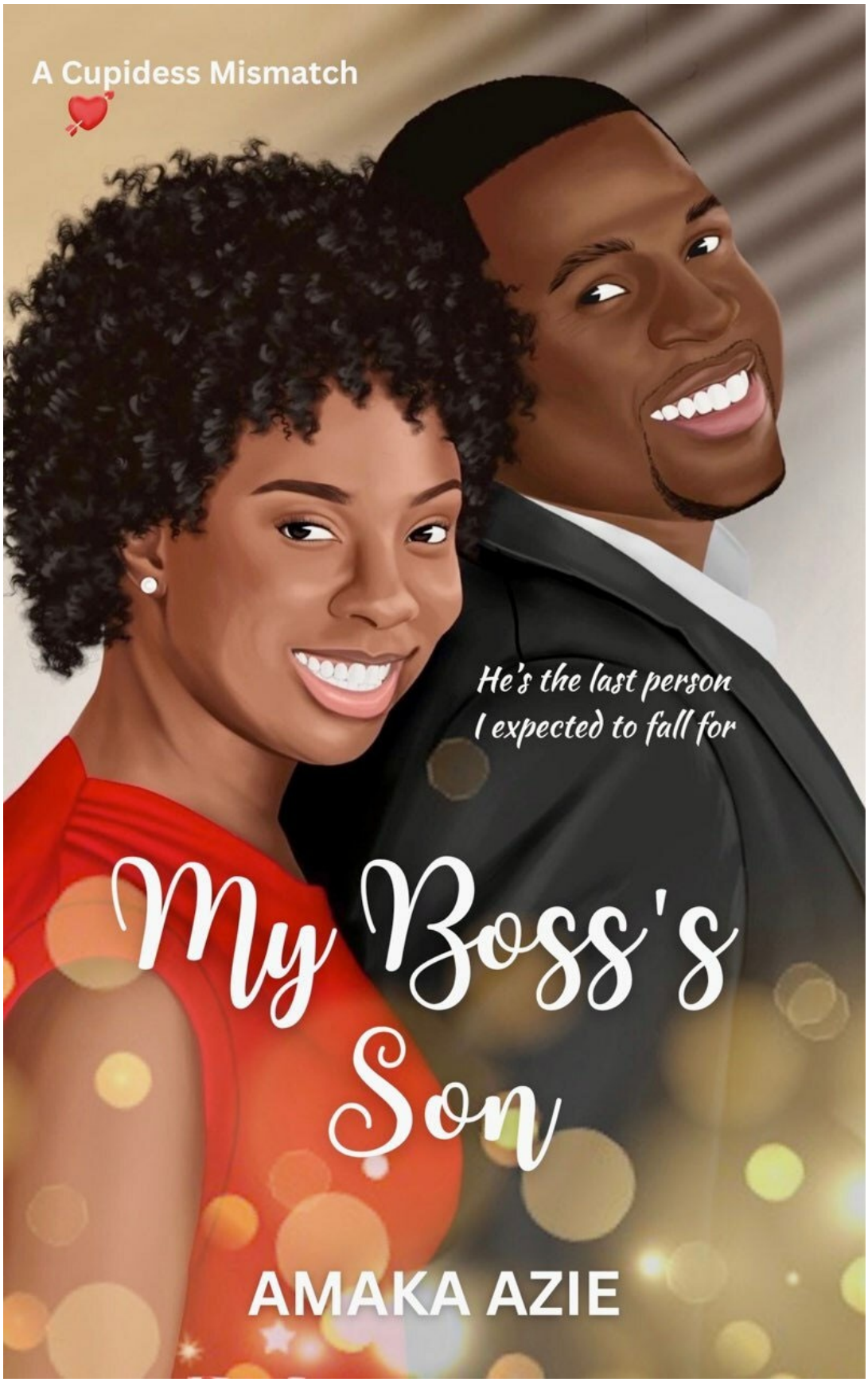
A Cupidess Mismatch
He's the last person
I expected to fall for
My Boss's Son
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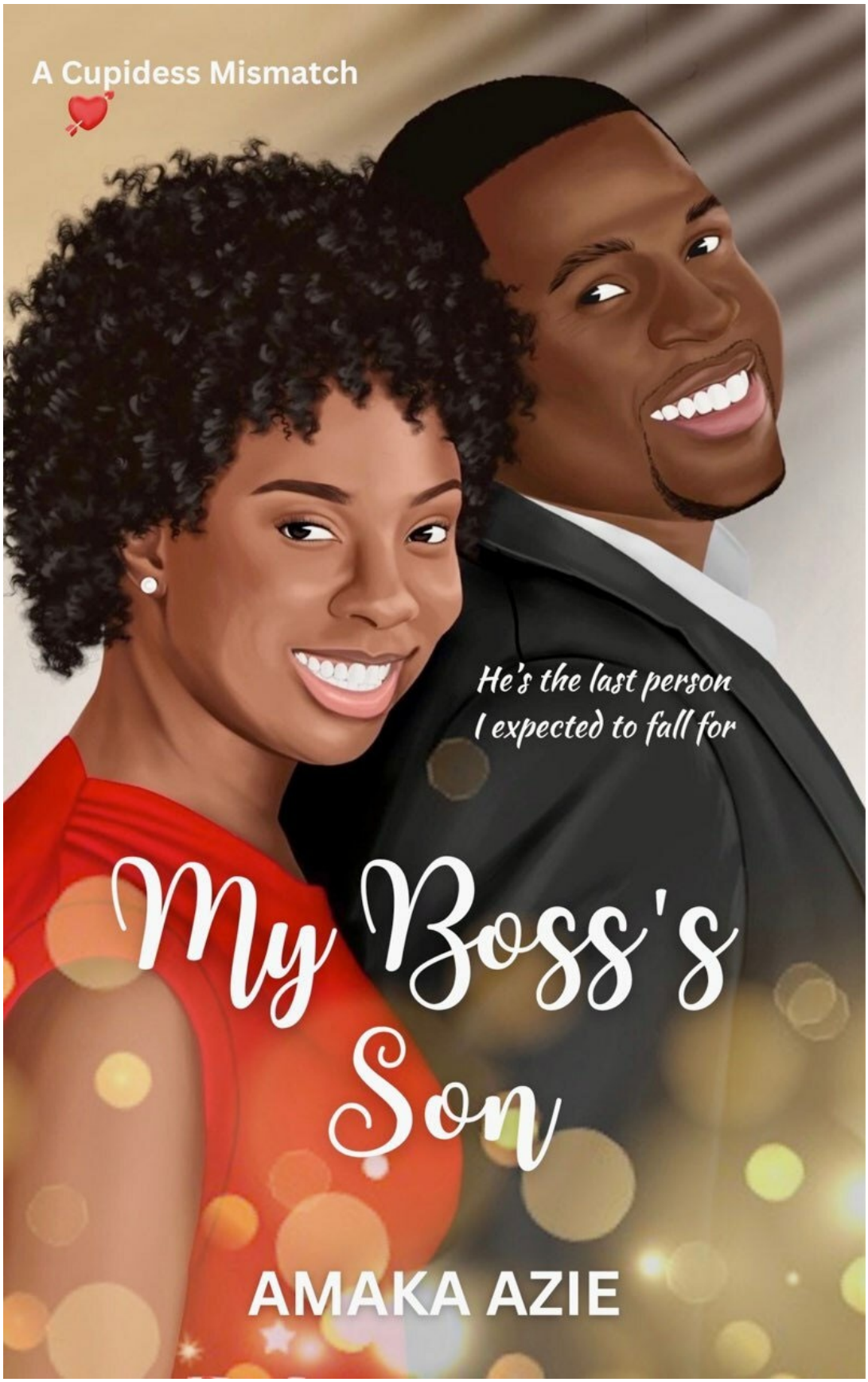
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Contents

Blurb

Note to my readers

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

More from the author

My Boss's Son

By Amaka Azie

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Blurb

Adanna Ezenna needs this promotion. What's more, she deserves it. But after a workday from hell, her chances look grim. So, when some joker, posing as the lead actor in a hit British television series, slides into her Cupidess dating app DMs, her response pulls no punches.

Her career, not romance, is on the agenda right now. Besides, no way could the lying fraud be the man for her, right?

Justin Igwe is in Lagos searching for his biological father. A bitter breakup has left him sour on love, but a savvy guide around town could aid his mission. So, he puts his profile on the hip, new dating app Cupidess. And bingo, there she is — totally not his type and knows the city like the back of her hand.

Now, if he can only convince her he's not a con. Easy enough. The hard part? Keeping his unexpected attraction to her in check.

Note to my readers

Thank you for your constant support. I started and stopped this story several times. I worried about creating a romantic tale from such a horrible experience like work-based sexual harassment.

So many doubts plagued me when I began to work on this idea. Would I manage to make Adanna's character and ordeal relatable? Would I be able to tackle the delicate issue with grace and sensitivity?

It all seemed so overwhelming. And then, I spoke to my sister Ogo. She told me that things like this happen more commonly than people speak of.

She said, "What is fiction if not a reflection of what truly occurs in our society? Why should romance be any different?"

Encouraged by this statement, I let go of my worries and allowed the creative juices to flow. I hope that Adanna and Justin's journey to love captures your hearts and minds the way it did mine.

Please don't hesitate to share your thoughts about this story with me.

PS: My editor said to include that I worked on this manuscript on my hospital bed awaiting gallbladder surgery. She says it speaks of my commitment to the story. You know what? I agree. Thank you, Stephanie. Ha ha.

Chapter One

ADANNA



Eyes and mouth agape, I stare in disbelief at the man seated in front of me. Did he just say what I think he said?

“I-I don’t understand, sir,” I mutter in a low voice, fighting the bile suddenly churning in my stomach.

He bursts into a garrulous laugh, his double chin jiggling like Jello. Pushing his chair slightly backwards, he pats his protruding belly in a self-assured way.

“You’re not a child, my dear. Surely, you don’t need me to spell it out for you,” he says, reaching to adjust his spectacles over his broad nose. “Nothing in this world goes for free.”

“But … Mrs Aramide said I was qualified for this … this promotion…”

“And she is right, my dear,” he affirms, nodding his head. “You are more than qualified.”

“So, why are you suggesting … why are you saying this?” My heart is beating so fast, I can almost feel the vibrations in my chest. How the hell can this be happening?

Last week, my supervisor called me to her office for a meeting to discuss my future. About time. I’ve been at the mobile network firm Ziltech for six years, working my ass off and going nowhere. No advancement, no pay rise.

So, I was thrilled when Mrs Aramide told me that she’d put my name in for a promotion. Apart from the much needed, fifteen-percent salary boost, I would finally be eligible for the company’s health and welfare insurance program.

“Yes, you’re eligible for promotion, but so are the other five people competing with you. What makes you think you deserve it more?”

“Well, sir…” I stop and clear my throat. “I’ve worked here for over six years, and brought in a lot of clients —”

He waves his hand to silence me, and then, resumes his belly rub. “All well and good, but that’s not how your mates got their promotions. You scratch my back, I

scratch yours. Simple."

"And … what does scratching your back entail?"

My question comes out in an almost inaudible whisper, but I can hear the laughter from Chief Madu resounding loudly in my ears.

"Like I said, you aren't a child," he says with a voice that now sounds icy, all the playfulness of a few moments ago long gone.

His gaze locks with mine, and the hairs on my neck stand on end. Sweat trickles between my shoulder blades. A shrewdness has replaced the usually benign spark in his irises. He is no longer the jovial boss who calls out cheery greetings to everyone he passes on his way to the fifth floor.

It's like the Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Someone has replaced our firm's General Manager with an imposter. I don't recognize the devil sitting behind this desk with the balls to make such an indecent demand before he gives me a promotion that's rightfully mine.

"All smart women know why they are women." He rubs his palms together and slides his tongue over his lips as his eyes glide over me in a way that makes me recoil and want to pull the ends of my coat together. "You are beautiful. Sexy. Use what the Good Lord gave you to get what you want."

Dumbfounded by his audacity, I remain mute, unable to shoot a word past my lips.

"Take some time to think about it, my dear," he says. "Let's say … four weeks. I'll be here on the 25 th of this month, and if your answer is yes, you'll get your promotion."

"Sir…" I begin, desperate to counter his assumption that I'd entertain this madness for even one second.

Stand up, my mind screams. Tell him to go to hell and to take his job and his promotion with him. I open my mouth, but the words stick in my throat. And even if I could loosen them, my tongue feels glued to the top of my mouth. I can't speak.

“Don’t worry, my dear. You’re hardly the first, and definitely not the last,” he says in a dismissive tone. “Ask your supervisor how she got her own promotion”

Without another word or glance at me, he turns his attention to the desktop in front of him and begins typing on his keyboard, effectively ending our interaction.

Stiff as a board, my mind thrown into complete befuddlement, I rise to my feet and walk out of the office, my gaze lowered to the floor.

Think about it.

As I stumble down the hall, his words buzz like angry killer bees in my head. My throat is tight with a burgeoning scream, but I bite down on my lower lip, fighting it. Why should I be the one upset instead of the disgusting man back there? What have I done wrong?

Pressing the down arrow on the elevator multiple times, I swallow hard, hoping to hell I don’t bump into anyone on my way back to my first-floor office.

The elevator chimes, and the door slides open. It’s empty. Thank God for small mercies. Heaving a deep sigh, I step in and squeeze my eyes shut, pushing back the tears that seem determined to flow.

My mind spins and my stomach churns on the interminable elevator ride down. I feel nauseated and somewhat dirty, like I need a bath for simply being in the room with Chief Madu.

Is this my fault? Did I give him a desperate vibe? A runs-babe vibe? I lift my head and glance at my reflection in the elevator mirror.

Is it because there’s a hint of cleavage peeking out from the top of my camisole? Are my clothes too provocative for the workplace? I pull my black, pantsuit jacket together and hide my chest.

Maybe I’m too chatty, too friendly. At that, I flash back to the last office Christmas party. Oh, God.

Chief Madu asked me to dance. I could hardly say no, but did he misinterpret that?

I cover my mouth with my palms, face warm with embarrassment at the memory of my dance floor moves—shaking my ample booty as I danced with almost every male staff member in attendance. Had Chief Madu noticed? Is that why?

I give my head a vigorous shake. No, couldn't be. He'd danced with my other female colleagues, and I wasn't the only one dancing and having fun. Lisa, Ebele, Yemisi and Hanatu were right there with me. All young women at the same level in the company as me. So, that can't be it.

Doubt floods my senses as I amble out of the elevator. Maybe I'm not the asset to Ziltech I imagine myself to be. Maybe sleeping with the boss is the only way he can justify my promotion.

I walk through the long corridor and into my own tiny cubicle at the end of the large office space, careful to avoid eye contact with my four office mates. Nobody says a word to me as I settle onto my seat. The silence is eerie, as if the entire office knows what's just happened to me.

Still keeping my gaze averted, I switch on my computer, my mind whirling in scattered circles, myriad emotions clutching at my chest. The most prominent and devastating of all—a heart-piercing shame.

Why am I still here? Why am I not packing up my stuff in a box and getting the hell out of this place?

It's not too late to salvage my self-respect. I could retrace my elevator ride, storm into Chief Madu's office, and quit. The very thought fills me with a heady elation.

And a sinking dread.

I open the database software and continue inputting the numbers. Just like I do every day.

For the rest of the day, I carry on as if nothing has happened. Like a zombie on the inside, but behaving business as usual on the outside. None of my co-workers asks me how my promotion interview went. In a way, I'm glad. I don't have to lie, or explain to anyone why I'm still here after such an indecent proposal. But somewhere deep inside me, disappointment simmers.

Maybe if someone asked, I'd talk about it, share with them how totally confused I feel. How surprised and ashamed I am that I didn't throw his proposal back in his face and walk out of the building without a backward glance.

Maybe if the person asked me why I didn't, I'd come up with an answer. Because I sure haven't on my own all day.

Five hours later, I push open the door of my home, still numb and unable to fully process what's going on with me. Am I really considering this?

I'm thirty-one years old, still living hand to mouth, working at a gruelling job with a salary that barely covers my monthly bills. This is my chance to earn a little more, to finally be able to afford a bit better for myself without needing to always borrow money from my brother.

As it is, I already owe him nearly a million Naira. Not that he cares. He's told me not to pay him back, but that doesn't sit well with me. It's just not in my nature to be in debt. Even to family.

To enhance my income, I've tried so many side gigs—selling hair extensions, selling clothes, selling bags and shoes. None have been profitable.

With a drawn-out sigh, I sink into the soft cushion of my sitting room couch. Bending forwards, I peel off my six-inch stilettos and toss them on the floor.

One would think I'd have better employment luck. I certainly thought so with my second-class upper degree in Mass Communications from Sandhill College. But the frightfully expensive private university hasn't done a thing for me. In fact, after a year-long, bank internship for my compulsory youth service, I ended up unemployed for nearly eleven months, living off my brother.

I only managed to land a job at Ziltech with my best friend's help. If Brenda hadn't connected me with a friend of hers who worked there, I'd probably owe my brother a few million more Naira. And even with the job, here I am stuck at the same level six years later. No salary increment, no career progress, and no way to quit. The economy is horrid right now, and there are simply no jobs out there.

That's why learning I had finally been recommended for promotion made me come alive with excitement. At last, some hope, a welcome silver lining, some

good news to hang onto. And now, just like the sudden detonation of a bomb, that dream has been shattered and I've been catapulted back to reality. I'll have to either sell my soul to get what I deserve, or quit and have nothing at all.

Letting out another weary sigh, I pull out the tablet in my bag and lean back on the couch. Using the numeric passcode, I unlock it and click open the Cupidess dating app. My last-ditch effort at entrepreneurship.

When I had the idea to start a dating site three years ago, I was convinced the venture would take off. Inspired by my love for romance novels, I hoped it would be a safe space for people to find love.

Men and women who passed security background checks would register for a monthly fee and input information on what they were looking for in a partner into the data. The database would search for possible matches based on similarities and compatibility.

Pumped by the innovation of it all, I implored Brenda to invest. And just like always, my bestie turned sister-in-law was all in. With her backing, we were off and running.

At first, Cupidess garnered mega interest. The site grew fast, even to the brink of making a profit after just a year.

I even found my ex-boyfriend Tayo on the app. And although the relationship fizzled out several months later because he moved away from Lagos, we had a wonderful time together.

Too bad that just like the relationship, Cupidess started to fizzle out, too. And poof … there went my ambitious dream for a cutting-edge dating website.

Nicking the inner membrane of my cheek with my teeth, I click on the website analytics, and my stomach convulses. Another ten people have deactivated their accounts in the past week, making a total of thirty in a month.

Not their fault, I guess. In a bad economy, which is getting worse every day, very few people can afford to pay to find love. Everyone's trying to survive, and with a monthly subscription of four thousand Naira—the cheapest I could make it and not run up a massive loss—it's just not sustainable. For the consumers or me.

I drag my thumb across the screen. Very soon, I'll have to deactivate the website, and put an end to what I hoped would be the breakthrough to my real dream—to host a television talk show about relationships and life. Just like Oprah Winfrey, my idol.

I blow out a harsh laugh. If I can't even make an online app work, how on earth will I successfully pitch the idea to a television network?

The tears I've been holding back since my meeting with Chief Madu begin to fall down from my eyes. Wiping at my cheeks angrily, I continue to stare at the screen of my Samsung tablet, my gaze fixed on the dating app I believed would launch me into showbiz.

What a bloody shame. Three years gone down the drain. The ultimate joke is I thought this would be so successful that I wouldn't need to work at Ziltech … or anywhere. Now, I have a terribly hard decision to make about that awful job.

The tablet pings, jarring me from my sorrowful musings.

▪

You have a new message from Cupidess.

▪

I look at the username. Justin Igwe?

I let out an annoyed hiss. What idiot is using a celebrity's name and picture on my dating site, trying to deceive unwitting women. As if the famous Nigerian-British actor, starring in one of the most popular drama series on the London BAC-TV network, would be looking for love on a Nigerian dating site. I should deactivate this account and save a lot of women a lot of trouble. In fact, I'll have a word with the company I use for the background checks required for all Cupidess users. How on earth did they manage this slip up?

Twisting my lips into a sneer, I click open the message. Irritation prickles my skin as I read.

▪

Justin Igwe: I’m intrigued by you and want to get to know you better, Adanna. Please reply to my message.

“Mtchew!” I hiss again. “You chose the wrong time to bug me, buddy!”

He obviously thinks I’m one of those ditsy chicks who’s so desperate for a man, I’ll believe anything. A man not confident enough to use his own profile name and picture to interest women is completely useless.

“Not today, Satan,” I mutter, grinding my teeth as I poise my fingers on the lower half of the tablet.

With my lips pressed into thin lines, I begin to tap rapidly on the screen, letting my entire day’s frustration flow from my chest, through my fingertips, and into every word I type in response to the idiot.

Chapter Two

JUSTIN



Resting the mobile phone against my ear with a huge smile on my face, I lean back on the executive chair in my newly converted study. This is my favourite place in the three-bedroom flat I've rented for an entire year.

The gorgeous view of the city below was a big selling point. That and the fact that the dark grey walls and the total lack of clutter provide the perfect ambience for me to be productive. A quiet place where I can write … and think.

"Mum, I'm fine," I mutter, shaking my head as though she can see me. "I'm a grown man quite capable of looking after myself."

My mother's constant fussing drives me crazy. And pulls at my heartstrings. I love her for always showing me how much she cares. Sometimes, even going overboard, calling me almost daily or sending me positive affirmations every morning.

From the age of ten, when I was rescued from a biological mother whose severe drug addiction left her unable to look after me, and then, got adopted by my new family, my mother's loving care has cocooned me in her eternal positivity.

Mr and Mrs Duncan … they came to meet me, and that was that. Originally from northwest England, the pair took me into their home, showered me with love and support, and did their best to help me forget the harrowing early years of my life.

Yet, all the love I've received from my adoptive parents and three siblings hasn't done much to eradicate my bleak and pessimistic outlook on life.

Blank soul. Hardened heart. Incapable of loving anyone.

Just a few of the ways women have described me. Mostly exes. Including my most recent—an unfaithful former girlfriend trying to explain why she'd strayed.

"I couldn't get to your heart. You're made to be alone."

I tap my fingers on the desk. Unpleasant as the memory is, it's my main reason for being here. To sort through my past. And if at all possible, heal some festering wounds.

“So, have you found him yet?”

My mum’s question pulls me from my roving thoughts. I let out a low chuckle.

“In the less than two weeks I’ve been here? I’m an actor, Mum, not a magician,” I reply, crossing my legs at the ankle. “Besides, I'm still settling in and getting the lay of the land before I go searching for him.”

Her soft laugh warms my heart. “Okay, love. I hope you find whatever it is you’re looking for and that it brings you peace…” She hesitates, and my stomach clenches.

“What is it, Mum?” I ask, although I already have my suspicions.

“Well … I just don’t really understand why you’d travel half a world away looking for a man who may not want to be found. Or why you’d want to dig up disturbing memories.”

Her Scouse accent, which fifteen years of living in London hasn’t dampened, rises in my ear. Hearing her voice always soothes me. Reminds me of our life in Liverpool, when I was just a young black boy living with an all-white family, carefree and without the constant scrutiny from folks asking why I was so different from the rest of the family.

People in my neighbourhood knew exactly why, and were relieved that I’d finally been removed from a harmful environment and placed in a safe, loving home.

Moving to London changed all that. A new city meant new neighbours, ones who asked loads of questions, sometimes curiously, and other times, rudely.

My early years in Croyden were marked by misery. People glared at me whenever they saw me with my family. Things at school were even worse. If I had a nickel for the many times that I was called the real black sheep of the family, I’d own a castle made from the silvery metal.

Without my wonderful mother who always found a way to shield me from the pain, I would have imploded. I push back the memories.

“Nigeria is not worlds away, Mum,” I say with a wry twist of my mouth. “It’s

only a six-hour flight."

"I know, but … are you sure you really want to —"

"Oh, Mum." I suppress a sigh. It isn't fair to be flippant about my mother's concern. I know she loves me unconditionally, perhaps even more than my biological mother Nancy. "We've talked about this. I need to find him. Look him in the eye and tell him what he did to Nancy ... to me…"

My tone is more passionate than I intended, but the thought of seeing the man whose evil blood runs through my veins angers me. And yet, I am eager to meet him.

"I need some closure. And maybe if I get it, I can finally heal ... finally manage a healthy relationship."

"Oh, Justin, I wish you'd realise how wonderful you already are. Rochelle … she's the fool, the one that cheated and —"

"It's not just Rochelle, Mum. Three women have cheated on me. Three," I say, humiliating as the truth is. "They are not the problem. I am."

My outburst seems to have rendered her speechless, because Mrs Duncan, who is never at a loss for words, has no response.

"And their excuses are scarily similar," I continue. "I'm the reason they've strayed."

I brush my palm across my face, tightening my jaw at the recollection of opening the WhatsApp message Rochelle intended for her sidepiece, but erroneously sent to me. If she hadn't deleted it immediately, I may have even believed the lie she first told me.

My disbelief and persistence eventually wrung the truth from her—that about six months into our eighteen-month relationship, she'd started seeing an up-and-coming musician named Raul. According to her, my lack of emotional availability had left her no choice but to seek her happiness elsewhere.

Having replayed that fateful evening and her candid assessment of me in my head countless times, I can still remember everything Rochelle said as if I'd

recorded her.

“You’re a brick wall,” she cried out, tears running down her cheeks. “Even now, you’re so calm. I’ve just told you that I’ve been fucking someone else for months, and you’re unmoved, silent. What kind of man are you?”

That question still haunts me, because her assessment was dead-on. I felt close to nothing. Sure, a little miffed … a certain hit to my male pride. But truthfully, no more upset than the time I lost my keychain and went through all it entailed—a locksmith, new keys, changed locks. Inconvenient, but hardly worth going on about.

Nope, I was neither hurt nor devastated. I still am not, and I actually planned on marrying Rochelle. Had even ordered the engagement ring. Is she right? Is there something wrong with me?

“Maybe it’s in my blood, Mum. Something genetic about me that repulses women. Maybe just like my biological father, I’m —”

“Not another word from you, lad,” she cuts in, her voice suddenly back in full force, her words heavily laden with her Scouse accent. “You can’t inherit evil. It’s an excuse wicked people give to avoid taking responsibility for their horrid actions.”

She blows out a harsh sigh that prickles my ear. “And you can’t let any adult blame you for their decisions. Those awful women decided to cheat instead of talking to you. That’s on them, love. Not you.”

I drag in a deep breath. On some level, I agree with my mother. Of course, I didn’t make Lily, Nene, or Rochelle cheat on me. No. They did it all on their own.

However, they all found me lacking emotionally—called me detached, hardened, cold. That’s got to mean something.

“Okay, Mum,” I say, reluctant to start a debate I’ll never win. She only sees the best in me. No way I’d ever convince her I’m the loser I sometimes feel like. Or that I am unable to keep any woman happy or even content. She thinks I’m the greatest thing since sliced bread.

“Justin ...” My mum blows out my name in a soft voice. “Just take care of yourself for me, alright?”

“Will do, Mum.”

“And keep me in the loop, no matter what, okay?”

“Always,” I say, my throat tight. This woman’s my rock, a light that shines in the darkened space of my heart. “Love you, Mum.”

“Love ya, too. Stay safe.”

“You can count on it. And you, too. Stay safe.”

Ending the call, I lower my mobile phone onto the chestnut oak desk and glance out the massive bay window. I rise from my seat, walk across the room and slide it open. Taking a deep breath, I fill my lungs with the fresh air that filters into the room.

It’s Friday morning in Lagos. And from my apartment’s third-floor vantage point, I can see the busy traffic below.

Bumper-to-bumper, cars move at a snail’s pace, motorcycles snake between vehicles with reckless abandon, horns are blaring left, right, and centre, and people are yelling instead of talking. Maddeningly chaotic. Exactly how I feel right now.

My first time ever being in Nigeria should be joyous—a sort of homecoming. And in some ways, it is. Except really, my sole purpose for being here is finding my biological father. Not that I have much to go on. Just a grainy picture of the man who my birth mother believed sexually assaulted her.

According to Nancy, she had been so high off drugs that she couldn’t remember much about the incident, except that she’d woken up bruised at the corner of a building, her clothes in tatters, and bleeding from down below. Her only real memory of the attacker was going home with a man she’d met at a party—a handsome Nigerian student vacationing in Liverpool.

I walk back to my seat and pull out the desk drawer. Retrieving the old photograph, I settle back onto my seat and stare at it for long moments. The one

picture she’d managed to get of him. Because the club had been dark, his facial features are blurry. All I can see is a dark-skinned black man of average height and build.

My first task is to find this man. And as if that’s not hard enough, then I need to come up with a plan to get a sample of his DNA, so I can see if he’s really my father. And find out if I share the genes of a person capable of such a heinous crime. A shudder runs through me at the thought, but it doesn’t deter me.

Which is why as soon as we wrapped up shooting the final episode of Men of Valour’s Season Four, I headed straight back to my Chelsea flat, packed my bags, and took the next flight from London to Lagos.

Fortunately, there's nothing pressing on my plate for a while. Yes, a few promo rounds are scheduled four months from now in preparation for next season’s premiere, but I can easily fly in and out for those.

So, I have enough time for the hunt. Somebody somewhere must know him. Lowering the picture carefully back into the drawer and sliding it closed, I turn my attention to the open laptop on my desk.

I unlock the screen and log into my Twitter account. I’ve uploaded the photograph onto my feed and have already got over three hundred retweets. I know the chances of someone already replying are less than remote, but I can’t help looking. Sure enough, I’m right. Nothing. I’ll just have to wait and be ready for the first lead I get.

A notification blinks at the top of the screen, fracturing my musings.

▪

You have a new message from Cupidess.

▪

I click the link, and my heart lurches. As I read the text, the staccato beat in my chest strengthens with each word.

Good Lord. Nearly a week of ignoring me on this app, and the first response I get from Adanna is a none-too-pleased epistle berating me, followed by a herd of

angry emojis.

I pull my seat into the desk and lean forward, keeping my gaze glued to the screen, completely arrested by what I just read. My breathing becomes shallow as I re-read the message, slowly this time, so I don't miss a single word.

▪

Adanna: Mr imposter Justin Igwe, you couldn't have chosen a worse day to contact me with your fake-as-hell profile. You may enjoy playing games on this app, but the rest of us are not here for it. Possibly you think all women are desperate and stupid enough to fall for your scam. We're not.

▪

So, you find me intriguing? What a load of crap. You really want to get to know me, you say. Well, here's a sneak peek of intriguing me.

▪

Just a few hours ago, my boss informed me that I have to have sex with him to get a promotion that I totally deserve.

▪

He calls it scratching his back. As if agreeing to it wouldn't mean selling myself short and losing all my self-respect.

▪

And you know what's worse? Instead of telling the pompous, rotund, old-as-my-father lecher that I have no intention of selling myself or my professional abilities short and throwing away my self-respect, and that he could shove his offer where the sun doesn't shine, I remained silent. Mute as a mule.

▪

You know why? Because I'm so broke that I barely have enough money to make it from month to month. I left the office actually contemplating his disgusting proposition.

▪

Now, what about this do you find so intriguing, Mr Fake Celebrity?

■

Next time you're tempted to use your fake profile to chat up an unsuspecting woman, stop and think. Maybe, just maybe, she's having a day from hell, and you would do well to resist that temptation.

▪

Flabbergasted, I lean back onto my seat and whirl it around, almost as rapidly as my mind is spinning. Several emotions collided with one another as I read Adanna's message. But red-hot rage wins out.

My seat comes to a crashing halt and I grip the armrests, closing my eyes tightly. How can any man be so disgusting, so vile? To demand sex in exchange for anything. To take advantage of Adanna … or any woman.

Bile rises within me, and I swallow hard to keep myself from being sick. I'm a product of this kind of evil. I can't explain it—it's irrational really—but I feel guilty. Almost responsible for her boss's behaviour.

I let out a frustrated sigh. Life is so damn unfair. That Adanna, or my mother, should have to suffer something so ugly is unconscionable. I hate that she's going through this, even if I don't know her. And I wish I could do something to help, find a way to make her boss pay for this.

I glance back at the darkened screen of my computer and clench my jaw. The screensaver is a black hole. Just like my heart.

Ever since my birth mother Nancy revealed nine years ago that she'd been raped and I was a product of that violent act, I've been on auto pilot—almost like the life I'm living is not under my own control. As if someone else is pulling the strings on a marionette.

I know exactly how it feels to bear the burden of someone else's sins. So, I don't judge Adanna for considering the offer at all. In fact, I feel sorry for her, angry on her behalf. And completely helpless, just like I sometimes feel about my own situation. If only I could do something to help her.

I lean forward again and my fingers fly across the keyboard in reply, my chest burning with all my conflicting emotions. I stop typing, read over my message,

and correct a few typos.

Heaving in a deep breath, I press the Send key. When I see Message Sent, a surge of anxiety floods my senses. What if my message makes her feel even more shitty? What if I've made things worse?

There's no way to delete a sent text. My stomach churns. Damn it. I hope to God she doesn't block me and that I don't lose the only connection I have to the most intriguing woman on this dating app.

Chapter Three

ADANNA



Today’s my second workday since the indecent proposition, and everything seems almost normal, kind of like I dreamt up the bomb that exploded in my life.

I’m in my corner cubicle, my gaze focused on my computer, and my fingers tap relentlessly on the keyboard as I key in data on the online spreadsheet.

My colleagues sit at their own workstations, getting on with their duties. A typical Wednesday morning. My occasional, monotonous responses to various queries thrown my way don’t raise any suspicions.

No quirked eyebrows. Nobody saying, “Haba, Adanna, you’ve been quiet lately, so unlike you. What’s up?”

Absolutely zilch. Except there’s an eerie silence in the air, and it makes me think everyone is aware of what happened, yet determined to ignore the fact that my disposition has changed since meeting with Chief Madu. That I’ve shrivelled into myself, curled up tightly like a ball of yarn? It goes totally unaddressed.

My gut tells me I’m not the only one here he’s propositioned. I slide my gaze surreptitiously across the room to the cubicle opposite mine and take a peek at Hanatu. She’s perched forward on her seat, a mobile phone anchored against her ear, speaking animatedly as she scratches her desk with her long nails.

Did Chief Madu ask her for sex in exchange for a promotion, too? Hanatu is very attractive, tall and slender with the loveliest smooth, cocoa-brown skin I’ve ever seen.

She’s also my competitor for this position. Will she say yes and get the job instead of me if I turn him down? My gut plummets at the thought. I turn back to my table.

Like a robot, my actions are mechanical, free from any analysis. I don’t want to think, don’t want to analyse my reasons for still being here when I should be at the HR department, reporting my boss for intimidation and sexual harassment.

I spent the entire night thinking, my brain on overdrive. I’m done with that. All night, I was restless, unable to catch a wink of sleep, my mind flooded with ideas to handle this situation with my dignity intact.

The upshot of all that thinking? My best bet is to take my name out of the running for the promotion.

Yes, I'm broke and badly in need of the pay rise, but I'm not that desperate. Not enough to sell my soul. Thanks to the bungalow my late parents left me, I'm not homeless and don't have to pay rent.

All I need is a regular amount of money for my monthly bills and a little extra to pay off my debt, which I've been doing in small instalments. I'll survive. Just like I've been doing from month to month.

I'll simply have to relentlessly pound the pavement from here on in, and reinvigorate my job search efforts. Yes, the economy is in the pits, but who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky and land a better job with better pay.

One thing became very clear as all this buzzed in my head last night … I'd never forgive myself if I get promoted because I had sex with the boss. And I would never have confidence in my ability to be promoted based on merit.

So, mind made up, I climbed out of bed, tired as hell, but resolute in my decision. I grabbed a quick shower and dressed for work with all the confidence I could muster. Then, I drove here determined to keep my head up and carry on with my current role, knowing that even if I remain on the first floor, doing the same job for another few months or years, at least, I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror.

So, here I am, behind the same desk that I've worked at for over six years, doing the same old shit.

A shadow blocks the light in my periphery. I look up, and my chest tightens. The one person I've been avoiding for two days stands before me.

"Hi, Adanna. Please, can I see you in my office?" Mrs Aramide says, her tone low and conspiratorial, as though divulging international trade secrets.

"Yes, ma," I mutter, springing to my feet, my pulse rate thrown into pandemonium.

As I follow her out of the office, I'm acutely aware of my co-workers' eyes boring into me. Do they think I'm about to be fired? Are they pitying me? I flip

my gaze sideways and catch Hanatu's gaze. Yep. That's pity registered in her dark eyes alright.

My gut plummets, and I look away. Worse than being canned at work, is your co-workers knowing the reason why. Walking stiffly down the long corridor beside Mrs Aramide, my thoughts race several miles a minute.

Why the hell does she want to see me? To fire me? To ask me why I didn't immediately agree to Chief Madu's preposterous proposition?

My throat goes dry as we step into the elevator. There are already two male occupants whose faces I recognize from the management floor above. They are happily chatting away with the confidence of people who know they belong in the building and deserve their high-placed positions.

Probably a safe bet that neither had to sleep with anyone to be promoted. Nope. These two are both sure they are managers based on pure merit.

The men acknowledge us briefly, but carry on with their conversation, almost loud enough to drown out the buzzing in my ears.

The air around me suddenly feels snuffed out, and I part my lips to breathe, the need to escape this claustrophobic space overwhelming me. I clench my hands into tight fists to stop myself from reaching out to punch on the elevator button until the door opens.

I want to run away from this building, free myself from the disgust churning my stomach. Disgust at myself. At Mrs Aramide. And most of all, at the entire work culture that has landed me in this predicament. However, I remain still beside her, my gaze lowered to my feet, studying the crisscross pattern of my black-and-yellow stilettos.

I jump at the chime of the elevator, my already frayed nerves jarred by the sharp noise. If anyone notices my apprehension, they don't react. Instead, Mrs Aramide and both men burst out of the open door as soon as it slides open.

Swallowing saliva to soothe my parched throat, I follow Mrs Aramide's lead to her office on the third floor.

"Please have a seat," she says as soon as I step in. Her voice is soft and pleasant.

Friendly as usual. Nothing in her lilt to indicate an ominous vibe. Hope surges within me. Maybe she's not going to fire me.

She strolls gracefully to her executive seat, her slender hips swaying from side to side. Like Naomi Campbell—whom she does somewhat resemble.

Mrs Aramide is tall and slim with glossy mahogany skin that reminds me of newly tarred roads. Her straightened hair is cut in a stylish bob that suits her heart-shaped face.

Anxious as I am, I have to admit that her poise and elegance are remarkable and one of the reasons I've always admired and looked up to her. It's shocking that now, I can't look at her without remembering Chief Madu's comment.

Ask your supervisor how she got her own promotion.

"Want anything to eat or drink?" she asks.

"No, thank you," I murmur as I lower myself onto the cushioned couch opposite her.

"How was your interview with Chief Madu?" she asks, her perfectly manicured fingers curled around a pen she's fiddling with on her desk.

Straight to the point, I see. I lift my gaze to meet hers. I'm not sure how to answer this. Should I be honest, tell her exactly what happened? Or should I act like Mrs Aramide and pretend that everything is honky dory?

I open my mouth to speak, but only a whoosh of air gushes out. No words.

"Listen, Adanna," Mrs Aramide says, sitting more upright. "Sometimes, as women, we are faced with difficult situations, but we are strong enough to overcome them."

I scrunch up my face in confusion, not entirely sure what she's trying to say, although somewhere deep down, part of me grasps the message she's subtly passing on—just get on with the job and do whatever you have to.

Mrs Aramide fidgets with the pen once again, and then, pins me with an intense look. "What I mean is, I really want you to get that promotion, Adanna. You are

the most qualified out of the bunch downstairs, and you really deserve it." She pauses, flicks her hair behind her ear. "Don't let anything stop you from achieving that."

My blood suddenly boils, and fiery rage sweeps through my body, making my skin feel tight. I squeeze the armrest of my seat, fighting the urge to rise and storm without responding.

I need this job. Even if I don't get a promotion, I need the salary from my current role to afford my monthly bills. Even as it is now, I am barely able to do so with my pay. So, to lose this job would spell disaster.

Dragging in a deep breath, I part my lips and blow out slowly, gathering myself together. I can't afford to lose my shit.

"And by that, you mean I should sleep with Chief Madu," I murmur in a voice that doesn't sound like my own. I'm surprised by how calm I've been about this all, that I haven't gone berserk and caused a ruckus. Which typically, given the way I feel right now, would be my default response.

Where the hell does Mrs Aramide get off, telling me that if I don't acquiesce to Chief Madu's odious proposal, I've caused myself to lose the promotion. Why am I to blame instead of the vile man who made the preposterous request in the first place?

Her eyes widen and narrow almost simultaneously. "Well … it's just sex. Won't take up much of your time. Believe me, Chief Madu doesn't last more than two sec —"

"Just sex? Is that what you call trading my body for a promotion you say I deserve?"

She sighs again. "Listen, Adanna, I'm not saying it's ideal. In fact, it's vile and criminal of him or anyone to ask for …" The skin between her forehead furrows, her eyes are distant, like unpleasant memories have resurfaced.

She shakes her head as if to disperse them. "But this is life. Women endure a lot to get to the top. It's sad, and pathetic. However, men hold all the cards in this and most companies. We have to play their game until enough women get there."

“We don’t have to play that game. We can all work together to report Chief Madu —”

Mrs Aramide’s mirthless laugh interrupts my speech. She taps on the table with her long nails as she bellows.

“You really are as naïve as I thought, Adanna.” She gives her head a tiny shake. “Do you think you are the first woman he’s done this to? That other women haven’t tried to stop him?”

The question is rhetorical, I know, so I say nothing. I keep my gaze fixed on her instead, pressing my lips together.

How is it that for the many years I’ve worked here, I never suspected this—that a self-assured woman like Mrs Aramide, who is outstanding in her managerial role, was a victim of Chief Madu’s filthy behaviour.

“The last woman who tried to expose Chief Madu not only lost her job, but was arrested for fraud. That was seven years ago. Just before you joined us.” Mrs Aramide twists her lips into a wry smile. “They are the big fish with all the connections, and we are the worms, dear. We play their games until we become them. Understand?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head vigorously. “I don’t want to accept that giving up is the only way to handle this. What about Mrs Bassey. She’s a female shareholder. Maybe she’d —”

Mrs Aramide stops me with a wave of her hand. “And you think she isn’t aware of what’s going on?” She releases a sharp hiss. “When I approached her years ago with this same dilemma, that woman told me to either leave or do what needed to be done. Her words almost verbatim … Every woman who wants to get to the top has to pay her own dues. I did. Now, it’s your turn.”

My jaw drops. “No way.”

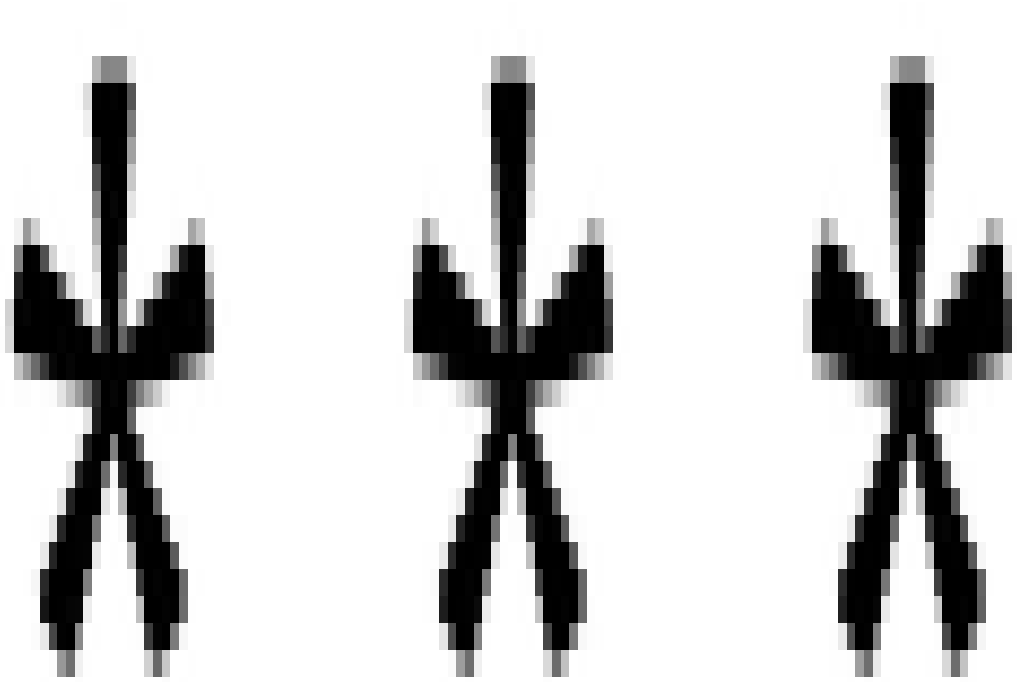
“Well, that’s what I’m telling you, Adanna.” Mrs Aramide draws in a long breath and leans closer. “You have a choice here. Close your eyes, open your legs, and endure two seconds of Chief Madu huffing and puffing above you to get your promotion, or …”

“Quit?” My question comes out in an almost inaudible whisper.

She shrugs. “I’m afraid so.” Mrs Aramide’s tone is regretful. “He won’t leave you in your position if you turn him down. He can’t take that chance. Sleeping with any woman here is his way of flexing his muscle. If you turn him down, he’ll know he can’t trust you. He’ll kick you out.”

A weary look clouds her eyes. “I know you need this job, and I need you here. You are really good at what you do. Please think about what I’ve said, okay?”

A wedge of anguish forms in my throat, making it impossible for me to speak. All I can do is nod my head.



Not until I get home do the tears flow. I don't even bother to hide my sobbing from the security officer who looks at me quizzically as he closes the gate.

"Madam, you dey okay?" His forehead is furrowed in concern.

I shake my head. "No."

He takes a step towards me, worry etched in his face. "Make I call your brother to help?"

Shaking my head again, I raise my hand to stop him. "Nobody can help me," I say. "Please don't make Ugo worry unnecessarily."

He remains standing where he is, his lips drooping in disapproval. "Madam, make you no dey struggle by yourself. That's why you have a brother. He's there to help."

Despite the grief that overwhelms me, I manage a wonky smile. "Thanks for caring. But I have to do this myself."

He nods, but I can tell he isn't convinced. "At least, put it in prayers. May Allah guide you."

"Amen, Mr Abdul, amen," I say, retreating and turning towards the bungalow's entrance.

His response is a gruff grunt that would have made me laugh if I didn't have so many worries on my mind.

After my brother Ugo married Brenda three years ago, he moved out of this bungalow we'd shared for over six years to live in their own newly purchased house.

Before he left, Ugo employed Mr Abdul, a middle-aged and well-trusted security guard. I told him not to, but he'd been worried about leaving me all alone. Now, I'm glad that Ugo insisted on hiring and paying for a security guard for me, but sometimes, Mr Abdul gets on my nerves. The man takes his job way too seriously, oftentimes ringing my brother to share updates on my welfare.

