstairs to get ready. Upstairs in my room, I rummaged through my wardrobe for a long time before settling on a pair of jeans and a slinky

blouse with a pair of black heels to match. As I was dressing up, my phone rang. It was Lare asking if he could hang out with me.

“I’m sorry but I’ve already made plans with my girlfriend tonight. I’m getting ready right now for our girls’ night-out”.

“Well, okay, next time perhaps,” he said and ended the call abruptly. I thought he was going to suggest meeting up with me at the club, anything but end the call so abruptly. One can never really tell with these men. I hurried up with getting dressed and make-up- I wanted to be ready by the time Sade arrives to pick me up.

At the club, Jaiye led the way in towards the table he’d booked for us while letting us know that a few of his friends would be joining us later. He mentioned Uche who I vaguely remembered from Sade’s 18th birthday party. Then, he was this scrawny, shy boy who had a major crush on Sade. I wonder what he’d look like now after a few years. Bottles of chilled *Ciroc* were already waiting for us at our table. There was something about the club – the music blaring, the dancing bodies moving to the rhythm and vibes of the music, the couples hiding away in the darker corners of the club, making out, the single men and women sitting by themselves sipping their drinks quietly while checking out each other to know who to approach and who’d eventually go home with them, the circle of friends talking and laughing together – that all looked and sounded so familiar, so Nigerian.

Sade motioned to me to accompany her to the bathroom, I stood, adjusted my slinky top before leaving for the bathroom with her. She started talking excitedly about Uche. I was frankly surprised. When we were teenagers, she wouldn’t even look at the young boy, he didn’t interest her. He was just her cousin’s shy friend to her and even though Uche often showed her that he liked her, she ignored him. She ignored him when he beautifully and skillfully made her paper flowers from newspapers or when he bought her sweet-smelling perfume with romantically- written notes. I wonder what had changed over the years. While Sade went into the stall still rambling about Uche, a tall black woman with a round face and messy looking wig started hitting on me. I ignored her and when she started stroking my face affectionately, looking down into my eyes with liquid lust, I became uncomfortable and screamed at Sade to hurry up. I didn’t know there were open lesbians in Lagos nowadays. So much has changed. Back then, one would never dare show ‘signs’ of being gay. Mobs lynched gay people in those days. I remember the case of two women who had been caught making out in the bathroom of a restaurant once, they were paraded naked and had their

heads shaven.

Back to our tables, we noticed that there were a few more guys sitting in the previously unoccupied seats. Jaiye introduced us to Zahir and Femi. When I shook his hand, Femi held onto my hand longer than usual, giving me a flirty kind of look. He was not my type so I didn't bother with him. I simply pulled away gently from him and slid over to Jaiye where I felt safer. I told him about my bathroom experience with the lesbian and he laughed merrily, saying the lady was probably a pimp. We partied all night. Sade and I got a little wild; we got on top of the table and shook our derrieres while the guys cheered us on. It's been so long we had so much fun together. At about 4am we left the club, Jaiye dropped us off at Sade's.

I woke up around 9 am with a banging headache. I managed to crawl out of bed and headed to get some painkillers and water in the kitchen downstairs. Sade's mother knocked on the door afterwards with two glasses of orange juice. There was a text from my mum informing me that she would be staying out for most of the day with dad, and the boys would be over at their friend's houses. A call from Lare made my phone ring out loud, jarring my ears. He asked for Sade's address so he could come pick me up- he wanted to take me out on a proper date.

He arrived at noon precisely to pick me up. I was wearing a white t-shirt with denim shorts and my converse sneakers. I had flung my sunglasses on and let out my freshly washed hair. Lare was driving a 1963 land rover defender. My dad has the same car which he treasures so much he won't even let anyone else drive it. I hopped into the car and leaned into peck Lare on the cheek. He smelt so good I wanted to melt into him.

"So where are we going?" I asked him smilingly.

His eyes brightened and twinkled mischievously. "It's a surprise," he replied. I giggled softly. I love surprises. We drove into Ikoyi till we got to Queens Drive. We branched off into a compound with a few apartments built here and there. He asked me to get out briefly so he could pick up something from one of the apartments. We climbed the flight of stairs into the penthouse apartment and opened its door with a key he got out of the pocket of his trousers.

"Lare, I am not coming into your house so you can take advantage of me," I said feigning a serious face. He laughed.

"I just want to pick up the lunch my chef made for us," he said.

I relaxed and entered the apartment with him. It was tastefully furnished, color-

coordinated and reeked of affluence. I thought to myself that he was quite the "big fish". In the kitchen, a stout man with an apron and a chef's cap greeted us and handed us the food basket. Lare led me to the door out of the apartment. I want to stay for a while, to familiarize myself with every nook and cranny of this beautiful place where Lare lives.

We hopped back into the car and drove out towards Victoria Island. We headed over to the private jetty on Walter Carrington just close to the American Embassy. I was scared; I've never been on a boat before. I told Lare that I was scared and couldn't get on the boat with him.

'Don't worry, it'll be fine," he said softly before sweeping me into his arms and carrying me aboard the boat. It was a very nice, boat called '*Ayaba*[8]'. We sailed out to Illashe beach where quad bikes were waiting for us. Lare helped me off the boat while one of the guys on the beach transferred our items from the boat to the quad bikes. We headed out to a nicely constructed beach house. I was a little worried that I had not brought a bathing suit. Lare assured me that I'd get one at the beach house. Around 1pm, we arrived at the beach house. Lare offered me lunch but I wanted to look around first – to soak in this new environment, this whole new world he was showing me.

It was a 2-bedroom, tastefully furnished beach house. Lare led me to the guest bedroom where he quickly laid out four bathing suits in varying sizes and colors for me to choose from. I wondered if he did such with every lady he met. Something tugging at my core was sure he was a playboy. How many women had he brought here to show his world? He told me that I was the first woman he has ever tried buying bathing suits for. He showed me messages from the shop he'd gotten them from. Still, I didn't feel at ease. I texted Sade the full details of where I was with Lare in case I ever turn up missing or dead. It was just a security measure.

I chose a two-piece bathing suit. I grabbed a towel and headed out to the pool. Lare, dressed in his swimming trunk, was sitting on a beach bed waiting for me already. I pulled my hair in a ponytail and jumped into the pool making a big splash.

"You coming?" I yelled at Lare who was watching me, smiling contentedly. I splashed some water at him, and he responded by jumping into the pool. We swam laps competitively. I won the first lap because he let me win. What a gentleman. I was still tired and famished from last night's outing and soon I decided to rest and eat. I got out of the pool and grabbed a bottle of water from the table. Lare came up behind me. He gave me a wet hug, pressing his body

against mine. I didn’t stop him; I didn’t want him to stop. He hugged me even tighter and started kissing my neck. I melted and leaned further back into him, moaning softly. He turned me around, pulled my hair elastic out, my hair fell gloriously down my shoulders.

“You’re so beautiful, do you know that?” his low lilting voice mumbled into the hollow on my neck.

“Oh yeah? Thank you,” I mumbled.

“Yes, you’re so beautiful and you’re not even trying to be.” He continued kissing my neck. My legs were beginning to shake, my body wanted more.

“I am not going to do anything without your consent. Do you want me inside you?” he continued torturing me, biting down on my lips, teasing me.

“mmmm-hmmmm,” I moaned loudly.

“Say it out loud, baby. Do you want me?”

I was no longer a virgin. I don’t even want to pretend to be one. Nobody has ever made me want to be fucked so badly. Nobody has ever made my legs wobble with such tremendous desire. I wanted him to pick me up and run his hand and tongue all over my body.

“Yes, I want you to fuck me hard,” I whispered my reply into his ears in a low voice. I leaned further into him until I could feel his hardened manhood. He picked me up, gently carried me into the bedroom and placed me on the bed. I straddled him and brought his head lower until his lips met mine. His touch sent fiery sparks all over my body. I let my hands roam his back, learning the inches and patterns of his body. He kissed my neck and dropped kisses all over my body and nibbled on my nipples.

“May I?” I heard him ask again. I nodded my consent. He grabbed my breasts, pushing my bikini top over my head. He dropped the top on the floor. He started sucking my breasts. I moaned softly barely keeping myself from screaming out in ecstasy. His left hand traveled down to take off my bikini bottoms. He started a kissing trail down my body and took a dip when he got to my navel. He parted my legs, I felt him breathing down on my vagina before he went down on me.

He licked on my clit and I had to press my lips together to stop screams from escaping my mouth. I held his head, ran my fingers on his head. He slid his finger into my dripping wet vagina, stroked gently at first and then harder. He slid two fingers into my vagina until the screams came pouring out of my mouth. He lifted his head and asked if he could penetrate me. I nodded my consent

again. Still stroking my clit, he pulled his trunk off, pulled on a condom over his hard manhood. He slid into me gently causing me to gasp. He fucked me hard until my wobbling legs went numb. He turned, lay on the bed and pulled me on top.

“Now’s your turn. I’m all yours. Fuck me,” he said. I could see my reflection in his eyes. At first, I was confused. I’ve watched so many porn videos. I’ve seen the way women rode the men, moving their hips fast. I tried to imitate them. I started riding him. He gave me an encouraging moan and I went fast, slow and fast again. He grabbed me and turned me over such that my arched back was staring at him. He took me from behind. He fucked me hard till I cried out his name as I climaxed. I was shaking, this had never happened to me before. The only time I had *orgasmed* was when I touched myself while watching porn. The other men I’ve been with didn’t even bother trying to make me cum. They’d climb on me, make a few weak strokes and grunt manly when they cum after a few minutes. Lare was different. He pulled the covers over my body before he went into the bathroom to clean up. When he returned, he slipped into the bed next to me, pulled me into his arms and rocked me till I fell asleep, sated.

Chapter six

Adamu came in through the kitchen door to hand me a ‘letter’. It was in a small brown envelope. For a moment, I wondered if it was from Lare. I’ve been avoiding him, ignoring his calls and texts. It’s been four days since the sex at the beach house. I was too embarrassed to face him again. The ‘letter’, however, was not from him. It was a wedding invitation that read: “Cynthia weds Andrew”. The wedding date was 23rd December. The groom’s name was familiar. Cynthia was my classmate in secondary school, and I’ve not seen her since we left school. I wonder how she got my address. I called Tina, a former classmate. She confirmed that she’d given Cynthia my address. The card said I could bring just one guest. I thought about taking Lare along, but I am not ready to talk to Lare yet, so I decide to go with Sade.

Since we all went to the same high school together, I was certain Sade would know almost half of the guests at the event anyway. She was popular in high school and also the kind who could maintain friendships with most people. Heck, she is still friends with some of her nursery school classmates. The networking that friendship offers soothes her in a strange kind of way. Seeing crowds of friends at parties delights her and gives her the sense of visibility I never understood. Sade confirmed that the groom’s name was familiar because he was small league footballer in the U.K. when I read out the venue of the wedding reception, she smirked and said: “why would anyone want to have their wedding reception at such a tasteless nightclub”? I didn’t even know the venue was a nightclub.

The wedding date arrived sooner than I thought. Sade called me early 23rdmorning when the howling wind outside my window shook the tree branches and rustled the leaves, leaving chilled shivers on my skin. She wanted to know what I’d be wearing to the wedding. We plan to head to the venue in Ikeja from my house.

“Just come with at least three outfits, I will help you pick out the best one to wear. Also don’t forget your make-up kit, I am not sharing mine with you oh”, I said sleepily. She giggled softly before we hung up. I already picked out the dress I’d be wearing to the reception – a short, black dress that showed my bare, upper back. I plan to see Lare after the party when I’ve had enough drinks to boost my courage. I want to look sexy enough. We missed the church ceremony or rather avoided it. Churches bore me, so we went straight to the reception. The driver dropped us off at the venue. It was a dimly lit hall with soft music playing.

The tables which were decorated with fancy clothes held bottles of blue wine and the program cards.

A lady standing at the entrance welcomed us. “You can sit anywhere you like except the high table,” she said waving us into the hall professionally. A groomsman came up to us and offered to take us to the best seats. He helped us settle in at the back of the hall. We noticed his fingerless gloves. The bride and groom were yet to make their entrance. Looking around the bland hall, there was a lot of mismatched *aso-ebi*; we also noticed that the waiters never made it pass a certain area of the hall. They took all the food and drinks towards that area. Probably fed up with being ignored, an elderly woman suddenly dragged one of the waiters to our side of the club, I mean hall. The waiter, protesting, said: “cocktails are for the *aso-ebi*[9] ladies only”.

“*Ehe*[10]? So, the rest of us are supposed to drink our saliva abi[11]”? the petite woman argued mockingly. We laughed. The woman snatched a drink from the tray and the other women sitting near us did the same. They charged at the tray, fighting to grab drinks before the tray got empty. Glasses were flying all over the place. Sade and I ducked under the table to avoid the drinks from spilling on us. Another waiter came around with more cocktails and the women rushed the drinks again. It was absolutely chaotic. I wanted to leave immediately, but Sade refused. She was enjoying the madness, laughing like a lunatic at the show. “God, this is why I love Nigerian weddings. *We no dey carry last*. I’ve missed this entire charade,” she said. If I wasn’t so busy trying to duck away from spilling drinks, I would have enjoyed the showdown too.

Another waiter came around with the miserable-looking food. A roadside *buka’s*[12] meals would have been so much better. The jollof rice was probably made with palm oil and the small meat added on top of each plate of rice looked as hard as a rock. At this point, I was very uncomfortable. I suggested we leave again, stop by a bar to get some drinks before heading home but Sade insisted on staying to see the bride and groom. The bride and groom danced into the hall; we noticed the finger-less gloves on their hands. Tina and other bridesmaids were dressed in horrible matching shades of purple and green dresses that were probably sewn by a roadside tailor. The entire charade was a terrible eyesore I didn’t want to be a part of anymore.

“Let’s go, Sade”, I tried again, sounding frustrated and desperate.

“Just hold on a sec. I have a feeling this is just the beginning. It will get funnier,” she pleaded with me. Soon, a guy in a tacky, ugly suit walked up to us. “Hello,

nice to make your acquaintance. I am Stanley. What's your name"? he asked Sade. I started laughing silently. That suits Sade right. If we had left when I suggested, she wouldn't have to deal with this kind of guy. My glee didn't last because another loser dressed in a 3-piece suit and loafers accosted me. His terrible, thick, market man accent made my head throb with pain.

"My name is Kene. I have big electronics shop in Alaba". When he smiled, I could see a chipped tooth.

"Oga[13] please, I am married, thank you," I gritted through clenched teeth.

The MC announced it was time for the toast. Stanley and Kene left to make speeches with promises to come back to us after the toast. The pyrotechnics went off as the toasts were still going on. The bride and groom were lifted off the floor on some sort of pop-up stage that went up and down. I cringed hard. The event planner – if there was one – should quit his/her career. It's time to gift the guests, and rows of buckets and umbrellas were brought into the hall. The groom handed out the souvenirs to the guests. He gave the umbrellas to the men and buckets to the women. This was ludicrous. I was so ready to get out of the crazy wedding that I dragged Sade out of her chair. On our way out of the hall, we ran into a few former high school classmates. They invited us to join them at their table. I didn't want to indulge them; I've forgotten most of their names and even their faces. Before I could reject their offer, Sade was already heading to their table. We came in Sade's car and I couldn't leave without her, so grudgingly I joined them too. They had alcohol and small chops served at their table. I was so thirsty and hungry; I grabbed a bottle of Smirnoff ice from the table and ate some of the chops. While I still ate, the MC announced a special performance. A disabled young man in a wheelchair was rolled into the hall.

"Oh oh, he's going to sing," Sade said excitedly.

"You know what? I can't decide if this is a real wedding or a circus performance. This is so absurd," I exclaimed, frustrated.

The guy hopped out of the wheelchair, turns out he was just a small person with no arms. He started rapping what no one understood. "I shoot you; gunshots *booyaka booyaka*" he 'rapped'. We burst out laughing. In Nigeria, the music industry is thriving and to the youth, it is one of the fastest ways to 'blow'. Everyone here is convinced that he/she is a talented artiste. When the 'rapper' was done yapping, thankfully, the MC proceeded to tell us all we need to know about his album. "You can get a copy of Mac Little's album outside for a just a small fee", he announced. This was too much for me to handle on my own. I

turned to one of my old school mates and asked if we could get stronger drinks. She reached down underneath the table and pulled out a bottle of vodka. Apparently, they had brought their own bottles. They knew how tacky Cynthia and her family could be and how badly organized her wedding was going to be, so they came prepared. I gulped down shots of vodka until I got tipsy, my head swimming lightly. The dance floor was open. Sade and I went up to congratulate the couple so we could exit.

It was still early when we left the reception. It was just 5pm and my parents were not expecting me back home till at least 9pm. I dialed Lare's line. He picked up after the first three rings.

"Hey there!" I greeted cheerfully.

"Look who decided to reach out to me," he muttered.

"Sorry about that, I can explain."

"I'm sure you have a good explanation but still…"

"Are you angry with me?' I dropped my voice to almost a low-pitched whisper.

"Well, I am not particularly happy with you. You've refused to talk to me since our time at the beach. Did I do something wrong? You could have talked to me about it you know, I was worried".

"I'm sorry. Can I make it up to you? I want to see you. Are you home?" I asked.

"No, I am in the office. I am not sure I'll be going home tonight. I have loads of work to do as I have to meet up with deadlines. You can come over to my office if you want to".

"Sure. Just text me the address," I said. He texted me the address which I showed to Sade's driver so he could take me there.

When we arrived at the office, I called him from the reception. He came downstairs, I introduced him to Sade. He offered to take me home whenever I am ready, Sade left with her driver. He ushered me into his office.

I walked ahead of him. I was still wearing my black dress and red pumps despite my hurting feet. I was sure he was looking at my shaking ass. Inside the office, I sank into the soft visitor's chair and kicked off my shoes. I was a bit cold, so he turned down the AC. I placed my feet across the second visitor's chair and rubbed them gently. He noticed my discomfort, came over, picked my legs off the chair to sit and massage my feet. He rubbed them so gently. Does he know that his slightest touch makes me shiver with desire? Does he know the

consequences of being so nice to me? He started tracing lines on my leg, wandering up and down my thighs. Tingles traveled from the tip of my toes to my thighs and upwards to my belly and breasts. Soon, I was kissing him, tearing our clothes away. We were savoring and devouring each other. I straddled him naked on the chair.

“Fuck! I don’t have a condom here,” he gasped, his desire wavering his voice.

“Oh!” I was slightly disappointed; I really wanted him inside me.

“I didn’t know I’d ever need a condom at my workplace. See what you do to me?”

I laughed. “That’s okay, we can do other things that don’t require a condom. Like…. I can repay your gracious beach house favor right now”. I fixed my flirty eyes on him while sliding down slowly to take him in my mouth. He moaned softly, threw his head back as I sucked and licked his dick. I didn’t stop until he came all over my face and mouth. He pulled me up and kissed my lips before carrying me into his office bathroom to clean up. In the bathroom, he continued kissing me until I stopped him.

‘It’s almost 8pm. I have to get home so you can finish up your work,” I muttered between kisses.

“Mmm-hmm, I’d rather you stay here. You’re a welcome distraction,” he whispered into my ears. I wrapped my legs around his waist and held onto him. He pushed me up against the wall, kissing my face, neck, breasts. I didn’t want him to stop. I never wanted the moaning or the sweet sensation tingling inside my belly to stop. When we got out of the bathroom, he ordered dinner – my favorite Thai food from a restaurant nearby, don’t tell my mother, she swears Malaysian food is my favorite….

Chapter Seven

Sade says all the time that people love in different, varying ways. And for some, gifts are ways of showing their love for others. Lare kept on buying me gifts and I wondered if that was his way of showing his love for me. He had never openly confessed love for me but the expensive gifts he bought for me all the time made me believe he might actually have fallen in love with me. Sometimes, actions are better than words. I dumped the Christmas present he got for me in a corner of my room. I didn't want to open the bag because I felt bad for not getting him something in return. Christmas day was generally uneventful, and I liked it very much that way. Another former schoolmate got married but after Cynthia's wedding fiasco, I wasn't really excited about another wedding, so we didn't go for it. With Sade's heart set on sinking her claws into Uche, she wasn't really open to going to events that might likely expose her to potential suitors.

The Christmas gift from Lare was a set of pearl earrings. The earrings were so beautiful and gleamy. Lare's obvious like for me was starting to worry me. I liked him a lot too, but I have a lot of baggage that I feel might scare him away from me if he ever knew the half of it. What if he wants to marry me? I wondered. I wasn't ready for any kind of commitment. I still had about 3-5 years to finish my first degree and maybe two more years to get my Master's degree. Lare would be about 33 easily by the time I am somewhat ready to settle down, would he still be waiting for me by then?

I still had Mr. A to worry about. Since I got back to Nigeria, I've not replied any of the emails he kept on sending me. I was so glad he did not have my Lagos phone number. I stepped down from a 50-year-old man to a 28-year-old demigod. What am I supposed to offer these men besides sex? I asked myself. I literally have nothing else to offer yet they keep coming for me. I tried on my earrings, making a mental note to wear them on New Year's to uncle Biodun's 60th birthday party. My mum has been planning the outfit she'd wear to the party all week long; she was worrying our new "financially-struggling" status might reflect in her outfit.

On 29th morning, a text from Lare woke me up. "Need to see you, lunch?" the text read. I didn't reply the text right away, I decided to text him back at 11am thinking the delay would deter him or annoy him but his reply carried no undertones of rage neither did he sound deterred. "Will send driver to get you right away," he replied. As Lare's driver showed up some few minutes later, I quickly snuck off so that *Ibu* would not see the Benz picking me up though I'm

sure Adamu will probably tell her in his broken English, "*madam na big moto come carry am comot o*[14]", I imagined he'd say to her, and *Ibu's* face will contort with curiosity. I was dressed in a skater dress and ballerina flats.

"Where to?" I asked the bald-headed driver when I stepped into the car. He mentioned the name of one of the most expensive restaurants in Lagos. I instantly started panicking; I had dressed casually for a simple outing not for a full-blown expensive date. I was definitely underdressed for such an expensive place. I quickly asked the driver to turn the car around, he dropped me two houses away, and I walked back to the house to change. I bumped into *Ibu* and she wandered why I'd returned so quickly. 'Oh, I forgot my phone," I lied swiftly. I quickly changed into a nice body-con dress in navy blue and threw a confetti patterned kimono over the dress to camouflage its sultriness – I might take it off or leave it on when I get to the restaurant. I hid inside my handbag the nude pumps I'd wear in the car.

Lare was waiting for me at the entrance when the driver pulled into the fancy restaurant. He was a little irritated with his driver for the long delay, but I quickly explained to him that I had forgotten my phone at home. He placed his hand on my lower back as he led me into the restaurant. He had booked a table in the VIP section, so he guided me to our table. Lare was dressed in a nicely tailored black suit. After settling in, I asked him casually about work. He started telling me about a contract he just recently signed to lay the internet cable for the entire State Government Complex. I knew he expected me to be impressed or excited by the enormity of the contract, I was truly just stunned. Lare really was so far out of my league. How can I be with such a man of such pedigree and ambition?

As soon as my lemon fizz arrived, Lare took a sip from his brandy and announced how much the contract was worth. I went silent for a while. "Come on, say something," he said, looking straight into my eyes.

"That is so nice and I'm so happy for you". I managed to force the words out of my throat. The waiters served our meal; we ate in relative silence. I wondered what he was thinking. As soon as I took the last spoon of my coconut cake with salted caramel ice-cream dessert, Lare spoke up.

"Simone, I want to talk to you about something very important," his voice was low and anxious.

"Okay, please go ahead," I answered. My stomach tightened with strange anticipation.

“I… meeting you has changed my life so much. Being with you makes me feel young, spontaneous, romantic, and happy even. You awaken everything in me. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt like that – this innate yearning to care for you, to love you, to be with you always keeps me up at night. I know that you’d be returning to school in a week or two. I’d love to be in a properly defined relationship with you. Do you want that?” Lare’s words tugged at my heart, it almost made me cry.

“I like you a lot, too. I would love to be with you, but my life right now is so complicated. I don’t want you to become involved with the whole mess. You deserve better,” I said softly with a sad voice.

“I don’t care about the complications and mess. Let me into your heart and I’d try to help you clean up the mess, please.” He pleaded, his eyes moist with plea and love and so many other things in-between.

“Look, I still have like five more years to complete my education. You’re nearly thirty and soon you’ll start feeling the pressure to settle down. I won’t be ready by that time. I am far too young for you,” I explained to him. I didn’t see the need to tell him more about my other problems. I didn’t tell him about the pressure to focus, build my life so that I can help my family, especially my younger brothers when they’re ready for their tertiary education.

“I don’t care about that. We’ll make it work. I can wait for as long as it takes. Just promise me you’d think about it at least, please?” he asked again. The love in his eyes softened something inside me. I’ve never seen such degree of affection, longing and yearning for me before.

“I’ll think about it,” I replied. I heard him heave a sigh of relief.

On the 31st, I joined my family for the crossover service at their new church. I felt lost, my life disorganized and chaotic. I needed some sort of spiritual guidance and respite. I still haven’t told Sade the truth about Mr. A and the scholarship. Lare wants a full relationship from me but I still can’t articulate what it is I feel for him exactly. Was it love or intense sexual attraction? I still don’t know him very well.

I live in a 2-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with the basic necessities and a roommate. I am a 20-year-old struggling freshman and a man who is in the top 1% of the economy with all the killer looks and family heir who is hounding me for semi-permanent status. What exactly is it that he sees in me? Is he just like the other men who feel attracted by my looks and struggle to win me, keep me as a trophy for show? But Lare seemed different. He touched me, looks at me, loves

me in ways no other man has ever done before. Before the service, he'd asked me out for dinner and when I told him I would be going to church for the crossover service, he burst out laughing.

"I don't see you as the church type of girl," he said.

Uncle Biodun's birthday party on New Year's was extra special. He was turning 60 but wanted just a gathering of close friends and family. Even though I was tired and sleepy from the previous night's service, my mother – who fancies herself as the Malaysian caterer in Nigeria – woke me up by 10 am to help her make some *Nasi Goreng* and a few other Malay delicacies for the party. My aunt always praised her cooking – I suspect she shows off my mum's Malay delicacies to her friends. Going to uncle Biodun's party would mean seeing all my cousins who think I am on a scholarship at NYU. They all idolize me because of my little scholarship lie.

For the party, I wore a white, short sleeve shift dress I bought on sale in the DVF section at Bergdorf. It looked innocent enough, but if you looked well, it emphasized the curves properly. Uncle Biodun is wealthy, so I wanted to wear my best to his party, can't show up to rich people's shindigs looking poor. I threw on blush pink Salvatore Ferragamo peep toe flats and pulled my hair into a neat, nice bun. I decided to wear the pearl earrings from Lare. I ran a light pink lipstick across my lips. My reflection in the mirror satisfied me. My family had left earlier so my mum could deliver the food she had made for the party. My favorite cousin, Funke, had agreed to pick me up on her way from Ikeja so we could go to the party together. I was excited to see her again. It's been so long since the last time we saw each other. She sent me occasional emails when I was in school- we catch up through emails. Funke is 23 and yet my closest cousin.

She squealed when she drove into the house and saw me standing near the gate waiting for her. We hugged, gushed over each other's outfit and hugged some more. On the way to uncle Biodun's house, we gossiped. I told her about Lare and in her typical Yoruba girl fashion, she said to me: "Simone hold him oh. He's a real one. My friend has tried that guy once, she even *comot*[15] cloth for him last summer but he didn't touch her at all. He's one of the biggest catches in Lagos". Funke had moved back to Lagos from Texas after completing her bachelor's degree last year so she knew about everything happening in Lagos.

Since Uncle Biodun lived near the water, we knew the celebration would be an outdoor party. When we got to his house in Victoria Island, we found a parking spot, texted his daughter Adunni to come help us get inside so we wouldn't have to meet and greet random guests we don't even know. Adunni appeared at the

gate and true to her silly self, started screaming, “Fashionista NYU” at the top of her voice. Funke gave her a quick hug and told her to shut up. “Just show us the way in,” she scolded the squealing Adunni. On our way in, we greeted a few family members – Aunty Toyo, Uncle B’s wife. She pointed out where Uncle Biodun was siting so we headed over to greet him too.

Getting to Uncle Biodun, I noticed Mr. A sitting next to him. I nearly screamed out “*Ha mogbe ohhh*”[16] in shock. He was supposed to be in NY with his family for the holidays. I pulled myself together and knelt down to greet Uncle Biodun. A quick glance at Mr. A and I could see the shock flash on his face too. He wasn’t expecting to see me too. “Good evening, sir,” I said to him. Funke greeted him too but didn’t notice the tension in my voice or how my body quivered slightly. I walked away from them as fast as my legs could carry me thinking what a small world it really is.

I found Adunni talking to some other cousins, so I pulled her aside after greeting them. I needed to know what Mr. A was doing at that party and how he knows Uncle Biodun. “Who is that man sitting next to your dad?” I asked Adunni, trying to keep my panic to myself.

“Dad is his mentor. He’s always coming here,” she replied suavely. My legs nearly gave away from the shock. I started panicking hard, what am I going to do? My entire family must never find out about my outrageous lies. The shame and disappointment would kill my parents. I let Adunni pull me along as she weaved her way through the crowd of guests into the house and one of the living rooms. As we entered, I noticed her 30-year old much older brother with some of his friends sitting at the bar. The guy in a native outfit brooding over what looks like a glass of brandy eerily reminded me of Lare from behind. What are the chances that Lare could be at this party? I wondered.

Seye rushed over yelling “my baby cousins are here”. I’ve always liked his goofy nature. Funke smacked him playfully, “We are no longer babies, Seye. How many times do I have to tell you that?” she said feigning annoyance. We laughed. Seye turned to me, “So should we call you Simone NYU or Simone New York? He asked. I was still laughing when the guy who looked like Lare turned around. I froze mid-laugh, it was Lare. He was staring at me shocked as well and I remembered immediately that I had not given him an answer to his relationship proposal.

What am I going to do with Lare and Mr. A at the same party with me? They don’t know about each other yet and I wonder how I am to make sure it stays that way. I felt at a loss, I’ve really messed up this time and the consequences of

my actions are staring right at me just waiting for the perfect time to jump at me unless I do something fast to prevent it. Seye pulled us over to his friends for introduction.

“She’s the one I have been telling you about, Seye,” Lare said. I froze again. Wait he already told Seye about us? So, my big cousin knows all the intimate details of my life? How much does he know? I wondered, rage tightening my chest. Lare pulled his chair next to me. “Nice earrings,” he muttered into my ears as he sat. My fists curled, the strange sensations in my belly tightened some more. This is going to be one long dramatic party if I am not careful.

