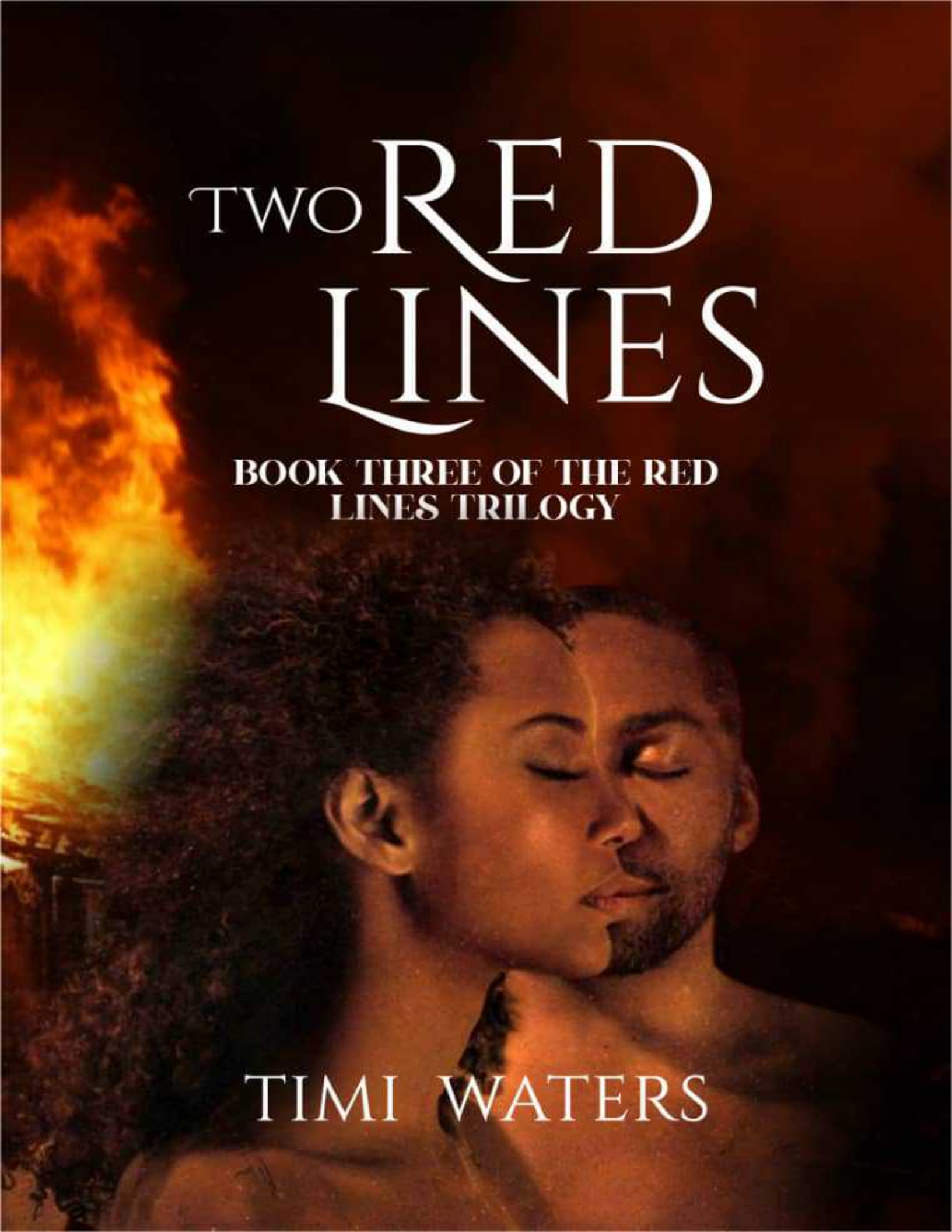




TWO RED LINES

BOOK THREE OF THE RED
LINES TRILOGY

TIMI WATERS

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T.W PUBLISHING



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The author based the use of the Dangote refinery on her immense respect for the business mogul and recognizing his extraordinary achievements.

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For Niyi.

Thank you for loving me past my mistakes and doggedly fighting for us.

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Until we have seen someone's darkness, we don't really know who they are. Until we have forgiven someone's darkness, we don't really know what love is.

-MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

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INTRODUCTION

When we observe people through our imperfect eyes, it is often easy to weigh our strengths against their weaknesses and judge them. We ignore the human in them, overlook their emotions, fears, and driving forces behind their actions. All we focus on is our loathing of their behavior as though we too are beyond failing. In its entirety, Red Lines explores a woman's vulnerabilities, worries, anxieties, and a deep sense of guilt. It lays bare a man's deepest fears, insecurities, and drive for a chance to find love despite his flaws. This story, as you would come to find out, is close to my heart. I hope you enjoy reading every part as I enjoyed writing it, and that you learn to let go of whatever pain is keeping you from embracing love, open your heart to forgiveness, and always remember that love is not just a word. It is, as the Bible describes it, a reflection of God. For God is Love.

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This book is the concluding part of a Trilogy. Please don't read it without first reading the first two books: **RED LINES** and **WAITING ON TWO RED LINES**, as it connects all three books.

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PRESENT DAY

She's cheating on me.
The words kept resounding in his head. Its chilling effect made him grip the steering wheel with every echo.

She's cheating on me.

"No," Ayo muffled.

He recalled her cheerful face. Her large expressive eyes and silvery laughter. His solemn belief that she was the perfect fit for his best friend. The one sent by God to mend Folu's broken heart, confer on him the happiness that had always eluded him, and give his friend—his only friend—the happy ending he deserved.

Ayo knew a cheating woman when he saw one, and he'd bet his last *Kobo* that Bekere was no cheating woman.

Or was she?

He exhaled, slowed his car to a crawl at Falomo roundabout, cast a flitting look out the window, then returned his attention to the long line of traffic in front of him.

A street vendor flashed his wares in his line of sight—a neatly arranged row of sausage rolls—and pleadingly mouthed an: "Oga, buy gala."

Ayo gave the traffic hawker an apologetic wave, turned on the radio, tuned it to *Traffic Radio*, and regarded the road in time to see a scruffy boy spritz a generous amount of foamy liquid on his windscreen. He blared his horn to ward him off. The window washer watched him in red-rimmed soulless eyes, baptized the glass in more foam, and artfully ran a squeegee across it.

Ayo gritted to quell his impatience and allowed the boy, who looked to be in his late teens, to do his perfunctory, unsolicited windscreen wash.

As he swung his arms in a cleaning motion, Ayo musingly took in the boy's pitch-black skin grimed like a coal mine, his disheveled rust-colored hair chunked into tiny dispersed locks, and gaunt frame garbed in a ratty, oversized t-shirt; the exact color of desolation.

Ayo's roving gaze of the boy's t-shirt landed on a fading dollar sign captioned, 'My money grows like grass.'

It's the Lagos hustle, he chuckled. Anything for the Naira.

He was there once, broke, hungry, and desperate. He'd done odd jobs, invested in Ponzi schemes, tried his hands on cyber-crimes, everything to keep the lights on.

Until Folu.

Ayo palmed the steering wheel and let out a loud whoosh of breath. Folu was not just his friend; he was his savior, the beacon of light that led him out of a darkened path. The man who had pulled him off the edge of a precipice. The demigod that kept him from selling his soul to the devil when he was deeply entrenched in the clutching grip of poverty.

If he'd tried locking hands with Lucifer once, Ayo was ready to visit hell and back for Folu if he as much as hinted at it. That was how much he loved his friend. As Ayo navigated the Falomo gridlock of traffic, his conscious mind ran through a replay of his earlier conversation with Folu.

"She's cheating on me, 'Mide. I know it. I can feel it."

"Don't be quick to conclude yet, bro. Bekere would never do that."

"Are you sure, 'Mide, are you sure? God, I dunno what I'll do if she is."

"She isn't, bro. Get a hold of yourself."

"I love her too much, man."

Ayo clenched and unclenched his fist. As astute and business savvy as his friend was, women were the vulnerable chink in his amour. They'd always seeped through his exterior, break his heart, and bend him to his knees. It wasn't just Ese that had hurt Folu. A classmate from their early senior secondary school year had started it. Ese was only the last before Bekere.

Ayo recalled the scene vividly. Folu had talked on end about her, followed her around, carried her bag, became an utter fool for her. Ayo had not only loathed the sound of her funny name and having to listen to Folu blather about her. He'd also churned at the fact that he often caught her coming out of secluded places with Fola while she allowed Folu to make a total fool of himself trying to please her.

Ayo sighed when thoughts of how that failed relationship dented his friend's self-esteem and left him skipping school for hospital appointments.

Life, Ayo thought as he inched his way forward in the slow-moving traffic. So stark when the stakes are low, and there's nothing to lose. And so gut-wrenching, frightful when you have everything but can't seem to find what you desire the most.

Ayo turned half-heartedly to regard the windscreen cleaner when he tapped his window, then he reached for the wad of bills in his pocket and handed it to the boy without counting it.

The window washer shrieked in delight. "Chai! Daalɔ, sir. God bless you, sir. Thank you, sir. May you live long."

Ayo waved off his gratitude with a flitting smile, then ran his wiper across the window screen to blot out the result of an unprofessional screen wash—a murky hue.

I think it's me, 'Mide. I'm messed up sideways.

"You're not, Folu," Ayo said sotto voce. "The women are just plain blind and stupid, and God! If Bekere did cheat on you, I'd be utterly disappointed in...." A sudden buzz of a phone kept him from finishing his soliloquy.

"Hey, boss." Ayo creased his face in a small frown when all Folu did was breathe heavily into the phone. "Folu?"

Folu panted, gave a small whimper, and groaned.

"Hello, Folu. I can't hear you."

Listening to Folu take more raspy breaths and mutter inaudibly, Ayo finally heard him say: "I killed her."

Ayo plodded on the brakes. "You, what?"

"I killed her, oh God. Oh God, I killed her," Folu yelled, then gave a sharp howling cry. "Oh, God!"

Ayo took his legs off the brakes and eased the car forward when an angry driver blared his horn in impatience.

“Deep breaths, Folu. Breathe, breathe.”

He heard a crashing sound, followed by a throaty yowl, and a husky: “He touched her, he fucking touched her!”

“Who touched—” The line went dead.

Ayo wound the steering in gusto and looked about him to be sure he wouldn’t ram his BMW X1 into an oncoming car but determined to if the need arose.

Folu needed him, and for that, he’d do anything. Even if that included cutting through traffic, plying a one-way route, having a pair of *Federal Road Safety* guys chase after him, and bursting through traffic lights.

Folu needed him.

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ONE

A Few Hours Earlier

He knew something was wrong the minute he pulled the door open and saw her hurrying towards him. It wasn't just the unnatural sheen in her eyes, his twin's glare, or the cold feel of her lips on his. It was the absence of oxygen in the air, the thumping of his heart, the blinding glow of her skin.

God, no, he huffed. *No.*

He sought the answers in her eyes. They regarded him with warmth. Warmth, and something else. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, baby," she said.

The cold feel of her lips when she kissed him sent an ominous chill down his spine. He heard his twin's groan, saw him regard her in disdain, and knew he was doomed even before Fola uttered the chilling words that slew him.

"Cut it out, Bekere, Jesus!"

"Watch your tone, Fola."

"She's pregnant."

The discordant tremor of his heart flattened out, then resumed its flutter of beats when he recalled the IVF trip they just returned from. "Was that the news you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes," she smiled nervously.

Folu broke into an ecstatic laugh and pulled her into his arms.

We did it. We finally did it. Thank God!

She stiffened in his arms when Fola snorted. “Aw, for fuck’ sake, love! You wanted to tell him about my baby?”

Folu swallowed the trepidations of his heart, bore his gaze into hers, willing his suspicions into fiction. “Baby?”

She pulled away from him, sauntered towards an armchair, slumped into it, and buried her face in her palms.

“Bekere and I are lovers, Folu.”

He clipped his gaze on her, his heart freezing over in splitting shards of ice. Then he saw it—the look he’d seen a million times—been afraid of his entire life when she raised deflated eyes to his and burst into tears.

A predatory growl bubbled forth the center of his core. “No.”

“She was with me that night she went missing.”

“She went with you to Johannesburg?”

“Pfft, come on, bruh. Don’t tell me you fell for that shit. With all your cunning experience?”

Fola’s words sent a bullseye shot straight to his bone marrow, flushed deep into his ventricles, spiraled up his neural functions, and bounded down like an acidic burn.

“I told you there was a shitstorm heading your way, bruv.”

“No!” Folu echoed, slowly walking backward, “No, Fola, no, please.”

“I warned you.”

He regarded his brother’s scornful look and ominous approach in looming rage, huffed at the earsplitting ring in his head, and willed himself to reject this reality.

“At least now, you’ll get off our backs.”

As Folu locked gazes and touched noses with his twin, a chilling being enveloped him, violently undulated his blood, freeze over his neural functions, and powered his entire sense of presence in a red-hot magma of wrath.

He fucked my wife; he fucking fucked her!

Folu clenched his fist, rumbled in scrunched teeth, and blanked out to a technicolor replay of Bekere moaning in Fola's arms while she thrust her hips into his.

"Wait, what's that smell?" Fola sniffed, then raked a disparaging look over him. "Yeah, that's the steaming bowl of shit I've just handed you."

"You motherfucker!"

Folu saw his hand move, felt it connect with Fola's face, rammed it past the haze of blinding red filming his vision, delved deep into the screaming voices in his head, and kept butting his fist into flesh.

He didn't hear her screaming. Didn't feel her tugging at his shirt. All he saw as his fist continuously smashed skin was her naked body fused with Fola, her head thrown back in ecstasy, her hips thrusting into his and screaming out his name.

End this, a voice ordered. Put a gun to his head and end this shit now.

"Fuck it!" Folu said, responding to the summon, "This shit ends now."

He threw blazing eyes around the living room, squinted to see through the red smog of fury. Hazy shadows of humans floated into his line of sight, but they soon faded as he hurried into his home office, pulled out a gun from the safe, and stormed back into the library.

And there she was, the woman he'd given his heart, body, and soul to, built a home with, committed three years of his fucking life to. There she was, crouching beside his twin, offering him comfort, touching him.

"Folu, please, please, put the gun down," she said, stretching entreating arms to him, shielding Fola.

He fixed glazed eyes on her, deafened to her pleas by the whispering voices screeching a terminal command into his ears.

Kill them both!

She's soiled, filthy, tarnished by him.

She's not your wife anymore.

Kill her and the bastard she has in her womb.

I gave you everything! He panted, unable to find his voice. *I gave you everything, Bekere.*

“What are you going to do, brother? Shoot me?” Fola screeched.

You loved her too much, sunk in too deep, trusted her.

That was your fucking mistake.

Now, all you have to do is fix it by killing them both.

“Folu, please,” she cried. Her outstretched arms inches from his, her mournful eyes, the eyes he’d do anything to see twinkling in excitement, looked at him in... in what?

Do it, dammit, pull the fucking trigger!

Shoot them now!

“Put the gun down, Folu,” Fola said.

He fastened his gaze on Fola, saw fear creep into his eyes, saw him pull Bekere into his arms. The boastful promise he’d made rattled in his head.

Trust me, when I dominate that ass, you’d know.

That was when he found his voice. “My wife, Fola. My wife!”

“Put. The. Gun. Down!”

“My wife!” Folu grated hysterically, brandishing the gun, “Ah, Jesus, God, my wife!”

“Go ahead then, bruh,” Fola said, taking several steps back and dragging Bekere along with him, “Do it.”

“You... you... you s-s-slept... Ah, Jesus, God, Jesus!”