Sighing, I push open the front door and move through the hallway of the bungalow. Without bothering to switch on the light, I head straight to my room and slump on my bed, allowing the tears to flow freely from my eyes as I sob.

Will I have to sleep with Chief Madu to keep my job and get a promotion as Mrs Aramide suggested? Can I even do it?

A disturbing image storms my brain—me in a room alone with old, pudgy Chief Madu, who's not merely unattractive to me, but physically repulses me. My entire body shudders at the thought, and I cover my face with my palms and let out a low howl. Never. I couldn't stand to be touched by the spotty toad. Not a chance in hell.

What am I going to do now? Turning him down means losing my job, which I can't afford. Not in this terrible economy. What else can I do? Go to the police? Will they believe me?

Damn, I need to talk to someone, get this off my chest. Unfortunately, I can't tell my brother any of this. He'd be livid, and probably storm into my office building ready to attack my boss. I can't even talk to my best friend. It wouldn't be fair to ask Brenda to keep this from Ugo.

So, my parents are gone, and I have no close relatives or true friends I can trust with this. I am well and truly on my own.

Swiping tears away from my face, I sit up and reach for my handbag. I retrieve my tablet from the black purse and unlock it. I open my Facebook page and smirk at the profile question … What are you thinking?

I let out a harsh laugh. What am I thinking? I'm thinking maybe I shouldn't type in: My boss says I have to sleep with him or get sacked. What do I do?

Of course, I could, but my work colleagues are also Facebook friends. Nothing I post would be confidential. So, I close the app and move my attention to the red, heart-shaped logo with an arrow piercing the centre. My finger lingers over the Cupidess app.

Why do I suddenly feel like chatting with Mr Fake Celebrity? The Justin Igwe imposter has already heard of my struggles. Maybe talking with a total stranger isn't the worst thing in the world. Especially one that's not even using his real

identity.

Being so secretive on a dating site, he must be hiding something himself. That should make it easier for me to be totally honest with him. At least, he won't judge me. And if he does, I won't care.

Typing in my password, I log onto the site. I have five unread messages in my inbox, but only one interests me. I trail my index finger across the screen, scrolling straight to the envelope icon. I drag air sharply into my lungs as I click on it. My breath traps in my chest, and my heart rate escalates as I read.

Justin: Dear Adanna, I'm terribly sorry about what's going on with your boss. He belongs in jail.

I know what it's like to feel helpless in certain situations, believe me. So, you'll get no judgements from me on feeling like you need the job so badly that you're actually considering the wanker's proposition … even if I hope there's another way.

If you need to talk, I'm here for you. No judgement and totally confidential. And if you're looking for someone to kick your boss's arse, I'm at your service. Lord knows I'd gladly help with that.

Sending out positive thoughts.

Justin Igwe.

PS: It's really me. I wish this app allowed video calls. Check out the photo I've attached. And make sure to note the date.

My head feels like it’s about to explode. This can’t be real. Justin Igwe is chatting with me? Justin Igwe of BAC-TV’s Men of Valour?

I shake my head in denial as I click and open the image he sent. My God. There he is, in all his magnificent glory—standing inside a speed boat, wearing a white polo t-shirt that clings to his muscular arms and a pair of khaki shorts that showcase firm thighs and calves. And goodness, his face is stunning. Piercing brown eyes, a strong, straight nose, and a firm jaw covered with a well-trimmed goatee that surrounds thick, luscious lips.

A black cap atop his head is pulled low over his forehead, but he is still a hundred percent recognisable. I’ve been a fan of his for nearly five years. I know it’s him.

I dip my gaze to the date below the photograph. Taken just three days ago.

Double Damn! This is really Justin Igwe. And omo, the guy dey Lagos.

Chapter Four

JUSTIN



Three weeks in Nigeria, and over five hundred Twitter retweets, two hundred Facebook shares, and two paid blog adverts with nearly a thousand comments each. And still, not one solid lead.

I puff out a frustrated sigh and toss the photo I've spent an inordinate amount of time staring at back into the drawer. It's like the man disappeared in a puff of smoke after attacking Nancy. And maybe he did? For all I know, he's not even alive anymore.

I shake my head at the thought. Even that doesn't matter. Somebody somewhere will recognise him. And I'll find him—dead or alive—come hell or high water.

It's time for professional help. I reach across the table and pick up my mobile phone. I punch out the numbers on the Post-it note on my desk and hit the green button. As the phone rings, my stomach muscles clench with anxiety.

Just as I'm about to hang up, the ringing stops and I hear a gruff male voice. "Third Eye Private Investigators. Ola speaking. How can I help?"

I hold a breath in my chest. Am I really doing this ... involving an investigative agency in my personal problems? Since I learned about Nancy's ordeal, I've called the shots. Deciding if, when, and how I will look for her attacker. Turning the search over to an agency means relinquishing control over the situation, which I've held onto like precious gold for a long time.

For years, I believed what Nancy told me about my biological father. That he had run off and abandoned us soon after my birth. When she finally fessed up about the man that she thinks is my biological father, I felt completely blindsided, devastated and angry.

Finding out she'd not only lied about him, but wasn't even sure of the man's identity made me confused for days. But even worse was when she said he attacked her, and I was the product of that attack. A tidal wave of rage, mixed with shame, devastated me.

I stewed on the information for months before telling my parents. And it's taken years of their love and support since then for me to overcome the numbness that settled inside of me at the knowledge that I'm only here on earth because of a

violent act.

I'm not quite sure I have completely got over the blow Nancy's revelation dealt me. So, when I made up my mind to do some digging of my own, I wanted to be in total control. To be able to manage my emotions each step of the way.

Hiring the most respected private investigator in Lagos to take over the case will change all that. Am I ready to do that? Before my mind answers the question, the breath I've been holding whooshes out, and I start talking.

"My name is Justin Igwe, and I would like you to find someone for me."

A brief pause at the other end of the line. The tapping of the keyboard of a computer reaches my ear.

"You have come to the right place. We have a ninety-five percent success rate," Ola says. "Can I get some details from you and register your case in our system?"

I tap my foot lightly on the floor, trying to calm the agitation coursing through me as I tell the man all he needs to know.

"So, you have only one old picture of him and no name?"

"Yes, I know it isn't a lot to go with —"

"Don't worry, it's a start."

"Can you tell me when the picture was taken? What year? Where? Any details would be helpful."

I pause at that. It's never occurred to me to put that information on the social media posts. Massaging the bridge of my nose, a small smile curves my lips. Hiring a professional P.I. is the right decision.

"It was in 1985, Liverpool. A pub called Horsfall." I puff out a sigh. "I wish I could add more —"

"That's a lot, Mr Igwe. We've worked with less." A brief hesitation. "Would you like us to keep you abreast with each lead we receive or wait until we come up

with results?”

“I’d like to know everything, step by step …”

“Great … and our fees? Are you aware of how we charge?”

“All on the website. I’ll make the initial payment and upload the photograph to your site.”

“Fantastic. We’ll get right to it.”

I thank him and end the call. Standing up, I stretch my arms and legs. Rubbing my eyes to ease some of the fatigue that has settled there, I give a big yawn.

Bloody hell, I’m exhausted. I spent a good portion of the night working on a book I’m writing. Shortly before her death, I told Nancy I wanted to tell her story. How a young woman who spent her entire childhood in the foster care system was left to fend for herself at eighteen with barely any survival skills or guidance. How the system had failed her, leaving her prey to a life of drugs and violence. Initially hesitant, Nancy finally gave me permission to tell her story, hoping it might help other young people in future.

I sit back at my desk and pull my laptop towards me and flip it open. Dragging in a long breath, I open the word processor and scroll through the text, checking for any highlighted grammatical or typographical errors. Just two spelling mistakes. Not bad.

Yesterday, I managed to complete Chapter Seven. No easy feat considering the gut-wrenching emotions I tackled. As I wrote about Nancy being taken to another foster home because her foster parents couldn’t cope with an older child, it felt like I lived the incident with her.

She’d been devastated to leave the first home where she’d found love and acceptance since she’d been in the system. She was never quite the same person, she said, eventually spiralling more and more out of control, becoming rebellious and angry with everyone and everything.

Although I’ve always held a deep resentment for my biological mother, I don’t blame her entirely. Yes, she had a lot of personal issues which she could have dealt with, like her cocaine addiction, but I believe she’s a product of systemic

failures … many attributable to the colour of her skin.

I'm still reeling with rollercoaster emotions from penning that chapter. I need a break. No way can I stomach a scene about her introduction to drugs and alcohol through her next foster parents. Certainly not today.

As soon as I click the software closed, my eyes catch the notifications on the Cupidess app. I have twelve new messages.

Biting down my lower lip, I hesitate. I've ignored all the women who have reached out to connect with me through this app. Three of them have been quite aggressive with their pursuit, refusing to accept my silence and bombarding me with messages.

I'm not sure if they are persistent because they recognise me. I'm not an international sensation, but it's possible they know who I am. I usually keep a low profile, and only true fans of my TV show would probably recognise me, especially outside the UK. Which all works in my favour, because I don't want to get sucked into any romantic relationships. I'm only here for a year. No need to lead anyone on.

What I want is a friend, someone to show me around the country of my ancestors —a place I've longed to be a part of, but know very little about.

Adanna is the only one that I want to explore Nigeria with. I'm not sure why, but as soon as I read her profile biodata, she caught my attention and hasn't let go.

A smile touches my lips as I recall the first time I stumbled on her profile and read the bold text she'd written under her picture.

The universe sends back the same energy you put out. Give love, you get a lover. Give shit, you get a shitstorm. Every action yields an appropriate reaction. Let's be kind to each other.

Nothing about wanting to be desirable to the opposite sex, like the copycat profiles of a thousand other women with cookie cutter interests. I love to read, cook, bake, take long walks on the beach, and cuddle. Blah, blah, blah.

Even Adanna's profile picture isn't conventionally sexy. It's a photo of her in blue jeans and a t-shirt, wearing little to no makeup, her hair styled in a twist-out

do. The proverbial girl next door. A fun person I would like to meet and explore this city with.

Without a thought, I ignored the Cupidess app's twenty-three percent compatibility prediction for Adanna and me, and wrote her anyway. After all, I'm only looking for a friend, not the love of my life.

My initial message went unanswered for several days, and I thought maybe Cupidess was right. Then, she wrote that startlingly candid reply, and captured my interest even more. Since I wrote back, not a word.

For the past four days, I've visited the app regularly, hovered over her profile, anxiously hoping she'd write. Each time, I've been disappointed. No message. Zilch. Nada.

Normally, I wouldn't give a woman's brush-off a second thought. And she's a complete stranger—we haven't even met. So, don't ask me why this is different. Maybe because of the raw honesty of her message. I could feel her vulnerability, could empathise deeply.

Regardless, I told myself enough is enough yesterday. To forget her and move on. That I'd just have to find my own way around Lagos.

Blowing out a long sigh, I click the Cupidess icon. Time to delete my profile from this app.

▪

You have a message from Adanna S Ezenna.

▪

My heart bumps into my chest and beats hard. I click to open the message.

▪

Adanna: Oh, no. I'm totally embarrassed dot com. Sorry for not believing you … and for my lovely reply. *Blushing emoji*. But can you blame me?

▪

I mean, you’re Justin “Sexiest Man Alive” Igwe. And really, what are the odds that the star of a British BAC-TV network hit show has a profile on a Nigerian dating app among us mere mortals? And with his real name and picture, too?

It's unbelievable. I don’t even know what to say. I’m a huge fan of yours. Your character is actually my favourite on the show. It’s why I watch.

Oh, no! Here I am stanning again … can’t help it though. Okay, Adanna, get a grip and try to type something halfway coherent.

Welcome to Nigeria, Justin Igwe. Is this your first time to Nigeria? How are you finding Lagos so far?

PS: I still can’t believe it’s really you.

Laughter rumbles in my chest as I read. Damn. There’s a reason that I’m drawn to Adanna. She’s hilarious.

I sit upright, a smile on my face I can feel, and start tapping the keyboard.

Justin: Don’t apologise. I understand why you doubted me …

My fingers stop midsentence. Full of yourself much, Igwe. I laugh and hit the backspace button, deleting the entire text. My fingers hover above the keyboard as I gather my thoughts. Soon, they’re flying across the keyboard again.

Justin: No need for apologies. Totally understandable. I’m enjoying Lagos so far.

Everyone here is nice and friendly.

▪

I press Send and wait, my stomach roiling with anxiety.

▪

Adanna: Friendly? Really? Is this the same Lagos I live in, or is this your politically correct answer?

▪

Her reply pops on my screen and my cheeks flood with heat. Pretentiousness isn't my thing. I should have known she'd recognise my phoney reply and call me out on it.

▪

Justin: Okay, you got me. I lied. This city is wonderfully chaotic. On the one hand, Lagos is exciting, full of activity and a lively noise that I'm not quite used to.

▪

On the other hand, it's quite overwhelming. A few days ago, I witnessed extreme kindness from a woman who found a little girl crying and carried the child in her arms, asking around to find her mother. Less than an hour later, I saw a woman slap a young boy across the face right in the streets. And nobody batted an eye. It was business as usual.

▪

Such a conflicting city Lagos is. Two days ago, I went to the fruit market for some papaya (which after some friendly mocking, I learnt is called pawpaw here). The seller told the man before me that one costs 350 Naira. I stepped in, ready to pay, and when he heard my accent, he shook his head vehemently. When I asked why, he said, "For you, it's seven hundred Naira or nothing."

▪

Although I felt completely duped, I paid for the item for almost double the price.

I can laugh about it now, but I was a bit miffed then. This is a wonderful city, without a doubt, but I feel way in over my head here.

▪

I read through my long text again. Is it too much information? Should I hit the Backspace key again? Letting out a grunt, I press Send before I can talk myself out of it. Her reply comes seconds later.

▪

Adanna: Ehen! This is the Lagos I know. The complex city where madness thrives. Don't worry, with time, you'll get used to the chaos.

▪

▪

Justin: You think so?

▪

▪

Adanna: Absolutely. Sometimes, I'm even a part of the madness. You should see me driving in Lagos traffic. I spend more time cursing at crazy drivers on the road than actually doing any driving. It's impossible to be a calm driver in Lagos. But I've got used to it. I'm sure you will, too.

▪

My chest expands. I love how guileless she's being, how totally down to earth. I want to get to know her better. For reasons I can't explain, I want to delve deeper, peel away all the layers covering this woman who has captured my interest.

▪

Justin: How are things at work with the evil boss? Have you decided what to do?

▪

As soon as I press Send, my heart dive-bombs in my ribcage. Have I fucked up

by being too personal? Turned a free-flowing chat into something upsetting?

Anxiety gnaws at my gut as I wait. Maybe I should apologise. Tell her that I didn't mean to —

Adanna: Yes, I have.

The three-word reply pops up under my question, halting my train of thought. I wait for more. Nothing else comes. Should I ask what her decision is? Will she sleep with her boss for the promotion?

Bile churns my gut. The possibility that she'd do it nauseates me. Yet, who am I to tell her what to do with her life or her future? I know nothing about her. She's a total stranger. Why am I flooded with disappointment at the very idea?

I want to tell her not to do it, to quit her job, that I'll give her money until she finds another job. Instead ...

Justin: I'm keeping my fingers crossed that it will all turn out fine for you, whatever you decide.

A small beep ushers her reply.

Adanna: Thank you.

Again, I wait. In vain. My screen remains blank. I want to kick myself in the shin for spoiling the happy mood, for ruining the easy conversation. I need to change this ASAP. Can't miss out on the opportunity to get her in my corner.

▪

Justin: Will you be my tour guide in Lagos? Show me the madness while I’m in town?

▪

Seconds tick by. The skin of my entire body feels hot and tight. A gush of blood rushes to my head, anticipation of her response making me dizzy.

▪

Adanna: Of course, I’d be delighted to, Mr Justin Igwe.

▪

I blow out a sharp sigh. Damn. Such a relief. How can I be this thrilled that someone I hardly know has agreed to meet up with me?

Chapter Five

ADANNA



“Girl, stop trying to play me,” Brenda says as she hands me a cup of coffee. She rests her hand on her hip and fixes me with a faux-angry stare. “First, I’m supposed to believe the Justin Igwe has a profile on our app. Then, that he wrote you. And finally … wait for it … that you two are hooking up here in Lagos?”

She lets out a puff of laughter and slumps onto the sofa beside me. “How can you do your bestie this way?”

I set my coffee down, take hers from her hands, and set it down, too. Then I take her hands, look into her eyes with all the sincerity I can muster. “Brenda, I wouldn’t do my bestie this way. I’m dead serious.”

She narrows her eyes and rakes me over. Then, her gaze widens along with her mouth, and she squeals like a stuck pig. “Omo, Adanna. You mean it,” she cries out. “You’re really meeting up with hot-as-hell Justin Igwe. I can’t believe it.”

With a lopsided grin, I nod at my best friend of over ten years. I didn’t think her eyes could go wider, but now they are wide as dinner plates. She’s totally awestruck. I can’t blame her. We binge-watched Men of Valour together and crushed heavily on Justin’s character, the sexy and intense Andre Crowley.

“I know, right,” I say and blow out a little laugh. “Although we’ve spoken on the phone and I know it’s him, I still feel like I haven’t woken up from a dream.”

“Who the hell is Justin Igwe, and what’s so special about him?” my brother asks. Ugo is leaning back on the recliner across from us.

I turn to see his thick eyebrows arched so high that they almost kiss his hairline. A snicker curves his lips. There’s also a slight edge in his voice that amuses me. Boy, does he hate when his wife gushes over celebrities.

“Oh, don’t be jealous. You’ll always be my number one stud. My one and only obim’,” Brenda says to her husband, blowing him a kiss.

I notice a subtle, dusky flush rise from my brother’s neck and settle on his face. He looks embarrassed, but I can tell he’s pleased with his wife’s use of the Igbo endearment.

They've been married for three years now, and still, their love continues to wax stronger and stronger. My initial doubt about my bestie, who I assumed was incapable of maintaining a healthy romantic relationship, has completely disappeared.

Together, she and my brother have created a warm, cosy life for themselves. They are completely devoted to each other.

My fear of losing both of them because of their relationship is also gone. They always take care to include me in their lives as much as possible. Just like today. They invited me to their home in the Lagos suburb of Ikeja for breakfast.

The four-bedroom duplex is stylish and comfortable. Its strategic location at the end of a road adjacent to a golf course provides a serene ambience. The perfect escape for me whenever I'm tired of the noise and air pollution of my home in Agege.

Sitting in their living room this sunny Saturday morning, a tray of scrambled eggs, fried plantains, and a glass of orange juice settled on the sofa table in front of me, I feel like a special guest at a luxury hotel.

"You must be terribly excited. What are you wearing?" Brenda's chirpy voice draws my attention back to her.

I raise my shoulders in a nonchalant shrug, although my stomach flutters. I haven't even thought about what to wear.

"Girl, nothing special," I answer, taking a sip of the steaming drink in my hand. "I swear, it's not romantic at all. We've been chatting on Cupidess for days, and he's only interested in me as his Lagos tour guide, nothing more."

"Lies!" Brenda snorts with a dramatic shake of her head. "He must be interested in a romantic relationship. Why else would he join a dating site?"

"He really isn't. Besides, I'm hardly his type," I say as I lower the coffee mug to the table. Then, I pluck my phone off the sofa, tap on the screen, and shove it in Brenda's face. "Just take a look at him with his ex."

Brenda focuses her attention on the picture and scrunches up her face. "And what's your point?"

“See how tall and waiflike she is? Like a runway model.”

“Yep, but what has that got to do with anything?”

I shake my head and swipe across the screen of my mobile device until I find what I’m looking for. I hand it over to Brenda. “Slide to see more pictures of him with his other two exes.”

“Ah…” Brenda nods her head vigorously as she scrolls through and inspects each image, her eyes widening with discovery. “I see what you mean.”

“Exactly. The man has a type. Tall, thin, and glamorous.” I point to myself with both hands and lead Brenda on a tour of my pale blue jeans moulded over curvy hips, and move on to my thick thighs and legs. “I’m barely above five feet, I have more curves than a mountain road, and not enough hair —”

“Oh, come off it, sis, you’re gorgeous,” Ugo says.

Brenda and I dart our gazes to him simultaneously. The vehemence in his tone is quite startling. That and the fact that he’s inserted himself in our conversation about relationships. Totally unusual.

An introvert and a man of few words, my brother typically sits mute as Brenda and I dish, especially about topics that he considers “girl talk”.

“I don’t doubt that one bit, Ugo,” I say, rolling my head sassily. “I am fine and confident as fuck. Just not his type. And there’s no need fooling myself.”

Ugo harrumphs. “I don’t believe in types. Having rigid preferences based on superficial things is the reason a lot of people miss out on satisfying relationships.”

“I agree with you, babe.” Brenda nods and flashes him a smile that lights up her entire face. “Ugo and I would never have happened if I had not snapped out of my shallow mindset.” She pins him with a look that I can only describe as gooey. And in this split second, it seems I’m not even present in the room with them. “I don’t ever want to imagine my life without you,” Brenda says in a soft whisper.

My brother smiles at his wife, warmth touching his eyes. “Me neither.”

“Okay, enough of this mushy bullshit,” I say, cutting into their tender moment, my lips twitching with amusement. Sometimes they can be downright corny with their love. “Justin Igwe isn’t my type either.”

Brenda turns to me, an eyebrow quirked in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes, girl. You know I’m not into celebrity types. They are always full of themselves.” Leaning forward, I pick up my fork and stab a piece of plantain right at the centre. “Besides, he lives in London. I’ve done the long-distance relationship thing with Tayo, remember? Not interested in rinse and repeat.”

“You don’t know if it would work if you don’t even give it a chance.”

“Haba, Brenda. The man hasn’t even asked me out.” I plop the fleshy plantain into my mouth.

“And if he does?”

I ponder her question as I chew, the sweet-sour flavour between my teeth igniting my tastebuds. Am I ready to start a relationship when I’m not even sure about my future at work? Do I want to be dependent on a man for my livelihood? Nope. Not me. Too many things on my plate right now. Like finding a new job.

“I’m not interested in a relationship at the moment. I’ve got too many problems.”

I notice my brother stiffen. My gut tumbles. He’s ever so perceptive. He won’t let this slide.

“Everything okay?” he asks. The boy’s a bloodhound. Spot on.

“Of course,” I say with a shrug. Evading his gaze, I fork another plantain slice.

“How is work?”

Goodness. I should have known better than to even hint at my inner turmoil. Now, I have to lie. It’s either that or spoil the evening with my troubles. Besides, there’s no way in hell I can tell Ugo about my boss’s indecent proposal. No way.

I know my brother. He's usually reserved, but when it comes to stuff like this, he would go ballistic, and most likely land himself in jail for assault trying to defend my honour. I can't let that happen.

I force an enthusiastic smile. "Great," I say. "I'm due for a promotion interview."

"Wonderful news," Brenda squeals, clapping her palms together. "Long overdue."

"Congratulations," Ugo adds. "You deserve it. You work too hard and aren't paid enough."

A sudden urge to cry chokes my throat. I lower my gaze to my plate once more to hide my anxiety from them.

"I'm sure you'll get it," Brenda says. There's a slight strain in her voice as if she's sensed the change in my mood. "And whatever happens, you know we are here for you, right?"

I shove another forkful of plantain into my mouth and nod to keep from having to talk. I just know if I do, I'd give it all away.

"Whatever you need," my brother says, his dark eyes trained on me as if he can see into my soul. "It's not your fault this economy sucks. And like I keep telling you, stop trying to pay me back. You're my sister."

Although I want to refute his comment about settling my debt, I remain mute and continue chewing my food instead. No need to be stubborn about this right now. I may actually be unable to pay him back if I lose my job. I have just two more weeks until the meeting with Chief Madu. The moment of truth. How time flies. And it's not because I'm having fun.

"Well, whether a romantic meetup or not, we have to find something nice for you to wear when you see Justin Igwe."

Brenda's carefree statement is her attempt to change the subject and lighten the mood. For that, I'm grateful. My financial woes aren't my favourite topic. Not with them. Especially because my brother and Brenda are doing so well with their combined business ventures.

There have been a few times I've felt quite envious of their success, comparing my own dire financial situation with their booming fortune. And each time, I've had to shake myself mentally, talking myself out of the self-doubting rut that consumes me when that happens. Like my brother always says … I'm doing the best I can in a crappy economy.

"Mbanu, I'm dressing casual. Just like what I'm wearing now," I say, keeping my tone as breezy as possible. "No need to give him the wrong impression."

Brenda laughs. "Adanna, you never change." She pats me on the knee and shakes her head. "But God will have to strike me dead before I let you meet Justin Igwe dressed in tatty jeans and a t-shirt. We're going shopping for a dress. On me."

"Nooo—"

She raises her hand to cut me off. "I don't want to hear any arguments."

I hesitate for several seconds, and then, nod my agreement. To be honest, I do need a new dress. Why try to stop my bestie from splurging on me? It's not like I'm going on a real date with Justin anyway. "Thank you, sis," I say with resignation.

Chapter Six

JUSTIN



I cross and uncross my legs at the ankle, unable to keep still. My anxiety levels are on steroids, and damned if I get it. How can I be this eager to meet a woman I barely know, a woman who's not my normal type? Not that I find her unattractive. Far from it. But in all honesty, she's not the tall, willowy type I naturally gravitate to. So, what is it about Adanna that has me all jittery?

Shaking my head, I brush a palm down my face in frustration. My preoccupation with her makes zero sense. From the moment we agreed to meet, I've been unaccountably on edge. I have zero interest in a romantic relationship with her ... or any other woman for that matter. Not right now with my truckload of mental baggage.

And yet, I'm eager to spend time with her. These past six days, Adanna and I have been chatting regularly on Cupidess. We've exchanged text messages about almost every topic under the sun ... politics, religion, gender, and even celebrities.

I enjoyed the written back and forth with her so much that I took the bull by the horns yesterday and asked for her mobile number.

When her digits flashed on the screen, my heart somersaulted in my chest. Not wasting a moment, I dialled her immediately. Her voice has a soft lilt with a hint of sultry hoarseness. And her accent … sometimes sweet and sometimes tangy. Her speech pattern is unapologetically Nigerian, adding 'o' to almost every sentence to emphasise her point, or breaking out into pidgin English when she's amused.

We spoke for hours yesterday, and still, I didn't want to hang up. I even managed to learn a few popular Nigerian phrases. Who better than Adanna to help me explore Lagos and enhance my knowledge of my country of origin? I can't wait to meet her.

In order to learn more about Nigeria, of course. Nothing else.

A shadow blocks my peripheral view, and my gaze flips to the entrance for the hundredth time since I sat down. A man in a traditional kaftan walks through the door. My gut plummets. It's not Adanna. My stomach muscles clench tight. Is she going to ghost me? Will I be left here all evening waiting like a pathetic loser

for her to show up?

I take a quick peek at my watch, and my stomach muscles relax. It's just 6:12 p.m. I've only been here fifteen minutes.

And Adanna has already texted, alerting me she's stuck in traffic and running late. She's not going to bail on me. And even if she does, it's nothing to get so worked up about.

Crossing my right ankle over the left again, I lean back on the plush upholstered seat by the window at the restaurant Zuri. I sweep my gaze around, taking in the decor. The reflective light from the kaleidoscopic ceiling dances around the room in a soft glow. The most impressive thing about the large space are the four dolphins in each corner of the room spouting water from their blowholes into pools.

With evenly spaced tables and chairs providing diners with privacy, and soft music playing soothing rhythm and blues, it's quite a romantic spot.

At that, a knot winds itself in my chest. Will Adanna think that I'm one of those tourists looking for a holiday fling? Will my restaurant choice give her the wrong impression?

When we decided to arrange our first meeting, she offered a few restaurant choices closer to my flat. Zuri had great reviews, so I made a reservation.

Now, glancing around and noticing only couples dining, I'm not so sure. I don't want to come off like a man who's misrepresenting himself, using the guise of needing a tour guide to get laid —

A movement at the door halts my train of thought. I whip my head in that direction. I spot Adanna standing uncertainly at the front of the restaurant. Her gaze sweeps the room, and my breath traps in my chest.

Wow. She looks … wow. Her profile picture doesn't do her justice at all. Adanna's a real knockout. Her pale green gown clings like plastic wrap to the dangerous curves of her petite frame.

Granted, I'm known to gravitate towards tall, slender women. But they say there's an exception to every rule, and I think I've just found the one to mine.

Adanna.

Her hair is done in a stylish twist out, with the short tendrils draping her perfectly symmetrical, oval face. Subtle makeup complements her smooth brown skin, giving her a natural glow. And the most captivating of all, a shiny nude gloss coats her mouth-wateringly kissable lips. Such a tempting pout.

A totally unexpected physical arousal grips me, and my groin twitches with need. Damn. I've been lying to myself the past few days. Sure, I love Adanna's sense of humour and our conversations, but she also appeals to my baser instincts. Like a teenage boy craving the touch of his crush.

Her gaze slides across the room until she meets mine. My pulse rate goes haywire as her lips part and a beautiful white-tooth smile lights up her face. Okay, I'm a goner.

She begins to make her way towards me, and my heart does a little flip-flop. Wow, who is this? Her profile picture looks nothing like this vision I'm beholding right now. No smile, no hint of a latent, but potent sensuality on her Cupidess bio page. I watch the gentle sway of her hips in motion, and a bizarre feeling of betrayal sweeps through me.

If I'd had the slightest hint that Adanna was this alluring, like a tasty treat served on a platter to a starving man, I'd have never messaged her. I'm not in Nigeria for romance. Not after being betrayed by three women back to back. What am I going to do with all this new, confusing physical attraction to Adanna?

Forcing my lips into a smile, I jump to my feet, awkwardly bumping my knee against the table. Pain shoots up my thigh, but I keep my gaze on her, unable to look away.

My breathing seems to go on pause as she gets closer, her curvy hips swaying from side to side as she puts one high-heeled clad foot in front of the other.

Maybe designers should rethink their penchant for tall, slender models. Adanna may be petite, but her strut packs more visual punch than any I've ever seen on the runway. And that's rich, coming from me. An actor who's attended several London fashion shows and been mesmerized by many a seductive trot down the runway.

“Hey, Justin,” she says as soon as she gets to me. “Sorry I’m late. The traffic out there is mad as usual.”

My mouth goes dry at the sound of her voice. There’s a husky quality to her voice that reminds me of the singer Sade’s soulful voice. I clear my throat to avoid sounding like a croaking frog. “Hi, no worries at all. I’m just happy you’re here,” I say with a smile.

Stepping around the table to her, I lean forward and press a welcoming peck on both her cheeks. As I pull back, I notice the startled flash in her eyes and her palm hanging awkwardly between us. An amused smile lifts the corners of my lips.

“Uh, sorry about that … forgot I’m not in England where we go around kissing friends and strangers alike. Forgive me and the silly custom.”

She laughs. A rich, warm sound that cloaks me like a furry coat on a chilly day.

“Please don’t apologise. I’m here for all that. I mean, I’ll take a kiss over a measly handshake from Justin Igwe any day.”

I grin. “And I will from you, too, Adanna.” I pull out the brown, cushioned chair beside her. “A seat, milady?”

She flashes me another one of her gorgeous smiles and sits. My chest expanding with pure pleasure, I walk back to reclaim my seat.

“I like this place,” I say as soon as I’m settled. “I must confess, I’ve been in quite a state of shock since arriving in Lagos. Some areas are so carefully planned, and others, a chaotic hodgepodge. One can cross the street and be in diametrically opposed neighbourhoods.”

I know I’m blathering, but I can’t stop myself. In a way, Adanna unnerves me, intimidates me. Maybe it’s the confidence she exudes, like she’s comfortable in her own skin, very self-aware, and in control of her life. Whereas I’ve been trying to make sense of who I am, struggling to take back the reins of my life. And through it all, feeling like I’m grasping at straws.

Meeting a woman who knows herself and isn’t afraid to reveal it is refreshing. She reminds me of my mum. The Scouse woman from Liverpool who didn’t let

the fast pace of London intimidate her. They share a self-acceptance I admire.

“I know, right? You should see my own neighbourhood … Agege. One of Lagos’ slums. The houses are beautiful and well-built. But the roads are untarred. In contrast, the next street is a different world. Flimsily built houses, but with expertly tarred roads.” She shrugs. “That’s Lagos for you o. It’s like a clown is the district planner. You never know what to expect from one area to the other.”

“Well, I can’t wait to explore it all with you.”

She links her gaze with mine. My heart takes a leap. Such lovely, dark eyes. A subtle coat of shimmery, green eyeshadow lends her a sultry look that pulls me in, makes everyone and everything but her fall away.

“I’ll do my best to show you everything about Lagos without any bias.”

I blow out a relieved breath. “You promise?”

“Scout’s honour,” she says, raising her hand in the three-finger salute. Her smile is playful, as if I’m a buddy, someone she’s known for ages.

And I get it. It’s like we’re long-time friends.

It’s pretty clear Adanna’s not romantically interested in me. Not with the way she’s being so chill about this evening. And that’s a good thing, right? I should be glad she’s not living in some fantasyland about tonight’s date … er, tonight’s meetup.

Instead, my gut tumbles like a tossed ball at her blasé attitude towards me. And I don’t think it’s my fragile celebrity ego looking for hero worship.

In fact, I'm enjoying the relative anonymity while here in Lagos. Yeah, a few people have asked if I’m the actor on BAC-TV. But for the most part, I go unnoticed.

After years of only theatre work, Men of Valour was my first big break into mainstream television. While it’s going into its fifth season in England, it’s pretty much a new series in Nigeria. And even though I’ve got used to being recognized back home, it never gets easy. So, being here is heaven.

“Have you eaten here before?” Adanna asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shake my head. “I wanted to explore it for the first time with you.”

Her expression freezes at my comment. Desperate much? Note to self … maybe filter responses before blurting out the unvarnished truth.

“I’m not so sure about the menu, so any advice is greatly appreciated,” I hurry to say. Anything to draw attention away from my cheeks that feel on fire. She doesn’t need to know how many times I talked myself out of trying out this place so I could experience it with her first.

She smiles. “Sorry, never been here either. So, we’ll have to advise each other.”

She slants her head sideways towards a waiter, and my fingers itch with an urgent need to trace the skin from the angle of her delicate jaw down to her sharp collar bone. I curve my fingers into my palm to suppress the urge.

A rumble from her stomach rises to my ears. “Damn it,” she murmurs, embarrassment clouding her eyes. “I skipped lunch.”

I chuckle. “Me, too. We should order now,” I say with a wave of the hand at the waiter in a red-and-black uniform standing in the corner.

“Oh, you’re a lifesaver.”

I choose the salmon rolls for starters, and as an entrée, the less spicy chicken curry option with plain white rice. The more adventurous Adanna goes for a peppery goatmeat samosas appetizer and yam portage for her main course. The waiter scribbles our choices and leaves us to our own devices again.

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask you ... why are you in Nigeria? Work or leisure?” Adanna asks, saving me from thinking of something to say.

I lift the bottle of Veuve Clicquot Brut champagne from the ice bucket set beside the table. “A bit of both.”

She quirks a perfectly arched brow. “Are you working on a new movie?”

Before I can answer, her eyes widen in excitement, and she heaves out an

enthusiastic gasp. “In Nollywood?”

I laugh as I twist the bottle cork. “Nah, but I wish. I’ve seen some great Nollywood movies and would jump at a chance to get in on the action. Love films by Kemi Adetigba and Zeb Ejiro. But Amaka Igwe is my favourite. She’s a top-notch filmmaker.”

Adanna nods vigorously. “Her movies and television series are phenomenal. She’s amazing. Rattlesnake is my favourite. Well written and directed …” Adanna’s forehead scrunches up in concentration as though suddenly having an epiphany. “Wait a minute. Igwe … are you related?”

“Search me,” I blurt out. “I have no clue who my father is … or my mother’s true surname.”

Adanna’s face couldn’t freeze any harder if confronted by a cobra with its raised head poised to strike.

Uh oh. I just met the woman. Should’ve filed this under too much information. If I keep this up, I’ll be the scary reptile.

Any woman would be frightened away by a man with an obscure family background, as if there’s some deep dark secret he’s hiding.

Still, I want to explain, let her in on why I travelled here. Only because, with her as my ticket into the Lagos scene, I may need to confide in her later.

So, there’s no part of you that wants to confide in her because you like her more than you should?

No. Not at all. So what that I’ve never confided this to anyone other than my family? Doesn’t mean a thing, and certainly not that I like her more than I should … because I don’t.

“My biological mother was abandoned as a baby at a church.” I say, chasing away the pesky thoughts. “She never met either of her parents. They found the name Nancy Igwe tucked inside the blanket she’d been wrapped in, so that’s the name she was given.”

I drag in a breath, recalling the day my hopes and dreams of finding blood

relatives were smashed to smithereens. “According to Nancy, her only knowledge of her background was a DNA test showing her parents were Nigerian, likely from the Igbo tribe. Despite all the efforts, the authorities were never able to locate either of them.”

Adanna’s face is still frozen. Her mouth agape, and eyes opened wide. “Oh, Justin. I’m so sorry,” she finally manages. “I can only imagine how strange it must be not knowing about your background.”

I can understand Adanna’s shock. It mirrors the feeling I carried around for weeks when I learned the truth.

“Exactly. So that’s why I’m here,” I say, finally pouring crisp, clear champagne into our glasses. “After Nancy passed, I decided to find my biological father. I need to know where I’m from. That’s the first step to finding out who I really am.”

Slowly, Adanna’s facial muscles relax. “And how’s that going?” she asks.

Sighing, I lift the wine glass to my lips for a quick sip to soothe the dryness in my throat. “Feels like backwards sometimes. I really have nothing to go by except an old picture of him, and the fact that he’s Nigerian.”

“Have you tried using social media?” She reaches for her wine glass and takes a sip. Probably to wash down the tension from my weighty disclosure.

My abdominal muscles clench. Am I divulging too much? Giving too much of myself away? Maybe I should zip it.

“I’ve heard of people finding lost relatives on Facebook and Instagram,” she offers.

The gentleness of her tone, and the genuine empathy in her eyes, relieves the tension in my chest. My revelation hasn’t repulsed her. In fact, she’s leaned in a bit closer, her gaze trained on me with interest. I relax again.

“As a matter of fact, I have. It’s been posted a couple of months, but I haven’t had any leads.”

“Give it some more time. Somebody somewhere will surely know,” she said

with confidence. “And before you know it, you’ll be reunited with your father.”

Not a reunion I’m looking forward to. I take another sip, swallowing hard to stop myself from blurting that out. She’d ask why, and I can hardly tell her Daddy Dearest is a rapist and his blood runs through my veins. Talk about reptiles. She’d run for the hills, and I wouldn’t blame her.

“It won’t matter much if I don’t find him. I just want to try,” I say with a shrug and a nonchalance I don’t really feel. “I already have a family who love me. Three brothers and parents I adore. I may be adopted, but I felt like family immediately, which is how I know that family doesn’t necessarily mean blood.”

“Amen,” Adanna says with a vigorous nod. “My grandparents were hardly in our lives. I barely know them or any of my mother’s relatives. I’m closer to most friends than my own flesh and blood.”

“It’s one of the things in life we learn early … we may not be able to choose our relatives, but we can definitely choose our family.”

“Facts.” She raises her glass in salute and smiles. A powerful pull to lean in for a kiss overwhelms me. I take a quick sip of my drink to distract me.

Platonic … remember, Justin? Just friends.

The last thing I should be thinking about is kissing Adanna. I’m an emotional mess, and besides, I have no plans to stay in Nigeria. It wouldn’t be fair.

“So, you’re not close to your grandparents … what about your parents?”

Her face falls, and a hint of sadness touches her eyes. “They are both dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to —”

Adanna cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “My dad died ten years ago, my mum three years later. I’ve had some time to adjust … but it’s never easy.”

I nod and blow out a sigh. “You don’t have to tell me. Nancy died nine years ago. You couldn’t call us close, and our relationship had cracks. Still, her passing was hard. It felt final. Like I’d squandered my chance to really know her … to truly forgive her for abandoning me for a life of drugs and alcohol.”

“Oh …”

Adanna’s mouth pops into a cute little O. Something tells me she understands exactly what I mean. Maybe the death of her parents left unresolved feelings for her, too.

My gaze focuses on her manicured finger idly trailing the stem of her glass. A sudden image of my skin receiving that same treatment causes my blood to heat up and flow down south. I straighten my back on my seat. Damn. I need to get a grip. I cannot afford to be distracted by a woman. I’m here for one purpose, and only one purpose.

“As a fan of your TV show, I’ve read about you on Wikipedia,” she says, breaking through my self-admonishment. “I knew you were adopted, but I never saw anything about your biological mother there. Or anywhere really. Is that deliberate?”

Hmmm … she’s looked me up?

My heart does an unexpected little happy dance at Adanna’s curiosity about my personal life. Nice that she’s not trying to hide she’s a fan of my work. Makes it easier to relate with her.

However, along with the pleasure expanding my chest, her question reverberates in there, too. I understand the weighty import of what she’s asking.

Damn, the girl’s perceptive. She’s not the first to ask this, but she’s certainly the first to pick up on it so quickly.

Why didn’t I include Nancy in my successful, new life? Why did I leave her to a destructive life of addiction? Shouldn’t I have done more to save her from the social disease that eventually took her liver and her life?

At first, I did try with all my might. I found her a program, footed the bill, kept in touch. I put all my heart and soul in it, and thought it was working. Until it didn’t, and she ended up back on the streets.

I think my disappointment with her was all mixed up with my original disappointment—her abandoning me. A mixture of pain and anger I couldn’t get past. And so, I detached. Refused to endure the pain of her leaving me again for

drugs and alcohol.

I told myself I had to move on to save myself. And I know it was right. Except sometimes, I regret the decision. Because look at me now, trying to find my roots … and she was right there. I know I was just trying to survive, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. But it still hurts.

In the past, my usual response to the question has never been as complex. I usually put it on Nancy—she wasn't interested in a relationship. Which, in a way, is quite true. However, I do know that I could have tried harder.

I part my lips to give my canned, simple response, but snap them shut when the waiter approaches with trays of steaming food balanced effortlessly in his hands.

"Sorry about the wait. Busy night," he apologizes.

"No worries," Adanna says, returning the young man's smile.

One after the other, he lowers the silver trays to the table, having confirmed he has our orders correct. Then, he takes a step back. "Enjoy your meal, and please … let me know if you need anything else."

"Thanks, Soji," I say, glancing at his name tag. "I'm sure we will."

"Looks delicious," Adanna enthuses when we are alone again. She peeks at my plate, her eyes sparking with mischief. "If you want to try a bit of my yam pottage, you're welcome to."

I angle my eyebrows together in confusion. "And why would I want to?"

"Well, you specifically asked for plain rice and curry without any spice. You may need a bit more flavour on your tastebuds after you eat that."

Throwing my head back, I bellow out a laugh. "Blame it on growing up in a white family. The British aren't exactly known for their cuisine, so my palate doesn't extend much beyond salt and pepper."

Her husky chuckle strokes my auditory nerves like a feathery touch. Sexy and arousing.

“Stick with me long enough, and I’ll change all that,” she says.

My body stiffens. Her eyes widen, too, as if just realising the implications of her comment. That I’m here to stay, that our interactions, and her effect on me, would mean enough to change something about me.

“Many Nigerians eat spicy food. You’ll probably find that you can’t avoid it here …”

She lowers her gaze to her meal and lifts her fork to her mouth. A clear message. She’s generalising. This isn’t about just her and me, but the country and me. She’s relegating herself back to her tour guide role.

I sigh inwardly and relax … or maybe deflate? I should be glad she’s not coming on to me.

I’ve been scarred one too many times by unfaithful women. I need to steer clear of relationships for a while. And if I do see a woman I’m attracted to, I’m going to make sure the relationship is purely physical. Full stop.

Adanna smiles at me, and despite my resoluteness about this, I feel a flutter of sadness. A sort of unsettledness in the pit of my stomach, like bees disturbed in their hive.

Chapter Seven

ADANNA



I burst out laughing and cover my mouth to keep food from spewing out. “You’re joking, right?” I say, shaking my head in disbelief. “Please tell me you’re not serious.”

Justin sucks his teeth, his eyes dancing with amusement. “I wish I could, but that’s why I left the hotel and rented an apartment.”

“So, he simply handed you a bowl, a bucket of water, and said there wasn’t enough water to shower?”

“Yep, and with a straight face. Luxury hotel, my foot.”

“Good Lord,” I say, shaking my head again. “Why didn’t you book into the Hilton or some other five-star hotel in the first place?”

“I asked myself the same question afterward.” A wry smile, laced with a hint of embarrassment, twists his lips. “I guess … I don’t know. I wanted to experience the real Nigeria.”

“Well, you most certainly did.” I give him a playful wink. “A good number of Nigerians, including me, don’t use the shower because of water shortages. Buckets of water and bowls to the rescue.”

“The things some of us take for granted,” he says with a sigh. “On the bright side, lesson learned. I’ll never again leave water running for no reason.”

I nod and take a scoop of soft yam with my fork. “You know what’s maddening? We don’t even have a water shortage. It rains every year.” I pop the yam in my mouth and wait until I swallow it. “What we have is a shortage of governmental integrity and a mismanagement of our natural resources.”

“Every government has its problem —”

I raise my palm to stop him “Nope. Don’t lump Nigeria’s troubles in the same category as the rest of the world. Our problem in this country is quite unique. Almost unsolvable.”

“How do you mean?” He slices into his chicken with his fork and knife.

“Oh, where to start …” I take another forkful into my mouth, indulging in the burst of flavours of spice and heat tickling my tastebuds.

His gaze is trained on me, his eyes narrowed in expectation, waiting for me to continue. Suddenly, I feel self-conscious. The intensity of his gaze is unnerving … and exciting.

From the moment I stepped into this restaurant and caught a glimpse of Justin, my senses have flipped into high alert. I didn’t expect the rush of attraction that gripped me at the sight of him.

Yes, I knew from seeing him on television that he’d be fine. But I didn’t reckon with the live-and-in-person impact of all that fineness. It’s not like a television screen can really capture it all.

Tall and broad-shouldered, with firm rippling muscles that have me envying the black t-shirt clinging to his chest like a second skin right now. The bold, masculine angles of his face, accentuated with sexy facial hair. And those long, dark eyelashes—Lord, I don’t know whether to rip them off for myself or kiss them silly. Not so for those luscious lips though. He can keep them. I just want a sip—a long, satisfying sip.

So, yeah, I thought I’d get a little buzz from meeting a celebrity, but this—the sudden possessiveness overwhelming me the second our eyes locked—this I didn’t reckon with.

Because, I am so not a possessive woman. When my relationship with my two exes fizzled, they ended amicably. No tears, no anguish. Just wished them well and kept it moving. I even ended up an ecstatic bridesmaid in my ex-boyfriend Effiong’s wedding. My brother thought I was nuts, but I was happy for Effiong.