Chapter Eight

I'll be heading back to school on 10th January. At some point, I had to check my email or call Mr. A and listen to him deliver any blow he'd prepared for me since Uncle Biodun's birthday party. I still need money from him to complete my fees for the spring. Since that birthday party, I was avoiding Lare's calls and texts too. I needed space to think about my life. I need $20,000 less whatever scholarship I'll get when I apply this January, but I can't even count on the funding and if they had disbursed all of it, I would be on no scholarship, scholarship-less essentially.

I headed out to the cyber-café down my street. I settle down into my seat after buying 20-minutes' worth of data time. Logging into my email account, I saw notifications for 25 new emails. Five of them were from Lare and one from Mr. A. even without opening them, I could guess what Lare wrote in his emails, so I clicked on Mr. A's email notification. The email subject line screamed in all caps at me: YOU NEED TO CALL ME! The body of the email was blank. Fury overcame me. I had to deal with all this irritating behavior just because I needed tuition. I raged at my parents for their inability to take care of my school fees but then I realize that they have given me the best they can and even more. Nothing lasts forever. I can still take loans and work full time. My school has a payment plan anyway. I made a mental note to apply for the scholarship for the next year. Lare's last email contains his profound love for me. It made me smile, I was momentarily happy. I forgot my problems as I read and re-read the email.

On my way back home, I bought some *agbalumo*[17] and a bottle of water I used to wash the fruits before eating it. When I got home, I turned on my New York cellphone, scrolled through my contact list until I found Mr. A's number. I sent him a call-me text because I did not feel like wasting money on a phone call that might likely not end well. Few minutes later, my phone rang.

"Hello, good afternoon," I greeted him, my voice malleable.

"Ah, Simone. You remembered me today". He was almost yelling into my eardrums.

"Yes. I didn't realize you were back to Lagos," I said accusatorily.

"If you had replied all the messages or returned all my calls, maybe you'd have known," he retorted.

"Well, I didn't have the chance to check my emails."

“Anyway, I didn’t know Biodun was your uncle,” he said with a voice empty of the earlier rage.

“Yes, he is. I am sorry I never told you. It never came up and…”

“It’s not your fault. I guess we never really got to know each other in such close ways,” he cut me short.

“I guess so”.

“Simone, I’ll have to let you go. Whatever it is we had needs to end. Biodun is my mentor, I respect him. I don’t want to keep his niece as my lover. We have to end this,” he told me in a stern voice that I imagined he often use when scolding his kids. That tone made me feel little like a child, it humiliated me. I was sitting in my parents’ backyard, watching the swaying trees and listening to the singing birds when he told me that. My first thought was how to pay the $20,000 tuition fee?

“*Abi bobo yi ya were ni*[18]! How am I supposed to pay my tuition?” I screamed at him. I heard the click of the call ending. I had just five days before leaving lagos, how and where will I get tuition fee? I walked back into the house, avoiding everyone. I headed to my room and sat on my bed. Involuntary tears ran down my cheeks. What am I going to do now? I wept. For the rest of the day, I locked myself in my room.

Few days before I leave for NY, my cousin Seye called me. I figured he must have gotten my number from his sister, Adunni. “I just want to know how you’re doing,” he said.

“I am fine.” I replied trying not to sound dejected.

“Good, that’s good. Funke and Adunni made me promise to take them out. Do you want to come along?” he asked. Sometimes, Seye feels like our protector since he’s older than us. He deems it his solemn responsibility to protect us from his predatory friends.

“I don’t feel like going out,” I rejected his offer.

“Come on Simone, they told me you’ve been acting weird and feeling sad for the past few days. You’ve barely been answering their calls. Is everything okay?” The deep concern oozing from his voice almost made me break down. I wanted to share my problems with somebody, to let someone in on this secret but I am scared of what they’d think of me afterwards.

“I am fine, I just don’t feel like going out”.

“You’ll love it I promise. We’re going to the beach”. He’s not going to stop until I agree, and I don’t have the strength to continue arguing with Seye so I acquiesce.

“Great. Meet us at the Walter Carrington jetty tomorrow morning. Adunni will let your mum know that you’d be spending the night with us. You all will be returning to school soon, its best to spend your last few days together as not just family but also as friends,” Seye advised. I’ve been so caught up in my misery I had almost forgotten that we’d all be leaving soon except Funke. I’d miss them all.

Ibu packed my overnight bag. I headed to the jetty the next morning. A few boats were docked at the jetty, *Ayaba* stood out almost as if it was mocking me, bringing back sweet memories that I’ve let my dark secrets taint. Seye was waiting for me at the jetty but I couldn’t see Adunni or Funke anywhere close by. Seye hugged me and when I asked about my other two cousins, he said they might be running late.

“I need to talk to you very quickly about Lare,” he said. I refrained myself from rolling my eyes. He’d probably start admonishing me to stay away from his playboy friend. He’d never approve or support us dating any of his friends, yet I wonder why he keeps them as friends anyway since he doesn’t trust them.

“Look, when Lare told me about this amazing girl he met at the airport, I never thought it’d be you. He spoke so much about her and his face lit up like a dark bright moon. I’ve never seen him talk about a babe this way before. He is in love with you. You know I protect you guys a lot from my friends but Lare is different. He’s not a playboy and I can vouch for him. Just give him a chance and if he breaks your heart, trust me when I say I’d break his neck”. Seye said to me, pleadingly.

I stared unbelieving. I’ve never heard Seye vouch for any of his friends before. Lare truly must be special.

“What about the age difference? Do you think he’d wait for me to finish school?” I asked. His phone rang before he could reply me. “Excuse me,” he said, raising his hand slightly up.

“Yes, we’re waiting for you,” he replied and hung up. Was he talking to Adunni or Funke? They better hurry up, I thought. But it wasn’t Funke neither was it Adunni who turned up few minutes later. Lare showed up carrying an overnight bag. Lare had organized a secret overnight excursion for us. I didn’t know how to feel – manipulated, cheated or happy. It was actually sweet. Lare walked over,

Seye shook his hand. “You better take good care of my cuz,” he warned him, waggling his fingers at Lare’s face. Lare smiled, waved him off before turning to me.

“I’m really sorry. You were not picking up my calls. It had to be this way,” he said to me. I’ve felt sad enough for myself. I made a mental note to enjoy myself for as long as it lasts.

“Shall we start this cruise?” I ask, leading the way to the boat. We hopped onto *Ayaba* and this time I was more confident than the last time. We sat down next to each other; I looked at Lare and felt something inside me lighten. I’ve been avoiding him and yet he refused to give up on me. Was I that loveable? I leaned into him as the boat started moving away from the shore. He wrapped his arms around me. It felt nice and warm and I wanted to stay there forever with him. The boat boy offered us drinks, but I declined. I wanted to wait till we get to the beach house. Lare took a glass of brandy from him.

I was very famished by the time we arrived at the beach house. The boat boy was sorting out the food in the kitchen for us. “Do you want anything from the kitchen?” I asked Lare as I headed down to the kitchen to get food.

“Just fried chicken with salad and perhaps a coke,” he said.

I filled my plate with pasta carbonara with smoked salmon and took out a bottle of Smirnoff ice from the refrigerator. We sat on beach loungers watching the ocean from the balcony above the pool as we ate unhurriedly. After eating, I lay on him and soon we both fell asleep with our full bellies. An hour later, I woke up to find him playing in my hair. He’d taken out my ponytail. He smelt so nice, I snuggled into his neck. He dropped kisses on my hair, forehead, cheeks, and all over my face before slowly reaching for my lips. I moaned softly as he took off my bra, freeing my breasts. He caressed them, kissed them and then kissed my skin down to my navel. I was in ecstasy. I pulled his shirt off to run my hands and fingers all over his chiseled body. He took off my shorts, slid my panties over my knees till it pooled around my feet. He drew me up gently and made me straddle his face. I grabbed his head, moaning loudly and uncontrollably as he gently savored my love down below till I climaxed, quivering slightly. He picked me up and carried me inside leaving our clothes behind on the balcony.

Lare ran a nice warm bath for us. He dropped me gently into the bathtub. He washed my back, tracing the lines on my back. He slid into the bathtub and pulled me onto his laps. He left kiss trails on my body till my legs wobbled with desire. I wanted him inside me, thrusting nonstop. “I want you inside me,” I

murmured into his ears, my voice thick with desire. “I want that too. Let’s get out of here,” he murmured back. We rinsed off quickly, he carried me into the bedroom and he never stopped kissing me till he dropped me slowly on the bed as if scared that I’d slip out of his arms and hit the floor. Soft music played from the speaker in the room. Lare pulled out a condom from the drawer on which a small-sized mirror was gingerly placed. He strapped it on before coming back to the bed. He stroked my neck, kissed my skin, and fingered me mercilessly until I was dripping wet. I felt a slight discomfort when he penetrated me because of the big size of his penis but almost as soon and sharply as it came, the pain disappeared.

He held my head, pulled my hair roughly, locked my hands together above my head as he thrust into me. I scratched his back with my long nails as I was about to climax. He pulled out, used his fingers to stroke my clit fast, put himself back in and continued thrusting while stroking my clit. My body could not contain the ecstasy and unspeakable pleasure he gave me. I came screaming his name. I shuddered before my body relaxed. Lare matched me, “I love you. Simone,” he whispered in my ears as he came, his entire body shaking. He dropped on me. I held him in my arms until he stopped shaking. *I love you*, he had said. *I love you*. I was sure he had said that because of pleasure. “When a man is in-between a woman’s thighs, he can say and promise anything,” dad often said. I wondered if Lare had meant that for me or for someone else, maybe his ex-girlfriend even. Had he mistaken me for someone else?

Five minutes later, I got up to clean up. Lare handed me a robe while pulling his over his body. I like staring at his naked body, such perfection. We found food again in the kitchen. We fell asleep again in each other’s arms after eating. I woke up around midnight, feeling hornier than ever. Lare is sooooo hot and even after sleeping with him; he’s still so sexy to me. I still yearn for him.

He was sleeping peacefully beside me, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. I wanted to wake him in a very special way. I untied his robe while he still slept and put him in my mouth. He jerked awake when he felt the warmth of my mouth. He rubbed his eyes and stared shocked at me. I rolled my tongue around the tip of his shaft just long enough to get him fully awake and ready for what I was about to do to him. He moaned loudly; his moans were like a Marvin Gaye love song to my ears. I kissed him hard and pulled a condom from the nightstand. I rode Lare as if my life depended on it. I may not have the tuition money, but I’d be damned if I didn’t enjoy this body of his. He came screaming my name out loud, I thought for a second the entire Lagos could hear him. He

gathered me in his arms, breathing heavily. “The things you do to me drive me crazy. You drive me crazy, baby. I want this every day,” he murmured rubbing my back. I giggled, kissed him on the lips. “Get some more sleep,” I urged him.

I woke up to the smell of coffee filling the entire house. Lare walked into the bedroom with a breakfast tray, I sat up in bed. The tray was filled with plates that held eggs and toast with sausages and jelly. It all looked delicious. “Good morning, sleepy-head,” Lare said dropping the tray on my laps. He leaned over and kissed me on the lips before sinking down beside me. The bed folded in under his weight. He watched me eat the food smiling fondly. He reached out to wipe something off the sides of my lips. He waited for me to finish the food, took the tray away from me before saying, “We need to talk”.

“Thanks for the meal. It was delicious,” I said deflecting.

“Anything for you baby”.

“So, what do you want to talk about?”

“You still haven’t given me any feedback about our relationship. We need to define this. I want to define it.”

“I know but I’m still skeptical about it”.

“Why?” The pain in his eyes stabbed my heart.

“I am too young for you, Lare.” I said, lowering my eyes. He lifted my chin up till I was staring into his eyes.

“You’re not too young to feel all the emotions you feel for me, about all this,” He said.

“You’re far too accomplished for me. I have nothing to offer you”.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. To say that it doesn’t matter is to actually admit that these barriers exist. How are we going to make this work? I still have like five years before I can finish school. Can you wait for five years?”

“If you want me to get you an engagement ring right now to prove how willing I am to wait for you, I would. I can get you a ring,” he shocked me.

“No, I don’t want a ring. I just…”. I paused. It was all too overwhelming for me.

“Tell me baby. I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s bothering you. What is wrong?” he asked, holding my hands.

“I’ve got a lot of baggage that I am too ashamed to share with you,” I said, tears sprang into my eyes. I wiped them off.

“Nothing would ever make me be ashamed of you. Nothing would ever make me judge you,” he reassured me. Yet I couldn’t find the courage to tell him the truth.

“My scholarship sponsor died over the Christmas break. To be frank, I don’t know how I’ll pay my tuition. I am exploring other loans and extra work-time options but still $20,000 is too much money,” I said amid sobs. I was sobbing to discourage him from asking incriminating questions like who my sponsor really was. Instead, Lare was quiet for a while. He didn’t say anything.

Sitting at the Lagos airport waiting for my flight back to New York via London, few men dropped by my seat in the business class lounge to say hi and hand me their business cards. I wasn’t interested in any of them. I had resolved I’d leave older Nigerian men alone. I tore up each business card that was thrust into my hand. There was something unsettling about the one-degree of separation thing in Lagos. Before boarding, I called Lare and *Ibu* to let them know I was almost out of Lagos. I sent a text to Mr. A. The scathing text read: Mr. A, I really hope all is well. Please kindly send my tuition money or else, I’ll report you to Uncle Biodun. I’ll tell him things no other person probably knows about you”. I know I was blackmailing him, but I had no other option. I turned off my phone after sending off the text.

The plane took off; I slept for most of the flight. In no time, I was back to my shitty New York reality now made worse. I had no tuition money, no sponsor and possibly no boyfriend since I didn’t give Lare any conclusive answer. At least, I had amazing sex with him and that is more than enough for me. It had to be.

Chapter Nine

On Sunday morning, I tried to get myself ready for school the next day. I logged into my Chase bank account to check the balance. I had only $3,000 left and I needed roughly $20,000 within three weeks as that was when I would be

dropped. My classes will be dropped if I don't pay up my tuition. I sat down to think properly. Maybe I can withdraw some of the money in my bank account for my tuition. Even if I go on a payment plan, when will I ever finish paying? Frustrated, I reached for my wallet to bring out my ID cards. I couldn't find the wallet. I rummaged through my hand luggage and suitcases, yet I couldn't find it. I called *Ibu* to search my room in Lagos thoroughly. When I called her an hour later, she said she couldn't find it in my room. Now I have to pay $100 since I have to get new drivers leaner permit, student ID card and social security card. I groaned, frustrated.

There was still $5 left on my phone, I called Adunni with it to execute my other sinister plan. She picked up after the first ring.

"Hello, Simone". Her cheerfulness irked me. How can anyone possibly be so cheerful when my life was disintegrating slowly?

"Hi," I replied concealing the rage and bitterness in my voice.

"How is New York?"

"NY is still the same old NY. Look, is uncle B there? Can I talk to him?" I ask.

"Yes, hold on let me hand the phone to him". I heard her shuffling feet till it stopped and Uncle B's gruff voice came on.

"Hi! Uncle, good afternoon".

"Ah Simone. How are you?" he asked, shouting a little too loud. Uncle was one of those old Nigerian men who still shouted when speaking to people in faraway places. He feels that the person wouldn't hear him unless he shouts. He still doesn't understand technology.

"I am fine, uncle. School is fine too. Please I called to ask if you know anyone at Amberton & co., do you?"

"Yes, that's Tunde's (Mr. A) company. Why are you asking? Any problem?" he asked.

"No problem at all. I want to intern there next summer, I just wanted to know if you could help me talk to the person in charge"

"I'll call Tunde right away. Call back Adunni in an hour" he said before ending the call. An hour later, I called back Adunni.

"I've sorted everything with Tunde. he will be contacting you directly" uncle B said to me. Few minutes later, the call from Mr. A came through. He was

screaming into the ears:

“What’s this nonsense Simone? I just got a call from your uncle about an internship in the summer, what the hell is going on?”

“I don’t care about any internship in your stupid company. I just want my tuition fee. But if I don’t get that the money for my tuition by Tuesday, be sure that I’ll take that internship and make sure that I let everyone, including your wife know about your affairs” I threatened vehemently.

“Why are you suddenly like this, Simone?”

“You created the monster. Make a wise choice. You either send the money or get ready to have your name and reputation dragged through the mud. Let’s see who my uncle will believe.” I retorted. I ended the call immediately after my threats.

Since my first class on Monday is by 12 noon, I decided to visit the bank first so I could withdraw enough cash to re-apply for my ATM card that I’d lost over the holidays. I also needed a new school ID card and financial aid so I headed to the bursar afterwards. At the financial aid office, I met an elderly, kind looking blond hair blue eyed woman, Ms. Moss who seemed eager to help me. She listened to my story about my family’s financial incapability and how scared I am that I may have to drop out of school if I can’t afford to pay my tuition money.

“I need all options available to me”, I pleaded. She smiled kindly and started pulling out forms. I sat in the office for almost two hours applying for different scholarships and loans. I filled the paperwork carefully before heading over to my first class. The events of the last few days had exhausted me tremendously, I needed to rest. Thankfully, I won’t be starting work for another week. I could use the break to rest and re-think my life.

I logged into my bank account on Tuesday morning to see that Mr. A had transferred the money in two separate transactions to avoid them being flagged for potential laundering. They’re both pending as deposits. I also got email notifications from Mr. A and Lare.

“This is the last payment I’ll ever send to you. If you ever dare blackmailing me again, I’ll come for you and trust me you won’t survive what I’d do to you”, his email typed in all caps read. Did he type it in all-caps to scare me or show me the severity of his threat? Doesn’t he know that I don’t scare easily? I do the threatening not the other way round. This man must be mad!

“I’ll forward this email to my family. If anything happens to me, they’ll be

coming for you" I typed back at him in all-caps too. I was happy; at least I had my tuition money. I clicked on the email from Lare. "My steward found your ID and wallet at the beach house. Please call me as soon as you can" the email read. I called him right away.

"Hey, how are you?" he answered the call after the third ring. His cheerful voice warmed me.

"I am fine dear. How are you? How is Lagos?"

"Lagos is fine. We are all alright"

"Thanks a lot for my ID. I've been looking for it so much. I was about to apply for a new ID." I said happily.

"Oh, thank the steward instead. I'm sorry for all the stress that must have put you through."

"Please thank him for me"

"I'll be sure to do that. Hey, listen so I'll be in New York in about three weeks for business meetings." He announced excitedly.

"That's great. Do you have a place to stay?" I asked

"I've booked a room at the Washington Hotel midtown. I didn't want to impose on you since we are not really in an exclusive relationship…yet" he said. I tried all I could to refrain from sighing out loud, I rolled my eyes instead. Can't he just give it a rest? Who says we need labels for what we have? Do we really need labels to validate what we feel for each other? Either way, I was excited to meet him in New York. By Thursday, the money Mr. A sent to me had cleared. I took my checkbook to school to pay off my balance. If my scholarships applications turn out to be successful, I can always get a refund. The bursar gave me a printout, I noticed that my outstanding balance was half of what it should have been. The bursar clarified my confusion; apparently some Lare Abiola-Fernandez had paid off some of my debt with a MasterCard. I was shocked and enthralled all at once. Lare would still be in his office, I pulled out my phone to call him. He picked up on the third ring.

"Did you pay part of my tuition?" I asked him directly ignoring his greetings.

"Yes, I did. I hope that's okay" he calmly replied.

"So how did you know my student and social numbers?" I asked confused.

"You forgot your wallet at the beach house. I found everything there" he

answered, the calm in his voice unnerved me.

“I can’t accept this. This is too much. Please how do I return your money? Maybe when you get into town, I could write you a check. I…”

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s okay to accept help. It’s okay really.” He cut my mumble short.

“I just – I’m shocked” I said in a low voice lanced thick with gratitude.

“It’s okay babe. How is your day going?”

“Pretty well. I just found out that I got awarded a $20,000 scholarship” I exclaimed joyfully.

“Oh my god, that’s awesome. My baby-girl is so smart”, Lare exclaimed excitedly. He had no idea how smart I really am.

With my tuition paid, I buried my head into work, trying to build up my ‘*rainy day*’ funds. Summer school will soon be coming up and so are the next three years of tuition. By my graduation, I have to make sure I could help my younger brother pay his first-year tuition till he can afford to take care of himself. The week Lare was supposed to come into town, I reduced my work hours. I wanted to spend quality time with him and show him the New York I know, not like he needed to be shown anything.

Lare called to ask if I wanted anything from Lagos.

“I’d really love *agbalumo* and *suya*.” I told him.

“*Agbalumo* is a fruit so no, but I’ll buy you all the *suya* in Lagos If I can.”

I giggled.

“Please don’t buy me all the suya in Lagos, I can’t finish it.”

Even though the cost of taxi was high, I still offered to come meet him at the airport. Thankfully, Lare said he had a free drop-off service from the airline.

“I’ll call you once I get in” he said before we ended the call.

I cleared my schedule for the weekend; I did my laundry on Thursday night, packed an overnight bag. I planned to take Lare to the Jamaican restaurant downtown Brooklyn, but instead I swung by the spot alone and bought a bunch of patties, some oxtail with rice and peas for him, curry goat with white rice for myself and some pepper shrimp for us. I also bought some kola champagne. I packed everything into a bigger tote bag and headed out to the Washington hotel. He had emailed me his hotel details earlier.

At the hotel reception, I called his room. The receptionist handed me a key and offered to carry my bags up, but I declined. I got on the elevator; made sure my hair I had straightened at the Dominicans in Harlem still looked good. Lare was at the workstation in the suite when I opened the door. He was dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants that rode low on his slim hips. I jumped on him; he twirled me around in the air. “I’ve missed you so much” he murmured into my hair.

‘I’ve missed you too” I replied. We kissed hard. I wrapped my legs around his hips.

“So how was your flight?” I asked when he finally dropped me on the bed.

‘It was okay, I guess. I was more ecstatic about seeing you, I didn’t notice anything eventful” he said, stroking my hair. I laughed. His sweet words always made me laugh.

“What were you doing before I came in?”

“Just replying work emails, boring stuff. I won the contract, so I’ll be working out of the Nigerian consulate in NY with two members of my technical team. We want to set up the systems this week.”

He’s always winning contracts; perhaps I should let him win me too. I thought to myself. So many other women would kill to be with this man, yet I kept on stalling. He dropped my bags in the closet before taking off my winter coat. He gave me a ridiculously long hug, smelt my hair. “It smells so good”, he said burying his face into my hair. ‘You’re such a freak”, I teased him laughingly. He placed me gently onto the big, soft bed.

“It’s been so long since I fucked you. I am dying to do it again” he was breathless with lust.

“Fuck me hard then” I replied breathlessly. He ran his hands slowly down my body, removed my clothes piece by piece, kissed and sucked my breasts. He fingered me to the moon and back. He rolled the condom fast over his hardened cock. He held my hands over my head, refusing to let me touch him or cover my lips as I often did to stifle the screams. “I want to hear you moan and scream”, he said thrusting hard into me nonstop till I climaxed. He came soon after I did, he rolled over rushed into the bathroom to clean up. When he returned to the room, a satisfied smile was plastered on his face. “So, my darling Simone, how have you been?” he asked, sinking into the bed next to me. I burst out laughing. I’ve missed him so much.

Chapter Ten

We decided to spend the Friday night indoors to watch movies while eating in the living room of the hotel suite. We talked about a lot of things and got to know each other better. I realized that Lare's career was about to take a serious ascent. He was stamping his name all over the West African information technology world. After the movie credits, I grabbed my checkbook out of my bag to repay him the tuition money he paid for me. I explained to him while handing him the check that I had a total of $10,000 since some of the scholarships I applied for came through. I had put the money in a high yield mutual fund against the next semester and declined the loan the school offered.

"I just want you to be happy. Don't worry about repaying me"

"If you don't accept this check, I'll just assume you're trying to buy your way into a relationship with me" I sternly insisted. He sighed sadly, took the check and placed it on his laptop.

We ordered ice-cream from the hotel kitchen. I chose grape-nut – my newfound favorite while Lare chose a salted caramel flavor. Before the ice-cream arrived, I had a wild idea. "Let's shower before room service comes up with the ice-cream", I said excitedly to him. "Why? We already showered?" Lare asked, confused.

"You'll see. I have this crazy idea." I replied, dragging him into the bathroom. Room service rang our doorbell just as we were drying off. I pushed Lare on the bed, smeared my ice-cream all over his body including his dick. Slowly, I licked and sucked him until he was trembling uncontrollably. As he was about to climax, I stopped sucking him, leapt off the bed, grabbed my robe and ran into the living room. I dropped onto the couch there, laughing wolfishly. Lare yelled at me from the bedroom, "I'll get you back for this, Simone. I promise". I laughed some more. He joined me on the couch. I kissed him, held his hands and looked deep into his eyes. "I want to talk to you, Lare", I said.

"I'm all ears"

"I've thought about it and I've decided. I want to be your girlfriend" I told him. I was searching his face intently to see every nuance of his reaction as I told him the good news. His face lit up and brightened with joy. "Wait, are you serious?"

"Yes, I am", I squealed happily.

"Oh my god!!! Thank you. Thank you. I promise you won't regret this" Lare

screamed, twirling me in the air. I hoped I could make him happy and not regret ever meeting me. I don't know what the future holds but what I do know is that I want him to be a part of my life for as long as he can.

On Saturday morning, we went to the Museum of Modern Art. I had an art history class assignment and when he asked what we'd be doing for the day, I suggested we go to the museum. At the museum we looked at a few Rembrandts, he seemed very knowledgeable and interested in the arts. He told me about the pieces he loved a lot. After the museum, he asked me if I'd love to go shopping, I was tired and wanted to get back to the hotel, so I declined. At the hotel lobby, he spent a few minutes discussing with our suite butler. Around 6pm, he told me we'd be going to see the Lion King on Broadway.

"Those tickets are very difficult to get. And besides I don't have anything Broadway-worthy to wear."

"I thought you might say that. Just hold on a sec while I call the reception."

Less than 45 minutes later, room service delivered the most stunning dress I've ever laid my eyes on to our room. I dressed up quickly; I loved the way the dress clung onto my lean figure. I loved the play and the dinner we had afterwards. The rest of Lare's NY trip was wonderfully spent. We laughed, had amazing sex and visited a few more places in the City. When he returned back to Nigeria, I was so sad to see him go. Despite the distance, somehow, we managed to make our relationship work. We called each other every day, several times a day, exchanged emails and saw each other when Lare had his periodic work breaks.

For Easter, he offered to fly me to London for the holidays, but I declined because I planned to work during the spring break. He never took the check I gave him for the tuition he paid on my behalf, he mailed it back to my house and I was still a little angry with him about that. I am not sure why I am angry with him for mailing back the check to me. I needed the money, yet I was pretending I wasn't happy that he returned it to me. I need money yet I keep pretending to be Ms. Independent. I was confusing myself.

My roommate was graduating in May. I needed to find a new roommate since I couldn't afford to pay for a new apartment and live alone. I still have summer school to contend with if I plan on graduating in three years.

Lare threatened to break up with me around June because I told him I won't be seeing him anymore unless he gives me the details to an account, I could pay the money into. I really don't want to be in a relationship with someone who had so much hold over me. I was turning 21 soon and the more I thought about it, the

more convinced I was that I needed to protect my assets. Lare can decide to leave me anytime and what will I have left from our relationship if that happens? Ibu keeps pestering me about coming to NY in September to see me. I need to raise her ticket money and make sure I have a decent apartment ready for her visit.

On my birthday in June, I got a lot of calls and emails from friends and family members from far and near. Lare called me with an unknown number; normally I wasn't one to answer calls from unknown numbers, but since it was my birthday, I thought some people might be trying to reach out to me. So, I picked up the call to hear his sweet voice singing a happy birthday song for me. Adunni called me after Lare.

"Are you still seeing Lare?" she asked me.

"Well…why are you asking anyway?"

"His mom was complaining to my mother the other day. She said he'd be 29 in August and he's not yet married. She wants to match him with Mrs. Ekundare, her best friend's daughter." She said. Hearing that broke my heart, I knew this would happen. I predicted it from the beginning.

"Anyway, I just thought I should let you know." Adunni said before the call ended.

By noon, a delivery truck pulled up on my apartment's driveway to deliver a bouquet of flowers and a wrapped package to me. I had planned to take myself out for lunch at Junior's – a cheesecake factory just around the corner. I accepted the package from the delivery man and stepped back indoors. Opening the package, I squealed with excitement. It was a spa day at one of the most expensive, beautiful spas I've only dreamt of. I had a 1pm appointment and a car service pick up. I only know one person who could be this thoughtful and romantic; I knew it was from Lare. I called the spa to make sure the gift was authentic. The lady I spoke to said they were expecting me.

After the 3-hour relaxing spa time, my cell phone rang with a NY number showing on my screen. It was Lare asking me to come out of the spa. From the window, I could see his tall figure leaning on a car. I forgot about our fight and jumped right on him. My skater skirt flew up so high I swear the entire city block saw my thong, how befitting. He suggested we go back to my apartment, I declined quietly. Going back to the apartment would lead to sex. We slipped into a Japanese restaurant instead and ordered some sushi.

“Thanks for the spa date” I said while we wait for our order.

“Did you know I was coming?”

“Not really. We’ve not been talking for weeks now”

“You are still mad at me because of the tuition money?”

“Yes, I am”

“Alright, let’s go to the bank so you can withdraw it. I’ll collect it this time”

I don’t have much money to spare paying back such huge amount of money, but my pride got the best of me. I agreed to head to the bank with him. I deposited the money into his account, trying hard to hold back the rage rising and falling within me. “No more ridiculous expensive gifts from now on” I said to him in a gruff voice after giving him back the money. He spent my birthday night with me in my apartment. “You really need a better place” he observed looking around my apartment condescendingly the next morning.

“Go to hell. I stay where I can afford” I screamed at him. The high pitch of my voice surprised even me. Lare did not respond, he quietly walked out of my apartment. This was our first major fight.

Chapter Eleven

For most of the summer, I completely ignored Lare. Soon it was time to start my sophomore year. I was expecting *Ibu* by the end of September. She'd be staying with me for one full month. My scholarships came through which meant I didn't have to keep putting up the exhausting façade. I got a full academic scholarship along with a full-time work study program in the statistics department. Also, my cumulative GPA of 3.8 made me so proud. I didn't have to work waiting tables or at the homecare job anymore. I had over $20,000 in investments and close to $10,000 in the bank. My summer hustle paid off and I was incredibly proud of myself.