Bekere’s movement drew his attention to her. He hazily stared at her as she positioned herself in front of Fola, ran his eyes down her, and felt disgusted.

Slut!

“Put the gun down, Folu, please...”

You let him touch you, you fucking slut!

In a split second of out-of-body wrath, he trained the gun at her and squeezed the trigger.

You chose him. You picked him over me, you slut! He muttered when she stared at him in stunned numbness and slowly dropped to the floor with a loud plop of her head, hitting a coffee table.

He curved his lips into a grin when the blood flowed out of her, sucked in a breath of frenzied triumph when he saw the horrified look on Fola's face. *I'll be damned if I let you have her, brother.*

Fola, with dropped jaw and eyes popping out, screamed. "What did you do? What the fuck did you do?"

Folu smirked as he watched Fola crumple to the floor and broke into tears.

No one takes what's mine, Fola. Not even you, especially not you.

He saw the crowd of people race into the room, saw them crouch over her, heard their garbled voices, distorted utterances, and loud piercing cries.

Folu stood frozen when Fola grabbed him, shook him violently, and threw a continuous round of punches on his face.

"You *mother-fucking, cock-sucking*, psycho! You killed her, you fucking, God!"

Folu watched the cloaked figures lift Bekere off the floor, fixed his stunned gaze on her unconscious face, and slumped to his knees when the icy essence of his vicious alter ego floated out of his body.



Folarin's first reaction when his twin burst opened the door and pointed a gun at him was that of hilarity. He'd pegged Folu for a lot of things; killing wasn't one of them. He felt the bubble of laughter gurgle up his stomach, burst forth in his throat, and twitch the sides of his mouth. He wanted to laugh; he did laugh.

He surely wouldn't shoot me. He's not that stupid.

An unsettling chill swept across his spine when Folu visibly transformed into a crackling amber of rage. The sudden sound of the gunshot immobilized him, frizzed his eyeballs, and popped the bubbling laughter in his belly into a bilious rush of terror.

Oh no, he didn't!

He blanched when the bullet zinged past him, saw her slump in excruciatingly slow motion, heard the echoing flop of her body hitting the ground. Fola stood shell-shocked, fixed stunned gaze at her, watched a

generous amount of blood ooze out of her cracked skull, and then it hit him like a ton of ice.

He killed her.

Fola registered the smirk on his twin's face, slumped to his knees when the gashing holes on Bekere's stilled shoulder and nape oozed a continuous stream of blood.

He killed her.

He didn't recognize his voice when he spoke, didn't feel the throb of his fist butting skin, didn't see the group of people crowding the room.

"Jesus! Oga, Oga wetin happen?"

"Hey, *Abasi mbok!*"

"She's bleeding to death!"

"Press on the point of bleeding!"

"Call 112!"

"Jesus!!!!"

"Cover the... press the wound! *Eh! Obara Jesus, madam!*"

The distorted shrieks floated through him as he continued fisting his brother until one voice got through to him.

"She is still breathing. She's still alive. We need to get her to the hospital *sharp-sharp!*"

Fola rushed towards her, snatched her into his arms, and raced out the door.

"Stay with me. Stay with me, please!"

He vaguely noticed Iyke and a few other security personnel run alongside him. "Open the gate!" One of them yelled.

"Stay with me," Fola pleaded, keeping his eyes that were now pooling with tears on her. "Please!"

Fola applied what little first aid he could call up while Iyke drove with demonic haste to Blue Cross. He was immensely thankful that traffic was light and bounded her into the clinic's hallway as soon as Iyke pulled into the driveway. Half a dozen doctors hurriedly placed her on drips, oxygen

masks, and brusquely uttered medical jargon as they wheeled her into an emergency ward.

Fola ran alongside the gurney, brushed his arms across his face to rid the blurry vision of his tear-pooled eyes. “Please... God... please!”

A nurse prevented him from rushing into the operating room with the doctors. “We’ll take it from here, sir.”

“Please!”

“Calm down, sir. A doctor will attend to you.”

A throaty groan burst out of him when she shut the door in his face. He walked towards the waiting room, slumped into it, and jerked up to pace.

Iyke and a few members of staff regarded him with mournful eyes and sat in stunned silence.



The muscles on her face didn’t twitch when she got the call. Not even the gaze she fixed on the television screen or the hand she wrapped around a mug of mint tea. The only body part Mama Ajibade moved as she listened to the frantic voice of one of Bade’s lair staff were her lips. And that was because she wanted to ask one question.

“Where is Folu?”

“In his room, ma.”

“Thank you, Derrick.”

She gently placed the mobile device on a coffee table and resumed sipping her tea. Then, in a voice that belied the burning rage wafting from the pit of her stomach, she called out to her manservant, asked him to instruct the chauffeur to get the car ready, and reclined on her seat. Mama Ajibade rubbed the thumbs on both hands across her fingers as one would a stress ball, as she mulled over the news she’d just heard.

“I don’t have the exact details, ma, but we rushed into the library when we heard the gunshot to find Oga Fola beating up Oga Folu,” Derrick had said.

When she’d inquired about the gunshot’s origin, Derrick reiterated that he wasn’t sure, but he suspected Folu shot his wife.

Mama Ajibade pressed firmly on the armrest of her chair and sucked in a deep breath. She arose slowly when the manservant informed her the car was ready, plucked off her phone from the stool, and dialed a number. The receiver's voice, unlike Derrick's, was calm. He apologized for not calling sooner; then, he informed her he was currently at the hospital.

"Are you alone?" She asked.

"Yes, ma."

"Did he do it?"

"Yes, ma."

"Tell me everything, Iyke."

Iyke, like Derrick, told her he wasn't sure how it happened. What he could state for a fact was running into the library when he heard the gunshot to find Folu clutching a gun and staring dazedly at her bleeding form.

"Who else saw him shoot her?"

"I was the first to enter the library, ma. Others arrived when Oga Fola began beating up Oga Folu."

"What hospital are you at?"

"Blue Cross Hospital, ma. I informed the doctors it was a robbery incident."

"Good. The Chief Medical Director is a family friend. His name is Dr. Bodunrin. Ask to speak with him. Let him know we don't want to file a report."

"I tried doing so, ma, but Oga Fola insists he wants the report filed."

Mama Ajibade, now seated in the backseat of her Maybach, pressed a finger on her temple. She instructed Iyke to scout out Dr. Bodunrin after confirming that Fola was still at the hospital.

"Do so without Fola knowing," she said.

"Okay, ma."

After a few minutes of waiting, Dr. Bodunrin's voice rang out of the phone.

"Abiodun, *bawo ni*?"

"I'm great, ma. Good to hear from you," Dr. Bodunrin said.

"How is she?"

“She’s still in surgery, ma. I have all my top surgeons working to save both mother and baby.”

The phone in her hand wobbled. “Baby?”

“Yes, ma. She’s pregnant. Six weeks gone.”

She gulped down the surge of emotion that flowed through her gut.

“I’m sorry about the robbery incident, ma.”

“Do all you can, ‘Biodun. Do everything humanly possible to save that baby.”

“We will, ma.”

“I want us to keep this between us,” Mama Ajibade said in an almost whisper. “I know you’re bound to file a gunshot report, but I want you to keep this incident between us.”

Dr. Bodunrin sighed. “Okay.”

For the rest of the ride to Bade’s lair, Mama Ajibade made more calls to cash in more favors. The sight that greeted her at Bade’s Lair almost made a screamer out of her. She swallowed a gag as she gazed at the blood-stained rug—doing all she could to keep from emptying her stomach’s content. Then she instructed Derrick to assemble the staff.

Her meeting with them was a one-line statement. “Nothing about this incident leaves these walls.”

She fixed a scrutinizing gaze on all the one-hundred-plus staff of the mansion as she regally circled them.

They chorused an affirmative response.

Satisfied with the meeting, Mama Ajibade made one last call and went up to her son’s room. On her mind was one question; *Fola’s baby?*

TWO

When Folu sloshed glass after glass of liquor and gulped it in quick successions, he affirmed it was to soothe his nerves. He couldn't get them to still. They ran amok in his head, fizzed his sense of balance, made him imbibe shots after shots of whiskey until his wits were an entire mass of numbness.

After his twin left off fisting him, he'd picked up the gun, pressed it to his head, and squeezed the trigger. All the blasted gun did was click, click, and clicked some more! He ran crazed eyes around the library, did a mental check of his stash of spare bullets, and slowly got off his knees to seek the key that would open his path to eternal bliss—a loaded gun.

Folu, taking a purposeful stride towards his study, partly noticed Derrick walking in steps with him. He wrenched the door to his home office open, pulled out the spare magazine, and began loading the gun with stilled fingers.

“Would you like me to call Mama Ajibade?” Derrick asked.

Folu threw him a fleeting glance and cocked the gun.

“Sir!”

Folu placed the gun's muzzle to his head, his fingers inches away from the trigger when he felt the weight of a body hitting his.

“Get the fuck out, Derrick!”

Derrick snatched the gun from him and immediately smashed it. “We're not recording two shooting scenes in this house tonight, sir. Not as long as I live and work here!”

Folu heaved in vehemence, clenched his fists, and then ran his hands across the desk. “Get. Out. Derrick. Get out now!”

Derrick stooped to pick up the remains of the smashed gun and strode with resolute shoulders out the door. Folu, panting like a labored dog, yanked off his jacket, tie, and unbuttoned his shirt. Feeling caged in, he uncuffed his shirt, rolled up his sleeves, and grabbed a whiskey decanter, wanting nothing more than to get himself totally inebriated. He was gulping down the final content of the decanter when Ayo barged into the room.

“What’s going on, Folu?”

Folu broke into a giggle, raised the whiskey bottle to his mouth, and winced at its empty content. Frowning, he made to get off the seat but slumped when the room suddenly spun. He brushed off Ayo’s supporting hands, pushed himself off the chair, and staggered towards the door. The sudden ring in his head and the room’s total darkness swept him into an infinite vortex.

He awoke to whispers, flashing lights, and lurid murmurs.

Where am I?

He felt sweat break out of his skin and soon grew into rivulets of secretions as he tried to make sense of his environment. The numbing whispers grew louder, drew closer, and filled him with an aura so intense he felt the rippling surge of goosebumps.

Where am I?

Folu.

Folu spun around when he heard her voice, trying to see her face through the pallid lights of his strange environment.

Bekere, baby, is that you?

Why did you do it?

He leaped up from the floor, then pressed a palm on his temple when his blurred vision whirled.

Why did you do it?

He broke into a tortuous sob. *I’m sorry!*

The room's whispering ambiance suddenly flipped to an eerie silence. Folu threw his eyes, now attuned to the darkroom, open to peer at his environment. The long aisle of white walls with glass doors gnawed at a small recess of his memory. Drawing his face into a contemplative frown, he slowly walked towards one of the glass doors and marveled at the incongruence of the room's brightness with that of the darkened aisle.

Present in the room was a man with an invisible face, shrouded in the fluorescent light. The man picked up a baby from the other occupant of the room, placed him on an examination bed, and mildly pressed his stomach. From where he stood, Folu squinted to get an unrestricted view of the woman's face, then gasped when he recognized her as his mother.

"Your suspicions are correct, Mrs. Ajibade," the man said, returning the baby to the woman. "Your son has both his testicles undescended. The medical word for it is cryptorchidism."

"Can you correct it?"

"In most cases, the testicles are palpable, meaning we can easily find and correct them with a simple laparoscopy. But, in your son's case, I'm afraid we can only correct it with..."

"Orchidopexy," she chimed in.

"You've done your research. That's impressive," the man said. "The MRI scan showed one testicle in the inguinal area; that's the space shy of his pubic area. However, we couldn't find the second one. Not even the scan gave us a view of its location."

"What does that mean?"

"Surgery," he said, moving further into the bright illumination. "With that, we'll be able to locate and correct the condition."

Folu squinted to get a better view of the man but found he couldn't. *'If only he'd move a step away from the lights.'*

"What are the chances of my son surviving this surgery?" Mrs. Ajibade asked.

"It's a good thing you watchfully observed him and brought him in time to have us correct it. The risks at this point are minimal, and chances of his leading a regular life are high."

Folu took a step back when the baby suddenly turned and giggled at him. Then he huffed when he recognized the uncanny resemblance.

‘Is he my son?’

The view of the room suddenly flipped with his mother trying to soothe the now bawling baby and the doctor trying to calm her down.

“Look on the bright side, Mrs. Ajibade. We successfully brought down one of them, which can still carry out the normal function of both. It would have been worse if we couldn’t salvage both of them.”

“His groin still looks distorted,” Mrs. Ajibade snapped. “Tell me again why you couldn’t get both down.”

“The missing one is too small, didn’t form, or it may have atrophied. But if you insist, we might do another check.”

“This is the fifth check, doctor; I can’t subject him to any more torture.”

“I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Ajibade rose to her feet, clutched the baby to her bosom, and turned to the door. “I need a second opinion on this.”

“I advise you to let him be for a while, ma’am. You’re subjecting him to too many surgeries. It might prove traumatic in the future.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she said, taking quick strides to the door. “I can’t have a disabled son. Not on my watch.”

Folu darted from the door when she jerked it open, resumed walking down the hall, and screeched to a halt when he saw her seated in a room across from another stranger dressed in a lab coat.

‘How did she move past me?’ He muttered, noting she no longer held a baby but sat next to a boy that looked to be about six years old.

“Your son has two options, ma’am,” the stranger dressed in a lab coat said. “We either keep subjecting him to more open surgeries, or we stay positive that the unfound testicle would naturally atrophy with time.”

“What if it doesn’t?” Mrs. Ajibade quizzed, “What if it causes some health complications later in life? What then?”

Folu listened in rapt attention at the conversation going on in the room and started when the boy suddenly turned to regard him. And again, he had an

eerie sense of looking into a crystal ball, seeing the future version of himself.

Or was it the past?

He snapped his attention back to the women's conversation when his mother said:

"I'm willing to try all the alternatives that won't leave my son a cripple."

"After this one last surgery, where we'll search through all the probable places the testicle may have gotten stuck at, we can safely assume that it didn't form."

"I'm willing to take that option, doctor."

"If you'd like, we could have his lost testicle replaced with a prosthesis. That way, his scrotal area looks normal, and also keeps him from having to deal with social traumas."

"Tell me more about it."

"It's like having a broken limb replaced with prostheses. But in this case, we're giving him an artificial testicle."

"Will he be able to function later in life?"

"I'm afraid the saline ball is simply to bolster his self-confidence and keep him from having to explain his slackened scrotum when he finds himself in a male locker room."

"What about his physical growth? I hear the absence of a testicle gives them female features. I don't want that for my son."

Folu took several steps back. He couldn't stomach listening to the conversation.

"You don't need to worry about that since we could bring down one of his testicles," the woman responded. "But you must teach him to develop a healthy and well-balanced life. That includes a well-planned diet, structured exercise, and a strict and disciplined lifestyle."

"We can arrange that. What about the aspect of fertility?"

Folu walked away from the door when he noticed the boy's sorrowful look and trotted off.

He wasn't interested in this conversation. All he needed was to see Bekere. His thinking about her teleported him into another hall filled with a fuzzy group of colorful people. They all dressed in green scrub suits, carried files, and had stethoscopes dangling from their necks. He took in their faces and frowned when they all floated through him and turned in time to see a teenage boy and a woman walk into a room.

He was about walking back where he came from when a hand took his.

"Bekere," he said, turning to her.

She smiled and motioned towards the door. "Tell me everything, Folu. Tell me all there is to know about you. No more secrets."