So, what in heaven’s name is going on with me here? Sitting across from a man I barely know, and longing to claim him. And Lord help me, I can’t lie and chalk it up to being starstruck. This is not the celebrity adoration of the masses. It’s like he should be mine and mine alone.

An image pops in my head—me in a white gown beside Justin at the altar. Hurriedly, I pick up my water glass and take a swig, hoping to swallow my insanity with the water.

As if the two of us could ever work. First of all, he's a television star, and I don't know if I'll have a job come next week. Second, and more importantly, I'm not interested in a relationship right now, especially one so financially unequal.

Come to think of it, I did have one relationship end badly. The guy was rich as Croesus, with an ego to match. Treated me like a nobody. When I showed him the door, I vowed never to date anyone with a huge financial advantage over me. Nope, not going down that road again.

So, whatever crazy Cinderella fantasies I have going on in my head right now … I'm showing them to the door, too. Fairy tales are for kids.

I intend to focus on a new job and pursuing my dreams, and that means keeping it platonic with Justin. I'm just his tour guide, so I might as well start acting like it.

"Why is unity impossible ..." I ask. "Because Nigeria has nearly two hundred tribes with different languages, different religions, and different ways of life."

I've slipped back into tour mode, proud of myself for maintaining an unaffected façade when I feel anything but. "It's like two hundred countries, each voting based on tribal and religious interests instead of competence. How do you make one country from that?"

Justin dips his head side to side, mulling over my words. "I see what you mean. When a group of people have divergent interests, they can never succeed as one."

"Exactly. And unfortunately, like racism, it's difficult to break years of tribal and religious animosity. Even amongst people of the same tribe, there's still lack of unity."

"Really?"

"Yep. I'm Igbo from Anambra state. I once met an Igbo man who was interested in me, but because he's from Enugu, his parents fought against us dating."

"You're joking?"

"I kid you not, but truthfully, I didn't even sweat it. Far be it from me to stay and

fight for a man when he can't stand up to his parents' bigotry."

"So, letting go wasn't hard for you?"

There's a slight edge to his question. Why? Some hidden angle? Or maybe not. Before I can respond, he continues.

"If I'm being too intrusive, I apologise," he says.

I give a little shrug. "No need. And no, it wasn't hard at all. We only went out three times, so it was pretty easy. Besides, I don't stay where I'm not wanted."

"Smart way to think about such things." A shadow crosses his eyes, and for a brief moment, his jaw tightens in annoyance.

Has someone made this gorgeous man feel unwanted?

I've seen pictures of his ex-girlfriends. One is a gorgeous Brazilian model, and his latest an English socialite and only daughter of a wealthy businessman.

"What about you? Last I heard, you were dating Rochelle Barnes. Why did you break up?" I ask.

His eyebrow arches at my question. "Wow, you know a lot about me …"

I shrug and let my lips curl up in a playful smile. "Yep, I google all the actors and actresses of my favourite shows. Right now, Men of Valour is third on my list."

His head jerks back and his mouth opens wide. "What? Not Number One?"

I laugh at his mock outrage. "Oh, don't be so greedy. Surely, you know that Game of Thrones and Line of Duty are way ahead."

A rumble of laughter bubbles up from his chest. "I can give you Game of Thrones, but a hard NO on Line of Duty."

"I like your self-confidence, but my viewing pleasure, my choice. It's not up for debate."

Silence passes between us, and I find myself just enjoying the food, the music,

and the peaceful atmosphere that settles around us. I've not felt like this in a long while, being with someone who helps scatter my worries to the wind.

"About my last relationship … Rochelle cheated on me." His comment cuts through the air like a knife, shocking me out of my tranquil thoughts.

"Wh—" I shut my mouth, my question stuck in my throat like a fisherman's hook in a prize trout. It would be too intrusive.

Besides, does the why really matter? There's hardly any solid reason for infidelity. Most people just cheat because they want to, and because they think they'll get away with it.

But damn, who would want to cheat on Justin Oliver Igwe? The man's a dreamboat, not to mention, he appears so kind and considerate. Is there something about him that he's not letting on?

"You wanted to ask why?"

"No—" I say with a swift head shake.

"Sure, you did. It's natural." He cuts me off with a stiff smile. "Not like I haven't asked myself the same thing countless times."

Then, he leans forward and gives me a conspiratorial wink. "Want to hear another bit of juicy gossip the tabloids haven't managed to unearth?"

His question comes out in a clipped tone, even though he looks unaffected by our conversation. I should be ashamed of my suspicious thoughts about him. Men don't have the market cornered on bad behaviour. His ex could very well have hurt him for no reason.

"You don't have to talk about it," I say, wishing I hadn't uttered my half-spoken question. It's none of my business, and I don't like the tension it's caused.

"Why not? Three women cheating on a man has to be the man's fault, right?" he says. "My therapist, my exes, and even Nancy all told me the same thing at one time or another … I don't allow myself to love and feel love."

Three? Holy crap. I lock down every muscle in my body, refusing to give away

my surprise. But wow … I did not see that coming. Three unfaithful exes? That's deep.

"Apparently, I'm cold and unfeeling. I deserve to be cheated on."

My body relaxes. Finally, something I can respond to unreservedly. "Nobody deserves deceit," I say quickly.

It's strange. We've just met, but it's important he knows that I don't ever condone dishonesty. I've seen how it can destroy lives. Serial infidelity nearly drove my bestie Brenda's mother to kill herself. Seeing how her husband's affairs ate away at her self-worth, not to mention my own sordid brush with infidelity, sealed it for me. There's no excuse for cheating spouses. No matter what.

Impulsively, I reach across the table and cover his hand with mine. His hand is warm and strong, and the intimacy of our touch sends a current of electricity flowing right through me. For a second, I lose my train of thought, but I need to say more.

"Nobody … including you, Justin. You didn't deserve what they did, no matter what. And you should never let yourself believe it."

"What if they're right? What if I'm really the problem?" he asks in an uncertain tone. It's surprising, so unlike his supremely confident Men of Valour character.

Funny how fans confuse the man with the character. Right now, I see just the man … trying to make sense of his real life. Hoping to understand the complexity of his personal relationships. His candour and unguarded vulnerability are totally endearing. How can anyone call him cold and unfeeling?

I swallow hard, giving his hand a quick squeeze before reaching for my champagne. I take a sip, gathering my thoughts. I want my words to be perfect, so he really hears them. "The problem with a liar is always the liar. If someone is unhappy in a relationship, they have choices. How about picking up and leaving? That's far better than lying … or cheating."

A weak smile slants his lips. "So says my mum, too."

"Well, she's a clever woman."

“That she is, which means you are, too.”

An easy silence stretches between us as we concentrate on our meals. But I can’t lie. Justin’s opening up about his personal life has thrown me completely off guard.

As a fan, I’ve read many articles about him. To be honest, I love celebrity gossip. I’m not ashamed to say I comb magazines and blogs for juicy titbits about the private lives of my favourite actors and actresses.

I remember when he broke up with Rochelle. And much to my shame, I remember my judgements. Not a hint of what precipitated the split was reported, but I didn’t need it. Good-looking, rich, and adored by women. Naturally, the breakup had to be his fault.

Never in a zillion years did I ever consider Rochelle the guilty party … and certainly not by stepping out on him. Not even when a magazine published a picture of her in the arms of an up-and-coming rapper just a month later.

In fact, I dubbed her my kind of girl. A woman who didn’t sit around crying after a breakup, but moved on quickly to the next love interest.

So ironic. Assuming we know the lives of people in the public eye. I need to change the way I think about such things.

“You’re so easy to talk to.” Justin’s remark crashes through my thoughts.

I give him a warm smile, my cheeks flushing from his compliment. “Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself.”

“I’m glad we met up tonight,” he says.

His eyes are warm and tender, and my skin tingles under his gaze. I take another sip of my drink … at this rate, I’ll finish the bottle singlehandedly. I need to focus, so that I don’t lose myself in the depth of his intense gaze.

“What do you think about meeting up in the coming week? We could take a bike tour of Lagos, maybe visit the local markets. That’s a great way to explore the city,” I suggest.

He smiles, and now, my insides sizzle.

“There are a few museums around. But I must warn, they are badly maintained. Going to a club or Fela’s shrine at Ikeja would also be fun. Let me know which places you’d like to visit,” I babble, but I can’t help myself.

It’s unnerving the way Justin makes me feel. Like I could forget all my reservations about dating and relationships, jump across the table, straddle him and kiss his soft full lips.

“All sounds like mad fun. Can’t wait,” he says enthusiastically. “And don’t worry, I’ll foot the bill.”

And just like that, my heart sinks. Why’d he have to bring up money and bring me crashing down to earth. Like always, it’s an instant downer for me, being reminded of my precarious financial state. “I can pay my own share,” I mutter.

“Not on my watch.” He shakes his head vehemently.

My jaw tightens. I hate the feeling of helplessness—especially the part about not being able to live the Lagos dream life—that comes with an insufficient bank account.

I’ve endured it for years with Brenda. Her family is also rich as Croesus, and Brenda always insists on treating me. It’s still a tad uncomfortable, but Brenda’s my girl. We’ve known each other forever, so I go with the flow.

But damned if I’m going to add another benefactor to my life. In a way, I wish I’d never said a word to him about my job troubles.

“I may not be nearly as rich as you, but I can still afford some things,” I say, infusing as much dignity in my voice as possible.

“How can anyone not want to promote you at work? You’re not only intelligent, you’re witty, compassionate, and gracious. How can your boss be so daft?”

“Wh-what?” The sudden change of topic causes a stutter in my voice.

“Don’t do it.”

Speechless, I simply stare at him, confused as hell. What on earth is he talking about?

His dark eyes laser on me with intensity. “Don’t sleep with the pig for a promotion. Quit, and I’ll give you a job as my personal assistant and pay you for —”

“How dare you?” I interject, my voice low and hoarse. Intense rage sweeps through me like a forest fire licking the trees along its path. “What gives you the audacity to think you have the right to tell me what to do?”

His head jerks back as if I’ve just slapped his face, and I don’t care. In fact, I would really like to right about now.

“Do you think you can simply buy me out of my life, my problems?” I ask, incredulity making me sound like I just inhaled helium. “What will that make me to you then? Your property? Will that make you my pimp?”

Still shaking with fury, I jerk to my feet and lift my purse off the table. “I don’t need this.” I dig into the cavernous interior of my black-and-green tote and retrieve my wallet. I pull out some bills and hold them out to him. “That should take care of my share of the bill.”

Instead of taking them, he closes one warm, strong hand over mine. “I’m sorry,” he says, his tone filled with remorse.

I lift my gaze to meet his. He’s standing across from me, his eyes darkened with regret.

“That was highhanded of me to insert myself in your life. And you’re right, I have no right to tell you what to do. Please forgive me.”

My heart is pounding as I breathe in and out slowly, trying to let the anger seep out of my bones. His eyes are remorseful. And he’s biting his lower lip, like he’s anxious. Like my decision matters.

I like him, and I think he means well. It’s just that I hate when people view me as a relief case.

I may be struggling financially, but I still have my pride. Chief Madu, Mrs

Aramide and everyone else may think that I'm desperate—that the mere mention of money will buy my compliance. Well, they can all kiss my luscious ass.

But somehow, I know it's different with Justin. And that I've overreacted. With a slow sigh, my bones release the last bit of anger and I relax. I lower myself back to my seat. Justin does the same, relief etched on his face.

"Okay. But for this friendship to work for me, you need to understand that I'm not a charity case," I say.

"I can do that," he agrees with a ready nod. "But for this to work for me, I need you to accept my paying for your tour guide services." He holds up a hand to stave off any protests. "Not debatable. It's me who wants to see the city, not you. Either I do it awkwardly on my own, or you let me pay for our trips around town."

I contemplate his demands for several seconds. Nothing wrong with getting a fresh view of Lagos on his dime. After all, he is right. It's his desire, not mine.

"Fair enough," I say with a small smile.

"Are we okay?" I sense the uncertainty in his question, which warms my heart. It would be really awful to have to bail on the great rapport I feel because of a misunderstanding.

I smile again. "Yep. Just make sure you order spicy food next time. It would have been nice to taste your rice and chicken curry."

His chuckle disperses all traces of the chilly atmosphere. "I admit it, my food was quite bland. Yours looked more appetising."

"I told you so."

I relax again, glad that the awkwardness between us has disappeared.

Chapter Eight

ADANNA



I know I’m walking, but it doesn’t feel so. It’s like an invisible force is propelling my body forward, and I can’t stop it, much as I wish to. Something like a plane on auto pilot.

I come to a halt at the elevator and press the up arrow. My head is buzzing, and my heart pounds as if keeping time with a pulsating disco beat. Worst of all, I’m sweating all over, so badly that even the front of my blouse is soaked.

The elevator door swings open, and I groan. A full house. There goes my hope to be alone. Six people stand shoulder to shoulder almost touching.

“Come on in. Space dey,” the tall man directly in front of me says, angling his body sideways to give me room.

Is this a sign for me to take a hike? That I should turn around and flee this building as fast as I can without looking back? Maybe, but I heave in a sharp breath, step in, and sandwich myself between the tall man and the cold elevator wall. As the door slides shut, and we make our ascent, I squeeze my eyes shut, tuning out the faint conversations around me.

How on earth could my car give out today of all days? I press my lips together tightly. The mechanic’s bill is close to a hundred-thousand Naira. Where the hell will I get that money?

I shake my head. The thought of borrowing money from my brother for the gazillionth time, knowing that I may not be able to pay him back for a while, brings on a fresh bout of perspiration. Especially after today.

My stomach roils, and tears burn the back of my eyelids. Why does everything bad happen to me? Have the gods chosen me to handle all the shit?

A chime sounds. My eyes pop open, and my pulse quickens. Fourth floor. The elevator door slides open, and a few occupants streak out. Too nervous to move my head, I don’t bother to look around to see who’s left with me.

One more stop, and I’ll be walking the guillotine … to the office of the man with the power to fire me. My chest is tight, and I swear acid is eroding the lining of my empty stomach. I should have had breakfast this morning, but I’d have

thrown it up for sure.

This must be how criminals on death row feel being led to their execution. Flanked on either side by prison guards, and knowing they won't come out alive. Maybe that's what their last meal is for … to stem the stomach acid churning from fear.

Another chime, and my breath catches in my chest. The fifth and final floor, where all the bosses hang out and pretend to work, while the rest of us worker bees actually do work.

Like everyone else, I step out and continue on my way. Nobody knows that for the past few hours, since getting the repair bill for my car, I've been seriously contemplating accepting the indecent proposal.

All morning, like an out-of-control pendulum, I've oscillated between rejecting and accepting Chief Madu's terms. I shudder in repulsion at the idea. But my debt, and the money I need to get my vehicle working again, storms my consciousness and shakes my resolve to refuse.

It's just sex, isn't it? A night with a man I never have to sleep with again, right? I can do it. Many women before me have and survived. It must not be that difficult.

I go left at the end of the long corridor and arrive at my destination. On the closed door, the nameplate proclaiming the devil's lair—Chief EW Madu, General Manager/Chief Sales Representative.

I tap lightly on the door, and bile rises to my throat. It's reckoning time. Do I sell my soul to get what I deserve, or do I walk away and lose everything? Either way, I don't wish this decision on my worst enemy.

"Come in."

His tone booms in my ears. Loud. Confident. Excited. Oh, my God. He already knows that I'll say yes. He is so sure of himself. Utterly sickening how accurate he is.

My throat tightens as I gulp. It feels like tiny razor blades are embedded inside the lining of my gullet, making the simple act of swallowing mucous painful.

Pushing open the door, I inch into Chief Madu's office. The grandiose decor of the large space fits his ostentatious personality. Multiple life-size photos of wild animals hang on the walls, giving off a weird safari vibe. Which makes sense—the man's a vulturous hunter.

Seated behind a massive semi-curved mahogany desk, he waves me over with a huge grin splitting his face. "Ah, Adanna, you're right on time," he says, adjusting the spectacles on his round face. "Please have a seat."

Pulling the seat opposite him back, I mutter a word of thanks as I sink down, my heart beating at breakneck speed. Profound shame grips me as his tongue swipes across his lower lip, his eyes gleaming with evil delight, like a yahoo boy about to cash a big cheque. I press my palm over my stomach, willing myself not to retch.

"Would you like something to drink before we discuss business? I have some chilled malt in my fridge …"

I give a sharp shake of my head to cut him off. The gall of the man to think that a simple offer of a drink would mask the stench of this situation. I refuse to play his game, to pretend this is anything but what it is … coercion and sexual harassment. Accepting his pseudo-friendly gesture would undermine that.

"So, do you want the promotion or not?"

I turn my face until my eyes lock with his. There's a coldness in them impossible to misinterpret. He is back in business mode. The devil he usually disguises has resurfaced.

"Y-yes…" I murmur.

"And you will do what I want to secure it?"

The bitter taste of bile rises from my stomach to my throat. I swallow hard. "Y-yes."

The nearly demented gleam illuminates his eyes again. He rubs his protruding belly as he reclines into his seat.

"Ehen! I knew you had common sense," Chief Madu says with a grin. "But don't

look so scared. I'm a gentle lover. I don't have the energy to be rough sef." He chuckles at his own private joke.

I can almost feel the inner repulsion eating away at my insides like a rat gnawing on a piece of cheese. Dragging in a deep breath, I remain silent, unable to utter a word.

"It's not like I'm raping you," he continues.

The sick bastard. Who's he trying to convince … himself or me? Still, I stay silent. He won't get an inch of cover from me.

"You have the right to say no," he says.

And that's it. I see bullfight red. "Do I really? Would I still have my job if I say no?"

The question leaps out of my mouth before I can stop it. His grey-dusted eyebrows arch in response, surprise enlarging the diameter of his eyes. I bet he never expected me to question him.

"Ahn ahn," he grunts, his forehead furrowed in irritation. "Why are you asking this? I thought you'd already agreed."

"I have, but —"

"No buts, my dear. It's either yes or no. And no means no promotion and no job. Simple." He presses his thick lips together, a frown line appearing at their drooping corners. "If you want this promotion, you have to clearly say yes. Do you?"

I clench the hand resting on my lap into fists so tight that I can feel the blood draining away from the veins in my fingers. "Yes," I mutter.

"Good." He brushes a thumb across the stubble on his jaw. "I'll arrange the hotel room for this weekend. My wife believes I'm going on a business trip, so it's a perfect opportunity."

My gut plummets at his comment. Another bout of shame envelopes me. He's already made plans, banking on my acquiescence. He knew I'd give in.

“Now, come over here and give me a kiss to seal the deal.” Then, he puckers his disgusting lips, taps them with one finger, and says, “Right here.”

Now … he wants me to kiss him here? In his office?

It’s like I’m glued to my seat, completely shocked by his audacity. Not only is he demanding sex in exchange for a promotion, but he is also brazenly demanding intimate contact at work.

“Come on, don’t be shy, Daddy needs some loving.”

I rise slowly, my head spinning as fast as a fidget in the hand of an excited child. I feel a sense of impending doom, like I’m going to drop dead this instant. I try to move, but my feet feel made of lead.

“You’re not a virgin, are you? I’m sure you know how to use your succulent lips on a man.”

His words hit me like a slap in the face. I physically recoil. “No,” I say. My voice is so low that I’m not sure he hears it.

“Come on, baby, we’ll be doing a lot more than kissing this Saturday, so just try and relax and —”

“I said no!” The words burst from my mouth like a cannon ball. Loud and powerful. “I quit!”

“So, you don’t want this promotion?”

“I do. But frankly, no job is worth having sex with you.”

His face transforms into a mask of fury as he glowers at me. “How dare you waste my time, this small girl,” he snarls. “Do you think I have all day to play around with ingrates like you?”

“Ingrate?” I cry out. “What have you done that I should be grateful for? I’ve worked in this company for six years, been a productive member of the team, and you’re saying before you give me the promotion that’s long overdue, that I have to have sex with you?” I’m talking so fast—barely taking a breath in between—that my mouth goes desert dry, but I’m not done. “Don’t you have a

twenty-year-old daughter? What if someone does this to her?”

“Don’t involve my daughter in any of this. She is a decent virgin, not a slut like you.”

“How dare you,” I say. I shouldn’t be shocked, but my jaw drops. Still, I’m not done. “How can you be so sure your daughter’s a virgin? Even if she isn’t, or I’m not, it’s not your business. Who died and installed you as the morality judge?”

“Get out of my office this instant. You are fired,” he bellows.

A sudden, mirthless laugh erupts from me. It’s so intense I shake from head to toe. It takes several seconds for me to tamp down the dry humour overtaking me.

“And to think I even considered degrading myself by sleeping with you for this promotion.” I shake my head. “You don’t get the privilege of sleeping with me …. or firing me.” Then, I straighten my back and square my shoulders. “I fucking quit.”

His mouth opens to speak, but only incoherent sputtering finds a way out. I shake my head, and let out a harsh laugh. And with that, I whirl around with as much grace as I can muster and strut out of his office, leaving the door wide open. Adrenaline pumping in my veins, and my pulse beating almost precariously, I continue walking through the corridor.

I blow past the elevator, refusing to break my stride, because really … I don’t want to stand idle and stew about what just happened. The sooner I’m out of here, the better.

Filled with steam, I take the stairs two at a time, my stilettos clicking on the terrazzo floor with each step and me trying to remain upright.

Breathless and still geared up, I get to my office and walk past my co-workers to my desk. I fish out the large shopping bag from under my desk—I'd brought it for just this purpose. I toss it on the desk and let my gaze sweep the room.

“Listen up, guys,” I announce, clapping my palms together. At the loud noise, a sudden silence settles in the room. Hanatu, seated at the opposite corner, lowers her mobile phone onto her table slowly. There’s a resigned expression on her

face, as though she's been expecting this.

"I've quit."

Mouths pop open, gasps of shock fill the air. But Hanatu doesn't look surprised. Instead, there's regret dampening the usual spark in her eyes.

Something tells me she found herself in my shoes once, but made a different choice. "This environment isn't a place where work skills are rewarded. I'm not prepared to have my sexual skills dictate how far up the ladder I can climb here. I'm done."

"Ahhh, what happened?" Yemisi asks in a tone reeking of innocent curiosity.

I know it's all bullshit. Every single person in this room has known about Chief Madu's behaviour and never let on.

Why else have they been avoiding me since my first promotion interview? Why didn't any of them reach out to me to ask how it had gone? And most importantly, why isn't there collective outrage about my comment.

Shaking my head, I turn to Yemisi. "Like you don't already know."

She lifts her shoulders in a noncommittal shrug. "I thought that's how you got your job here. We've all had to scratch backs for favours o. It's part of life."

This confirms my suspicion. Sudden weariness overwhelms me. That, and profound sorrow. It's always sad when people accept aberrant behaviour as the norm.

"No, it's not," I mutter. "I got my job here without scratching any backs. I handed my CV to HR and got an interview."

"Because you were connected to the previous manager through Brenda Umeh," Hanatu says, her face deadpan. "Some people have connections, but others who don't, need to find a way to survive. You have no right to judge anyone."

A sharp pang hits my chest. She's right. I got this job through nepotism. My best friend's neighbour was head of Human Resources when I applied. I shouldn't feel superior to anyone in this room. Especially since we worked very well as a

team. We've been quite productive these past few years, earning us the tag, The Five First-floor Queens.

"I'm sorry, Hanatu, I didn't mean to," I say. I lift my faux plant from my desk and place it into the thick sack. "And you're right. Na survival mode we dey o …"

Hannatu nods and jumps from her seat. She walks to me and gathers me into her arms for a heartfelt hug. "Congratulations for being the first chick here to tell that prick to shove his dick where it belongs—in the bowels of hell."

The room ripples with laughter. And I find myself joining in, despite the doomed feeling that my entire world is falling apart.

The full weight of my emotions hits me as I open my bedroom door nearly an hour later. "I'm unemployed," I mutter in the air, tossing my handbag to the floor carelessly. "I'm unemployed, in debt, and broke as fuck."

A chuckle bubbles from my throat as I slump onto the bed, not bothering to take off my shoes. "A broke bitch. That's who I am." I wave my hands in the air like a rapper. "A beautiful, broke bitch is who the fuck I am."

I guffaw … my rap game sucks, but I don't care.

"Girl, do you have any money to get your car back on the road?"

I shake my head.

"Nope, because you're a broke bitch."

Flipping onto my stomach, I bury my face in the cotton sheets. The detergent's lavender scent permeates my senses. The smell usually calms me. Not this time. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting tears.

What do I do now?

I have no backup plan. No other real means of income. No security. Even the vehicle that I hoped to register with a taxi company and use as a cab is as broke as me.

Studying the Cupidess website stats last night was more than discouraging. My subscriber list has dropped yet again from a hundred to only eighty. Pathetic. It's definitely time to close the site. The cost to maintain it is more than it's bringing in.

A ragged sound escapes from deep within me as the tears spill down my cheeks. This is the most devastating blow of all. Losing Cupidess means losing my dreams. No turning back from that one, is there?

The musical lilt of my phone's ringtone pulls me from my sorrowful musings. I remain still. I don't want to move, can't speak to anyone. Maybe if I just disappear, everything will turn out okay.

The ringing stops. I let out a relieved sigh. It starts again.

"Damn it," I growl. "Who the fuck is that?"

Jumping up, I charge towards my handbag and lift it angrily from the floor. I shove my hand inside and pluck out my phone.

The flashing light displays the caller's ID clearly. Justin. I definitely don't want to speak to him. Not when I feel this shitty. I would be poor company, and he doesn't deserve it.

I know I promised him a tour of Lagos when we met up two weeks ago, but since then, I've been distracted, anxious about my scheduled meeting with Chief Madu.

Justin understood, and readily agreed to wait until this situation was resolved. We've been talking on the phone regularly though, conversing about everything and nothing, dancing around the topic of my meeting today, until this morning when I'd woken up to his text … All the best today.

Deafening silence follows as the phone's ringing stops. Phew. I hope he gives up.

The missed-call notification graces the small display. I twist my lips as I hold it in my hand waiting. Still silence. What a relief. I sigh. Just as I put my thumb over the switch-off button, a text flashes on my screen.

Justin: I’m so sorry you had to deal with your asshole boss today. He should be in jail. PS: The offer to beat his arse still stands.

A smile curves my lips. I swipe at my cheek to wipe off an errant teardrop. I may very well take him up on this offer.

Somehow, this simple message from Justin relaxes me. And just like that, I’m struck with an overwhelming desire to see him. At this point, he is the only one who knows what I’m going through. I want to bitch about it openly, I want to yell out my frustrations, I want to curse out everyone and everything. And yes, I want to have Justin’s ears as the receptacle of all of that.

Selfish? Probably. However, right now, he is what I need.

I blow out a long sigh, then trail my thumb across the screen to the call notifications for his number and press redial.

Chapter Nine

JUSTIN



Standing by the front door, my heart pounding within my ribcage, I wait. My stomach is tied up in knots, and I'm shifting my feet on the floor restlessly, unable to keep still.

I hate how Adanna sounded when she called me an hour ago. The tears in her voice were so gut wrenching.

What did she do? Did she give in to that toad? Sleep with her boss?

My chest tightens with agony, and I shake my head, trying to disperse the selfish thought that pops into my head. Stop it, I chide myself. It shouldn't matter if she did.

I massage my temples, annoyed with myself, yet unable to stop the anxiety creeping in. Would things change between us if Adanna slept with the man?

After our first meeting, I became somewhat more personally invested in the situation, having developed a strong connection with her. It was particularly difficult leaving her that evening without a clear plan about how to tackle her boss, knowing her fateful meeting with him was just two weeks away. And even though I knew the prospect would eat at her, I avoided bringing it up during our numerous phone conversations since. It seemed better than provoking her again, and losing her friendship altogether.

However, last night, I couldn't sleep, tossing and turning in my bed, my body roiling with myriad emotions. Rage at the bastard doing this to her. Helplessness because she wouldn't let me assist her. And finally, terror … because somewhere deep inside, I worried that I wouldn't be able to stomach her giving in to the creep's demand. Knowing that any budding feelings I've been harbouring about something more developing between us would be completely destroyed if she slept with her boss for the promotion.

It didn't matter how many times I tried to fight that thought, telling myself that whatever her decision, it shouldn't make a difference, shouldn't change how I feel about her or how much I respect her. Still, I hoped, prayed she wouldn't do it.

The bell rings, crashing through my musings. With my emotions running helter-

skelter, I swing the front door open. There she is, dressed in white denim shorts and an oversized t-shirt. She raises her head and fixes her gaze on mine.

My heart plummets. Adanna's beautiful eyes are red and puffy, filled with defeat. There's an uncharacteristic droop of her shoulders. Fiery rage surges in my chest at the man who's caused this.

Everything in me wants to storm out of here, find the dirty old wanker, and beat him to a bloody pulp. My hands ball up in fists with the urge to make him feel all the pain he's inflicted on her.

But that's not what Adanna needs right now.

So, I control myself, unfurl my hands, and spread my arms wide. She rushes forward and slams her body into mine, flinging her arms around me and clinging to me with a desperate fierceness.

"It's okay," I coo, brushing my palm against her back in a gentle rhythm. "It's okay."

"I quit, Justin. I couldn't do it." she wails, her body trembling in my arms. "I just couldn't …"

Relief surges through me. My delight at her not succumbing to that rat's demands cannot be described. Yet, a simultaneous shame at my selfishness grips me, too. None of this is about me, and yet, I've made it so in my mind.

Her tears dampen my t-shirt, and I wish the cotton material could soak up her distress as easily. If only she'd let me help. I'd be happy to give her money, take care of her bills. And make sure her boss pays for his unacceptable behaviour. What sort of man thinks it's okay to pressurise women into having sex with him?

"Just give me the green light, Adanna ..." I seethe through clenched teeth. "And I'll knock out that swine's teeth."

She sniffles and pulls back a little, quirks her head until our gazes link. Her eyes are dulled with sorrow, her face swollen from tears, but she still manages a weak smile.

"Maybe I should let you and my brother beat his ass …"

“I’ll gladly do that. He deserves a good old-fashioned beat down and some jail time, too.”

Adanna shakes her head. “I don’t think it’s even worth all that. I mean … it’s my word against his. I don’t see any of my colleagues or superiors going against him. They’ll find a way of making it my fault. And maybe they’re right. I — ”

“Don’t you dare even complete that thought,” I interject, cradling her face in my palms. “That bastard is the one at fault. Him and every person that’s allowed him to get away with this shit. Not you. Never you.”

“But I can’t help blaming myself, too. I feel like somehow, I let it happen, that it’s all my fault.” She breaks into another sob that makes her shoulders quake. “I hate that I even considered doing it —”

Refusing to hear another word of self-blame, I pull her back into my arms. It works. She leans in and silently accepts the comfort.

“What real choices did you have … his threatening your existence like he did? Sexual harassment is a crime for a reason, Adanna,” I say, my hand sweeping across her back again. “It’s coercion and abuse of power, and he shouldn’t get away with it. Let me help you hire a lawyer, we could sue —”

Adanna stiffens in my arms and shakes her head. “No, I just want to let this go,” she says, her words sharp and decisive. “With no proof of what he did, the whole thing could end up backfiring on me.”

I grind my teeth together, so tightly that my jaw aches. I don’t want to let it go. It’s a sure bet he’ll do it again and again—ruining God knows how many women’s lives—until someone stops him. We have the chance to stop him, and it seems wrong not to take it.

Still, I know it’s not my battle, not my existence on the line. This has to be Adanna’s choice. And my instinct to fight is not helping her, or the situation, right now. I have to simmer down and let her call the shots.

Heaving in a deep breath, I let it out, along with my impulsive tendencies. I press a soft kiss on her forehead. “Forget the idiot. Karma will have its way with him at some point,” I say. Not that I really believe there’s an invisible omnipotent force at work holding people accountable for their wrongs.

“You’ll be fine … everything will be okay.” Now this, I strongly believe. Adanna is tough and resilient. She’ll bounce back from this stronger and better. “Try not to worry too much about anything right now, okay?”

She exhales sharply and nods, remaining locked in my embrace until her body melts into mine, limp and exhausted. For long moments, we hold each other, just letting the warmth of physical contact soothe the emotional turmoil of the past few hours.

Several minutes later, Adanna disentangles herself from my arms, embarrassment in her eyes. “Oh, look at me … I’ve ruined your shirt with my tears.”

I glance down at the wet patch on my blue cotton t-shirt and give her a warm smile. “Nothing an airing won’t fix. I’ll just go change into a new one.”

Her lips twitch. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” I brush a thumb across her jaw. “I’m always here for you, okay? Whatever you need …”

Another film of tears coats her eyes again as she nods. She looks so vulnerable. So shattered. Quite different from the self-assured woman I had dinner with just two weeks ago. Again, a storm of rage charges through my bloodstream. My facial muscles spasm as I clamp my jaw tightly together to keep from grunting out my frustration. Why won’t she let me make that man pay?

A strange possessiveness overwhelms me. Suddenly, I want to gather her in my arms, whisk her into my apartment and keep her for myself … safe from all harm.

But who would keep her safe from you?

I swallow hard. It's true. I’m not a safe bet, not capable of making any woman happy. Something about me seems to eventually drive women away, straight into the arms of another man.

This relationship right here? It’s blossoming into a significant friendship. It makes no sense to wish on a star for more between us, especially when I know anything more will ruin everything between us. Best to stick to Plan A … a

platonic relationship. Adanna's already going through so much. No need to add my bullshit to her worries.

"Want to come in?" I ask, offering her an encouraging smile.

"I don't mean to be a bother ..."

"Not possible," I say, moving away from the door to give her room. "Come on in. I've prepped some chicken for the oven. And I even seasoned it much better this time around."

Her eyebrow quirks in amused surprise. "Hmmm … trying more than salt and pepper, huh?"

I chuckle. "Yep. Thanks to your expert advice, I've started training my stomach and tastebuds to be more adventurous."

"You'll not regret it, I promise. Spice is life."

Her statement hangs between us for several beats. I can see the hesitancy in her eyes. She's still not so sure about trusting me in her vulnerable state, which I get. Trusting any man right now, after being cornered by her boss, must be difficult. So, I wait, fighting the impulse to wade into the silence and persuade her. She needs to take this next step on her own.

She lets out a sharp breath and steps into my apartment for the first time. She looks around, as if not sure she wants to continue. Arms wrapped around her midriff, she moves one tentative foot in front of the other, as though wary about invading my space.

Little does she know that ship has sailed. She's already done that … and more. She's beginning to get under my skin. Since our first dinner date, Adanna has occupied most of my thoughts. I enjoyed our time together in a way I never have before with any woman. It's rare for me to let my guard down and share my past —not even with my girlfriends.

It shocks me how comfortable I feel with her. Something about her makes it easy to talk to her, to drop the emotional shield I usually have guarding me. It's surprising to me how much I want her to know me.

That first evening, when I walked her to her car, I found myself wanting to linger, eager to spend more time with her … to continue talking, listening, and simply dousing myself in her incandescent aura.

Now, having her here, free from the clutches of her boss, I don't want her to leave. I want to keep her safe, here with me forever.

This is so confusing and crazy—thinking about forever with a woman I've just met. We don't even live in the same country. Plus, I'm not looking for anything serious right now.

Needing to focus, I rake my fingers through the thick curls on my head. Adanna is here as my tour guide. I need to keep it simple, enjoy a platonic relationship with her while I'm here. And then, move back to London after concluding what I came here for.

Finding my father. And nothing more.

"Make yourself at home," I say when we get to the sitting room, pointing to the sofa opposite the TV.

"Thanks." She stands a second and lets her eyes sweep around the room.

Heat creeps into my cheeks. Other than two dull, brown couches, a tea table, and the television sitting on a stand, I've done nothing to make this flat welcoming. No pictures on the wall, no bookshelves, no intimate lighting, no plants. The place gives zero clues about the person living here. In fact, it's like no one does.

Is this a red flag for her? An indication that I'm cold and unfeeling? I press my lips together, annoyed with myself for not bringing at least a family photo with me.

"This really is just a pit stop for you, huh?" Adanna remarks, finally sinking into the chair.

Do I hear a tinge of regret in her voice? "Why do you say that?"

She shrugs. "Because you haven't made yourself at home," she says with a sly smile, tossing my words back to me. "Not a single picture or personal memento. Nothing."

“You’re right,” I admit. “I’m not sure what will happen if I find my father. I want it to be easy for me to leave.”

She nods in understanding and reclines in her seat. That simple gesture comforts me. Adanna is beginning to relax again. “Any progress on that front?” she asks.

“Nothing yet. The private investigator loaded the picture on a website he promises gets a lot of traffic for missing persons. He thinks it won’t be long.”

“Fingers crossed.”

We lapse into silence. A twitch in her jaw tells me she’s considering her next words quite carefully, so I wait.

“Let’s go out and explore Lagos together this Friday,” she finally says. “We could take a bike ride around town, visit the market, and then, head to a night club later …” Her lips slant into a wonky smile. “I’m unemployed now, completely at your disposal.”

Not as completely as I wish, but I let the thought pass. “Are you sure? I understand if you want to take a few more days to —”

“To what … cry … wallow? Been there, done that.” She shakes her head vehemently. “Nope, I want to forget the whole damn thing and have some fun .... until I have to face reality and my bills.”

“Let me help you pay off your car bill at least.”

She stiffens at the suggestion and glares at me. “We agreed you’d not do this,” she says in a low, angry tone. “It makes me feel even worse.”

“I’m sorry.” I brush my palm across my face in frustration. “I just … I hate seeing you struggle when I have more than enough to help. I could even make it a loan if you prefer.”

“I owe too much as it is,” she mutters on the wings of a resigned sigh. “I’m not about to add you as my debtor.”

“So how will you cope with no job?” I take a few steps forward and stand just by her sofa. God, she frustrates me. Why is she so unwilling to accept help? How

can I convince her that I have no ulterior motive with my offer? That I'll never use it against her.

"I just have to figure it out." She throws both palms upwards in a helpless gesture. "Luckily, I don't have to pay rent, thanks to my parents. Getting a roommate could help. That will help me fix my car, and register it as a taxi to bring in money."

"Why don't I fix your car and then —"

Her eyes spit fire, and she shakes her head back and forth.

I raise my hand to stop her before she starts in on me again. "Let me finish. It's not charity because you'll pay me a percentage of your taxi earnings each month to pay it back. What do you think?"

She ponders it for a moment, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. Then, a smile curves her lips. "Sounds like a good idea. Thank you, Justin."

Relief washes over me. I suppress the sigh that nearly makes it past my lips. Damn, Adanna is strong-willed. And quite unusual. I've never met a woman who refuses financial help from a man. It's admirable … and totally bullheaded.

No matter the financial circumstances of the women I've dated, they always let me foot the bill for our mutual outings. Not that I minded. I'm the kind of man who believes money is to spend and enjoy. Especially because I work hard for it. I have investments in stocks and bonds and two properties, but I also don't play with my leisure.

"Then, it's settled," I say, matching her smile. "Just send me the bill when the mechanic is done with your car repairs."

She nods. "And would ten percent or fifteen percent of my earnings be okay for paying you back?"

I bark out a laugh. "Already thinking of paying me back. You won't quit, huh?"

"Nope. I'll pay back every kobo. Adanna Ezenna is no charity case." She flashes me a cheeky smile that melts my heart. She's happy again.

“Okay, ten percent,” I say. “And take your time. No rush.”

“Deal.”

“Now, let me change my shirt, pop the chicken in the oven, so we can have lunch ... and Netflix the afternoon away.” I wink at her. “Okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

She laughs, and the sound soothes me. I’m glad to hear her laugh again. Knowing that I did something to bring some humour in the midst of her struggle makes me feel fantastic.

“Stay put. I’ll be right back.”

As I stroll towards my bedroom, I can feel her gaze boring into my back, and I still picture the gorgeous smile on her lips. Intense pleasure grips me when the sound of the TV comes on. Adanna’s making herself—and me—at home in my flat.

Chapter Ten

ADANNA



The sights, the sounds, the crowds. As usual, Balogun Market pulsates with activity. Kiosks burst with handbags, clothes, and shoes for sale. Buyers loudly haggle with obstinate traders, determined to get a discount.

As we walk along, the sun's dry heat prickles my skin. I'm sweaty, and strands of damp hair cling to my face. And I'm unaccountably happy.

Normally, the hustle and bustle of Lagos' biggest market irritates me. Not today. Instead, I'm here with the fresh eyes and heart of a tourist … all thanks to Justin Oliver Igwe.

For the past hour, I've been showing him around. We've visited the fruit section, where he purchased mangoes, pineapples, and oranges. And much to my surprise and delight, he even bought udalas after I convinced him to try the sour-sweet fruit.

Then, we took in the electronics section, where he found a tripod for his camera. And now, we are at the clothes section. His eyes are agog with the wide variety. Right now, he's eyeing a Kente-print kaftan top.

"These are gorgeous," he gushes, rolling his thumb and forefinger over the fabric. "And this …"

He moves farther into the store, his face deep in concentration as he inspects one African-print top after another. "I want to buy them all …"

"Slow down, Justin," I murmur in amusement, moving a bit closer to him, so that I don't have to talk so loudly. "The prices will double once the trader hears your accent. Let me do the haggling for you."

He turns to me, and his lips twist into a wry smile. "Oh … I'd better zip it then."

Laughing at his antics, I watch as he roams the stall, enthusiastically lifting almost every shirt hanging, and heaping them over his arm.

He halts in front of the women's clothing, and an Ankara single-sleeve dress catches his eye. A satisfied grin slowly spreads across his lips. "You'd look lovely in this," he murmurs.

I survey the dress with interest. “I know, right? It’s a beautiful design with lovely bright colours.”

“Let me get it for you.” He pulls it from the hanger and drapes it over his arm.

“No, Justin. I don’t want you to spend—” I begin, but he cuts me off with his hand held up like a stop sign.

“Come on, Adanna. It’s just a dress.”

I hesitate, and wonder, why I am being so stubborn about accepting his gift. Not a hard question. The scars inflicted by my wealthy ex-boyfriend run deep. When we broke up, he had the car and phone he’d gifted me repossessed in the most humiliating way—in public.

Since then, gifts from the opposite sex have been a no-no. I vowed to never give anyone the opportunity to treat me that way. To never allow myself to be vulnerable to the shifting winds of a man’s generosity. If I can’t afford it, I don’t need it.

But standing in this wood shed in the middle of a crowded market, I know with all certainty that Justin would never humiliate me like that. I’m not sure why I’m so certain about this. Maybe because he’s seen me at my worst—contemplating exchanging sexual favours for a job—and still, he’s happy to hang out with me. Or maybe it’s his gorgeous face, staring at me with such tender hope that I accept his gift. Whatever the case, my apprehension dissipates.

“Thank you, Justin,” I say.

Spoiling his excited mood with an unnecessary argument isn’t worth it. I’m having so much fun sharing his enthusiasm about a market I normally find quite rowdy and overwhelming. Why ruin it?

His face splits into a wide grin. “Excellent.” He lifts another dress with the same style, but a different material, and swings it over his already full arm. “They go in pairs,” he says with a cheeky wink at me.

I shake my head and stick out my tongue in jest. “You eh …”

When Justin’s done buying out the store, we head over to the shop attendant

seated at the corner. The overweight man, with a thick head of hair and a toothpick peeking from the corner of his mouth, grins when he sees us approaching.

“Mr London, don’t you want to pick more clothes?” he asks in a thick Igbo accent. His London sounding like Rondon. “I have African print trousers as well. They are one size fits all.”

I laugh out. “Nwanne, he’s picked enough. Just tell us how much these cost.”

Lifting the clothing items one after the other from Justin’s arm, I place them on the trader’s desk. “And I want the true price o. Don’t let his British accent fool you. He’s a Naija hustler like you and me.”

The trader flings his head back and bellows. “Madam,” he calls out, his amusement so intense that he breaks into a fit of coughs. Then, he addresses Justin. “Oga, this your wife is harsh o. She won’t let anyone else chop your money for here o.”

I freeze. It’s on the tip of my tongue to refute the man’s assumption and declare that we’re not married.

Before I can say a thing, Justin drapes his arm around my shoulders. “Yup, that’s my darling wife. So protective of my assets.”

Although I know Justin is just playing along and joking with the trader, my heart skips a beat, and then, takes off in a gallop so fast that I fear it might burst through my chest.

“Good. Na that kind wife I like,” the trader says, while tallying the items on his calculator.

“Hundred and twenty-five thousand Naira,” he soon announces.

“What? No o! Nothing more than ninety,” I object, raising my hand like a lawyer in a courtroom.

“Ahn Ahn, Madam.”

At the man’s protest, I grab Justin’s arm. “Let’s go abeg. This guy thinks I’m

playing …”

Justin’s brows knit up in confusion and apprehension. He really wants these clothes. I have to pinch my lips tightly together to keep from laughing—he’s like a little boy whose mum just told him to put that toy back on the store shelf. Finally, comprehension lights his brown eyes.

As we turn and walk a few steps, the trader’s resigned grunt follows us. “Okay. I’ll take ninety-five.”

I swivel back to him, a pleased smile on my face. “Nope. Ninety or nothing.”

“Madam! You are tough o!” the man grumbles as his toothpick wobbles at the corner of his lips. But he begins folding the clothes neatly and placing them into a large bag.

We won.

“I think we’ve had enough of Balogun Market, don’t you?” I ask as soon as we step out. The setting sun on the horizon and the lessening crowds are a clear sign the market’s winding down for the day.

“Totally agree,” he says. “Time for the next adventure. Dinner and a club?”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll have to go home and change though.”

“Me, too. How about your place first and then mine?”

I nod. “Perfect.”

Justin is silent as we stroll out of the market. From the corner of my eye, I notice his drawn expression. I can tell he’s deep in thought and wonder what’s on his mind.

Does he regret spending time with me? My chest tightens at the thought. Oh, no. Did my haggling put him off? Is he used to posh women who only pay full price? Anxiety knots my stomach.

But really, why should I even care? I like a good bargain and will haggle until I get it. That’s me. I refuse to be ashamed of myself for that, or anything about me.

This is the exact reason I avoid men with a lot more money than I, why I prefer —

“Thank you for being here. For showing me around.” Justin’s deep voice breaks through my troubled rumination.

I look up to find his gaze trained on me. His eyes are dark and intense.

“Adanna, you made this so much fun. I’ve never been to a market like this in my life. Without you, it would have been … boring and awkward for me.”

Before I can respond or even process the emotions charging through me, he dips his head and plants a firm kiss on my mouth. It’s so quick that I don’t even register the feel of his lips on mine. Still, intense heat suffuses my entire body.

Good Lord, I want to grab this man and kiss him senseless. We’re right at the entrance of the market, amidst a crowd of total strangers, and I don’t care. I want to wrap my arms around him and feel the expanse of his rippled chest pressed against my body, to trace my fingers over the firm biceps and forearms peeking from the short sleeves of his black shirt. Damn, those well-sculpted muscles have been distracting me all day. If only I could reach out and give them a little squeeze ...