I had enrolled for the Spanish 101 class to fulfill my general education requirements, but I am not quite sure if I will pass the class. The first day I attended the class was a total disaster. I noticed that most of my classmates were already familiar with the language. It was almost like the same thing that happened to me in secondary school with my French class. I wanted to take the French classes because all my friends were taking the class. Already, Sade can speak fluent French because her parents hired a private tutor who taught her every day after class from when she was in nursery school. I flopped out of the class eventually because I couldn't keep up at all. Now, I wonder if the same thing will not happen to me in the Spanish class. The only other black student in my class was Brent, a tall guy with dreads.

Brent was the stereotypical Brooklyn guy. He always wore denim and heavy timberland boots, and when he spoke to me, he always flipped his dreads. He was not trying to seduce me, but I lusted after him. Sometimes, I imagined running my hands through his dreads while kissing him. I wasn't talking to Lare since the fight we had in my apartment on my birthday party. Adunni was trying to get whatever information she could about Lare from her brother. I missed his gentle romance and high-end treatment. Sometimes I wished Lare would pop up on my doorstep with flowers and full of apologies, but life isn't a movie and wishes don't often come true. So, I decided to move on, after all I knew that it was only a matter of time before our relationship would end. It was doomed from the start.

By the end of my sophomore year, I had ceased every form of communication with Lare. I started dating Brent officially. I missed Lare all the time. I was dating Brent to fill the void that Lare's absence caused. I wanted Brent to be like Lare somewhat, but I could never mold a grown human being to fit my idea of

what perfection is. The sex with Brent was just bland sex, he didn't make my heart race and my skin freeze with desire like Lare did. I never really paid Brent and his lifestyle any attention. Once at the beginning of the summer, he disappeared for two weeks. I couldn't reach him anywhere. He resurfaced later to tell me that he'd been stabbed. I was shocked but he dismissed it as the usual Brooklyn random crime. He had asked me once for unprotected sex. "Raw sex feels better", he had theorized but I insisted until we both got tested, we'd never ever have unprotected sex.

One Friday evening after Brent disappeared again for weeks, even missing most of his classes, I decided to visit the apartment he shared with his mother. Brent originally was from Guyana and seemed extremely attached to his mother as he claimed. He continued living with her even when he could afford to move out. As I walked towards the complex, I noticed the police yellow tape around the building. Some kids were playing outside, kicking a weary-looking ball around. I asked one of the kids what happened at the complex. "Some gang members shot up Brent's apartment over some stolen drug money." The kid who looks like he could be ten said casually as if he was used to explaining things like this to strangers all the time.

"*Ye temi ba mi ohhh*[19]", I screamed. The kid stared strangely at me. "Say what?" he asked smiling.

"Is anybody dead?" I asked.

"Yeah, Brent's old lady was shot" the boy said, not even the slightest flinch of sadness showed in his voice. I was so shocked; I turned sharply, walked away from the street before jogging slowly to the train station. How did I break up with a white collar professional just to stoop so low as to date a drug dealer? Why didn't I suspect this earlier? The disappearances and crazy stories about getting stabbed and mugged should have given me hints but I chose to ignore them all.

Chapter Twelve

After the entire fiasco with Brent, I resolved I'd not date anymore. I seem to be a drama magnet, drawing the wrong kind of men to myself. I had an uneventful junior year and was actually looking forward to graduation. I didn't take any time off between working and going to school. Neither did I visit Nigeria during any of the breaks. Adunni kept me up to date with information about Lare. He started seeing someone else and seemed to be totally in love with her. It was a

family friend – his mother's best friend's daughter, Morayo Ekundare. His mother was already planning the wedding of the decade. Rumors had it that she was planning the wedding around August the next year to take place off the coast of Spain, but the traditional wedding would hold at Eko Hotels and Suite, Lagos. When Adunni told me all this, I drank myself silly and fell asleep in a pool of my own tears. I caused the break-up and now I can't seem to get over him. I thought I was emotionally ready to let him go finally, yet I keep torturing myself, I keep asking Adunni questions about him.

To numb the pain and try to forget Lare, I hit up Richard – one of the random men who kept pestering me on the streets of Brooklyn. We went clubbing, I planned to get drunk; to drink away the pain. I lost control of myself that night and fucked Richard in his car. I was too drunk to make sure we had protected sex; I just wanted to fuck every memory of Lare out of my system. A few days later when my vagina started itching miserably, I knew that I had probably fucked Richard without a condom that night. The test I took at the department of public health confirmed my fears – I had gonorrhea. I locked myself indoors and cried so much after getting the results. Maybe I was being punished for my promiscuity. Maybe this was my punishment for trying to blackmail Mr. A.

The counselor at the clinic handed me a prescription to pick up my meds, she told me to come back for re-testing in two weeks after completing the dosage. Just two months after turning 22, I got my first ever STD due to my own stupidity. The new semester was starting in a few weeks, yet I kept hiding. I changed my phone number so that Richard could not reach me ever again. I should have yelled at him for giving me this STD, but I couldn't even find the strength to fight about that. My life sucked a lot because of my own actions, and I needed to learn how to move on.

My brother Michael had gained admission into a four-year college in Brooklyn at age 16. Soon, he'd join me in NY. I agreed to pay his partial tuition for the first year; he would have to either work on getting a scholarship or work full time to make up the tuition. He had a half scholarship to a catholic college in Brooklyn, so I had to balance out his tuition of $2500 per semester and help him pay for his books. My dad called to tell me how proud he was. He apologized for all the stress I was going through trying to look after the entire family. He wished he could have taken care of us the way he should, but life happened. He thanked me for looking out for my brother. His words made me tear up.

I still had one more year to finish up my degree at NYU. Lare married Morayo traditionally in December of my senior year. When he came to NY in January, he

called me. Adunni must have given him my new number. We went out on a lunch date. He was looking as handsome as ever in his slacks and shirt.

“Marriage suits you”, I said. He smiled. He made me self-conscious of the way I looked. I had lost a lot of weight due to working long and arduous hours. Working had aged me so much and made me look five years older than my real age.

“You look good yourself” he complimented me.

“Please don’t flatter me. I know exactly how I look and good isn’t what I’ll use to describe it” I looked out of the restaurant window to the people milling outside the city clad in their bulky winter coats. The weather that day was particularly cold; I could not feel my hands under the gloves I had slipped them into.

“Are you angry that things didn’t work out between us?” Lare asked me after a long silence. I kept quiet, turning that question over and over in my head. I was not angry; I regret that things had ended the way they did and frankly I blame myself.

“I am not angry, just regretting. Sometimes, I re-play everything that led to that break-up in my head. I wish I had not tried to be Ms. Independent. Maybe you wouldn’t have asked for that tuition money back and I wouldn’t have been pissed at you for taking it back. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you to go to hell and frankly I wished you did not leave. Or you returned. But you left and never returned. I stayed inside my apartment waiting for you. ‘He’ll come back’ I kept on telling myself. I moved out of that apartment into a better one and wished I could tell you to come back – that I’ve moved out to a better place, but I didn’t. And the more I think about it, the more I can’t fathom why I did not summon enough courage to send any of the emails I typed but ended up deleting” I poured out my heart to him.

“We both made mistakes. I shouldn’t have left or I should have returned. I should have apologized or at least tried to get on the plane after buying so many tickets to come see you. I guess I was a coward. But that’s all in the past right now. All that matters right now is the present and future”

“The present reality right now is that you’re married, and the future reality is that you’ll probably remain married forever and I’ll spend the rest of my life wishing and longing for what could have been” I retorted sharply, the edges of my voice roughened.

“There is nothing we can do about it. We just have to move on. I want you to be happy. Is there anything I can do to make you smile again?”

“Nothing. I really wish you a very happy married life.” I ended the lunch date. It was all too sad for me. I just wanted to leave and never see his face again.

A week before my graduation day, Adunni called me to give me the current gist.

“Lare and his wife are not getting along oh. Hmm, rumors have it that they’re having serious problems” Adunni informed me excitedly. But I wasn’t in the mood for any story about Lare.

“Okay but why are you telling me this now? What am I supposed to do with this information?” I questioned her aggressively.

“Relax. I’m just trying to make small talk.”

“Abeg[20] oh, I no wan hear that kind story” I chided her softly.

“Oya sorry now”

“How is school?”

“School is fine oh. I’m almost done with my final year. How about you? I’ll be coming to NY for the summer. I hope to see you then”

“I think I’d be in Lagos by then. I need to get ready before taking up the job offer at Grumman. I can’t leave Michael alone in NY without any guardian until he is at least 18, so I’ll wait for my parents to come up” I informed her quickly.

“oh, well I guess I’ll be seeing you during Christmas then’ Adunni sounded disappointed. She had planned to turn up in NY with me.

Ibu and papa arrived together to NY. I bought two premium economy tickets for them. They deserve good treatment; life had been hard for the entire family. I was almost done with school – I’d be graduating salutatorian of my class and already had a job offer of $70.000 with other full benefits as a statistical analyst waiting. I plan to take one year off school before going back for my masters. I am still undecided where I’d love to do my masters. My options include staying back in NY or moving to Atlanta or Houston. An old friend said she could recommend me for an opening at the center for disease control in Atlanta. I still have a year to decide. Ibu planned to spend the entire summer with Michael while I gallivant around Lagos with Paul and dad taking care of each other at home.

As always, I was looking forward to returning back to Lagos and all the troubles

and excitement it has to offer.

End of Book one

Hurricane December

2

Chapter One

Over the years, I matured and became smarter, at least I thought so. I'd been through a lot, but those lessons are reasons for who I have become. I was taking better care of myself. I had no sugar daddy or any sinister movements. For my trip back to Lagos, I booked a virgin Atlantic flight transiting through London in economy this time, how the mighty have fallen. I planned to sleep the entire flight to Lagos. The flight was uneventful. An older Nigerian man who sat next to me kept on pestering me, asking silly questions about the food served on the flight till I rudely ignored him, stuck my headphones connected to my mp3 over my ears and feigned sleep.

Lagos was still the same old, chaotic mess since the last time I was back. The immigration and customs officers at the airport were still subtly demanding bribes from travelers. Immediately I stepped out of the airport, I heard my cousin Seye yelling my name. "SimSho", he was yelling and flailing his hands around. He rushed towards me and lifted me off the ground. "Look at you. You've grown so much since the last time I saw. Ah, if you're not my cousin *ehh*, I would have married you" he joked. I laughed. I had the keys to my parents' house; I decided to stay there instead of at Seye's house. If I stayed at Seye's place, that could mean running into the groom-to-be Lare. His wedding to Morayo was scheduled to take place in about three months in Tenerife.

"A room has been made up for you at my father's house." Seye informed me. Driving back to uncle B's house, I spoke to Seye about my plans to go to Ghana for my 24th birthday. "I might even go to Rwanda if possible", I added.

"Have you ever been to Cape Town?" Seye asked.

"Not yet', I replied.

"Why not choose Cape Town then? You'll love it" he suggested.

"I was thinking more of a trip alone, you know to think about my life" I said. Seye was the ever-gregarious bachelor. He doesn't really date and had no plans of settling down anytime soon, but loved the ladies, nonetheless. Offering to chaperone me to Cape Town was just one of the benefits of being single to him. The next few weeks after I arrived in Nigeria, Seye took me to different clubs. Funke barely had time for us as she gallivanted around town with her new

boyfriend. Once, we found her boyfriend at a club when he had told Funke that he wouldn't be going out due to his malaria, clearly, he didn't have malaria in the club. I chose not to snitch to Funke, I didn't want to get involved in any relationship squabbles.

On one of our outings, I met Chuka. He had an East Coast American accent and when he smiled, his lips curved slightly upwards sexily. I gave him my number and after talking for about two weeks, he asked me out for lunch. At the lunch date, I found out more about him. He had graduated from Columbia in NY and was a VP for a bank's asset management division. His work, especially with Asia made him keep late odd hours. I liked the fact that he was based out of NY and was in Lagos for a friend's wedding. I promised to let him know when I get back to NY in September.

Seye called to ask about my birthday plans, May was already ending and June 28th was right around the corner. "I want to travel. I just want to see the other parts of Africa alone for a while. I plan to go to Ghana for a weekend and then to Cape Town for a week" I told him.

"I can arrange that. Just think of it as my birthday gift to you. I'll send you the number of a travel agent to call for the Ghana trip. I'll take care of the rest" he said. He sent me the agent's number and we arranged the trip. Chuka who had returned to America kept calling me almost daily. I liked him enough to think that he was a very good catch, but the romantic feelings needed to start a relationship were missing. I couldn't even imagine him naked. Ignoring his constant wooing, I packed my two-piece bathing suit for my birthday trip. I wanted to spend some time away from everyone I knew, have some fun, and show off my new cancer tattoo I had gotten on my hip.

I boarded the flight from Lagos to Accra, flying business class. The business class ticket was $100 difference from the economy class, so I wasn't really reaching. A handsome guy who looked like a bag of money literally was sitting in front of me. He was wearing Gucci, Fendi and Louis probably. I didn't understand why he clad himself from head to toe with designers, who was he trying to impress? Maybe his village people told him if he didn't wear all his designer items at once, they would walk out of his life or something. As soon as the flight took off, he took the seat beside me, trying to get my attention. The old me might have been turned off by his obvious bad taste in fashion, but the new me thought he looked exactly like a fool and was playing the part right. Even

after I tried to dismiss him by lying about going to meet my husband, he still stuck around wasting about 30 minutes of the time I could have napped.

I hopped into a taxi that drove me from Kotoka international airport to Labadi beach hotel. After checking into my room, I decided to walk around the grounds before settling in for dinner. I dressed up in a maxi dress and some flats for dinner – I planned to go swimming the next day and just generally relax on the beach. I went through the buffet line to fill my plate, looking around I found an empty table in a quiet corner. As soon as I dropped into the chair to pick up my fork, a guy appeared right in front of me holding his plate of food. “Can I join you?” he asked.

“It’s a free world. By all means, make yourself comfortable” I replied.

He sat in the chair facing me. “I’m Damien.” He introduced himself. I nodded.

“I’m from Trinidad. I’ve always wanted to come to Africa, such a beautiful place” he continued. It irks me when non-Africans, refer to Africa as a country instead of a continent. Back in school, people assumed and asked me ridiculous questions about Africa. Once, a white professor with a receding hairline said to me: “I’ve been to Africa. I met so many great people. Do you know Kwame? You must know him since you’re from Africa as well”. He simply shrugged and moved on from me with a bored expression on his face when I explained that I was from Nigeria and Kwame was most probably from Ghana.

After dinner, he invited me out to go to the hotel’s night club. After a few drinks, I was possibly drunk. I followed Damien back to his room where he did some dirty things to my mind and body. He reminded me of Lare with his tender loving, yet I was scared he might demand something more from me. I was not ready to attempt any long-distance relationship, especially not with a man who thought Ghana was Africa. I was not prepared to start teaching him the cultural heritage of an entire continent. The next morning, I requested the hotel give me another room on the other side of the hotel. I wanted to avoid Damien for the rest of my stay. Guiltless, I had filled my slut quota for the summer.

When I got back to Lagos, an email from Seye was waiting for me. He asked for my passport details to book the Cape Town trip, I sent it to him. A week later when I called him to ask for the ticket price, he laughed merrily. “I’ve sorted everything out for you. I’ll send your ticket details soon. Just consider it a graduation gift”. I squealed thankfully.

Oddly, Cape Town was uneventful. My girls and I had so much fun, eating, drinking and partying, we even made it out to Robben Island. Seye ignored us for most of the trip, going after the hot South African girls. I half expected to see Lare on the trip especially since Adunni said things were not really going very well with his fiancé. Even after claiming I was over him, I still longed to see him. His wedding scheduled to take place on August 29th must have been keeping him extremely busy. I thought about dating Chuka just to see where the relationship could go.

My birthday month ended faster than I thought. One August morning, I stepped downstairs in uncle B's house to grab a cold drink from the kitchen. I noticed the long legs sprawled across the couch; I did not see any faces. I heard Seye's voice chatting to some other distant voice. I was wearing a loose shirt and denim shorts so I tried sneaking pass them but Seye heard me and yelled at me. "Simone, so you are home?'. I turned red with embarrassment. His friend was staring right at me. Seye introduced him as Bode. "How are you doing?" he asked, smiling kindly.

'I'm fine" I answered, hurrying out of the room. "She's too shy", I heard Seye say laughing loudly. "I heard that Seye!!" I yelled back at him.

Since that day, Bode stopped by the house after Seye had gone to work almost daily. He was a very handsome, tall man with the sexiest legs I've ever seen. But I've already dated one of Seye's friends – a relationship that left a gaping hole in my heart. I didn't want to be the chick that was passed around Seye's circle of friends. Bode kept disturbing me for my number and I kept on deflecting. "Talk to Seye first" I told him. I knew that if he was a good man, Seye would give him my number but if he is not good enough for me, Seye will refuse him. Till I left Lagos on the 28th of August, he did not get my number. Either he didn't talk to Seye or he did and Seye refused, either way, I was glad to leave Lagos to start my new job and start considering my graduate school applications.

Chapter Two

My first day at work was relatively easy as it was the first of many orientation days. It took me a week to navigate and get familiar with the office building. The company provided free lunch for the workers, so my paycheck essentially was intact except for work related expenses like transportation and clothing. I was able to save up enough money to pay for my first apartment alone. In choosing an apartment, I considered a three bedroom just in case Ibu wanted to come spend more time in NY. My younger brother Paul had just one more year of secondary school in Nigeria and is likely to be joining us in NY afterwards.

My work entailed a lot of number crunching but it was what I was built to do so I enjoyed it. My supervisor, Natalya had a thick Russian accent. She was a very nice woman who loved inviting me out to lunch at the 33rd Street food court despite the food the company provided for its workers downstairs. I've snuck a few bagels home occasionally from the company food court, I won't even lie. One Friday morning, a white coworker Steve joined me in the elevator as I was taking some work down with me to the cafeteria during lunch break. The chefs made their usual Friday *Nasi Goreng* special. I am sure the food doesn't taste as delicious as my mother's, but I decided to try it. Steve was wearing a woody spice perfume that filled the elevator immediately he entered. His scraggly beard scattered across his jaw gave him this sexy, rugged look.

"Hi" he greeted.

"Hello" I nodded at him.

"Going down for lunch?"

"Yes."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Sure, no problem at all"

We grabbed our food, chopsticks and settled down with bottles of Snapple iced tea to enjoy the meal.

"So how long have you been working at Northrup?" I asked him as we ate.

"For five years now. I work in the engineering department."

“That’s cool. I’m a statistical analyst.” We spoke throughout lunch. He told me about his days at M.I.T, his family lived on the Upper East Side. He seemed very interested in getting to know me, I told him quite a lot about myself. He was a good listener; seeming to draw me in with his smile, sweet voice and the way he kept his eyes on me throughout lunch. After lunch, we exchanged cell phone numbers. On Thursday, he sent me a text message inviting me to happy hour at the bar around the corner. I met him at the bar; he was with a bunch of friends. We had so much fun; he told me it was a weekly occurrence on Thursdays.

I’d never been attracted to white guys prior; the affair with Steve surprised me. It started with grad school discussions. He helped me with suggestions of schools to consider. And then he invited me to lunch on a Saturday in his apartment. We hung out in his apartment, watching movies, reading books, arguing over politics and other issues. It became a thing. By mid-October, we’d already gotten so close that we cuddled on the couch when watching movies. He’d wrap his arms around me, draw me into his arms. I love burying my face into his chest, taking a deep breath of his clean, sweet-smelling skin. The sex was expected, it was natural and memorable. We became almost inseparable but because there was a HR policy against dating a co-worker, we stopped having lunch together. We didn’t really want to lose our nice jobs, well at least I didn’t.

Chuka kept on calling me. Something seemed off with him; he no longer interests me. He’d invite me out at ungodly hours and whenever I invite him over to my place, he always seems to have an excuse. I called Adunni and Funke to do a background check on him as they often do with the other Nigerian men, I meet who may be potential romantic interests.

November soon arrived with the winter chill knocking and the preparations for thanksgiving in full swing. I didn’t know what Michael and I would be doing for the holiday as frankly I was not in the mood to cook turkey which I am not a very big fan of. I was counting on Steve to invite me to his family’s thanksgiving. But by the third week of the month, the invitation never came. After thanksgiving, I asked Steve furiously why he never invited me to his family’s thanksgiving. “That was because my girlfriend is in town. She always spends the holiday with my family.” Steve replied in a cold voice. My heart almost stopped.

“What did you just say?” I yelled in my Nigerian accent as I often do whenever I’m enraged.

“I said my girlfriend…”

“Hold on, girlfriend? You have another girlfriend?”

“What do you mean another girlfriend, I have just one girlfriend”

“And she isn’t me?”

“No.” he looked confused.

“Then what have we been doing?” I was so cross I couldn’t even keep my voice down.

“errmm, we’re just friends”

“Just friends? Did you just say ‘just friends’? I was fuming.

“I’m sorry if you got the wrong impression, Simone. I really am but…”

“Save it” I screamed into his face before running out. I skipped lunch to roam the streets for fresh air. I was tired of running, tired of being rejected, tired of trying of getting my hopes high with thoughts of finally meeting the Mr. right for me only for me to have those hopes cruelly dashed. I’m really tired of getting ahead of myself. I had walked five blocks west when I noticed the Anglican church of St. Rose.

There was a long line for the soup kitchen, so I chose to go into the cathedral despite my rumbling stomach. I knelt down at the altar and let it all out. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t understand where it came from, but all the years of pent-up struggle, toughness and survival broke me. I wanted to let it all out because I was officially tired, so tired of everything. As I wept, I felt a hand touch my back. “God loves you” a soothingly calm voice spoke up behind me. It was the parish priest who helped me up, “come sit here with me’, he led me to the first pew. He spoke to me in a very kind, gentle voice. “Cast all your fears onto the lord. He never fails to listen and help us through our troubling times”. I listened to him, mesmerized with his words till he stopped speaking. “Would you want me to call someone to come get you?” he asked at the end of his monologue. “I’ll rather stay here or maybe help out in the kitchen if that’s okay with you”.

I called Natalya to inform her that I left work early and won’t be returning because I wasn’t feeling too well. “That’s okay, take all the time you need.

Please feel better" her kind words warmed me. I spent the rest of my workday in the soup kitchen. As I was leaving later in the evening, the priest handed me a bible, some reading material and devotionals. Reading the materials and bible helped me draw closer to God. I even started attending mass during lunch and working in the church's soup kitchen. Doing all this gave me a settling sense of fulfillment.

Instead of living the life of want and discontent I was used to, and feeling like God had forsaken me, I started enjoying the simpler things of life. Thinking back to Thanksgiving Day, I had happily helped Paul prepare and cook the duck, we had gotten few days earlier on sale at the local grocer. We had a very intimate thanksgiving dinner. Ibu called to wish us a happy thanksgiving. We could hear dad in the background laughing and asking her if she even knew what the day meant. I was grateful for the laughter and merriment and pure joy of spending the day with my own family. In hindsight, life was giving me some hard lessons, Steve's heartbreak taught me a lot that I'll ever be grateful for.

Chapter Three

December was beautiful; Christmas was beautiful, as usual. I felt a lot lighter in my spirit, and life generally was good to me. I enjoyed my work more, completely forgot and ignored Steve. I started studying for my GRE; with the aim of doing my masters in statistics. I couldn't decide between Hunter College, NYU and Columbia. I preferred remaining in this city I've grown used to and might even love a little considering some of the brutal hands it has dealt me. I had pockets of memories stashed in many corners of this city. Chuka was calling me frequently, setting up lunch dates and begging to come over to my place. I let him in a few times and also visited his apartment.

Chuka talked about settling down a lot since he wasn't getting any younger. He asked me if we could possibly set up family introductions for Easter the next year. Since I rededicated my life to Christ, I insisted on no pre-marital sex with Chuka which he quickly agreed to. I was determined not to mess this relationship up. I also decided I'd not be returning to Nigeria for the Christmas holiday since I didn't want to use my 20-days' vacation running around Lagos like a headless chicken. I've already started making plans for an Easter break vacation at the Bahamas. Maybe if things go well with Chuka, I might end up going there with him if the introduction happens.

Chuka told me about his plans of spending the holiday in Nigeria for two weeks. The news didn't move me; I am not going to miss him. I like Chuka a lot but not enough to fill my gut with excitement. But Nigerians often say that marriage should be based more on intention than feelings. I started shopping for Christmas especially all the gifts I'd give my friend Latoya and her family where I'd be spending my Christmas. I offered to make jollof rice and some other Nigerian delicacies. Michael also will be taking his first trip back to Nigeria since he came to America for school. He seemed quite excited for the trip back; I shopped extensively for the gifts for our family.

Michael left for Nigeria after his finals on December 10th, leaving me in the apartment by myself. Chuka, since he wouldn't be leaving for the next few weeks, was eager to spend time with me in the apartment. I specifically made it clear to him that he'd be sleeping either on the couch or in Michael's bedroom. I made a mental note to make sure I lock my door firmly each night. In my opinion, pre-marital sex may have been the cause of my long series of bad luck.

Chuka came over to my place one Saturday, bringing Chinese for dinner. We ate and decided to watch movies in the living room since Chuka wasn't a fan of going to the movies – he thinks going to the cinema is childish and immature. I climbed onto the couch, snuggled up into Chuka's arms and threw a blanket over my legs. My apple cinnamon pie and a mug of hot cider were already placed on the coffee table. Midway through the movie, Chuka tried kissing me and rubbing his hand all over my skin.

"Chill out, Chuka. Don't be disrespectful" I said mildly, pushing his hand away.

"Come on!!! You've been giving me blue balls since I met you. See, touch me to see how hard I get whenever I am around you" Chuka morphed into a strange person. He started forcing himself on me; he tried pinning me roughly down on the couch. I fought him nonstop, kicked, bit and pushed back till I broke free. I ran into my bedroom, locked the door shakily. My legs gave way under me; I slipped down to the floor. Shakily, I pulled out my cellphone. I couldn't hold the phone firmly; it kept slipping out of my hand. Chuka was banging the bedroom door, yelling at me to open up and cooperate with him. I threaten to call 911 if he doesn't leave my apartment. I dialed my friend Lance instead of calling 911. Thankfully, Lance answered on the third ring. I was weeping incoherently; I wasn't sure he understood what I said, but he said he'd be coming over right away. Lance called me about 20 minutes later to tell me he was in my apartment building and was coming up. Chuka had left already so I opened the door, letting Lance. He took me into his arms, rocking me gently as I wept. I'm not quite sure

why I thought of calling Lance even though we've grown closer since we met at yoga class in my sophomore year. He was a bit effeminate – he was like a sister girl to me. We've both nursed dreams of getting certified as yoga instructors till we found out the high cost of trips to India. Lance brushed the hair off my face, squeezed me tighter. Why did I call Lance? He was a softie; he couldn't even handle Chuka if he chose violence. Lance couldn't protect me but at least he was capable of offering non-threatening comfort. Lance offered to take me out. "I don't think I really want to be around happy people right now" I sniffled.

"Come on, there's a diner three blocks down. I'll call a few friends to join us. You need cheering up" he insisted. At the diner, we ordered waffles, chicken and hot cocoa. Lance's cop boyfriend, Billy wanted to arrest Chuka, but I managed to talk him out of it. Chuka may have been fed up trying to keep to his promise and his inability to control himself was extremely worrisome to me. If he knew he couldn't keep the promise, why did he agree to wait till after marriage? While Lance and his friends chattered boisterously, I ate my waffles and drank my hot cocoa quietly. Chuka's calls and apology texts kept on lighting up my phone, I completely ignored them. We stayed at the diner till 2am when they kicked us out and we all returned back to my apartment to crash. We were so tired; everybody fell asleep anywhere they could find somewhere to lay down.

The next morning, I woke everyone to leave my apartment – I needed to be alone. It was a Sunday morning, I opted not to go to church; I'd spend the day indoors talking to God in my own, private space. I spoke to God numerous times that day, crying, laughing, and pleading, nonstop. I begged him to show me the way forward.

Early Tuesday morning I woke up drenched in cold sweat because of the most horrifying nightmare I had. In the nightmare, I was fully dressed in a beautiful white dress with Chuka standing across from me at the altar and when the minister asked if there was anyone who has any objection to the union, Lare stood up. I jerked awake just as he was to speak. I prayed from 4am till 6am till it was time for my morning jog. I thought it was over with Lare, but he keeps popping into my mind, thoughts, prayers and now dreams. It must surely be a sign; nah it couldn't be.

Two days later at work, Chuka called me. He wanted to meet and talk. I chose to forgive him because of my faith. I decided to meet him on Friday for lunch. After all, he'd be traveling on Saturday anyway. My cousins – who were digging up details about him, fed me with all the details I needed about him. I know that he attended Greg's in Lagos as Adunni spoke to someone who knew him from

secondary school and ironically, the same dude's cousin worked with Chuka in NY. Amaka worked for Chase and so did Chuka. They both worked in the customer service center. He was also a university drop out and an *odu*[21] boy – a credit card scammer. I decided to go by his place after work to have a heartfelt talk with him. A European gentleman who met me at the door told me that the house was a daily rental. My head was spinning.

"Are you really sure?" I asked the man confusedly.

"Oh yes. I could give you the number of the rental manager if you want me to" he patiently replied. I left in a daze.

Chapter Four

I prayed well before falling asleep that night. I didn't want to confront Chuka over all the things I had found out; I just wanted him out of my life. I called him to let him know that I'd be too busy at the office for lunch. I wished him a good trip to Nigeria. He sent me another apology text. "I'll be thinking about you till the end of my trip" he texted me. I really hope I won't ever be seeing him again.

I was in a very good mood on Christmas morning. 1-800-flowers delivered a bouquet of beautiful red roses and chocolate to me. The card that came with the flowers indicated that they were from Chuka. How did I end up being entangled with such messy human beings? Do I have to lie about having an STD so he can leave me alone forever? When he called me to know if I got the gift, I simply thanked him for it. For Christmas, I made jollof rice, fried chicken and fired Nigerian stew. I made a quick call to Latoya to find out if they had plantains to know if I should bring some. She said they had it covered. While the food cooked, I called Lagos to wish everyone a merry Christmas.

"What are you doing for Christmas? I hope you are not spending it alone over there?" Ibu asked me anxiously.

"No, I am going over to Latoya's" I replied.