"No more, darling," he averred, pulling her into his arms. "I promise."

He groaned when she flitted out his arms and looked into the room through a small glass.

"The results are out, ma'am, and I'm deeply sorry to inform you that the swelling in his groin and pain he complained about was due to damage to the surviving testicle."

"How did that happen?"

"A lot of factors would have led to it, but the most likely of them is a lack of proper blood supply."

"What's the implication?"

"It's best and safer to have it removed."

"So, we're talking permanent erectile dysfunction?"

"With proper medical help, that wouldn't be a problem."

"I don't understand."

"From here on out, he'll see a hormone specialist. With regular medical checkups and prosthetic surgery, he should lead an everyday healthy life."

"So, he'll spend his entire life with fake balls and a continuous need to pump himself with testosterone?"

The doctor regarded her sadly.

"Tell me, doctor, what's a boy's life without testicles?" Mrs. Ajibade said in exasperation. "I might as well get him female clothes! Or better yet, buy

him a vagina.”

“I understand your frustration, ma’am.”

“Do you?”

“We’ve had patients who, though lacked testes, could still have an erection and have sex. They’re even known to give women greater sexual pleasures as they’re able to maintain sexual stamina for as long as it takes for a woman to reach orgasm. Which is usually longer than it takes for a man to.”

Mrs. Ajibade snickered. “So, my son, if he’s able to, might grow up to become a stud.”

“Ma’am, your son will get all the medical attention he needs and can even lead a normal life. All we’re laying out are the various outcomes his condition might cause.”

“The long and short of what you’ve all been telling me is that my son will hide his deformity, but he will remain sterile for the rest of his life.”

“For now, yes. With the dynamic medical research going on, there’s no telling what might pop up in the future. But for now, it’s safe to conclude that your son is and will remain sterile.”

Folu’s groan called the attention of the tall, gangly boy seated next to the woman. He fixed him with a grim look and returned his attention to the doctor.

Why am I in this room? What does this mean?

He ran past a gated entrance, blinked rapidly to get his eyes attuned to the bright greenery, and stomped down a neat lawn pathway.

‘I’m in a maze? Why am I in a maze?’ He raised a hand to touch the palpable green wall of shrubs, turned when he heard still breathing beside him, reached out to grab her evasive form but held nothing but clenched fists.

“Find me, Folu,” she said, gliding in frills of white lace and filling the air with ripples of laughter. “Don’t let me die here, Folu. Find me.”

He raced after her, dashing through slithering turns, buoyed by her laughter and cheerful whispers of “Find me.”

‘Why do you keep floating out of reach? How do I find you?’

He winced to the deafening sound of static noise and turned in time to see Fola’s glowering look.

“Put the gun down, Folu!”

Then Bekere cried: “Folu, please, please put the gun down.”

He groaned in despair when he saw his projected version, raised the gun to Fola, heard Bekere’s pleading cry, and gasped when he pointed the gun to her.

‘I killed her,’ he yelled in stunned realization. ‘God, oh, God, I killed her!’

He raced towards her, grunted to ward off the hands, pinning him to the ground.

“Let me go,” he cried, fighting to jostle off their muscled grip. “I need to find her. Let me go. Please let me go!”

“You’ll get through this, Folu. You will rise above it.”

He recognized the voice as Ayo’s, but he couldn’t see him through the haze of blinding darkness.

“Ayo?”

“I’m right here, Folu,” Ayo said.

Folu threw his eyes open, blinked rapidly to attune his blurred vision to the soft glow of the bedroom lights, cast them around the room, registered the face of Dr. Fashina, and winced when he felt the prick of a needle.

“You’ll be fine,” Dr. Fashina said, “Just relax... relax.”

Folu reclined on the bed when a calming wave of serenity washed through him. Ayo squeezed his hand and continued whispering relaxing words.

“Take me to my wife, Ayo,” he said in an inaudible mumble as he drifted onto the shores of calmness. “Please, she needs me. I need her to know that I’m sorry. Take me to her.”

“Be strong, Folu,” Ayo said, “Fight this, my friend. Please fight it.”



At the grand gated entrance of the Bade's abode, while Folu hallucinated on past and present events, and Ayo worriedly whispered soothing words to him, one of the security personnel punched a button that buzzed the large, wrought-iron gate open.

Four unmarked white vans and a black SUV drove in, parked in a straight file on the driveway, and eight grim-faced men choreographically descended. One of the men, a sturdy man in a sky-blue three-piece suit, threw a flitting look around, noted the security cameras, and took hurried strides into the stately manor.

Derrick smiled in welcome at him, pointed him to the library, and ushered in the group's remaining members—seven jacked up men in gray coveralls, matching boots, and mean strides.

"Thank you for coming on such brief notice," Mama Ajibade said in a forced smile.

"It's no bother, ma'am," the suited man replied, then he ran his eyes around the library. "How do you want this handled?"

"Make it go away."

"And the witnesses?"

Mama Ajibade locked gazes with him, "Keep a close eye on them."

The man nodded, signaled at the jacked-up men, and set to work.

THREE

Folarin was on his fourth can of Red Bull when he saw his mother walking down the clinic's hallway. Determined to ignore her, he turned away from the beverage refrigerator and took a hurried stride towards the lobby.

"Fola."

"If you're here to judge me, mother, I suggest you retrace your steps."

Mama Ajibade quietly walked beside him, matching his long stride with her sturdy ones. "I spoke with Bodunrin a few minutes ago. He informed me both mother and child would come out on top."

Fola lowered himself on the sofa, his gaze fixed on the aisle leading to the emergency ward. A pair of nurses whispering to each other smiled consolingly at him as they walked down the marbled floor of the clinic's hallway. It had been six hours since he'd rushed her in here, although a doctor had come out of and returned to the room occasionally, none had told him anything concrete about her state.

"She'll be fine," Mama Ajibade said.

"You don't know that for sure, mother."

"She's a fighter. I know that about her."

Fola squashed the can of energy drink and got off his seat to pace.

"Sit down, Fola."

He ran his hand across his head, threw her an accusatory glare, and paced some more.

Mama Ajibade sighed and reclined on the sofa with legs crossed.

Listless and in desperate need of getting an update concerning Bekere, Fola walked towards the front desk.

A middle-aged woman in a pearl-white gown and a matching, starched miniature cap smiled indulgently at his approaching form.

“Any word?”

She shook her head and did a few punches on her computer. He wondered if she had a video view of the private ward and craned forward to peek at her desktop computer. She slightly shifted the monitor and raised pitiful eyes to his.

“She’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

“Do you know when I can get word on her state?”

“One of the doctors will update you on it soon.”

Fola returned to the couch, flumped down on it, and shoved down the thumping pain on his face. He jerked himself away when his mother placed her hand on his shoulder, clenched his teeth to keep from breaking into sobs, and pushed off the seat.

He needed a drink, fresh air, more drinks, and a lawyer.

After dousing his face with a cup of cold water to sate the pulsating pain, he plucked off another can of Red Bull, emptied it in few gulps, and pulled out another. He ignored the buzzing phone in his pocket, trudged towards one of the cane sofas scattered about the neatly cultured lawn of the hospital, and sat legs apart on it.

The buzzing phone resumed its vibration as he poured his drink into his mouth, and again, he ignored it.

When a childish giggle floated to him, he raised peppery eyes towards the direction to see a woman tickling her son.

Would our child be a boy? Or a girl.

He wanted a girl—a beautiful, plump baby with Bekere’s eyes, her beatific smile, and uncommonly long curly hair. Then he wanted a son that’ll be as tall as he was but looked every bit like his mother.

A flitting smile flittered around his lips as the giggling child regarded him in curious wonder.

He'd teach his children to play basketball, take them with him to the gym, wheel them around in carts at the mall, twirl them around on his shoulders, and spend his every waking moment with them.

He frowned when he saw the woman hand her child over to a poorly dressed girl in her early twenties, squeezed the can of energy drink when the girl kissed the child's cheeks and looked away.

He wasn't having anyone look after his kids. He'd do it himself. No nanny, no help, no nothing. Just him, Bekere, and their children.

"Fola."

He half-heartedly turned to register his mom's presence and took a swig of his drink.

"Can I sit with you?"

He shrugged.

She lowered her petite, agile self to the seat beside him and adjusted her kaftan. Then she threw a furtive glance to him, sighed, and cast her glance around.

He lost track of how long she sat next to him, almost forgot she was there.

"Can we talk?"

He trashed the can and got off the seat.

"Sit down, Fola!" She barked.

Fola raised a cynical brow, stood feet apart, and shoved his hands in his pocket. She flashed a mirthless smile at his rigid stance, leaned her back on the chair, and crossed her legs.

"I understand your pain, Fola."

He scoffed.

"You may think that I don't, but I do." She sighed. "I'm sorry I let you down, failed on my duty to protect you when you needed me."

Fola shuffled his feet and threw restless eyes around.

"I know you feel I loved Folu more..."

"Can we cut this, mother? I'm not in the right frame of mind for it, please."

Mama Ajibade sucked in a deep breath, uncrossed her legs, and adjusted her dress. “You’re angry.”

“Angry?” He spat, “Try a stronger adjective, mother.”

Mama Ajibade patted the chair, “Sit.”

“I need to go see how...”

“She’ll be fine, sit.”

Fola gritted, swallowed his frustration, and settled into the chair.

“So, you were....” She gritted. “You were still chasing her, knowing she was married to your twin.”

He flashed her a sardonic grin, “You don’t know me too well, mother, if you think I’ll relinquish my one shot at happiness just to appease your trophy son.”

Mama Ajibade rubbed the thumb of both fingers across each other and pursed her lips in disdain, “I’ve known you to be a lot of things, Fola. A womanizer, man-whore...”

He sprang up from his seat, “Watch what you say to me, mother!”

“What I didn’t know was that you’d risk destroying your legacy over that... that no-class piece of filth!”

“What did you say?”

Mama Ajibade rose slowly to her feet and regarded him with a full blast of ire. “Be thankful, son, oh be very thankful I’m not as hot-headed as I used to be. Otherwise, I’ll make this town unbearable for you!”

Fola swallowed the sudden bile that flowed into his mouth and bit firmly on his fist. Then he broke into a fevered pace.

“The baby she carries is an Ajibade,” she said, settling on the sofa and adjusting her kaftan, “The first heir to the Ajibade empire. My priority is to protect that child.”

“The child is mine, mother.”

“I don’t give a toss who the child belongs to,” she spat. “The child is an Ajibade, a legal heir, and that’s final.”

“I won’t let you turn my child into a tool, mother. I won’t allow you to see him as nothing but a means to sustain your fucking empire.”

Mama Ajibade regarded him with eyes crossed between pity and scorn. Then she extended her hands to his, “Come, sit with me.”

Fola ran his hand across his head, prepared to ignore her summon.

“For all its worth, I’m happy something good came out of this.”

He flashed her a bemused look.

“She’s with child. That’s the sweetest lemonade you made of this lemon.” She grinned. “So, *oko mi*, come, sit with your mother, let’s talk plans.”

Fola grudgingly sat next to her, allowing her to squeeze his hand.

“What about your wife? What about Ivy?”

Fola twitched his legs and looked about him.

Mama Ajibade sighed and adjusted her gown. “Your brother didn’t mean to shoot her; you know that, don’t you?”

Fola got off the seat.

“I can’t douse the enormity of this mess, but as an Ajibade, we’ll treat this as a family squabble.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He said in a mirthless snicker, “You wouldn’t want to sully the image of your perfect son.”

“This is not just about Folu. If words of this get out, it will put Bade Inc. in an unpleasant light. Our investors will panic, and our stocks will plummet.”

Fola snickered. “Of course, it’s the company. It has always been about Folu and the damn company.”

“*Şora*, Fola,” she seethed, “*Maşe jẹ ki n bú ọ*. Don’t provoke me into saying something I’d regret!”

He scoffed. “Go ahead, mother, rain the curses on me. It wouldn’t be the first.”

She gasped, rose to her feet, and strode towards him, hurling cuss words in Yoruba at his receding form.

When the phone in his pocket buzzed, he pried it out, ignored the call when he noted it was Ivy, and speed-dialed a number.

“Boss.”

“Are you in Lagos?”

“Yes, boss.”

“I need you.”



While Fola stormed out on his mother at the pizazz hospital in Victoria Island, Inspector Joel Amadi swallowed a large morsel of pounded yam at a *Bukka* in Keffi Obalende.

As he scraped off the last morsel of pounded yam, he threw a distracted glance around the sparsely crowded canteen. Then he deftly molded the pounded yam into a sizeable ball, thumbing a hole in it, dipped it in a near-empty bowl of Egusi soup—raking up the pieces of stockfish scattered in it—and wolfed it down.

“Officer,” a short, dark-skinned girl with a distinct *Ikot Ekpene* accent said when she arrived at his table to take out the used dinner wares, “*Hope you enjoy the food?*”

The Inspector boisterously nodded as he shoved a piece of bushmeat into his mouth and washed his hands in the bowl of soapy water she handed to him. The server smiled in satisfaction and left with the used plates.

“Bring another bottle of Coke, Uwamobong,” he said, “*Dis one don finish.*”

“Which type, Orobó?”

“Yes.”

Uwamobong nodded, waved at another diner, and walked with a boisterous jiggle of her enormous backsides towards the refrigerator. Inspector Amadi stared appreciatively at the ass as he sucked his soda with a straw and wistfully shook his head.

Local or no, this babe packs a good grip. He chuckled, emptied his drink, and pulled out his phone when he felt it buzzing.

“Sir!”

“Are you still on the Island?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We just received a distress call from someone saying he heard gunshots in his neighborhood. I want you to look into it.”

“Where, sir?”

“Ikoyi. *Na, all those big men place*, I’m sure it’s just banger. But just check.”

“Okay, sir.”

When he got off the phone, he reclined on the chair and languidly sipped his fizzy drink while dialing his partner, Kole Banks. After a few rings, the call gave a busy signal. Inspector Amadi paid for his meal, tipped Uwamobong, and bade her goodnight as he took unhurried steps to his *Kia Picanto* parked on the street.

While pulling out into the express, he retried Kole’s number, sighed when it still rang out, and drove to Ikoyi.

When he got to Ikoyi, he drove onto a smooth paved road lined with tall, gangly trees and streetlights. He noticed a coal-black SUV with tinted glass and a number plate that read MILITARY drive in the middle of four unmarked white vans.

“Bullion van,” he chuckled, “That’s how they steal this country’s money and cart it away in bullion vans.”

When he arrived at Bade’s lair entrance, a hefty man dressed in khaki pants, a sea-blue uniform, a small face cap, and a bulletproof vest greeted him.

“How can I help you?”

“I’m inspector Joel Amadi. I’m a CID official.”

“Yes?”

“I’m here concerning the shooting?”

The buff security flashed a torch at the insides of his vehicle and shone it on his face.

“Please remove that torchlight from my face,” Inspector Amadi spat.

The security raised a cynical brow at his tone and asked to see a means of identification. Inspector Amadi flashed it and waited in gritting impatience as the man continued his search.

“Pardon the delay,” the man said a few minutes later, “But we just suffered a robbery incident that has made us all extra careful.”

“Okay, can I speak with someone about it?”

“That won’t be possible now, sir. The police just left a few minutes ago.”

“Police?”

“Yes, from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. We called in the incident, and they’ve taken all they need to begin investigations.”

“Can I have a look around?”

The security regarded him in muted patience.

“I just need to see for myself, you know, for record purposes.”

“Can I see some papers?”

“I just showed you my badge. I want to speak with one of the family members.”

The security shrugged, “Do you have a pass?”