“Are you ready to go?”

A hoarse male voice snatches my mind back from its sensual journey. I dart my gaze to the motorcycle driver that has pulled up in front of us, a hopeful glint in his eyes.

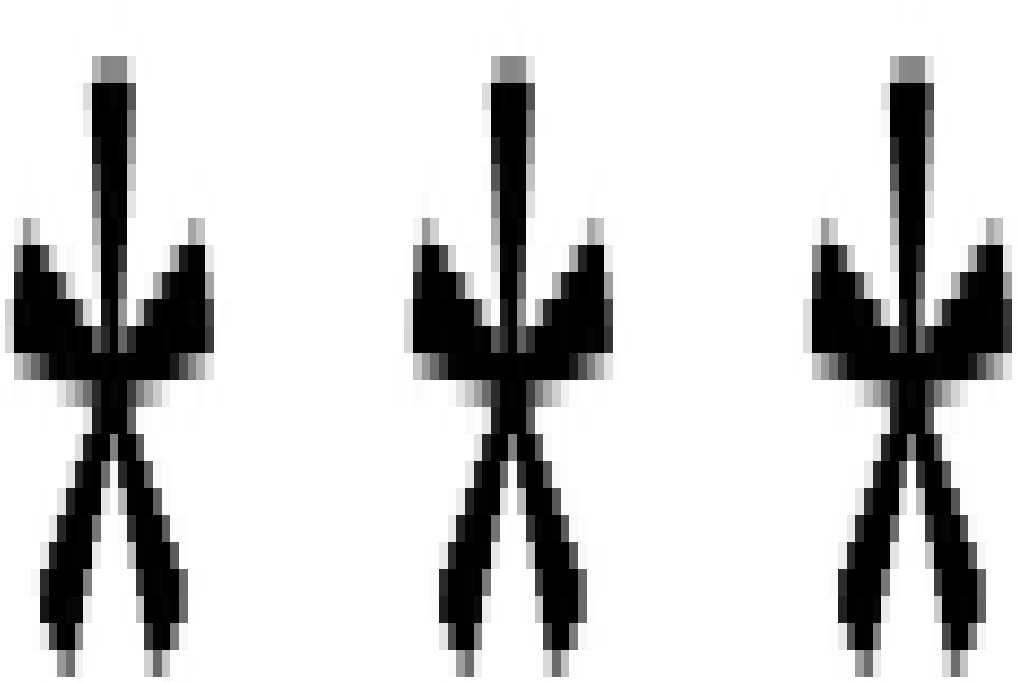
I clear my throat as I turn my head back to Justin, slightly annoyed at the interruption. “You want to take a taxi or Okada?”

Justin’s lips twitch. “I’ve always wanted to try these motorcycles. Let’s go for it.”

I chuckle. Justin sounds so excited about the prospect of being at the back of a motorcycle. It’s cute that he is not acting all brand new or ajebutterish. He’s so down to earth. One of the reasons I like him so much.

“Okay,” I say, nodding. “Let me get my own ride so we can head off.”

After I flag down another Okada driver, I give my address to both drivers, and we mount the back seat of each motorcycle and take off.



“What did you see with your eyes squeezed shut the whole way here?” I say with a chuckle, as I watch Justin swing his legs from the backseat of the motorcycle and plant them on the ground. “The point of a motorcycle tour is to actually look around.”

He grunts in response. “No helmet and a driver zigzagging around lorries like a daredevil cat with nine lives.” He retrieves his wallet from the pocket of his black jeans. “My bucket list is long, but watching myself plunge to my own death isn’t on it.”

I toss my head back and laugh. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh, it was worse than bad. Fucking scary…” He pulls out a wad of cash and hands it to his motorbike driver whose lips are curved upwards in an amused smirk.

“I swear, Lagosians are the bravest people on earth. Anyone who willingly gets behind these Okada drivers has a death wish,” Justin says, continuing his grumble, notwithstanding the mockery written all over the middle-aged man’s face.

The way Justin pronounces the word Okada like Oak-ae-da with his thick British accent is so funny. Profound amusement grips me, but I hold my breath to prevent another laugh from busting out. He’s told me how self-conscious he feels because he sounds different. I don’t want to ever make him feel like he doesn’t belong in a culture he so desperately wants to be a part of.

“Ahn Ahn,” the bike rider protests with a guffaw. “No be like that ooo. We bike riders are experienced. I’ve been driving this motorcycle for over six years.”

Justin snorts. “And I wish you another six healthy years, sir. Just not with me.”

“Na wa ooo,” the bike man mutters, shaking his head as he switches on the engine and makes a turn. “This na Lagos, not London.”

“Exactly! Tell him, sir,” I call out in agreement as he speeds away.

“I should remember that. Lagos, not London,” Justin says, a sexy smile playing

on his lips. He flicks his gaze around, his forehead furrowing in confusion.

“I want to pay your bike man. Where’s he?”

I shrug. “He’s driven off. I’ve already paid him.”

Frown lines form at the corners of Justin’s eyes. “I don’t like this, Adanna. Didn’t we agree that I’d foot the bills for all our touring —”

“Okay, okay …” I say, holding up my hands in surrender. Then, I snatch his wallet, and pull out a thousand-Naira note, and hand him back his wallet. “You happy now?”

He laughs out and gives me a playful swat on the shoulder. “Extremely.”

“Ready for a little walk? Taxis and Okada drivers will only go so far here, because of the potholes,” I explain.

“Some of that great government in action you told me about, huh?”

I nod with a roll of my eyes, and we set off side by side. Lagos weather in November is my favourite. The harmattan season is just beginning, and the chill in the air hasn't yet reached the coolness of the dry season. I take a deep breath in, savouring the feel of the cool evening breeze against my skin.

There’s a slight fog gathering in the air. The streetlights are on, lending an almost dreamlike haziness to the evening. And it does feel surreal, taking a leisurely stroll to my home on an untarred road in the slums of Agege with BAC-TV’s Justin Igwe.

How unreal is that? Justin Oliver Igwe is about to enter my house.

I swallow hard at that. A celebrity, exposed to the finest things life has to offer, in my modest home. Excitement mingles with anxiety in the pit of my stomach, and spins like clothes in the drum of a washing machine.

It’s not that I’m ashamed. In fact, I love the home my parents built, filled with love, and left to me and Ugo. But there’s no getting around the fact it’s a shabby neighbourhood with hit-or-miss electricity, rationed water, and abysmal roads. All certainly not the standard of living Justin’s accustomed to. What if he is

repulsed by it all?

I angle my head, and cast a sidelong glance at him. His eyes roam the surroundings wildly, taking everything in. I'm not sure what to make of his silence, and the hectic roiling in my stomach increases. I bite the inside of my lower lip, fighting the urge to say something … to explain.

Justin's well aware of the lack of urban planning in many parts of Lagos. He has already observed this. I need to simply relax, and go with the flow. Enjoy this time. Because all too soon, he'll be back in London, and I'll be back to my regular hustle. And in the years to come, we'll both tell the story of his time in Lagos. Him … at parties telling his posh friends about the girl from a Lagos slum who acted as his tour guide. And me … reliving the fairy tale time I spent with Justin Oliver Igwe of Men of Valour.

My heart sinks at the thought, and I turn my head back to the road. Justin and I are from two different worlds. What on earth would a famous British actor starring on a hit television show have in common with a jobless Nigerian woman who can't even manage to keep a dating site up and running?

There will be no romantic walk down the aisle for us, and I know it. Still, I'm gutted.

I'm falling for this man. The realisation hits me square in the chest, and with an intensity that makes me hold my breath. I know it's insanity, but I'm beginning to hope for something more between us.

I swallow hard and give my head a small shake. Naïve dreams do no one any good. I need to get real.

We arrive at my home a few minutes later, and I press the bell. Mr Abdul opens the pedestrian gate almost immediately. His eyebrows angle together quizzically as he gives Justin a once-over.

"Good evening, Adanna," he says, without taking his eyes off Justin.

I suppress a grunt. I'm sure my brother will hear about this. It's been more than a year since I've had a male guest over in the evening. After ending my last relationship eighteen months ago, I've avoided dating.

Mr Abdul usually corresponds with my brother, who pays his salary every week. It's a safe bet that he also keeps Ugo apprised of my life.

"Good evening, Mr Abdul," I say. "I'll be going out again tonight with my friend Justin."

"At this time?"

I blink several times to keep from rolling my eyes. "Haba, Mr Abdul, it's only 6:15p.m.," I say, shaking my head in amusement. For real, this man thinks he is my father.

Mr Abdul peers at Justin again. "Evening, sir," he finally says in acknowledgement.

Justin smiles and nods. Then offers the older man a handshake. "Nice to meet you, Mr Abdul. Don't worry, sir, I'll look after Adanna."

"Hey," I protest with a little laugh. "I'm standing right here. And I can look after myself."

Mr Abdul's tight facial expression relaxes. "Please take care of her," he says to Justin. "And bring her back safe."

"Hey!"

My protest goes on deaf ears as they shake hands firmly.

"I'll do just that," Justin promises and pulls me to his side. "I'll always make sure she's safe."

Damn. The brief contact with Justin's firm chest makes my body tingle, when I should be annoyed at the patriarchal display happening in front of me. Instead, I'm giggling like a schoolgirl as Justin takes my hand as we head for my front door.

"I thought I had just my brother and Mr Abdul to worry about," I mutter, still giggling. "Now, I have to add you to the list of my self-proclaimed protectors?"

"Yep," he whispers into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Oh, come on …” I unlock the door, and we step into the hallway. My hand still in his, I lead him to the sitting room.

“This is me,” I murmur, a residual pang of anxiety surging through me. “My humble abode.”

Justin releases my hand and steps farther into the medium-size space, taking in the multiple framed pictures on pale-yellow walls. He moves from one photograph to another, inspecting each portrait, a sombre expression on his face.

He halts in front of a large family portrait and fixes his eyes on it for several seconds. My mother beaming as my father whispers into her ear, and me and Ugo sitting on the floor in front of them.

I remember that evening all too well. It was my mother’s birthday, and we were on our way for a celebratory dinner. She wore a beautiful red gown, and my father, a smart tux. Before we headed out, my mother had suddenly whipped out her large camera, set it on a timer, and created the impromptu photoshoot.

That day, we had such a lovely time, sharing pleasant reminiscent stories as we dined at a high-end restaurant. The last family dinner we all had together, and one of the best memories of my life. My father died suddenly from a stroke just six months after.

“You’re so lucky that you grew up in a happy home.”

Justin’s deep voice pulls me out of my thoughts. I hear a wistfulness in his tone that tugs at my heartstrings. Here I am, worried he would think poorly of my humble home, and the first thing that draws his attention is the love oozing from every picture in the room.

Shame causes my cheeks to heat up. Why am I being so shallow? Justin clearly isn’t.

“Yep, I felt loved and protected,” I reply.

He turns to face me. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Must have been hard for you losing them both.”

A wedge forms in my throat, and I am gripped by a desire to comfort him with a

hug. At least, I experienced this kind of love from my parents. Justin didn't know selfless love from his biological parents and had to find it from his adoptive family.

I clear my throat so I can speak, squeezing the handle of my shopping bag a bit more tightly to keep myself from giving in to the urge to hug him.

"Yes. It never gets easy. But I'm glad for photos and memories. Helps me cope."

We lapse into silence. His gaze is fixed on mine. There's a growing spark in his eyes that I can't misinterpret. He's looking at me like a man looks at a woman he wants to pull into his arms for a kiss … and more. My pulse rate goes into a mad beat, echoing in my ears.

For some insane reason, I want him to do it. Grab me right here and pull me in for a passionate kiss. I want to feel his succulent lips moving against mine, his pink tongue twirling with mine, the firmness of his large frame pressed against my plushness.

It will never work. You're not his type.

The errant thought jumps into my head, hijacking my sensual fantasy. I blink twice and avert my gaze from his. "A quick shower and change, and I'll be ready," I mutter.

He nods, but says nothing.

"You want anything to eat or drink while you wait?"

The muscles of his jaw tighten as he shakes his head. His stance is rigid, his posture tense, as though any movement would unleash whatever he's holding back. I have to escape this gorgeous man's presence, or I'll be unable to stop myself from pouncing on him. And I'm not sure it's a good idea.

"Okay, see you in a bit," I say, spinning on my heels. The farther away I am from him, the less likely I am to beg him to touch me … and to make a fool of myself.

Chapter Eleven

JUSTIN



Wow …

The only word that jumps into my head as Adanna steps into the room. The sparkly, silver material of her short-sleeved gown hugs every tempting curve and compliments her honey-brown skin. It's short, above the knee, accentuating her finely sculpted legs.

Her feet are tucked into silver, strappy sandals with heels so tall and sharp, they should be categorized a deadly weapon. Her hair has been tousled into bouncy short twists that suit her oval face, bringing attention to the gorgeous contours of her cheekbones.

But damn, her eyes dusted with a shimmery grey eyeshadow, and pouty lips shining with a nude lip gloss, lend her a sultriness reminiscent of movie stars of the 40s, like Ethel Waters and Josephine Baker. Sexy and classy. And strong.

Just like those brave actresses who defied the odds and succeeded in an era of deep racism, Adanna took a stand, lost her job, and still manages to not only look like a million bucks, but also maintain a positive attitude. It's like she has the whole world at her fingertips.

So, yeah … wow.

I swallow past the sudden lump that forms in my throat. "You look lovely, Adanna," I say, hearing the deep rasp in my voice.

She lowers her lids and mutters a thank-you, her discomfiture at my compliment totally endearing ... as if she doesn't believe she's a knockout.

Simply lovely … but what an inadequate word when my heart pounds like a jackhammer in my chest, and blood surges south to harden my dick.

Bloody hell, I can't deny it another second. I want Adanna in the most intimate way possible. Right now, all I can think of is leaping across the room, my hands spanning her narrow waist, and fastening her full hips flush against my throbbing member.

Don't know why I'm so surprised. It's been building inside me all day, while out

together in the local market, seeing the sights, and exploring the beauty and complexity of Lagos.

Her company made the experience all the more enjoyable—the ways she took her time to explain various ambiguities about the city to me, translated the English dialect commonly spoken around town, and finally … haggled with the trader.

I found that totally sexy. Going head-to-head with the stall owner to get the best price—for me. My entire body came alive with an intense longing to claim her there and then.

In a way, it transported me to my Liverpool childhood, following my mother to the meat market and watching as she haggled with almost every trader until she got the best bargains. And doing it all for the love of her family.

Being with Adanna, I'm reminded of the peace and joy of finally finding my place in the world with my adoptive family. There's just something warm and wholesome about Adanna—and let's not forget sexy as hell—that makes me want to risk everything to be with her.

"We should head out if we want to get to the club on time." Her husky voice shatters my transfixed admiration.

She steps a bit closer, and a soft floral scent wafts in the air. Her perfume. I drag a deep, intoxicating breath into my nose, then let it out and nod. "You're right. Lagos traffic doesn't play. But this time, we'll take a cab. Can't have the wind messing with your perfect hair and makeup."

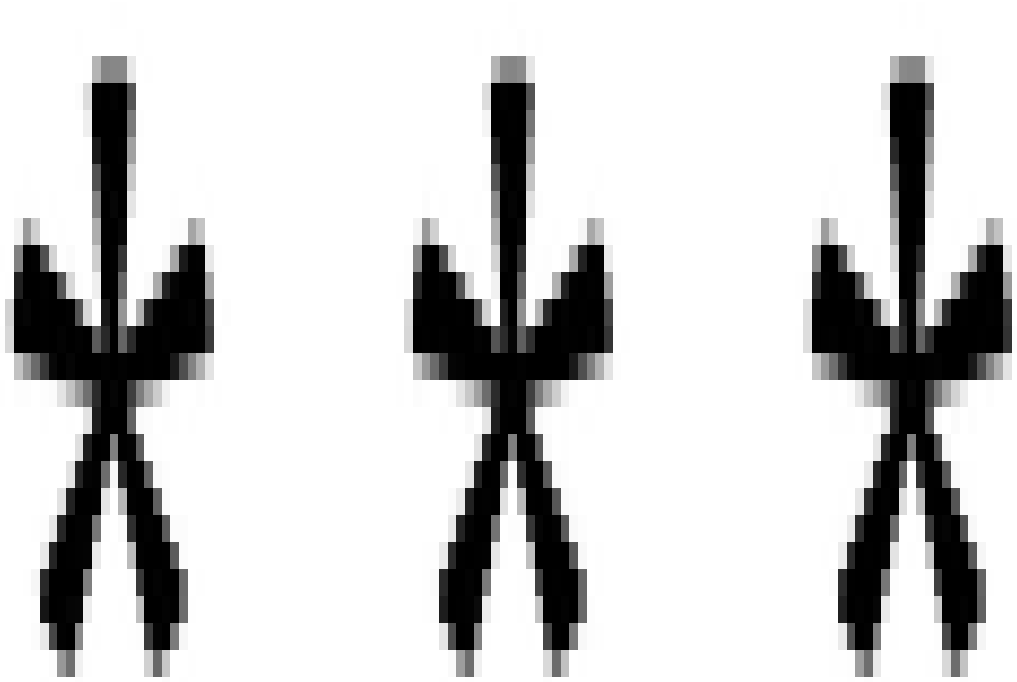
She gives me a shy smile that sweeps gooseflesh all over my skin like butter spreading over a slice of warm bread.

I want Adanna, and I'm going to do my best to convince her to give us a chance.

Exhaling in relief, I take a step towards her and extend my hand. She hesitates for a split second before placing her soft palm in mine.

"Let's go have a lovely time together," I say, all the tension in my muscles relaxing.

Now that I’ve made up my mind not to fight the attraction between us, I feel more in control of my emotions.



Her soft ass grinds against my groin as she twerks on my hardened dick to the thumping Afro beats blaring from the speakers. I move in perfect rhythm with her, holding onto her slender waist as I thrust my hips forward to match her movements.

Who knew Adanna was such a spitfire on the dance floor? Or that the music at Firefly nightclub would unleash her wild side. Right in the middle of other enthusiastic, gyrating couples, Adanna and I are having a blast, working off the grilled steak and red wine we consumed an hour ago.

At first, she was hesitant, keeping her distance and swaying from side to side. And to be fair, so was I. Then, Davido's song Fia came on, and the entire dance floor caught fire. Adanna and I followed suit, casting our inhibitions to the wind.

Her body is pressed so close that I'm not sure where I begin and she ends. The only difference between our dance moves and fucking is the orgasm … and I'm not even sure that hasn't happened.

She flips her head back and flashes me a sexy smile that sends another wave of arousal down south. Smiling back at her, I wrap my arm around her midriff and do a slow sway of my hips, pressing my body into hers.

I'm loving this. Her disinhibition, the sheer pleasure on her face. At least for now, she's let go of whatever keeps her from fully relaxing with me.

Not missing a beat, I swirl her around to face me and pull her against me, swinging to the music in time with every thump. She flings her arms around my neck as she continues to dance close to me. I know she can feel the swell of my arousal on her stomach. I can't help it. My dick is steel hard, strong enough to drill through concrete. Not that concrete's what I'm looking to drill through right now.

With her heels on, she's just a few inches shorter than me, so I can feel every swell of her soft body pressed to mine.

She leans in and whispers in my ear. "Having as lovely a time as I am?"

I pull her closer, and she gasps at the intimacy. I grin and look deep into her

eyes. “Everything about this evening is lovely.”

She continues swaying against me, moving the lower half of her body sensually against my hips, teasing me in the most painfully erotic way.

Damn. I want to fuck her. Right here in this room.

“Do you want to have more fun?” she whispers in my ear again.

My heart slams into my chest and begins a manic drumbeat. Trembling with need, I pull back slightly so I can see her properly. With tiny light bulbs high up in the ceiling, the room is dimly lit, but I can see every contour and plane of Adanna’s face. Her sultry eyes are sparking with mixed emotions. Uncertainty, excitement, anxiety … even fear. But very clearly, I see desire and a determination to do something about it.

“I … I ...” As if someone zapped my brain, a coherent response eludes me.

“Because we’ve pretty much been dancing around this since the day we met.” Her tone seems bolder now, her body is no longer moving.

My breathing stalls, and I still can’t find my voice.

“Are we going to just dance all night or are we going to DANCE all night?” she asks.

If I don’t answer quick, the moment might pass me by. And just like that, my voice dislodges itself. “Let’s DANCE. Just let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

“Now,” she answers with urgency, her throaty voice almost making me lose all control. “Your place or mine?”

“Mine’s closer,” I mutter, grabbing her by the wrist.

Without another word, we make our way past the wall of moving bodies on the dance floor.

My pulse rate in overdrive, I can barely contain myself as we make it out of the night club. From the moment I met Adanna, I’ve wanted her. Her body, yes, but

also her company. I've enjoyed every moment spent with her. She's so different from the women I've dated, women I thought I wanted. Yet, Adanna captivates me like no other.

That she made the first move heartens me. After the episode with her boss, I anticipated knocking against a brick wall trying to win Adanna's trust. Instead, the brick wall crumbled on its own, and she wants to spend the night in my bed as much as I want her there. There is a God.

At the entrance of the nightclub, I arrange for our Uber. Her hand tightly clasped in mine, we stand together, waiting for the taxi. My mind is whirring in opposing circles. I want Adanna, I know she wants me, too. But is it too soon? Is this something she'll regret in the morning?

I tilt her face up gently with my thumb and forefinger, and I gaze into her eyes. "Are you sure you want to?" I whisper as I rest my forehead against hers. "We don't have to if —"

She suddenly presses her lips to mine and then flicks her tongue over my lower lip. My heart leaps, and the jackhammering begins again in my chest.

"Is this answer enough for you?" she murmurs, repeating the enticing movement of her tongue.

Goddamn! All control snatched away, I swoop in for another kiss. She melts into me, opening her mouth for the invasion of my tongue.

Lord above, Adanna tastes so good, like wine and honey. Her lips are full and soft, moving with mine in a slow, sensual rhythm that ignites flames of desire down every nerve in my body.

Thoroughly aroused, I anchor my hand over the curve of her bottom and draw her closer to me as my mouth mates hungrily with hers, exploring its intimate, dark corners with my greedy tongue.

I want Adanna to feel every hard inch of my dick pressed against her, want her to know the promise that awaits her in my bed. By the end of the night, I want her to cry out my name in ecstasy, to claim her, to write my name on every single cell in her body so that she remembers my touch long after.

“Oh, Justin,” she moans, a throaty sound that fires waves of electrical current down my spine.

“Ahhh,” I groan, angling my head for a deeper kiss. She’s so responsive, so hot and passionate. I want to devour her, drink from the well of her sweetness.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, shattering my passionate haze. I pull back, my chest heaving as I drag in air into my lungs. Adanna’s also breathing hard, her eyes wild with lust.

“Our Uber’s here,” I say. My voice is so hoarse from the desire burning inside me that it sounds alien.

Her lips slowly slant upwards into a smile. “Good,” she murmurs with a little laugh, planting another kiss on my mouth. “Because I’m seconds away from ripping your clothes off right here in the open and risking arrest for indecent exposure.”

A chuckle rumbles through me as I dart my gaze around. My cheeks flood with heat when I notice two women staring at us with undisguised interest, and another man pointing a phone our way, likely taking pictures or recording us.

Shit, I’ve lost it completely, making out with Adanna in public without any thought of prying eyes. My privacy’s been invaded countless times … I should know better. I grind my jaw, annoyed with myself. I don’t want this precious moment between us ending up on a gossip blog or in a magazine.

Pulling Adanna close to shield her from nosy eyes with my body, I drape an arm around her shoulders, and we proceed towards the carpark for our waiting vehicle.

Chapter Twelve

ADANNA



We're barely through Justin's front door before I reach for him and pull him in for a kiss. The entire drive here, we spent kissing and touching in the back of the cab. The poor driver … he got an eyeful.

Drunk with lust, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. And now, I'm so primed that I don't want foreplay. Let the main event begin.

"Ah, Adanna…" Justin groans.

The deep timbre produces a warm gush between my thighs. There's a helplessness, an urgency when he whispers my name like this that fills me with boldness.

I'm like a puppet under the control of an invisible force. All I can do is feel. And at this moment, pure desire is what I feel.

To have sex with a man because I want him, because he wants me, too. Not just as a power play to control and debase, like vile Mr Madu dangling a promotion. No, we want each other, and the feeling is exhilarating. I'll never take this kind of sexual freedom for granted again.

Justin's hands move under my mini dress and cup my ass, squeezing and kneading the soft flesh as his mouth plunders mine in an almost aggressive kiss.

My blood heats up at his boldness. Moisture floods my panties, soaking the flimsy material. It's uncomfortable, and I want him to rip them off me.

Good Lord, for a man whose exes are damn near flat boards—waiflike models with barely any tits or ass—he knows what to do with a woman with more assets, handling my ass with confidence. Why on earth was I ever worried about a physical attraction between us?

Still massaging my plump bum, he lifts me and anchors my legs over his hips, curving the lower half of my body upwards until my core is pressed against the bulge in his jeans.

"Ohh…" I gasp. Intense need shoots through me at the contact of my throbbing centre with his hardness.

“Yes, Adanna … yes,” he rasps, sucking on the tense muscle of my neck.

The sensitive flesh between my thighs quivers as he rocks his hips back and forth, dry humping me in a slow, erotic rhythm as if to a tune playing in his head. Fuelled by my lust, I wrap my arms tightly around him, hungrily kissing him back. All the while, grinding my pelvis in perfect sync with his hips.

I’m cresting rapidly towards a climax with each movement, squeezing my eyes shut as I concentrate on the growing pleasure gathering deep inside my core. It’s getting closer … closer … closer …

“Justin … Oh, God!”

The ragged cry rips from my throat as an intense climax slices through my entire body with a violence that robs me of all coherent thought. I can barely breathe, the air around me seems insufficient for my flaring nostrils.

Justin’s arms cocoon me in warmth, holding me steady until my shudders quell. Sated, I loosen my grip on his shoulders as I rest my head at the crook of his neck.

Goodness, we’re both still fully clothed, and I’ve already come with reckless abandon.

Before I can fully recover from the daze of my orgasm, I find myself being hurtled down a long corridor and into a dark room. I’m not sure where I am until a soft light fills the room, and my back hits the plush mattress that absorbs my weight.

“You’re so sexy, Adanna,” Justin murmurs. His tone thick and raw as his large hands move to the hem of my gown and begin tugging upwards.

Lifting my hips off the bed, I help him take it off. Then, I reach behind and unclasp my bra. With the same swift motion, I pull off my underwear. Never in my entire life have I felt such disinhibition, such recklessness. Still, I can’t control the urgency and desperation to be touched by Justin or see him as naked as me.

“Get undressed,” I order, fixing a sexy smile on my lips.

His mouth slacks as he sweeps his gaze over my nakedness with wide eyes. “Oh, Adanna … beautiful … simply beautiful…”

A heady sensation fills my head at his perusal. I know I’ve got a great set of tits. All my exes said so. My breasts are a solid C-cup, perky, and my nipples are prominent. Still, seeing the sheer admiration in Justin’s eyes thrills me.

“I said, take off your clothes, Mr,” I order again, broadening my sly smile.

This newfound sexual boldness stuns me. I’m not the type to let go and take control during sex. Not me. Usually, I’m quite docile between the sheets, allowing myself to be led, and never taking charge of my own pleasure.

But tonight, here with Justin, I’m not afraid of being judged for my sexuality. I feel free as a bird, comfortable releasing the freak I know lurks inside me. And it feels so good.

I inch back and prop myself up on the bed pillows. From this vantage point, I watch Justin divest himself of his clothes. As he pulls off his boxers, my gaze focuses on the dick that has teased me all night. From the grinding on the dance floor to the dry humping we’ve just done.

My tongue glides over my lower lip in delight at the gorgeous sight of the erect penis standing in salute to me. Long, thick, with tortuous veins along its path. Lord, I can’t wait to feel all of that inside me.

“Oh, Justin…” I gush, spreading my arms wide in invitation. “Come to Mama.”

Blowing out an arrogant chuckle, he strides to the bed and pulls me into his arms. Soon, we’re kissing again, our hands roaming over each other’s bodies ... grabbing, squeezing, kneading.

I’m already so primed from my earlier orgasm that I’m not willing to wait for prolonged foreplay. I want him now, fucking me hard and fast.

Justin lowers his head and takes one nipple in his mouth. My body quivers from pleasure. “Please,” I cry out, not sure if I’m asking him to stop or continue. All I know is I need another release from the sexual tension building inside me.

Deaf to my pleas, he continues the sweet lapping of the swollen buds with

eagerness, alternating between breasts and treating each with loving attention.

“So lovely…” he murmurs, moving his head even lower, nibbling and kissing along the skin of my stomach, my belly button, and finally, my hip.

He spreads my legs and presses his face against my mound and inhales deeply. His warm breath against my pussy folds makes me dizzy with desire. “Oh, Justin,” I moan.

“Ahhhh … the sweet smell of pussy juice. I want a taste …”

Those erotic words, and his lips so close to my throbbing centre, produce another wave of miniature spasms coursing through my body. A sudden urgency overwhelms me. I grip his shoulders and pull him back up. I can’t wait for him to eat me. I need his dick inside me right now. Reaching between us, I palm his straining erection.

“Aaaaah!” His harsh hiss resounds in the room as I begin to move my hand, stroking from base to tip, massaging the bulbus head.

“Oh, fuck, Adanna …” A helpless growl that’s hot in my ear.

“That’s right, Justin … this is exactly what I want deep inside me.”

“Okay, that’s it!” Justin growls as he covers my hand with his and slips it away from his rigid manhood.

Stretching his hand across the bed, he pulls out the top bedside drawer and retrieves a condom. My breathing shallow with anticipation, I watch as he rips open the square packet and sheaths himself, his face drawn in concentration.

He grabs my thick thighs in his hands and spreads them wide apart. He takes hold of his fully erect member and begins a slow tease around the entrance to my womanhood, stroking its spongy head against my quivering flesh.

A throaty moan tears through me. “Justin, please ...” I moan again.

“You want this hard dick, don’t you?” A harsh question in a raw voice as he continues to stroke my wet centre with his penis.

“Ooooh!” I cry out, the sensual torture of having him circling the place where I crave him most and not pushing inside, almost unbearable.

“Say you want my dick,” he commands, tapping on my clit with his hard shaft. “Say it, Adanna.”

“I want it, Justin … I want your dick.”

My helpless declaration resounds in the room. I sound needy and downright possessed, but I don’t care. At this point, my need for this man outweighs my self-pride.

“That’s right, Adanna,” he growls, spanning my hips with his hands and thrusting into me in one sure move.

I part my lips into a gasp. He fills me up and pure ecstasy—intense and profound—grips me. Every inch of my sex is invaded by his powerful erection. Just when I think I’m unable to contain the pleasure of his penetration, he begins to move, pummelling me with long and deep strokes.

“You like this dick? Yeah? You like this dick?” he grounds out, rotating his hips and plunging into me powerfully from different angles, hitting all my sensitive spots.

He anchors my leg over his shoulder as he drives into my dripping core again, finding the most intense bundle of nerves inside my vagina.

“Ohhhh …” I moan, clutching the bedsheet tightly as his penis persistently strokes against my g-spot with his precise thrusts. “I like it … I fucking love it. Oh, Justin, just like that … keep it right there. Don’t stop …”

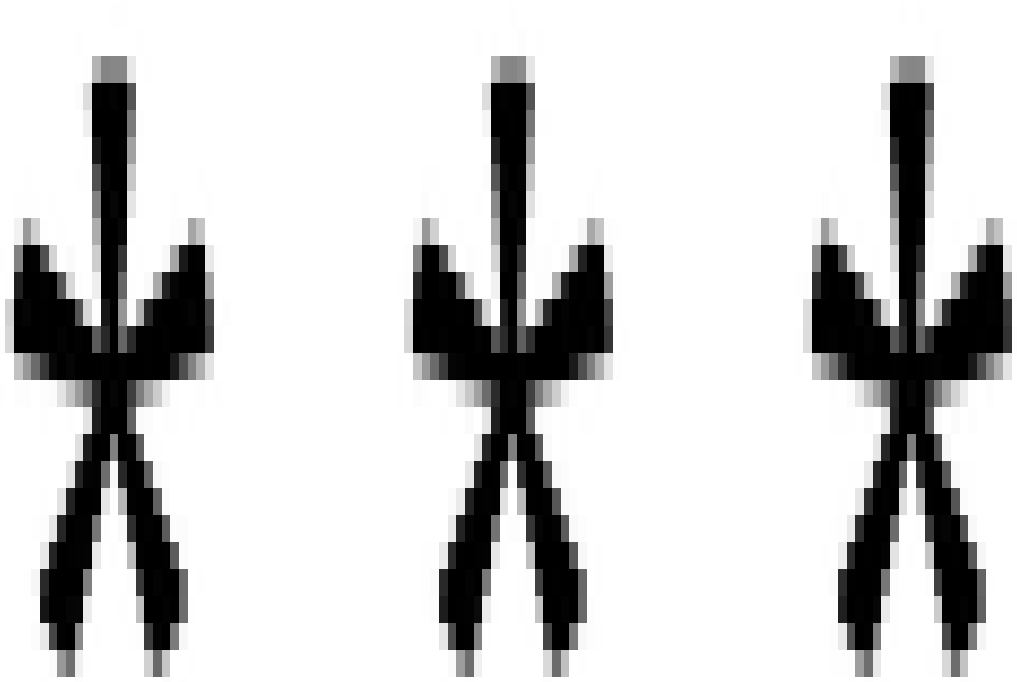
At my urging, he keeps his pace, pounding in and out of me with piston-like precision. I can feel a climax building from my womb, it’s speeding fast towards my opening, it’s coming … it’s coming. Nearer, nearer, almost there, almost there …

“Oh, God, I’m coming … I’m coming!” I cry out in a strangled whimper.

Tears of sheer joy spill from the corner of my eyes as my body splinters into waves of overwhelming pleasure. I clutch Justin tightly as I spasm from my

orgasm, his relentless thrusts prolonging the ecstasy.

“Adanna … fuck!” he roars, throwing his head back as his own climax claims him.



The woosh of flushing water permeates my subconscious, and I pry open my eyes. Confused at first, I sweep my gaze around the strange room. The magenta walls, a large wooden wardrobe opposite me, plush grey carpeting, and finally, the rumpled bedding and quilted blanket. It all comes into focus slowly. I spring upright.

Justin Igwe.

I'm in his bedroom. I spent the night in his apartment. Sounds of running water from the adjacent room capture my attention. I direct my gaze to the closed door and sudden panic overtakes me. My breathing accelerates, and I shiver as a chill suffuses my body.

Justin is in the bathroom. How long has he been there? Is he hiding, trying to avoid an awkward morning-after conversation?

I let out a soft wince as I lift the white cotton quilt. There's a dull throb between my thighs and I'm stark naked.

Tsk tsk. I shake my head. I didn't even bother to slip on anything before I nodded off to sleep. Images of last night flash in my mind, like a porn video on double speed. Me and Justin going at it on the bed, in the bathroom, against the wall, and then, back on the bed.

I shiver again. Heat suffuses my entire body at the vivid memory … at the intense pleasure we shared.

But now, in the light of day, the slight prude in me resurfaces. I feel a bit embarrassed.

What if he thinks I'm easy? A slut? A woman who went from contemplating sex with her boss for a promotion to the wild vixen I became with him last night. How can I face him this morning naked and smelling of sex?

I shake my head and tap on my forehead repeatedly, annoyed with myself for getting so carried away by lust that I didn't think things through.

What have you done, Adanna? Why didn't you control yourself better?

If my previous dilemma of my boss's indecent proposal didn't convince him, my wantonness last night will certainly do the trick. Justin will have every reason to believe I'm one of those women who sleeps around with strangers. I've only known him for four weeks, just met him three weeks ago for crying out loud.

Oh, no … I cringe. Justin promised to repair my car. Will he think I had sex with him in return for his offer ... consider this quid pro quo? Maybe tell his friends how he shagged the poor Nigerian girl he helped out financially?

Oh, God. Surely, I can't accept his money now. Won't it just prove it?

Shame spreads all over my body. I have to leave now, find somewhere to clear my head away from this apartment, far away from Justin. He makes me lose focus, do things alien to my character. Not in a million years would I ever have made the first move with any man. God, I practically begged him to shag me.

"No, no, no," I murmur, covering my face with my palms in utter embarrassment. How needy I must have sounded to him, how desperate.

The sound of the shower comes from the bathroom, and I raise my head. This is my chance to vamoose. He'll be distracted for at least five to ten minutes. With extreme care, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and rise to my feet. Walking on tiptoe, I move about, frantically searching for my clothes.

Oh, there! I spot my bra and dress hanging neatly on the wardrobe's handle. My chest warms. Justin must have put them there to keep my gown from rumpling. How thoughtful. Maybe I'm overthinking and overreacting.

The image of me pressed up against the wall, my leg hooked over Justin's shoulder as he eagerly sucked on my pussy, pops into my head. The raucous cry I made as I orgasmed startled even him.

Nope. I shake my head again … wild. He's surely lost all respect for me. I need to get out of here pronto.

With deliberate care not to make any noise, I put on my bra and dress. I spot my panties tucked at the bottom of the bed. I move quiet as a mouse and retrieve them, squeezing the red lace into a tight ball. Barefoot and walking as stealthily as possible, I creep towards the closed bedroom door.

From the corner of my eye, I catch my reflection in the mirror and freeze. With my twisted hair scattered all over my head, my posture bowed, nothing on my feet and holding onto my underwear, I'm the poster girl for the walk of shame.

I'm hit by a sudden epiphany. Turning fully to face the mirror, I draw in a deep, steadying breath. Shame about what? What's so wrong with a single woman having a consensual sexual encounter with a man who is also single? Where's the crime in enjoying a shag without any promises made?

I run my fingers through the short twists on my head, trying to bring some semblance of order to my hair. Smoothing my palm down my dress, I exhale and make my way back to the bed. Nope. I won't run away like a thief making off with stolen goods. I'm a grown woman who is free to have sex with whomever I desire. We used protection throughout. Nothing to be ashamed of.

Sinking back onto the plush mattress, I shimmy up until my back rests on the wooden headboard. I'll wait patiently for Justin to shower and have an adult conversation with him about our night together.

Less than ten minutes later, he walks into the room, a white towel secured around his waist and a happy grin on his face.

My heart bumps into my ribcage and flutters. Lord Almighty. I forgot just how gorgeous the man is. His broad shoulders, perfectly chiselled torso, and ripped abdomen are such an enticing sight that it takes herculean effort to keep my focus on his face.

"Morning, Beautiful," he says, walking over and settling across from me on the bed. I drag in a deep breath, suppressing the desire to flee. We need to talk, to clear the air.

"Hi, Justin … um, about what happened last night …" I begin. I clear my throat and swallow hard. "I-I don't want you to think that it's a payoff for repairing my car. In fact, you needn't even lend me the money. I'll just go to my brother."

His posture becomes very still, shock registering in his eyes as he gapes at me.

"I eh … I want you to know that I don't usually have sex with men I'm not dating," I continue. My voice is shaky and awkward. So not the confident way I'd practiced saying this while he was in the bathroom.

I notice a cloud slowly settling over his face. His chest rises and falls in a shallow rhythm as if he is struggling to keep calm.

“And that doesn’t mean that I want to date you or that we should be in a relationship because of … last night.” I blow out a nervous chuckle. “In fact, you don’t need to worry about me clinging or being a pest. I know it was a one-night thing. And thank you for making it a wonderful experience … I needed that. To feel good … to have control over something in my life. So, once again, thank you.”

Silence follows my nervous rambling. Justin remains stock still, staring at me like I’ve just told him the Queen of England is actually a man. Eyes dark and turbulent, he rises to his full above-six-feet height with a frown line forming at the corner of his mouth.

“Are you quite done? Are you finished with all you’ve got to say?”

Knowing his question is rhetorical, I keep my lips pressed shut. He doesn’t wait for an answer either. Instead, he walks over to stand at the side of the bed where I’m propped up. He is looming over me, stance akimbo, face drawn in displeasure, and yet, there’s a thrill that passes through me at the fire in his eyes.

“You must think very poorly of me to assume that I’d be judging you for what we shared last night.” His tone is low and angry, his nostrils flared as he heaves in annoyed breaths. “Clearly, you believe I’m one of those men like your boss who demands sex as payment for favours.”

“No, I don’t—” I gasp in objection.

“Yes, you do.” He barks out a humourless laugh. “Why else would you bring up paying me with sex for helping with your car, huh? Have I ever given you any reason to believe that I’d even consider that? Have I?”

He shakes his head bitterly, hurt penetrating the dark embers of his eyes. My chest burns with regret. Why on earth did I overreact this morning?

“I’m sorry, Justin,” I murmur.

“But why, Adanna?” he asks, confusion furrowing his forehead. “Have I not always been upfront with you about everything? Why would you say these

things to me?”

Soberly thought, his bewilderment is justified. He truly has been nothing but a gentleman since the day we met. Why have I allowed my past experiences to creep into the present? It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out.

My first love Obinna cheating, and then, coming to my off-campus university apartment like a madman. Yelling for the world to hear that the only thing I was good for was sex. And to top it off, repossessing his gifts. The trauma of that has never left. And more recently, Chief Madu and his indecent proposal. It’s no wonder I have trust issues.

But it’s not fair to lump Justin in with these men.

“I … I …” The words jumble up in my mouth. How can I explain that I allowed two creeps to affect my thought process this morning? Better to keep those cans of worms tightly shut and apologise to Justin for being silly. I can’t project that nonsense onto him. He’s certainly not like either man. “I’ve … I’m sorry…” I begin again.

Justin sits on the bed beside me and takes hold of my palm in his large hand. “I joined Cupidess to find a companion in Nigeria. Someone who would show me around. It was never my intention to date or hook up with anyone,” he says.

My heart skips a beat. Here’s where he confirms last night was a one-night wonder. Even though I’m not looking for a relationship with anyone right now, I hold my breath, unwilling to hear him say it.

“But your profile stood out, called out to me in a way unlike anyone else on that app. I desperately wanted to meet you, and I had no idea you owned the site when I wrote.” He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “Adanna, the truth is that this morning while I was in the bathroom, I was stalling, thinking about how much I enjoy being with you, how amazing last night was, and how to tell you that I want more.”

My breath hitches. Is he trying to say what I think he is?

“I’m attracted to you, and I like you a lot. I sense the feeling is mutual,” he carries on in a deep, reflective tone. “Why can’t we continue to explore what’s developing between us?”

His question seems reasonable. But also, ambiguous. I need clarification. “You mean date, or continue to hook up?”

He suddenly reaches out to cradle my face in his palms. “Let me make this perfectly clear, Adanna. Last night wasn’t a hookup for me. I don’t let just anyone spend the night in my bedroom.”

He caresses my jaw with his thumb, spreading shards of desire from his fingertips through my skin, and transmitting those sensual impulses straight to the already sensitised bud between my thighs. I do an involuntary Kegel exercise, trying to tamp down the need stirring in my loins.

“Dating is what I mean, Adanna. Can we give this relationship a try and see where it leads us?”

Multiple concerns storm my brain like a blizzard in winter. Can a relationship with Justin possibly work? Won’t I be setting myself up for another train wreck.

Let’s get real. He lives three thousand miles away in London. And I already know from my time with Tayo that long distance is a no-no for me. When he moved to Ghana for work, he became insecure, and it intruded on our rapport. Am I really prepared to go through that again?

Then, there’s the problem of my unemployment, and Justin being an English actor with a net worth of over ten million pounds. Can a relationship survive such a vast divide in financial and social status? Will he eventually realize dating a broke, unemployed Nigerian hoping to make ends meet as an Uber driver would bring down his international status? What if …

“Don’t overthink things, Adanna,” he murmurs, cutting into my torrential thoughts as if he’s read my mind. “It’s just me and you. Right here, right now. Nothing and nobody else. Does this feel right?”

I gaze into his eyes, and my heart flipflops. Pure hope is shining in their dark depths. The answer is plain and simple to me. And it’s a whooping YES. At this very moment, taking every other thing out of the equation, being here with Justin feels absolutely fantastic.

A ball of emotion forms in my throat making speech difficult for me, so I simply nod.

“Then why don’t we do this?” He lifts my hand in his and rests it on his bare chest. I can feel the pounding of his heart vibrating against my palm. “Let’s give this a good go,” he says.

Still too overwhelmed to reply, I nod again.

“Say it, Adanna. I want to hear you say yes.” He pins me with an intense look that pierces my defences. He is completely still as he waits for my response. “It’s really important for me to hear the words.”

“Yes, Justin,” I say in a breathless whisper. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter Thirteen

JUSTIN



I feel the trickle of moisture on my right thigh through my plain white shorts, and I stiffen. “I can’t believe you’re crying,” I say, shaking my head in amusement. “In fact, I can’t believe you watch this shit with such seriousness.”

Adanna lifts her head from its resting place on my knee and sits upright on the sofa. “It’s so good, Justin,” she says with a sniffle. She wipes the tears trickling from her eyes. “If you followed the series, you’d understand. I promise.”

It’s Saturday evening, and after a delicious pasta dinner she prepared at my flat, we’re settled on the sofa, relaxed and cuddling, watching one of Adanna’s favourite K-drama shows.

We’re only at the two-week mark since agreeing to give our relationship a romantic go, but being here with her feels so peaceful, so natural, so comfortable. It’s like I’ve known her forever and she belongs here … with me in my home.

We even have a routine. Adanna spends her days at her Uber gig. Me? I spend the better part of those same days highly anticipating her finishing up taxiing folks around. And ringing me to say she’s done, and on her way to my place … to me. In short, the fourteen days and six hours of being Adanna’s lover and friend have been the happiest of my life.

She’s introduced me to a carefree side of myself that I never knew existed. We’ve been exploring the city together—wining and dining at some of Lagos’ best eateries, visiting the museums, and dancing the night away in several nightclubs.

The ease of being with her is something I’ve never experienced. Adanna is a straight shooter—no drama, no stress. And so caring. She truly gets me in a way nobody except Mrs Duncan does.

I can’t wait for them to meet. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. About ringing my mother and telling her I’ve finally found the woman who makes me want to try again, to be better, to think of starting my own family.

Right now, sitting on the sofa and bantering about a TV show, may seem mundane and unsexy to many. And yet, it’s all brand new and exhilarating to me

—something I've never been able to do with any of my exes. Simply chill, with no thought but savouring the peaceful shared moments between us.

"Highly unlikely," I grunt out, tossing the magazine in my hand on the tea table. "Two things I don't watch. One, movies with subtitles. And two, sappy stuff like this." I point at the television and let out a laugh. "I mean, look at this silly show, the man and woman keep bumping into each other accidentally. How realistic is that?"

Adanna quirks a brow and prods my bare chest with an accusing finger. "How do you know so much about it?" She curves her lips into a teasing smile. "It can't be that bad if you know the storyline," she says.