"Ah, why didn't you make *Nasi Goreng* for them now, don't you know that you're not just Nigerian, you're also Malaysian" she started teasing. I burst out laughing. "Please put daddy on the line, I'll report you to him" I told her. Dad was his usual pleasant, boisterous self. He thanked me for all the Christmas gifts I got for the family. When I asked to speak to the boys, he told me that they had gone out. The older I grow, the more I understand the reason dad married *ibu*[22]. While she was full of life, outgoing and lots of fun, dad is usually reserved and introverted. I remember *ibu* dragging him to social functions when we were younger, Dad was too modest to show his face in gatherings where his *age-mates* who were richer than him threw around money and boasted about their connections to other well-known Nigerian personalities.

After preparing and packaging the food, I called a gypsy cab company that took me into Brooklyn, East Flatbush where Latoya and her family lived. She introduced me to her family after I handed the food to her at the door. Her mother pushed a glass of eggnog into my hand; the party had already begun. Her dad whipped out the dominoes for us to play. Latoya's brother passed around trays of beef, shrimp, chicken and veggie patties with some coco bread.

By 5pm dinner was laid out on the dinner table as a buffet. Rice and peas, oxtail, curry goat, jerk pork, escovitch fish, fried plantain and some pepper shrimp along with the food I brought. The food on display was so appealing, I couldn't stop myself from eating. I haven't had a nice, home-made meal in such a long while.

"You know you can stop by someday to teach us how to make such tasty jollof rice" I heard Latoya's dad say behind me. He was carrying a plate heaped full of my jollof rice. "That's not a problem at all" I said, smiling docilely. "You've finished all the plantain here", he accused me mockingly. "I love plantain. I can't understand how you all eat a whole plate of rice with just one plantain" I retorted, laughing. "Maybe because we don't like plantain as much as you do" he said. We giggled. "Even some of the Caribbean restaurants I've been to do this same thing. They'd serve plates of rice with just a tiny piece of plantain. It's irritating especially to a plantain lover like me. If I order rice and plantain, I want to see enough plantain covering the rice" I continued. He laughed some more.

At 10pm, I was so tired I couldn't even move. Latoya asked me to spend the night, however I chose to go home as some of her cousins were spending the week with them. I didn't want to crowd them out. She called a taxi to take me home. The cab driver was a Ghanaian named Kofi. He had a long scar that ran down the back of his head. He was an upbeat, chatty man who kept on talking to me as he drove.

"Where to Miss?" he asked.

"Fulton street, downtown Brooklyn" I replied.

"So, where you from?" he asked me. I ignored him to discourage further questions from him. I was too tired to talk, especially to a stranger. But my silence did not deter him at all; he kept on chatting to me.

"I'm from Ghana, a PhD student" he continued telling even the smallest details about himself. There is this insufficiency that lower- class working Africans in New York encase themselves in especially when they meet other Africans who they think are better than them. They keep talking about their achievements even back home as if to convince one that they really are not poor. Once a Nigerian cab driver kept on telling me about his family's wealth and about how he is the prince of his community. People like that bore me – I really wish they'd just focus on the honest work they're doing. There is nothing shameful about one's honest work, no need to seek validation from strangers.

So, I ignored Kofi – as I had no interest in his conversation; it bored me tremendously because I've heard stories like his so many times before. I just wanted to get home and put my food away. Perhaps enraged because of my reticent disinterest in him, Kofi started jerking off. His right hand was inside his pants while his left hand held the steering wheel. He was moaning loudly. I was so furious. What kind of sicko is he? I didn't know if I should scream or take the risk of jumping out of the moving car before he crashes the car and kills me. My seatbelt was on, so I quietly took it off.

"If you no wan see my *kain*[23] madness right now, you better stop this car right now" I quickly switched to pidgin, screaming at him in my high-pitched Nigerian accent. He pulled up two blocks away from my apartment. I slammed the door shut after I got out. "Your bill is $12" he yelled at me as I stalked out. I flung a $10 bill at him and walked away, pulling out my phone to report him to the cab company. I ran all the way home thinking about how important it is for me to either buy a car or move to a different state. I am so tired of NY – there are just way too many crazy people in this town. When I got to my apartment, I realized that it was already Boxing Day. I started opening the gifts I got from family and friends. Latoya got me a nice blouse from Macy's and Michael got me a book from a Nigerian author. There was an envelope tucked in the middle of the book. It was $50 wrapped in a letter.

The letter was written in Michael's neat handwriting. It read:

"Dear Simone,

I wanted to say thank you for being such a wonderful sister/ mother to me. I could never repay you, but I wanted you to know that I love and appreciate all the things you do for the family and I. I know you struggle a lot with different things, and I wish you God's peace. Permit me to say how proud I am of you and your accomplishments. You are more than a role model to me, and I pray you find greater success in your endeavors.

Love,

Michael"

The gift was so simple yet so moving. It touched me so much I cried for a long time. By 2am, I stopped crying, had my bath – I spent a long time in the bathroom, washing off the grime of the horrible cab experience before heading to bed.

I didn't wake till 10 am. Since I didn't have anything planned for the day, I

decided to stay indoors. I had the whole apartment to myself and a lot of leftovers from the day before. The Macy's Boxing Day sale was tempting and since I did not get any Christmas present for myself, I decide I might go shopping after eating.

I had a hurried thought to make a mimosa, opening the new bottle of champagne I saved in my fridge. I warmed up two beef patties and coco bread, dropped them all on a tray and headed to my living room. I haven't been alone in a long while and it felt good. I grabbed my laptop from the coffee table to search through the travel websites. I found a decently priced flight and a four-star hotel combo for $600 for five days during the Easter break. I grabbed my wallet to pay for it. In four months, I'd be going to the Bahamas for Easter vacation. I squealed excitedly. I can't wait, yeah take that Macy's.

Chapter Five

On New Year's Eve, I got a text from Chuka apologizing for everything that happened between us. According to the text, he has rekindled an old relationship with one of his childhood female friends in Nigeria and was moving on. I was ecstatic to read that text. To celebrate his exit from my life, I decided to head to Times Square to watch the ball drop and possibly meet new people. The New Year has a lot of new possibilities for me that I couldn't wait to embrace.

Also, I made a new year's resolution to volunteer more. I wanted to give back more to this society that has helped shape me. I started looking for mentoring opportunities.

I spent the New Year's Day at home, relaxing, reflecting on my life so far and thanking God for the fairly decent life I've lived. Every single experience helped make and shape me. Twenty-four has been a dynamic year for me – I had a great job, wonderful family and friends scattered across the globe. I called Uncle Biodun for his birthday. Adunni snatched the phone from her father and started screaming into my ears about Funke's engagement. "I am so going to be the maid of honor", she screamed excitedly. I could hear Seye's voice in the background gibbering drunkenly.

"Simsho, happy new year!!! Your husband is in my house oh" he was screaming.

"How drunk is he? Which husband is he talking about?" I asked Adunni.

"Lare, of course now" she replied brazenly. I swear I could hear her roll her eyes.

“Please pass the phone to Uncle B *abeg*[24]” I hissed. She did, I wished uncle a very happy birthday. Uncle begged me to come back home sometime to see him.

“Uncle, I’ll be home soon” I promised. I called Funke next to congratulate her on her engagement. We squealed excitedly for a long time. She told me everything there was to know about her fiancé despite the fact that Adunni had already told me about him.

“I’m older than Adunni so you know I’d be the maid of honor abi?” I asked her.

“You two idiots are fighting over this role, two of you are my maids of honor” she chided mildly, laughing.

“That’s better. I really hope you know the kind of craziness you’ll have to deal with, right? Anyway, will it be a local or destination wedding?” I asked.

“I really want a summer destination wedding. Dad likes the idea and is ready to support me, as usual mum is giving me attitude.” She replied sadly. Marriage is a big issue to Yoruba mums. They want to be in-charge of everything, I kind of understood what she was saying.

“Just try to be reason with her, I’m sure she’ll understand. Or you can come to an agreement with the formal wedding” I suggested. Funke agreed to try it.

After making all the calls, I turned on the TV, grabbed the bottle of rose wine in my fridge. I popped the bottle in celebration of Funke, my favorite, most reasonable and responsible cousin. I was so happy for her. At 27, she already had a successful career and was getting married to the love of her life. After finishing the bottle of wine, I sorted my laundry. I made a grocery list next; I cannot live off the holiday leftovers forever. I’d be a maid of honor in about six months; I needed to start eating healthy to achieve the perfect body for my outfit. I really wanted Funke to have her destination wedding because the Nigerian churches might start with their modest dressing rules. I planned to give them hot-hot this sexy “bawdy” and really had no intention of covering up. Funke’s fiancé is a petroleum engineer; the wedding might be filled with potential suitors if his friends were anything like him.

Latoya had been trying to get me to go numerous speed dating events, she continually suggested several for me and I’d been declining because I wasn’t ready for a relationship. I called her to wish her a happy birthday and ask if she’d be going to any of the speed dating events soon. She told me to meet her

on Friday night in lower Manhattan at 6:30pm.

It was a professional only event – a bachelor's degree was the minimum requirement for entry. "So, they can just lock us out because of diplomas? Good thing we have our certificates then", I teased Latoya who laughed. I begged her to pick up the ticket for me, promising to reimburse her later.

After cleaning up my apartment, I was bored I decided to sign up to one dating site I saw on TV. I registered with my real details, careful that I didn't add where I worked or lived. The internet was filled with psychos; one has to be very careful. I put up my profile picture and clicked the register button. Within ten minutes, I started getting match notifications. The first match was with a fire fighter from New Jersey, the next guy was an oil and gas expert from Mexico and the third guy was a waiter from NY. I chose to chat up the NY waiter. It was already past 9pm and almost time for me to sleep.

"Can we meet up?" he asked me after exchanging pleasantries.

"Nah, it's way too late. I need to wake up early tomorrow for work"

"Cool. When can I meet you?" he asked.

"Well, I'll be busy all week." I typed back.

"I can eat your booty if you like", he replied. I knew it – there are way too many psychos out there for me to try online dating. I quickly deactivated my account; being single is not a crime, I'll rather remain single.

Chapter Six

The return back to work after the holiday celebration was quite uneventful. I noticed that Natalya wasn't speaking much; I gave her the space she seemed to need. I hoped she'd work through whatever it is she's going through. I really like Natalya; she was like the unofficial mentor I needed in a workplace filled with men. I made a mental note to pick up the new blouse I'd wear for the speed-dating event with Latoya on Friday.

I missed Sade. It's been so long since we spoke. I checked my personal email to chat with her. Sade has been very quiet and reluctant to communicate with me. I wonder what she must have been going through. Whenever Sade recoils into solitude, it's usually a sign of hard times, most probably man problem. "You know you can always talk to me about whatever it is, right? I promise I won't judge" I typed to her. A new notification from Funke popped up. The email introduced all the bridesmaids to each other and information about the dresses she wanted us to wear for her wedding.

"Please if you have a different idea in mind, drop your suggestions here" Funke wrote. Adunni immediately posted a picture of the sluttiest dress I've ever seen. "I saw this on the internet. I'd like to wear this one. It's classy and sexy in a subtle way" she wrote.

The talk and wedding plans exhausted and made me a little envious. Funke is not prettier than me; she's not smarter than I am. She's getting married and I couldn't even find a decent guy who could commit to me. Thoughts about Lare ran through my mind – I regret each day about how things ended between us. I should have tried making things work between us. I managed to push the ugly thoughts running through my mind out. Funke was my cousin – my blood relative. A victory for one of us should be a victory for all of us.

I opened new tabs on my laptop to search for the perfect bridesmaid dress that would match Funke's color choices and yet appeal to Adunni's *hoe-is-me* fashion taste. I selected and sent three sample dresses to Funke and also a personal email informing her if she wanted anything from NY to let me know. After sending the emails, I instantly felt better – comparison really is the thief of joy.

I wore jeans and winter boots to work on Friday morning. I'd be going to the speed-dating event from the office, I opted to wear a fancy blouse underneath my sweater. A notification from the Boys and Girls club regarding an

orientation session the next day at 10 am distracted me temporarily. Natalya, who seemed to be in a better mood, came around my office to say hello. At the end of the workday, I picked up my purse and headed out to the train station where I hopped on the number two train heading to lower Manhattan. Latoya was waiting for me on the platform, we hugged and together we headed above ground into the frigid January air.

Walking hurriedly, Latoya quickly fills me in on everything I need to know about the event we were heading to. I handed her my cash for my ticket – our ticket numbers were 13 and 14 respectively. We bought two corona beers and settled into our seats. There were about thirty men and thirty women at the event. We had to spend at least three minutes sitting in front of each person to decide if we like the person or not based on the conversation with them during the allotted time. We also wrote down the numbers of the people we were interested in and if they pick us in return, then we get to sit down with them and engage in proper meaningful conversations and maybe follow up outside the venue. I sat across from the number 13 man – he was everything I never ever wanted in a man.

He was heavily tattooed with rough, calloused hands, a permanent evidence of his profession as a construction worker. I felt slightly lucky with the number 20 man – a doctor who worked the emergency room, he seemed decent enough, so I wrote down his number. Number 25 guy also intrigued me; a Yoga studio owner and into holistic health. His untidy dreads turned me off. By the time we were done, I had about five numbers written down. Numbers 2, 7, 11 were the top on my list. Most of the people present were white collar professionals because the college degree part of the qualification requirement deterred those without degrees from attending the event.

I had to wait a few minutes for all the tickets to be tallied to see which of the guys I had picked actually chose me. Numbers 7 and 11 picked me. Number 7 was a white professional writer who wrote for the geographic. He was from upstate NY, 30 and seemed very excited about culture. He travelled a lot for work and was just back from Costa Rica. Number 11 was a 33-year-old African American pediatric nurse. “I’ve been a nurse for over 7 years now. I love kids so much”, he told me.

I chose to sit with number 11 since he was the free one and also because I didn’t want to stay out too late, it was already 9pm. We chatted briefly and the whole time he kept on licking lips. I was not sure if he was trying hard to be sexy or if he had a really bad case of dry lips. For a guy, he seemed really invested in his looks, telling me his favorite pastime was going to the spas to get facials.

When I asked him about his job, he lit up and started talking passionately about his job. He told me about the babies he had helped deliver and about how he was the only male nurse on the floor in the hospital where he works. He talked nonstop. I noticed that he simply loved being the center of attention and working with mostly women gave him just that. If I were to end up with him, I'd have to spend long hours paying attention to him and condoning his weird fascinations. Abruptly, I got up to excuse myself. Number 7 was the only person left that I really wanted to speak with. When I found him, we sat across each other to discuss. The conversation was sparkling and going well until I mentioned that I was from Nigeria and he derailed the entire conversation into his Kenyan 2nd ex-wife and the two kids he had with her. I feigned interest as he drooled on about himself, travels and family.

I had to cut him short when I got tired of listening to him. "I really have to go. I've got to get up early tomorrow morning for work", I lied. "oh, sorry for keeping you. Here's my email, write to me sometime" he said, pulling out a pen from his black jacket to write down the email address on the back of the ticket. I wrote down a fake email address for him in return.

Latoya was ready to leave too, her experience at the event wasn't any better. I concluded I may have been cursed or perhaps I am a closet lesbian, because I don't know how I can have such ill-luck with men. Maybe I just have to adopt a child after grad school or go to a sperm bank. Ibu will not be pleased with the decision but unless I meet someone soon, I may not have any other choice.

I walked into my apartment to meet my brother Michael in the kitchen putting away the bags of *garri, poundo, kilish*[25]*i*, crayfish and many other things he brought back from Lagos. We hugged each other tightly. "I've missed you so much", I told him. "Well, I didn't know how much I had forgotten about Ibu's[26] craziness till I got back to Lagos", He said. We laughed. "That's mum for you; always has a way of sending everyone up the wall sometimes". I said. He brought out two well-wrapped packages for me. The first package was suya – its sweet smell filled the room. The other package was Nasi Goreng. Even though it was past 10 in the night, I still pulled out a bowl, soaked some *garri* and sat down to enjoy it with the suya. By midnight, I was so stuffed. I changed into my nightshirt and hopped into bed so I could wake up early for my mentorship program.

I was lying out on a private beach sunbathing, wearing just my bikini bottoms. I had fallen asleep with the sun kissing my back. I felt a light caress on my butt and familiar feeling hands sliding down my bottom. He kissed me from the cape

of my neck, down to my back and bottom parting my legs. I felt the warmth of his tongue part my lips and make its way down to my love below. I gasped when he used his fingers to penetrate me. I came up on my knees to give him better access and heard myself screaming: "Lare baby please don't stop", i kept on yelling till I exploded on his face.

I woke up drenched in sweat. A glance at the clock on my nightstand showed that the time was 3 am. Touching myself, I noticed my panties were dripping wet. How is this possible – dreaming about receiving pleasure from a married man who I thought I was done with?

Chapter Seven

For the most of January, Natalya was extremely busy, busier than usual. One day, she summoned the entire department to an unusual mid-week meeting. She informed us of the latest development – the U.S government would be auditing the company. We had to provide information and that entailed working longer than normal hours. We ended up providing a flurry of information for almost three weeks into early February.

Funke had planned to visit NY after Easter to buy her wedding dress. Adunni agreed to take a week off to assist her in picking out the perfect dress. I couldn't take time off from work to join them since the workload was so hectic and I hadn't earned much time off yet, not if I still wanted to go on the Bahamas vacation. However, I made a list of designers/brands Funke could consider for her wedding dress. I made appointments with about fifteen potential boutiques in NY that had the dresses. Some of them were close to my workplace and others were in the evenings after work hours – I'd join them for the shopping whenever I could.

Ibu was still trying to match me with the sons of her numerous friends. Few days before valentine, she called me again to tell me about the son of her Malaysian friend. "He came to New York from Malaysia the same time you did. See? It's a sign. I think he is the one for you" she said excitedly. I hated crushing her excitement, but I didn't care much about any of her matchmaking choices.

"Ma, you know I don't like Malaysian men." I gently eased in.

"Just meet him first. What's the harm in trying, Simone?" she insisted.

"If you don't stop harassing and trying to matchmake me, I'll have no other option but to report you to daddy"

"Valentine's is coming up soon. You're not getting any younger. I'm just trying to look out for you." she reduced her voice. The threat worked.

"I appreciate that, Ibu but it's all coming off a lot like pressure. Can you back off a little? The perfect guy for me will find me at the right time" I sermonized. She sighed loudly before changing the topic. I knew that I had turned into a valentine Grinch among my friends since I'd be the only one without a valentine date. Even Latoya already started dating. My other friends had plans for valentine; even my brother Michael had plans too.

On valentine day, romance and love filled the air, almost choking me. At every

turn, I saw couples everywhere loving on each other intimately, gifting each other flowers and chocolates. My office gave out single roses to the ladies. Natalya brought cake to the office; someone else brought a bottle of wine. We laughed, gossiped about who forgot to get their wife and girlfriend presents, who had to beg to book a spot at a restaurant for the night, who proposed and who spent almost all their savings to please grumpy people. I didn't care about the love in the air; I cared more about the candy sale taking place after the celebrations.

Two days after the euphoria of Valentine's Day, I walked into the office about fifteen minutes early to find Natalya in a heated argument with the HR manager inside her closed office. I made a cup of tea for myself and settled at my desk for the day's work. As I turned on the computer and tried logging in, I couldn't. I tried logging in again about ten more times and still couldn't log in. I walked over to my neighbor Ryan's cubicle to ask him if he could log in. "I've been trying to log in, but I still can't. It could be a technical problem" Ryan complained. We were about to call IT when Natalya walked into the office. "I'd like to see you two…individually" she said sadly. Ryan entered her office first, he came out with a long face and started packing his things. Perplexed, I entered Natalya's office.

"Ryan's packing. What's happening?" I asked even before Natalya could look up from her desk.

'Please sit, Simone" she instructed calmly, waving me into the swivel chair in her office. I sat down nervously.

"Now's there's no easy way to say this. I'm equally appalled, we've lost the contract that funds our department. We'll be letting you go since there's no funding for the department anymore." Natalya said quietly, a dull lull in her voice.

"What do you mean?" I asked shocked.

"Our employer committed some improprieties when bidding for the contract. I wish I can tell you everything; I would if I knew everything. All I'm sure of is that we're all being laid off"

"Even you?" I asked even more shocked.

"Yes" Natalya's eyes turned moist.

"oh my god". I was so shocked; I couldn't even string words together coherently.

"Look, I'm so glad I met you here and had the privilege of working with you.

You're a brilliant, efficient young woman with loads of potential. Anyone who hires you will be so glad they did. I hope we will continue being friends" Natalya continued. I felt my eyes well up.

"Can I hug you?" I managed to ask. We hugged and held onto each other for a brief moment. I'd miss her so much. She taught me so many things about our work. I went back to my desk to pack up.

I took the train home, trying hard to hold back the tears threatening to spill from my eyes. I broke down, however when I got to my apartment. My work was the only thing that gave me a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. I loved working so much. And now it's all gone. I was almost 25, unemployed, unloved, no hope of going to grad school, I felt so empty. I cried so hard my eyes hurt. Michael was still in school and will be heading to work from there; I wasn't expecting him back home till at least 9pm. I curled into myself on the couch and cried some more.

Hunger forced me into the kitchen at noon. I toasted a bagel, spread some cream cheese on it, and poured myself a glass of orange juice. After eating, I started the process of filing for my unemployment – I was qualified to file for unemployment since I worked at my previous office for more than six months. I decided to call Natalya's cell just to know how she's doing. She picked on the third ring.

"Hello" her voice was so low as if weighed down by pain.

"I just wanted to know how you're doing." I said.

"I've had such a hard day. I told about 15 people I've worked with for years today that they no longer had a job. I lost my job. It's been really tough" she said breaking down. I comforted her. We spoke for a few more minutes. I managed to calm her down. We agreed to meet for coffee the next day.

Before meeting Natalya, the next day, I went to St. Rose for the early service. Afterwards, I met Natalya at the Macy's on 34th street. We headed to the Sabarros on 33rd for pizza, where we communed for over three hours. We laughed, exchanged meaningful information that could help us. Natalya gave me the number to call to start processing my unemployment for half of my last paycheck weekly. If the process was done successfully, I can at least afford to pay my rent without worries and still have more than $30,000 cumulative in investments and liquid cash. I'd still be able to afford attending Funke's wedding. She had announced the Wedding would be in Ghana at the Labidi beach resort hotel in June. Natalya suggested I consider studying for the GRE

and look for grad schools to apply to.

Since I wasn't job hunting, I went down to Barnes and Noble during the weekend to pick up a few GRE books, also adding a few chic-lit novels to the pile of books I bought. I couldn't wallow in self-misery for the rest of my life; losing my job should not be the end of my life. For the first time in a long while, I was not working, I made a list of places in NY I wanted to see; planning to visit them weekly. I called home to let them know I was no longer working. Ibu didn't handle the news well. She broke down hard; dad had to take the phone away from her. His soothing, reasonable voice over the phone was the healing balm my soul needed.

"How are you holding up baby girl?" he asked.

"Surprisingly, I've been very fine. I guess I've matured more than I realized" I replied. If I closed my eyes, I could see dad's face widen with smiles.

"Do you have enough money?" he asked. H revived the catfish farm, and the business seems to be doing very well. He can now afford to send me money. I declined his offer. I told him I'd be home for Funke's wedding in June. He seemed happy to hear that. After we ended the call, I felt lighter, happier and even more willing and excited to live life.

I volunteered more at the Boys & Girls club and the church, signed up on a few more social networking sites to connect with old friends and make new ones. I read the GRE books – for the first test I attempted, I made 40%. If I was going to make grad school, I needed to study more to make higher grades than that. Latoya came over to my apartment to spend a weekend with me. We had a great weekend girlfriends' show marathon. We watched Nigerian movies – we bought the DVDs on Flatbush in Brooklyn. We laughed and talked so much. Latoya told me about her past relationships, crazy relatives, her uncle in jail, her crazy cousins in Miami. We bonded so much over the weekend and shared with each other secrets we couldn't share with the other people in our lives. Her sleepover made me realize just how much I've missed Sade. We've grown apart so much over time as distance has a way of putting a strain on relationships. I wondered how she was doing, making a mental note to email her later.

Adunni called to check up on me. We spoke for a while about the Easter trip to New York she'd be making with Funke. I introduced her to Latoya, and they spoke as if they've always known each other and made plans to hang out together when Adunni visits.

On Friday morning, Michael went to school and was heading to work

afterwards. Since I lost my job, Michael has been taking care the other bills, even offering to pay the rent till I got a new job. I was so grateful to have him as my brother. The building intercom rang shortly after Michael left. I ignored the intercom – since I wasn't expecting any visitor. I was startled out of my thoughts when my apartment bell rang. Who could it be? I wasn't expecting any visitor at 10 am that Friday morning. I ignored the doorbell, but the buzzing didn't stop till I dropped my phone. Looking through the peephole, I saw Lare standing outside my door. I was still wearing the same clothes I've worn for almost a week. I ran into the bedroom, pulled on a pair of sweats, a clean bra and shirt. I hurriedly brushed my teeth and gargled, pulled my hair into a disheveled bun before opening the door.

"Come in" I said

Chapter Eight

Lare stood in front of my door, wearing the same perfume I remember, the same haircut I remember, the same wristwatch; he was also wearing the same smirk I remember. He looked unchanged, like the same Lare I remember. Emotions swirled inside me. I wanted to jump on him, to kiss him, to pull him into the bed with me but I quickly jolted to my senses. “Please do come in”, I led him into the living room. He walked into the apartment, looked around, swept his arms across the living room. “I really like it” he said. I smiled widely because he remembered what he said at my previous apartment that led to our break-up. “Thank you” I managed to say when I found my voice. I was still shocked. I haven’t seen him in what a year or so and now he was standing in my living room. Lare was carrying a few bags he dropped on the coffee table.

So many questions were running through my mind I wanted to ask him. I settled into my lounger after offering him a drink.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’ve been trying to reach you for about three months now” he said calmly.

“Why are you trying to reach me? Do you need my professional services or something?” I retorted austerely. He shook his head slowly. His entire presence was starting to turn me on.

“Do you want to go down to the coffee shop downstairs?” I asked. Lare lifted the Starbucks bag he came with –he bought three different cups of coffee, some muffins, bagels and sandwiches. He still remembered my favorite coffee.

“Do you want the cappuccino?” he asked, handing me the cup and a warm toasted bagel with bacon and eggs. Hurriedly, I entered the kitchen to get some plates.

“You might want to come over to the dining table” I said. We ate in almost utmost silence for twenty minutes. I couldn’t take my eyes off him; the way his stubbly jaw moved as he chewed fascinated me.

“Why are you in New York? Why are you in my apartment?” I asked when we finished eating.

“I came into town to renew my contract with the Nigerian embassy. Also, I really needed a personal trip” he replied. He coyly ignored the question about what he was doing in my apartment.

“Lare, what are you doing in my apartment? How did you know where I live? How did you know I’d be home? Why didn’t you call before coming?” I asked with a mix of fury and confusion.

“I got your address from Adunni. Seye refused to even listen to me. Adunni told me that you lost your job, so I figured you’d be home since you are no longer working.” He replied.

“Can I help you? Why are you here then? You’re a married man, Lare. Have you forgotten?” I questioned relentlessly.

“I was married, yes but I was not in love with Morayo. She’s a wonderful woman who seems to possess every quality required of a decent wife. My mum said we don’t need love in marriage; that we’d grow to love each other. But we’ve been married for years now and I still can’t get myself to love her, not in the ways a husband should love his wife” Lare revealed to me.

“What am I supposed to do with this information? Why’d you marry her if you know that you don’t love her like that? I asked.

“The summer before our traditional marriage, I visited Morayo in her private apartment to find her having sex with her female PA. She was wearing a strap on dildo, seriously pounding her assistant. I was shocked because Morayo had told me she doesn’t believe in pre-marital sex, not knowing she was a closeted lesbian or whatever she was. I wanted to call off the wedding, but she kept on begging me to think about how the news would devastate her family. All her mother ever wanted her to do was get married. Also, I was so embarrassed I didn’t even want to share that with anyone. Besides, you had left me, and I wanted to move on. So, I married her despite knowing that the woman I was marrying was possibly bisexual”

“Oh my god!!! Why’d you do that?” I was nearly screaming.

“Look, I thought I’d help her keep her secret, that type of news will break her mother especially. At least that was what I thought until around October when I started noticing some of my personal belongings were missing from our home. You know the cook, housekeeper and steward, right? They’ve been with me even before marriage and I retained them after I married Morayo. They’ve never stolen anything from me. When my favorite watch went missing, I decided to install a hidden camera in our bedroom without telling Morayo before traveling to Abuja. I wanted to know how my personal belongings were disappearing. Around November, my university graduation ring disappeared along with the custom cufflinks my dad gifted me. I watched the video from the hidden camera,

I couldn’t believe my eyes. It turned out my wife who I married to keep her secret was cheating on me, I saw strangers on two occasions in my closet while my wife was busy fucking someone else. They were not only robbing me, but they were also fucking my wife and having orgies.

I just couldn’t take that, It broke my heart. I downloaded the video to my laptop and went to Ghana for a weekend. I needed to calm down and think rationally. As soon as I got back from Ghana, I called my dad and told him everything that happened. I told my mum I’d be asking for a divorce. Morayo’s parents were angry that I wanted to end the marriage to their daughter, not wanting to hear what I had to say at first. Everything escalated so quickly into such an ugly situation that included name-calling. My dad tried talking with her father, but he didn’t want to listen, so I had no other option but to play the video I had as evidence. Her parents were so shocked, Morayo was crying hysterically. By December, everyone had calmed down enough with Morayo’s father agreeing to return the bride price. I filed for divorce. The catholic priest who married us was able to dissolve the marriage and I was glad the entire charade was over” Lare continued with his story. I was so shocked; I couldn’t speak.

“I am so sorry you went through all that. I’m really sorry”, I was almost crying.

“I thought that was the end but around January, Morayo appeared again claiming she was pregnant with my child. I was so sure that child was not mine. I insisted on a DNA test. The results came out about a week ago, that child doesn’t belong to me.” he concluded.

I looked at him in disbelief.

“How have you been doing, really with all this you’ve been through?” I asked calmly holding back the wild range of emotions I was feeling. Lare started crying, his entire body shook with pain. I got up from my chair, walked towards him. I held him in my arms; he leaned into me, held my waist and wept even harder. I rocked him gently and let him cry out all his frustrations. I didn’t even know how fix this mess.

When he calmed down, I asked to see his laptop, asking for the video, I deleted the video and DNA test results, and even emptied his trash.