Inspector Amadi snickered. “A pass for what? I told you I’m just checking.”

“I just told you investigations are underway. Please move your vehicle away from the driveway, sir,” the security said.

Inspector Amadi gripped the steering wheel, exhaled, and nodded. “I’ll hold you up for this.” He squinted to read his name off the nametag. “Boniface. I’ll have you arrested for deterring an officer from carrying out his duty.”

Boniface nodded, “That’s fine, sir. Draw up a warrant and swing it by me anytime. Have a goodnight.”

Inspector Amadi reversed his car and was about to drive off when Boniface flagged him down.

“I’ve just spoken to my superiors,” he said, “You can go in.”

He gave a short laugh when the buff security guard marched towards the shed and punched a button that rolled the gate open. When he drove into the imperial compound, he stared in genuine admiration at the neatly cultured lawn, the silhouette of an Olympic sized swimming pool, and the house’s stunning splendor.

“Leave am. Money good,” he thought wistfully, “See house wey one person dey live. Chai, this country.”

A sharply dressed man ushered him in, walked him into a pizzazz living room, and asked his drink of choice.

“Water is fine.”

The suited man nodded and strolled out of the room. The Inspector threw a studying glance around, noted the aisle’s mild disarray leading to what looked to be a dining room, and saw a pair of maids dressed in blue checkered shirts and gray pinafores walked out in orchestrated movement.

“We weren’t expecting another visit from the cops,” a voice said.

He turned to see a petite woman dressed in a floral kaftan and matching turban.

“Good evening, madam,” he said, keeping his gaze fastened on a set of piercing honey-brown eyes, “I’m inspector Joel Amadi.”

She nodded in response, strolled towards a Victorian styled armchair, and sat crossed-legged on it. Then she sighed, pointed him to a seat, and waited while he sipped the water placed before him by the pair of maids.

“We got a distress call, ma, from a neighbor saying he heard gunshots.”

Mama Ajibade gave him a questioning glance, “Who made the call?”

“I don’t have the exact detail, but...”

“The shots fired came from one of the estate’s securities.”

“Was any of the culprit apprehended?”

“No, they escaped.”

Joel noted the information on his notepad, “What about members of the family? Was anyone injured?”

“No.”

Joel bobbed his head, uttered a few lines of commiseration, and stood to leave.

“Thank you for the refreshment.”

Mama Ajibade gave a slight bow and kept her gaze trained on his retreating form.

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FOUR

The limitless power of the mind is often a leading topic of many a debate. The mind, psychologists maintain, provides an ideal upon which an individual or being perceived self and environment, responds to the said environment, and builds upon it the innate totality of consciousness.

Folu, recumbent on a king-sized bed, tossed fitfully to the repeated replay of the nightmarish scene of pointing a gun to his wife. While a significant part of his conscious mind fought to tune out her shrilling cry and another stared in horror at her bleeding form, a subliminal part of his mind churned out a repeated reel of a white dress, squeals of laughter and:

Put the gun down, Folu!

He sprang up on the bed. “Bekere!”

“Stay still, son,” Mama Ajibade said, wiping sweat off his face. “You’re burning up.”

His shoulders heaved as he panted laboriously, threw fever-pitch eyes around the posh room, and slowly got off the bed. A piercing headache peeled out a numbing sound that petrified him. He blanched, pressed a hand on his temple, and sauntered around the room.

“What time is it?”

“It’s a little past noon.”

Folu shut his eyes, then clenched his fists to curtail a searing need to lie down. “How is she?”

Mama Ajibade sighed. “She’s alive.”

He gave in to the need to sit down and flopped into an armchair. "I need to see her."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, son," Mama Ajibade spat.

He threw critical eyes to her, rubbed his nape, and croaked. "Please have Derrick in here, mother."

"You're parched," she said, handing him a glass of water, "Here, drink this."

"Get Derrick." He cleared his throat and sucked in a deep breath. "I need..."

"What you need is rest, Folu. I've got everything under control. Your action will piss on the company's stocks for sure if word of it gets out."

He gazed musingly at her.

"I called The Bleachers."

He gasped. "Why would you do that?"

The Bleachers were a covert organization open only to four families of Lagos one-percenters. Their operation is *In Cognito* and can only be reached via a ghost code of encrypted messages. If there was a malignant tumor, you needed to yank off; *The Bleachers* were the surgeon you'd call.

"I almost killed her. I deserve to be punished for it. Why would you try to hide it?"

"No one is getting punished for anything, Folu, not on my watch!"

He flinched at the last statement.

"If there's anyone that should be punished, it is that tramp!"

He sprang up from the seat and bore down on her with a raised fist. She stood defiantly with eyes shooting daggers and fists raised.

"What did you call her?"

"A tramp!"

"Mother!"

"An opportunistic, ungrateful filth! How dare she treat you like this after everything you've done for her?"

"Contain yourself, mother!"

She gasped and furnished him with a resounding slap. “How dare you put my company at risk over that piece of filth, Folu!”

Folu rumbled, grabbed her hand when she wanted to deliver another cuff, and growled. “Mother!”

“It’s bad enough you married below your class, now this?”

Folu turned away from the blast of her glare to look out the window. He shut his eyes to the chugging wheels of his mental battles, pressed a finger on the space between his brows to stay the raging flow of images of her pooling blood on the floor, and willed himself to hang on to the deep loathing he felt, wanted to feel for her.

“I knew she was trouble; knew she didn’t have it in her to love you unconditionally. Wouldn’t be able to withstand the heat of knowing you couldn’t sire children.”

Folu spun around and pinned her with a withering stare. “The child is mine.”

“Is it?”

“She’s my wife! My wife! That makes me father to whatever child springs out of her.”

Mama Ajibade snickered, “Yet you wanted to kill her.”

Folu shuddered in rage and turned away from her. A vivid picture of the pre-shooting scene flashed before him, melted his sense of focus, and raised a fresh ire of vengeance. He blanked out to his mom’s moans of regretting the day she met Bekere, wishing he listened to her and broke up things with her when she ran away over something as mundane as learning he was engaged to someone else and continuously called her a ‘tramp.’

He flexed his shoulders, rubbed his neck, and exhaled. *We’ll rise above this. All I need to do is see her, be with her, hold her hands, and nurse her back to health. She loves me.* He gritted to quell the derisive snort his conscious mind let out. *She loves me. This is just a minor glitch in our marriage. Once she’s recovered, we’ll—*

“Push for a divorce.”

Folu spun around to regard his mom in befuddlement, “A what?”

“A divorce.”

“That’s not happening.”

Mama Ajibade sniffed and adjusted the bodice of her kaftan. “She’s carrying an Ajibade. That’s her saving grace. But after this disgraceful act, she’s as good to us as a Mom-for-hire.”

“I will not abandon the mother of my child over a case of infidelity.”

Mama Ajibade snickered, “You’ve grown disgustingly soft, Folu. So, you’re still entertaining thoughts of keeping your marriage after what she did?”

Folu approached her in uncontrolled rage, “Mother?”

“*Wo, joko jo, ko gbenu osi soun!*” She spat. “Douse that destructive fire and sit your ass down!”

Folu groaned, made a fist, squeezed hard on it in gritted teeth, and lowered himself on a seat across from her.

“I’m trying to recognize the man you’ve become, son. I’m trying to wrap my mind around the stranger sitting across from me. This hormonal teenager given to tantrums. What happened to you?”

He crossed and uncrossed his legs, “What’s your plan, mother?”

“There’s a cop snooping around, so here’s the tale we’ll spin.” She picked up a glass of water, took several sips between a reflective purse of her lips. “You did not shoot her.”

Folu stilled.

“It was a robbery. A planned robbery orchestrated by a compromised member of our security detail. You came home from work, found Fola in the living room with your wife, and as you were having a normal family feud, the robbers came in. While you were trying to negotiate with them, they opened fire. They, not you, shot her.”

Folu twitched his legs in impatience. “What about the bullets, mother? How will you explain that? The gun is registered to my name, remember?”

“I called in the incident, reported it as a robbery. To the knowledge of the SARS team, no one was shot. So, no one would look for a bullet.”

“What about the doctor? He knows it’s a gunshot and is obligated to report the incident. How will you corroborate his report with your grand tale?”

“Good thing Fola rushed her to Blue Cross. Dr. Bodunrin, as requested, didn’t report the incident.”

Folu took several calming breaths, “That’s where she is, Blue Cross?” He paced, rubbed his head, and paced some more. “I need to see her.”

“You will do no such thing!”

“Is that part of your plan too? Keep me away from her?”

Mama Ajibade pranced off her seat, “Did you hear me say we have to do everything to have this blow over!”

“I’m not open to any plan that involves me allowing Fola to be with my wife.”

Mama Ajibade sucked in a deep breath, pressed hard on her temple, and ambled towards him, “You will not see her.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. As soon as she delivers, you will fight for full custody of the child and divorce her; otherwise, I will strip you of everything you’ve got, or so help me, God!”

Folu threw the tumbler across the room and walked far away from her to keep from convulsing her.

“What I did to her was wrong on all counts. There’s no getting around the inhumanity of it.” He swallowed the tears that flooded his gut, “I shot her, tried to kill the woman, the only woman I’ve ever truly loved. And yet you stand here.” He gritted. “You stand before me and tell me I can’t see her? That I should divorce her?”

“What she did to you was despicable, marrying you and whoring herself to your twin, your blood! How would you want to return to that same woman?”

“She’s my wife!”

“She’s a whore!”

“Mother!”

“And I will not have you bring this family to its knees without doing everything within my power to fix it.”

“Fix it?” He snickered. “How, mother? How can you fix this?”

“Leave that to me.”

“Will you try to fix it the way you did my testicles?”

She gasped.

“Will you have them repeatedly cut me open even when they told you time and time again that they couldn’t find it? Will you have them cut open my head this time? Rip out my heart that is burning with love for her and yank the crippling image of her lying helplessly on the floor while I repeatedly shot her? Will you!”

He grabbed her and convulsed her.

She let out a frightful scream. “Folu!”

“Will you?”

He hoisted her, twirled her around, and howled when her shrilling cry cut through him. Before he could shove her, Derrick burst into the room and snatched her sniveling form from him, then he and a pair of security muscled him to the bed and frantically called Dr. Fashina when he grabbed his head, howled in anguish, and began tearing the room apart.



When Fola saw her for the first time, twenty-eight hours after the incident, he was ill-prepared for the ton of grief that hit him. He slowly walked towards her bed, repeatedly swallowed the rush of sob on his throat, and gently took her fingers jutting out of a cast in his. A small tear raced down his face as he looked at her bandaged head and the mass of cast wrapped around her arm.

The voice of the doctors floated to his conscious mind. *She was lucky; the bullet missed her vital organs.*

Fola vaguely heard the door creak open.

“She’s currently in a mild coma, but the worst is over,” Dr. Bodunrin said, “We successfully removed the bullet and save both mother and child. All we need to do now is wait.”

“How long before she wakes?”

“Given the swelling in her brain, a result of hitting her head from the fall, we’ll need to watch her closely.”

Fola threw him a venomous glance, “That doesn’t answer my question!”

“Two weeks, give or take.”

Fola rose slowly to his feet, “I want this wing on a twenty-four hours guard. Other than I and the attending staff, allow no one, I repeat, no one into this room.”

“What about her husband?”

Fola darted and grabbed the doctor’s lapel, “No one! Not even my mother. Do you understand me?”

Dr. Bodunrin nodded, adjusted his suit when Fola released him and trotted out of the room.

Folarin took calming breaths and slouched into a chair. Taking another deep breath to calm the brooding storm of rage, he placed a light kiss on her fluttering eyelids and took her hand to his face when she involuntarily twitched her fingers.

“Come back to me, baby,” he whispered, placing feather-light kisses on her face. “I need you. Come back to me, please.”

A nurse walked into the room, threw a furtive glance at him, and busied with changing Bekere’s drip. When done, she threw another furtive glance at him and strolled out the room.

Fola knew he looked a sore sight. Save for regular showers and change of clothes, he hadn’t been able to still his fingers enough to trim his beard or find the fortitude to visit a barber’s shop. A slight itch on his face reminded him of the stitches done and the fact that he had a portion of his face covered in plasters.

He raised her hand to his lips when she jerked, brushed her hair, and gulped down the raging need to kiss her. When the phone in his pocket buzzed, he reluctantly released her hand and went out of the room to take the call. He knew who the caller was even before pulling out the phone. He’d started the move, employed his service, and promised to reward him immensely if he was successful with his request.

Contrary to his mother’s admonishing, Fola employed a lawyer. The lawyer was a chubby man in his forties, named Ejiro Onahoro. Ejiro was reputed as the best divorce lawyer in the city of Lagos. His conversations with him,

most of which were done over the phone, were the only thing keeping Fola from scouting out his twin with a cocked gun.

Although he narrated the actual event to Ejiro, he affirmed he did not want the press privy to it or was ready to report to the authorities. All he wanted was for Ejiro to use the information to push for a divorce. Ejiro informed him Bekere was the only one in the position to file a divorce petition.

“Isn’t there a way you can work around it?”

“Not legally with her in a coma and all. My advice would be that you wait it out until she’s able to file and then use his attempt to kill her to speed up the process. Any judge would grant her a divorce in a blink after hearing what he did to her, not to mention his also facing criminal charges.”

“What do I do in the interim? I can’t just let him do what he did and do nothing.”

“You can talk to one of her relatives, have them—”

“We do not want to make this public knowledge, Ejiro. Not even her mother is to know about it,” Fola had said in a rancorous whisper, “If word of this gets out, it will not only put a dent to my company, but I’ll lose the only leverage I have to rid her of my twin.”

Ejiro saw reason with his argument and assured him he would do his best to get him the document he seeks. Fola hoped this call was in response to that promise.

“I just got off the phone with your informant. Your twin is currently under close watch by his doctors.”

“What about the divorce petition? Were you able to get a forger to sign her signature?”

“Yes, but as your lawyer, I’ll advise you to wait.”

“Wait?”

“Yes. Your twin is no fool. He knows his wife is in a coma and currently unable to attend to such matters, and going by what you said earlier about keeping this hidden, I take it none of her relatives are aware of the incident or are they?”

“No.”

“Then let’s wait until she’s fully recovered before sending it. That way, it looks legit.”

“Fair point.”

“Besides, did you know your twin suffered a mental breakdown?”

“I don’t give a fuck if his brain popped out of his skull,” Fola spat.

“You should care, Fola, because if word of his crime gets out, or we state his abuse of her as a reason for divorce, his lawyers might get him down to temporary insanity or crime of passion.”

“He purposefully went out of the room in search of a gun! How is that temporary?” Fola said, “That’s full-blown insanity and intent to kill.”

“Do you want to move this to court?”

Fola rubbed his hand across his face and winced at the sting from one of his bruises, “Bade Inc is trust sensitive. A scandal like this would cripple us.”

“Then approach this on another angle.”

“I’m listening.”

“Bide your time. Allow your twin enough time to come to terms with his action, then approach him with an offer of a peaceful divorce or a gruesome one that lays bare his crime and possible criminal charges.”

“Mm,” he said noncommittally, a nexus of ideas running through his mind.

FIVE

Mama Ajibade sat regally on an armchair at the apartment in Victoria Island as she listened to a detailed report on the best course of action to protect her family from the dark cloud of doom looming on their horizon. She'd been immensely relieved to learn both mother and child successfully pulled out of surgery. Bekere's comatose state slightly worried her as she considered its impact on the baby's growth, but she relaxed when Dr. Bodunrin assured her she was getting the best medical care there was. As much as it pained her to learn Bekere had cuckolded her husband, she grudgingly admired her sense in securing a place in motherhood.