I toss my hand upwards in surrender. "It's on all the bloody time, babe. I can't help but catch a glimpse of a scene every now and again, especially with the way you keep sighing with pleasure as you watch."

She flings back her head and guffaws, pulling the strap of her ankle-length, summer gown back over her shoulder. "Come on, just admit it. You like it, Justin. You like K-drama series." She prods my chest again.

I shake my head as I pull her closer to me. "And what's my reward if I do?" I nuzzle her neck. "The thing you do with your tongue on my di —"

"Gerrout!" She chucks me on my arm playfully. "And just for trying to bribe me, no nookie for you tonight."

I laugh out. "Nookie? Does anyone still call it that?" I caress her forearm and then lower my lips to peck her collarbone, a very enticing part of her anatomy, because of how well defined it is—sharp and prominent—a complete contrast to all the softness of her lovely curves.

"But seriously, Adanna, you're a K-drama addict. We may need to get you into rehab."

With a giggle, she lowers her head back on my knee and faces the television. "If I ever catch you watching a Korean drama movie alone eh … you'll join me in rehab."

"Never," I groan in mock protest, squeezing the soft flesh of her arm as I relax

back onto the sofa.

The truth is Adanna's addiction to K-drama is catching, like I've been infected and can't shake the bug. Especially this current series Crash Landing on You. But damned if I'll ever admit it. I've teased her mercilessly for her guilty pleasure, so I'm sure enough not handing her the ammunition to aim at me.

As we lapse into silence, I pick up my magazine, contentment flooding my chest. This is what relationships should be—feeling at peace next to the person you love.

My heart leaps in my chest at that word. Love? Have I fallen in love with Adanna, a woman I just met five weeks ago? Is that even possible?

As if sensing the sudden tensing of my muscles, Adanna lifts her gaze to me.

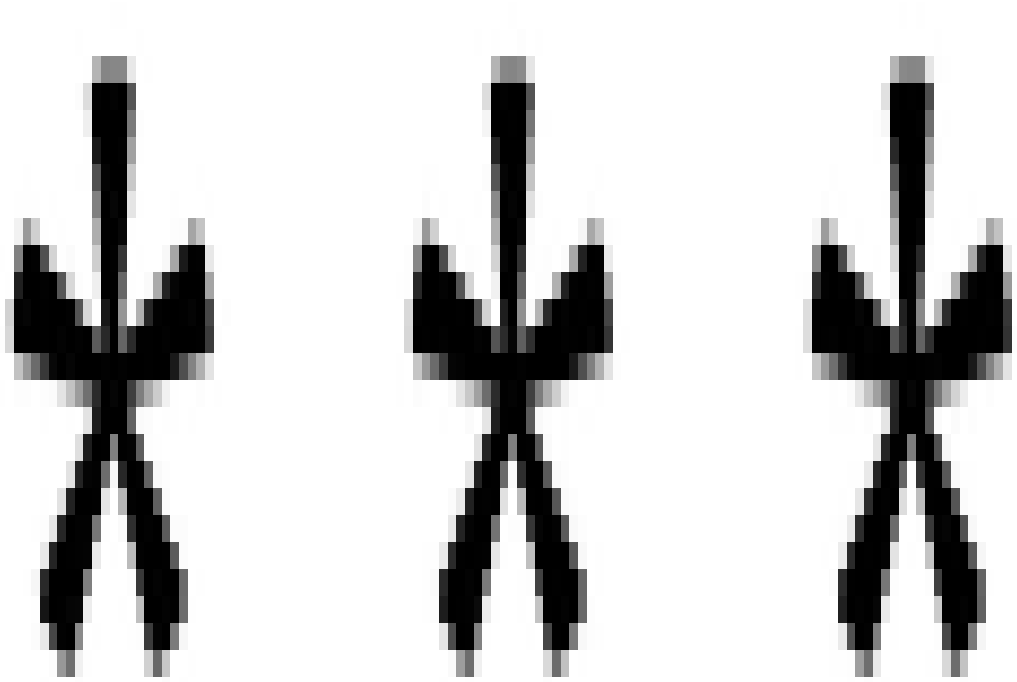
"Is everything okay?" she asks, concern creasing the skin between her eyebrows.

I stretch my lips into a smile that I hope comes off as relaxed and free of the storm of emotions in my chest.

"Yep," I say, pointing at the large TV screen in front of us. "You're right. This scene is captivating."

"Told you so," she says, breaking into a disarming smile that brightens up her whole face. "Can't wait to introduce you to the world of K-drama."

As she settles back to her position, my throat tightens with profound emotion. Yes indeed. I have fallen in love with Adanna.



“I’ve met someone. We’ve been dating for a while, and I think I’m in love with her.”

Several heartbeats of silence follow. I can hear my mother’s soft breathing from the other end of the line, but no words. Unusual for Mrs Duncan, who always has something to say.

I wait patiently for her response, which right now, I’m unable to anticipate. My mother has always wanted me to find the right woman to settle down with. So far, she’s not been thrilled with my picks. Says I go for the wrong type—women I have little to no true feelings for and even less in common with.

According to her, it’s my subconscious way of protecting myself from disappointment. A defective adaptation I developed to cope with Nancy’s constant abandonment.

“Don’t you think it’s too soon?” There’s a tentative lilt in her tone, as though worried about being honest with me. Also, quite unusual. Mrs Duncan is known for never mincing words. “I thought you wanted to find your fath … um, the man in the picture … before trying again with dating anyone.”

I squeeze the phone in my hand and press it to my right ear. It’s true that I don’t quite feel ready. That I’m probably incapable of having a healthy relationship now, especially since I still doubt my self-worth. I know I haven’t completely let go of the past that haunts me still, and it affects my ability to fully love and accept love.

It’s been nearly a month dating Adanna, but I’m terrified that like my exes, she’ll end up finding me lacking emotional depth. I don’t know if I could survive her gravitating to another man, too.

My gut tightens as I squeeze my eyes tightly shut trying to suppress the thought. The very idea of Adanna with another man makes me sick to my stomach. But how do I know I can fully trust her? Or myself, for that matter? Because, let’s be honest, I always manage to find a way to mess up my relationships.

Today, sitting in my study after a productive hour of working on my manuscript, I decided to ring my mother for some advice. I wanted to get her perspective on

how to deal with my doubts.

Now that she's voiced hers, too, I'm even more terrified.

"Justin, I think you should slow things down and focus on finding your biological father." My mother's voice filters through the phone's speakers to my ears, increasing the tension in my stomach.

"And what if I don't find the man? Do I keep living my life in limbo, afraid of finding love, happiness?"

My mother sighs. "No, Justin, I'm not saying that at all."

"Then what are you saying, Mum?"

"Well, I really think you haven't resolved the inner turmoil you've been dealing with yet," she says. "Getting involved in a new relationship before doing so may not be the best idea right now."

"I can't keep waiting to find the man who hurt Nancy and abandoned me, can I?" I retort, upset, but not with my mother.

I'm pissed at myself really, for letting my emotions get the better of me concerning my biological father. They consume me, bring out a side of me I wish didn't exist. Remembering that I'm a product of violence constantly makes me want to disappear, run away from myself.

My mother doesn't respond to my outburst, and for a moment, I think she's hung up on me, but then I hear her soft voice.

"Justin, my dear," she calls out to me, her Scouse accent soothing me immediately. "I'm happy you're willing to open your heart and give dating another go. However, I think you should schedule some sessions with Dr Smith first."

The mention of my therapist causes my chest to burn with anxiety. Am I so screwed up in the head that I need a psychologist before any major decision in my life? Can't I be normal for once? Fall in love without all the mental gymnastics and self-doubt?

“I know that I was initially hesitant about your traveling to Nigeria to confront your past,” my mother continues. “But I now believe it’s a good idea. If you don’t deal with what’s holding you back, you can’t move forward.”

I nod. “Thanks, Mum,” I say. “I’ll give Dr Smith a ring.”

Although I’ve acquiesced, I’m not sure I’m ready to be psychoanalysed again. I just want to enjoy being with Adanna and not overthink things too much.

“Great, Justin,” Mum says. “Keep safe, okay, love.”

“Will do. And you, too. Love you.”

“Love ya, too, Justin. Will ring you later to talk more about this, okay? Off to the dentist.”

I smile at that. My mother and her teeth whitening craze. Spends more money on the dentist than any other venture. “Bye, Mum, talk to you soon.”

Several minutes after hanging up, I remain seated on the chair pondering my mother’s advice. Is she right? Will I end up pushing Adanna away if I don’t focus on the negative feelings from my past that are waging a war in my soul?

I wish I could come up with an answer that would give me more confidence. But the reality is that I’m not sure about anything, except that for the first time ever, I feel dreadful about an ending to a relationship.

Chapter Fourteen

ADANNA



I pull the car to a stop at the side of the road directly opposite Zenith Bank and switch off the engine. Quirking my head to face the middle-aged man in the backseat, I stretch my lips into a broad smile.

“That will be two thousand Naira, sir,” I say.

He returns my smile and shoves his hand into the front pocket of his kaftan, retrieving his wallet.

“Are you sure you won’t give me your number?” he asks, pulling out two, thousand-Naira notes. “I’d really love to take you out for a nice dinner.”

I giggle—the girlish type I usually hate—but shake my head. “No, thank you.”

“But why not, baby,” he persists, his fingers tightly holding onto the crisp notes in his hand.

I grind my teeth to suppress a grunt. First of all … baby? For real? Why the hell can’t he address me by my name, which is clearly written on the laminated certificate attached to the back of my seat?

And secondly, why on earth must he hit on me? Four weeks as an Uber driver, and I’m constantly faced with this shit. Almost every man who’s stepped into the back of my Audi has made a pass at me.

One even had the audacity to reach out and touch me. I pulled out my pepper spray, and told him to back the fuck off. He snatched his hand away so fast, it was like a rattlesnake reared up and hissed at him. I had to keep from laughing. And now, here’s another player.

“I’m not interested, thank you, sir.” I say, the effort to remain polite causing my facial muscles to tighten. “I have a boyfriend.”

Boyfriend—still strange thinking about Justin Igwe of BAC-TV’s Men of Valour as my boyfriend. For the six weeks we’ve been dating, I’ve spent most of my evenings with him, getting to know the man behind the television screen better.

The more time we spend together, the more I want to be with him. After my long

day of driving people around, all I can think about is finally heading over to his apartment to hang out.

Everything between us clicks. We share similar interests in art, music, and movies. Well, not all movies. I'm still trying to get him interested in K-drama series.

Still, Justin and I are so in-sync, we can converse for hours about anything, everything, and nothing.

He's so easy to talk to, and with him, I'm relaxed—able to be myself in a way that I've never been with my exes. And with the mind-blowing sex, I've discovered a sensual, sexy, bold part of myself I didn't know existed. A part I don't think I'd have let out with anyone other than Justin, even if I had known about it.

I'm so happy, but also terrified. It all seems too good to be true ... that Justin Oliver Igwe, a celebrity and amazing British actor, is my boyfriend. It can't possibly last, can it?

That's why I've been keeping the relationship private. I've not even told my own bestie Brenda, who is my go-to girl regarding all things personal.

For the past two months, I've been floating on cloud nine, drifting in a wonderful bubble of privacy. I'd like to keep everything lowkey before more people know and things become complicated.

"A boyfriend that lets a beautiful woman like you drive a taxi? Mbanu." The man's comment draws my wandering mind back.

He thrusts his chin upwards with a haughty smile as he points to the bank. "I'm a senior manager here. If you were mine, you'd never have to struggle like this."

I let out the hiss that I've been holding back. "Who says I'm struggling?" I snap back, my voice adopting a higher pitch than I intended. "Why is it that when a woman wants to make money for herself, it's called struggling, but when it's a man, it's called hustling?"

I shake my head and flip my palm open. "Please can I have my money now?"

“Ahn Ahn, I’m just playing o.” He snickers as he pays his fare, alights the vehicle, and slams the door shut behind him.

For some odd reason, the man’s casual dismissal inflames the embers of my simmering annoyance. “Mtcheeeew!” I hiss again, watching him walk away with an arrogant pep in his step.

How dare these men assume that all women need from men is their money to solve their problems. Yes, I need money. But I also need to be self-sufficient. Just as my father taught me to be.

As a little girl, I was gutted when I realised my parents were alienated from my mum’s family because my father, the only child of a poor farmer, had the audacity to marry the only daughter of a wealthy professor and businessman. What kind of people did that to their daughter?

Still, that wasn’t the worst part. What really hurt was watching my father work so hard, to the detriment of his physical health, just to prove he could take care of his wife and give her the life she was used to.

We lived in a mansion in Ikoyi for a long time where he paid thousands in rent, and my brother and I were sent to private schools he could barely afford. It put a massive strain on him until my parents decided to stop trying to prove anything. They moved out and bought the more affordable bungalow where I now live.

Although he insisted that his children continue to have the privilege of a pricy private education, my father finally relaxed about other superficial things. Still, he remained somewhat jittery, worried that he’d failed my mother who earned a meagre primary schoolteacher’s salary. Even though he acted like he didn’t mind the snobbery from her family, I knew he did. Many times, during our long, evening conversations on the sitting-room sofa, he would tell me how important being self-sufficient as a woman is.

“Have your own, so that if anyone abandons you, you’ll be able to survive like we have.”

From then on, I swore to be financially independent, to never let myself rely on anyone for money, especially a man. The potential hurt when abandoned is simply not worth it.

I've managed to pay off some bills with my earnings from working as an Uber driver, including the Cupidess website maintenance bills for another six months. I've also made a dent in my car repair bill. And no matter how many times Justin begs me to forget the debt, I won't.

He finally seems to have got that my financial independence is paramount in any relationship I'm in, and knows my mind's made up.

My phone rings. I glance at the centre console where the phone's attached to the AC vent, and a wide smile splits my face. Think of the devil. I tap on the Bluetooth earpiece to answer.

"Hey, Boo," I say, unable to control the excitement in my voice, the way I always feel whenever I see or hear Justin.

"Someone is having a wonderful day," he says.

"Nope. It's hearing your voice that has turned things around."

"Ah, Adanna, you say these sweet things, and I start to blush like a baby."

I chuckle. "It's true, though. I've just had to tell a silly customer off for making a pass at me when I asked him to pay."

Justin's harsh sigh sounds in my ear. "These annoying creeps won't let you be."

"I know, right." I shake my head as if he's here beside me. "They see a female driver behind the wheel and immediately assume she's desperate for a boyfriend."

He lets out an exasperated grunt—one I've heard before when we discuss this. "I don't blame them for trying though, Adanna. You're gorgeous. I just think …" He trails off. From his total silence, I can tell he's weighing his words wisely.

"Just say it, Justin. You think this job is too risky for me."

"Well, I do … I have enough money to take care of you. Why do you insist on doing this?"

Okay, I thought he got it. Guess not. I brush my face with my palm in frustration.

We've had this conversation more times than I care to count. I know Justin means well, but sometimes he can be so obstinate.

"Now, you sound like the asshole I told to eff off."

He puffs out another sigh. "You know I don't mean to. I just worry about you."

I breathe in sharply and exhale, blowing out through my mouth to try and calm myself. "I know that, Justin. But I've tried to explain to you that I'm not comfortable being taken care of."

"But you'll be working for me. I'll put you on my payroll."

"And I'll know it's because we're dating that you created an unnecessary job for me."

"So what if? Does that really matter?"

"Yes, Justin. It does to me." I swallow back the weary sigh that surges to my throat. "Come on, is it so difficult to believe I want to do this on my own?"

"No, but I'm your man. I can't stand by and watch you struggle …"

The word struggle again. Seems it's going to be me versus the entire world about this. Lord knows my brother and bestie would also have this reaction. And that's why I've been avoiding them like a hay fever sufferer avoids pollen. Neither of them knows I've been fired, or that I'm now working as an Uber driver.

They don't even know about Justin … but that's for an entirely different reason.

"It's called life, Justin. I'm trying to earn a living." I massage the back of my neck to ease the muscle tension developing there. This conversation never seems to end. "I've always been someone who has to find my own way. Of course, this job isn't my destination. I'm actively searching for a job in television, to follow my true passion. But in the meantime, I'll get by doing this." And because I know that the only way to change the subject is to reassure Justin, I add, "And don't worry, I'm keeping safe. I got the pepper spray and penknife like you suggested."

My impassioned speech seems to have stunned him into silence. His breath

against my ear is all I hear for several seconds. I smooth my palm down the denim material over my right thigh. Will this continue to be a problem for him? Is he ashamed that I'm an Uber driver? Is that it?

I shake my head. Nope. Not the Justin I know. He's not the type to snub anyone. He's been totally down to earth and has never acted in any way that made me feel inadequate.

I know he is simply concerned about me. Not that I blame him for his fears. I had my own doubts initially when I registered four weeks ago to start this job. But with each day, I've become more confident navigating the streets of Lagos with total strangers in my car.

"You really are a rare gem, Adanna. Driven and gutsy," he says, the smooth timbre of his tone igniting a path from my ear to my core.

My abdominal muscles clench. God. This man can make my emotions go from 0 to 100 in seconds.

"I'm so glad I met you. You inspire me," he says.

Such wonderful words to hear from a man I admire, a man who is slowly peeling away all the armour constructed around my heart. I recline against my car seat, a wide smile spreading across my lips. "Oh, Justin. Now I'm the one blushing like a baby."

"I'm telling the absolute truth. You're simply amazing." A brief hesitation, then, he continues. "But heavens, also bloody stubborn," he adds with a laugh.

I can almost envision the amused lines at the sides of his eyes. Those tiny furrows in his skin that always make my heart leap whenever they appear, because they also show up when he's in the throes of passion and just about to climax. "I know, right. So, are you going to punish me for being naughty tonight?"

"And what kind of punishment do you have in mind, Miss?"

"Well, a little spanking of my ass would hurt, good sir…"

His sexy chuckle spreads goosebumps over my skin. "Oh, trust me, there'll be a

lot more severe punishment than spanking. I'll beat that pussy up, I'll eat that …" He breaks off and bursts into an embarrassed laugh. "Gosh, I'm terrible at phone sex, babe. Absolutely dreadful."

I throw my head back and roar. The dismay in his tone is hilarious. His own laughter rings in my ears.

"Not as bad as you think you are," I say, wiping tears from my eyes. "I was getting a little excited there, you know."

He huffs. "Let me just say in plain and simple terms that I'm counting down the minutes until I see you tonight."

"Me, too, Justin. Me, too." The smile on my face is completely uncontrollable. In just six weeks, I have no doubt that I've fallen for this man.

God help me, but I think I'm already in love with him. How on earth will my heart survive it when he returns to London? My gut tumbles at the painful thought. I squeeze my eyes shut. How can it be that I'm already heartbroken before he even leaves? "See you soon," I say, my voice a bit shaky.

"Ditto," he says, and then, disconnects the call.

I sigh in satisfaction as I pull back the driver's seat to a reclining position, resting my head on the leather cushioning as I wait for the next buzz for a taxi. Because of the outrageously high cost of petrol, I usually wait for another client to be booked before I get back on the road. It is mid-afternoon on Thursday, so I expect a lot of customers. Hopefully, I'll be out of here in no time.

Leaning forward, I retrieve my sunscreen from the glove compartment and twist open the cap. I squeeze the creamy paste onto my palm, and slather it on my face, neck and arms. The disadvantage of being in the car so much is the constant exposure to the UV radiation that dries my skin, so I'm vigilant about this.

The sunscreen stowed back in the glove compartment, I settle back into my seat, and my mind wanders back to Justin, like it always does. An involuntary smile curves my lips. Three more hours before I see him.

I never allow myself work past 8:00 p.m. Mainly for safety reasons, but also

because of my desire to spend time with Justin.

He is now so much a part of my daily routine that I can't believe we've known each other for less than three months. I know, at some point, we're going to need to have a conversation about the future of our relationship. He has a scheduled promo tour in London in five weeks and will be away for a month.

I'm not sure if he'll ask me to come with him. If he does, I'd be delighted. However, I'd also be apprehensive, because apart from the fact that he'd have to take care of all the bills, which I'm not comfortable with, I'd be away from my brother, bestie, and support system. Plunged into his life and world for such a long period. That's not something I think I'm ready for, even though I'd miss him very much.

What if he doesn't ask you?

I shut my eyes, breathe in and out slowly, pushing back that awful thought. That would be even worse. A clear sign that I'm way more invested than he is in what we have going on.

Nope. No need to think about that. Not yet, anyway. I'm having such an amazing time with him right now. I'll just focus on the positives.

"Adanna?"

My eyes snap wide open at the familiar voice calling my name. I dart my gaze across to spot Brenda and Ugo walking out of the restaurant beside the bank, their hands clasped together.

"Oh, Lord." I gasp in panic as I duck down, covering my face with my palms. I keep my body completely still, trying to breathe evenly, despite the ferocious beating of my heart.

Geez. What on earth are they doing here? And who on earth goes for a lunch date with their significant other in a city where the traffic sucks? Well, for starters, my bestie and my brother.

I grit my teeth and shake my head. Since those two got together, they've been stuck to each other like crazy glue.

“Adanna?”

Brenda calls my name again. I remain stiff as a board, afraid to move a muscle. Did they really see me? Brenda doesn’t sound so sure it’s me. Maybe if I remain hidden here, they’ll walk on by.

“Adanna.”

This time, it’s my brother who calls me. His voice is close, and he sounds pretty certain it’s me.

Blowing out a resigned sigh, I slowly lift my head as I sit upright. They are standing by my car, peering at me through the rolled down window.

“Girl, why the hell are you dodging when we can clearly see it’s you in your Audi?” Brenda asks, her eyebrow arching in bewilderment.

My face is on fire as I stare into the dark eyes of my bestie of nearly fifteen years. She’s tall and slender. Her long hair, which has been straightened to perfection, frames her stunning heart-shaped face and falls to her shoulders. Dressed in a pristine, white pantsuit, high heels, and holding an expensive-looking purse under her arm, she looks like a movie star on her way to a red-carpet event.

How on earth can I admit to her how far from grace I’ve fallen in my career pursuit without feeling like a total failure?

Not that I’ve ever tried to compete with Brenda, but sometimes I feel she’s had life a bit easier than the rest of the world. She’s never had to struggle financially. And now, she and my brother are steadily acquiring more wealth as a couple. They just recently expanded their poultry business to Eastern Nigeria. Beside them, I feel like a total fuckup.

“I’m not dodging you o. My phone fell and I reached down to pick it up.”

My brother points at the mobile device still secured on the console’s air vents. “That phone?”

Trust Ugo to point out the flaw in my weak attempt at deception.

“Okay, okay. I was dodging you guys. Didn’t want to intrude on your love nwantinti moment.”

Brenda chuckles. “Haba. You can never intrude. You’re family.” She glances around and then back at me. “What are you doing here on a weekday afternoon. Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“Sis … I …” Unprepared for an excuse, a response eludes me. My eyes catch the Zenith Bank logo on the building across from us, and the perfect lie jumps into my mind. “I came to the bank to withdraw money.”

“Zenith? But you bank at GTB …”

My brother again. Shit! Bloody Detective Ugochukwu Theophilus Ezenna.

I lift my shoulders into a shrug ready to burst into another flurry of lies when Brenda stops me with her palm.

“What’s going on, Adanna?” she asks, concern creasing up her forehead. “And don’t bother lying. I’m your bestie, and I know there’s something wrong.”

“No there’s nothing wrong o … I’m —”

“Come on, sis,” my brother cuts in. There’s a slight edge in his voice that hints his exasperation. “We’ve known you for too long for you to be ducking and dodging. You haven’t visited for over a month, and you rarely pick up my calls, or Brenda’s for that matter. And now, you’re dressed in jeans and a t-shirt on a day that you should be at work, lying about banking at Zenith.”

“Tell us what’s happening, Adanna. We care about you.” It’s Brenda this time, her voice soft and persuasive.

“Okay, okay.” I turn to my brother and point at him. “You have to promise to remain calm when I tell you what’s been going on.”

He stiffens. “I’m not sure I can make that promise.”

I shake my head. “I’ll need that reassurance. I’ll be unable to —”

“He promises,” Brenda interjects in a brisk tone. Squeezing her husband’s hand

with hers, she adds, “I’ll make sure of it, Adanna. Please just tell us.”

“Want to step into my Uber while we talk?”

“Uber? What’s going on?” Concern causes the skin between my brother’s eyes to furrow. “You’re an Uber driver now? What happened to your job at Ziltech?”

“I was fired six weeks ago,” I answer honestly.

“Fired?” Brenda gasps in disbelief. “Why? What the fuck happened? Why didn’t you say anything? You know I could have helped.”

I press my lips together. I don’t blame her for her shock, or for the flood of questions. She’s the only person I’ve ever been able to confide in about almost anything. But since she and my brother started dating, things haven’t been quite the same.

Anything I tell her has the potential to find its way to my brother’s ears. Yes, I know Brenda would never betray my trust, but I also know that she’s close to her husband, and in extreme cases, may be unable to keep my secrets from him.

Still, she makes a good point. Why didn’t I tell her, since she’s the one who helped me secure the job in the first place? She may have been able to do something about the situation.

Truthfully, I don’t have a good answer for that question. Maybe it’s simply because I’m just sick and tired of needing her or my brother’s help to sort my life out. Whatever the case, I don’t regret it.

“Come in, have a sit, and let’s talk,” I say.

Brenda nods, opening the passenger door and stepping inside. My brother, who has been silently listening, gets into the backseat behind her and shuts the door.

“We’re listening,” he mutters. His jaw clenches, and he begins cracking his knuckles one after the other, a gesture that usually calms him—proof he’s trying to keep the promise his wife made on his behalf.

I smooth my palms down the fabric of my jeans to steady my nerves. Revealing the truth to my friend means reliving that horrible ordeal. I still avoid thinking

about that morning in Chief Madu's office, how scared and vulnerable I felt. Makes me sick to my stomach to remember that I ever even considered giving in to his sordid suggestion.

I feel like locking up that memory and everything about my last few weeks at Ziltech in a bottle and throwing it into a sea where it would float far, far away. Instead, I open my mouth and begin recounting the entire story, starting from the first day Chief Madu made the indecent proposition.

"He should be in jail," my brother says, seething with anger. "That idiot called Chief Madu should be beaten up and thrown in jail. I need to teach him a lesson."

"Please, Ugo," I murmur. "You promised not to do anything —"

"But how can you let him get away with trying to force you to have sex with him?" He shakes his head vehemently. "Mbanu. Somebody needs to punch his lights out."

"I agree. But I don't want trouble biko. I just want to forget that wicked soul and move on —"

"As a taxi driver? Is this what you want to do now?"

I gasp at his derogatory tone. Sometimes, my brother can act annoyingly like my father. Indeed, he's played the role of advisor, occasional provider, and self-imposed protector since my father died, but still, I'm grown. He needs to check himself.

"Ehen, what's wrong about being a taxi driver?"

Ugo looks at me like I've grown a second head. "It's simple, Adanna. For a woman, it's a dangerous job."

I roll my eyes. "There you go again with this kind of chauvinistic talk —"

"Guys, stop." Brenda lifts her hand up in protest of our sibling squabble. She turns to her husband. "This isn't helping. We need to find out what Adanna needs from us."

I let out a low groan. There they both go, thinking I need to be rescued. “Absolutely nothing. I’m absolutely fine.”

“Fine?” She looks sceptical.

“Yes, I am. I’m making some money doing this. I’m paying some of my bills. I’ve even managed to keep Cupidess running for another few months from my earnings.” I tap my palm on my chest, hoping to convey my confidence to the pair I know are still worried about me. “I’ve started applying for jobs in television networks, just like I’ve always wanted to. Things are going quite okay.”

She’s still looking at me. Have my two heads sprouted matching sets of horns?

“Yes, Brenda. Don’t be worried. I’m doing alright.” I give her a knowing wink. “Even in my personal life. I’m dating again.”

Her jaw drops. My brother emits a shocked gasp.

“Who is he? When?” Brenda’s questions come out in a squeaky tone. There’s a mixture of hurt and surprise in her eyes.

It pains me to see that I’ve made her feel this way. But I really wanted to be sure before confiding in her. Even now, I can’t say that I’m certain Justin and I will last beyond his stay in Nigeria.

“Girl, you won’t believe it if I tell you,” I say, drawing closer to her in a conspiratorial way like I’m about to reveal state secrets.

“Justin Igwe,” she mutters.

It’s my turn to pop my mouth wide open. “How do you know?”

“Close your mouth, girl,” she says, shaking her head as she laughs. “The first sign I picked up of your interest in him was when you told me he wasn’t your type.” She harrumphs. “Especially when I know how you love him on Men of Valour.”

Turning her head to face my brother, Brenda says, “Do you mind driving home without me? I’ll Uber back with Adanna.”

“Are you sure?” he asks with hesitation in his eyes. “I can wait in the car while you ladies talk.”

“No, babe. It’s going to be a long one.”

He nods and hops out of the car. He takes two steps forward and then swivels back to us. Looking pointedly at me, my brother says in a low, firm voice. “Adanna, if you send one more Naira to my account to pay me back eh, I’ll break my promise and beat up your ex-boss.” He points a finger to me in warning. “I’m sending all the money back. I’ve told you for the last time that you don’t owe me a dime.”

I smile at him. Ugo is really the best brother anyone could ever ask for. Mostly quiet and introverted, we are poles apart in our personalities. However, we’ve clicked so well since childhood. My throat tightens. “Thank you.”

He nods. Turning his attention to Brenda, Ugo’s face breaks into a warm smile. “See you later, babe,” he says, plants a firm kiss on his wife’s lips, and then, trots off.

As soon as we’re alone, Brenda turns to me. “Okay. Spill the beans about Justin. And I mean everything. From the very beginning. Don’t miss a damn thing.”

Laughing out, I remove the key from the ignition. “Buy me lunch and I’ll sing like a bird.”

She snorts as she reaches for the door handle on her side. “You’re lucky that you’re my bestie and that I’ve forgiven you for keeping important things from me. Let’s go jare.”

“Brenda, my love,” I squeal, giving her a big hug. “That’s why you’re my girl for life.”

We step out of the car and make our way to the restaurant. Relief floods my chest. I’m glad that I’m finally able to talk to someone about my relationship with Justin Igwe.

Chapter Fifteen

JUSTIN



Sweeping my gaze one final time around the living room, I sigh in satisfaction. It's spotless, even if I say so myself. My chest is filled with excitement, my entire body on alert as I wait for her arrival.

It's the day before Christmas, and I've invited Adanna over for a proper British breakfast of bacon, eggs, and scones. After doing a thorough, spring clean of my apartment and preparing what I consider the best meal in the world, I'm seated on the sitting-room sofa ... waiting.

I take a deep breath in as I glance at the clock. 7:14 a.m. She'll be here soon, and I can share my exciting news with her.

It's been quite a task, but I've finally finished writing the first draft of my novel. Typing the final sentence last night was like a dream come true. Of course, I know I've got a lot of work to do with editing, finding an agent, and possibly pitching the idea to a movie producer. Still, I'm thrilled the first step is over.

I can't wait to share the completed draft with Adanna. She's been reading the manuscript and giving me insightful, positive feedback. I know it's genuine, because she recalls even minute details of the story and makes plausible suggestions.

Hopefully, she'll also like the last few chapters, even though it ends tragically. That will be a challenge though. Adanna's love for romance novels and happy endings is legendary. She even cries wistfully when watching the most unrealistic Korean drama movies.

I dart my gaze to the almost empty bookshelf beside me. A smile tugs my lips. Adanna's current read rests there. She usually leaves her books in my apartment. According to her, its quieter to read here than at home.

Stretching my arm sideways, I reach and pick up the novel. The cover is a picture of a bare-chested man holding onto a bikini-clad woman who seems unsteady on her feet. I blow out a low chuckle. Yep, it will definitely be a challenge getting Adanna to like my story's ending. Not nearly as sexy as this picture.

A happy ending. Is that what's in store for Adanna and me? Or will our

relationship end up a disaster, with her unsatisfied and cheating on me?

Such questions plague me as I find myself falling more and more for her. Yes, I can admit without a doubt that I'm sunk, I'm utterly in love with her. And it scares the shit out of me. I've never felt such a strong connection with any woman.

Everything about Adanna inspires me. Her sense of humour, her drive, the way she finds a way to pick up the pieces of her life and move on whenever faced with challenges. Plus, the sexual chemistry between us is unbelievable.

Sex with Adanna amounts to my fantasies made real. She's uninhibited, passionate and responsive, giving as much as she takes. She's always fully present, without a care for her hair, makeup or other distractions like my previous lovers, who sometimes seemed more distant than involved. Adanna doesn't hesitate to let me know her sexual desires, and makes sure to find out my own needs, too.

She is also kind. She looks for any opportunity to help out. Even her limited funds don't stop her.

Nearly a week ago, she gave a lift to a stranded, elderly woman without any means to pay for the Uber. I was so impressed by her compassion, that later that evening, I rang to tell my mother all about that.

"She seems like a wonderful person, Justin. Unlike the self-obsessed women you've dated in the past. I'm eager to meet her," she said in excitement when I'd finished talking. "You'd better bring her over for lunch when you return to London."

Will Adanna be willing to follow me back home? That has been the huge elephant in the room between us. The topic we never broach. Distance, relocation, sacrifices that will have to be made when I need to leave.

My scheduled promotional trip for the fourth season of Men of Valour is in two weeks. I'll be in the UK for an entire month. I want Adanna with me. Yet, I'm worried about the huge step it would mean for both of us. That would mean going public with our relationship, which we've managed to keep private and safe up to now.

I’m not sure I’m ready to throw her into the showbiz mix. Not yet. Not until I’m certain about her, about how invested she is in what’s happening between us. I know she likes me, perhaps even fancies herself in love with me, but I sense she’s holding back. I’m not sure if she even sees me in her future. Is she in this for the long haul or just with me while I’m in the country?

For the two months we’ve been dating, we’ve never talked about the future. I’ve been hesitant, and so has she. The closest Adanna has come to making a move towards defining things is inviting me to spend Christmas with her brother and his wife. So, we’re having dinner at their place tomorrow evening.

Although I’m excited about meeting Adanna’s family, I’m also anxious about it all. What if, after all that, things go downhill between us?

You don’t trust her.

My stomach roils. The summary of my doubts jumps from my subconscious to the forefront of my mind. I shake my head and press my lips together, but no matter how much I want to push the thought away, the fact remains.

I don’t trust Adanna. It’s not really to do with her. She’s never done anything to cause my scepticism. It’s all on me. I have never trusted anyone. I have trouble letting go, trusting people not to let me down. It’s a flaw … a protective shield, one that keeps me detached emotionally.

From childhood, my biological mother disappointed me repeatedly. Her drug and alcohol addiction made me an afterthought to her many times. On numerous occasions, I was forgotten at school, left at home alone to starve, without money or any basic necessities, so that she could chase after a high.

In my early years of life, I hoped she'd change, especially during the rare few days when Nancy would sober up, telling me things would be different. However, time after time, she relapsed, throwing me back into a life of chaos, and abandoning me once more.

I was ten years old when I finally accepted that Nancy would always disappoint me. The realisation produced a form of apathy, making me detached.

According to the very expensive therapist I saw after my last ex admitted cheating on me, I dammed up my emotions from childhood—a survival strategy

to protect my heart from constant disappointment.

Even finding a wonderful adoptive family at the age of twelve hasn't changed that. For years, I was terrified, waiting for Mr and Mrs Duncan to kick me out, or one of my brothers to turn on me. It took several years for me to relax and accept the love they openly showed me. Even longer to reciprocate.

Adanna means a lot to me. No woman has come this close to breaking through my defences. But I'm anxious about lowering my guard, of trusting her. I believe she also has some reservations about being with me, because she skits about every morning, making sure she doesn't leave any personal items in my flat, as if she worries that each night we spend together may be the last.

There are times I want to call her out on it, tell her that leaving her toothbrush or some clothes behind wouldn't kill her. But I always talk myself out of it. Maybe we are right to be cautious, to take things slowly. There's no rush. Whatever will be, will be.

Lowering the book in my hand to the tea table, I glance at the wall clock. What's keeping Adanna? She should be here by now. Maybe I should call and check what's going on.

I pick up my phone from the couch beside me and see a missed call from Third Eye P.I. Services. My heart catapults into my chest.

Damn. My phone has been on silent, and I had no clue he rang. Has he found my father? Am I finally going to meet the man whose act of violence gave rise to my existence? Gooseflesh pimples my skin as I hit the redial button and wait.

"Hello, Justin." Ola's hoarse voice comes on as soon as the line connects. "Thank you for getting back to me."

"Hi," is all I can manage, intense anxiety knocking away the wind from my lungs.

"We've got a lead. Someone recognized the man in the photo."

My heart begins to fibrillate almost dangerously. The words I've been hoping to hear since I decided to find my biological father have been spoken. Finally, some progress. A step forward in the quest to meeting the man who fathered me,

whose evil blood flows through my veins. The second person responsible for my inability to let go and trust.

“A man living in Ibadan claims he was in the pub when the picture was taken,” Ola carries on, oblivious to the turmoil his revelation is causing within me. “He says he went to school with your father.”

“Is he …” I clear my throat. “How credible is he?”

“I’m almost positive about this identification. The man, a Mr Ekundayo, a retired banker, mentioned the pub without any prompting. ‘Horsfall in Liverpool’, he said. He even mentioned the year the photo was taken, and your father’s full name. It’s …” A rustle of papers sounds from the receiver.

My breath catches. Is this it? Am I about to find out what my last name would have been if my life had been normal, if my father had been married to my mother, if he had not been a rapist prick?

“Professor Silvester Amadi.”

Professor … a fucking rapist professor? For a split second, I wish I’d not heard Ola’s revelation, that I had never even embarked on this ill-fated mission to find a man who ruined Nancy’s life. How on earth does a rapist end up as a professor?

“I’ve done more digging, and it’s very plausible that we are on the right track,” Ola continues to speak, his tone even and persuasive as if giving a sales pitch to a boardroom packed with investors.

“There is a record of a Silvester Amadi arriving in the United Kingdom in 1984. He attended University of Sheffield for a Master’s in Business Administration, graduated with honours, and left the country in 1986.”

I swallow hard, taking in all the information like a boxer receiving punch after punch to the head. My ears are ringing, my brain is buzzing, but like a mop, I’m soaking it all up.

“If this Professor Amadi is your father, then you are the son of one of the wealthiest men in media. He owns the cable network ALTV.

My jaw drops as I stare at the bright, green logo on the cable box under the 75-inch TV in front of me.

Bloody hell. The evil man not only flows in my veins, but he is also sitting pretty in my sitting room.

“Are you still there?”

I clear my throat again, which feels gritty and dry. “Yes, yes,” I say, my voice a low croak. “So, how do we proceed?”

“A DNA test would be great. But first, we have to confirm that he is indeed the man in the picture.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“Leave it to me. I’ll find a way to get someone to ask the man for confirmation,” Ola says. “It should be easy. The hard part will be getting a sample for DNA. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. One step at a time.”

I nod, and then, remember that he can’t see me. “That’s amazing, Ola. And I agree. One step at a time. Thank you so much.”

“It’s a pleasure. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Fantastic. Talk to you later.”

I end the call, breathing heavily from the weight of information sitting in my chest. All this time, I hoped to find my father and be gratified to discover that he’s turned out a low-life drunk who’s living in a hut in a Nigerian village, broken and damaged for what he did to Nancy.

I prayed that karma would have found a way to make him pay and destroyed his life. Instead, he has been living the good life, creating wealth for himself. I bet he also has a family, a wife and kids. Bile rises to my throat as I type his name in the Google app.

A picture of the man pops up. Multiple articles about him, too. My stomach churns as I look from one to the next. I stop at a photograph of him with his family. A beautiful wife, three teenage sons, and a much older daughter surround

him, all dressed in traditional outfits of the same shade of silver and green. A bloody perfect family picture.

I expand the screen and focus on the man who is supposedly my biological father. He is average height, slim, dark-skinned with a head full of silver hair, and a long oblong-shaped face.

Do we look alike? I don't see any resemblance between us. Maybe the P.I. is wrong. Maybe this man isn't the one we are looking for. Maybe, like I hoped, the man who hurt Nancy is still out there wallowing in pain and shame, dying slowly and painfully from a disease.

The bell rings, splintering my troubled thoughts. I toss the phone aside as I heave myself off the sofa and dash to the front door. With eagerness that seems uncontrollable, I unlock it and drag it open.

"Sorry I'm late, Justin, the traffic is mad —"

I haul Adanna into my arms, cutting her off. "Oh, God, I'm so glad to see you," I rasp, squeezing her tightly, letting the emotions of the past few minutes seep through me in the comfort of her embrace.

I've never let myself be vulnerable, so needy in the presence of anyone, but having Adanna here at this exact moment is all I need.

"Are you okay?" Adanna asks, clinging to me, rubbing her palm up and down my back, absorbing all my confused emotions.

"Yes, I am," I murmur. "Now that you're here, I am."

Chapter Sixteen

ADANNA



Something is terribly wrong with Justin. He's clinging to me with a desperation that's unusual, almost melancholic. I've never seen him like this before.

I want to stop his frenzied kisses, disentangle myself from his frantic hold, and ask him to tell me what's going on. Instead, I cocoon him in my embrace, returning his fervent kiss with ardour, pressing into him as his body crushes mine.

"I need you," he rasps, drawing me farther into the hallway of his apartment and shutting the door behind us. "I want you."

He pushes my back against the wall and immediately recaptures my lips, his mouth devouring mine with a hunger that seems desperate.

"I'm right here, Justin," I murmur in between his fierce kisses, trying to reassure him, to break through the fugue that seems to be engulfing him, and bring him back to me.

He lets out a grunt in response, but I sense he is far away, in a space where I can't reach, at least not now. As if possessed by an external force, he continues plundering my mouth with his, his tongue twirling with mine in a fiery rhythm.

"Justin …" I moan as a flood of arousal gushes between my thighs, making me squirm against him, craving more intimate contact with him.

My breasts feel heavy, their tips hardened to throbbing pebbles. God, I want this man so much, to have him buried deep inside me. It's like a craving in my blood, this need to be ravished by him.

Almost reading my thoughts, he lifts me as if I weigh nothing, anchoring my legs around his waist as his hand reaches up my dress roughly to squeeze my ass.

"I need you …" he growls again. This time, there's pain in his declaration, a cry for help.

An alarm bell signals in my head. I need to stop him. We need to talk. We can't do this. Not like this, not when he isn't fully present.

He slips his finger into my panties and begins to stroke his thumb over the swollen sensitive nub between my thighs.

“Ooooh, God,” I whimper, all rational thought zapping from my brain. The pressure from his sweet caress is just right, the rhythm perfect. Moisture seeps from my core as overwhelming pleasure overtakes my senses.

Completely taken over by sheer sensations, I’m barely aware of his hand reaching into my tank top and pulling my breast from the confines of my bra. A shudder passes through me as the cool air hits my skin.

Before I can even process what’s happening, he is suckling my nipple, swirling his tongue over the turgid tip while his finger continues the sensual torment on my swollen sex. My entire body is on fire from his ministrations, my brain has ceased to function. All I can concentrate on is the climax building from deep inside my womb.

Just as I glide towards the pinnacle of ecstasy, I crash back to earth as Justin pulls his hand away. A shocked gasp escapes my lips as my eyes pop open, the unexpected withdrawal of his touch leaving me lightheaded, like a balloon floating in space.

I part my lips to question him, but just as I’m about to voice my frustration, I feel the hardness of his penis prodding my wet opening.

Lord! When did he free his member from his shorts? I was so carried away that I never even noticed.

“I need you,” he grinds out as he rams his turgid length into me in one sure move.

Bliss. Shock. Unadulterated pleasure surges through me at his penetration.

“Ahhh, Justin,” I cry out as he begins to pound in and out of me, his firm hands clutching my ass and rocking me into his fevered rhythm. I’m completely filled by him, every inch of my vagina occupied by his thick, rigid length, the sweet friction almost unbearable.

God, this feels so good … so good. The pressure inside my core is building again, cresting towards the zenith of blissful release with every stroke of his

hardened shaft inside me.

“Adanna, I need you,” he growls in a hoarse, helpless plea that resounds throughout the room, shattering my sensual daze.

The warning bell chimes again. My eyes pop open. No condom!

“Stop,” I call out, frantically pushing against his shoulder.

At first, I don’t think he hears me as he continues his fervent thrusts, his face buried at the crook of my neck.

“Stop now, Justin, we don’t have on protection.”

My shrill voice seems to permeate his senses. He freezes, lifting his head and locking his gaze with mine.

My facial expression must have revealed the sheer terror enveloping me, because he emits a shocked gasp, pulls out of me, and lowers me gently to the floor. A curtain of shame covers Justin’s eyes before he dips his gaze. He drags his fingers across his cropped hair, letting out a growl that sounds like an injured animal.

His shoulders are slouched, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows hard. His chest heaves as he struggles to catch his breath.

In a state of undress, I remain standing, staring at him in total confusion. What just happened? My heart is pounding in my chest, my pussy throbbing from heightened and unfulfilled desire, but my head is spinning from the mixed emotions erupting inside me like a volcano.

This is so unlike Justin to be reckless, unprepared, and detached. I was just a body to him seconds ago, a receptacle to ease whatever was tormenting him before I came in. I’m upset that he zoned out from me like that, but also terribly worried.

“I-I’m sorry,” he murmurs in a low, contrite tone, his gaze still averted from me as he pulls his shorts and boxers back up to cover his semi-erect penis.

I swallow hard, breathing through my mouth to get my lungs back to working at

their regular respiratory rate.

This is unbelievable. How can Justin think a simple apology is sufficient at such a pivotal moment like this? What I need is an explanation.

The man standing before me, his gaze fixed on a space between me and the wall so that he doesn't look at me, is not the man I've been dating for two months. The Justin I think I know has retreated into a shell, replaced by the stranger in front of me.

"Sorry?" I say, eyes wide in disbelief. "Sorry is not enough. I want to know what the hell is going on. Is everything okay?"

"I-I should have used a condom," he says in a tone so low that I barely hear him. "It won't happen again."

"You aren't answering my question, Justin," I say, the exasperation in my tone driven by concern. "What the hell just happened? You closed up on me. This is totally unlike you."

"I'll get tested for STDs and show you my results," he continues as if I haven't spoken. "I know I didn't … eh … finish, but if you fall pregnant from today, I'll support whatever decision you make."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I flip my hands upwards in helpless surrender, befuddled by his behaviour. "I'm asking what's going on in your head, and you're taking the cop-out route, ignoring me, rather than addressing the real issue?"

"What do you want from me, Adanna?" he snaps, turning his gaze to face me squarely. "I said I'm sorry, I got carried away. Can we drop it?"

His tone is harsh, confusing, and totally unacceptable to me.

"Okay, I don't need this," I say with a snort, shaking my head.

Pulling my skirt down my thighs and securing the upper buttons of my blouse, I whirl back towards the door. "Call me when you're ready to talk."