“You did nothing to deserve this garbage treatment, Lare. Everything that happened wasn’t your fault” I said, taking his face in my hands. I was looking so deep into his eyes; I could see my reflection in his eyes. Overwhelmed with emotions, he started kissing me, I kissed him back. I pulled back from him when I realized that I was dealing with a damaged man. I didn’t want a broken man.

“Why did you choose to pour out your heart to me?” I light-heartedly asked him.

“You’re the only person I can freely talk to without fear of judgment. I knew you’d listen to me” he answered quietly in a low voice.

“Let’s go for a walk”. I went into the shower, locked the door properly, turned on the showerhead and touched myself till I orgasmed. I needed a clearer head. Lare’s presence made my legs and vagina wobble with desire and lust. After showering and getting dressed, I grabbed my coat from the closet, along with my Ugg boots and handbag. We set out to wander around the city with no definite direction in mind.

Chapter Nine

As we walked around the park, watching the people and buildings, we talked more.

“How long do you intend to stay in NY?” I asked Lare.

“About a week but I can extend it to three more weeks if you agree to spend time with me.”

“What are we going to be doing together?” I said.

“We’d be going on dates and doing any other things couples do” Lare replied. I paused for a moment.

“You just got out of a really bad marriage. I don’t think it’s time for you to jump into another relationship” I said.

“I want to move on. I’m trying to move on…possibly with you” he said. His words melted my heart. I asked him where he was staying – he mentioned a quite expensive hotel.

“That place is quite expensive”

“Don’t have to worry about the bill, just say yes to my request.” He said. I giggled and said I’d think about it. After fifteen minutes of walking around the park, talking and laughing, we sat down on a bench in the park to rest.

“What do you want from me?”

“Another chance. I want to try again with you. This time, I hope to make it right”

“Would you consider re-marrying?” I asked.

“With the right person? Absolutely yes.” He answered.

“I was concerned you’ve been so badly hurt and that might make you not want to try marriage again”

“I’ll be going to therapy soon. It might help me work through my issues. You don’t have to worry about me; you are not going to be my free emotional dumping ground. I’ll try my best to be a better man for you – the kind of man you deserve.”

After so many years apart, my soulmate was finally back, a little broken, but back nonetheless.

“I’d be turning twenty-five in a few months. I still have two years of graduate school…”

“Please Simone. Let’s not go through this again. I came to you because I’ve learnt my lesson. Even then, I was still willing to wait for you. That hasn’t changed. Even if I have to wait till, I turn 100 with grey hair all over my head, I’d still be waiting for you” Lare said softly.

While we still spoke, my phone rang. It was a strange Nigerian number. I had no clue who it was clearly.

“Hello”, I greeted when I picked up.

“Hello, Simone. This is Toni, Lare’s sister. Please have you heard from him? I have been sending him emails and calling him, but he still hasn’t responded in over 36 hours.” I heard a strange voice say. I handed the phone to Lare. “It’s your sister, I muttered”.

“Hi, Toni.” He spoke into the phone. He listened for a while before saying: “yes, I think she has agreed.” He handed the phone back to me. I was a bit confused. Agreed for what? Toni was still on the line. She told me about how Lare’s marriage broke down and about how he confided in her his plans to get back with. “I’m so happy; he’s trying to love again, all thanks to you. Because of you, my brother is willing to open up to love again and heal. The next time I’m in NY, I hope to meet you” she told me.

After the call ended, I asked him if he was hungry. We’ve been at the park for over two hours. “Come on, I’m taking you to lunch” Lare offered. “I have some leftovers from the last meal I made. Let’s go back to my apartment” I suggested. Lare teased me laughingly. “I didn’t even know you could cook” he said. At my apartment, I pulled out the food I had made, Nasi Goreng with friend chicken, rice, peas and jerk chicken that Latoya taught me how to make. Lare asked for all the food. I made our plates and put them into the microwave. I set the table and asked him to sit down. I poured him some strawberry flavored water with a wedge of lime. We settled down to eat. He ate in complete silence and smiled afterwards.

“Ah, where have you been all this while?” he asked playfully.

“I’ve been here in NY all this time”. Michael would be home soon; I didn’t want him to meet Lare in the apartment.

“Do you have any plans for this evening?” I asked him.

“Not really. I don’t have any work to do till Monday. Do you want to do

anything?" He replied.

"Not quite." I answered.

"Can you spend the night with me then?" he pleaded. Since I re-dedicated my life to Christ, I vowed never to have pre-marital sex. Yet, here is the man I have always loved tempting me.

"I'll be right back", I said before rushing off to the bathroom. I called Latoya to ask for her advice.

"Girl, this is true love. He came back for you. You should let him sleep over at your place or go with him. Give it another chance" she squealed into the phone. I decided to spend the weekend at Lare's hotel with him. I left a note for Michael, informing him that I'd not be around for the weekend and that he'd have the apartment to himself for the weekend. I packed an overnight bag with some of the ugliest clothes I owned. I'm not sure why I chose to go with the ugliest clothes, but I suspected that I may end up sleeping with Lare. I wanted to discourage his interest in me by dressing badly. I love him so much, but I need him to heal first.

At the hotel, we stayed in to watch a movie while eating dinner in front of the TV. I told him about my Bahamas Easter vacation.

"Do you really want to go alone? You could stay with me here in NY if you want" he said. "I really want to go to the Bahamas. I want to spend some time alone to prepare for Adunni and Funke's visit. Besides, I've already gotten the ticket." I replied.

"Can I come with you then, please?" Lare pleaded with me.

"Wait, hold on! You're not yet technically divorced on paper oh." I countered.

"But I'll be divorced soon, nonetheless right?" he asked, laughing.

"Well, till then, I have to see the papers" I said.

"Simone, I want to marry you. If you want to right now, we could go down to the justice of peace right now to get married."

"That'd be bigamy" I said.

"I don't care" he said.

"Look, if you want me to consider going into this relationship with you, you'd have to do a few things for me. First, you'll go to therapy to work out your messy issues with your ex-relationship. You'll have to finalize your divorce

before proposing. And finally, we won't get married till I'm done with my masters. We need to start this slow if we're going to make it work. I am not the same person I used to be and I'm sure you've evolved too. We need to get to know each other better, slowly". I laid down my rules.

"All these are things I am willing to do to be with you." Lare agreed.

"When was the last time you got tested for STDs? I'm sure you were having unprotected sex with your ex-wife not knowing that she was cheating on you." I asked.

"I've been tested twice since the break-up. I can show you the results on my laptop if you want. They're all negative" Lare said. After eating dinner, I was so stuffed that all I wanted to do was lie down and sleep. Lare offered me the bed and chose the couch in the living area of the suite. I plugged my headphones to listen to my favorite song – *You're the one* for me by SWV. I sang along to the beautiful lyrics of the song. I didn't know when Lare entered the bedroom, singing and dancing along to the song. I looked up to see him singing and dancing around, I burst out laughing. His funny dance moves amused me a lot. He pulled me up from the bed, "come on, join me let's dance" he said. We danced together till I got tired. I went back to bed while Lare went into the bathroom to shower.

I listened to the sounds of Lare bathing, unable to fall asleep. Thoughts about all the wonderful things Lare had done to me in the past flooded my mind; I wanted him to do all those things to me again. Creamy liquid made my pants wet. I jumped out of the bed, grabbed Lare's laptop, found the folder for all SWV's songs. I made a playlist of all my favorite SWV's songs. I took off my clothes, it littered the floor. I opened the bathroom door, the water running down his lithe body aroused me. I hugged him tight from behind and started crying. With the water now hitting us both, he turned around to face me and hugged me in return.

"I'm so sorry for all the pain I must have caused you, baby. I love you so much"

"I don't want to fight anymore. I am tired of struggling to keep my head above" I wept.

"You're all I need" he said. He washed me thoroughly, dried me off and carried me to the bed where he applied lotion all over my skin and pulled his t-shirt over my head. He wore his pajamas, climbed into the bed with me and cuddled me till I fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter Ten

I woke up in a daze the next morning around 9 am. At first, I was confused about the strange room I was in but then slowly it dawned on me. I quickly brushed my teeth; I was still wearing Lare's shirt. I pulled my hair into a neat ponytail. Gingerly, I stepped into the living room but Lare was not there. I went back to the bathroom to take my bath, get dressed before he came back. I also made a few calls to Michael first, and then to Sade. Sade's phone rang out, but she did not answer. Something must be wrong. I made a mental note to call Ibu to get Sade's mum's number from her. I sent Adunni an email. Afterwards, I turned on the TV to listen to the morning news, the bad news televised depressed me. I turned off the TV and got back to the bed. I dragged out my laptop from the bag to get on with studying for my GRE. I downloaded more material from some websites. When I became famished, I debated whether I should order some food from room service or wait for Lare to return. I gulped down a bottle of water and fell asleep again. I woke up again by noon to find Lare sitting in the living room working on his laptop.

"Hey, you're awake" he said, standing from his laptop.

"Where did you go to?"

"I'm so sorry. I had some things I wanted to handle, and I didn't want to wake you. I should have written you a note"

"I'm hungry. Did you order room service yet?" I asked.

"Yes. I wasn't sure what you wanted to eat. So, I ordered everything they had and some Thai for lunch" he said, pulling me towards the dining. I settled down to enjoy the food sprawled on the table. Lare selected a TV series, we binge-watched for over four hours.

"We need to talk" Lare said while the movie was still on.

"Come on, let's head out. I need fresh air; we'll talk while walking" I suggested.

"But first before we do that. Close your eyes" he instructed, holding my right hand. "Okay", I said, closing my eyes. He clasped something on my hand before telling me to open my eyes again. There was a very sparkling, shiny Harry Winston looking diamond bracelet on my arm. I squealed with excitement. "Thank you, thank you so much" I screamed, jumping on him.

In the evening, he suggested we go shopping. I didn't feel like shopping; I just wanted to eat, cuddle and sleep. So, we stayed in, discussing our future goals.

“There are so many things I want to do to grow my brand. I also want to give back” Lare explained to me.

“That’s great”

“Have you started studying for your GRE?”

“Yes. It’s not easy to grasp but I intend to keep at it” I replied.

“Are you sure you want to stay in NY for your grad school?” he asked me.

“I have to stay in NY. Michael is almost graduating. Soon, Paul will be coming here too in September to start his university education. I need to be here for him.”

“That’s what I love most about you – your selflessness.” He kissed me on the lips, gently.

“You know you can go to grad school online right?”

“Yes, but I don’t really like the idea.” I turned down the offer. He wanted me to go to online grad school so I could be with him. Sometimes, he makes me feel so small and under-accomplished. I want to do certain things on my own terms. I’ve also noticed that the turn of events in his life may have changed Lare a little. He now seemed a bit insecure and not really as sure of himself. I chose to push those thoughts to the back of my mind and enjoy a good day with him. We went to the games arcade in Times Square where we played all sorts games, afterwards, we went to the restaurant section – I ordered a Pina colada with my burger and Fries while Lare ordered a corona beer to go with his smoked salmon and mashed potatoes. Watching Lare eat aroused me so much, the way he smacked and licked his lips sent shivers down my skin. I took off the Ugg boot on my right foot, and with my stockinged foot I started caressing Lare’s crotch, making him nearly jump out of his chair with shock. He begged me to stop.

“Stop doing that please” he pleaded with me breathily.

“What would you do to make me stop?” I asked.

“I’ll do anything…anything just please stop” he pleaded.

“I’ll have to get back to you on that, you promised” I said before taking my foot off him. We left the arcade holding hands. We walked around the city, trying to see new things around the familiar streets of NY. While we strolled, Lare stepped away from me to make a call to Nigeria. I stared into a display window of a designer shop on 5th avenue while he made his call. When he was done, he led me back to the hotel. “I want to send an email’, he told me. Inside our room, I

took off my clothes to take my bath. The bathtub was already filled with water and red roses floated on top of the water.

Lare knocked on the door, entered smiling mischievously.

“Get in. take your bath”, he urged me gently. I slipped into the bathtub carefully, allowing the water to envelope my body, serenading me. Lare knelt on the floor next to the tub, picked up a bar of soap. He worked his way from my back to my front, gently running the soap around and underneath my breasts. Using his soapy hands, he caressed my breasts while kissing my neck. I felt his hand rub my belly, going further down. He held me up with his other hand on my upper back as he touched me. I tried kissing him, but he moved his face away.

“Now’s my turn to tease you” he whispered into my ears. He continued touching me and when I started whimpering, about to cum, he stopped pleasuring me. I gasped. “Please don’t stop”.

“That’s payback for the torture you put me through at the restaurant earlier” he said, standing to leave. I whined frustrated but he kept on laughing at me. “Finish up your bath” he said, leaving me with my frustrations. After the bath, I met him in the living room. “I need to get back home on Sunday” I informed him, still pissed at what he did to me in the bathroom.

“Oh, come on. Stay here” he objected.

“I need to get back because I’d be going to church on Sunday. I need to see my brother and call my mom too” I insisted. Also, I needed to get away from him. Being around him makes me lose all my senses. With Lare, everything felt right, even the fornication I had vowed never to engage in again, but I still need to be sure I was doing what’s right for my future. I need to be sure that I still love this man or if it was my loneliness caused by years of being single that was messing with my head.

On Sunday, I called *Ibu* early in the morning. Just like my father, Ibu wasn’t really the church-going type.

“How are things going?” I asked her after greeting her.

“Everything is fine dear. The business is picking up again. We just got new contracts to supply three hotel chains with fish and also a supermarket with over 100 branches wants us to supply them fish too” she sounded so happy and excited.

“Wow. Mama we’ve made it ohh” I yelled excitedly. Ibu laughed heartily.

“How are you my darling daughter?”

“I’m fine. I just came back from mass”

“That’s wonderful. How’s your brother?” she asked.

“Michael’s fine. You should call him sometime soon” I said.

“I will. How are your boyfriends?” *Ibu* asked.

“Quit playing with me, *Ibu*.”

“My friend’s son is still single. Should I collect his number for you?”

“*Ibu*, that’s not why I called you, I want to discuss something with you. If dad’s around you, could you move away from him?” I heard her shuffle off to another room and shut the door.

“What’s the matter Simone?”

“Nothing major. It’s just that I’ve started seeing someone recently but I’m not too sure about him. He just recently got separated from his wife.”

“Do I know him? What’s his name?” she asked. I told her Lare’s full name.

“I recognize that name. His wedding was covered in one of those glossy magazines I keep around here” she said. I explained Lare’s situation to her briefly, asking for her advice.

“You should pray about it. If you trust God, he’ll lead you and tell you what to do” she advised after listening to me.

“Thanks a lot mom. Please don’t tell dad anything about this” I begged her.

“I won’t. And please tell Lare to come see me in the office when he gets back to Lagos” she said before hanging up the call. I was dreading that. Who knows what she will say to him?

I called Latoya afterwards to come over to my apartment for a late lunch. I emailed Adunni while waiting on Latoya. I was still pissed about her snitching on me to Lare. If not for the information she provided him, I’d still have my life and head set straight. I called her a sellout in the fake-angry email I sent to her. The lunch with Latoya was so much fun. She told me about her boyfriend who was trying to propose to her but doesn’t seem to have enough money for marriage.

“Just believe in love” I advised her.

“You’re an idiot. Is it love that will pay the bills?” Latoya said. I laughed so

much.

“Maybe you should accept the proposal but don’t marry him right away. Just give him some time to grow” I insisted.

‘I’ll think about it” Latoya said.

“So, tell me everything about your little get-away with Mr. Right” Latoya said, drawing closer to me with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. I told her everything about my time together with Lare, leaving out the sensual parts of course. I didn’t want her to judge me. She hollered when I showed her the bracelet Lare gave me. She grabbed my laptop to search for the bracelet on the harry Winston website. She found it after a few clicks. According to the website, the bracelet cost about $6,500. She asked me about how I met Lare. I told her everything I wanted her to know.

“Awww!!! That’s so sweet. You’re so lucky to have him and he is so lucky to have you. Please if you have any available brother who is just like Lare, hook me up” she joked.

We laughed.

Chapter Eleven

Lare called me on Sunday evening. He wanted to know if I'd like to go to dinner.

"Since you have a big day tomorrow at the consulate, why don't we do it Monday night?" I suggested.

"That will be nice. Tomorrow is my first day with the therapist"

"Are you ready for it?" I asked.

"I want to do it so I'm ready." He replied.

After we ended the call, I headed to the bathroom to pack up my laundry to put it in the washing machine. Getting there, I found out that Michael had already done the laundry. So, I searched online for libraries located around my house. It's already March and I'm still undecided about where I'd apply for grad school or what I'd even study. I needed to get my thoughts together. If I don't decide soon, that'd mean I won't start grad school next fall. I had already missed application deadlines. I might as well find a job that will enable me pay for my education at least partially.

I woke up at 7am on Monday morning, called Lare to wish him a good day before hopping into the shower, made my coffee and dressed up to leave the house with my laptop bag. At the library, I settled into a dark corner and logged into the U.S college news websites to look at graduate statistics and other related programs. I found programs rated top five. M.I.T had an online statistics program. I found out that I'd be making Lare wait for me an extra three years. I made notes of all the requirements for all the schools, mentally scheduled my first GRE for early June. I had three months to study and write my personal statement.

I studied till 4pm. My phone was in silent mode and when I left the library, I saw the missed calls from Lare. I tried calling Sade, but her number seemed to be off. So, I called Adunni instead. "Snitch bitch" I called her immediately she picked up the call. We laughed.

"You should be thanking me because my hookup should be working." She said jokingly

"You owe me a big favor, Adunni. Else, I'll stay mad at you forever" I said sternly.

"Fine. What do you want me to do for you?"

“I need you to check up on Sade for me.” I said. I read out Sade’s address and asked her to go there to check up on her for me.

“okay. I’ll go there and get back to you by the weekend, stop acting like Sade isn’t my friend by default too dummy, I know her parents’ house.”

Ending the call with Adunni, I headed back home. I poured myself a glass of orange juice. Michael was already back by the time I got back. We chatted for a while. He told me about his plans to go to Miami for his spring break week. I encouraged him to go for it.

“And make sure you enjoy yourself”, I advised. Lare called me afterwards to ask me out to dinner. I suggested we meet up in the village for spicy fried chicken and waffles. We got to the restaurant around 7:15pm. We hugged each other; he planted a kiss on my forehead, making small talk while waiting for our drinks and food. As soon as the waitress walked away after serving us, he asked me about my day.

“I missed the application window for the fall.” I said.

“I’m so sorry about that babe”

“It’s okay. I found five good programs I’d like to consider. I’ll have to get back to work earlier than anticipated to get my tuition benefits.” I said. I watched his facial expression drop when I mentioned ‘tuition benefits’. It must have reminded him of our previous break-up.

“That’s great.” He said.

“So how was your day?” I asked.

“It was okay. Look Simone, I don’t think I need therapy, I am a Nigerian, we’re tough. I don’t need to pay someone to diagnose me with what I don’t have.” He said.

“It was part of our agreement, wasn’t it? I don’t need to deal with any of your baggage. I am not going to be your emotional laborer. I need my husband whole” I snapped at him. Lare perked up when I said husband. I saw the hope flash across his face.

“Okay, I am going to continue with the therapy” he agreed. We ate our food, teased each other and laughed so much. The dinner ended around 9:30pm, Lare got in a cab with me and rode home with me, by the time we got to my apartment, we couldn’t tear ourselves off each other. Lare wanted to come in. “No, Michael is home” I said. He groaned frustrated. We kissed each other good

night before parting for the night.

“Well, we still have other days to look forward to” he said sadly.

The weeks flew by quickly with Lare still in NY doing his work and going to therapy. The last week before his STD results arrives and my trip to the Bahamas begins, I made sure I prepared everything I need for the trip. I still didn’t know if Lare would be coming with me. He had asked me for my travel details like what airline I’d be flying.

I made sure all of Funke’s appointments for her dress shopping were still intact before I left. She had moved the wedding to July, so I had enough time to finish studying, take my GRE before heading to Nigeria and Ghana for the wedding. I had been studying a lot and had completed my personal statement. I would submit my applications by mid-May.

My relationship with Lare was going smoothly. Just like any other couple, we had our rows but this time it was so much easier, but we knew that after each argument we’d end up together and that no one was going to leave. Frankly, I didn’t want Lare to leave NY, but I understood that he had businesses to grow and that the distance situation was temporary. I shopped some more for my Bahamas trip. I bought mostly bathing suits, beach towels and sun hats.

I met up with Lare after picking up my bathing suit from Macy’s on 34th street, I got two bikinis. Lare was supposed to have gone to the doctor’s earlier that day for his test results. I rounded the corner of 14th Street and 7th avenue to find him standing in front of the restaurant. I moved in for a hug instead he kissed me. I was so embarrassed. I wasn’t used to being kissed in the middle of the street. We entered the restaurant where he ordered a bottle of champagne.

“I already pre-ordered our dinner” he said.

“What did you order?” I asked.

“Rib-eyed steak and some mofongo” he replied.

“Yum” I said. I was so famished from all the walking through the seven floors of Macy’s trying to find the perfect outfits. Lare waited until after dinner to tell me that he’d be heading back to Lagos the next day.

“Oh” I said. I started thinking about how I’d survive without him. Three weeks ago, my life was perfectly fine, I didn’t think that I’d ever need him as much as I do now. Three weeks ago, I didn’t even know he was no longer married. I didn’t think I’d ever see him again. Until he walked back into my life to ruin it

beautifully like he always does. Without leaving yet, I started missing him already.

“What about your appointments with the therapist? What will happen to that?” I ask not knowing what else to say.

“She said I’ve made significant progress we don’t need to see as often. I’ll be consulting her via Skype.” He replied.

I waited for him to invite me to spend his final night in NY with him, but he didn’t till we left the restaurant. I got home slightly disappointed and feeling overwhelmed. Part of me wished he’d come with me to the Bahamas. I finished my packing, emailed Michael my flight and hotel details while reminding him to send me his for the Miami spring break trip. I packed my necessary documents and the cash I had withdrawn earlier into my handbag before going to bed.

Even though my flight was scheduled for 9 am, I left for the airport around 6:30am. On the drive, I thought about Lare. I called him from the airport at around 8am to inform him I had checked in, picked up McDonalds’ breakfast in duty-free for my inflight breakfast. The flight began boarding at 8:20 am. It boarded business class first and from where I was sitting, I thought I saw a figure that reminded me of Lare. I waved it off as I was sure my mind was playing tricks on me, making me see things because of how much I missed him already. I proceeded to board the plane when my section was called.

At the boarding gate, the agent told me there was a slight issue with my seating. The other gate agent he spoke to told me I had to wait for the whole flight to board and if there was no extra seat, they’d have to take my bags off the flight. Panicking, I kept on looking through my tickets and asking them an unending series of questions. After the last passenger boarded, they told me I’d be getting an upgrade to business class.

“We’re so sorry to keep you waiting, ma’am. The flight was overbooked. We’d be upgrading you to business class” the gate agent told me.

“Thank you”, I mumbled, immensely thankful that I’d be flying to the Bahamas after all. On getting to my seat, I noticed that I had a seatmate who seemed to have gone to the bathroom, moving into the window seat and settling in just as they were announcing the closing of the doors. I called Lare to tell him the flight was about to take off. I switched off my phone afterwards, settled into my seat, pulled out my headphones connected to my mp3 player. I was about to hit play when a familiar voice said hello to me. I looked up to find Lare standing next to me, smiling handsomely.

I started laughing hysterically, clapping my hands together and hugging him speechless. “Oh my god you better explain yourself mister” I said hitting his chest mildly. He laughed. “Keep it down”

“I thought I saw someone who looked like you but didn’t take it serious. I thought my mind was playing games on me.”

“I wanted to surprise you. Did it work?”

“YES” I almost yelled.

“How did you manage to pull this off?” I asked.

“Well, I wanted to come with you on this vacation so when I asked for your flight details earlier, it was all because I wanted to pull this surprise. I upgraded your ticket at the airport this morning using your name only. I told them you were my wife” he explained. I bet they were more than glad to collect his money. I smiled so widely my cheekbones started hurting. About fifteen minutes into the flight, the attendants started the service. When my drink showed up, Lare plopped a white envelope on my table. The envelope contained his medical report. I was so happy to see that his STD results all came out negative.

The excitement and desire I felt kept on mounting till I couldn’t control myself anymore. I forgot everything about my newfound faith and vows about pre-marital sex. I kissed Lare as if my whole life depended on it. My left hand went straight for his crotch. I began caressing him, until his penis hardened, thankfully, there was no other passenger in our row. We kept on kissing until he pulled back.

“Go the bathroom baby” he whispered to me.

“What?” I muttered breathlessly.

“Go to the bathroom, I’ll join you soon” he instructed. As I got up to leave, he smacked my ass, naughtily. He waited a few minutes that seemed like eternity to me before he joined me in the bathroom. I grabbed him and started kissing him breathlessly again. He unbuttoned my jeans, pulled them down, and backed me against the bathroom door, kissing my ass wildly. I unbuttoned his khakis; he took a condom out of its packet, wrapped himself up and gently bent me over. I felt my face flood with color as Lare struggled to enter me. When he finally did, he covered my mouth to stop my screams of pleasure as he thrust in and out of me nonstop. I moaned into his palms. As I was about to climax, I bit into his palms, shaking. He shuddered and came too. He held onto me trying to get himself together.

“You make me do wild things” he whispered to me.

“I can’t believe we just fucked in a plane bathroom” I giggled.

“Welcome to the mile-high club, baby” he whispered into my ear before taking my lips possessively. We cleaned up quickly and snuck back to our seats.

Chapter Twelve

I asked Lare about his hotel plans since the room I booked only had a twin bed. When I planned the vacation, I was living on a budget and had no idea that I'd be traveling with him.

"What if there are no other rooms on the whole island and my hotel is not good enough for you?" I persisted but Lare shrugged not answering my questions. I was sweating till we got past immigration. As we stepped into the arrival's hall, I spotted a gentleman in a black, well-tailored suit holding up a card with the Atlantis Logo on it. "Mr. & Mrs. Abiola- Fernandez" was written boldly on the card. I smacked Lare playfully on the arm. "You are so full of surprises" I said kissing him on the cheek. He smiled happily. Everything in my life seemed perfect at that moment.

We checked in, dropped into bed to rest a little as lare went through the brochure to pick what we could do afterwards.

"We could go to the fish fry over in Nassau for dinner" he suggested.

"We have the entire weekend to explore the resort" I mumbled from the bed where I lay.

"I am so tired" Lare said jumping into the bed besides me.

"Old man" I teased him.

"Who are you calling an old man?" Lare asked, pinning me on the bed and sliding down between my thighs. He slipped my jeans and panties off. "Can an old man do this? He asked, burying his face into my vagina and getting to work. I kept on apologizing, but he didn't stop till I gave in to orgasms that ripped through me.

Afterwards, we fell asleep.

Lare woke me by 6:30 pm to get ready for the private boat across to Nassau for the fish fry. I quickly showered, threw on a maxi dress and flat sandals. At the fish fry, I ordered grilled fish with plantains and a conch salad while Lare ordered pan fried salmon with herb potatoes but didn't add the conch salad. The waiter spent a few minutes trying to convince him that the salad was an aphrodisiac but still Lare skipped it. Dinner was fantastic. We went to a nearby club soon after dinner to party. The drinks were nice; we danced till the DJ yelled: "somebody's getting pregnant tonight".

“Okay, it’s time to leave” I said, dragging Lare out of the club. The boat was waiting for us anyway. We bought some jerk chicken from a roadside vendor before heading back to the hotel. Lare tried to tell me some of the activities he had planned for us, but I was barely listening as the boat sped off in the early misty morning. I woke up the next morning around 11 am, feeling hungover. All the drinks and partying from the previous night had my head banging hard and my ears ringing furiously. I peeked under the blanket to notice that I was completely naked. Confused, I yelled for Lare to come into the bedroom. I told him to bring me a robe that I quickly threw on before climbing out of the bed. I brushed my teeth. Lare handed me a glass of orange juice for my hangover and told me to come out for breakfast.

“We are going jet-skiing later” he said.

“I’m so hung-over, I don’t know how I’d be able to jet ski” I mumbled.

“You’d be fine, believe me” Lare reassured me. After breakfast, I put on my bikini, sunhat and my sunglasses. I threw on my see-through beach coverup. When I stepped out of the room, Lare whistled cheerfully.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We don’t even have to go down to the beach you know… we can stay in bed and...”

“I am going down to the beach with or without you” I waved him off, giggling. Lare threw on his trunks and t-shirt. He called our private butler to notify housekeeping to clean the room while we are gone. At the beach, I sprawled out under the afternoon sun while Lare sorted out the jet-ski rental. Lare rented just one jet-ski after I complained about driving myself while still hung-over. We strapped on our lifejackets, I hopped on behind him, and we took off laughing. I noticed we were the only people on the sea; the day was too hot for jet-skiing. I began kissing Lare’s neck when we moved far away from the beach. I ran my fingers along his thighs.

“You’re going to get us killed if you continue doing that” he yelled over the noise of the rising sea tide. I kissed his ear, bit his earlobe softly, mumbling:” at least we’ll die together – A classic example of eternal love”. I slid my hand down into his trunk to stroke his cock. I worked it nonstop, asking repeatedly, “who’s the boss right now”. He kept yelling my name over and over till his grip on the jet-ski almost slipped off. I had to lean over and turn off the machine as he shuddered and came in my hand. I giggled mischievously.

I drove us back to the beach. We sprawled out on the beach, laughing. It was so blissful.

“I could stay here forever, just sunbathing” I said.

“Me too as long I’m here with you” he replied.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your medical tests earlier?” I asked.

“I wanted to surprise you” he answered.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. I knew I’d be traveling with you, I decided to keep it a secret as part of the surprise.”

“I loved all your surprises”

“I’m glad you did, I always want to take you somewhere nice, give you the entire world if I can because you’ve never asked me for anything. I like being around you. You give me so much comfort and peace and the excitement is out of this world. You make me feel like a teenage schoolboy in love for the first time. I want to spend every waking moment with you. But I don’t know how that will happen since you still have to stay in NY for a few more years.” Lare opened up to me. I was so moved; I couldn’t even speak.

The rest of the holiday went well. We even had sunburn as a result of our combined recklessness. We went shopping on Paradise Island. On Sunday when Lare was napping, I snuck down to Tiffany’s in the hotel lobby to get him a pair of sliver cufflinks. I had stolen a glance at his passport to figure out his full name since no one seemed to know what it was. The full name printed out on the passport was: “Ilare Luciani Abiola-Fernandez” – I almost burst out laughing. His name was so funny, little wonder he shortened it to just Lare. I gave the jeweler his initials as I.L.A. I went shopping to buy a few knick-knacks and souvenirs. The cufflinks were ready when I returned thirty minutes later. With the cufflinks safely tucked into my purse, I headed back upstairs to our room.