Mama Ajibade had never believed in marrying low or mixing aristocratic blood with a commoner. No, it wasn't because she was raised in affluence or that she toed the line by marrying within her class. It was because she'd built her life's philosophies and principles on one simple rule: Never adorn a pig in pearls. It goes against its genetic makeup.

When her son stayed resolute to marry the schoolteacher, she'd swallowed her reserve and allowed the union because her findings on Bekere turned out pristine—excellent grades, good genes, above-average friends, and hilariously naïve.

She didn't credit her for having what it takes to run an empire but concluded that all she lacked in entrepreneurial oomph was made up for in stunning good looks and manners required to grace Folu's arms and keep his home.

A trophy wife, she'd secretly called her.

When she discovered both her sons competed for Bekere, she'd shrugged it off in a tittering fit. Her boys had always competed over everything, toys,

clothes, cars, attention. Mama Ajibade had never felt the need to douse her boys' competitive nature when she noticed it in them as kids. She instead encouraged it.

The competition will bring out the best in them, keep them on their feet, and propel them to stay ahead in the corporate world, she'd concluded.

On some days, she'd surreptitiously raised a glass as she watched them silently battle to outsmart each other and toast to "May the best man win."

She felt gratified when Folu outsmarted Fola in running Bade Incorporated. She never thought Fola had it in him to run the company, anyway. He had too much of his father's romanticized views on life. Folu, however, was more like her, committed to crushing monumental goals and setting bigger ones.

The only weak spot Mama Ajibade loathed in Folu was his sinking in too deep with the women he dated.

Mama Ajibade began looking closely into her son's bickering over Bekere when Fola went away to England and returned with a new bride. Fola's tale of falling in love with the white woman on sight didn't sit with her. She never bought into it. That was why she carried out detailed research on Ivy.

And when her results came back disturbing—perfect home, thriving career in advertising, lover of animals, socialite, and strong family values, she kept tabs on Ivy. When her spies began sending her images of Ivy's unprincipled nighttime activities, Mama Ajibade had swallowed her disappointment and waited for the charade to reveal its purpose.

The building bubble of Fola's charade burst earlier than she expected. What stunned her was what came out of the burst—Fola doing what he did to seduce Bekere. She disdainfully pursed her lips at the thought and adjusted on her seat with a sniff. Then she thought: *There's a bright side to it, after all. She's carrying a child, an heir to the Ajibade empire. That trumps all else.*

"We've made all arrangements, ma," The Bleacher said.

"Good, and the notes?"

"The twins would receive them before the end of today."

"Thank you, Tuegi."

Tuegi Enagi, head of the covert organization called *The Bleachers*, was a sprite man with a lean face that sported a thin stretch of a goatee, flappy ears, and thin lips. His hands, which held a glass of Cognac, were, as with every part of his body, sinewy.

“A CID operative came calling a few days ago. Do you know how he got a whiff of it?” Mama Ajibade asked.

“I’m still looking at it. My last conversation with the DIG pegged the caller at a few buildings away from Bade’s lair.”

“The house is soundproof. None of the neighbors could have heard the gunshot.”

“It’s a hunch, but I think one twin is playing dirty.”

Mama Ajibade sighed, “Fola is duty-bound to protect the family, although I agree that he would feel the need to get his pound of flesh. Could it be he’s anonymously tipping the cops?”

Tuegi shrugged and got off his seat, “We’re working overtime on this one. With the current plan, this should blow over in a little over two weeks.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as Tuegi exited the room, she made two calls, one to her chauffer, another to the airport, and then she waited for a call she knew would come. When the phone rang, she smiled at the caller’s announcement and resumed sipping her wine.



Folu bit hard on his lower lip, rubbed his shoulders, exhaled loudly, doing all he could to keep from murdering Ayo for all the suggestion he’d been dropping since he came into his study. After his violent attack on his mother, he’d been conscientiously keeping a tight leash on his impatience so he’d tolerate his staff and everyone around him. He was sure he wasn’t losing his sanity, as his mom expressively voiced when he awoke to find her sniveling by his bedside. Or did he think he needed to resume visiting his therapist. What he desperately needed was to be at his wife’s bedside.

After impatiently waiting for his mother to tire of her dotting over him and leave, he’d showered, meticulously saw to his grooming, and called his driver, Andrew, to inform him of his plans to spend the day at Blue Cross

Hospital. He was on his way out of the house when Derrick announced that Ayo awaited him in the study. Folu had thought to ignore Ayo's visit, and would have, had his friend not come out of the study at that moment to inform him of an unsettling murmur within the board.

"Who started it?"

"I can't say for sure, but I'll wager Mr. Odinaka and a few others are behind the whispers." Ayo took a few sips of Brandy and exhaled. "I sold them the robbery tale, but I'm sure they didn't buy it."

He took a jerky stride towards the minibar, loaded a tumbler with ice, and sloshed an inordinate amount of Hennessy into it. Ayo's continued narration of the unrest within the board and his attempt at convincing him of the downsides of visiting the hospital floated in and out of his ears as he thirstily gulped his drink. He regarded the empty glass when the ice rattled, poured another shot of Brandy, and strolled towards the bookshelf.

"Are you hearing a word of what I'm saying?"

"I don't speak gibberish, Ayo," Folu said in a drawl, "When you speak in the language I understand, you'd have my attention."

Ayo let out a loud sigh of exasperation, "Think about what it'd do to the company, Folu."

Folu snorted and raised his glass to his mouth, "Do you remember how we met?"

"I'm sorry?"

He turned to Ayo, took in his agitated stance, askew tie, and full-bearded face drawn in a petulant frown. "Do you remember how desperate you were to survive?"

"Folu."

"Do you, I wonder, still have that searing nightmare of being down to your last dime and wondering where the next meal would come from? How you desperately sold lies after lies to naïve old women and fleece them of their pension money?"

"I don't understand the allusion."

"Answer the question, Ayo."

“I do.”

“Then you of all people, Ayo should know how it feels to hit rock-bottom. You, more than anyone, should know what it means to be on the verge of slipping off the edge while hanging on to nothing but cobweb. You should comprehend my desperate need to survive.”

Ayo scratched his beard at a fevered pace.

“If anyone should try to talk me out of seeing her, fight for her, and do whatever it takes to keep from sinking, Ayo, it shouldn’t be you!”

“I’m only looking out for you, bro, trying to prevent you from going into a fist battle with Fola and saying things you shouldn’t say.”

“Bullshit!”

“So far, we’ve been able to keep this under wraps and zero down the witnesses to just the house staff. But if you go into an altercation with Fola, I fear you’d say things that would leave a long line of witnesses.” Ayo placed consoling palms on his shoulders, “We can’t afford the risks, Folu. All I ask is that you give it more time...”

“It’s been forty-eight hours, Ayo, two miserable days of not knowing how she is.”

“I know, all I’m saying is let’s give it more time for the heat to blow over, then we’d hurdle future barriers.” Ayo sighed. “Just give it a little more time, my friend, for the sake of the company.”

“She’s...” He swallowed audibly, took a loud gulp of drink, and harrumphed. “She’s all I live for; all I care about. If I lose her, then the company and everything surrounding it could very well sink.”

He flinched when Ayo took his hands in a firm squeeze, snatched it away, and slumped into a chair, pressing the cold tumbler on his temple.

“I can’t get the scene off my head, can’t stop seeing her staring at me with eyes dripping blood, can’t...” he hit the glass on his head, “Get her scream off my head!”

Folu let out a dry, wracking sob when Ayo pulled him into a firm hug. He attempted to brush free of his friend’s hold of him but gave in with an anguished cry when he couldn’t. “I can’t believe I tried to kill her. I’ll never... never be able to get past it... forgive myself...”

“Stay strong, my friend.”

Folu clenched firmly on his teeth to stay the raging grief, then he pulled away from Ayo, sniffled, and ran a hand across his face.

“Get Bash to send me a detailed report of Fola’s visits and get him out of the hospital so I can see her.”

“I’ll arrange that.”

A slight knock on the door saw Derrick walking into the room with an envelope, “This just arrived for you, sir.”

“What’s in it?” Folu asked, reaching for it.

“Documents.”

Folu pried the document out of the already opened envelope, scanned through the content, and stiffened.

“What’s that?” Ayo probed.

“A note from Dr. Bodunrin. I need to be at the hospital now.”



After his call to Ejiro, Fola returned to the hotel he’d been lodging since he brought Bekere into Blue Cross to attend to his grooming. After a relaxing shower and a beard trim, he was donning on a pair of jeans when he saw Ivy’s FaceTime. Knowing he couldn’t keep putting her off, he connected the call, forced a smile when she went into a tirade of his ignoring her calls and making her worried, and said in a reassuring voice that he just needed some bit of fresh air.

“Has she called you?” Ivy asked.

Fola thought to feed Ivy strings of lies but concluded that it wouldn’t be a wise course of action. He figured the more ally he drafted into his side, the better his chance of winning the war. Ivy’s response to the news raised in him a new heave of indignation. She vehemently encouraged him to fly Bekere to a private island equipped with expert doctors. A place his twin would not be privy to.

“I’m not sure it’s safe to move her yet,” he said.

“Bullocks!” Ivy spat. “If that wanker could do a ghastly thing like that, he’d do worse when he realizes you’re trying to stop him from seeing her.”

“I have the ward under a close guard. They would alert me if he as much as drive by the hospital.”

“That’s not good enough, Fola. You need to take decisive action on this one. Take her away and keep her safe from him.”

Fola spent the rest of his dressing up time and drive to the hospital listening to Ivy’s plans and keying more and more into it. He knew there was only so much he could do concerning Bekere. As much as he loved Bekere and would do anything to protect her, Fola was and is still legally her husband. More than anyone else, he has controlling right over her, and if push came to shove, would wield said right. If he were to whisk her away, however, away from Fola, his mother, the world, laws, and principles responsible for keeping them from being together, he would uninhibitedly nurse her back to health. Teach her to love him, and together, they would raise their baby and several other babies to come.

Feeling a sudden tingle to set his plans in motion, he hurriedly parked his car at the hospital’s garage, pulled out his phone, and dialed his pilot. While waiting for the phone to connect, he half-heartedly raised his head, returned it to the dashboard, and twirled them in rage when he saw his twin getting into his car.

Fola tossed the phone, jerked out of the car, and took hurried strides towards him. He groaned in frustration when Fola’s car drove out of his reach. He stormed into the hospital; his thoughts fixed on thoroughly reprimanding Dr. Bodunrin.

“Sir,” a nurse called out when she saw him.

He ignored her, noted she and several other nurses trotted beside, towards, and about him. When he arrived at the doctor’s office, it stunned him to find it locked.

“Where is he?”

The nurse who had earlier come into Bekere’s room to cast furtive looks at his appearance said, “Please—”

Fola pushed past her and the milling medical personnel and marched to Bekere’s room. The sight that greeted him when he barged into the room

dislodged his heart.

“Where is she?”

“Please, sir,” the furtive-glance nurse said, “Call Dr. Bodunrin.”

She might as well have addressed a rock as Fola, lost in the throes of not finding Bekere in the room, took distressed strides further into the room, pulled open all doors, bedsheets, chairs, and trays.

“Where is she?”

A nurse jogged into the room, raised consoling palms to him, and slowly mouthed a “Calm down, sir.” Then he handed him a note.

Fola jerked the note from him, glanced through it, and let out a loud huff.

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SIX

Mama Ajibade smiled into her glass of Pinot Noir when her first son drove into the stately driveway of the beach house in Eko Atlantic.

As she watched him jostled out his vehicle and threw ravenous stride into the house, she grinned at her dexterity in arranging his arrival to match his order of birth—first to arrive. When her son, her Taiye, the first fruit of her womb, the man whom she loves more than all else and whom she'd given all to redeem from the pit of self-condemnation, entered the house, she heaved a worried sigh and emptied the content of her wineglass. The booming sound of his voice followed that of the blare of a car's horn, and her second son, her Kehinde, as did his Taiye, bounded out of the car and into the house. Knowing what they would do to each other if their path crossed, she quickened her pace and entered the room in time to see them lock venomous gazes.

"Hello, sons."

They briefly pulled off their murderous gaze to regard her.

"Mind telling me what the fuck is going on?"

"I do not care for such language in my house, Fola." She lowered herself on a floral loveseat and smiled affably at both men.

"Where's my wife?"

Fola burst into a sarcastic cackle, "Your wife?"

"Have a seat, boys."

None of the twins made to accede to her request; they instead circled each other.

“I still have a loaded gun with your name on it, Fola,” Folu spat. “One shitty attitude, barb, or even giggle, and I’ll redecorate this room with your brain.”

Fola snorted, mildly pinched his nose, and suddenly landed a fist on Folu’s face. Dissatisfied with the outcome of his first hit, he delivered another blow and struggled to gain control of his footing when Folu grabbed his shoulders and tussled him.

Mama Ajibade poured herself another glass of wine as she watched her boys having a go at power tussle. She caught the worried frown on the face of her manservant and shook her head to discourage him from interceding. Two glasses of wine later, the boys finally ran out of fighting steam and engaged in wit-battle.

“You could have anyone, Fola, anyone, yet you chose her, seduced her, and do what you do best, fuck up my life!”

“Your ineptitude and lack of manly valor made the job an easy feat.” Fola sniffed and rubbed his nose. “If you’d been man enough, she wouldn’t feel the need for my cock, now would she?”

Folu charged towards him and stilled at the sound of shattered glass.

“That’s enough!” Mama Ajibade barked. She got off her seat when both men continued regarding each other and positioned herself between them. “I called you both here so we would talk plans on getting us out of this mess.”

“The only plan I’m interested in is the one that furnishes me with my wife’s whereabouts!”

“Oh, quit the charade, brother. We both know you kidnapped her!”

Folu looked from his mother to his twin and back, “Mother?”

Mama Ajibade clicked her tongue and returned to her seat.

“What’s going on?” Fola asked. “Did you do this, mom? Did you have her transferred to a different hospital?”

“Sit down, both of you.”

They didn’t budge.

“Suit yourselves.” She crossed her legs and picked up her wineglass.

“Tell me, mother, where the hell is my wife!”

“Somewhere, I’ll be sure your shenanigans won’t traumatize her into having a miscarriage.”

Folu bore down on her, “That’s my wife. You have no bloody right to move her without my consent!”

“After trying to kill her, Folu, I have every right to do whatever I darn well please!”

He broke into a fevered pace. “How could you do a thing like that? Moving her when her condition is still critical? What if the move complicates things or, worse, kills her?”

“None of that would happen.”

“Mother,” Fola said cautiously, “Please, tell me you’re joking, tell me you didn’t put the mother of my child at risk—”

Folu snatched the lapel of his blazers, “Don’t you dare utter any more filth about my wife and child, you lecherous snake!”

Fola shoved him and threw a frustrated glance at his mother, “Tell me where she is, mother!”

“All you boys need to know is that she’s fine.”

Folu crouched before her, his fevered gaze boring into hers, “I have my ways and won’t mind turning the entire Lagos upside down to find her if I have to. But as someone I hold in high regard, I’ll give you the benefit of telling me where the hell she is.”

“She’s safe—”

“Dammit, mother!”

Mama Ajibade slowly got off her seat and moved around the living room in regal strides, “My grandchild is a top priority. You boys can cut each other’s throat for all I care, but Bekere and her child will forever remain out of your reach unless you both cool your heels and listen to what I’m about to tell you.”

The twins exhaled and moved farther apart from each other.