I manage only two steps away from him when I feel his strong arms around me,

pulling me back towards him.

“I found my father,” he says, enfolding me in a heated embrace, his body melting into mine. I feel the tremors from his large frame covering mine. Is he crying? I can’t tell because my face is buried in his chest.

He’s found his father. Why isn’t that good news?

Instinctively, I know saying congratulations would be inappropriate, so I remain mute, clinging tightly to him.

“I’m sorry for being an arse, Adanna. Please forgive me.”

I withdraw a bit, leaning back so that I can look at him properly. His eyes are red, but dry. No tears. Good. However, the troubled spark in his irises is deeply worrying.

“You’re forgiven,” I say, brushing a thumb over the stubble covering his jaw. “But I still don’t get it. Why aren’t you happy that you’ve found your father? I thought that’s what you wanted, came all the way to Nigeria for?”

He doesn’t respond to any of my questions, instead simply plants a soft kiss to my lips and then to my cheek. With tenderness, he brushes a final kiss on my forehead.

“Adanna,” he says in an anguish-infused lilt. “I think it’s best we break up. I’m no good for you.”

Taken aback by his unexpected remark, I pull away completely from him, searching his face anxiously, needing an explanation for his bizarre behaviour this morning.

Last night, we talked on the phone until way past midnight. Our conversation ended on a high note with us counting to three to disconnect the call, because neither had been willing to end the call first.

Never in a million years would I have predicted that just a few hours later, Justin would be suggesting that we end it all. And on Christmas Eve? A day before we’re scheduled to have dinner with my family.

I swallow past the lump of despair that forms in my throat. It's not like I ever thought this relationship would be forever. Only in Nollywood movies, do gorgeous, worldly, and successful men like Justin fall for ordinary, financially struggling women like me.

So, Justin might be right. It will hurt like hell to break up with him, especially because I've fallen in love, but it's probably for the best. Better now than before things get too deep.

Straightening my back and squaring my shoulders, I still myself, preparing to have the inevitable conversation I've been dreading since we agreed to see each other exclusively. I still remember how uncertain I was about the decision because of the high odds stacked against us, including that we reside on two different continents.

I should have listened to my gut. Even Cupidess warned me about our compatibility rating. Just a measly 23%.

"Do you want us to end things?" I ask in a soft whisper, my stomach roiling with trepidation.

"No." His answer is immediate and firm.

Perplexed, I curve my eyebrows upwards. "What —"

"Evil runs in my blood, Adanna. You deserve better. Don't you see that?"

His outburst only seems to confuse me further. What on earth does Justin mean? Is he trying to weasel out of this relationship with a silly excuse? Does he think I'm one of those clingy women who would do anything to hang on to a man who doesn't want them any longer? Or refuse to let him go if he simply tells the truth about wanting out?

The questions are swimming rapidly in my head like an Olympic competitor determined to win a gold medal, but my parted lips are unable to produce the words that are burning my tongue.

"My father is a criminal." He shakes his head bitterly. "Nothing good can come from being with me, Adanna. It's best we end things."

Ah! Blood rushes to my head, and my ears begin to buzz with the information he has just given me.

There's so much pain in his eyes that my heart breaks into tiny pieces for him. What did his father do? Kill someone? Steal? Does Justin blame himself for his father's crimes?

My gaze locks with his, and a whoosh of air gushes from my lungs. Damn, he does. What crime on earth could be so horrible as to make Justin doubt himself like this?

"What did your father do, Justin?" I ask, reaching out to take his hand in mine. "You can talk to me, tell me what's going on."

He squeezes his eyes shut and then pops them open again. "It's not just what he did, Adanna. It's what I am because of it."

Standing on tiptoes, I plant a soft kiss on his lips. "It doesn't matter to me what your father did. Even if he murdered someone. He's not you." I press my mouth against his ear. "You'd better listen to me. You're a kind, thoughtful, and loving man. And nothing your father did can change that."

"I don't think my exes would agree. They called me cold, detached, incapable of feeling," he says, his tone solemn and defeated. "Maybe they're right. Maybe my father's evil runs in my blood."

"And maybe you acted the way you did with your exes because you've let yourself believe you've inherited his evil," I counter. "We've known each other for a little over three months, and you've been totally opposite with me. Until this morning. Until you let your father get into your head."

"Listen, Adanna. I know you mean well, but I have a lot of stuff to process. I need to do this alone."

"But, Justin, you don't have to. I'm here for you, just talk to me. Whatever your father did doesn't matter to me —"

He cups my face. "I'd rather deal with my shit now than let it fester. I don't want you caught in the crossfire."

My gut plummets, and my chests spasms with pain. Justin is edging me out. For some reason, he doesn't trust me to be here with him while he goes through this moment in his life.

Tears burn the back of my eyelids. I clench my jaw tightly, fighting it. I will not cry. Not here.

"Okay," I say in a broken whisper.

"This isn't about you. You have to understand this is strictly about me."

"Of course."

What else to do but agree, even though I don't. It's always about the two people involved. He simply doesn't believe we can weather his personal crisis together. It means I'm not an important part of his life.

My skin prickles as if multiple needles are stabbing me everywhere. Why did I fall so hard for him? Way too deep, way too soon. It's always a recipe for disaster. I know this, and that's why I'm usually careful before getting involved in any romantic relationship. Why wasn't I more cautious with Justin? Apparently, he doesn't feel the same way about me as I do him.

"I'm sorry, Adanna." He releases my face from his hands, rubs the bridge of his nose, and puffs out a sigh of frustration. "I feel like an arse. Inviting you for breakfast and then doing this shit."

He is definitely an ass for that. Even with the wonderful aroma of food that permeates my nostrils, all I can smell right now is Justin's BS. A man driving a woman away because he doesn't want to be vulnerable with her.

"But right now, I need to be alone," he continues in a raspy tone. "I need to figure out what to do about my father, sort out my emotions on my own."

"It's okay, Justin. Do what you've got to do."

My tears are dangerously close to the surface, stinging my eyes with the need to escape. I've got to leave this instant, or risk bawling like a teenage girl who can't accept a breakup.

“Goodbye. And good luck with everything. I mean it, Justin,” I say, then quickly turn away, dashing out of his apartment like the hounds of hell are nipping at my heels.

With the speed of lightning, I race through the broad corridor, ignoring the lift I took up, and jump down the stairs two at a time.

Once I’m out the main entrance, I run to my car, pull open the door and slump into the driver’s seat, immediately securing my seatbelt.

I still can’t believe what just happened. As I switch on the engine, I half expect Justin to come up behind me, yell for me to stop, and say he was only joking.

My heart sinks when I hazard a glance towards the entrance of his apartment. He isn’t there. The door is still closed the exact way I left it when I fled the building.

And just like that, the tears that have been threatening to fall from my eyes begin to stream out in a flooded rush. This is so humiliating. Imagine being dumped by a man who invited you for breakfast without even having the fulfilment of a full stomach? Talk about “Chopping Breakfast”.

How could this have happened so unexpectedly? And on the day before Christmas? God, what do I tell my brother and bestie about this?

Adanna, this is a new record for you.

Broke, fired from work and dumped by Justin Igwe of Men of Valour all in less than six months.

How low can you sink?

“Oh, God!”

I let out a loud howl as I pull out of the parking lot and drive off. I’ve hit rock bottom. Any lower than this and I’ll be sitting comfortably in hell.

My vision clouded by tears, I’m not sure how I manage the long drive home. As soon as I park my Audi in the compound of my bungalow, I burst out of the vehicle, hoping to hell that the gateman doesn’t see me before I make it to the front door.

I’m certainly not ready for his curious, albeit well-meaning interrogation.

“Adanna, you have a delivery.” Mr Abdul’s voice rings in the air, halting me mid-stride.

Fat chance of an uninterrupted escape ever occurring here. This gateman is like a hound with an excellent sense of smell. I swivel around in his direction, but avert my gaze. Hopefully, he won’t notice my tear-stricken face.

“Is everything alright, Madam?”

Again, never going to happen. Mr Abdul also has the vision of a microscope, able to detect the most minute details. I’m sure my obviously puffy face will be easy peasy for him to spot. I should be annoyed with his intrusion, but it’s impossible. What makes him irritatingly perceptive also makes him an excellent security man.

He’s saved me twice from a spree of armed robberies by calling my phone and instructing me to turn on the lights when he’d heard early morning gunshots ringing out in the neighbourhood.

“Yes, I’m fine … just sprained a muscle, but it’s better,” I say, stretching my lips into a strained smile.

“Hmmm.” Mr Abdul’s grunt and facial expression clearly show that he doesn’t believe a word.

Well, I don’t give a fuck. He can ring my brother and snitch about my heartbreak for all I care. I won’t talk to him about me and Justin. Not when I can’t explain what really happened, even to myself.

“So, there’s a package for me?” I ask. Best to change the subject.

“Yes, a man brought it this morning soon after you left.” Mr Abdul dashes to the kiosk beside the gate and runs back with a carton box in his hand. “He said for your eyes only. It was difficult for me to even convince him to leave it with me. But here it is.”

I take the package with a thank-you, and examine it with curiosity. I haven’t purchased anything online for ages. Since I lost my job, I’ve been extremely

frugal with money, so what the hell could this be … and from whom?

Whatever it is, I'm sure it's a mistake. Probably sent to the wrong person. Turning back to the house, I make my way to the kitchen.

My heart is heavy, but my stomach is growling. If I don't eat something, I might just collapse from a combination of a broken heart and hunger.

I place two slices of bread in the toaster. Luckily, there's electricity. I walk over to the fridge and bring out a Diet Coke.

From a promised spread of bacon, eggs, and scones to toast and Coke. How nice. Tears flood my eyes again and spill out with reckless abandon. I make no attempt to wipe them. Home alone now, I can grieve without restraint.

How can things go wrong so quickly, with no warning whatsoever? Life is so cruel. One minute, I'm picking up the pieces of my life and moving on from being sacked at work, thinking of possibilities of love and a relationship. The next, I'm being sacked by Justin, too.

The toast pops up from the toaster and draws my attention back to the present. I retrieve the two slices of warm bread, butter them, and carry my unappetising breakfast to my room.

After wolfing my food down in minutes and gulping my drink faster than a thirsty camel, I pick up the package from the bed where I'd dropped it and stare befuddled at the text scribbled in black.

Private and Confidential

To Adanna Ezenna

25 A Okeho Street, Dopemu

Agege

Lagos

Hmmmm. Definitely not a mistake, like I thought. What on earth could this be?

Now overwhelmed with curiosity, I use my car key to tear through the Sellotape at the top of the box and rip it open.

Inside, there's a folded piece of paper and a memory stick. My heart begins a fast-paced beat that echoes in my ears as I peel open the A1 sheet and begin to read the hand-written note scribbled on it.

Dear Adanna,

First of all, I want to apologise for failing you. For failing everything I believe in. I've been a coward for many years, allowing Chief Madu to violate women unchecked under my watch.

The truth is, I am so worried about losing my job that I've looked the other way while he's continued to abuse his power.

This in no way excuses my behaviour, but just trying to explain my reasons. My husband has been unemployed for years after his business went under. I'm the sole provider for my family. Without this job, we'd all be screwed.

The courageous way you turned down Chief Madu not only inspired me, but gave me a chance to reflect on my shortcomings, too.

In this box is the video recording of Chief Madu trying to violate you in his office. After my meeting with you, I put a secret camera in there, hoping to catch you succumbing to his wish. Terrible, I know, but I wanted to feel better about myself for giving in to him.

However, to my uttermost surprise, you did the exact opposite in the bravest of ways. I'm ashamed of myself and extremely proud of you.

For several weeks, I've been sitting on this evidence, wondering what to do with it. But after a lot of self-reflection, I realise now that it's not my decision to make, but yours.

With sincere apologies

Mrs Aramide.

Fresh tears streaming down my face, I pick the plastic memory drive from the box and rush to the sitting room. I lift my charging laptop from the tea table and switch it on. Adrenaline pumping in my veins and sweat prickling my skin, I wait patiently until it powers on.

With shaky fingers, I insert the memory stick into the USB drive, and then, type my password to unlock the screen.

Seconds later, I'm watching a video of me, seated in Chief Madu's office on that dreadful day. It's such clear evidence of my mistreatment by the famous man whose image in the press is squeaky clean. A man known to be a loving husband and father, philanthropist, entrepreneur, and the General Manager of thousands of employees in the multibillion-Naira, tele-network company Ziltech.

I drag a slow breath in, my pulse rate refusing to slow down as I stretch my lips into a wonky smile.

Chineke me e o! Thanks to Mrs Aramide, I'm sitting on a bloody gold mine.

Chapter Seventeen

JUSTIN



I let out a low grunt, massaging the sides of my temples, trying and failing to ease the throbbing in my head. It seems like years since I managed a good night's rest. But it's been only ten days. Stretching my legs and pulling the lever beside me, I tilt my seat backwards.

The murmurs of other plane passengers fill the air. A full flight to London, it's noisier than usual. I press my lips together in frustration. First-class seats don't mean a damn when one can't get enough peace and quiet to fall asleep.

My brain is pounding, my eyes are gritty from a dire need for some shuteye, and my heart feels numb.

A baby howls close by. I turn my attention to the woman in the seat in front of me. She is trying to pacify a toddler that refuses to be soothed. Even though I'm exhausted, the scene fascinates me, and I keep staring at the young mother, bouncing her baby up and down on her knee, cooing and singing as she does.

Finally, the baby stops crying and gives her the brightest of smiles, gazing up with adoration at its mother. God, I want that. For someone to look at me with such love in their eyes, like I mean the world to them. I need that emotional boost right now. Anything to make me stop feeling like the world's biggest loser.

Ten days since I last spoke to Adanna, and it feels like my heart's been ripped out of my body and shredded. I keep thinking about that awful morning when I pretty much pushed her away like a piece of trash, berating myself over and over again for it.

Who invites someone to their home for breakfast and tosses them out like garbage when they arrive? Only Justin Igwe.

I clench my jaw tightly, swallowing back the bile of self-loathing that surges to my throat. My exes are absolutely right. I'm a cold-hearted, good-for-nothing piece of shit. Hurting someone I love because … I'm not even sure why.

For days, I've been trying to understand what happened that morning, trying to rationalise my actions. What overtook me to make me act so horribly?

Zero answers come to mind. No excuse for my vile behaviour. No way to

explain why I keep doing this—destroying any chance of genuine happiness that comes my way.

The only thing I can say with certainty is that seeing Adanna in my home, just moments after knowing my biological father was within reach, made me want to sabotage the prospect of my happiness, of allowing myself to enjoy being loved.

I know Adanna has strong feelings for me. Maybe even loves me. And I feel the same way. In this short time without her, I've come to admit that to myself.

The depth of her absence, the pain tearing through me because I haven't heard her voice, seen her, touched her, can only mean one thing—I'm utterly and unequivocally in love.

Why on earth did I drive her away when all I wanted to do was pull her close to me, tell her exactly how I feel about her?

I turn my attention from the woman whose baby is now fast asleep in her arms, and back to the small screen in front of me. There's nothing on the inflight entertainment that tickles my fancy. Nothing I want to watch, read, or listen to.

All I want to do is ring Adanna, tell her I'm sorry, beg her forgiveness, and ask for a second chance.

Yet, no matter how many times I have picked up my phone to call, I've stopped myself. First, I need to deal with the jumbled emotions erupting within me after finding my biological father. I may be wrong about the way I handled things the last time I saw Adanna, but I think I'm right about this.

Since confirming that Professor Silvester Amadi is indeed the man in the picture, I've been restless, unable to focus on anything other than the plan to get a DNA sample from him.

I'm not sure I want to confront him until I know for sure he is my father. But how does one gain access to a heavily guarded entrepreneur's home or personal space to obtain a test sample?

Even the mole that Third Eye P.I. Services planted couldn't get close enough to the professor to confirm he was the man in the picture. He'd had to confirm it through Amadi's oldest daughter.

Another way to test his DNA would be trying to get close to his children and obtaining a sample from one of them to crosscheck if I am related. However, I don't want to involve innocent parties in this quest unless absolutely necessary.

According to Ola, he is working on another plan to get access to Professor Amadi. But it's taking some time. I just have to be patient.

I turn the light switch beside me off, draw down the window blind, and turn the television screen back to flight mode. Pulling the soft blanket up to cover my neck, I close my eyes.

Just like with this six-hour flight back to London, I have no choice but to wait until I get to my destination. I'll make sure the man who violated Nancy sees the evidence of his vile actions up close and personal—me. How rewarding it will be to confront him with it all.

Almost eight hours later, I step out of Heathrow Airport's arrival section, my blue suitcase in tow. Sweeping my gaze around, I search for my driver.

My eyes catch a tall, lean man waving at the end of the road, a placard held high with my name on it. I wave to him and roll my luggage purposefully towards the black taxi.

The chilly January air is biting, but I take a deep breath in, savouring the smell of London. The place I now call home.

There are many things I hate about this city—the fast-paced activities, people always bumping into others as if they are in more of a hurry than anyone else, the constant smell of cigarette smoke in the air, and the most peeving of all, an incorrigible scarcity of parking spots.

However, coming back from Lagos to what is comparatively a reasonably sane environment reminds me of the many things I appreciate about London. The fact that one can get food delivered at 3:00a.m., the taxis that are constantly available, the general friendliness towards tourists, and finally, the chilly winters I've come to love.

"Mr Igwe?" the man says when I get to him. "You ordered a taxi to Chelsea?"

"Yes, but can we change the route?" I ask with a hopeful smile. "I want to go to

Croydon instead."

The man looks at me quizzically. "I don't think I'm allowed to do that."

"I'll call the taxi company and pay the extra fare."

He nods as he takes my suitcase and puts it into the car boot.

After re-organising my route, I slip into the backseat and recline against the cushion for my journey to my parents' house. I'd rather be with my family than alone in my flat thinking about the turmoil I left in Nigeria.

My mother called this morning before I boarded the flight, insisting I drop by once I arrived, because everyone's popping by for dinner to welcome me home. She even tempted me with a promise of her famous apple pie. Nothing like the comfort of my loving family and my mother's tempting desserts to lift my spirits.

Following a silent forty-minute drive, I'm finally at the main entrance of the Duncan home—the white, detached duplex where I spent many years healing from my early childhood trauma. I take a deep breath in, blowing the air back out slowly through my mouth, and then, press the bell. Home sweet home.

The door bursts wide open to reveal my mother, a portly woman with long, curly red hair and a pretty, round face dusted with freckles.

"Hey, Justin," she squeals, engulfing me in a bear hug.

"Mum!" My heart is full of joy as I embrace her. It's always nice to be welcomed like this, loved unreservedly by someone.

She leans forward, kissing both cheeks. "We've missed you, slugger. So very much." She grabs onto my hand. "Come on in, your brothers are all here."

Taking hold of my luggage, I follow her into the house, down the long hallway, and into the sitting room.

"Welcome home." A chorus of greetings rises in the air as soon as I step in.

Pure pleasure explodes in my chest as I glance around the room. As usual, my

father is standing at the corner beside his favourite recliner, a Cuban cigar perched between his lips. My brother Mark is beside him, his long auburn hair falling to his shoulders. Dressed in skinny jeans with the top part of his shirt undone, he looks like the typical rockstar he hopes to be one day.

Next to the television is Liam—five years older than Mark, but three years younger than me. One shouldn't have a favourite brother, but Liam's mine. A prim and proper Brit, just like our father, Liam is formally dressed in a plain collar shirt that's neatly tucked into trousers and so well pressed that the visible front lines are straighter than a railway. With a glass of wine in one hand and a cigar in the other, he is the spitting image of our father at the same age.

Finally, my gaze settles on Toby, aka The Redneck Duncan, who is standing closest to me. The one who, after his three-year stay in Mississippi, can effortlessly imitate a southern American accent. Toby came back acting all different and with a different accent to boot.

Now, wearing a cowboy hat over his head, boots on his feet, a pair of ripped jeans and a tight t-shirt, he looks like a character from a western movie instead of the family doctor that he is.

As the entire gang rushes over to embrace me, I hug them back eagerly, happy to see them all. That everyone made time from their busy schedules to welcome me touches me deeply.

"Hey, mate, we're glad to see you after so long," Liam says, patting me on the back. "How was Nigeria?"

"Awesome," I say. "Bloody hot and crazy, but generally, fun."

"And the birds, eh? I bet they're fit, eh?" Mark chimes in, winking at me suggestively.

"Nigerian women are stunning," I say in agreement. But the only woman whose image fills my mind is Adanna. My heartrate gallops at the thought of her. It would have been wonderful to bring her here to meet my family. I'm sure they would all love her.

"You shag any? I bet you did, you old dog —"

“Guys!” Dad’s deep voice booms in the air, cutting Mark off with a hand raised in protest. “No talks about shagging before dinner.”

“Or at all,” Mum calls out from somewhere in the house. “My apple pie won’t be in the presence of such filth.”

Laughter resounds in the room, filling my chest with warmth. I love these people with all my heart. Why on earth do I even want anything to do with the devil of a man whose blood flows through my veins? Looking at the delight in all the faces staring at me, I immediately feel better. We may not share any blood, but they are my true family.

“Come on, folks,” Dad says. “Let’s go eat the famous apple pie.”

“Great,” I say with a huge grin. “I’m famished.”

We all make our way to the dining room. Immediately, the sweet aroma of warm food rises to my nose. Mrs Duncan loves to cook. And her desserts are to die for.

The table is covered with several plates of mashed potatoes, peas and gravy, a centre tray of turkey roast. On the sideboard for later are tiny cupcakes and a large apple pie. To wash it all down, there’s water and two bottles of a nice Sauvignon Blanc. A wave of nostalgia hits me at the comforting sight.

Evening dinners with the entire family were always fun when we were younger. We talked endlessly, teased each other relentlessly, and sometimes, broke out into song. Never a dull moment in the Duncan household.

Such a shame that we get to do this now only on birthdays, holidays, and on rare occasions like this—my return from Nigeria.

Sinking onto my usual seat beside Mum, I vow to come home more often without waiting for the holiday season. After all, I live alone and close by.

Before long, we all settle at the table to eat. I immediately tuck into the turkey slice on my plate, using my fork and knife to lift a piece mixed with some mashed potatoes and gravy into my mouth.

The flavour of familiar home cooking appeases my tastebuds. Although I enjoyed the spicy food I tried in Nigeria, there’s something comforting about

eating a traditional family meal.

“Have you had a chance to talk to him?” my mum asks, lifting a forkful of her dinner from her plate.

Silence befalls the room as everyone’s gaze focuses on me. We all know who she’s talking about. The topic that my dad and brothers have skittered around since I informed them of my decision to find my biological father.

I know they are not pleased with my endeavour, but they’ve been supportive, choosing not to give me grief about it.

I lift my wine glass, take a sip, and swallow hard. My mum means well, and I’m certain she’s worried about me, but I’m not sure I want to talk about my biological father now, especially not when I’m having such a great time. Bitterness engulfs me every time I think about him. Any conversation about the man is surely going to ruin my mood.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Justin,” my dad says from across the table. I turn to look at him, seeing the understanding spark in his grey eyes.

Just like Mr Duncan, I tend to keep things bottled up inside, tucked away until I’m ready to bring them out. The rest of the family are polar opposites though, expressive and open about almost every personal detail.

“If it’s okay, I’d rather not,” I say, idly fiddling with the mashed peas on my plate with my fork. I feel my mother’s hand on my arm giving me a gentle squeeze.

“Whenever you are ready, son,” she says.

I turn and smile back at her. “Thank you.”

“Okay, since you’re keeping mute about that, let’s hear about all the sexy Nigerian birds you hooked up with,” chirps Toby in his fake southern American accent. “Lord knows I would like to visit one day and find a Nigerian lover.”

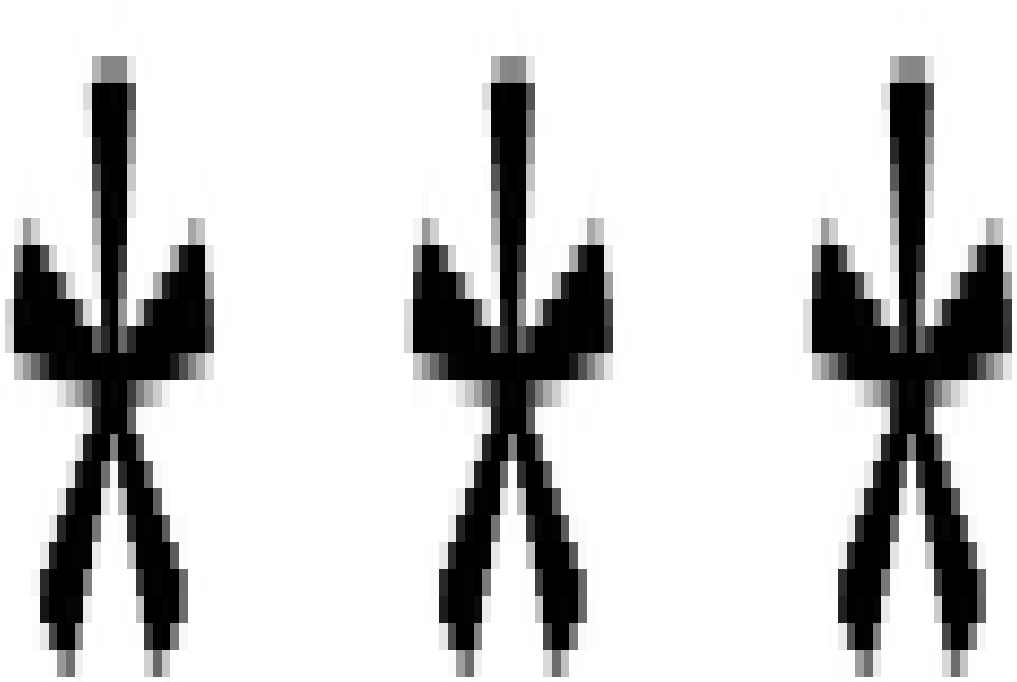
“You would, wouldn’t you?” I tease. “Since no woman is giving you any play over here in London.”

Laughter rings out following my comment.

“Oh, fuck you!” Toby snorts, a feigned grimace contorting his face.

“Love ya, too, bro.” I call out, dodging the cupcake he throws my way.

As the laughter settles, I find myself relaxing again. Nothing beats a Duncan family dinner party.



Bright lights flash all over me, but I keep my eyes open—trying not to squint—and my lips parted with a grin plastered on my face.

For three whole weeks, I've been traveling around England, doing knock out interviews for magazines and on radio and television.

From Manchester to Liverpool, then, on to Blackpool, Leeds, Birmingham, and now, back to London for this interview hosted by Harry Masters on TVC Television.

I'm tired of all the travelling, waking up to catch early morning planes, trains, and taxis. However, this warm welcome from such a large audience—who have paid for tickets to hear me talk—is humbling. So, I squash my lethargy and pile on the good cheer. The fans of my TV show deserve to see me enthusiastic about promoting it.

"Isn't it great to be up close with the man voted as one of TV's sexiest actors?" Harry asks.

The audience answers in unison with an affirmative roar accompanied by deafening applause. I laugh, hoping no one sees my heated cheeks darkening. My brothers have taunted me mercilessly ever since the news was announced, and I can't help the embarrassment that comes over me whenever it's mentioned in public.

I wave at my mother and youngest brother who are in the front row, clapping vigorously and howling.

"Welcome everyone to Lunch Hour with Harry," Harry says. "We are in for a great live show today. Justin Igwe is here to tell us all about the upcoming season of BAC-TV's Men of Valour, and a whole lot more."

Again, the audience launches into loud applause. "So, ladies and gentlemen, sit back and relax for this hour-long show."

When the cheering tapers off, I settle on the couch opposite Harry, still smiling. Goodness, my cheeks hurt from the effort of appearing upbeat, and trying to be entertaining, when the bits and pieces of my life are in shambles.

Last night, while stalking Adanna's Instagram page like I've been doing for the past five weeks since I last saw her, I stumbled on a video of her in a club surrounded by a crowd, mostly men. She seemed to be having a great time on the dance floor, a drink in her hand.

Seeing the short clip of her slow dancing to a rhythm-and-blues tune caused a profound yearning within me. The memory of our own first night at a club together, and the moments after, stormed my head and left me sad.

Intense regret overwhelmed me, but what completely pulled the rug from under my feet, was her caption for the post.

Moving on to bigger and better things. Sitting on a secret that I can't wait to share.

Secret? The questions that flooded my mind were endless and relentless.

Is she now dating the man who is dancing dangerously close to her with his gaze on her chest?

Is she relocating?

Has she found another job?

Is she engaged?

So disturbed by the caption, I scrolled down to read through the five comments on the post. I recognised one from her best friend, a name she mentioned often in the short time we dated.

Brenda: So proud of you, honey. You deserve it.

Deserve what? Overcome by curiosity and anxiety, I typed a quick message

asking Adanna what the good news was, but stopped myself from sending it at the last minute.

I have no right to be curious about her any longer. I was the one who rudely cut her out of my life. She deserves to be free of my shit. And to be happy, too. So, pain tearing through me, I deleted the message and tossed my phone aside.

Now, this chilly afternoon, I'm seated here on the stage before an enthusiastic audience, compelled to act like I'm thrilled to keep repeating the same information about Men of Valour that I've been dishing out for three weeks. But in all honesty, I'd rather be in Lagos, holding Adanna in my arms and telling her how sorry I am for being such a buffoon.

The chat with my mother late last night as we sat on the patio long after Dad fell asleep was enlightening. Without mincing words, she told me that I'd fucked up royally by pushing Adanna away because of my hate for a man who couldn't care less if I was alive or not. By the time Mrs Duncan was finished, I felt like an even bigger arsehole than before for how I treated Adanna.

Her plain honesty struck me hard. And later, when I saw the video of Adanna enjoying herself in a club without me, looking as lovely as ever, I felt like a heel all over again.

"Justin, I'd like to say first of all, congratulations on the new season of Men of Valour," Harry says, hauling my mind back to the present. "What should we expect from your character Andre Crowley this season?"

"Oh, a lot. He is no longer being controlled by his grandfather and has broken away from the gang, so expect a lot of self-reflection from him."

"And will he and Elaine finally get together? I can say without a doubt that's what everyone is hoping for."

Mild laughter rises from the audience, and I chuckle, too. "I am, too. But who knows?"

"You cheeky man, tell us. A simple yes or no will suffice." He winks at me suggestively.

I shake my head with a laugh, crossing my legs at the ankle. "Nope. Not giving

that up. You'll all have to tune in for the season's premier on the 28 th of January to find out."

"Oh, sod off!"

Another bout of laughter erupts at Harry's antics.

"Okay, since you won't tell us about Andre from Men of Valour, let's talk about Justin, the man behind the role." Harry gives the audience a knowing smile. "We also want to know, are you seeing anyone?"

Adanna's image flashes in my mind. Her warm smile, her gorgeous eyes, her petite and curvy frame, her wonderful and caring personality, her drive … everything about her urges me to say yes to his question.

I shake my head. "Nope, Harry, I'm still single and ready to mingle."

"Are you sure?" An image on the screen projector in front of me comes alive. My heart careens into my chest, almost bursting out of my ribcage.

"There are images floating around the Internet of you and a Nigerian bird having a blast on your trip to Africa," Harry continues, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "You look pretty cosy in that photo. Are you sure you two aren't an item?"

My body breaks into a cold sweat as my gaze focuses on the image of Adanna and me in a heated embrace, my palm over the curve of her arse. The first night we went clubbing together when I lost myself in the sweet taste of her mouth and forgot we were in public. I was so happy that evening to finally have Adanna in my arms, I wasn't thinking straight.

The audience's amused cackles draw my attention back to the present. Damn. Such a horrible invasion of privacy, making such a sweet moment between two unsuspecting people appear sordid and scandalous.

It should be a crime capturing people on cameras without their consent. No matter how famous. I pride myself on keeping my life under wraps and away from the public eye. How can someone be so callous to share this on the Internet?

“She’s a stunner, Justin, isn’t she?” Harry says, unaware of the chaos this line of questioning causes me. “Is she your new lass, huh? Or just a holiday fling?”

It takes everything in my power to fix the muscles of my face into a carefree smile. “Oh, yes, she’s gorgeous,” I say, my cheeks hurting from the tension in my jaw. “But we never dated or had any fling, Harry. She’s just a friend. Nothing more, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, how terribly disappointing for her,” Harry says with a laugh.

Pointing at the audience, he adds in an exaggerated comedic tone, “But good news for many single birds in Britain.” He winks. “And some single lads, too.”

A drumroll sounds, and cheering erupts from the audience. My face warm from self-loathing and a bit of embarrassment, I scan the many faces in the crowd as I feign a laugh at Harry’s joke.

Settling my attention on my mother in the front row, I note the disappointment that tugs her lips downward and the slight shake of her head. She isn’t pleased about the way I dismissed Adanna.

My abdominal muscles tighten with another bout of self-derision. Well, neither am I. But what else could I have done? Claimed Adanna as my woman on national television when I pushed her away privately?

I totally agree with my mother that I’ve messed up big time and need to make things right with Adanna. But how? She’s already moving on to bigger and better things. Would she even want to listen to anything I have to say? I don’t blame her if she’s decided to forget me. I did her wrong. And in the most humiliating way. Practically ravishing her against the wall of my apartment and sending her off within minutes.

“A short commercial break, and we’ll be back with more talk with Justin Igwe from BAC-TV’s Men of Valour on Lunchtime with Harry.”

The sound of loud applause reels my mind back to the audience. As the jingle from the theme song comes on, I stretch my lips into a happy smile even though my heart is down in the dumps.

Nothing would make me happier than for Adanna to forgive and forget, and give

me a second chance.

Chapter Eighteen

ADANNA



In the blink of an eye.

I've never really thought about the phrase as much as I have for the past three weeks.

Yet, nothing else captures the whirlwind of events that have occurred in my life since I released the video of Chief Madu trying to pressurise me to have sex with him for a promotion.

Five weeks ago, just two days after I got it, I contacted Blogville, a popular Nigerian blog. Not an easy decision, especially since going public exposes my pain to the world.

But after speaking to my brother and Brenda, we agreed rather than filing a lawsuit—which I'm not prepared to do—this was a good alternative. And wow, were we ever right.

Overnight, the video went viral, even making it to the national TV news. Since then, several Lagos radio and television stations have contacted me to discuss the incident, some even offering a token reimbursement for my time.

The money, even though it's helped, didn't influence my decision to accept the interviews. In less than two weeks, Ziltech's Board of Directors has sacked Chief Madu. And from several online sources, there are also talks of possible prosecution by the state.

Finally, I feel justified for going public with this. Yes, it's exposed me to the judgement of a few irate people who have written hateful things online about me, or even said them to my face. Mostly, that I am ruining a man's life.

Their judgements haven't swayed me. The truth about his abusive behaviour is out in the open, and hopefully, he and others will think twice before attempting to harass anyone else. The hashtag #stopsexualharrasmentatwork has also been trending on Twitter, with many people sharing their own experiences. Spreading awareness and sparking a conversation gives me pride in my decision.

Blowing out a sigh of contentment, I recline on my seat. It's a Monday morning, and I'm waiting in the boardroom for a meeting that's about to change my life

forever.

The muscles of my abdomen contract, and worry churns my insides. What if this is all a trap? Is there something I'm missing?

A subtle glance at the middle-aged woman beside me, and I take a calming breath in, blowing out slowly through my mouth to steady my nerves.

Barrister Akoka seems confident and relaxed. As long as my lawyer is satisfied with the contract, it should all be fine.

I glance at the white door of the medium-size conference room and sit upright. Any moment from now, I will be signing a document that will change my life.

Somebody pinch me, but this seems too good to be true. The offer of 1.2 million Naira a month to be a talk show host came after Liberty Network's CEO saw my interview on the local news.

According to the producer who interviewed me, he was so impressed with my eloquence and boldness that he pictured me hosting a talk show dealing with difficulties women face in the community.

So, here I am, perched on my chair as anxious as a mosquito trapped inside a net, waiting for my big break into television. A dream of mine since I was a little girl. I've always wanted to be in media, behind the scenes as a producer of a show or onscreen as a host. It's almost surreal that I'm on the cusp of achieving that.

Blowing out another sigh, I tap on the desk again. The room is too quiet. My lawyer is not much of a talker, and I need some distraction.

"Relax, my dear," Barrister Akoka says, as if sensing my unease. She places a hand over mine in reassurance. "This contract is airtight. You will be employed for two years with them."

I give her a grateful smile. "Thank you, ma," I say, so glad that I have her here to guide me through the biggest career decision of my life so far.

My brother may be a pain sometimes, but I'm grateful he referred me to her. Ugo was excited by my job offer, but also sensible about it.

“You need to check that there are no loopholes in the contract,” he said. “It’s always better to have a lawyer for these things.”

Although his advice initially annoyed me—all I wanted to do was break out the champagne—I’m glad that I listened. The twelve-page document the network sent me felt alien, like I was reading a language from Mars. Thanks to this competent, kind lawyer who walked me through the entire document, I feel more confident about signing.

The door squeaks open and two men walk into the room, both beaming with a sense of fulfilment. This immediately makes me feel less anxious. They don’t look uncertain or unhappy. They are definitely here to move this contract along.

“Thanks for coming in this early in the morning,” the taller man says. He is Mr Okafor, the one who interviewed me, and the chief producer of five TV shows on Liberty Network. “I know how difficult it is with the Lagos traffic.”

He chuckles, and I blow out a short laugh.

Dressed in a silver kaftan and matching trousers, with a traditional cap on his head, Mr Okafor is every bit the distinguished businessman. I appreciate his relaxed attitude. Unlike many people who hold esteemed positions in successful enterprises, he is cheerful and has a way of putting people at ease.

“Would you like some refreshments before we begin?” the light-skinned man beside him asks.

I’ve never seen him before, but from his formal business suit, I’m guessing he’s a network lawyer. I shake my head, smoothing nervous palms over the fabric of my navy-blue skirt as I wait for them to settle in the chairs beside us around the long oval table. My lawyer also declines the offer, and a brief introduction of everyone in the room ensues.

“Shall we proceed?” Barrister Razak says, peeling open his briefcase. He retrieves a file and passes it to me. “Are you happy with everything in the contract?”

“Very much so, but two things ...” Barrister Akoka says. “We’d like clarification on the start date. Also, to hammer out if, and to what degree, Ms. Ezenna has control in choosing the show’s content and topics.”

A smile tilts Barrister Razak's lips. "First Saturday in March is our target. It's a pre-recorded show. So, taping will start two weeks before. Is that sufficient?"

Barrister Akoka's eyes meet mine for confirmation. I nod. That's in just two months. So exciting.

"More than sufficient," I say with a smile.

"Perfect." The other lawyer confirms, scribbling on his notes. "And per the other question. Of course, Ms. Ezenna will have a say in the topics discussed on the show. Always works better. However, the first two years, the producer will have the final say. We can renegotiate after that if that doesn't suit you. Is that okay?"

I hesitate, pondering the potential difficulties that may crop up if I'm not allowed the veto power in a talk show that I'll be singularly hosting. Will it be a hindrance if I'm forced to talk about topics that I'm not passionate about?

An image of Mary-Jane from BET's Being Mary Jane pops into my head. On this television show that I absolutely adore, she had to fight to be heard. And maybe like her, I'll need to earn the trust of the network before demanding autonomy.

"It sounds reasonable," I say.

"Fantastic," the barrister says and widens his grin. "Good news is that you have absolute control over the name of the show. Any ideas yet?"

"Sunsets in Lagos," I reply without hesitation. "It's an evening show discussing the struggles of women, but I don't want it to be too obvious, so that we get male viewers tuning in, too."

Mr Okafor repeats the title, rolling the name off his tongue several times, and then, his face breaks into a broad smile. "You know what? I think I like the sound of that. It's unique."

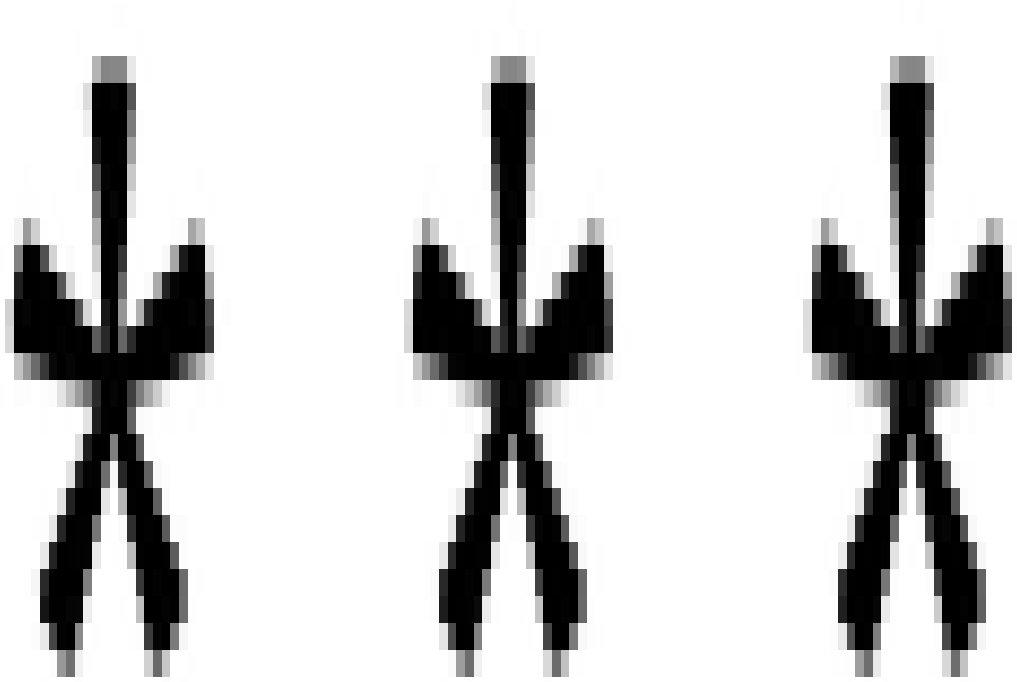
"Then we're agreed," Barrister Razak says. He pins me with eyes filled with gratitude. "Thank you for being a brave young lady, Ms. Ezenna. I have a daughter who is just entering the work force. I don't want to even picture her being in the position you were put in, and I hope this show will be a platform of change in Nigeria."

My cheeks heat up at the deep respect in his eyes. Although I'm humbled to be the object of admiration from so many people for my stand against sexual harassment instead of giving in to the boss's lascivious demand, I do know that it takes bravery to acquiesce, too. There should never be a situation where anyone has to make either decision in the first place.

"I hope so, too," I murmur, my voice croaky from tears choking my throat. "And thank you for everything."

"You're very welcome, Miss." Mr Okafor presents his hand for a handshake. "A final contract, including the points we have detailed, will be sent to you for signing. We have less than six weeks before shooting commences. I'm excited."

"No more than I am," I say, shaking his hand. "Can't wait."



Bolting upright on my bed, I rush to the bathroom as a wave of nausea hits me. I pull up the rim of the toilet seat and hurl the contents of my stomach into the bowl.

“Shit. I hate alcohol,” I say, pressing the flush button.

The swoosh of water flooding the toilet resounds in my brain, worsening the throbbing in my head.

This is exactly why I hate clubbing. The morning after a drunken night out is no joke. I should have sat my behind at home. Especially since I wasn’t in a partying mood in the first place.

After my successful meeting with Liberty Network, Brenda convinced me to go out with her and some of our other friends to celebrate. We went to Ozone nightclub in Lekki and partied until 3 a.m., drinking and dancing and having a blast.

It was good for me, a way to pull me out of the rut I’ve been in because of missing Justin so much. But now, all I have to show for such hardcore partying is a growling stomach and a headache from the pit of hell.

Groaning at the pain that slices between my temples, I move over to the bathroom sink and lift the bottle of mouthwash resting on the shelf. I quickly untwist the cap and take a swig straight from the bottle, swirling the minty liquid in my mouth for several seconds.

After spitting it out, I gaze at my reflection in the mirror and puff out a sigh. I’m a hot mess … my twist-out hairdo is scattered on my head in all directions, my makeup is smeared over my face like ojuju, and my eyes are bloodshot.

It was a fun party all right, but I came back home and cried myself to sleep.

I snatch my face towel from the hook, wet it with cool water, and press the damp cloth over my forehead, trying to quiet some of the throbbing in my head.

How is it that I’m on the verge of the most life-altering success ever, and all I can think about is the pain tearing through my heart from Justin Igwe’s

abandonment? Why does the man who left me high and dry matter so much? Why can't I just forget him?

Because you're still in love with him.

Sure, I could fool myself, but really, that's the answer. For days, when I found out he went on his trip to London without even so much as a simple text to me, I was crushed, crying myself to sleep every night.

Soon, my tears turned into anger. All I could think of was finding a way to hurt him back. Make him feel the pain I'd been feeling.

Yet, last night, after such a fun time with my pals, even after giving out my number to two cute guys, I came back home, curled up in bed with only one man on my mind.

God, I miss him. In the short time we were together, I was genuinely happy. All the times we talked about life, shared jokes, cooked together, dined out … and the sex… so explosive and electrifying.

Justin made me feel loved, yet in control of my life, my decisions. With him, I wasn't a helpless damsel who needed him, although he always insisted on lending a helping hand. He respected my autonomy, yet wasn't afraid to share his point of view. In a way, he reminds me of my father. A man I loved so much.

My throat prickles from the rush of emotions that seems to have lodged a wedge in there. Tears burn my eyes. Shit. I can't believe I'm crying again. I thought I was done with that, that I had moved forward in the grieving process.

Last night, I uploaded a reel of me in the club dancing with one of my male admirers, hoping to send a message to Justin who I know is still following me on Instagram.

Did he see it? What does he think about my caption? Does he even care?

Moving on to bigger and better things …

If only my heart could move at the same pace as my social media feed. If only…

Shrugging in defeat, I peel off my glittery, silver mini dress and my underwear. I

pull aside the shower curtain and step into the bath. A shiver runs through me when my feet touch the cold ceramic surface. Thank goodness there's electricity, and the heater is on.

I turn the shower knob, watching a weak sprinkle of water from the showerhead.

"Nothing works in this bloody country," I snarl in frustration, switching it off. Puffing out a resigned sigh, I turn on the tap and wait for the bucket to fill with lukewarm water.

After washing up, I make my way to the kitchen, pull out two slices of bread and make myself some French toast and scrambled eggs. I pour myself a glass of apple juice, place both items on a tray, and stroll into the living room.

It's 2:59 p.m. Exactly an hour ahead of London time. Phew. I haven't missed the show. Thank God.

One of the perks of living alone is having the television all to myself. I can watch whatever I like without any interruptions.

Justin's interview with Harry Masters on TVC is coming on soon. I can drink my fill of him through the television screen without the concerned looks from my brother or the pity of my best friend, who've both been telling me to just forget him and move on.

As if I wouldn't if I could. Maybe they don't know just how devastated I feel because they never had a chance to meet him. If Justin had followed me to their house for Christmas dinner as planned, they would have seen how great we were together, and perhaps, understand how pained I am from the unexpected end to our relationship.