We left for the airport the next morning, holding each other’s hands. It was our last couple of hours together. Lare was heading to Nigeria and I won’t be seeing him again till April or later. Funke and Adunni were coming up to NY in two days with a few other friends. As soon as we boarded the flight, I handed Lare the cufflinks I bought for him.

“How did you get my initials correctly?” he asked when he saw the initials engraved into the cufflink.

“Your passport. What’s the meaning of Ilare anyway?”

“It’s the name of my grandmother’s town in Osun state” he answered.

“What about Luciani?”

“It was the real name of the pope at the time when my mom converted to Catholicism. She used to be Methodist.” He explained, patiently.

I almost immediately fell asleep on his chest; I was so exhausted. We’d be spending the rest of the day at my place since he already sent off his luggage by cargo to Lagos. We got off the flight after the plane landed, flagged a taxi that drove us to my place. I dropped onto the couch while Lare checked out my fridge trying to find what he could rustle up for lunch. He found salmon and sweet potato fries. While he made lunch, I made a mango and avocado salad with some onions. We eat silently; Lare’s food was delicious.

“When do you expect the divorce to be finalized?” I asked later.

“December hopefully. When will you write the GRE?”

“Early June”

“Do you have any particular kind of work you’re interested in doing?” Lare asked me.

“It’s best I apply to everything I can find” I answered.

“Nice. So, do you want anything particularly for your birthday?”

“I don’t really know.” I replied.

“Not to worry, I’m sure you’ll come up with something nice by then” I replied.

“You’re all the present I need” I said. He paused for a moment, as if stunned by my words.

“If you need any referrals for your grad school applications, just let me know” he deflected. I really don’t want any help from him for grad school. I may miss him when he’s gone but it’s time to face reality.

End of Book Two

Hurricane December

3

Chapter One

Funke, Adunni and the friends showed up to New York on Tuesday night. They called me to let know that they'd rented a van from the airport heading to my place. As soon as they arrived, I ushered them in, hugging Funke and Adunni. Funke introduced her two friends, Caroline and Chiamaka to me. She explained Hauwa couldn't make the trip with them. As soon as I asked them to settle in, Caroline made a snide remark about how she thought I lived in Manhattan with the way Funke kept on talking about me.

"Well, Manhattan is a stone's throw away and just $300 - $400 a night. You're free to help yourself." I retorted, mildly irritated.

Adunni made everyone breakfast the next morning. At the table, we made plans and made a list of the boutiques we'd be visiting, including Kleinfeld Bridal. We headed out, bought some metro cards at the train station. "Why is the subway so dirty?" Caroline asked, making a disgusted face.

"I swear to God, I'll drop-kick this girl onto this train tracks right now if she provokes me one more time" I complained to Funke who started laughing hysterically with Adunni. I liked Chiamaka who seemed quietly in her own world, unwilling to invite any other person in. She was an extremely introverted woman. Funke found one dress she liked for the bridal train. Caroline kept overstepping her bounds. For someone who claimed to be from the upper echelon of the Lagos society, she struck me as a badly mannered, tacky young lady.

At Kleinfeld, we found out we had an appointment for when the show 'say yes to the dress' was being filmed. Funke didn't want to be filmed, but Caroline kept on pushing her to be filmed. Adunni and I convinced Funke to go with her gut.

Caroline suggested Funke buy a Pnina Tornai dress. The attendant told us the dresses cost $10,000 on average when we asked. Funke told us she had a $3000 budget, the attendant pointed us to the section with less expensive dresses.

"I don't like this Caroline chic" I told Adunni.

"Me neither, but she's Funke's friend. I wonder what Funke saw in her" Adunni said. We ended up leaving Kleinfeld without a dress. The next day at the third appointment at a bridal shop filled with dresses donated by designers. Funke whispered to me that she'd found the perfect dress. It was a Vera Wang dressed designed in the mermaid style, with a sweetheart neckline. The price tag stuck on the dress read $9,000, I approached the shop attendant who told me the dress

was on sale for $4,000. I explained to her that we had a $2,500 budget.

“Is there anything you can do for us, please?” I asked her. She agreed to let us have the dress for $2,700 plus the taxes making it $2,900. Caroline was incredibly quiet throughout the selection and negotiation while Chiamaka kept on suggesting that a belt or tiara that would go nicely with the dress. The shop attendant offered us a basket of free veils; we found a cathedral veil that matched Funke’s dress. When she tried the dress on with the veil, she looked absolutely divine. Adunni even started whimpering. We walked out of the shop with the dress and grabbed pizza for dinner.

I called Lare when we got back to the apartment.

“Hey babe, how are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m fine, matter of fact, I called your mom today. She told me to come by her office at noon on Friday” he replied. I started panicking. I don’t know why she wants to see him; I really hope she won’t say anything embarrassing.

“Oh, that’s great. So, how’s work? Any new projects you’re working on?”

“Work is fine. Yeah. I have a contract to run a MySpace campaign for the upcoming Ghanaian elections”

“That sounds big”

“It is.”

“I’m happy for you”

“Thank you. So how is the girls’ week out going?” he asked.

“It’s been fun so far. I miss you” I replied.

“Miss you too”. We were still talking when Adunni snatched the phone from me to speak to him.

“You owe me oh” I heard her say. I giggled.

“Yeah, I can convince her to move back to Lagos. She needs to be there after all for all of us” she said. I laughed. Adunni handed the phone to me.

“If you think I am moving back to Lagos without finishing grad school, you’re a joker. Your little plans with Adunni won’t work on me” I said to him.

“We’ll see about that. How is the job hunt coming along?” he asked, laughing.

“I’ve been applying to so many companies. I only slowed down since the girls were in town.” I answered.

“Keep applying. I’m positive something will come up sooner or later” he encouraged.

“Thank you so much”

“I might be there in three weeks but if I can’t make it, then it will definitely be around May. I have to be in New York for a Middle East project lobby.” he said. I felt a flurry of excited anticipation in my heart; I couldn’t wait to see him again.

By Friday, it was time to choose the bridesmaids’ dresses. Funke said she wanted us to wear black dresses. Caroline kept on picking the most *thot-ish* dress style she could find. Chiamaka, on the other hand picked out the most boring, *mary-amaka*[27] outfits. Adunni chose tight dresses that showed off her 27-inch waist. I, on the other hand, chose a modest, yet sexy enough dress. I didn’t want to draw all the attention to myself.

“You need to pick out the kind of material you like here so we can all pick variations of it”, I whispered to Funke. She did and we all had to choose variations of the same fabric. Caroline’s dress had a front slit with a halter neck. We managed to convince Chiamaka that she looked gorgeous in an off-shoulder full length dress. Adunni picked a boat neck dress with a long slit in the back while I chose a dress with transparent capped sleeves. Funke agreed we could wear different shoes and hairstyles.

Caroline told us she needed to head back to mine. We decided to head to the club nearby after rounding up our purchases and dropping them off at my apartment, we met Caroline in the club. She was drunk and flirting with a stranger and we ended up dragging her home. She’d be leaving the next day with Chiamaka; they had to pack their bags for the trip.

I tried calling Sade’s mum to see if I could get to Sade. She answered the call on the third ring. I introduced myself and asked about Sade.

“I’ve been trying to reach her for weeks now.” I said. Her mother sighed deeply and sadly.

“Sade is still recuperating. I don’t think she’s ready to speak to friends right now” she said.

“Recuperating? Was she sick?” I asked, aghast.

“Sade tried to ruin herself. She was hospitalized for a while.” She said sadly.

“WHAT!?” I screamed into my phone.

“Yeah, it’s a long story. But she met a guy who promised the entire world. He introduced her to drugs, broke her heart and fled with her money. She tried to shoplift and was arrested”

“Oh my god!! I’m so sorry Ma. I didn’t know at all. Where is Sade right now?” I had tears in my voice.

“She’s in a rehab in south Africa” she replied.

“Please can you let her know that I asked about her? I’d be returning to Nigeria soon for a wedding. Can I come see you when I’m back?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. I’ll also pass on your message to her” she replied softly.

I curled into myself and cried for over ten minutes till Adunni found me. I told her about Sade.

“I’ve been such a horrible friend. Sade tried to kill herself and I didn’t even know. I couldn’t even be there for her” I sobbed.

“This is not your fault, Simone.” Adunni comforted me.

“It is. If I had checked up on her regularly…”

“You don’t even live together in the same city, Simone.” Adunni hugged me tight. I tried calling Lare, but I couldn’t depend so much on him emotionally. I hung up before the call could go through. I berated myself for not being there for my friend till I fell asleep.

Chapter Two

My apartment felt empty after Funke and Adunni left, my life felt empty too. To a stranger, my life seemed perfect and almost complete. I had a college degree, a great catch for a boyfriend, great family and friends, yet I felt so empty. I worked tirelessly like a horse to achieve all I had but I kept on feeling unsatisfied. Layers of discontent curdled within me. These feelings kept me awake at night, turning around in bed and sometimes crying, feeling confused and absolutely lost. I enshrouded myself in thick layers of self-pity.

I slept in, closed drapes in the apartment, ate sometimes too much and sometimes too little, watched TV, switched off my phone, and generally did not want to engage with the outside world. I was also so tired and feeling sorry for myself. Soon, I recognized that I need help or to stay around people who love me. So, I called *Ibu*.

After telling her how I felt, *Ibu* was silent for a while.

“I know my daughter. You are a smart, kind, loving and most beautiful girl ever. And I am so proud of you and all you’ve accomplished so far. I know that things haven’t been easy. You need a break. Maybe we should take a girls’ trip together” she suggested. I didn’t want a girls’ trip, especially not with my own mother.

“No need for that, Ibu. I am going to be fine soon”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“You know you can call me whenever you want to talk, right?” she asked.

“Of course, I will” I promised.

“You didn’t ask me how the meeting with Lare went”, Ibu diverted the topic to cheer me up.

“Oh, I guess I forgot.”

“He showed up to my office about fifteen minutes early. I made him wait in the lobby even though I was free. I wanted to see what he looked like and what he did with his free time. So, I watched over the CCTV, He read the papers, declined all offers of tea, coffee and water. When he was called into my office, he straightened his blazer nervously. I was impressed when he prostrated as he entered the office. I offered him lunch. Did you know that he was in Malaysia

for a semester? We talked about his brief time in Malaysia. We also talked about his marriage and divorce."

"Mum, that's going too far" I lamented.

"What Simone? He was willing to talk about it"

"Still doesn't make it okay" I insisted.

"That's your own personal business. If I wasn't married to your father, I'd probably marry him, he's a good man" mum said.

"Thanks, mum, for your feedback, I appreciate that" I thanked her.

"Simone, I think you need a change of environment. Maybe that is why you are feeling so low. Why don't you apply to jobs outside New York?"

"I still need to start grad school"

"You can take courses online. Your father has been taking courses online" she retorted sharply.

"What about Paul and Michael? How will they cope without me?" I tried deflecting again.

"Baby girl, you did it alone. At least your brothers have each other. They'll be fine."

"I guess."

"Please come back home baby girl. We all need you here. I can help you find the perfect organization to work for"

I thanked Ibu, ended the call and spent the next few hours studying for my GRE, and looking for a job. I enrolled in my yoga studio, drew back the drapes of my apartment. I began meeting more people and networking. I started a blog with the anonymous name, *'someladyinNY'*. My followers increased rapidly. I began volunteering at the library close to my apartment, reading to school age children, helping them with their homework and teaching them how to use computers. Volunteering gave me a satisfactory feeling; it was one of the better experiences. I planned a visit to an ashram in India by December. Volunteering at the women's shelter helped me with my personal growth.

Lare called me one day to tell me that he wouldn't be able to make the next trip to New York.

"I have to work in Dubai. Please can you come see me?" he asked.

“No” I firmly declined. I didn’t think I deserved such a dedicated, accomplished man. I didn’t feel I was worthy of his love. I focused more on getting my GRE scores up. I was also invited to two interviews in May.

Chapter Three

In May, Lare still didn’t visit and I miss him a lot, I didn’t want to bother him or appear desperate. I turned down Lare’s Dubai trip offer because I didn’t want to appear clingy. When I expressed my fears to Adunni, she’d advised me to hold onto Lare. “Remember the first time you pushed him away, he ended up almost self-destructing” she’d said. What she said may be true, but I needed to set myself up – accomplish a few things on my own.

I called papa for advice. I told him about my new idea to invest in property in Lagos. Daddy seemed pleased at my plan. Recently, he bought a land along the old toll gate axis that he intended to build several units for rent. Dad suggested a land close to the Lagos state border. “It’s cheaper and with focus, you could work on building over the next few years”. He said. I asked several other questions, especially regarding funds, I took down important notes from what he said.

“We’ll meet with an architect I know when you come back for Funke’s wedding” dad concluded. I made another quick call to Sade’s mom to know how my friend

was doing.

“Sade has improved significantly. She even started taking some design classes in the rehab”

“When can I see her please?” I asked.

“She’ll start receiving visitors in July” she answered.

“Is it okay if I fly down there to surprise her?” I asked.

“It’s okay. I’ll come with you”. Sade’s mum offered. I couldn’t wait to see my friend after a few years. I felt so bad for not being there for her when she needed me most. During the craziest periods of my life, Sade was always there for me.

I kept on studying and applying for jobs. Natalya helped me revise my resume, giving me pointers and advice when I needed it. Natalya had a new job with Mordy’s working in credit risk. She’d asked me if I would love to work in finance. But finance doesn’t interest me.

Lare was still working in Dubai. The Sheikh personally commissioned his project which meant that he had to be there himself supervising the work. I decided to surprise Lare. I knew where he was staying and also had an idea of his daily schedule. I looked up the airlines going from New York to Dubai and found several. I noticed that Emirates had two long flights flying directly to Dubai with the ticket costing $1200. I bought the ticket and booked a cheap hotel I could afford.

The night of my flight to Dubai, I spoke to Lare on the phone. I was already checked in at the airport, yet I yawned and told him I was tired.

“Maybe you should get to bed early” Lare suggested. I coyly asked details of his hotel apartment, also confirming his room number.

“Why are you asking me about my hotel?” Lare asked suspiciously.

“Because I want to send you a stripper” I replied, laughing.

“Hahahaha, be serious” he said.

“Okay, okay, okay. I want to send you a care package.” I tried again. He seemed to believe that. I quickly wrote down the address and searched for the hotel details online before the flight took off. I made sure my phone was also roaming for security. I didn’t tell any other person besides Michael about my trip.

The flight was one of the nicest I’ve ever been on. Despite being in economy, I got a nice emergency row seat. I turned on my screen to watch movies. I ate till I

was stuffed and watched movies till I passed out. I woke up four hours before the flight landed, listened to Corrine bailey Rae even though her music makes me cry.

Soon, the pilot announced the landing, my heart began beating fast. Before making the trip, I had read up on things not to do in Dubai. There were rules of dressing modestly and no public displays of affection etc. I pulled out my single piece of carry-on luggage from the overhead bin. I got off the flight, headed to the immigration counter where I met the most handsome man, scratch that beautiful man. Arab men were so beautiful!

“You look like Beyoncé” the handsome man said flirtatiously to me.

“Thank you” I said, batting my eyelids seductively at him even though I think I look like a taller version of Alicia keys.

“What are you doing in Dubai?” he asked.

“Visiting” I replied, showing him print-outs of the tours, I had booked to explore with Lare. He asked for my hotel details. I showed him the printed reservations.

“Well, enjoy your stay in Dubai” he said merrily. I hopped into a taxi. “Sheikh Zayad Road” I told the driver. I had planned to tell the hotel front desk that I am Lare’s wife if they tried stopping me. I’ve watched the virtual tour of the hotel and felt a bit familiar with the hotel. If the front desk doesn’t stop me, I’d simply take the elevators to his room.

The taxi driver sped off. There was slight traffic along the way from the airport. I panicked and asked the driver how long it’d take us to get there.

“Just 45 more minutes” the turbaned driver replied. I started shaking. If we stay any longer than 45 minutes on the road, Lare would be on his way to work already. I forgot to brush my teeth at the airport, so I popped some mints and re-applied my lip-gloss. The traffic eased up. We got to the hotel on time. I gave the driver a 50 dirham note. He hopped out of the taxi, picked out my luggage out of the trunk. The hotel bellboy rushed to me; I quickly waved him off. My hand luggage was small enough to wheel past the front desk without being noticed.

I wheeled through the lobby without being noticed as the front desk staff were busy attending to other guests. I headed to the elevators, looked at the buttons in momentary confusion for a brief moment before hitting the 47th floor. Lare’s room was 4702 to be precise. As the elevator ascended, I started panicking again. ‘What if I find another woman in his bed?’ ‘What if he doesn’t want me to be here with him?’ ‘What if he already left for work?’ A flurry of insecure

questions ran through my mind.

The elevator stopped on the 47th floor; I followed the apartment numbering direction and beelined for his door. I took a deep breath, lifted my hand and rang the doorbell. I moved away from the peephole. I rang the bell again and heard the hurried footsteps rushing to the door. Lare opened the door. He was almost fully dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of slacks. His tie was hanging halfway across his neck, ready to be knotted. He couldn't even hide the shock on his face.

"It's you" he managed to say. I laughed mischievously. "Surprise", I exclaimed, stepping into the room.

Chapter Four

I hugged Lare, buried my face into his body. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the sweet smell of his skin.

“Why don’t you finish dressing up, head to work while I get some rest? I’ll see you when you get back from work” I suggested.

“Absolutely not” Lare almost yelled. Obviously, he was still in shock. He picked up his phone to call one of his employees to inform him that he wouldn’t be in the office for a couple hours. He drew me into his arms after the call and started kissing my neck.

“I still haven’t showered or brushed my teeth” I said, laughing happily.

‘Right, right. Come on, I’ll show you around” he said, releasing me from his warm embrace. He showed me around the swanky hotel apartment. He ran the bath for me, made me breakfast while I showered. I stepped out of the shower, dried off. I wanted to pull my pajamas on but I noticed his shirt hanging from the back of the bathroom door. I pulled that on over my boy shorts. I stepped out of the bathroom with my hair still dripping wet. Lare was sitting on the living room couch. I sat on his lap. He held me closer to his chest.

“I’ve missed you so much. I love you” he whispered, kissing my forehead.

“I missed you too”

“I was so scared. I thought I’d lost you. When you refused to come earlier, it scared me” Lare said.

“No, you’re not losing me. That’s why I’m here.” I replied, stroking his head.

“How long do you plan to stay?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“What about canceling your hotel bookings because you’ll be staying with me here right?” he asked.

“I don’t want you paying for everything” I whined.

“What do you mean? I want to spoil you” he chided mildly.

“I don’t want to you think my entire existence revolves around you, babe. I know you have the best intentions for me but sometimes I need to work at a pace that’s different from yours” I explained.

“I see you, babe. I don’t want you to assume that I’d ever think less of you simply because I decided to pay the bills. Like I keep saying, I want to give you my possible best” Lare said. I swooned. Why does his speech always have such effect on me?

“Thank you so much”

“Why don’t you get some rest while I head to the office? I’ll be back soon” he said, gently carrying me into the bedroom. He dropped me on the bed and climbed in beside me.

“Aren’t you going to work again?” I asked.

“I want to watch you sleep” he replied, pulling me into his arms.

I snuggled deeper into him; he cuddled me. I nuzzled his neck, kissed his face. He slowly took my lips with his in a very hot, passionate kiss. I started unbuttoning his shirt, stroking his hairy chest. He pulled my shirt off, slid down my panties. He kissed my forehead, down to my lips all the way down to my tummy and thighs. Using his fingers, he parted my lower lips and stroked my vagina. I grabbed onto his shoulder with one hand, using the other to cover the screams threatening to escape from my mouth. His fingers stroked me faster, and then he dropped his head between my thighs and I felt his tongue on me. He worked on my clit till I exploded with pleasure. I called out his name loudly as I came. He raised his head, a smug smile on his face as he wiped off the cum smeared all over his face. He cuddled me afterwards.

“I had no idea I’d need condoms, so I don’t have any here. I’d get some on my way back from work” he said releasing me from his arms.

“Try to get some sleep baby. I’ll be back soon” he said, pulling his shirt on to leave.

The next day, Lare offered to take me to the gold souk in the mall. Fridays and Saturdays are Dubai’s weekend schedule. Lare called up the concierge desk that arranged for a car that took us to the Souk. We headed straight to a particular store. The attendants at the store knew his name; they were warm and friendly to us.

“Seems like you’re a regular here” I observed.

“Oh no, the owner is my mum’s personal jeweler. Go ahead, look around to see if you’d find anything you like.” Lare answered. I found a small sapphire piece resting in a corner. The jeweler told me it came with earrings, a bracelet and a ring. I tried them all on; they looked good on me.

“We can get them if you love them” Lare said, smiling admiringly.

“I love them, thank you”

“We can also shop for an engagement ring if you want” Lare lowered his voice when he said that. I glanced up at him, shocked.

“Ring?”

“Yes. Look, I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but I just want to get an idea of the kind of ring that will make you happy when I finally propose” he explained. I pointed to a ring in one of the displays, the jeweler brought it out.

“This one is an asscher cut 2-carat flawless diamond set in 18-carat white gold” the jeweler said.

“Try it on” Lare urged me. As the jeweler was pulling it out of the box, I saw the price written on it: $17,500.

“Lare, that’s too expensive. Tell him to put it back, I don’t want it anymore” I said, pulling him aside. Lare laughed and ignored me.

We did so many other things on my Dubai trip. I even went with Lare to his office a few times to keep him company while he worked. We created a stronger bond. I understood Lare better – my biggest insecurity disappeared and I realized that Lare wanted me to succeed as much as I wanted it for myself. He helped me download more study materials for my GRE; he proof-read my application and personal statement. Sadly, the trip came to an end and I headed back to NY.

I wrote my GRE in June. I arrived at the testing center early, checked my phone – there was a ‘good luck’ message from Lare that warmed my heart. The test went well, I think I did well too. The results came out almost immediately. I scored 92%. I called Lare screaming happily once I left the center. He urged me to send in the score to the schools I applied to. I had listed Lare as my husband while filling the M.I.T application form since he was an Alumni.

Three days later it was my birthday. To celebrate GRE test success, I treated myself to a $400 Zac Posen bag. Lare had told me earlier that he won’t be able to make it to NY for my birthday, so we made plans to see each other in Lagos when I return for Funke’s wedding in July anyway. Latoya planned a small birthday party for me.

The party’s venue required a black-tie dress code. Latoya took me shopping where she gave up $500 to purchase a stunning dress for myself.

“Did you win the lottery or something?” I asked her at the store, surprised she

could afford to spend that much on a dress that wouldn't even belong to her.

"Anything for you, bestie" she casually replied. We bought a soft burnt orange, off-shoulder Sachi & Babin tea-length dress with embellished bronze Stuart Weizman peep-toe pumps and a matching clutch. After trying on the outfit, I looked like a goddess. Latoya grinned at me when I stepped out of the dressing room.

"You look lovely. But there's something left to perfect this look." She said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"We need to do your hair" she replied.

On my birthday, Latoya showed up to pick me up in her dad's Toyota Camry. I left Michael a voice notes about my evening outing since I couldn't find him in the house. I hopped into the Camry. Latoya drove into the city – to a nice Tappan spot uptown that looked like a reservation-only spot. We parked in an expensive parking lot.

"Taking a cab would have been cheaper" I commented jokingly. Latoya shrugged me off. As soon as we walked in, a greeter welcomed and ushered us into the dimly lit restaurant. I couldn't really make out the faces of the other diners sitting in the restaurant. Most of them seemed to be having drinks. SWV's '*weak*' was playing softly from hidden speakers in the restaurant, I found this a bit odd. Latoya and I were led to our table, she hesitated to sit. As soon as I put down my clutch, the lights brightened and standing right in front of me was Lare dressed in a full tuxedo, I noticed Michael was sitting at the next table. The music's volume decreased slightly. Lare pulled me up, went down on one knee and brought out a shiny diamond ring – the same ring from the jewelry shop in Dubai.

"I should have done this before, but I was too scared. I was scared that I couldn't handle you. You were too much for me. So, I let you get away the first opportunity I could find. Leaving you the first time was my biggest mistake that I still regret. Baby, now I'm ready again, life has taught me that you're the only person I want to spend the rest of my life with. You bring me so much love, joy, peace, excitement and I don't ever want to lose that again. I want to spend every waking moment with you. I want to have more fun with you; I want to travel with you, to have more adventures with you. Simone, will you do me the honor of being my wife?" Lare said. I was speechless. Joyful tears ran down my cheeks. My chest was heaving with happiness.

“Yes, yes I will marry you” I managed to answer as emotions clogged my voice. Lare gently slipped the ring onto my finger, twirled me around in the air while kissing me. The tears running down my face made the kiss taste salty and delicious.

“I love you so much” I whispered into his ears.

“I love you so much too” he replied. The room erupted in applause with the other diners clapping and whistling. I saw Ibu, Papa, Michael and Paul standing at their table, clapping happily.

“Oh my god. You didn’t have to do all this just to propose to me” I said, smacking Lare playfully.

“I didn’t have to, but I wanted to. You deserve it and so much more” he replied, kissing me on the lips.

We sat down to a full-on family dinner.

“I am so going to kill you” I muttered to Latoya jokingly. She laughed at me.

“So mum, when did you guys get into NY? How did you manage to pull this kind of surprise on me?” I asked Ibu.

“We came in two days ago. We really wanted to surprise you. When Lare’s divorce was finalized, he flew from Dubai to Lagos to show us the documents. Your father invited him over for a little chat, you know your father. He grilled him for over an hour. Lare asked your father permission to marry you and also to request our presence at the proposal. He wanted to surprise you on your birthday. Your father bought tickets for us.” Ibu explained.

Lare was sitting beside me, laughing merrily. I squeezed his hand. “I love you so much. Thank you for making me so happy” I whispered into his ears. Ibu started planning our wedding right away. I rolled my eyes at her. I just wanted to enjoy my birthday celebration. After dinner, my parents went back to their hotel. I went back to Lare’s room with him where he handed me a simple birthday card. It read: “happy birthday to my husband” but he crossed ‘husband’ out with a blue pen and wrote ‘wife’ underneath it. I laughed; it was the cutest birthday card ever.

He handed me a small bag, opening the bag, I found two documents inside. The first document was Lare’s divorce papers. The second was a title for a two-bedroom apartment near where I lived in Brooklyn. The second document listed, “Simone Oluwanifemi Sosanya” as the owner. I was beyond shocked to say the least. Lare gave me an apartment in Brooklyn as a birthday/engagement gift. I

started crying. I was not a property expert, but I was pretty sure that apartment was mortgage free and could cost about $300,000. I couldn't find the appropriate words to express my gratitude. I felt so blessed.

"Thank you so much" I muttered in-between sobs.

"It's okay baby. I didn't want you to worry about work or rent. I want you to focus on your grad school studies"

"I am so…thank you so much" I sobbed some more.

He held me in his arms, rocking me back and forth. I felt like the most blessed woman in the entire universe.

Chapter Five

“I love you so much. I am so honored to be your wife” I said to Lare when I finally found my voice. He beamed from ear to ear. I felt so overwhelmed with love. I didn’t deserve the wonderful people in my life; I do not deserve their love either.

“I have just one last birthday surprise for you” Lare said to me. My heart was ready to burst from all the excitement. “What more can be better, with all the surprises you’ve given me so far?” I asked laughingly.

“Trust me this one’s even better.” Lare replied, dragging me into the living area of the suite where he presented me with a small, beautiful cake. “Happy birthday to you” he sang to me. His baritone voice was melodious. I was so ready to marry Lare, but first, we needed to talk about a lot of things.

“Today’s your day baby, we’ll just rest today. Tomorrow, we talk” Lare insisted, shaking his head stubbornly. We took off our clothes, climbed into each other’s arms, cuddled till we fell asleep. I woke up in the morning, panicking. I fell asleep with the ring on, I worried it might have broken or gotten lost.

“Why didn’t you take it off me last night when I fell asleep?” I asked Lare jokingly.

“Baby, you have to wear it to everywhere you’re going” he teased me.

“What if I get robbed on the subway?” I asked, snuggling up to him.

“It’s insured” he replied. I glanced at the ring again. It was so beautiful and expensive. We went down to the hotel restaurant for a quick breakfast. I called my family, I wanted to know how long they’d be in town and what they plan to do. Ibu told me they’d be around for two weeks.

“We want to help you move into your new apartment” she said. We made plans for lunch. Afterwards, Lare and I headed to the park, finding a comfortable bench where we sat to talk.

“What is it going to be, Lare? What are your expectations from this relationship?” I asked him bluntly. He thought for a minute, as if contemplating my question carefully. “I’d love us to get married right away but I know you want to finish your masters’ degree first and I promised to wait for you. However, it won’t be a bad idea if we’d just go down to the justice of peace with two witnesses and sign a marriage certificate. I’ve spoken to your dad about it all. He wants a traditional wedding in Lagos and probably a church wedding at

the Cathedral in Marina Lagos" he replied.

"But what should we do? It's all about us in the end, right?" I asked.

"We'll have to wait to see what programs you'd be accepted into and which school you'll choose to attend." He replied.

"What about my work? I really want to work"

"I know how much you love work, baby. You just have to decide which school you'd love to go to first, that will help you know where to start looking for work for proximity sake" Lare advised.

"Does your family know about your proposal?" I asked.

"Yes, my immediate family is aware" he replied.

"I'd love a Christmas wedding" I mentioned.

"Whatever you want, baby. Everything will work out. We'll make it work" he said, squeezing my hand reassuringly. His phone rang. It was his dad calling. I heard him say, "Hold on, she's here with me" before handing the cellphone to me.

"Hello, good morning sir" I greeted nervously.

"Ah, my daughter! How are you doing?" he asked.

"Very fine sir"

"We've heard so much about you. I actually can't wait to meet you." He said cheerfully.

"I am so honored to be your daughter sir. I can't wait to meet you and the entire family too"

"What a respectful child. I heard about how you ran away the first time; please don't run away again this time. You are the only one making my son happy. If you run, we'll have no other option but to kidnap you" he teased. I laughed nervously.

"There will be no need for that, sir because I am not running away again" I replied happily.

"I am so glad to hear that. Welcome to the family" he said before handing the phone to Lare's mother who was equally warm and welcoming. I spoke to his sister too before ending the call. It occurred to me that marrying Lare would mean getting a new family. The thought of that exhilarated and frightened me at

the same time.