“There’s a cop snooping around.” She regarded both men through the rims of her wineglass, noted their inscrutable looks, and shrugged. “I’ve doused

his interest and made Tuegi look into him, but I'm certain whoever tipped him will feel the need to do it again. So, here's fair warning, If anyone in this room entertains plans to blow this mishap out of proportion—"

"Mishap?" Fola snorted, "This is criminal, mother. Folu should be locked up or, better yet, confined in a psycho ward for what he did to her. Why you want to cover it, beats me!"

"What's done is done, Fola," Mama Ajibade said, "Let's put it behind us and proffer ways to move on."

"No."

Folu and Mama Ajibade looked at him in a combination of bemusement and perplexity.

"I'm not willing to sweep this under the rug, mother. I want justice."

"Justice?"

"I want him...." He locked gazes with his twin's scornful regard, "To pay for what he did to her. I want him to agree to a divorce. Otherwise, a snooping cop will be the very least of your worries."

Mama Ajibade raised a hand to silence Folu's attempt at responding to Fola. "I am your mother, Folarin. *Emi ni mo bi o*, so believe me when I tell you you don't want to cross paths with me!"

Fola slowly approached her, a slow, poisonous smirk slitting across his face, "Dear Mother. You stopped barking orders and having me follow them when you allowed a nobody to sexually molests me for years!"

"*Dake enu re!*"

"You ceased being this sphinxlike enigma I thought you were when your domestic staff took turns with me!"

She delivered a loud smack on his face.

He clenched his fist and look down at her with a biting snarl, "I will find her, mother, and claim what's mine, and if you try to stop me, I will crush you, your beloved son, and your fucking empire!"

"Fola!"

He threw maniac eyes to his twin and stormed out of the house.



In the weeks following the meeting with their mother, Folu pulled out every resource he had at his disposal to get wind of his wife's location while trying to keep Bade Incorporated from sinking under the weight of an unidentified rumor mill. It didn't escape his notice that his mother, like his twin, had vanished or that Bash, whom he'd always thought of as the best PI, displayed an uncanny amount of ineptitude in getting his wife's location. Suspecting Bash was intentionally less forthcoming, he employed a new PI and threw in five more, informing them to leave no site, town, or country unchecked.

While he waited day after day for reports from his team of investigators, he buried himself in work, made Linda fill out his calendar with meetings, and pushed Ayo and the rest of his marketing team to drive more business for the company. He focused on keeping his sanity by tackling takeover attempts and allaying investor's fears. It wasn't yet clear to him what was behind the muted murmurs bubbling within the board, but he'd put Ayo to task in making sure the story he sold them sunk deep into their bellies.

Their deal on Dangote was already within grasp. The last thing he needed was to allow the quagmire of his private life to muddy the company's waters. To drive more business for the company, he'd indulged Ayo's prodding on Optimus bank. He listened in keen interest on one of such meetings as Ayo weighed the pros of their pushing for the bid irrespective of the cons on Bankole's shady business dealings while he ran the company.

"How many branches do they have?"

"They have a presence in all 36 states of the federation."

"And you think it's a good call?"

"I know it's a good call."

"What's their current market price?"

"~~₦~~6... well technically, ~~₦~~5.99 per shares as we speak."

"Make them an offer," Folu said, picking up a cup of coffee.

"How much are we talking?"

"Begin at ~~₦~~10, then set up a meeting with the SEC and Bankole. Let him know we're coming to help tidy up his house."

“Got it, boss.”

Folu silently hoped Bankole Junior, CEO of Optimus bank, would fight to prevent the takeover and was utterly disappointed when he caved in at the very first offer.

“He’s bled out,” Ayo said. “If we’d gone in at ~~N~~8, I’m very sure he’d have latched onto it.”

“His father was a brilliant entrepreneur; too bad his son did a messed-up job on it.”

“It’s the things we love that kill us,” Ayo said philosophically. “Bankie couldn’t get over his love for the casino. Not to mention the decadence.”

When the thrill he expected to feel on Optimus bank’s takeover attempt fell at the first hurdle, Folu buried himself in work. He seldom returned to Bade’s lair, ignored his mother’s calls, read through all Bekere’s emails, WhatsApp, and social media communications. He sent a message to his mother-in-law that Bekere was currently vacationing in France when she kept calling and promised to call her when they returned.

When Mrs. Bodmas didn’t seem satisfied with his tale and kept calling, he made the IT guys jam Bekere’s cellphone signals, so all incoming calls were automatically rerouted to Linda’s official line.

Burying his days with work, meetings, dozen cups of coffee, and energy drinks were comfortable; the nights were a different story. He couldn’t close his eyes without seeing Bekere gliding in and out of his reach in frills of whites, hearing her tinkling laughter, jerking awake to booming sounds of gunshots, the horrid images of her drowning in blood and screaming out his name in fright.

On nights when the dreams woke him and filled him with a burning need for her, he’d curl up on the bed and weep bitterly.

To calm his nerves and enable him to keep functioning during the day, Folu began medicating on valium. His refusal to see a therapist made it impossible to get a prescription, so he made Linda get him one across the counter. He was immensely gratified with the relief he felt from the pills, and it wasn’t long before he developed a dependence on them.

While the pills provided him with tranquility, it did nothing to prevent his bristling in anger whenever he counts the days and realizes it’d been two

weeks since his mother whisked her away from the hospital. It didn't douse the feeling of impatience with his PIs, didn't shake off the image of Bekere's naked body fused with Fola, their bodies glistening in passion, or the sounds of her moans while she made love to his twin.

If the Benzodiazepine did anything at all, it made him sink deeper into the dark thoughts and wild imaginations of Bekere, Fola, and the baby.

Therefore, with a brooding voice and sour mood, he took the call when Linda announced one of the PI's requested a conversation with him.

"Speak."

"We've found her."

Folu leaped up from the seat and asked the only question he'd been dying to ask, "Where?"



Twenty-four hours before Folu's PI found success, Fola got a call from his informing him of their success in locating her. He packed a duffel, called Ivy, and told her of her need to return to London. When Ivy refused with a complaint of needing to be sure he didn't cower in the face of defeat, he'd assured her leaving for London was the best way she'd help him.

"When I find her," he'd said, "We might need a place to stay, a place my mom and brother will not think to look."

"Fair point, bruv."

Ivy wished him well and assured him he had all her love.

When his driver dropped him off at the house, a semi-detached duplex on the outskirts of Apapa-Wharf, he'd alerted the men of his presence, listened to them explain the modalities of whisking her away without the staff knowing, and waited in trepidation when they got off the phone. Fola didn't know how long he stayed in the car or how he kept his racing heart from bursting out of his chest. All he knew was the flood of relief that swept through him when they called to tell him they'd secured her and was heading towards the drop off point.

"Thank you," he said, "Thank you very much."

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SEVEN

She smiled warmly at the man who had his face buried in the bright lights of the sun.

“Come,” he said in a compelling voice, “It’s a lot more peaceful here.”

Indeed, she thought, it is peaceful. Very peaceful

She threw her eyes around her, took in the sweet smell of frangipanis, and smiled as a fluttering butterfly perched on her nose.

“Your children await,” the man said.

My children? She thought, throwing her eyes open. Then she saw them, far into the garden of bliss. They squealed in laughter as they raced each other down the neatly cultured lawn, their young and innocent faces shining in an unhindered reflection of the sun. Just then, they raised their eyes to hers, smiled openly at her, and then they waved at her.

“Come on, mummy,” they squealed in childish delight, “Come play with us.”

Bekere grinned and floated towards them. *It’s peaceful here, quiet and relaxing.*

She gasped when a turbulent wind swept across the serene garden and swirled in a whooshing sound before her. Bekere shrieked as she watched the gusty wind whirled into a vortex of colorful air. While she was still trying to process the abnormal occurrence before her, she heard a faint gurgling noise floating in repeated strings out of the vortex.

“*Stay with me, Bekere,*” the voice yelled.

Then it shifted to the sound of weeping. “*God, oh, God, please don’t take her away from me, please!*”

Bekere gazed forlornly at the spinning kaleidoscope of colorful air and reached out to touch it. *Pain. It's filled with so much pain.*

"Don't go back there, love," the man in the lights said, "It's got nothing but misery to offer you."

"Miss Beweke!" A child squealed from a distance.

Bekere turned to the direction of the call and discovered it was Mary-Jane.

Hey! She beamed, hey, darling.

Mary-Jane ran in childish glee towards her. Her soft, clinking laughter bursting into the horizon in a harmonious symphony. Bekere smiled openly at Mary-Jane's approaching form. Then she noticed it wasn't only the charming little girl racing towards her. Other children of distinct races and nationalities equally ran towards her in open arms and excitement.

She halted when the voice from the vortex gritted a: *Damn, you! Don't you dare take her away from me, don't you dare!"*

That voice, Bekere thought. She needed to see him.

Bekere walked towards the vortex, felt its magnetic pull deepening as she drew closer to it. She gasped when the blazing heat emanating from it burned right through to her.

"Don't go in there, child," the man in the light said, "Your children await."

My children?

The shrieking cry of a baby broke the somnolence of the paradisal garden. Bekere turned towards the direction of the sound and found a dozen babies, wrapped in a cocoon of banana leaves, bawling into the bright lights of the sun.

My babies, she thought in alarm, oh God, no, my babies!

"What's happening?"

Bekere heard the voice from the vortex say.

"She's having a seizure."

"No, no, NO!"

"We're going to need you to leave the room, sir."

"No, please," he cried, "I can't. Do something, dammit!"

“Clear!”

“Bekere, please, baby, please.”

“Sir, we need you to step aside, please.”

“God, please, please bring her back to me, please.”

Bekere ignored the voices; she kept her gaze trained on the faces of her babies.

Her babies needed her. She beamed as she moved towards them.

“Clear!”

She jerked to a freezing halt when she felt the magnetic pull of the vortex petrify her.

No! She gasped as the electromagnetic force field of the whirlwind sucked her in. She reached for the crying sounds of her babies, yelled when their cries grew louder, and gritted in resistance when the magnetic pull lapped her further into the spiraling wind.

My babies, she cried, my babies!

Bekere tried but failed to repeal the gravitational pull of the wind. It lapped her into its eddy and straight into a spinning web of blinding darkness.

No! She screamed as she freely fell into the abysmal pit of hell, then clasped her palms to her ears to block the loud whisperings, and inhaled a frenzied gasp when she landed head-first into the brightest of lights and the discordant sounds of electronic beeps.

“Clear!”

She fluttered her eyes to adjust them to the blinding lights.

“Oh, thank God,” he said, “Thank God!”

She heard him exhale, and then she succumbed to the darkness.

When she came to, the first face she saw was the pale and haggard look of a stranger.

“Welcome back, sweetheart,” he grimaced, then he buried his face on her bosom and wept.

Fola, she thought, oh Fola.

She swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth and squinted into the bright glare of the room. Fola tightened his hold on her when she tried to move.

“Stay still, Bekere.” He turned to address the doctor in the room and returned his attention to her, “Don’t move, okay. Let the nurse know if you’d be needing anything.”

Her mouth, when she tried to speak, felt like brittle paper and dry sand. She closed her eyes, swallowed dry spit, and let out a loud breath.

“Can you get her something to drink, please?”

Bekere thirstily gulped the glass of water the nurse, a tall woman with a pleasant face and warm eyes, raised to her mouth. Feeling refreshed, she tried turning to her side but gave up the act when Fola stayed her movement. She sighed and slowly drifted into sleep when he caressed her hair, lightly kissed her, and whispered soothing words to her.

Bekere exhaled when Fola took her hands and sauntered her down a darkened path. Her instincts jarred at her to snatch her hands from his and return to the bright lights of the patio, but his charming smile, comforting words, and heated looks firmly pulled her further into his arms. She lost all sense of inhibition when he gently lifted her chin, grazed her lips, kneaded her breasts.

“We shouldn’t be out here,” she whispered when he trailed kisses down her nape.

“We’re exactly where we should be, Bekere.”

A prominent part of her conscious mind grappled with recalling the face of another, his name, the force of his love, hate...

“Bekere!”

She pulled out of Fola’s passionate embrace to see him standing before them with a face hidden in the shadows.

“Stay away from her, Folu.”

“My wife, Fola, my wife!” Folu barked, then he came out of the shadows and pointed a gun at her.

She blanched, her gaze locked on his. Every ounce of fight in her bone geared towards believing he wouldn’t do it, couldn’t possibly shoot her. ‘He loves me, he won’t do it, I...’

A sudden pain sliced through her, followed by a burning sensation in her heart, head, and a sudden paralysis to her sense of balance.

“What did you do? What the fuck did you do!”

She fought to keep the air in her lungs, struggled to stay afloat, but the feeling overpowered her. It squeezed her in a vise-like grip, stretched out her body, and made her fight helplessly to survive.

Bekere jerked awake, threw fever pitch eyes to him, and quaked when a tidal wave of fear flowed through her. “He shot me, tried to kill me.”

“Shh... you’re safe, safe with me.”

“Get away from me!”

“Bekere!”

“Don’t you dare touch me, you skunk! Get away from me!”

Fola frantically pressed firmly on her when she jostled off the bed, “Don’t move, please!”

The pain that shot right through to her arm numbed her. Clenching her teeth, she threw her legs off the bed, yanked off the needles on her arm, and trudged towards the door. She was a few steps to it when a sudden spell of dizziness, followed by a wave of nausea, hit her. When she slumped into his arms, a grand stream of liquid gushed out of every opening in her body. The last thing she saw when she succumbed to unconsciousness was his anguished look and tear-pooled eyes.

She awoke day after day to his nearness, mutely watched him hold her hands whenever she went into fits of nausea and unnamed fear of being watched. He takes her in his arms when she wakes up drenched in sweat after a horrid nightmare of swimming in her pool of blood.

His face became the only one she sees when she awakes and the last one before she sleeps. On days when the pain on her shoulder and the throbbing ring in her head moved her to tears, he would enfold her in his arms, gently stroke her face while soothingly assuring her she was sturdier than the nightmares, physical pain, and never-ending waves of nausea. As much as she was unwilling to admit it, she soon associated his presence with comfort, saw him as a panacea to her recurring nightmares and budding depression.

When her head wound sufficiently healed to have the bandage removed, she insisted she was fit enough to go for a walk. He'd offered to carry her and regarded her in open adoration when she chuckled.

"I'd rather walk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He nodded, took her hand in his, and walked at a slow pace with her.

Her bandaged arm still hurt occasionally and sometimes irks her with prickly itches, but she had grown used to ignoring it and even learned to gently flex it.

"Where's this place?"

He regarded her warily and smiled in response.

"I'll like to know."

"It's a private beach house in Lagos. But I'd rather keep the name a secret for now."

"Why?"

"The walls have ears."

When she turned to him in askance, he explained, "The attending staff are shipped in and out of the island at night blindfolded and are only allowed to take off their blindfold when inside."

"Why?"

"To keep you safe."

Bekere sighed when his intense gaze glazed into a glint and looked about her to take in the island's splendor. The calming whoosh of the waves washing ashore synced with the wind to stroke her hair and induce her into sucking in a cathartic breath. Slowly walking with her hands locked in his towards the beach, she felt a relaxing wave of serenity flow through her with every immersion her feet made into the white sands. Feeling a sudden need to feel the sand on her skin, she kicked off her flip-flop and dipped her feet into the sand. Then she raised her head heavenward. She grinned at the dark cloud of birds flying in a colony, gently moved her bandaged arm in

tune to the distant squawk of a crow, and closed her eyes to imbibe the peace brought on by the moment.

“We’ll stay here for as long as you like,” Fola said.

“How long was I gone?”