I reach for the remote on the table beside me and switch the TV on. Moving my fingers across the buttons, I press 132.

Voila. There he is on the screen, standing beside Harry Masters and beaming at the audience as camera lights flash on their faces.

My breath traps in my chest. Oh, Justin looks as handsome as ever in his red-and-white striped shirt that clings to every firm muscle of his torso. How I've missed grazing my fingers over the expanse of his chest. His blue jeans fit

snugly over his thighs and calves in a way that makes my mouth water. Although not tight, I can picture every inch of his powerful limbs like he's completely naked.

With deliberate slowness, I move my attention to his face. My heart does a slight flutter as I focus on his lips stretched into a smile. That mouth has taken me to heaven and back on many occasions, and has said so many lovely things to me, too.

Funny … he doesn't look as comfortable as one would think. There's something strained about his facial expression. It's subtle, but he's not thrilled to be there.

A surge of hope rises in my gut. Is he as miserable as I am? Does he want us to get back together?

I slice into the soft, buttery bread with my fork and scoop some eggs onto it. As I plop the mixture into my mouth, I watch spellbound as the interview starts.

The audience are as enthralled as I am. A clear sign that he is a great actor. Able to captivate people with his charisma.

"We also want to know. Are you seeing anyone?"

The question from Harry rings out in my sitting room from the TV. I halt my movements, the glass of apple juice in my hand midway between the tray and my mouth. Every cell in my body seems frozen in time, except my heart, which is beating at a manic pace, awaiting Justin's response.

The television audience roar at his answer, clapping in excitement. I can feel the tentative smile on my face. Will he mention me? He answers, and the would-be smile cracks into a million pieces and falls away.

The ease at which he dismisses my existence. No feelings. No emotions. As if the time we spent together meant nothing to him. Devastation tears through me like a whirlwind damaging prized possessions along its path.

I part my lips, trying to get air through my lungs, which seem like they're no longer functioning properly. Certainly, nothing could be worse than the pain piercing my chest at this moment, could it? But I'm wrong.

A picture of me in Justin’s arms on the first day we went to a club together comes on screen, and he easily laughs it off with an offhand comment … in front of the world.

“We never dated or had a fling… Just a friend. Nothing more, I’m afraid.”

Sitting stiffly on the sofa, the drink in my hand still stuck mid-air, I stare at the TV, unable to see through the cloud of tears forming in my eyes, or hear over the buzzing in my ears.

How can Justin casually dismiss a relationship I’ve been mourning for weeks? What a damn fool I’ve been. What an utterly pathetic fool. As my bestie Brenda would say—a mumu dot com.

Chapter Nineteen

JUSTIN



I pull the rented Lexus to a stop and switch off the engine. Peering through the window opposite me, I inspect the house. The high, black gate obscures the structure, and the barbed wire fence renders it impossible to see anything except the bungalow's aluminium roof.

Reaching into the breast pocket of my kaftan, I retrieve my mobile phone. I scroll for the number I want and dial. Two rings later, her voice reverberates through the speakers of the small device.

"Hello, Justin. How was your trip to Nigeria?"

"Great, thank you, Dr Smith," I say, idly stroking the leather cushioning of the steering wheel with my finger. "Got in early this morning on BA."

"Excellent."

Silence ensues. I can hear her soft breathing on the other end of the line, and picture her brow knitted in question as she runs her fingers through her short blond hair. She's probably seated in her executive chair, her legs crossed, her left hand resting on the arm rest of the black leather seat. Her typical posture during our therapy sessions.

"Everything okay?" her voice comes again. This time, there's uncertainty in her tone.

I shake my head, even though she can't see me. My last session with Dr Smith was just two days ago. Very insightful.

"You drive people you love away because you don't really believe you deserve love," she told me. "It's a self-protective, yet poor, coping mechanism. It's like you say to yourself, 'Just like my biological mother, she'll disappoint me one day... best to end things now.'"

Of course, I didn't want to accept any of that. I revolted at the very idea that I had caused the demise of all my relationships. My exes cheated. I hadn't been unfaithful or driven them away. They chose to hurt me.

However, late last night when I'd calmed down, I thought about it all. The many

times I'd shut people out, clammed up instead of expressing my true feelings, not responded to their subtle needs for intimacy and constantly withholding my trust.

All a subconscious way to protect myself from abandonment and a possible excuse for being hurt by loved ones.

Did I push my exes to cheat? Hell no. But was I emotionally there? Not really. None of them made me feel safe being vulnerable, showing my weaknesses, or relaxed enough to simply let go.

Except Adanna. With her, the strong wall I'd constructed over my heart started to crumble. I fell in love with her, became truly open. And still, I managed to mess that up, too, by sending her away.

I dart my gaze to the bungalow and brush the bridge of my nose with my forefinger, blowing out a sigh of defeat.

"I'm parked outside her house like a bloody stalker. Can you believe that?" I say, sure that Dr Smith will know exactly who I'm talking about.

My relationship with Adanna was the sole topic of my therapy sessions with Dr Smith in my final week in London.

After that awful interview with Harry Masters, I felt terribly ashamed of myself for dismissing Adanna the way I'd done. That night, I tried ringing her to explain myself, but she'd blocked my number. I tried her social media platforms, but I'd also been blocked on every single one of them, including Cupidess.

Desperate to contact her, I purchased another SIM card. No dice. Probably figuring a UK number would be me trying to reach her, she blocked it, too.

Demoralized and terrified of losing Adanna, I contacted Dr Smith to arrange urgent sessions. I needed to spill my guts, talk to a specialist about my relationship with Adanna. Find out if I still had any chance of winning her back.

According to Dr Smith, I probably didn't. And yet, here I am, defying the sound suggestion from my therapist.

"Don't go after her now, Justin. You hurt and embarrassed her. Give her a

chance to forgive you.”

That’s fair advice. Except, for the first time in my life, I want to risk it all to get Adanna back. I don’t care how humiliating it becomes, if I have to beg or bribe her. Whatever it takes for her to come back to me.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

Dr Smith’s question comes out in her typical even tone, like the sound of a flowing stream, tranquil and soothing.

“Of course not,” I mutter. “But I’m going crazy not doing shit.”

“Justin,” she says, mild exasperation seeping into her tone. “What do you hope to achieve ambushing her?”

“I have no fucking clue. I just have to see her, talk to her, tell her how sorry I am for being a total idiot.”

“Well, would posting a letter to her not be a better option?”

Despite the anxiety gripping my insides, I allow a wry smile. “You must know nothing about Nigeria. The postal service is not functional. I’ll have to either hand a letter to her security man or toss it over the fence, hoping she sees it. Neither sounds appealing to me.”

“Then why don’t you wait a few days more and try calling her —”

The sound of metal grazing granite catches my attention. I turn to find the black gate of Adanna’s home sliding open. My breathing stalls. And apparently, so does my hearing, because I can no longer hear anything else Dr Smith is saying.

“I’ll have to call you back, Doc,” I say, keeping my gaze focused on the part of the compound I can see through the opened gates. There’s a black Range Rover parked inside. My heart lurches. That’s not Adanna’s Audi.

The front entrance to the building opens, and a man steps out beside Adanna. His arm is around her shoulders, and they are laughing heartily.

Fuck! Is that her new man? Has she really moved on?

My skin feels scorched, like I’m being slowly immersed in boiling water.

“Justin … don’t do anything stupid.” Dr Smith’s warning sounds from the mobile phone speaker like an audio narration of a movie scene.

Without taking my gaze off the lovey-dovey couple still cackling by the Range Rover, I end the call. Who the fuck is that man? Bile surges from my gut to the back of my throat, making me feel sick. A red haze clouds my vision as intense jealousy, hot and raw, overtakes every fibre of my being.

Jealousy. An utterly new emotion for me. Nothing, and absolutely nobody, has ever elicited violent tendencies in me. Not my biological mum’s preference for drugs and alcohol, or that my biological father is somewhere enjoying his life after raping a woman and leaving her pregnant with me. Not even the fear that the Duncans would one day decide I wasn’t worthy to be part of their family, and certainly, not any of my cheating exes.

But right now, my blood is boiling hot, and my fists are clenched with the need to punch something as Adanna’s cheery laughter rings out while she embraces the man tightly, her face bright with happiness.

The man who is dressed in khaki shorts, a t-shirt, and clunky brown boots, plants a kiss on her forehead and retreats into the vehicle. Adanna stands there, beaming as if the sun shines from his arse.

I can’t make out his distinct facial features from my distance, but there’s something familiar about him. Was he one of the men she danced with on her Instagram reel?

No, no, no. This can’t be happening. Adanna shouldn’t be with that chump. She’s mine!

I know it’s primal and oh-so-wrong, but the image of alpha male antelope locking horns over a female comes to mind.

The need to burst out of the car, race over to her, and haul her far away from him, from any other man, almost overpowers me. However, I remain seated, immobilized, unable to do anything but continue to observe Adanna’s new lover drive out of the compound in his fancy car, a pleased grin on his face.

Lucky devil. She used to make me smile like that. Why did I ever let her go?

My gaze focuses on her again, waving at the exiting vehicle. Such a beauty Adanna is. Dressed in a loose-fitting kimono that grazes her generous curves at just the right places, her hair tucked inside a scarf, and face makeup-less, she looks comfy and casual, like she usually does on a Saturday morning.

A sickening thought pops into my head. The man must have spent the night. It's just a few minutes after ten in the morning. So, he's either visiting quite early or woke up in her home. That means she trusts him.

No way ... this is too damn much. No way am I letting a bushy-haired, boot-wearing punk steal Adanna away from me. Absolutely no way.

The Range Rover speeds away from view, and in that moment, Adanna turns her head towards where I'm parked. My heart fibrillates as our gazes collide. Her eyes are saucer-wide with shock. Too late. She's caught me stalking her.

Blood pumping with determination, I push out of the car, slam the door shut, and take long strides across the street towards her.

"Close the gate, Mr Abdul. Don't let that man in." I hear Adanna's frantic cry as she retreats, rushing back towards her front door.

Is she so desperate to get away from me now? My chest constricts with pain. How has it come to the point that she isn't even willing to see me?

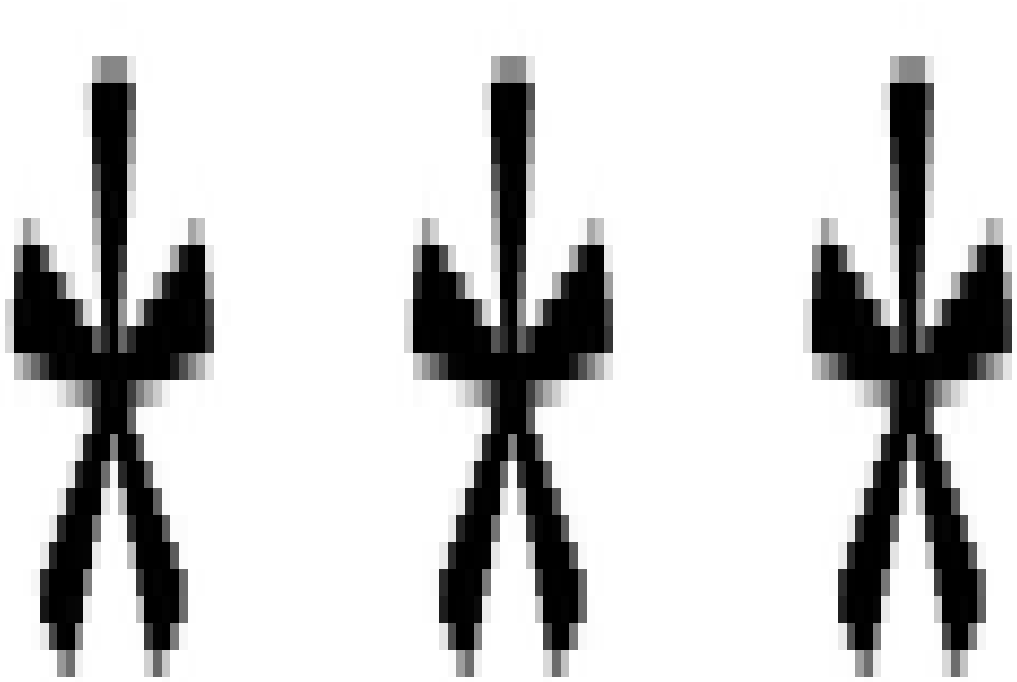
"Adanna, please," I call out, picking up my pace, dashing towards the gate with more urgency. "I just want to talk."

The black gate shuts in my face seconds before I reach it, leaving me panting, helpless, and to be honest, totally defeated.

Adanna's harsh sigh of relief reaches my ears from the other side of the metal gate. "Thank you, Mr Abdul," I hear her say to the gateman, then the sound of the front door slamming shut.

Another dead-end attempt to get Adanna to speak to me. Once again, I've messed things up. As if my feet are glued to the ground, I remain standing there for several seconds, pondering my next move. I have no clue what it'll be, but

I’ll never give up trying. That’s for damn sure.



Five days of letters. It has taken five days of writing long letters to Adanna—spilling my guts, telling her how sorry I am, pleading with her to give me a chance to apologise face to face—to finally convince her to agree to a meeting.

The first letter handed to Mr Abdul, he brought back unopened several minutes later. The second one was tossed right over the fence, still unread. The third and fourth never came back to me. But then, my fifth attempt was the one that clinched it, with Adanna's gateman approaching me, a smirk on his face and a sealed envelope in his possession.

"Madam said I should give you this," he said gruffly as he handed it to me.

"Will she talk to me?" I asked Mr Abdul.

He didn't respond. Just shook his head and walked away from where my hired vehicle was parked, the entire situation appearing to amuse him.

Fingers trembling with nervousness, I ripped open the letter to find a simple scribbled note from Adanna telling me to meet her at a specific address so we could talk.

Now, here I stand, dragging in a deep breath as I walk to the main gate of the address Adanna gave me. It's a white, medium-sized duplex at a cul-de-sac adjacent to a large expanse of land that looks like a golf course.

I press the bell and wait, my stomach twisted in knots and my neck muscles tight with tension.

Why did she choose here, and not her home or a restaurant? Is this where her new man lives? Is she trying to show me in clear terms how she's moved on to bigger and better things?

I grind my jaw. Well, I don't give a damn about a new boyfriend. I'm not going down without a fight, without telling her exactly how I feel about her, like I should have done in the first place.

The pedestrian gate slides open, revealing the man I saw in Adanna's home five days ago. Shit. My heart divebombs in my chest. This man really means a lot to

Adanna.

“Hi, I’m Justin Igwe, here to see Adanna please,” I say, struggling to keep the edge out of my voice. I don’t care for his threatening stance or the frown contorting his face.

“Come on in,” he says gruffly. “I’m Ugo Ezenna, Adanna’s older brother.”

Intense relief floods my senses, almost making me weak in the knees. Of course, that’s why he looked so familiar. I’ve seen pictures of him all over Adanna’s bungalow.

His thick ’fro and strong jaw are really quite distinct and memorable. The slight tilt upwards at the corners of his eyes resembles Adanna’s eyes, too. Damn. My jealousy erased all sense of recognition.

“Nice to meet you.” I stretch out my hand towards him for a handshake.

He doesn’t respond. Neither does he accept my gesture.

“Let’s go,” he says, turning away from me abruptly.

I swallow the saliva that pools in my mouth from nervousness. Okay, this is going to be tough, and I have more work to do. Not only do I have to convince Adanna to give us another go, I’ll also have to smooth things over with her brother.

Without so much as a glance in my direction, he leads me through the front door and into a spacious sitting room. I swerve my gaze to his in bewilderment. Nobody is here.

“I thought Adanna would be here …”

“Oh, she’ll soon be down,” he says with a sinister grin. “She’s upstairs with my wife. I saw you sitting in your car from the window and decided to have a talk with you first before getting her.”

“Oh, okay,” I murmur, a flutter in my belly. Definitely sounds serious. “Please can I have a seat?”

He nods. From his grave facial expression, I'm sure he's heard Adanna's side of the narrative. He has every reason to be upset, and I deserve whatever angry words he throws my way.

Settling in the chair opposite him, I lift my head to look him squarely in the face, preparing for his reprimand. I'll take it like a man. Even if he decides to throw a punch at me from the hand he has clenched into a fist, I'll accept every blow from him willingly. Lord knows if I had a sister, I'd hurt anyone who treated her the way I've done Adanna.

"Adanna is kind, thoughtful, and a good girl," he says, looking pointedly at me. "Any man would be lucky to have her. And despite my advice not to, she still wants to hear from you. Don't take her kindness for weakness. It would be a mistake."

I blow out a regretful sigh. I deserve this. Every bit of venom in his tone and the anger written all over his face. I messed up big time, taking Adanna for granted. I'll not make that mistake again.

"I won't," I say in a firm tone, hoping to convey that if I ever get a chance with Adanna, I will do my very best never to hurt her.

"Good," he mutters.

A simple acknowledgement aimed to reduce prolonged contact with me. It's obvious I've made a bad first impression. I swallow back another sigh. Hopefully, with time, I'll set things right between us.

"Let me go get her," he says, then turns away and walks out of the room.

Alone, I move my gaze around, taking in my environment. The living room is comfortably decorated with red leather seating arranged in a semicircle and facing a ceiling-to-floor, flatscreen television.

The Afrocentric, abstract paintings on the walls and the fresh, potted plants, arranged at aesthetic points in the room, give it a homey ambience.

A large portrait of Adanna's brother and his wife on their wedding day is on the wall beside my seat. The smile on his face is so disarming, completely different from his grim expression while with me. Maybe in the future, if Adanna forgives

me, I'll see a smile on his face directed at me.

For now, I need to concentrate on what to say to Adanna to explain my horrid behaviour the last time I saw her.

I've not been able to articulate my thoughts adequately in the letters I sent to her. How does one convey the terror of being so happy with another person that they sabotage it … by pushing the other person away so they avoid the pain of being hurt when that person leaves them? Almost impossible to describe my innate fears without coming off like a total nutter.

Approaching footsteps draw my mind back. My heartrate takes a giant leap and starts beating ferociously. I drag in a slow breath. I need to calm my crazed nerves.

Her soft, floral scent assuages my senses before I've even seen her. That perfect blend of sweet fragrances unique to Adanna, always filling my mind with images of bright colours and tropical islands. An aroma with the power to arouse and soothe me all at once.

Like an apparition, she strolls into the room, her bare feet moving gracefully on the plush white carpet as if walking on air.

God in heaven, she's lovely. She's wearing a red-and-white summer dress that drapes her generous curves like a caress. Her usual twists have been undone and combed out into a thick Afro fanning from her head in a glorious cloud.

With barely any makeup on her smooth, oval-shaped face—only a glistening, nude lip gloss coating her succulent lips—she looks like a dream come true. My personal vision of paradise.

Six bloody weeks without seeing that face, without the sweet sound of her voice, without touching her. How did I manage not to go insane? Why did I think I could live without her?

Did I only meet her five months ago? Damn, the way I feel about Adanna, it seems like I've known her forever, loved her for years. How can one woman mean so much to me in so little time?

Stopping about an arm's breadth from me, Adanna wraps her arms over her

midriff in an almost defensive gesture. “Hello, Justin,” she says, a wary lilt in her voice.

Oh, to hear her call my name again with that husky voice that drives me insane with want, even if there’s a cautious flare in her eyes as she looks at me.

My Adanna. My African queen. My mother used to tell me all the time, “You’ll know when you meet the right person. It’s something in your gut.”

Well, my gut’s screaming out, “Adanna is the one.”

Intense emotion clogs my throat, making it difficult for me to respond immediately. I swallow and clear my throat in a feeble attempt to rejuvenate my vocal cords.

“Adanna,” I say in a raspy whisper, rising to my feet.

Without a thought, I drop on one knee and reach into my jeans pocket to pull out a small box.

I open it, heart racing and tossing in my chest like a speedboat on rocky waters. My fingers tremble as I hold it out to her with a shaky smile. “Will you marry me?”

Chapter Twenty

ADANNA



“What the fuck?”

The startled cry leaves my lips before I can stop myself. Eyes wide in shock, I stare at the huge, single diamond peeking out from the tiny open box, the dazzling clarity of the oval stone sparkling and blinding.

Then, my eyes move to Justin, who is kneeling on the carpet, looking up at me, an uncertain smile splayed on his lips.

Blood rushes to my head, making me feel a little lightheaded. I take a step back to steady myself. Suddenly, an intense bout of anger saturates my senses, spreading fiery waves of heat all over my skin.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Justin? Are you insane?” I shake my head, unable to believe what is happening. A proposal? A marriage proposal?

“Two weeks ago, you told the entire frigging world you weren’t dating anyone. That we’re just friends. And now you’re here on one knee asking me to marry you? What the actual fuck, Justin?” I pause, waiting for his response.

He remains on bended knee, his hand still outstretched, and his face a frozen mask of confusion, like he’s in a scene from a sitcom. A very badly scripted one.

After watching the interview where he flippantly denied our relationship to the entire world, I was gutted, crying for hours until fury eventually overtook me. Mostly at myself for being stupid enough to let my guard down and believe he cared about me.

That night, I blocked his mobile number and every other avenue of possible contact. I even blocked several unknown numbers that rang my phone, not wanting to risk hearing his voice and becoming even more angry and upset.

I managed to get to a point where thinking about him didn’t hurt as much, until he turned up at my house like a creepy stalker.

Seeing him brought back all the emotions I thought I’d successfully buried. Rage and confusion had been at the forefront, battling for dominance, until my anger won the upper hand and I dismissed him.

Still, no matter how hard I've tried to let him go, I found myself weakening at his persistent attempt to talk to me through letters.

Although I kept three of them, I didn't open any. Words on paper don't mean much to me. I needed him to tell me to my face why he treated me like garbage, shut me out of his life like I didn't matter.

Today, I braced myself for a long apology, a half-arsed attempt to win me over, a request for us to resume our friendship … or even start dating again. But nothing, absolutely nothing, prepared me for this. I press my lips together in a disapproving frown.

"Is this what you think all women want?" I roll my eyes. "Maybe you're thinking, I'll treat her any way I please, then ask her to marry me. They all want to be married, don't they? It will definitely solve everything, and all will be right in the world again."

The words rush out of my mouth without so much as a breath between because of the annoyance bellowing inside me. "You invited me over to your house for breakfast, almost screwed me at the door, and seconds later, told me to fuck off. Then, you travel out of the country without so much as a word to me, and announce on live television that I mean nothing to you. Now, you want to marry me?"

A mirthless laugh erupts from deep within my belly. "If I weren't so fucking pissed off right now, I'd actually turn this shitshow into a bestselling comedy."

He still says nothing, staring at me as if he's in a trance, although I notice a hint of a smile touch his lips. His amusement should upset me more, given that his ridiculous behaviour this afternoon is nowhere near funny, but it has the opposite effect.

In the twitch of his lips to prevent smiling or cackling, I see that I've finally got through to him. The fog of absurdity that overtook him that dreadful morning has begun to dissipate, showing just a hint of the Justin I fell for. Maybe he now realises how stupid this all is, how weird he's been.

Spent from the intensity of my outburst, I drag in a calming breath. I've got everything I want to say off my chest. It's time to hear Justin out. But first, this ridiculous marriage proposal needs to stop right now.

“C’mon, Justin,” I say in a gentler tone, hoping to drive home my point without bruising his ego. It can’t be easy proposing to a woman who isn’t ecstatically screaming yes, yes, yes! “I know you don’t really want to get married. Not now anyway. And frankly, neither do I. Stand up, and let’s talk like sensible people.”

Relief relaxes his facial muscles as he rises to his feet, his face breaking into a grin. My belly flutters. Damn, I’ve missed that smile. And he looks so good. Absolutely divine in ripped jeans and a black t-shirt that highlights the expanse of his broad shoulders.

God, he smells fantastic, too. The woodsy cologne that always makes me want to bury my face in his neck and savour his unique scent.

Just looking at him now, the skin around his eyes puckered, and the straight, white teeth exposed by his sexy smile, and all I want to do is rush into his arms and hang on for dear life. To kiss him until the rubbish that’s happened between us these past few weeks is totally forgotten.

Without a doubt, I’ve missed him. The Justin Igwe that I could talk to about my boss, the one who I found myself trusting with more and more of me.

“Adanna, I’m so sorry,” he mutters, tearing me from my musings. “For being an arse. For everything.”

“You’ve apologised many times, Justin.” I let out an exasperated sigh. “But what I really want to know is why? Why did you shut me out the way you did, and in such a hurtful way?”

He heaves in a sharp breath, his face falling as if remembering that morning with shame. “It … I … Can we sit first?”

I glance around and nod, settling on the sofa opposite the one he vacated. He reclaims his seat and pins his gaze on me.

“I … I’ll just be direct about this.” He exhales sharply and clears his throat, leaning forward as if about to divulge trade secrets. “My biological father raped my biological mother, and she got pregnant from that. I’m a product of violence.”

My entire body goes into shock at his revelation. Of all the things I’ve imagined

his father could have done, including rape, I never contemplated this twist of events.

Sorrow shutters his eyes like he's been taken back to a dark place where he'd rather not be. Oh, my God. How horrifying it must be to realise that you exist because another person was violated.

"Nancy told me several years ago," he continues in a quiet and reflective tone. "And since then, I've never felt quite the same."

Utterly disturbed by this, yet incredibly saddened that Justin has been dealing with this private hell on his own, I remain silent, unable to think of anything meaningful to contribute at the moment.

"All my life, I hated my birth mother, the woman who abandoned me multiple times for drugs and alcohol. Even when I learned about her own messed-up childhood, and that her addiction probably stemmed from that, I wished her dead so many times." He drags a palm down his face, his gaze distant and tortured, as though transporting himself mentally to that awful period of his life. "When she developed liver cancer, I blamed myself for the years I wished death on her."

"It's not your fault—" I begin, hoping to say something comforting, anything to remove the sorrow in his eyes.

"I know that in my head," he says, cutting me off, lifting his shoulders in a defeated shrug. "But it still doesn't stop my guilt. I mean, there I was, enjoying an affluent life in London with a wonderful adoptive family, and my birth mother, for whom I'd wished a dreadful death, was dying in a care home in Liverpool with no family or friends."

I swallow hard, watching the raw pain in his eyes and feeling helpless, knowing nothing I say will make things better. This is something he has to deal with on his own, find a way to forgive himself for his misguided sense of guilt.

"Even though I tried to visit every now and again, it just didn't seem enough. She was withering away slowly, and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it. I couldn't wish it away."

Justin taps his foot on the floor twice and then stops, like an odd ritual he has to go through to continue his narrative. "Just before she died, she told me what my

biological father did to her and how she became pregnant. My guilt tripled. Became unbearable. I felt like once again, I'd hurt Nancy, let her down."

"But you know that's not true, it's totally absurd to feel —"

"I know. But knowing doesn't change the way I feel," he interjects in a low, raw tone. "The blood that flows through my veins is that of a rapist. I'm the son of a man who violated her. The same son who prayed for his own mother's death."

Goodness. Such a warped analysis of the entire situation. Now, I realise why Justin wanted to deal with his emotions by himself. There's no other person that can unravel the complex layers of contradictory conclusions he's allowed himself to believe for years except Justin.

A wave of sorrow floods my senses. I'll have to let him do this on his own. We can't survive as a couple if he doesn't find a way to heal. He'll only end up hurting me. Or I him. His next words haul me back from my troubled ruminations.

"On the morning I found out who my biological father is, my first reaction was intense disappointment. Guess why?" He hesitates, as if expecting an answer.

I part my lips to speak, but before I can say anything, he continues.

"I'd hoped he was suffering somewhere from a disease, unhappy and miserable instead of the wealthy, fulfilled entrepreneur and family man he is. I'd also wished evil on him, too, Adanna."

I swallow back my need to say that it would be a well-deserved fate for a rapist. I know Justin is still processing the emotions raging through him as he's speaking. So, I let him talk without interrupting his train of thought.

"Adanna, I love you. Right from the first time I clicked on the Cupidess app, I knew you were special, different, the kind of woman I'd want to be with."

His words, and the earnestness in his eyes, snatch my breath away. Although he is revealing his love for me, there's also pain saturating his voice. He is not happy to be in love. It's an unwelcome emotion.

My chest constricts. I love Justin and want to be with him, too. But I want a man

who is happy, ecstatic about his love for me.

He takes a long, slow breath in, as if gathering himself together to reveal a harsh truth. “But I worry about being able to have a healthy relationship. I’ve never felt like this before. Never known how to love anyone. Not my biological parents, not anyone I’ve ever dated. Even though I finally found a way to love my adoptive family, I’m still never fully relaxed and vulnerable with any of them but Mrs Duncan. She’s the only one who has managed to get through to me.”

His eyes meet mine, and my heart lurches at the depth of uncertainty there. “What if I’m unable to love because I’m a product of violence?”

“Oh, Justin,” I murmur when he’s finished speaking. “Is this the reason you shut me out? Because you believe that you’re not capable of love? That you are somehow born with an emotional defect because of what your father did?”

He nods. “I just worry about eventually hurting you.”

I puff out a soft sigh, rise and walk over to where he’s seated. Plopping myself on the plush carpet beside him, I reach for his hand.

“Well, I don’t believe you are defective. Or that because of what your father did, you are damaged,” I say, stroking the back of his hand with my thumb. “And I know you know the truth of my words. You are the only one responsible for who you turn out to be.”

I point to his temple. “You’re smart, and I’m sure that you know it in there.” Lowering my finger to the left side of his torso, I tap on his chest. “But you need to believe it in here. There’s nothing I can say to you that would make a difference if you don’t receive it in here.”

Giving his hand a gentle squeeze, I add, “I love you, Justin. But I think you were right that morning when you told me to leave. Whether through the help of a therapist, personal reflection, or through the help of family and friends, this is something you need to deal with on your own before getting into any serious relationship.”

He stiffens. “Adanna —”

I stop him with a soft kiss on his lips. “I’ll always be here for you … as a friend.

I'll listen if you ever need to talk. But you know as well as I do, that you're the only one who will know if you're ready for more to happen between us."

"No, Adanna, I'm ready …" His voice is hoarse with emotion. He cradles my face in his hands, a desperate glint in his eyes. "I don't want to lose you, or what we had together. I was a fool for letting you go."

My own chest burns because it hurts to be honest about this. Although I want to go back to things the way they were, I know that Justin isn't ready yet. He's still in an uncertain space when it comes to us, and to protect my heart, I have to let him go.

The reasons he shut me out in such a reckless way haven't changed. No point going back to the way things were without him healing his wounds.

"You'll never lose me," I say, propping myself more upright on the floor and pressing a kiss to his forehead. "But I need you to be convinced about us being more than friends, about giving our relationship another go. I'm not sure you are there yet."

He lifts his head, his mouth pops open, like he's about to refute my statement. However, he shuts it again and nods, pulling me into his arms.

"Oh, Adanna, I love you," he rasps. "I don't want to lose you … I can't lose you …"

Tears spill from the corners of my eyes as I embrace him, letting the emotions overtake me. "You won't. Not as a friend," I vow.

No matter what happens between me and Justin, I'll always make time to be there for him like he was for me when I was going through hard times with my boss.

Chapter Twenty-One

JUSTIN



I miss Adanna like hell. So badly that there are times I want to barge into her house and demand that we end this friendship business and become lovers again, anything but the platonic relationship we've been coasting through for these past two weeks.

Yes, she's reopened the channels of communication, and we talk on the phone a lot. We've even met up ... twice for lunch and once for dinner. But that isn't enough. Not when every time I see her, I want to pull her into my arms and beg her not to walk away.

"It's so hard to keep to her wishes, Dr Smith. I want more than she's offering." I rake my fingers through my cropped hair. "For the first time, I actually want a woman so badly that I'm unable to concentrate on anything. But I know Adanna's right. I need to sort things out in my head first."

Dr Smith nods, scribbling onto a notepad in her lap. "It's quite difficult when what we want conflicts with what's good for us."

"I know. But the more I stay away, the more anxious I am she'll eventually drift away from me."

"And why do you think so?"

"I don't know why. But it's just scary to think of that happening."

"And how do you cope with the fear?"

"Trying to do as you say, think about the positives."

"Does that help?"

"It does. Sometimes."

"Well, that's a massive improvement, Justin, focusing on the positives always changes our perspective," Dr Smith says with a wry smile. Flipping a page from her notepad, she asks, "Did you do the assignment I asked you to do last time we spoke?"

I twist my lips and huff. Two weeks of online therapy sessions with Dr Smith, and it already feels like being back in school. She is passionate about the mental health and wellbeing of her clients and takes her job seriously. Even though it's quite an expensive venture for me at £85 per hour, my spirits have vastly improved.

Thanks to the two, hourly video sessions with her three times a week since my preposterous marriage proposal, I've begun to unravel the defective mechanisms I've developed in coping with my emotions. In the past, I hardly participated in any take-home assignments Dr Smith required.

But because of my love for Adanna, I've been willing to engage more, try to get more from my therapy sessions than simply my talking and her listening with the occasional remark.

She's organised a new type of psychological treatment for me called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. According to her, CBT is a way to challenge my thinking process in order to change the way I behave.

Six sessions and two take-home exercises, and I can feel the benefits. Especially regarding the negative emotions I direct towards myself as a result of the circumstances surrounding my conception, birth, and early life.

"Yes, Dr Smith," I say, reaching for the notebook beside me. I lean forward on my desk, flick through a few pages until I find what I'm looking for.

"You told me to itemise three negative emotions and write a positive twist to them."

She nods, taps her fingers over her crossed knee and says, "Can we hear the first one?"

"Negative emotion: I'm worried my relationship with Adanna is over," I say, reading the first sentence on the page of my notebook. "Positive twist: I'm grateful that Adanna is giving me the space I need to sort through my emotions, that she's concerned about my emotional wellbeing first. We are also talking more and re-establishing the friendship I almost destroyed."

"Excellent, Justin," Dr Smith says, giving me a slight nod of approval. "For every negative automatic thought, there's a positive spin that you can put on it to

change the way you respond to the situation. How does this different perspective make you feel?”

I take a deep breath in, thinking about the jumbled emotions I have gone through in the last two weeks. When I met up with Adanna and Brenda for lunch four days ago, we had a great time. Most especially me, because seeing Adanna again after nearly a week thrilled me beyond measure.

I loved watching her enthusiasm as she talked about her new job as a talk show host in one of the growing television networks. She was enthusiastic about the prospect of shooting the first episode in a couple of days. It was gratifying to watch her laugh, see the joy reflecting from every fibre of her being as she spoke. However, there was a tiny part of me that felt defeated about it all. Irrationally jealous about the way she seemed so fulfilled without me. Her carefree attitude meant she has really moved on.

When I lowered my head to kiss her on the cheek at the end of our luncheon, I could swear I heard her breath catch, saw a spark of awareness in her eyes, but she withdrew quickly, retreated to her unaffected disposition, and waved goodbye. I watched regretfully as she strolled away, walking toward her red Toyota Camry.

Her shiny, new ride also took me aback. Fiery red and trendy, it suited her. But that had been my plan, to surprise her with a car on her first day of work. Her beating me to it put another dent in my confidence. It just felt like she was moving too fast and too far out of my orbit.

Putting a positive spin on my feelings of loss has been difficult. However, the regret I noticed etched in Adanna’s eyes as she turned back to glance at me one final time before she drove off is forever seared in my brain. I know she’s also not happy about the way things are between us. Her best friend Brenda, who was standing by me as we said goodbye, pretty much told me so.

“She misses you, you know,” Brenda said. But before I could respond, she turned and sashayed away.

Those words soothed me, wrapped around me like a warm blanket on a chilly night as I stood there for several minutes, staring into space long after they’d left.

“I miss Adanna terribly. But I’m glad she’s giving me time. The more I’ve allowed myself to process my emotions, the more I realise how precious being with someone who loves me is. One thing I’m sure of is that I’ll never take her for granted if we get back together.”

“Wonderful, Justin.” Dr Smith scribbles something on her notepad. “And the second emotion?”

I glance down and read from my notes. “Negative emotion: I regret trying to find my biological father. Positive spin: I’d never have met Adanna if I didn’t embark on this journey. Never have experienced the wonderful Nigerian culture she’s exposed me to.”

“That’s a fantastic way to look at regrets,” Dr Smith says. “I think regret is rarely helpful. There’s always something to learn from every disappointing situation. How do you feel about that second positive spin of emotions?”

I take a deep breath in, excited to share my response. “Amazing, Dr Smith,” I say. “I’ve decided to buy a home in Nigeria. Somewhere nice and comfy. It would be a way to stay in touch with my roots, a nice little home where I can relax when I’m not shooting my TV show in London.”

“Great news, Justin. And how’s that going?”

“I’ve already contacted a realtor. So hopefully, things will move smoothly.”

“Brilliant.” She jots down quickly on her pad. “And your final emotion ...”

I peep at the scribble on my own notebook and sigh. This was the most difficult to write. Because I’ve been researching a lot about my biological father since Ola called me to confirm that he’d managed to get a DNA sample from a used cup Professor Sylvester Amadi had discarded at a public function.

Ola told me he’d been trailing the heavily guarded, wealthy businessman for weeks until he’d got the golden opportunity when Professor Amadi attended the wedding of a minister’s daughter.

Disguised as one of the service men for the occasion, Ola managed to get inside the event, close to Professor Amadi, and obtain the sample which he’d sent off for analysis to a lab in South Africa, which is the only one he trusts for accuracy.

If all goes as expected, the results should be available in two weeks.

“Negative emotion: I’m worried that I’ll not know how to handle the fact that the man who raped my mother so long ago is no longer the monster I made him out to be in my head.” My stomach roils as I stare at the positive spin I’ve written under the text.

Researching about my supposed biological father has been hardest on me. The man is a prolific philanthropist, a devoted father to his four children, the employer of so many people. Professor Amadi donates funds to a lot of failing public sectors, including local government schools. He also buys out struggling companies to keep them afloat and maintain jobs.

But my most recent discovery about him shook the depth of my animosity towards him. He is the main financial contributor to Amadi Angels, a non-profit foundation headed by his eldest daughter that runs orphanages located in Lagos, Abia State, and Kastina.

How can such a man, who is an epitome of kindness in the community, also be a violent man? The more I discover about him, the more confused I’ve become. How can I despise, yet admire, a man so much?

“Positive twist: I may never forgive him for what he did to Nancy, or reconcile with the fact that I was conceived in an act of violence. However, I can appreciate the power of change. I’ll have to accept the possibility of transformation. Change is constant. I can adapt to change.”

Dr Smith smiles broadly. “This is a massive breakthrough moment for you, Justin,” she says, her eyes twinkling with glee, and her chin tilted up in pride. The way she usually looks when I’ve said something she agrees with. “It must have taken quite a lot to come up with this positive interpretation of negative feelings. What do you think about this alternative spin?”

As I explain to her how my research into my biological father’s life began to change my perspective, I realise that Adanna is absolutely right about slowing things down between us. I would never have been able to have a healthy relationship with her or anyone else while harbouring so much hate in my heart. For my biological mother, my biological father, and in a twisted way, for myself.

Somewhere deep inside, I feel that exposing the most negative emotion I’ve had

since I found out about my biological father, bringing it out raw and on the surface, talking about it and dealing with it openly, has finally reduced the control it has over my thought process.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ADANNA



First day of shooting Sunsets in Lagos. I'm excited and nervous. This whole thing is beyond my wildest dreams. I can hardly believe it's really happening. Sitting here, dressed in a glamorous black-and-white, polka-dot gown while the beauticians work on my hair and makeup, I have to tap myself every now and again just to check I'm awake and this is real.

"Hmmm ... a darker shade of lipstick might suit the makeup better. What do you think?" Rosemary, the young makeup artist who's been fussing over my face for the past twenty minutes, asks me.

I glance at the mirror and gasp. Wow, I look glamorous. My hair has been twisted and packed into a stylish updo. My eyebrows are shaped to flawless arcs, and the false lashes fanning my eyelids look natural, but better.

The contouring and foundation on my face is blended to perfection, especially the bronzing of my cheekbones, which gives an excellent finishing. Even without lipstick, I look like a leading lady on a movie set. Face beat dot com!

Beaming, I turn to the brilliant beautician before me. "I trust your judgement. Whatever you think is best."

She gives me a self-assured smile and continues working. As she strokes my lips with a brush, I cast a nervous glance at the script on the vanity table in my dressing room—a moderately-sized cubicle adjacent to the studio where I'll be centre stage in the next thirty minutes.

My very first TV segment will be a videotaped interview with Abiodun Oladokun, a well-respected entrepreneur who's revealed being sexually harassed by two superiors in her climb to the top of the banking industry.

I will also have a discussion with the tech giant Namisco's head of HR on best practices to handle sexual harassment at work and to support other employment agencies taking action on perpetrators in the workplace.

I've gone over the questions I'll be asking and my prompts so many times in the past two weeks, practicing with Brenda and my brother.

I take a deep breath in, trying to steady my frayed nerves. "It should be alright.

I'll be fine," I mutter under my breath. The affirmative words boost my confidence a bit. Still, my stomach makes a half turn. What if I develop stage fright and completely freeze up in front of everyone, including Mr Okafor who has so much faith in me? What if I mess up and am unable to deliver my best performance for this interview?

A tap on the door breaks through my musings, and Rosemary halts her work. I turn my head. "Who is it?" I call out.

"Justin."

My heart leaps with joy. He is here. Thank God.

"Come in," I say, doing multiple cartwheels inside. Holding my breath, I wait as the door opens and he steps in.

God, this man makes my whole world come alive. Just seeing him has the power to conjure up multiple emotions. Joy, excitement, anxiety, love, peace, fear of abandonment. The emotions are all-consuming, leaving my senses in a state of heightened arousal, and making me a bundle of nerves.

For the first time ever, I'm seeing him in a traditional, black kaftan and trousers with a black-and-silver hat, looking like a gorgeous Nigerian prince. The way the loose, silky material manages to hug the muscles of his chest and arms makes me want to rip it off him right now and jump his bones.

He smiles at me uncertainly, and my pulse beats in double time. Those succulent lips. Oh, I've missed them on mine, on my body … between my thighs. How can I continue my aloofness, acting like he's just a friend when any time I see him or hear his voice, the memories of our wonderful time together come flooding in?

Totally ridiculous. I've seen this man naked many times, had his athletic body pressed to mine in the most intimate way. All I can think of right now is rushing into his arms and pulling him in for a much needed kiss.

Three weeks of skittering through this limbo of a platonic relationship—look but don't touch, dream but don't act—it's driving me insane. I'm fucking horny, frustrated, and lonely. I miss him. So badly.

This morning, I walked into the studio, excited to finally begin my journey into

media like I've always dreamed of. Yet, a sense of restlessness consumed me. I knew exactly what was missing. I wanted Justin here. To be with me for the first video shoot of Sunsets in Lagos.

He was the only one I felt free to talk with about Chief Madu. I love the way he listens attentively without trying to impose his opinions on me. Even when he doesn't agree, he supports my decisions.

His calming presence helped me through it all. A few hours ago, as I buzzed about, trying to sort through my emotions on the most nerve-wracking day of my entire career, it hit me like a ton of bricks that I needed Justin here with me. After all, he also has experience with media.

Pushing aside my innate reservations and fear of rejection, I quickly pulled out my mobile phone and rang him.

"I'll be there ASAP," he said. No hesitation, no questions.

Now, here he is, and my heart is soaring like an eagle, unbelievably thrilled to see him.

"You look absolutely amazing," he says, giving me a once-over, like a slow caress.

My cheeks warm up. His dark eyes connect with mine, and heat suffuses my entire body. Undisguised admiration and lust spark in his pupils as his gaze trails over me.

A shudder runs through me. Unbelievable—the intensity of the response his mere perusal provokes within me.

My goodness. There are two other occupants in this room, both here to glam me up, but my tunnel vision is focused on only Justin. He's the only one I see.

"Thank you," I murmur, my lips slanting into a small smile, my heart thudding almost dangerously. "And so do you. First time I'm seeing you dressed like this." I sound like a babbling idiot, but I can't help myself. This man has the power to reduce me into a stuttering teenager in the presence of her crush.

He glances down at his attire and grins. "Oh, this? You really like it? I feel like a

phoney wearing it with my British accent."

I slide my gaze over him slowly, appreciating how the kaftan emphasises his striking physique. "You could never look like a phoney in anything," I say. "I love it."

His eyes light up at my blatant admiration. "Well, I'm glad I wore it then." He moves farther into the room and settles on the cushion beside me. "How are you feeling about today?"

"Nervous, excited, hopeful … nervous…" I say, his closeness making me flustered.

He reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze. "You'll be amazing. I'm certain of it."

"Oh, I hope so … I worry about freezing up and becoming tongue-tied," I murmur. "Does that ever happen to you on set?"

He nods with a wry smile. "All the bloody time. Just take a deep breath in and out, look at the teleprompter and continue. Nobody expects you to be perfect. Just relatable. Remember that."

"Oh, Justin, thank you for being here. I know you're busy, and —"

"Never too busy for you," he says, cutting me off with another squeeze of my hand.

My heart swells at his words, the earnestness in his eyes. He looks genuinely relaxed, more himself, no longer haunted by the negativity surrounding his past.

As our gazes interlock, my tongue burns with all the words I want to say, my mind whirling with the multiple questions I want to ask. Does he want to try again? Is there going to be a future for us if we get back together? Isn't it better to cut our losses now and move on?

"I think we're done here."

A deep voice snags my attention back. I snatch my gaze from Justin's and look up to find Lanre, the glam squad leader, adjusting the pendant of my neckwear.

Oh, Lord, I'd forgotten that Justin and I aren't alone. My face burns from embarrassment as I turn to the mirror. The final work of the beauticians is absolutely top-notch.

"Brilliant, guys, thank you," I say, applauding their amazing effort with the clapping of my hands.

Lanre beams. "You are most welcome, darling. You look television-ready. Go knock 'em out."

I laugh out at his overt dramatization and the way he snaps his fingers as he speaks. "Thank you. I feel like a princess."

"You are, darling. Do us proud."

As they both pack up their makeup kit, I watch them silently, grateful that they've made me look the way I should be feeling. Confident and beautiful.

Lanre and Rosemary stroll out of the room as soon as they are done, leaving me alone with Justin.

Heart fluttering and butterflies flickering in my tummy, I turn back to look at him. My mouth parts into a gasp. His gaze is already pinned on me. Intense, and focused, like a scientist looking at a tissue sample through a microscope, trying to analyse intricate chromosomes for mutations.

My pulse rate escalates, and my skin feels hot and tight. Suddenly, the room feels stuffy, too small for both of us. I know there's a lot to say between us, a lot he wants to talk about.

"You'll be awesome today. Don't even sweat it," he murmurs, his voice husky.

My chest expands with warmth, the hoarseness of his tone sending shivers down my spine.

"Oh, Justin … thank you." My words come out in a breathless whisper.