We headed out to meet my family at an Indian restaurant midtown. I know my dad must have chosen the restaurant because it was his favorite dining place in NY. My brothers were arguing heatedly when we arrived. I curtsied to greet dad while Lare bowed slightly. Dad smiled broadly, Ibu was looking on at us proudly.

“So, what are the wedding plans?” dad asked.

“Dad, we decided to hold off on the wedding till I finish grad school” I replied half joking.

“But you guys can get married. Lare can commute to NY for a few years, can’t he?” Ibu interrupted.

“Well, yes. We’re actually thinking of a Christmas wedding. Lare thinks we could get marriage certificates at the justice of peace while waiting for the Christmas wedding” I explained.

“That’s a great idea. But I won’t be attending it though. I have to get back to Lagos as soon as possible. However, we still need to meet in July to start preparing. I need to get the requirements from the Cathedral” dad said. We all agreed to the plan.

By early July, I already planned the trips I’d be making. I was preparing for the flight back to Lagos for Funke’s wedding that will take place on the 19th and the 23rd. Afterwards, I’d take the trip to Cape Town on 26th to see Sade. My dad suggested we do the family introduction ceremony on 25th before my South Africa trip. Since Lare’s first marriage didn’t work out, his family requested a very quiet introduction. I’d be gone till around mid-September, so I packed frantically for the trip. I was still unemployed; all the job offers I got weren’t very attractive nor did they interest me. I had already moved into my new apartment. Michael offered to pay the $300 monthly utility bills.

I booked a premium ticket from JFK to Lagos. On the flight day, I checked in and had a seamless flight to London. I marched into the lounge to eat before the Lagos leg of the flight began when I heard someone call out my name. It was my cousin Seye.

“Simsho, so much has happened since the last time we saw each other. I heard that you finally let that useless joker friend of mine put a ring on your finger” he teased me mercilessly.

“Yes, that joker is going to be my husband soon” I said, showing off the ring grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“It’s a very beautiful ring. Lare always has great taste, I am so happy for both of you. Looks like destiny made you for each other. You finally found each other at the end” Seye said seriously. He was traveling with his friends who quickly surrounded us. One of them introduced himself as Tunde. We shook hands.

“Seye didn’t tell me that he had such a gorgeous babe” he said flirtatiously, sitting close to me.

“Guy, *na*[28] Lare wife be that oh and she is my cousin” Seye informed him, laughing. I showed off the ring on my finger proudly.

“Damn, why are all the good ones taken?” he mourned. We laughed.

I boarded the flight to Lagos. It was a relatively peaceful flight. Most of the passengers slept for most of the flight hour since it was a night flight. Lare had sent his driver to come pick me up from the airport. He had emailed me the driver’s picture and since Seye was with me, he confirmed it was Lare’s car before I got into the car.

At home, mum served me food. I settled in, ate, rested very well before calling Funke to let her know that I was back. Adunni wanted to come over right away to see my ring live and direct. I had just few days left before Funke’s traditional wedding; I needed to see the tailor and organize so many other things. Adunni showed up at my parents’ house just as Lare was leaving. After admiring and commenting on the ring excitedly, we got down to business. She gave me a run down on the events for the wedding. She informed me the designer was to come to the house to take my measurement for the traditional outfits. The wedding was going to take place at the civic center, Lagos.

“Funke’s dad is not playing at all oh. He wants to give his daughter the best wedding” Adunni squealed excitedly.

Funke’s bridal shower was so much fun. Adunni’s plans were awesome. She organized everything even to the tiniest of details. Funke cried and hugged us with so much gratitude even though I kept on telling her it was all Adunni’s handwork.

Funke’s traditional marriage day arrived quicker than we thought. Funke’s *aso-oke*[29] was made by one of the biggest designers in Lagos. She looked so lovely in it. Adunni’s dress was awesome too. Lare hooked her up with one of his friends who was going to be at the wedding, so she dressed to kill. I kid you not,

the slit on her outfit almost reached her ovaries. I, on the other hand, chose a simpler style. We ushered Funke in as the photographers snapped away at the aso-ebi ladies dressed in gold and teal. The *alaga*[30] advised her to continue praying against every 'Susan' who might try snatching her husband from her. We all laughed at that. It was a great ceremony. I noticed Lare, Seye and Aigboje – the guy Lare had planned to hook up with Adunni sitting at the same table. I texted Lare: "you need to introduce Seye and Aigboje to each other"

"Of course. And you look so hot" he replied me. I grinned and typed back "is Seye aware of your plans to hook up his sister with your friend?" I asked.

"No but I can't wait to get you naked tonight" his reply notification popped up on my phone. I guess the few bottles of alcohol he must had loosened him up, he usually wasn't that playful by text. A few of the groom's friends tried hitting on me but the ring on my finger discouraged them. Aigboje kept on stealing glances at Adunni whenever she walked by their table. Seye teased her about her outfit, she waved him off. Funke danced her heart out; we helped her pick the money sprayed on her into raffia bags. At the end of reception, I handed the bags of money over to her brother.

I found Lare waiting for me by his Mercedes with the engine running and the driver ready to leave. I climbed into the car, I was sooo tired. "I wanna sex you up" Lare whispered into my ears. I laughed. He must have had more drinks than he could handle. I curled up to him in the back seat, nuzzled him and caressed his thighs subtly. He pulled me closer, held onto my butt and kept on whispering dirty things into my ear till we got into his apartment. Inside, we took off our clothes, showered and passed out.

The next day, I got a call from Adunni asking me about Funke's money and organizing her things for Ghana.

"Adunni, please leave me alone. I am exhausted. Besides, shouldn't Funke be sleeping with her new husband?" I asked tiredly. After I ended the call, I got a text from Funke asking us to meet up. I called Ibu to inform her that I was with Lare so they wouldn't send out search parties looking for me.

Lare had given his cook the day off so I walked around the apartment naked. I checked my email – I got two notifications from Columbia and one from M.I.T. I opened Columbia's email first. Reading through it unbelieving, I had been accepted into the graduate statistics program for the next fall September 2007. I screamed out of excitement. Lare came running into the room. I quickly clicked on the email from M.I.T; I had also been admitted to their online graduate

statistics program. I was supposed to begin in spring 2007(January)

An online program will change the dynamics of our relationship if I accept it. It would just require going at the end of the program for a week for on-campus study. If I moved back to Lagos, Lare, Uncle B and my dad are more than willing to help me secure a job easily. Lare picked me up and twirled me in the air.

“Babe, you’re golden. You’ve just got two positive responses from two of the five schools you applied to” he praised me.

“So how do you feel about me moving back to Lagos in the next few months and taking courses online?” I asked, looking him dead in the eye.

“What about your work in NY?” he asked.

“I’ll just get find a job in Lagos” I answered.

“That’s great. I can help you find job if you want. I’ll also help you study” he promised.

“I love studying alone” I teased him.

“Okay, I promise I won’t disturb you ever when you’re studying”. I cupped his face in my arms, kissed him on the lips.

“Thank you so much. I’ll let you know when I make my decision”, I walked into his bedroom afterwards, and making sure I shook my ass very well knowing Lare was watching me walk away.

We left for Funke’s wedding in Accra. Lare had to work hence he couldn’t make the trip. We left on Wednesday to Ghana to make sure my cousin’s intimate dream wedding of one hundred guests was accomplished. It was to hold in a popular hotel ballroom. The theme of the wedding was a beautiful winter wonderland with Funke excited to see the décor the event planner and decorator put together. The wedding was successful; it was a short, beautiful ceremony, and the reception was equally awesome, we danced till our feet hurt so much. Adunni kept on flirting with the other men at the reception, but Aigboje. I saw the lines of frustrations etched on Aigboje’s face as he watched her hop from one guy to another.

We headed back to Lagos the next day. We had a meeting with the caterer who was to cater our introduction. The designer made a beautiful, lovely skirt and blouse with a perfect fit. I didn’t want to tie *gele*[31]. Ibu was wearing one of her Malay sarongs. Dad had informed Uncle Biodun and a few other relatives and

friends.

On the introduction day, I was a nervous wreck. Lare's family showed up early in a convoy of five SUVs filled with quite a few of their relatives. They entered the living room, took up all the extra seats dad rented. After everyone settled down with a drink in their hands, the introductions began. I was in the bedroom gossiping with Adunni – she was telling me about Aigboje – when they called on me to come out. When I did, Lare and I knelt down for prayers. Our families chose a date in December for the engagement and formal wedding conclusively.

Chapter Six

Lare seemed relieved that the introduction was done and dusted, I was equally as grateful it was successful. I was finally free to go see Sade for four days in Cape Town. Sade's mum was waiting for me at the airport, she waved me over to the counter and we both checked in. her mom checked into business class, while I checked into economy. We hung out together before the flight took off; spending some time in the airport beer lounge where she ordered several drinks for us. She noticed the ring on my finger.

"Congratulations" she said. Sade's mum was extremely friendly to me. She was like an older friend to me.

"What's his name? Tell me about your husband to be" she urged me. When I mentioned Lare's name, she smiled demurely. "You're marrying into a good family, I was at his wedding ceremony to his ex-wife, I heard about the divorce too" she said. I smiled warmly at her, changing the subject immediately to Sade.

"What hurt most about this entire situation was that Sade didn't think to tell us – her own family about any of what she was going through? Rather, she went into drugs, and tried to take her own life" she said, sadness wrinkling her face. Our flight landed in Cape Town, we checked into our hotel after the short ride. Sade was no longer at the rehab, She lived in a small apartment from which she went to her fashion designing courses and art classes. Sade's face lit up when she saw me. We hugged each other tightly and cried together. I apologized for being such a bad friend to her.

"We were supposed to be sisters, but I couldn't even be there for you when you needed me most. I'm so sorry" I apologized.

"No, it's not your fault. I should have opened up to you." Sade replied. We held onto each other for a little while longer. She noticed the ring on my finger and

started asking me questions.

“I am so going to be your maid of honor” Sade demanded excitedly.

“Of course.” I replied, smiling.

The rest of the stay in Cape Town was pleasant; I had so much fun with Sade.

On my return back to Lagos, my dad handed me a list of requirements from his church. Reading it through, I noticed six months of weekly marital counseling sessions, medical tests for genotype and HIV (AIDS). I didn’t think they were invasive tests, so I asked my dad to kindly call the parish priest to inquire about organizing a class for the counseling sessions at our convenience. The priest confirmed that we had to submit the medicals prior to scheduling a date for the blessing.

Lare and I scheduled to get the tests done at the clinic close to his house before I head back to my life in NY. We were both relaxed about the tests because we both know that we were not HIV positive. I also know our genotypes were compatible; I was AS while Lare was AA. The HIV test results, sealed in a brown envelope confirmed this. We delivered the envelope to the church office, and then started considering wedding dates and venues.

Lare surprised me with a weekend trip to the beach – the first place where it all started. The nostalgia washed all over me. We laughed at the memories we made there.

“That first time here, I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to satisfy you. You struck me like a goddess. I wanted to make you happy so much; I still do.” Lare said. We were sitting out by the poolside late at night. We made love under the stars later. I ended up with malaria – it was so poetic, a night under the stars with my lover gave me malaria. While I was still sick, Lare went to the clinic to get our genotype results. He made copies of them to send to the church office. Opening the envelope, we found out that we were both AS. The parish priest called us immediately to tell us that he can’t wed us because we were both AS – the risk of making sickle cell carrier children was too high. I started crying hysterically.

We went back to my parent’s house. I was still weeping. Lare was hugging me, trying to comfort me. Lare stroked my back gently. I felt cushioned by the love of the two men in my life.

“Why is this happening to us, Lare?” I asked, staring up at him still weeping.

“It’s okay baby girl.”

“Maybe the clinic must have made a mistake, right?” I asked, looking for a flash of hope in their faces.

“Baby girl, that’s the best clinic in town. They don’t make such mistakes.” Dad said, skeptically.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“First, we need to keep this information to ourselves till I do some more research and confirm this news first” dad urged.

“I don’t want to lose you, Lare. I don’t want to lose you” I kept on saying to Lare who looked on shocked.

“I love you, Simone. I love you so much. Nothing will come between us” Lare whispered into my ears persistently, stroking my hair.

Chapter Seven

We had a long talk after the unfortunate news and decided to stay together.

“There’s always a way out for everything. Science has answers for everything. We can always adopt if we want to” Lare tried encouraging me. We agreed not to let any other person know about the recent issues – I couldn’t even tell Ibu about it. We concluded to go to the justice of peace in NY to get married before the end of September. We also decided to have a destination wedding instead of a church ceremony. I admired my dad’s calm resolve regarding the entire development; I loved Lare more for not giving up on us. When it was time to head back to New York, Lare drove me to the airport. He kept his hand on mine the entire ride.

“We’ll see each other in five days. Why are you being so mushy?” I teased him. I hopped out of the car to go check in. “I still don’t understand why you are flying premium. My wife shouldn’t be flying premium” he yelled out to me from the car window. “Your wife is unemployed” I screamed back at him, laughing. The flight back to NY was relatively peaceful; I had some quiet reflection time to plan my future. I knew I’d be accepting the offer for admission to MIT’s online program in January. I needed the freedom it’d offer me to move around.

Our plane landed in New York. I filled my lungs with the cool September air, I was back to familiar territory. I hopped into a taxi that took me to my apartment, unlocking the door, I was so happy to be home. I settled in, found something to eat and checked out the bills – Michael had paid almost all of the bills. He seemed more responsible than I thought he was. Lare needed me more than my brothers do. There were several messages on the house phone. There was an invitation for an interview at World Health Organization for a statistician position. I was confused because I didn’t apply for any job at WHO. I made a mental note to give them a call back.

My dad picked December 24th as the traditional wedding. He also permitted us to go ahead with the Justice of Peace ceremony. He told us to pick a destination for the wedding. I went down to the Justice of Peace the next day to find out about the processes of getting a marriage certificate. I made sure to send Lare a list of the documents I need him to send to get the ball rolling. I met up with Latoya to find the dress for the occasion. I already started delegating duties to all the bridesmaids – Latoya was in charge of getting the dress for the Justice of Peace event and my formal wedding dress. Sade was responsible of getting my traditional outfits and coordinating the bridesmaids’ dresses; she kept on skype-ing me to ask for my opinions during the making of the outfits. Sade’s newfound

passion of designing and making clothes took off faster than I could imagine. I wanted to support her in any way as I could.

I chose Zanzibar as my wedding destination; I wanted an outdoor waterside wedding. Lare was excited about the venue as were my family. I already responded to MIT, accepting the admission offer. Lare flew into town for our scheduled wedding at the justice of peace. He booked a hotel room.

“Why did you book a hotel room when you got an apartment for me?” I asked him, slightly confused.

“I got the apartment for you not for us. I didn’t want to make Michael uncomfortable.” Lare insisted. I followed him to the hotel. I told him about the WHO interview.

“Oh, they called you that quickly?” Lare asked, not surprised at all.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I sent your resume to my friend at WHO” he replied.

“Why would you do that? Don’t you believe in me? You don’t think I can’t get a job on my own? Are you trying to control me? Is that why you are trying your possible best to force me back to Nigeria?” I screamed hysterically at him, tears running down my cheeks. I ran out of the hotel, slamming the door. I called Ibu to tell her what happened. Ibu scolded me motherly.

“Go back and talk this out with him immediately” she chided.

“Lare had my resume because I begged him to help me go over it. He should have asked for my consent before sending off anywhere” I whined to Ibu

“Why are you telling me that? I am not the one you should tell that to. Go back to him and tell him everything you just told me right now and some more” she advised.

I went back to the hotel to speak with Lare. He apologized, promising not to do such a thing again.

“But please babe, consider that interview even if you don’t want to move back to Nigeria. It’s a great organization that will offer you so many opportunities. Don’t turn this offer down because of me, please” Lare begged. I hugged him tightly.

“I better get this job else I am not moving back to Lagos” I whispered into his ears. He gently spanked my ass.

“I love you so much. I love you, my drama queen” he whispered back to me.

The next morning, I dressed up for the interview. The interview panel asked if I had any interest outside West Africa.

“No, Lagos remains my first choice” I maintained. Apparently, Lagos had a current opening. They assured me they’d shortlist me for the position if they find me suitable. I headed back to my apartment, planning to meet Lare for lunch. At lunch, we sat down to delicious meal to discuss our wedding budget since my dad was handling the traditional marriage.

“The total bill for about 100 guests is $20,000” I informed Lare.

“That’s not a problem at all. Just be sure to add the planner bill too. Aren’t you going to go see the resort before the wedding?” Lare said.

“No, it’s going to be a surprise” I said grinning.

“Okay, dear. So, do you want kids?” Lare asked.

“I’d love to have three kids. But due to our circumstances, I don’t know if we can do that” I replied, sadly.

“We can always adopt. But I want us to spend at least one year before thinking about kids” Lare said, consoling me.

“There’s also the possibility of IVF and genetic testing” I suggested.

“We can always think about that”

“I’d be getting on the pills from tomorrow. So, we don’t have to use condoms after getting our marriage certificate” I said.

We had a successful marriage at the Justice of Peace with Latoya and Michael as our witnesses. Latoya’s mum insisted on cooking us a wedding lunch. She gave us some marital advice. We headed back to the hotel where we took brief naps. Lare got me a wedding present – another diamond tennis bracelet. I was thankful.

We had our first argument as husband and wife a few days later. Someone called my line; I introduced myself as Simone Sosanya. After the call ended, Lare scolded me mildly.

“Why would you say that? Your name is now Simone Abiola-Fernandez” he said.

“I am not interested in changing my name” I insisted.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before we got married?” he asked an angry scowl on his face.

“What’s the big deal? Look, I want to hold onto my identity. I’ve always been Simone Sosanya. You don’t just expect me to drop my identity like that” I explained calmly.

“Do it on your own terms” he said dismissively, coming up behind me to pull up my dress, take down my panties. I felt my legs buckle as he breathed down on my thighs. He carried me to the bed, laid me down and made me watch him undress slowly. As soon as he was done, he kissed me roughly, fondling my breasts, kissing them. He entered me gently, fucking me till I couldn’t feel my legs anymore. I screamed out his name as I orgasmed. I milked him till he came a little while later. We dropped back in bed, laughing mischievously.

Chapter Eight

The next few days were a whirlwind, I still couldn't believe I was married. It all felt new and exciting to me. I logged into my account one evening to check my finances and how much I could afford to spend on myself. I noticed that I had a lot more money than I remembered in my account. The extra $5000 was apparently my monthly allowance from Lare. I was happy and confused at the same time. It was a lot of money.

"Thank you so much baby. But why did you give me so much?" I asked Lare.

"Well, I just wanted to be sure you'd have more than enough money to take care of yourself especially when I am not around" he explained. Lare's patience with me was unmatched. It made me feel loved and wanted.

"Come on, let's go uptown" he suggested. I threw on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a blazer, my lazy fall look. I wore ballerina flats to complete the look. We got into a black car the hotel had arranged for us. The car drove us into a residential building where a white guy who introduced himself as Brian Thomas was waiting to receive us in the lobby. He addressed us as Mr. & Mrs. Abiola Fernandez. We rode the elevator to the 50th floor. As soon as we got off, I noticed there was only one door; Brian handed over the keys to Lare and left us alone. Lare opened the door, pulled me in.

"Look around. Do you like it?" he asked me. I wandered around the empty living room. The view of the city from the ceiling to floor windows was breathtaking.

"Yes, it's lovely" I answered.

"It's ours" Lare said.

"What do you mean 'ours'?" I asked.

"I bought it for us." he said pulling out the documents titled, Ilare Abiola-Fernandez and Simone Sosanya. I stared unbelievingly at the documents and around the apartment. I screamed, jumped on him and started crying.

"I love it. I love it" I screamed. Lare hugged me tight, twirling me in the air. We were laughing happily and in that very moment, nothing else mattered.

"Thank you for providing us a home" I said profusely.

"I didn't want to stay at your place because I was closing the deal for this place." He explained.

“Is the money you gave me for the furnishing?” I asked.

“No babe, I’ve set up a different account for the furnishing and decorating expenses” he explained.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Okay we need to talk about your wealth. How much money do you have exactly? What’s your net worth?” I asked slipping out of his arms.

“Not much. Just a little bit of money and a few assets globally that generate income for me” Lare answered casually.

“Wow. I might need bodyguards” I managed to say. His phone rang. It was Aigboje, Adunni’s boyfriend. Lare listened to him, saying yes and then he handed the phone over to me. I was slightly confused. He kept on rambling fast about Adunni.

“I want to propose to her, but I don’t know what she might like. Please can you help me with the ring and other things? Like proposal ideas” he pleaded.

“Okay calm down. First of all, you need to go meet uncle Biodun first. Lare will talk to Seye. Seye should take you to uncle B” I advised. I was so excited for Adunni. I picked out a lovely ring for Adunni – a ring that was almost as dramatic as she was. It was a 3 carat emerald surrounded by almost 2 carats of diamonds. She called me still complaining about Aigboje. “I am not even giving him my full attention *sef*[32]” she said.

“Just give him time. I’m sure he’ll come around” I said, trying my hardest to keep back the excitement in my voice.

At the end of September, it was time for Lare to leave NY. We didn’t get to see each other till November. We didn’t have much in the apartment; we had just a bed and few kitchen utensils. Before Lare left for Lagos, I promised I’d be done with decorating the apartment before his next trip back.

I went dress-shopping for a wedding dress with Latoya. I wanted something simple and clean – maybe a Pinina or Vera Wang. After all, it was just a simple sunset wedding at a resort on the coast of Zanzibar. I still haven’t seen the venue in person; it looked breath-taking in the pictures sent to me. I sent the bills to Lare who sent the deposit to me to make the payments. He told me Seye was going to be his best man. I asked the planner to order roses from Nairobi; the hotel coordinator even suggested a Japanese buffet for dinner.

I kept Ibu abreast of everything going on with the wedding planning. She was ecstatic about my return to Lagos. “You’re a blessed child. I’ll put Lare in my

prayers” she said joyfully.

When Lare sent me my October allowance, it dawned on me how blessed I truly was. I went from being average, broke, frustrated to marrying a billionaire the love of my life. I didn’t know how to invest all the money in my bank account. I bought myself a pair of diamond studs. I deserved it, after all.

Chapter Nine

In October, I planned to tidy up my life, furnish our apartment and finish the shopping for the wedding. I still didn't tell Lare about my decision to move back to Lagos because I needed to hear back from the job I applied for. Latoya helped me with the furniture shopping. We furnished the apartment, one room at a time. We were done within two weeks. I picked out my wedding dress around mid-November. It was a Pininia blinged-out dress – mermaid style. I also picked out my veil with a pair of Stuart Weizman shoes. Sade flew into town at the end of the month for a one-week stay to help me with the bridesmaids' dresses. She stayed over at my old apartment in Brooklyn with Michael. She told me about Abubakar her new crush. She seemed extremely smitten; he was a Muslim from the North.

"I know this is going to be a big issue with my family, but I'm determined to enjoy live my life at this rate" she told me. Abu, as she called him was a banker. His family owned one of the largest banks in Nigeria and she had met him through his brother Sodiq who was in therapy with her. Apparently, Sodiq had been trying to talk her into potentially financing her design business using his family's bank, but she wanted to start off small. Ironically, Sade had no clue how she was supposed to land Abu, she just knew he was hot, and she wanted to be in his bed. Lol.

"I am very proud of you for moving on and trying to love again" I commended her. I couldn't wait to meet this new man who gave my friend a chance to even consider men attractive again.

I gave my family the number of guests attending the wedding in Zanzibar. Lare's family had 75 guests and so did mine. My family and relatives were around 40. I kept 35 spaces for my friends. A lot my Lagos girlfriends were eager to attend the wedding. Adunni already organized 60 pieces of aso-ebi. Some of the girls knew Lare before we even met. Apparently, one of them, Tundun had tried seducing Lare years ago by stripping herself naked. But he didn't cave into her theatrics.

At the end of the month, I finally got a call from WHO. They offered me the job in Lagos; they wanted to know where they could send my offer letter and a potential start date. I offered to start work on 20th January. The job was appealing at $72,000 annually with additional car and housing allowances. When I read through the email, I screamed till Michael ran into the room. My brother rejoiced with me.

“Ah, so you’ll leave us here in New York abi[33]?” he feigned sadness.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine” I reassured him. I made him promise to keep the news to himself. I wanted to surprise Lare when he visits in a few days. I started sorting through my belongings to decide what I’d send back to Lagos and what to discard. I realized that I could afford to get a whole new closet without breaking a sweat. I had been saving my monthly allowance for three months now. I couldn’t wait to show Lare what I had done with our apartment. I spent only $20,000 out of the $50,000 he gave me. I didn’t know why I worked so hard to prove I was a good money manager. I wanted to show Lare that I could manage our resources well.

Lare called me from the airport when his flight landed just as I was taking dinner off the stove in our uptown apartment. I made him three different meals: white rice with curry crab, Nasi Goreng with beef satay and Pasta Carbonara with salmon. I hurriedly popped into the bathroom to shower, pulled on a t-shirt and denim shorts. I made sure the apartment was nice and warm. I heard the elevator stop. Soon, my husband walked through the door into our home. I jumped on him when he entered the house. He started kissing me hungrily, using one hand to close the door while the other held me. He grabbed the hem of my t-shirt, pulled it over my head. He tore the shorts off me. He carried me to the kitchen, laid me on the kitchen table as he clumsily unbuckled his belt, his slacks dropped, pooling around his feet. In no time, he was inside me, thrusting hard and fast. He shook till the kitchen table broke, taking us down with it.

I cried out in shock from the fall.

“Are you hurt? I’m so sorry” Lare asked worriedly, helping me up.

“No, I don’t think so. Thank God we didn’t try that on the dining table” I replied. “We should christen this apartment.” he said. We burst out laughing. I kissed him wildly, cupped his face in my palms.

“I missed you” I muttered.

“I missed you so much too” he whispered back to me.

“Come on, we need to shower” I said, pulling him along to the bathroom.

We showered, settled down to eat dinner. Lare wanted a bit of everything I prepared. “Are you sure you’ll not have a running stomach?” I asked, dishing food onto his plate. Lare brought a bottle of wine from our cellar. “Today, we are celebrating love” he announced merrily, popping the bottle.

“We’re also celebrating something else. I have good news” I said, grinning.

“What is it? Don’t tell me you’re pregnant” Lare said nervously.

“No, silly. I got the WHO job. I’m moving back to Lagos. We’ll live together all day, all week long. No need to shuttle countries” I announced happily. The pure joy on Lare’s face as he celebrated with me warmed my heart.

“I’m so proud of you baby. I may have referred you for the job, but you got it on your own and I’m so proud of you for that” he said, holding my hands.

“Thank you so much for everything” I said thankfully.

“Oh my god! When do you plan to move back? Do I have to refurnish my apartment or find a new apartment?” he asked nervously. I laughed.

“Babe, stop. I love your apartment just the way it is” I stroked his hand reassuringly.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I mean it’d need a few touches here and there but it’s perfect” I said, teasingly. Lare smacked my hand playfully.

“Are we all set for the engagement and formal wedding?” Lare asked.
“Yes, we are” I answered.

“Great. Is it okay if we take a brief trip before the wedding?” he asked.

“Sure, we still have time before the wedding as long as we come back on time to make me Mrs. Simone Abiola-Fernandez” I said, touching his face fondly.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything in the world” he replied, kissing me lightly on the lips.

“So where are we going to?” I asked.

“It’s a surprise” he replied, grinning mischievously.

“I can live with that” I said. I had less than six weeks left to be in NY. My life was changing drastically, I showed Lare the ring I had picked out for Adunni.

“It’s beautiful. It’s as dramatic as your cousin” he observed.

“I know right? That’s why I picked it” I said laughing.

Lare called Aig to inform him that the ring was ready.

“Are you ready for this? Should I bring it down when returning to Lagos?” he asked his friend. He must have replied affirmatively because Lare nodded his head, promising to bring the ring with him. I had some packed bags I needed

Lare to get down to Lagos for me too. I mentioned that to him.

“I need to rest. Work has been hectic” Lare complained stretching. He sprawled on the bed while I massaged his body. We made love afterwards again.

I changed all the bills to Michael’s name so he could have direct access to the accounts. I could pay our own bills through direct debit, so I made sure I set those up from the housekeeping account. I also got my yoga certification. Lare and I discussed the possibility of me teaching to stay in shape.

“Why not come to my class?” I asked.

“I don’t think that is such a good idea.” He declined.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I’d spend the entire time thinking of fucking you” he said seriously.

“You’re such a nutcase” I said, smacking him lightly.

When Lare left, I tried keeping myself busy. I shopped for my family. Ibu gave me a long list of things she wanted me to get for her when I called to ask her. I finalized the guestlist for the formal wedding in Zanzibar. I also completed the décor and flower arrangements. I informed all my NY friends of my return to Lagos. Natalya promised she’d be in Zanzibar for my wedding with her husband, Latoya said she’d be in Lagos a week before the traditional marriage.

“I also need to find my own Nigerian prince.” She said.

“I found mine, you can find yours too” I replied her. We laughed.

Chapter Ten

I flew to Lagos two weeks before my traditional marriage. Like a dutiful husband, Lare bought my business class ticket. I found a note inside the ticket with his card, telling me to shop at the Heathrow airport duty free and to also get myself a lovely meal. I bought a few items at the Mulberry store using Lare's card. I also picked up some jewelry for mum from Hermes with my own card. I bought a nice watch for dad and picked up a few shirts for Paul. I also bought Lare a gift – I dropped an entire month's allowance on a full leather briefcase with his name engraved on a metal plate that was inserted inside the briefcase. I knew he'd love his Christmas gift.

I slept for most of the flight from London to Lagos. The passenger who sat next to me tried conversing with me. When he introduced himself and asked for my name, I quickly replied, "Mrs. Abiola Fernandez". Dazed, he left me alone for the rest of the flight. As soon as we got off the plane in Lagos, a gentleman in an immigration uniform approached me.

"Are you Mrs. Abiola-Fernandez?" he asked.

"Yes. Is there any problem?" I replied.

"No. I am a protocol officer. Mr. Abiola-Fernandez sent me. Please follow me" he said. We sped through immigration checks; my luggage came out on time and he helped me carry them all the way out. He led me to the car sent to pick me up – a shiny grey blue G-wagon. The driver hopped out – it was Lare. I let out a small scream and rushed to hug him. Lare quickly shook the officer's hand, and they both loaded my luggage in the car, we drove off afterwards. I noticed he was driving me to my parents' house in Yaba.

"You surprised me again" I said smiling happily.