“It’s a little over a month since the incident.”

She stiffened, “How is he?”

“Bekere.”

“I need to know.”

“He won’t be a bother to you or the baby.” He gently took her hand.

“You’re safe with me, you and our baby.”

Feeling a sudden chill, she wrapped her hand around her injured arm and hunkered down.

“Would you like to lie down?”

“I want to go home.”

“Home?”

“I need to see my mother...” She suddenly jerked up to her feet. “Where is she? Where’s my mother? Is she safe? Does she know I’m alive? Did anyone...”

“Bekere—”

“Tell me! Where is she! Where am I?”

She balked when he suddenly snatched her into his arms, “Breathe, darling, you’re safe. When you’re fit enough to, we’ll go—”

“I need to call her.”

“You will.”

The scent of his perfume, the heat of his closeness, and minty fanning breath suddenly sent a primitive need for sex down her body. She stood stock-still, raised her eyes to his, and swallowed audibly when she saw a reflection of her sudden desire mirrored in his.

“Darling,” he hissed, slowly caressed her chin, “I’ve missed you, God, I’ve missed you.”

His kiss was fierce, consuming, and demanding, all at once. She inhaled when he pressed her firmly to him, interleaved his fingers into her hair, clutched her head tightly, and engulfed her lips. His tongue rummaged through her mouth, his foraging teeth bit slowly on her lips. When their teeth clinked like champagne flutes, he moaned and sucked wholly on her tongue like a baby would a pacifier.

“No,” she said, snatching her lips from his.

He let loose a censorious sigh, ran his hand across his head, and mumbled a stream of expletives, “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“No, I uh, just need, need to go...” She slowly turned away from him and began walking back to the house.

When he tried taking her hand back in his, she rebuffed it.

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EIGHT

Folu gripped the phone while he listened to his PI drone on about yet another failed attempt to locate his wife, then he jerked the phone off, slowly dropped it on the desk, and strode towards his newfound succor—valium and vodka. When the relaxing kick of the pill set in, he lowered into a reclining chair and dialed Bash.

“What’s your update?”

“We’re still looking, sir—”

He disconnected the call, sniffed, and took another shot of alcohol. With a glass in hand, he took a purposeful stride towards the window, raised the glass to his mouth, and fixed an unseeing gaze on the tumultuous wave of the sea. If all were right, he’d have thought this day a halcyon day. The bright ray of the sun bouncing off the sea in a sparkling wobble, the soft silhouettes of ships about to dock, and the continuous ripple of the wavy ocean would have filled him with a deep sense of completeness if all were right.

He sighed.

How did it go so wrong so fast?

Why couldn’t I summon up the courage to tell her when I had the chance?

If I’d told her I couldn’t be a father, I couldn’t give her what she truly desired. Would she have stayed?

Would she have loved me unconditionally?

Would our love have weathered the storm?

Folu emptied his glass and suddenly felt a hankering for their bed at Bade’s lair. Since the event, he hadn’t been able to sleep on their bed. The room’s

smell, the closet, and everything else about his home painted him a vivid picture of his mistake. If he'd listened to her plea, bridled his anger, and focused on their love for each other, he wouldn't have given into the jealous rage, wouldn't have done what he did. He would have avoided putting himself in a position of weakness.

Now I have to pay for it. I've pushed her away, drove her into Fola's arms, made him appear a saint in her eyes.

He exhaled, dialed Andrew, and sat moodily through the drive home.

After a fitful night on their bed with her favorite lingerie wrapped around his arms, he informed Derrick of his intent to move to Bade's tower. When Derrick offered to pack his bag, he turned him down.

Folu carefully put all items in a duffel bag, filling half the content with her clothes, lingerie, underwear, travel documents, certificates, and every personal effect that had her name on it. He threw his eyes around the room, saw her phone buzzing on the nightstand, and plucked it off to read all messages and missed calls.

Bisi had found the phone buzzing in the library two days after the incident and had brought it to him. He'd made sure the phone was regularly powered and kept on at all times.

When he picked up the buzzing phone, he slid through the missed calls and scanned the messages. Most were from Alice asking her to call when she could and promising to come by the house if she didn't agree to a meeting.

Folu punched a reply.

I'm fine, Alice. Folu and I are in Paris, doctor's order. I'll call you when we return.

He waited for Alice to acknowledge the message, smiled when she sent a thumbs up reply, and read the next text. He frowned when he saw it was from Obinna.

Hey, Beks, call me when you can; kinda worried (xoxo)

Obinna, he typed. *Focus on worrying about yourself and stay the hell—*He canceled the last three words—*respect the fact that I'm married and will not have time to attend to your calls or text.*

He reread the message, thought to add a few more lines, but brushed it off. He punched the send button and then blocked his number. He sieved through the call log, saw a couple of unsaved numbers, made a mental note to return the calls, and dialed her mom's number.

Mrs. Bodmas picked on the first ring, "*Akwai wata matsala*, what's the matter? Where's my daughter?"

"Hello, mummy. She's fine."

"I've been trying to call, but her number is not going. I've even come to the house, she's not there. Where is she? Is she ill? Why has she not called me?"

"Relax, mummy. She's fine. I'll make her call you as soon as she can."

She sighed. "I'm worried. Give her the phone. I want to hear her say something to me."

"She can't speak to you right now. She's ah, sleeping."

"*Toh*, make sure she calls me today. I'm apprehensive."

He assured her she would, hung up, and turned off the phone.

When he turned to take one last look at the room, Bekere's phone was safely locked away in a nightstand.



They say with grief comes multiple shades of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. What they don't tell you is that with the last phase comes numbness—a cold, sterile emptiness that relieves the acuteness of every pain, helplessness, and utter misery.

When Bekere sat at the beach house terrace, she had her gaze trained on the calming wave of the sea and a steaming cup of Chamomile tea in her hand. The sting of the cup's steam should get her dropping it, but it made her clutch firmly to it. She stared out dreamily as the sea ballooned into a small wave, rose a few feet above the ground, then hit the shore in rhythmic strokes.

She raised the steaming cup to her mouth, welcomed the scalding heat, and searing burn to her chest. She took more hot sips and kept her unflinching gaze on the beach. An egret strolled regally along the coast, its gangly limbs

perforating the sand in grace and leaving behind an artful footprint the ever-flowing waves soon washed.

Fly away, she thought, sipping more tea, *fly away*.

The egret angled its head as if trying to listen to her thoughts, threw its head from side to side, and fluttered its wings.

Yes... yes... just fly. Fly away.

Bekere felt the tears flood her gut, gasped as it choked her, took more sips to push it down, and stared unblinking as it pricked her eyes, filled them to a brim, and flowed in sync with the waves of the sea.

Just fly away.

When she regained consciousness and found Fola weeping heartbrokenly by her bedside, she'd taken one look at his red-rimmed eyes and had a full recollection of the event. She'd recalled Fola's despondent look, his pointing the gun at her, her flitting belief that he wouldn't pull the trigger, and shock when she saw the demonic malice creep into his eyes as he squeezed it.

Bekere couldn't get that look out of her head. It plagued her every waking memory, haunted her dreams, break her skin in goosebumps. In most versions of her nightmares, she saw him dressed in flaming red, his eyes shooting sparks of venom as he stood clutching a gun and squeezing the trigger.

She flinched when a hand clasped her shoulder. The tea mug slipped off her hands and shattered on the floor.

"Shit! I'm sorry," Fola said, registering her trembling form and gathering her in his arms.

She sobbed softly in his arms.

"Shh, it's alright. You're safe, safe here, safe in my arms."

Bekere sniffed, allowed the steady beat of his heart to soothe her, and wrapped her arms around his neck when he lifted her off the sofa and walked across the airy room. He placed her gently on the bed and tucked in next to her, gathering her in his arms.

"I'll never let anything bad happen to you, love. Not as long as I live."

She snuggled closer to him, sniffled, and took in the sweet smell of his cologne and aftershave.

It had been four weeks since she awoke to find herself in the beach house. Although the attending doctors maintained she spend most of her time in bed, Bekere insisted she was ready to leave. Foremost on her mind was the searing need to see her mother, call her, and assure her she was okay. An infinitesimal part of her thoughts centered on her need to see him, though for what reason she couldn't wrap her mind around.

Slut!

He'd said when he pinned her in a vile stare and curved his lips in a devilish snarl.

Slut!

That's was the last thought on her mind when the bullet hit her.

Slut!

That's what I am now, a slut. A whore who not only cheated on her husband but planned on saddling him with her lover's baby and was duly punished for it.

"He won't get away with what he did to you, Bekere," Fola said. "I promise you."

Bekere pulled away from him, rolled out the bed, and strode towards the window. He should have killed her, she gritted. Aimed better and put the gun to her head. That would have been heaven compared to this... this searing feeling of emptiness she felt.

"Sweetheart..."

Bekere stilled when Fola encircled her waist and clasped her to him.

"Say something to me, please."

She swallowed the sudden anger that flowed through her, sighed to let it out, and schooled her features into nothingness.

"I'm here for you... here to help you overcome this. Talk to me, please."

She pulled off him, tucked into bed, pulled the covers over her, and trained her gaze on the glass door.

Fola sighed, placed a kiss on her nape, and exited the room.

She blinked back tears, closed her eyes, and plunged herself into the event that led to her life, taking a turn for the worst.

If only she hadn't met him, hadn't given him her heart... If only.

The tears flowed in a grand stream as she replayed her happy moments. She worked to keep her thoughts there—her wild shopping sprees with Alice, their daunting trips to the Balogun market, their purposefully haggling prices, and laughing at the accents of some Igbo merchants. She'd hailed Alice's dexterity in beating prices down to the barest minimum, tried doing the same at another shop, and ran out in hoots of laughter when the seller angrily ordered them out.

Alice, Bekere smiled.

Her last conversation with Alice had been caustic. If Fola had killed her, she would have left this earth with her last statement to her friend being:

"Don't call me again, Alice!"

Bekere rose slowly off the bed.

"I need her," she murmured, searching for her phone. "I need to call her. Call my mom. I need to leave. Where am I? Where the fuck am I?"

A flip suddenly switched in her head and engulfed her with cold, gripping dread. Bekere frantically pulled the room apart in search of her phone.

"Alice!" She screamed, "Where's my friend?"

At her loud, piercing cry, Fola raced into the room, took in her panic state, and firmly wrapped her in his arms.

"I need to apologize to Alice," Bekere cried, struggling out of his arms. "I need to tell her I'm sorry before it's too late."

"Shh."

"I need to do it before he kills me..."

"No one is killing anyone, Bekere. They'll have to go through me first."

"He shot me! I hurt him. I'm a whore!" She shrieked with laughter. "A fucking whore, and he shot me for that! Tried to kill me!"

Fola regarded her bemusedly, crushed her in his arms, and deftly plucked the phone off his pocket and speed-dialed a number. "Come to the beach house now!"

Bekere pushed off his arms, groaned in frustration when he tightened his grip on her, and slapped him.

“It was all your fault!”

“Bekere.”

“Don’t you dare say my name, you scoundrel! You did this! You—”

He snatched her lips in a fierce kiss, pressed firmly when she tried to shove free, and deepened the kiss.

I’m a whore. She thought when his kisses sent a raging need through her body. *This is what whores do.*

She sucked hungrily on his mouth, wrapped her arms around him, and jumped on him.

“Fuck!” He sucked in a deep breath, snatched himself off her, and began putting distance between them.

She raced after him, dragged his head to her mouth, and would have kissed him again had he not gently shoved her off.

“Not like this?”

“Wasn’t this what you wanted?” She yelled.

“Bekere.”

“You fucked up my life! Seduced me, made me a whore!”

“Dammit, stop calling yourself that!”

“Why,” she sneered, “That’s what I am. Why deny it? Or are you suddenly too goody-goody to fuck a whore?”

Fola gritted, grabbed her into his arms, and pressed his rock-hard arousal on her. She swallowed.

“I want your heart, body, sanity, and fucking soul, Bekere. I want you so bad; it’s short-circuiting my brain. But I will not have half of you. I want all of you.”

Bekere’s shoulders heaved in a frenzied pant, the desire and intense lust for him raging tumultuously through her. She licked her lips and slowly ran her gaze on his pink, inviting lips. She groaned when he pulled back as she tried kissing him again.

“No.”

“Why?”

Fola sighed. “I want to make love, Bekere, not fuck. I want it to mean something this time.”

She swallowed a small whimper.

“I love you so damn much, but I want you to love me too. I want you to make love to me because you love me. Not because you see me as a rebound.”

A sudden lump took lodging in her throat when he slowly brought her back into his arms. She broke into a sob when Fola tightened his hold on her, rubbed slowly on her hair, and soothingly shushed her.

“I’m sorry you went through what you did, Bekere. But I want you... I need you, baby. I need you to come back to me, please,” Fola said.

“I c-can’t...”

“You can.”

“Get the image off my head. He haunts me...”

“I’ve called a friend, someone you can talk to. He’ll walk you through coping with whatever trauma the event may have resulted in.”

She shivered in his arms, clung tightly to him, and again felt the searing need for sex.

“Make love to me.”

“No,” Fola said, pulling away from her.

“Make me forget, help me...”

“Oh, God! Stop it, please, I can’t...” Fola sucked in a raspy breath when she snatched his lips, and then he moaned, jerked her off her feet, and crushed her lips to his. She ripped apart his shirt, groaned when he sucked her earlobe, ran his hands on her breasts, and fumbled with her dress.

Fola lost every shred of reasoning when she stood before him clad in nothing but a black lace bra and matching panties—her small baby bump filled him with a deep sense of ecstatic pride.

“Bekere,” he said in a deep sigh and pulled away from her, “Not like this —”

She gritted, “Then let me out of this cell.”

“What?”

“I’m well enough to leave.” She flexed her arm, “See, they no longer hurt, so I don’t need you or the nurses. I want to leave.”

“It’s not safe yet.”

She snatched her clothes off the floor and hurried into them, “I’m a big girl. I can defend myself.”

“Not as long as my brother has you on his most wanted list.”

She gnashed her teeth, angrily tied the sash of her wrap dress, and swept her hair into a ponytail, “Then I’ll make sure he finds me.”

“No!”

“He and I have some unfinished business.”

Fola blocked her attempt to prance out of the room, “You’re not leaving, Bekere!”

“So that’s what it is, huh? Kidnapping?”

“I’m only looking out—”

“First, he tried to kill me, then you try to kidnap me. What do I have to do to rid myself of you and your narcissistic twin!”

Fola’s face, drenched in anguish, drew closer to her as he tried to take her in his arms. She shoved him, winced at the searing pain that shot right through her entire body, and slowly dropped to the floor.

“I’m, shit, I’m sorry.” He carried her off the floor, wrapped her in his arms when she broke into a wracking sob.

NINE

In the days following his inability to locate his wife, Folu continued his lifestyle of working at breakneck speed during the day, returning to his hotel suite to an increasingly onerous night of tossing, turning, and weeping into the pillow. Then, at the break of another dawn, he'd medicate on calmatives, push himself to more breakneck speed, and repeat the process at night.

He kept trudging recklessly on the edge of an escarpment, continued surviving on less food, and numbing the pain with increasing doses of valium. For every passing day his PIs reported a lack of success, he would harangue them, employ new ones, and edge closer to the abyss.

He stomped on the walls of dealing with running a conglomerate gallantly, spoke fluently, laughed gaily, and repeatedly edged closer to the precipice. Until one day, like *Humpty-Dumpty*, who sat on a wall, Folu had a great fall.