I'm so glad he's here. I've missed him terribly. I want to tell him this. Tell him that I don't want to carry on this way—as if I don't love him and want him in my life.

It’s been several weeks of hell without holding him, kissing him, just being with him.

There’s so much to say, yet so much uncertainty. Has he made peace with himself? Is he prepared to let go of his past and carve a future with me? Does he trust me enough now to share his life with me? Can we really do this long-distance thing if he moves back to London?

My phone alarm goes off, shattering my thoughts. I glance at the screen, and then, back at Justin. “I have five more minutes. Can we talk after the show?”

Justin brushes a thumb across my jaw and nods. “Of course,” he says in a deep baritone that ignites the sensory nerves in my ears, shooting sparks of desire down my body and straight to my core.

He draws his seat closer, lowers his head and plants a firm kiss on my mouth. The message in the touch of his lips is clear and unwavering. We really do need to talk.

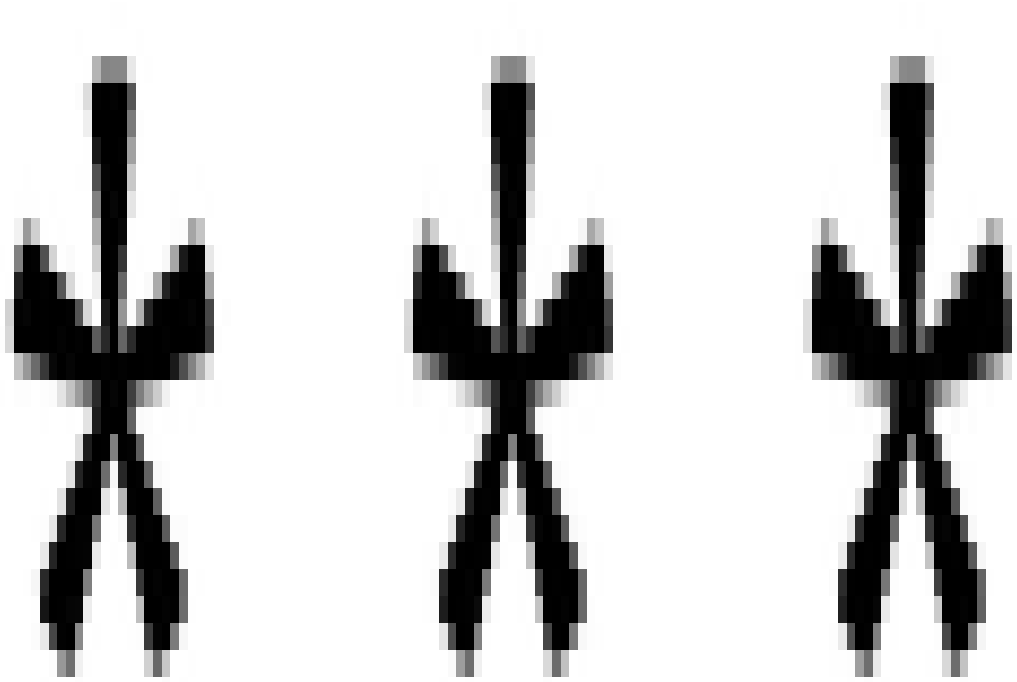
Lifting his head, he grazes his lips against my ear. “Go break a leg, hon. You’re going to be amazing.”

I sigh with pleasure. Things look promising already. Maybe everything will work out just fine between us.

“It’s going to be a great debut show,” I say. “I can feel it in my bones.”

“I know it will. Because you’re the star.”

Giddy with pleasure, my lips spread into a wide smile. It’s about time for things to turn around for me. I’ve struggled to get to this point in my life. This is my time to shine. I can do it.



“It’s a wrap,” says the production manager. His face splits into a relieved smile. “Great job, Adanna.”

Then, the entire crew unleashes a cacophony of cheers and applause. I may be a newbie, but even I can tell the show went off well. No major hitches at all.

“Great job, all of us,” I say, feeling tears in my eyes. “I couldn’t have done it without all your expertise and kindness. So, thank you, one and all.”

All eyes are on me in varying states of admiration, happiness, and relief. And I appreciate their support and congratulations, but there’s only one pair of eyes I need to see. I turn towards the backstage, where I know he’s waiting, and narrow my eyes on him.

He's standing there, with the backstage pass hanging around his neck, clapping like his life depends on it. His face is alight with absolute pleasure and pride. I pop up from my orange-cushioned seat and rush into his arms. I know it’s rude to everyone else, but I don’t care.

“Great job, Adanna. You did it.”

I wrap my arms around Justin’s neck, clinging to him as he whirls me around in the air, his firm hold on me exhilarating.

I feel the gaze of the crew members on me, and again, I just don’t care. Besides they need to get used to it. Justin means everything to me.

“I’m so happy,” I squeak in excitement. “So happy.”

“You were great, Adanna. You knew your stuff, and presented it brilliantly.” He lowers me to the floor and plants a kiss on my forehead. “Nobody could have done it better.”

“You think so?”

“I know so, babe.” He turns his gaze to the set and points to my seat. “Without you, there’d be no Sunsets in Lagos. You’re at the top of your game.”

Sweeping my gaze around, I smile. The show's décor has a homely feel … a plush orange leather seat for me and a matching couch for guests. A curved glass table with a fresh-flower arrangement. And in the background, a painting depicting Lagos mainland at dusk with Sunsets in Lagos boldly printed across the scene.

Simple, yet elegant. And all for me.

"Yep. I'm the shit," I quip, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"You certainly are."

"Well, thank —"

"Adanna!" The call of my name interrupts me.

I whirl around to see Mr Okafor waving me over. Two men stand beside him— one, an older man in his mid to late sixties, and the other, a much younger police escort.

The older man looks familiar. I've seen him somewhere. Maybe on TV? Is he a politician? He certainly looks like one, with the practiced smile plastered on his face as if he's about to give a speech. He's average height with a head of white hair and a slender frame. Wearing a simple, pale-blue kaftan with trousers, he seems ordinary, but the heavy gold watch hanging loosely on his wrist, and the shiny black leather shoes on his feet, scream old and new money.

"I'll be right back," I mutter to Justin.

Still searching my brain to figure out who the obvious dignitary is, I stride across the room to where the three men are standing.

"The show was fantastic, Adanna. Well done," Mr Okafor says. "So good that our very own oga wanted to congratulate you in person. He walked past during the shoot and ended up watching the entire show through the window. Said you and the topics discussed captivated him.

My chest expands with joy, and my cheeks are on fire from all the praise. "Oh, that's wonderful to hear." I turn to the older man.

“I really enjoyed watching. You’re a natural. Welcome to Liberty Network,” he says beaming and extends his hand to me. “I’m Sylvester Amadi.”

Ah, now I remember … he’s the owner of ALTV, one of the three top cable networks in Africa. I had no clue he also owned this one. Must be a silent partner.

“Thank you, sir,” I sputter, shaking his hand. “I’m Adanna Ezenna. And thank you for this amazing opportunity.”

“I should thank all of you. When I bought out Liberty Network last year, I hoped to make positive changes. I’m glad that you and other vibrant, young minds are getting on board and revamping the network’s image with so many fresh and innovative upcoming shows. Keep it up.”

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

“Okay, nice meeting you, Adanna,” Mr Amadi says. “And once again, well done. I’ve got to get a move on. I have a plane to catch in an hour.”

With a final nod of acknowledgement, he makes his exit, his bodyguard and Mr Okafor flanking him like two puppets being pulled by an invisible string he controls.

Excited about the encounter, I rush back to Justin.

“Guess who I just spoke to —”

I freeze at his facial expression. Justin stands stiff as a board, his eyes distant and unfocused, as if he’s just seen a ghost.

“Is everything okay? You look …” I trail off, concern choking the words out of me.

For several seconds, Justin remains mute. And then, he swallows hard, his jaw tightening.

“That was Sylvester Amadi,” he says.

“Yes, he came to congratulate me.” I smile, but something’s off with Justin.

“How do you know him?”

“The DNA confirmation came in this morning. He’s my biological father.”

Oh, my God.

How on earth could this be? Of all the people to come into the orbit of my small world at this crucial moment of my life, Justin’s biological father. The third wheel in our relationship. How could things get any worse?

Chapter Twenty-Three

JUSTIN



There are moments in life when one realises that the worst expectation of everything is magnified in the mind. This moment is one of them.

I've thought about meeting my biological father for a long time, dreamt about how we would meet since I was a little boy. In many of those dreams, I was successful and powerful, and he was poor, wretched, miserable, and on his knees, crawling back to me begging for my forgiveness.

When I discovered what he'd done to Nancy, the dreams intensified. I hoped he'd be sick, dying of an incurable disease, needing me as an organ donor. I fantasised many times how I would respond. The way I'd walk up to him and stand by his bedside at a dingy hospital, laughing in his face and telling him that I'd rather die than donate a single cell of my body to him.

Never in all those dreams did I picture this unremarkable scenario of meeting the man who had held so much control over my life. All the drama I imagined for years was thrown out the window.

I ended up seeing him by chance. And he breezed by without even sparing me more than a passing glance. The world didn't come crashing down, nothing special occurred. No poetic ending to all the pent-up emotions I'd accumulated from hating the man since I was a boy.

Even now, all the rage I expected to hurl his way, all the tension at what I expected would be a life-altering moment, didn't transpire. Not at all.

In fact, the primary emotion I feel right now is sheer surprise. The man whom I spent years loathing with a passion really isn't all that spectacular. Nothing about him is as mystical as I'd imagined. He's just a human with a sordid past that he's walking around trying to forget.

"Do you want us to find somewhere else to talk about this?" Adanna's question draws my attention to her. She is searching my face with concern in her eyes, her forehead furrowed with anxiety. "There's a canteen close by. We could grab lunch. Or we could go to your place."

I understand her deep concern. The way I treated her that morning I found out about my father—trying to have sex to soothe my pain, and then, tossing her out

with no explanation—of course, she's wary now. Thinking I might lose it now that I know my father is her boss.

I press my lips together, stop myself from telling her there's nothing to worry about. It's better to show her instead. So, I cup her face tenderly in my palms. Words won't matter at this moment. With time, I hope I'll be able to convince her that I'm liberated from the hold Sylvester Amadi has had on me.

My many counselling sessions with Dr Smith have done the trick that years of harbouring hatred and spinning revenge scenarios never did. Seeing the man who fathered me for the first time today—and feeling next to nothing—proves that almost every negative emotion is magnified in the mind.

"How about spending the afternoon sailing?" I ask Adanna, brushing my thumb across her jaw.

"W-what?" Her eyebrows arc in question as her eyes bulge almost comically.

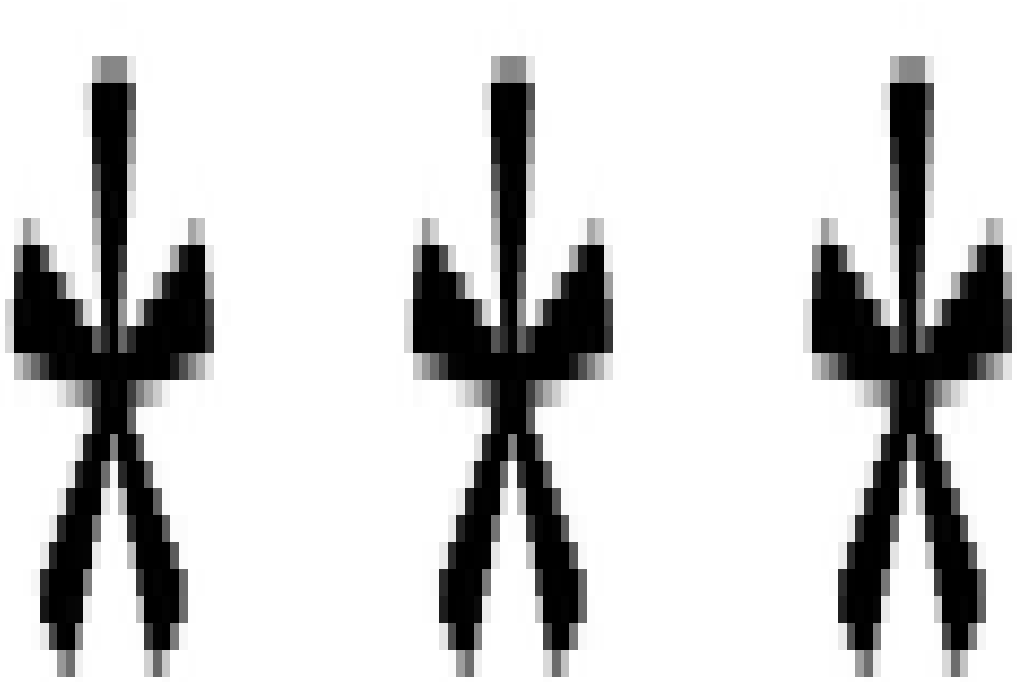
I bark out a laugh. "I booked a ride on a yacht at the Lagos Marina for us. I wanted to surprise you with a relaxing time after your first show's video shoot. We can have lunch there and talk. Is that okay?"

A grin spreads across her beautiful face, sending waves of pure joy down my spine. Seeing the elation my suggestion has brought her makes me want to reveal the ultimate surprise I'm planning for her.

"That would be awesome," she says. "Let me get my stuff so we can head out."

As I watch her walk away, warmth floods my chest. The day I'd imagined since childhood would be the worst day of my life has turned out quite okay. Seeing my biological father for the first time hasn't brought me any pain, any negativity. Not even the fact that he's Adanna's new boss changes how I feel.

For the first time in my life, I can truly say that I'm free.



“Oh, my goodness … this is beautiful,” Adanna gushes, her hands clutching the railing on the side deck of the sailing yacht, her gaze fixed on the clear blue waters ahead. “Thank you for this.”

My face breaks into a broad grin, thrilled by her excitement. She’s been wide-eyed since we stepped onto the yacht, curiously roving around like a tourist in Paris, and taking selfies at every single corner of the vessel.

I take advantage of her distraction to admire her. Her leopard-skin bikini emphasizes her narrow waist, generous breasts, and the smooth curve of her hips. With her silky skin glowing from the sun’s reflection, she looks like the wet dream of a sex-starved man like me. It’s hard to believe it’s been more than two months since I’ve buried myself inside her sweetness.

Still, my fantasies can’t compare with the thrill of having her here with me in the flesh, relaxed and happy in a state of undress that’s keeping my dick constantly hard and my concentration wavering.

A smile tilts my lips upwards as I recall the way she insisted that we stop by a shop on our way here to buy what she’s wearing.

“It’s my first time on a yacht. I have to look fabulous for the ’gram,” she said. “My pictures must pop.”

Of course, I obliged her. Now, I’m not sure if seeing her looking this sexy is doing me more harm than good. My libido is on the highest gear, but she’s having a blast, so it’s worth it. Luckily, I’m still fully clothed in my kaftan. So, it’s easy to hide my body’s response to her.

Still smiling, I stroll to stand beside Adanna on the side deck, and take in a deep breath, savouring the smell of the ocean mixing with the fresh scent of the amazing woman beside me.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” I say, echoing her words. “And relaxing. There’s just something about gliding over water that eases all tensions.”

She angles her head to me and grins. “I understand. It’s so lovely that I never want to get off. I could live here forever.”

“Ha! You’d have to sleep with one eye open because of dangerous sharks.”

She laughs out. “Sharks? In Nigeria? I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, have you seen the horrible economy?” She glares at me in mock horror. “Sharks are able to swim to anywhere in the world. Why would they want to suffer in this country?”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Living in Nigeria is not as bad as you all make it out to be. Come on, I love it here …”

She snickers, sticking out her tongue at me playfully. “That’s because you can buy your way out of most of the unpleasantness. And when you can’t and are fed up with the BS, you can hop a plane to London and be done with it.”

I stiffen at her comment. So does she. As if she’s just realised the weighty implications of what she just said. The other huge topic we’ve danced around—my impending return to England.

We remain silent for several seconds, her attention now back on the water. I wonder what’s going through her mind. Is she thinking about all the uncertainties between us? The obstacles we’ll have to overcome if we decide to give our relationship another go?

I have it all worked out in my head. But will she consider my offer? I drag in a deep breath. “Adanna, can we try again?”

She turns to face me, her lips quivering, the pulse at the base of her neck fluttering.

“I won’t quit my job,” she says in a soft voice. “This television show is the big shot I have been waiting for all my life. I can’t let it go.”

Relief floods my senses. Not a definite refusal. That’s promising.

“I wouldn’t want you to quit your job for me, Adanna. Why would I ever want that?”

“Well, you hate your father, and he owns the network. He’s technically my boss.”

“The man is not my father. I have a father whom I love with all my heart. His name is Mr Duncan from Liverpool.”

The skin between her eyebrows crinkles, like my comment confuses her. I chew the flesh inside my cheek to keep from cracking a smile. Her surprise at my carefree response is quite amusing.

“Adanna, I have you to thank for forcing me to face the underlying pain behind my behaviour that morning when I acted like a heel.” I cover her hand resting on the rail with mine. “Now, I’ve come to realise I gave a man who doesn’t even know of my existence so much power over me. Seeing him today, the way his eyes flickered over me with no sign of recognition, confirms what my therapist has opened my eyes to. All that pain, the animosity ... it’s all in my head, affecting me and not the person who should be ashamed of his past.”

“Oh, Justin.” She sighs in pleasure, a wonky smile playing on her lips. “I’m so happy for you. That you’ve found peace.”

I raise her hand and press it over the left side of my chest, making sure she feels the beating of my heart. “Thank you, Adanna. I want you to know that none of that matters anymore. You are the most important thing to me.”

Tears glisten in her eyes as she gazes up at me. “You’re important to me, too, Justin.” With the back of her hand, she wipes an errant tear trailing down her cheek. “But what about when you go back to England? I can’t leave my job or my family to be with you, and I worry about the distance.”

“What if I decide to stay in Nigeria with you?”

Her mouth pops open, emitting a shocked gasp. “W-what? And quit your own job? No way! I’m a fan of Men of Valour. I can’t let you do that.”

“Who says I’d be quitting my job? Nobody has to quit anything.”

“I don’t understand.” She rubs her forehead, her gaze clouding with confusion.

“Well, I usually shoot my series from the first week of June for two to three

months. And you also shoot yours ahead of release, with two monthly breaks in between, right?”

She nods, but there’s still a blank look on her face, likely not yet putting the pieces together.

“We could always work it out so that you’re in England when I’m shooting and I’m in Nigeria when you’re shooting.”

“Oh …” Her eyes light up with understanding. “That’s clever … I never even thought of that.”

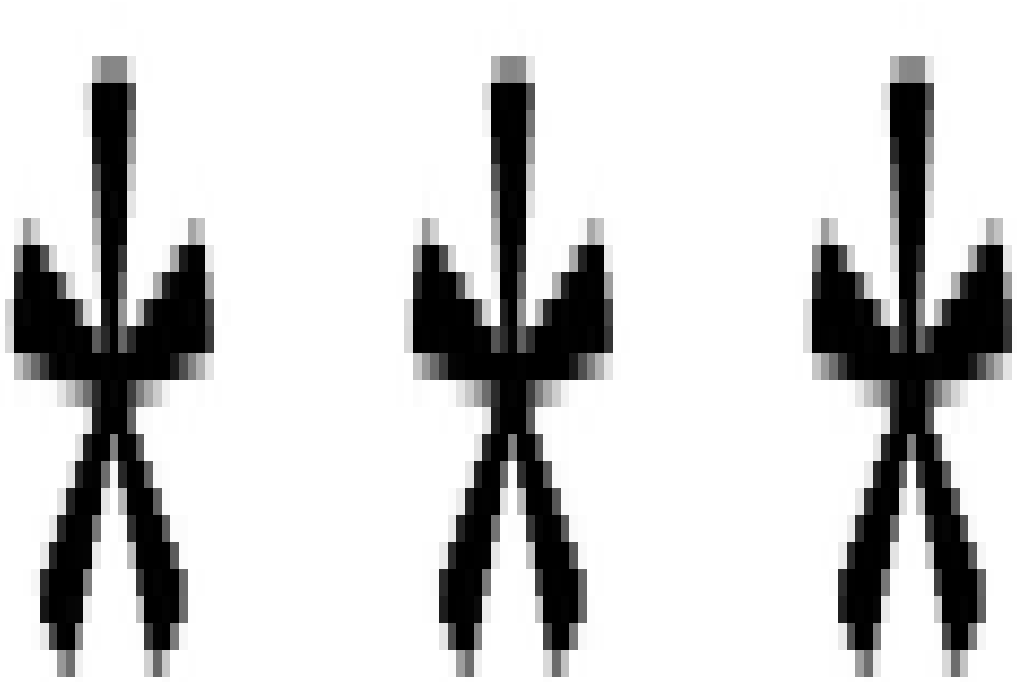
“Yep.” I grin self-assuredly. “It’s possible to have a fulfilling relationship and thriving careers if we are both willing to put in the work. I know I am. Are you?”

She nods again, this time with an enthusiastic clap of her hands. “I am, Justin. So ready. But are you sure you want to be holed up in the heat and madness of Lagos for several months a year? Away from your friends and family?”

“Of course. I’m loving it here because of you, and I’m willing to do anything to keep you in my life. I love you.”

“Oh, Justin.” She flings herself into my arms, planting a flurry of kisses on my face. “I love you, too.”

Unreserved joy fills my chest as I hold Adanna close, savouring her nearness, her warm breath against my cheek. I’m so grateful that she’s given me another chance to show her how much I love her, how great we can be together.



My phone rings, and I glance at the screen, my heart swelling instantaneously with pleasure as I note the caller ID.

“Hello, babe,” I say, unable to contain my smile. Three weeks back together with Adanna, and I can say, without a doubt, it’s the best decision I’ve made.

I’ve been incredibly happy sharing my life with her, enjoying her company, and generally relishing the healthiest adult romantic relationship I’ve ever had.

We are open with each other, respectful of each other’s space, and yet, able to share profound intimacies. It’s like before her, I didn’t know what being in love meant. Her body and spirit give me deep satisfaction, and I can’t wait to introduce her to my family at the end of the month. We’ll be flying to London for two weeks, and then back, just in time for her to videotape the season finale of Sunsets in Lagos.

“Hi, Justin. Is he there yet?”

I shake my head. Then remembering she can’t see me, I say, “Not yet. But I’m early anyway.”

“He’ll come. I’m sure of it. Mr Okafor assured me.” She hesitates for a fraction of a second, like she usually does when she’s gathering her thoughts, so that she says exactly what she means. Another thing I love about Adanna. With her, you get what you see. No subterfuge, no trickeries.

“You’re doing the right thing, Justin. I think it’s a good idea you hear his side of the story.”

“I know. It’s just that I feel like a phoney, meeting up with a business mogul under false pretences, when I’m really here with an accusation.”

“I also feel bad about misleading Mr Okafor, who worked on this meeting. But I’m convinced in my gut that it’s the right thing for you. And in an odd way, for him, too.”

I lean back in my seat and ponder her comment. Is it really? Do I have to have a conversation with a man who my biological mother claims violated her? I’ve

finally moved past my resentment for him. Do I need to go digging up graves?

Apparently, yes. Adanna and Dr Smith believe it will make a difference hearing from the man. For the past three weeks, Adanna has tried to convince me to meet Sylvester Amadi.

“He’s so involved and kind to people. He shows up every week, making sure things are running smoothly. It’s just hard to picture him as the animal who hurt Nancy,” she said that first time she brought his name up after my accidental meeting with him.

I was a bit taken aback by that, pissed off that Adanna would even mention the man’s name again, especially after I’d told her he didn’t matter in my life any longer.

“He’s my boss, Justin,” she said in self-defence. “And I know I’ve not had a lot of personal dealings with him, but everyone likes him. Even Mr Okafor has only good things to say about him. He bought Liberty Network, which was going under, and helped most of the staff keep their jobs, firing only the executives that were dishonest.”

“I don’t care if he’s an angel now, Adanna. He hurt someone horribly in the past. That’s unforgivable,” I said, still unconvinced.

“Yes, I know. Rape is unforgivable. But have you heard from him yet? Do you know the other side of the story?”

Her persistence annoyed me. There’s no other side to rape. Never. Without another word, I turned my back to her in bed, pulling the covers over my shoulder roughly, and ended the conversation. But not before Adanna slipped one final comment in.

“Of course, it’s unforgivable. But just think about this for a minute, Justin. The accusation is from a woman you admit wasn’t always trustworthy.”

That night, I couldn’t sleep, thinking about the many times Nancy had lied about my biological father’s existence. First, she told me he’d died in a plane crash, then later, that he’d run off with another woman. Is it possible that she also lied about him on her deathbed? Could she have been so callous to deceive me one last time?

It never crossed my mind to question the authenticity of her claim. She placed her feeble hand in mine, and relived that horrific event leading to my existence. How could I not believe it?

In my restlessness, Adanna's last comment echoed in my mind for hours on end, and no matter how many times I denied the possibility of Nancy lying, I kept coming back to her lies. So, I woke up the next morning, my annoyance simmered down, and with a new resolution. I told Adanna that hearing Silvester's side of the story would make a difference. With relief written all over her face, she agreed to work on setting up a meeting.

And she managed to do just that. So, here I am on a cool Friday evening, waiting at Zuri for Sylvester Amadi to show up.

I glance up the moment he walks into the restaurant, flanked by two bodyguards.

"He's here now," I mutter to Adanna. "I'll ring you back when I'm done with the meeting."

"Okay, babe. Talk to you later."

I end the call and wave him over. A quick peek at my watch tells me it's 7:00 p.m. Impressive. The man's right on time. Why had I assumed he'd stroll in arrogantly late with a phoney excuse about being too busy for this kind of meeting?

I inhale deeply. "No more assumptions, Justin," I say under my breath. "Have this meeting with an open mind."

"Good evening, Mr Igwe," Sylvester Amadi greets when he gets to my table. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

Rising to my feet, I accept his offer of a handshake. "Good evening, sir. Not at all."

"Great. I hate being late. But with the Lagos traffic, it's sometimes inevitable." He chuckles. "After I arrived late for my own wedding years ago, I make a point of leaving for every meeting an hour before I'm due to arrive. Since then, it has always worked for me."

I allow myself a wry smile. I can tell this is a frequent opening joke for him because of the way he's said it, like a stand-up comedian waiting for the expected laughter.

"Please have a seat," I say, pointing to the chair opposite mine at the round table.

He thanks me and sinks onto the chair, while his security men move to stand at the corner of the room.

"So, Mr Igwe, what is this urgent business deal you want to broker from England," Sylvester says as soon as he is settled comfortably. "Mr Okafor told me he's watched you on BAC-TV's Men of Valour, and you have a proposal for me."

My gut somersaults. I despise the way I've deceived him to show up, but for a man this busy, it would have been difficult to get his attention without mentioning business.

"Why don't we order first?" I ask, lifting the menu, hoping to buy some time before I come out guns blazing. How does one tell a man he has a thirty-six-year-old son he knows nothing of?

His eyes roam my face with a hint of suspicion, as if trying to guess if I'm genuine or not. I'd wager lots that he's done some background digging on me before agreeing to this meeting, but he still looks quite mistrusting of my intensions. Not that I blame him. Strangers and business propositions are usually a recipe for disaster.

"Okay," he says, finally, nodding. Picking up the menu, he scans it. "I'm now a vegetarian. So, I'll take the Caesar Salad without the anchovies."

My brow arcs in surprise, and a smile spreads across his face.

"I get that facial expression a lot when people hear I've stopped eating meat," he says.

I twist my lips into an amused smirk as I summon a waiter by pressing the button at the side of the table. Quite surprising how totally ordinary this man is, far from the enigma I'd made him out to be in my head.

Before long, our meals are served. I've opted for grilled salmon and couscous, which looks appetising and smells great.

"Have you ever been to Liverpool?" I ask, slicing off a piece of the moist fish with my fork and knife. I know it's time to get to the point of this meeting. He's a busy man and may soon need to rush off.

He stills himself, his fork midway between his plate and mouth as he locks his gaze with mine. "Yes. A long time ago."

I lower my cutlery to my plate, reach for the wallet in my pocket and retrieve the picture inside.

Handing it over to him, I ask, "Is that you in the photo?"

He stiffens, his eyes bulging in surprise. "Oh, my God, 1985 at Horsfall in Liverpool. Where on earth did you get it?"

"My birth mother gave it to me."

"Your mother?" His eyebrows knit in confusion. "How does she know me? Who is she?"

"Did you ever meet a woman called Nancy Igwe?"

At this exact moment, I see his brain working fast, spinning until he put the math together. His facial muscles freeze as he makes the connection in his head.

"Y-you're Nancy's son?" he croaks, the shock on his face making him look almost cartoonish. "Oh, my God … how is she? Where is she?"

"Dead. Died of liver cancer. Too much alcohol and hard drugs …"

A cloud of sadness settles on Sylvester's face as his gaze lowers to his meal.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," he says. "A troubled soul she was—Nancy. But the life of any party…"

"Yes, she was a troubled soul," I say, lifting my fork and knife again. "Anyone who went through the trauma of being raped would be."

Guilt darkens his eyes. “It’s so unfortunate what happened.”

“Unfortunate?” Annoyance bellows in my chest, and my voice rises a pitch higher than I’d intended. “Is that what you call raping a woman and leaving her in an alley?”

“Wh-what? Rape? Is that what she told you? That I raped her?”

“Yes.”

He blows out a harsh sigh, his shoulders slumping in resignation. “I can understand why she’d blame me for what happened. But I didn’t rape her. I was just too much of a coward to stop the men who did.”

Confused, I gape at him. What the hell is he talking about? Is he saying that more than one man raped Nancy, making up fantasies to shift the blame from himself? Reading the questions most likely etched on my face, he straightens his back.

“During a break in my Master’s programme in Sheffield, I travelled to Liverpool to spend some time with a friend. Bored and lonely during my short stay there, I met Nancy who lived in the same neighbourhood at Toxteth,” Sylvester says, idly fiddling with the salad with his fork. “Back then, we hung out a couple of times. She was fun-loving and exciting, and I was just looking for a good time before I needed to throw myself back into my studies.”

My gut roils. I know exactly what he means with his description of Nancy. The partying, the drugs, the alcohol—they’d always been a part of her life. Even several years after I was born, she carried on with that lifestyle.

“Then, I used to go over to her place, relax, smoke, drink and …” he trails off, tracing the bridge of his nose with his finger as if embarrassed to continue speaking.

He lifts his glass of wine to his lips and takes a swig, like he needs liquid courage to continue. “Do some hard drugs, you know, just generally wind down. I was young and foolish. With barely any sense of direction.”

Embarrassment warms my cheeks. Hearing about my biological mother’s wild ways is always difficult for me. I lived through it as a young boy. The many men

who came in and out of our lives because she had no boundaries whatsoever. As long as there were drugs and alcohol, my mother would entertain anyone.

“That evening after we went to Horsfall, I followed her home for …” He takes another sip, and if he were shades lighter, I’m sure there’d be red patches on his cheeks. “We were in the bedroom when people broke into the house. Three violent-looking men.”

I hold my breath … this story seems to be taking a rather unrealistic turn. I feel like a teacher about to hear the old my dog ate my homework excuse.

Still, I’m riveted, searching Sylvester Amadi’s face for any sign of dishonesty. All I can see from the grooves at the corner of his mouth, and the shadow that clouds his eyes, is shame and regret.

“It’s so horrible what they did to her … took turns … made me watch.” He shakes his head, clearly reliving the horrors of years ago. “I was helpless, begging them not to, ashamed that with a gun to my head, I couldn’t do anything to stop it ...” He trails off, pressing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, as if trying to squash the memories.

“And why would they just break into her house and do that to a total stranger? It makes no sense.” I ask, disbelief creeping into my tone.

“Nothing can ever justify their barbaric act … absolutely nothing. But they claimed she’d stolen drugs and owed them money. I don’t know the details, and I didn’t wait to find out. I was just so traumatised by it all, that I ran out of the flat immediately they left.”

He brushes his face with his hand, releasing a low groan saturated with self-derision. “I was such a coward, so spineless that I didn’t even check to make sure Nancy was okay. I was selfish, so worried about being mixed up in the crime that I simply fled …”

My jaw clenches as a surge of anger erupts inside me. How can a man abandon a woman at such a low point in her life? How selfish … how callous.

I drag in a calming breath, determined to hear everything Sylvester has to say. After all, that’s why I’m here.

“For a long time, I regretted being such a coward, leaving her there on the floor writhing in pain and saving my own ass instead.” His shoulders heave as he takes in a heavy breath. “I have no excuse. And I’ve never even tried to justify it to myself. All I can say is that I was so worried about getting mixed up with drug dealers that I just … panicked.”

The tremor in his voice, as the last word slices through the air, pierces the icy defence I built against him.

Panic. That’s an emotion I often had living with Nancy Igwe. How many times did I feel the same way? All those times she got mixed up with the wrong crew and dragged them home to the dingy two-bedroom flat we lived in at Toxteth, Liverpool … as a child, it seemed like numbers couldn’t go that high.

She would tell me to stay in my room while she entertained them—drinking, smoking, getting high, and having loud sex. Sometimes, the men would get aggressive and knock her about. In a state of terror, I’d remain in my room, wishing I could be brave enough to stop the loud fights, but remaining still, unable to do anything but listen and hope for the best. What chance did a ten-year-old boy have against grown men more than twice his size?

Looking at Sylvester Amadi now, I can identify with the feeling of helplessness, the self-hate for not being man enough to defend a woman determined to continue living her life on the edge.

“I tried to find Nancy a week after. But she’d moved away. Maybe too frightened for her life to remain in the area. She never gave me a forwarding address or telephone number. Nothing. She simply … disappeared.” He massages his temple. “I guess I don’t blame her for saying I raped her. I abandoned her at one of the lowest points of her life. Anyone would be angry. No matter how wild Nancy was, she didn’t deserve that. Nobody does.” He pauses, his gaze pinned on me. His pupils are darkened with gloom, and the white part of his eyes are a little bloodshot. “I’m sorry. Sorry for being a coward.”

I swallow hard, trying to digest all that I’ve heard, knowing that it’s his word against hers. And yet, what I know of Nancy gives the edge to him.

I may never know the truth. Never know who to believe. But one thing I’m convinced of is that Sylvester Amadi is certainly not the monster I made him out to be in my head for years. If he’s telling the truth, he is just a man who was

sucked into Nancy Igwe's chaotic lifestyle the way I was before fate thankfully removed me from the mess.

"Why … why did your mother give you this picture?" Sylvester Amadi's question pulls me from my thoughts.

I remain silent for several seconds, debating whether to tell him the truth. Is it worth it now? Does disturbing this man's world by letting him know about my existence help anyone in anyway?

I open my mouth, ready to lie, when an image of Adanna pops into my head. A future with her means allowing my past to be completely out in the open, to free myself from all that has held me back, including lies and secrets.

"I asked her about my father," I say baldly.

Sylvester Amadi becomes very still, his entire body unmoving, except his eyes, which widen slowly as my declaration registers.

"I came to Nigeria to find you," I continue, deciding that telling him everything would be worth it. I don't need anything from him. It's for him to do whatever he wants with the information. "I have DNA confirmation that you're my biological father."

"DNA? Nancy was pregnant when … Nancy was pregnant?" He still appears like he's seen a ghost, sheer shock written all over his face.

"Yes. I hired a private detective. He got a DNA sample from you from when you left your drink at a public function."

His jaw drops. "My goodness … I'm … I can't believe all this."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. "Well, it's true," I say, giving in to the amusement that claims me with a grin. "It's taken a lot for me to track you down and meet you."

He eyes me sceptically for several beats. "Another son? Nancy had my baby? Was pregnant for me?" he murmurs to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

Still looking puzzled, he picks up his fork again and stabs into his salad, raising

the vegetable mixture to his lips and shoving it into his mouth unceremoniously. He chews slowly as he ponders this information, looking at me like an investor studying the stock market at closing time, monitoring the prices of shares he's just bought.

"I'll have to conduct my own DNA test for proof," he says finally. "But I admit there's a possibility. Nancy and I … we were … young and reckless."

I shrug nonchalantly. "Of course. Although I'm not here to get anything, nor do I need anything from you. I just wanted to hear your side of the story about what happened to Nancy."

He nods. "I wish I'd known she was … I'd have done things differently if I'd known she was pregnant." He lowers his gaze, his face crestfallen. "I'm terribly sorry. But I guess an apology would never be enough."

For inexplicable reasons, a sudden calmness washes over me. To the contrary, without much to go by, except two contradicting versions of what happened between my biological parents, an apology from either of them would suffice.

"Actually, it's enough for me," I say. "I'll provide a sample whenever you want to crosscheck the DNA test. It's a good idea to make sure."

Silence ensues as we continue eating, both of us lost in our different thoughts.

"Justin," he murmurs, ending the silence between us. "I hope to see more of you —"

"You don't need to," I cut him off, shaking my head. "I didn't want to meet you to insert myself into your life and family. I just wanted to —"

"Hear my side of the story," he interjects, a small smile touching his lips. "I know you're self-made and have a wonderful adoptive family. I read about you when I thought this meeting was about business." He snickers with a cynical quirk of his eyebrows. "However, Sylvester Amadi never turns his back on flesh and blood. I made the mistake of abandoning someone I cared about when I was young and stupid. I'm now a mature man who will never do that again. Certainly not to my son."

His words are strangely comforting, even though I don't need anything from

him. I smile, lifting my drink to my lips, glad that I allowed Adanna to convince me to meet him.

I'm not sure what kind of relationship we'll develop, or what the future has in store for both of us. Whatever it is, the bitterness of the past regarding my biological father has completely dissipated.

After dinner with Sylvester Amadi, I get into my car and drive straight to my flat, joy blossoming in my chest. I know Adanna is there waiting for me.

Having already told her on the phone how surprisingly well meeting Sylvester had gone, she agreed to remain in my apartment until I get back home.

The thought of home being with Adanna floods my senses with contentment. I can't wait to hold her, tell her how much she means to me. Now that she's back in my life, I don't ever want to take any moment with her for granted.

As soon as Adanna opens the front door, I pull her into my arms for a heartfelt embrace. "Thank you for forcing me to speak to Sylvester," I rasp, my throat tight with emotion.

She nods, squeezing me tightly. "I'm glad it worked out okay for both of you."

She gives me a cheeky smile and cradles my face in her palms. "Although this is also important to me, too." Giggling softly, she adds, "I can't have my man and my boss beefing. It's a real uncomfortable position to be in o."

I swat her playfully on her butt as I lift her higher in my arms. "You're something else, you know that?"

"Uh huh." She winks at me. "But since I know you love me like that ... no shaking."

"Yes, I do … I love you just like that," I murmur, kissing her firmly on the mouth. "No shaking at all."

Epilogue

ADANNA



I glance sideways at the man behind the steering wheel, trailing my eyes over his large masculine frame. Fiery heat slithers down my body, concentrating at the sensitive nub between my thighs. Justin looks so sexy in his pristine white kaftan and trousers, and the red traditional hat on his head.

It's been less than ten hours since I've had his athletic, naked body all over me, and yet, I'd give anything to have a repeat of the last night's lovemaking that transported me to heaven and back. Even if it means pulling over for a quicky in this car.

An entire year with this gorgeous man as my partner, and I can't get enough of him. I notice his jaw clench and his hands squeeze the steering wheel a little tighter as he releases a low growl.

His eyes meet mine in the rear-view mirror and my heart leaps at the sheer lust darkening his pupils. "Keep staring at me like that, and you'll find yourself being shagged in the backseat of this car," he rasps.

Darting his gaze to my midriff, he mutters, "In your condition, that would probably be very uncomfortable."

I laugh out, instinctively placing a protective hand over my belly. "It's not my fault pregnancy makes me so horny." I give him another slow, appreciative perusal. "And it doesn't help that you look delectable and smell wonderful."

"Woman ..." He shakes his head, and the skin around his eyes crinkles as he grins. He reaches across and covers my hand over my abdomen with his. "That's why you have your baby daddy right here. To service you whenever and however you need it."

I sit up, excitement rushing through me. "You mean now? Can we turn back and —"

"Calm down, babe," he says, lifting his hand and placing it back on the steering wheel. "Not until after I give you your present."

I settle back in my seat, pouting like a petulant child. "Party pooper."

He chuckles. “Sorry, darling. But seriously, you’re the only woman I know who isn’t over the moon at the mention of presents.”

“Not true,” I say, sticking out my tongue in jest. “I love presents … when they come from you.”

He turns to me with warmth in his eyes and a sudden seriousness in his expression. “If I could, I’d give you the world.”

My throat traps my next breath. What more could this wonderful man give me? He has given me so much already. This year we’ve spent together, alternating between London and Lagos, has been all I could’ve hoped for. He’s put in effort to make sure our relationship is a true partnership in every way.

We’re so in tune with each other in all the ways that count … professionally, emotionally, sexually. And now, we’re also going to share in one of the most precious miracles ever. We’re having a baby.

We found out four weeks ago in London during a promo event for Men of Valour’s fifth season. Walking proudly beside him on the red carpet, a sudden bout of vertigo and nausea hit me.

Without a thought about missing his scheduled appearance, or his image taking a hit, Justin scooped me in his arms and rushed me to the nearest emergency department.

Worried, he stayed by my side, holding my hand as we waited for the verdict of the blood tests. Intense relief engulfed us when the young doctor gave us the news. We clung to each other, tears of joy spilling from both our eyes.

A peek at the very slight bulge of my belly, and an involuntary smile splits my face. “You’ve already given me the world, Justin,” I whisper. “Everything I want is right here in this car.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard, his gaze back on the road. “Still, I want to give you more. And I can’t wait to.”

Fifteen minutes later, he pulls to a stop in front of a duplex in Lekki phase one, a residential area of Lagos.

“Why are we here, Justin? I ask, sweeping my gaze around the stylish neighbourhood. I’ve never been here, and we don’t know a soul living on this street.

“Not yet,” he replies, leaning towards the glove compartment of our newly purchased Mercedes. He opens it, retrieves a large brown envelope, and hands it to me.

I take it from him, looking quizzically in his direction. “What on earth is going on, Justin? The suspense is killing me.”

Although I’m feeling confident about the way I look in my red-and-silver, off-shoulder gown that reaches my ankles and my spiky strap sandals, I am not sure I’m in the mood for a noisy surprise party.

Without responding, Justin opens the car door and steps out of the vehicle, rushing to my side of the car.

Grinning from molar to molar, he opens the door for me and helps me out. He takes my hand in his as we walk the short distance from the car to the duplex’s black gate. Pressing the bell, he leans back and waits.

“Justin,” I say, tapping his shoulder. “Tell me what’s happening this instant. You know surprise parties aren’t my thing.”

“Woman …” he grumbles. “Just be patient.”

The gate peephole slides open, and a dark-skinned man peers at us through it. “Oh, Oga,” he says, sliding the metal back in place.

The gate opens seconds after.

“Welcome, sir,” the man says as soon as we step into the compound. “Welcome, Madam.”

“Thank you, Ibrahim,” Justin says, placing a hand on the small of my back and nudging me forward.

I nod my acknowledgement at the tall man wearing a pale-blue uniform with the word security printed on the breast pocket. Turning my attention back to the

building, I let my gaze roam over the house, and then, the surrounding compound with admiration.

It's a simple, yet gorgeous home. Likely a four- or five-bedroom, detached duplex with a spacious garden. The walls are glossy with a greyish pebble finish. The roofing is gabled, and the upstairs windows are pretty bay windows.

I turn back to Justin, my eyes narrowed in question. "What's this? Whose house is this?"

He taps on the envelope in my hand. "Open it."

Fingers shaking, I rip it open and peel out the documents inside, my palms moist and sticking to the papers. I scan the front page quickly, and my heart bumps into my chest forcefully. I jerk my gaze back to Justin.

"Wh-what in the world … Justin!" I shriek, my mouth wide open.

He laughs. "It's all yours, babe. Happy First Anniversary, Adanna."

"Oh, my God ..." Still unable to believe my eyes, I flick through the documents again. Indeed, my full government name is written on the deed to the house at this address. Justin bought me a house. My man bought me a damn house! All flipping paid for.

"Justin," I cry out, flinging myself in his arms, kissing him all over his face. "This is unbelievable. Thank you. I love it. Thank you."

He holds me close. "Best believe it, baby," he says, rubbing his hand up and down my spine. "Want to come in and see more of it?"

"Try and stop me," I cry out in excitement, jumping down from his arms and racing towards the entrance of the building.

With his laughter rumbling in the air, he hurries to catch up with me. Fishing out a bunch of keys from his trouser pocket, he opens the front door.

"Want to see the living room first?" he asks as soon as we step into the hallway.

"Actually, the bedroom. But since it's probably upstairs …" I say with a laugh,

“I guess the living room will do.”

Justin shakes his head and grabs my hand, leading me across the corridor and pushing open a wooden door.

“Surprise!”

Cheers and laughter resound in the room. The ceiling lights suddenly come on, and I blink multiple times, my heart beating at breakneck speed as I scan the room, eyes bulging from shock and excitement.

My brother, Brenda, Mr Okafor, the crew members of Sunsets in Lagos, Mr and Mrs Duncan, Justin’s three brothers, Professor Silvester Amadi, his wife and his daughter … they’re all standing there in the middle of the almost empty room.

Practically empty, but nonetheless festooned, there are heart-shaped balloons dangling from the four corners of the wall, a bouquet of roses as tall as me in the centre of the floor, and a large, white banner hanging from the ceiling.

I look up and read it. WILL YOU MARRY ME?

“Oh, my goodness!”

I turn back to Justin to find him on one knee, holding out a tiny, opened jewellery box. A giant diamond catches the light and flickers back at me like dazzling sunshine.

“Adanna Sally Ezenna, love of my life,” he says, his voice low and husky. “I came to Nigeria searching for my past ...” He pauses, swallows hard, and then, takes my hand in his. “I had no idea that I’d find my future in Lagos … here with you.” Lifting my hand to his lips, he presses a kiss to my knuckles. “Will you make me the happiest man on earth by becoming my wife?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” I cry out, lowering myself to my knees and pulling Justin into my arms. I crush his lips with mine, kissing him with total abandon, uncaring that we have an audience, and barely registering the raucous cheering reverberating around us.

As Justin places the ring on my finger, I keep my gaze locked on his, staring deep into the eyes of the one man on earth who makes my heart soar.

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About the Author

Amaka Azie is an award-winning writer of romance fiction set in tropical West Africa. She explores the beauty and intricacies of the continent in her sweet and sensual love stories.

Born and raised in Nigeria, West Africa, she developed a passion for reading at the age of twelve. Her interest in writing began in secondary school when she joined the press club. Her active imagination has captured the interests of many.

Her books showcase bold and exciting female and male main characters with compelling storylines

She was named one of the most influential authors under Forty by the Nigerian Writers Awards (NWA) for the years 2017 and 2018.

Apart from getting lost in creating fascinating fictional characters, Amaka enjoys reading, painting and travelling with her family.

She lives in the United Kingdom with her husband and daughters where she also practices as a part-time family doctor.

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