"I wanted to pick you up myself"

"What about work?" I asked.

"Work will be fine" he answered. I smiled.

"Is this a new car?" I asked.

"Yeah, do you like it?"

"I love it" I answered.

As soon as we got to my family's house, Ibu in her usual loud manner came out to welcome me. I hugged her tight. I noticed that Lare did not bring out my bags.

We went inside the house to greet my dad. Lare prostrated to greet my dad. “It is outside sir” he said to dad. Dad asked us all to come outside. Dad opened the hood of the G-wagon and started praying. When he was done, he turned to me and said: “your husband bought you a gift”.

“What?” I asked stunned. Lare was grinning like a Cheshire cat, Ibu hugged me tight, my brother was clapping excitedly,I started crying. I felt so overwhelmed. I didn’t expect such lavish gifts, but this just seemed to be who I married. “Don’t you like the car babe?” Lare asked, pulling me into his arms to clean the tears streaming down my cheeks.

“No, I love it so much. I’m just overwhelmed” I managed to say through the tears clogging my throat. My dad shook his head amusedly, before heading back indoors.

“I’d be going over to Lare’s apartment.” I announced.

“Please be sure to see me tomorrow morning. We need to conclude some things regarding the wedding events” dad informed us before we left.

“Babe, you’re driving us home” Lare told me. Even though, I was nervous and had limited driving experience, I walked around to the driver’s seat. It was the weekend; Lagos usually is less congested during weekends. We made it home safe. The same cook who has worked for Lare for over five years rushed out to greet me.

“Aunty Simone welcome back. It’s been so long ma” he said enthusiastically.

“Yes dear.”

“The housekeeper already left for the day so if there’s anything you’d want me to do, I’m at your service” he said, bowing slightly.

“Thank you Dayo” I said smiling.

“Please bring in the bags from the car” Lare instructed him. We ate breakfast Dayo served us in near-silence.

“You can choose whatever room you want for your walk-in closet. I can move out of my home office if you want that room” Lare offered me.

“No, the guest room on the right is fine. I’ll use that one” I said. I entered the bathroom later to take my bath. I noticed all my things were exactly where I left them the last time I was there. I turned on the showerhead and stepped into the tub. I washed my hair and spun it into a neat bun afterwards. I rinsed out the tub, started to run warm water. I sat back in the tub and fell asleep. I didn’t know how

long I was asleep before I heard Lare open the door.

“Are you okay?” he asked, looking over at me.

“Yes, I’m fine. I am just tired” I replied.

“Can I join you?” he asked.

“You won’t fit in, but you’re welcome to try” I replied. He got into the tub behind me. I fell asleep in his arms. He woke me up about fifteen minutes later to rinse off and go to bed.

I woke up alone and naked in bed. I threw on one of Lare’s shirts to go out to the living room to look for him in the living room. He was sitting on the couch, reading the papers.

“Aigboje is coming over to see us” he informed me after kissing me on the lips. I knew he’d ask me help plan his proposal to Adunni. I changed into more decent outfit before Aigboje showed up. Lare offered him a drink from the bar, but he opted for coffee.

“You look tired, man” Lare commented.

“I’ve been working so hard these last couple days. Adunni isn’t talking to me, I don’t know why” he said.

I entered the bedroom to call Adunni. “How are you?” I asked.

“I am fine”

“What about Aigboje?” I asked.

“That one? I’ve cut him off since. I am meeting a new guy for lunch today” I said.

“Okay calm down. Tell me what he did? Why did you cut him off?” I asked.

“It’s not something we can talk about over the phone” she replied.

“How about meeting up tomorrow?” I asked. She agreed to meet up with me. “I’ll communicate our meeting spot to you soon” I told her before ending the call. I went back to the living room.

“If you want to commit to Adunni, tomorrow is the chance you’ll get” I told Aigboje.

“Really?”

“Yes. Have you asked her dad for permission?” I asked him.

“Yes, I did few days ago but Adunni was just being difficult. I wanted it to be a surprise proposal” he answered me. He seemed frustrated.

“If you still love her and want to be with her, just get yourself together so we can do this tomorrow” I advised. Lare called up the manager of a five-star hotel; I coordinated the booking of a 30-guest private room. I told Lare to call Seye to help us inform and coordinate his family. Aigboje’s family was aware and ecstatic about the plans as Aigboje called them all to inform them of the proposal plan tomorrow afternoon. I also called Ibu and Funke to notify them of the ongoing plan. Funke squealed excitedly.

My weekend turned into a proposal-planning event for my psycho cousin who I love beyond words. The next day, I told Adunni to meet me at our apartment; I also ordered a white, long sexy gown for her, thankfully she showed up on time. I pulled out the dress for her.

“It’s new. You can rock it with a pair of loubs” I said.

“When did I start wearing loubs?” she asked, making a face.

“When will your mouth stop leaking?” I asked. We laughed. As were doing our make-up, Adunni asked: “so what event exactly is it we are going to?”

“It’s an all-white lunch; a *lunch en blanc*, there will be loads of eligible men there. At the end of the day, I’m very sure you’d snag a few suitors” I said, twinkling mischievously because it sounded ridiculous to me, but hey. As if on cue, Lare called me to ask if we already heading out.

“We are almost ready to head out” I told him. I drove Adunni in my G-wagon. She couldn’t stop gushing over the car. By the time we got to the hotel, she seemed relaxed and excited. The event room was beautifully decorated. Brownstone’s *‘if you love me’* was playing from the speakers.

“That’s your main jam” I told Adunni excitedly.

“It’s making me want to dance” she replied, her eyes twinkling with excitement. As we opened the door to the private room, Brandy’s *‘I wanna be down’* started playing. Inside the room, the center light was on Aigboje who knelt on one knee looking intensely at Adunni.

“What’s going on, Simone? Is that Aigboje? What’s he doing here and why is he kneeling down?” Adunni asked me confused.

“Babe, go get your man” I urged her, pushing her forward to meet Aigboje.

She walked tentatively towards Aigboje.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Babe, I love you – all of you. I love your craziness, your drama. Your exuberance fills my day with sunlight. I’ve realized that you’re like the bloodline filling me with life and I don’t ever want to part with that. I’d rather argue with you than be apart from you. Let’s fight every day too, as long as at the end of the day, we find our way back to each other. I don’t know if any of this makes any sense, but what I know that makes sense is that I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Adunni, will you marry me?” Aigboje said, presenting the ring to her. Adunni dropped down on the floor with him, hugging him, crying. “Yes, yes, yes. I’d be honored to be your wife” she said, sobbing. The lights came back on and when she saw everybody in the room including her family, Adunni started crying again. Lare squeezed my hand. “Babe, you made this possible” he said. I sighed with relief.

After congratulating the newly engaged coupled, Lare and I headed out with Ibu to meet my dad. We explained the delay in meeting him, he was happy to hear that Adunni was engaged. We spoke at length about the wedding plans until we finalized the plans for the weddings. Lare promised to handle the plan to find a charter flight by the end of the week for all the guests leaving from Lagos.

Chapter Eleven

The week of the traditional wedding was very busy. I had my dress fittings with Sade and Adunni taking me to the make-up trial. I wasn’t particularly interested in the make-up but Adunni forced me to do it anyway. I tried to find out where Lare was taking me to on 26th. It was supposed to be a 10-day trip so we could be back just in time for the formal wedding. The two outfits Sade made for me were so lovely. I hugged her thankfully. Adunni and Funke’s outfits too were amazing.

Two days before the traditional marriage, Funke told me her husband was organizing an event at a newly opened restaurant.

“The dress code is pink for the ladies” she told me.

“What kind of dress code is that?” I asked, mystified.

“Just trust me” Funke assured. When I got to the venue, I found out it was my bridal shower. About forty friends were there smiling at me. we had so much fun. One of them asked me:

“How do you know that Lare was the one – the soul-mate” I thought for a moment.

“I didn’t know at first for five years. I lost him. It took him being married to someone else and a divorce later for me to realize that he was the one. I’m grateful fate brought him back to me” I said. My friends bought me gifts. I had new lingerie; Adunni bought me a whip, some handcuffs and a vibrator. I gave her a wild look in public while secretly wondering if Lare would love getting down like that. Funke was more decent with her gift – she gave me two gift cards for a private massage session at one of the exclusive spas in Lagos.

On the morning of my traditional marriage, Adunni and Funke were at the door by 7am. Sade spent the night with me; I wasn’t sure how Adunni and Funke made it to the house that early. I was a nervous wreck; I was worried about how to dance properly. I got into the shower while the caterer Ibu paid to serve food at the house sent up my breakfast. I asked Adunni for the bottle of wine I begged her to bring for me. At 9 am, I downed half the bottle while the make-up artist worked on my face. The ceremony was scheduled to start by noon at the venue on the Island. The ladies got ready; Sade made sure all my outfits were packed in my change suitcase. I got dressed and was ready to go by 11:15 in my Fuschia Pink lace *Iro* and *Buba*[34] with black stones and white pearls. My *Aso Oke* was black with white pearls. Adunni helped me put on my shoes while Funke held onto my clutch and fan. Sade crowned it all with the pink veil on my *gele*. Stepping outside, I noticed a brand-new land cruiser waiting with bride license plates. “Dad said that you need to ride in a new car, so he bought this one” Michael explained. I beamed with pride and happiness. We hopped into the car. We arrived at the venue by 12:15. Adunni pulled out the bottle of wine so I could take a quick swish. The venue was filled up with close to a thousand guests – I was going to be the center of attention; I was so unnerved. I instructed the coordinator to get a waiter to bring me a plate of small chops. I ate, and took pictures with my girls, by 1pm, they finally announced my entrance. All my aso-ebi ladies formed two lines to usher me in with the traditional music the DJ played. The alcohol loosened me; I danced in confidently even Funke whispered to me to slow down.

I kept on smiling throughout the ceremony rites and prayers. At some point Lare asked me how I managed to keep that smile. “I may be a little drunk” I replied, giggling happily. Lare shook his head, laughing.

“Just a friendly reminder right now: I’d be fucking you non-stop later this evening after all this is over” he leaned forward to whisper to me. I laughed at

him.

“A million naira bet says you won’t even get an erection due to exhaustion” I said.

“The bet is on” he took on the challenge. Fireworks went off as we cut the cake. I went off to change after the cake-feeding. The live band played popular traditional songs while I changed. Lare came out of his dressing room at the same time I was coming out of mine. We stood for a moment, staring at each other until Lare pulled me into his dressing room. We kissed each other wildly. Lare unzipped my outfit carefully, his hands went straight into me, fingering. He sat on the couch and pulled me into his laps. I rode him non-stop as if my life depended on it; it lasted for not more than five minutes. I was disheveled at the end of it. I called Adunni to come back to the fitting room with the make-up artist.

“What happened to you?” Adunni asked, confused when she saw me.

“I was fucking Lare” I replied bluntly.

“Oh my God! You guys couldn’t wait for the ceremony to end?” Adunni teased laughing. The make-up artist worked fast. Funke entered the fitting room.

“What’s taking so long? Lare is waiting for you” she asked.

“Simone couldn’t wait till the end of the day to fuck her husband” Adunni sharply replied.

“That explains the lipstick and foundation powder I just cleaned off Lare” Funke said grinning.

“I hope he doesn’t look so crazy” I wanted to confirm.

“No, he’s alright” Funke assured me. I went back out for the first dance with Lare. Funke, Sade and Adunni picked and sorted out the money sprayed. Latoya was busy talking to Ugo, one of Lare’s friends for most of the event. I was happy to see her enjoying herself; I hoped she’d find her Nigerian prince. Lare kept on grabbing my butt. By 9pm, we left the venue for Lare’s parents’ house where they washed my feet and prayed for our union. “May this one last” his mother prayed.

We made it home by 11pm. We took off our clothes at the door and headed for the shower. Lare helped me take off my fake eyelashes.

“Why did you put this on the first place?”

“Didn’t I look hotter with it on?” I retorted.

“You look beautiful without it” he insisted. I started the shower; he came up behind me. He backed me up against the wall, kissing me passionately. He ran his hand all over my body, cupped my breasts. He teased me till desire and lust built up within me, threatening to burst.

“Please take me right now” I begged. He grinned wolfishly, teased me some more. He lifted up against the wall, spread my legs and entered me slowly. I straddled him. He fucked me till I came, screaming his name. He washed me down, whispering to me: “my dear wife, it looks like you owe me a million naira”.

Chapter Twelve

We had Christmas breakfast in bed – pancakes with strawberry compote. I was too tired to get out of bed, so I barely sat up to eat. Lare tried talking to me but I fell back asleep. I did not wake up till 11 am. There was a gift on my nightstand. When I tore open the wrapped package, I saw a thong bikini set. I shook my head, laughing. I put it on before leaving the bedroom to look for Lare. I found him in the living room working on his laptop. The TV was on.

“So, how does it look on me?” I asked, turning around slowly. Lare licked his lips sensually.

“Looks like I got the right size” he said.

“A husband who knows his wife’s size…I’m so blessed to have you. I love you” I said dropping into his arms.

“You look divine” Lare said kissing me. I gave him the briefcase gift I bought for him in London on my way back to Lagos from NY. “I love it babe. Thanks a lot” he said admiring the bag.

“Just hold on for a minute. I’ll be right back” he said gently dropping me on the couch. He came out of his study carrying a big box. Inside the box, I found a navy color Hermes Birkin with matching slippers. The card inside the box read: ‘to match your car’.

“With the way you’re going, I may be kidnapped. I need bodyguards” I said, kissing him.

“You deserve to be spoiled.” He said.

“I am so blessed to have you” I said, stroking his scraggly beards.

“I am lucky to have you” he replied, kissing me on the lips.

On the morning of our trip, I still didn’t know where we were headed.

“Just pack your new bathing suit and nothing else” my husband instructed me. I was confused but just for my own sanity; I packed a few other things. When he saw my small suitcase, Lare asked me: “is that it?” “Yes”, I nodded.

At the airport, I found out we were traveling to the Maldives via Dubai for a few days. “We’ll spend three days in Dubai and the rest in the Maldives” Lare informed me. We checked into the presidential suite at the Atlantis, our room had a personal butler. Lare urged me to go shopping for all the things I needed. We picked up a few more things. I figured we’d spend more time indoors.

Our trip was uneventful; we had a splendid time, discovered each other and talked about work. Lare told me all about his diversification plans that include opening new offices in Ghana and Togo. I opened up to him about the possibility of starting my own studio and establishing my STEM foundation for girls. Lare gave me important tips and suggestions. He helped me write the business plan for the studio, his lawyer walked me through the documentation I needed. We headed back to Lagos. We joined the private flight to Zanzibar with the rest of the family and guests, arriving at the resort a day before the wedding. Lare spoke to me about having a real honeymoon.

“Where do you have in mind for the honeymoon?” I asked him.

“Seychelles” he answered.

“Maybe we can rain-check. I just want to rest, sleep and be indoors with you for a few days doing nothing” I said, resting my head on his shoulders.

“That’s okay too. We can do that” he agreed.

The wedding ceremony started at 5:30pm. I was already dressed and ready to go around 5pm. The photographer took my pictures with the bridesmaids. We all looked beautiful. Latoya gasped when she saw me step out in my mermaid dress with the beautiful cathedral veil. I was wearing the chandelier diamond earrings Lare gifted me that morning. My hair was swept up in a beautiful chignon, with my face lightly made up, I looked divine. Ibu cried when she saw me.

“You look so beautiful baby girl” she said.

“Mum, you’ll ruin your makeup” I said, comforting her. She cleaned her eyes.

“I am so proud of you baby girl. Your father and husband are waiting for you” she said. Dad was waiting to walk me down the aisle. Lare and everyone else were waiting for me at the make-shift altar. My dad and I started our three-minute walk to meet Lare. I could see his faint figure from the top of the jetty. Halfway, he started walking towards us. He had tears in his eyes, I smiled at him. He took my other arm and walked me down the remaining length of the aisle with my dad. Everyone clapped, ridiculous as it was. Lare couldn’t keep his emotions together. Maybe he was dazed by my regal looks. We said our vows before the priest and kissed just as the sun was setting. We moved on to the reception area on the beach where the fun began. For our first dance, we danced to Luther Vandross’s *‘so amazing’*. Our second dance was to Hi five’s *‘I like the way (the kissing game)’*. Lare’s father sprayed us so much money. The third song we danced to was Xscape’s *‘just kickin it’*. We had the father-daughter dance, Lare danced with his mother. I had a father-daughter dance with Lare’s dad and afterwards, he danced with my mum. The floor was then opened to everyone. Aigboje took over the DJ booth – I didn’t know he had great DJ-ing skills. He played all the 90’s jams.

“The best dancer today will be winning a private jet” Aigboje announced over the microphone. Everyone burst out in laughter. Ugo was all over Latoya like stew on white rice. I made a mental note to get details of everything that happened with Ugo from her. I motioned to Adunni to take the microphone from Aigboje. He was clearly drunk. Funke and her husband were in a dance corner grinding on each other. I saw dad and mum dancing ferociously. Everyone enjoyed the Japanese buffet with the night ending with fireworks. Lare and I went back to our room by midnight to find our turn down service had been activated. Lare carried me across the threshold. He helped me take off my dress, laid it on the bed. Lare poured himself a drink.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked me.

“No, thanks. I want to sleep” I said. I fell asleep shortly. I woke up three hours later to realize I had fallen asleep on my wedding night. I woke Lare up.

“We still haven’t consummated our marriage” I whispered to him. We had this brilliant idea to head to the beach at 3 am. We made gentle love on the beach, laying in each other’s arms. We watched the sunrise before heading back to our room. I had sand in my hair; Lare helped me wash it out.

Chapter Thirteen

We left for Lagos the day after the wedding. I had ten days left before starting work. I still needed to settle down, unpack, find a driver etc. I also needed to start working on the yoga studio and the foundation. Lare went back to work immediately. We were both glad the wedding was over. I wanted to catch up with everyone and refill my birth control pills etc. Adunni's wedding was coming up around Easter.

By the end of January, Lare and I had settled into each other's lives. We lived peacefully. Our life was relatively uneventful, and I found the perfect spot for the yoga studio. Lare, in his usual fashion, bought the entire building for me. I began to wonder if there was any purpose in working outside of my sense of identity. I chose to change my passports to Abiola-Fernandez. It was everything to him – hyphenating the names seemed ridiculous. I didn't tell him about my decision to change my name; I wanted to surprise him. He'd find out the next time we'd travel. I completed the name change quietly.

We spent our first valentine's day at the beach house. Since we already were working, the weekend vacation was both a relief and a time well-spent. We agreed to start IVF early the following year. We planned to go to NY in March for a one-week holiday. Perhaps, my office knew my husband; they kept on making exceptions for me. Lare was everything I could ever ask for in a man. He wasn't a man of many words, but one full of positive action.

The studio was almost done and would be open at the end of February. I planned to teach classes in the evenings for one hour, three days a week. I also added some weekend classes. Lare signed up all his employees for monthly packages. He also told his friends to enroll their workers.

Our first year together was positive and drama-free. When he asked me what I wanted for my 26th birthday in June, I told him I had absolutely everything I ever prayed for.

"I just want you to keep loving me and giving me your undivided attention." I requested.

"I can do that" I said.

Lare consulted me on investment decisions before making them; we were almost the perfect couple. We had a few minor spats just like any normal couple, but we didn't let those spats get between us. His mother started disturbing us for

grandkids. I overheard Lare telling her one day that we weren't ready for kids.

"But you're getting old, Ilare" she said.

"I am just 34, mum. That's not old" he retorted sharply.

I talked to him about it. I had so much to do with grad school, work, studio and starting up the foundation. Everything was so stressful; I wanted to give up and just stay home. I knew my sense of self was tied into those things. Working gave me a sense of accomplishment. Nursing the dream of the foundation gave me a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Lare was supportive and encouraged me so much. He respected my desire to do things I loved passionately. He waited for me to get back home before eating dinner. On Sundays when I didn't go to the studio, he served me breakfast in bed.

By September, Lare told me about a clinic he wanted us to try for the IVF with the PGD. We made the call, went to London for the preliminary tests. We got a mixed bag of results – Lare was diagnosed with low sperm count, with Varicocele (swelling of the veins that drain the testicles). The swelling can be treated with surgery, the doctor assured us. I was cleared and told us to get off birth control in December, the same time Lare was scheduled for surgery. The test results affected Lare. He became withdrawn and moody. He kept on apologizing to me.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to put you through all this" he apologized.

"We're in this together. I am not blaming you. This doesn't mean I love you less. It doesn't change anything between us" I assured him, cupping his face in my hand. Still, he didn't feel reassured. I'd often find him sitting in the dark when I got back home. Once, I saw him crying. It broke my heart to find him like that. I tried holding it together for us.

His mother wasn't helpful at all. She kept on making snide comments whatever chance she got. One time at a family lunch she made the same comment.

"For over a year now, I am still waiting for my grandkids" she said.

"Ma, God will give us children in his own time" I retorted sharply. She glanced at me with a coldness that sent chills down my spine. She took my response as an affront. She declared war against me, Lare's sister urged me to ignore her mother.

"Just ignore her. This too will pass." She advised me. I did my best in avoiding their mother. Lare started spending more time with his dad who didn't seem to care much for grandkids.

I started my treatment by December. Lare and I were medically advised to abstain from sex. It was tough for us, but we made do with oral sex and mutual masturbation. December was a trying time for us, we were both on edge, trying to find ways to help each other relax. We were hoping to complete the first treatment by the end of January. Lare's surgery was successful. The doctors confirmed the significant improvement in his sperm count. My egg retrieval however was a disaster. I was overstimulated. Lare stayed by my side the entire time. The doctors advised me to get enough rest; they switched my meds and told us to try again in March.

In March, I was confident we'd succeed the second time. One embryo was implanted during the first procedure. Thankfully, six embryos survived and passed the PGS, so we froze five. We returned to Lagos five days after the procedure and by the seventh day, I couldn't stand the suspense and 'madness', I tested at home. The test result showed a very faint line. I may be pregnant, I thought. I put the test in a ziplock bag to show Lare when he got back from work. He was so excited. Three days later, we went for a blood test that all came out positive.

We decided to wait out the six weeks to get a proper confirmation of the pregnancy before announcing it to our families. We went back to London for a check. The night before our appointment, I bled heavily. I was rushed to the clinic where we were told the baby was gone. I wept profusely. Lare tried comforting me while holding back his own tears. I felt defeated and broken. I did all the right things, yet I lost our baby. It was all becoming very hard for me.

"I am so tired. I don't think I want to do this anymore" I sobbed to Lare. Lare, not knowing what else to do to comfort me called my father. My dad spoke calmly over the phone.

"It's going to be okay. It will. This may not be the right baby because it chose to shed itself. Give it a little break to recuperate and keep trying" he encouraged. That night, for the first time in a long while, Lare and I made love. We both cried so much together.

"Promise me that whatever happens we'd remain best friends." I pleaded with Lare.

"Nothing will happen. We'll get through this" Lare reassured. The next morning, we went out to get 'morning after' pills. We wanted to avoid every possible chance of birthing a child with the sickle cell gene; that would break us completely.

By June 2007, I celebrated my 27th birthday in high spirits. I wanted to try again one more time in July. I contacted the clinic and resumed my meds. I went alone to the clinic – Lare wanted to go with me but I dissuaded him. I did ask him for a vacation after the frozen transfer. We headed out to Santorini for ten days, we had a good time even though we abstained from sex. We went back to the London clinic for the feedback, thankfully we were positively pregnant with an HCG of 450. We would be due for a scan in a few weeks; we chose to do the scan in Lagos instead of flying back to London.

As the weeks progressed, I worked more from home. I was taking things easy to make sure the baby stayed this time. I reduced my yoga schedule, handed over the studio and foundation to their respective managers. We waited till the seventh week before going to scan. We saw a beating heart on the sonogram. Lare kissed me on my forehead.

“Thank you so much” he whispered, teary-eyed.

“I love you so much” I whispered back. My heart was full of overflowing with joy. As I was putting on my clothes, the doctor asked me how many embryos we transferred. “Two” I replied.

“Get back on the table” she instructed firmly. She searched again and identified two more babies. I stared at the Lare, confused. We started laughing. This was ridiculous. We wanted just one child, what are we going to do with three children at once?

On our way out of the clinic, I asked Lare if he could drive. We were both in shock.

“I think it’s best if you call your driver to come get us” I suggested.

“What are we going to do?” Lare asked, still shock.

“We’re going to be parents of triplets” I said, turning the words over in my mind, trying to understand it. We laughed some more.

“When are we telling our families?” I asked.

“I think we should just tell your father for now. We need to be sure of this news before spreading it” he replied.

“That’s okay”

“We’re going to hire lots of help” Lare said.

“Okay, first of all we might need a bigger house” I said. We made more plans.

I’d resign from work. My dad came by our home that same evening with a bottle of wine. He brought me apple juice too. “Pregnant women don’t drink wine” he teased me when he handed it to me. I laughed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked me.

“I am feeling mostly fatigue, no nausea yet” I replied. he asked to see the medical reports. He observed the babies were similar in size.

“There is likely no threat of miscarriage. We can tell the immediate families right away but wait at least twelve weeks before announcing it to friends” he suggested. We all agreed on the plan. Lare and I decided to host the families to lunch at our place for the announcement. Lare was treating me as if I was handicapped. He’d serve me copious amounts of food that I could barely finish. He’d prop my feet up. I craved pizza so he had the cook making pizza for me every day. We spoke about where to have the babies. We decided NY was best since we had a bigger apartment there for Ibu, his mom and the nannies we’d need. We planned I’d travel in my fifth month while he’d shuttle back and forth.

My mother broke down crying when we made the announcement to our families. Lare’s mum started dancing and singing hymns, I rolled my eyes at her. His dad congratulated him. “You shot thrice and all of them entered the goalpost” he said gauchely. My dad prayed for an uneventful pregnancy and delivery. We found an obstetrician/gynecologist and hospital in NY that would take care of me. The hospital referred us to a fetal maternal specialist who would monitor the progress of my pregnancy. I was told to expect to carry the pregnancy for about eight months, but I wanted to push for as long as my body would let me. My pregnancy started showing at the eight-week mark, so I called my country manager to explain to her why I’d need to start working from home. She approved my request; she told me I could work from home as long as I deliver my reports weekly to her. She also was willing to extend my maternity leave to six months.

We decided not to check the gender of the babies. We wanted to have fun and speculate. Sometimes, we’d lie in bed with Lare touching my belly and we’d argue over the gender of the babies.

“They’re going to be two girls and one boy” Lare would say.

“No. they’re all going to be girls so that boys will chase them around and you’ll pursue their boyfriends around, threatening them till you get grey hair.” I’d counter fondly. We’d go back and forth till one of us fell asleep. We also argued over the names we’d give them. We knew, however that two of the babies shared

one placenta and were identical while the last baby C was fraternal. Lare came home every day with something for me to eat or drink – ice-cream, cake, pizza. “If these babies develop sweet tooth, I’d blame you for it” I said to him all the time.

“I just want to feed my kids” he’d reply laughing. By the fifth month, we could not have sex anymore. I weighed so much and felt heavy as a whale. Sometimes, I’d give Lare blowjobs. All I wanted in return is to have my back rubbed and to get out of the bed like a normal human being. I could no longer see my swollen feet if I look down standing. I felt undesirable. Lare tried his best to make feel sexy.

Christmas was a blur. Lare shopped endlessly for baby gifts. I bought the kids their first bibles. Lare gave me a beautiful necklace that had three angels on it. I was so miserable I couldn’t wait to get the kids out. We were expecting them around first week of March. Lare’s birthday was the second week of March; sometimes I imagine the best gift I’d give him for his birthday would be his kids. I wanted to have them on his birthday. I didn’t care for the gender of the kids, I just wanted healthy babies.

Our mothers were in town for the delivery. We hired three nannies. I managed to convince the doctor to move me up one more week to make it to the 10th for Lare’s birthday. I was worried about the epidural and didn’t care about the C-section. I had God and a 20-man team with me in the operating room. The neonatal intensive care unit was ready for me, but the fetal specialist thought we didn’t need them as we’re already at 35 weeks. On Lare’s birthday, Lare and I arrived at the hospital and checked in at 6:00am. We planned to call the family after delivery. At 8:30 am, baby A, a boy arrived. I cried so much, Lare stood by me, stroking my hair and squeezing my hands. Baby B, another boy arrived, baby C was a girl. They cleaned them and wrapped them up. When my babies were placed on my chest, I felt my heart exploding with so much love and happiness. They were an absolute joy. They were mine. I wanted to hold them forever, to protect them. I never wanted to part with them.

Lare wept so much. “I love you so much. I love you all so much” he whispered to me; the tears streamed shamelessly down his face.

“I love you so much too. Thank you for everything. Thank you for being mine.” I whispered back to him. Lare went out with the babies to the private nursery while the doctors stitched me up. We named our babies: Micah, Xander and Elsie. *Our babies.*

The End

Acknowledgments

A very special thanks ….

To everyone who has indulged my writing by encouraging my writing. When I become famous, I can take you out to lunch.

A Note About the Author

Mosunmola.K. Rose is a fun loving, well-travelled woman who enjoys writing in her free time. She was “bred and buttered” in Lagos, Nigeria. She enjoys weaving the characters of her books together and telling stories – some imagined, some real. She enjoys fantasizing about romance with a touch black love which she delivers with a sense of humor and ridiculousness that are uniquely hers.

About the Book

Hurricane December – A Romance Trilogy brings us the story of

Simone Osasanya life’s tale unfolding according to god’s plan that has been laid out for her, who falls in love and gets her heart broken severally. She is forced to come to grips with her heartbreak, unemployment and unhappiness. It is about love, forgiveness, second chance, learning to trust again and making bold hurricane choices.

Content warning: This book contains scenes that might be triggering for some readers.

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[1] Free
[2] This is debt
[3] Good for nothing elder
[4] Right
[5] Daughter
[6] Mom
[7] Malaysian Fried Rice
[8] The King’s wife
[9] Those wearing the selected wedding fabric
[10] How Come?
[11] Right
[12] Restaurant
[13] Mister
[14] An expensive car showed up to pick her up
[15] Took off her clothes
[16] I am in trouble
[17] Cherry
[18] Is this guy crazy?

[19] Mine has caught up with me
[20] Please
[21] Scammer
[22] Mom
[23] Type of
[24] Please
[25] Nigerian Food
[26] Mom
[27] conservative
[28] That’s
[29] Hand woven fabric
[30] Master of Ceremonies
[31] Head tie
[32] AS if
[33] Right?
[34] Blouse and Wrapper