The day began like every other day. He got off the bed after a night of fitful sleep, spent forty-five minutes on the treadmill, and another at the weightlifting. After a long shower, he resumed at the office with Linda laying a fresh jug of coffee on his table. He popped a pill, washed it down with coffee, read through tons of emails, and schedule for the day.

When he sat in for the board meeting, he'd heartily shook hands with Whyte and other executives at the successful conclusion of the Dangote deal, agreed to the date on the shareholders' convention, and laughed at Iyeunna's jokes.

Linda informed him of Whyte's presence thirty minutes after he'd concluded the meeting and a few seconds to 4 pm.

“It’s been a while I saw that beautiful wife of yours,” Whyte said as soon as he settled into a couch, “How’s she?”

“She’s fine.”

“Is she in Lagos?”

“Is there something you want to discuss?” Folu said bitingly.

Whyte arched a brow at his tone and snickered, “I’ve been catching a funny whiff. You wouldn’t know what it is, would you?”

“Unless I’m a hair in your nose, Whyte, I can’t say what whiff you’re talking about.”

“Heard your house was bungled, and your wife shot.”

Folu’s grip tightened on his coffee mug, “She’s fine now.”

“Is she?”

“Yes, thanks for asking.”

Whyte regarded him bemusedly, “I don’t know how you do it, man. But if I were you, I would take wifey on an extended trip to the Bahamas.”

Folu took a long sip of coffee, then shrugged, “We’re working on it.”

“You or your twin.”

“Excuse me?”

Whyte guffawed, “Guy, it’s me o, Iyeunna. I know you and your twin’s shenanigans from way back. Mind cutting the bullshit and tell me what the hell is really going on?”

“Our relationship is a business one, Whyte—”

“You found out about them, didn’t you?”

Folu gripped the desk and glared at him, “What did you say?”

Iyeunna slowly got off his seat and strode in a cocksure manner, “When Fola asked that I helped him move for the board to vote you out, I wondered why he wanted that. I mean, the Fola I know wasn’t the kind that would want to be shackled with running an empire. He made it clear he enjoyed spending the money while you worked your ass for it.”

“What are you saying, Whyte?”

“I’m saying we intended the Dangote deal to be a fluke.”

Folu snapped his brow.

“But I saw her...” Whyte smiled whimsically, “And listened to her expressed how much she loves you, and I lost the stomach for the scandal.”

Drained of energy on the news he’d just learned, Folu reclined on his seat and loosened his tie.

“Imagine my surprise, however, when I heard through the grapevine that you went into a jealous fit and tried to kill her.”

“I don’t... how did you...”

“Now she’s with your twin.” He chuckled. “Knowing Fola’s prowess in seduction, it’s only a matter of time before she realizes she had made house with the wrong twin all these years.”

Folu jerked up his seat, “Do you know where she is?”

Whyte regarded him in befuddlement, “*Guy, you dey disappoint me o* like you seriously don’t know?”

“Not yet.” He adjusted his tie in embarrassment. “But I will. If you have—”

“I’m not going to nosey into your affair, bro. Your affair is yours to handle. All I want to know is that this doesn’t put my business with your company at risk.”

“Of course not.”

“Good.” Whyte turned to leave, then paused mid-stride to regard him, “Fola bought a beach house in Bayero, didn’t he?”

Folu blanched.

“Bad guy, that one, that is one prime piece of property.” Whyte’s chuckling echo filled the room as he suavely strode out of the door.

Unable to curtail his excitement, he clocked out of the office and made Andrew drive at maximum speed to the jetty.



Folarin sat across from a dark-skinned sporty man in Ray Ban’s glasses, bald head, trimmed beard, and serene face. When Bekere had repeatedly fallen into mood swings and violent streaks, he’d called up his buddy from

Oxford, a renowned shrink whose sofa had graced celebrities and people at the upper stratum of society. He'd verbosely expressed his fears concerning Bekere, their baby, and the incident that led to her being in that state.

"Is your twin still looking for her?"

"He might try, but he'll never find her."

"Given the circumstance, don't you think that's a rather ambitious statement."

"Even if he does, he'd have to go through me to get to her, and that I guarantee you will not happen."

The shrink flashed a flitting smile and picked up a teacup. "When can I see her?"

"Now would be fine, Obaje, now more than ever. I'm sorely worried about her."

When Obaje Idibia, a pleasant-faced young man in his mid-thirties, dropped his teacup, it was with a small twinkle in his eyes and a cheeky, "So you finally found a woman powerful enough to hold your sails, huh?"

Fola reclined on his seat and chuckled, "You should see her."

"I'm definitely on pins and needles to see and talk to the woman that got the baddest boy of the *Yoruba Demons* to think about settling down."

"Too bad she had to be complicated as fuck!"

"I bet that's what got you on your toes then, that she's out of reach?"

Fola shrugged, picked up a glass of Cognac, and chuckled into it.

"Does she feel the same about you?"

"She does, only she doesn't know it, or knows it, but is unwilling to admit it."

"Guilt has a way of making people bury the purest of love and deepest of passion."

"Mm."

"She might love you and profoundly desire to be with you, but she's bound by societal values to do right by her husband and will do everything to stifle her genuine feelings."

“That’s what I want you to work on, Obaje. I want you to harness the part of her brain that loves me. I want you to hypnotize, autosuggest, I don’t know, just get her to focus on the core aspect of her brain that loves and wants to be with me.”

Obaje snickered, “You really are desperate, Fola, to want to resort to manipulation.”

“More than you’d ever know, man, more than you’d ever know.”

Obaje got off his seat, his 5’11 height and well-built body fitting snugly in his purple striped shirt and coal-black chinos, “I’ll like to meet her now.”

After he’d introduced Obaje to Bekere and proudly noted the look of admiration he tried to hide, Fola left them alone in the sunroom of his beach house to attend to some business in his home office. Following Bekere’s recovery, he’d made Ejiro send the divorce petitions and continually press further his need for the lawyer to keep pushing Fola to sign them. After the first paper he sent came back shredded, Fola had since made Ejiro send several other documents, most of which were unopened.

A quick call to Ejiro furnished him with his twin’s rebuff of the lawyer, while another made him privy to his mother’s return to Victoria Island. Recalling how he and his mom parted ways, he felt a heave of shame at the words he hurled at her. Contrary to what he allowed his emotion to make him utter, he didn’t hold his mom contemptible for his sexual abuse. He had concluded a long time ago that it wasn’t her fault and had even forgiven her for it. That he hurled those hurtful words at her made him cringe in shame.

Feeling contrite, he dialed her number and immediately disconnected the call at the first ring. Taking a relaxing breath, he was about to ring her again when a staff frantically raced into his study.

“It’s oga Fola, sir. He’s threatening to burn down the house if you don’t come out.”

Fola grounded his teeth, “How the hell did he find this place?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

He took relaxing sighs, hurriedly put a call to Ejiro, and nodded in agreement when Ejiro asked him to record whatever transpires between them.

“We’ll use it as leverage.”

“Smart idea.”

After calming his features and downing a glass of whiskey, he assuredly strode out of the office to confront his twin.

Folu stormed onto the terrace, regarded him in ill-concealed venom, and panted. Then he flashed him a mirthless smile, casually strode to the lounge, and settled on a sofa.

“I see you’ve warmed up to keeping what’s mine,” he said.

“I won’t bother asking how you got past my guys at the jetty.”

“You seriously thought those boys would keep me from getting in?”

Fola smirked, crossed his leg, and crooked a finger for a staff. “I’d offer you a drink, bro, but you’re an uninvited guest.” Then he whispered to the manservant and grinned into his brother’s lethal stare.

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“You know who, dammit!”

Fola scoffed, uncrossed his leg, and stroked his beard. “I honestly don’t, bruh.”

Folu snickered, threw a flitting glance around, and shook his legs.

“I’m not leaving this place, Fola, without my wife. So, save us both precious time and tell me where she is, or I swear I’ll sieve through this house with a fine-tooth comb, and if I come out empty, I’ll burn it down with you in it.”

Fola grinned, flitted his gaze to the phone to be sure the record button was on, and quickly snatched the phone when Folu followed his gaze to it.

“Where the hell is she, Fola!”

“Why ask me, brother. You tried to kill her, remember? Besides, you know mom isn’t forthcoming about her whereabouts.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Fola. I know you found her and brought her here...” He jerked up his seat. “You know what? I’m done fucking around.”

Then he raced into the house. Fola pranced up from his seat, pocketed the still recording phone, and ran after his twin.

“Bekere!” Fola yelled, pulling open doors and having the entire staff race into the lobby, “Baby, come out. Bekere!”

Fola signaled at one of the staff to alert Dr. Obaje. “Make him keep her as far away from him as...”

An eerie silence filled the room when a door suddenly burst open, and Bekere stood before them, resplendent in astonishment and a blue spandex dress. Dr. Obaje, who had equally heard the commotion and probably tried catching up with his patient, almost bumped into Bekere when she halted by the doorway.

“Baby,” Fola said, shuffling towards her.

Fola hurried towards him and stood between them.

“Get out of my face, Fola!”

“Or what, you’d shoot me?” Fola shoved him, followed his stumbling form, and shoved him again when he regained composure.

“I’m warning you, Fola!”

Fola shoved him and touched his nose with him when Fola stood stock-still at his continuous shoves.

“Touch me again, Fola, and I swear it’ll be your last!”

“Stop!” Bekere screamed, “Stop it, please!”

The twin brothers spitefully eyeballed each other, both breathing down each other’s faces.

Fola pulled away from him when he noticed Bekere standing a hair’s breadth away from them. He regarded her in askance. She looked at him, looked through him, and fastened her gaze on Fola.

“You shouldn’t be talking to him, Bekere,” Fola said when he watched her lock gaze with his twin.

“Hello, Fola,” she said.

Fola gulped. “Be...”

She turned on her heels and strode towards the library. Fola tried stopping his twin from following her but stopped when Dr. Obaje signaled him to allow them.

“It’s for the best,” Dr. Obaje said.

“Best? For whom?” Fola said in anguish, “Definitely not for me.”

“For her.”

Fola gritted a growl and slammed his hand on his palm.



Folu pocketed his shaking hands as he watched her dropped slowly on an armchair and regarded him in numbed indifference.

He ran through many things to say, opened his mouth to utter the lines that raced to the surface, but swallowed them when he couldn’t come up with a saner statement than “Baby.” He sat across from her and returned her gaze.

His searching gaze took in her flawless beauty, flowing curly hair, soulless eyes, full lips, pert flaring nose, and the slight bump of his baby growing in her. His trembling hands increased the frequency of its shiver and itched to touch her.

A wave of exhilaration flowed through his veins when she angrily stomped towards him. He locked an excited gaze to her. Groaned when a twinge of arousal shot through his groin and willed her to:

Hit me, touch me, hit me, please.

She halted mid-stride, clenched her fist, and regarded him in biting scorn.

Do it, please. Show me you still care, Bekere, please!

Folu winced when she masked the infuriated look, turned away from him, walked back to the armchair, sat on it, and then clasped her hands on her thighs.

Bekere.

“When two people get married,” she said. “And one of them cheats, that’s legal grounds for a divorce.”

“Bekere.”

“It’s not only legal in the eyes of the law; it’s a biblical law.”

Folu sprang up to his feet, took quick strides towards her, and halted when she flinched and ran out of his reach.

“Stay away from me, please!”

“Bekere!”

“Don’t come any closer, please, don’t!”

Folu stood frozen, his unblinking gaze fixed on her. She threw a searching look around the library, spotted a seat by a medium-sized desk, and sat on it, putting a long stretch of distance between them. Folu numbly returned to his chair.

“I want... no, need you to stay away from me,” she said. “We’ve both hurt each other. I’ve hurt you; you’ve hurt me. Now, we should move on.”

He blanked out to the rest of her statement, winced to the throbbing pain blazing through his heart, halfheartedly rubbed his chest, and continued sitting across from her. Watching her lips move, feeling the impact of her words chop him limb for limb until he sat immobilized on the chair.

He waited for her to continue speaking when her lips stopped moving, his pulsating heart truncating his breathing and making speech impossible.

“Is that what you...” He swallowed the quake in his voice, “Is that what you want, a divorce?”

“That’s what we should...”

“Is that...” He pushed slowly off his feet, walked towards her, his gaze boring into hers. “What you want?”

Her gaze faltered. “Yes.”

“Look at me, Bekere.”

She rested her chin on clasped hands and threw uneasy eyes around the room.

Folu placed his palms on the desk and craned forward. “Look at me and tell me you don’t love me anymore. Do me that courtesy, would you?”

Bekere swallowed and pushed back on her seat when he leaned towards her. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Do me the courtesy of looking into my eyes while slaying my heart.”

She jerked off the seat when he reached for her and whined when he hauled her to him.

“Look me in the eye and tell me I mean nothing to you.”

“Folu.”

“Dammit, look me in the eye and tell me we’re done. That you gave up on us, quit, without fighting.”

Folu swallowed desperately, willing the tears back, and clenched his teeth firmly when they fell unaided.

“Say it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Dammit, say it!”

“I don’t!” She yelled, breaking into a racking sob, “I stopped loving you when I found out...”

He sunk to his knees, buried his face in his palms, and sobbed. *Found out I’m not a man. Found out I’m nothing but a husk, a cripple. When you found out, I’m nothing.*

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Folu felt her gentle squeeze of his shoulder, sniveled to the raging need to drag her into his arms and beg her with everything in him to give them another chance. When he was done emptying his soul in front of her, Folu rose to his feet, raised deflated eyes to her, took in her serene face, and said.

“I hope you had a good look at the man that just groveled on your feet, Bekere. Because it’s the last time he would do it.”

She flinched.

“Remember, also, that no one, not even the one you’re about to leave him for, would love you as much as he does.”

Bekere moved several feet backward when he made towards her.

“And when you close your eyes to sleep, he’ll be there, haunting you, tormenting you, wanting you, slowly dying...”

“Stop it!”

“Waiting for you to come back to him.”

She pressed her palms to her ears. “Stop it, please!”

“Loving you, hoping, and praying that you’d realize the depth of that love and return to his arms.”

She hurried towards the door.

“Remember that, Bekere. For he’ll be there badgering your thoughts, dreams, nightmares, and every waking moment.”

She jerked the door open.

“What about our baby?”

“What about it?”

“I want full custody.” He walked towards her, suddenly burning with anger, “Since you’ve chosen to remain with your lover, I want full custody of my child.”

“Your child?”

He whirled her to him, “What the hell does that mean?”

She snatched her arms away from him and scurried off.

Inflamed by a desire to race after her and knowing it would only end in a fist battle with his twin, Folu slammed his fist on his palm, squeezed hard in clenched teeth, and stormed out of the house.

Upon returning to his office and picking up the pack of meds, he thought to use it to assuage his shredded nerves and burning anger. But when he began popping them and washing them down with Vodka, he realized he couldn’t stop.

Ayo found him clutching an empty pack of meds and writhing on the ground.

“Oh, God, Folu!” Ayo screeched.

When they pumped the drugs out of his system, the doctors diagnosed manic depression. He scoffed at the diagnosis, allowed Ayo and his mother to dot over him, spoke at length on FaceTime with Toyin and the kids, and stared passively at Ayo as he dropped snippets of Ese’s return to Nigeria. When mentions of Ese did nothing to pull him out of his brood, Ayo

suggested they called an old girlfriend, someone he knew Folu had an affection for while they were in secondary school.

“Do you remember her, Folu?” Ayo said when Folu stared morosely into space after yet another fits of rage and shots of sedative. “Hankuri, I hear she’s a doctor now, a therapist of sorts.”

“I’ve lost her, Ayo. I’ve ruined it all, made her hate me. I have nothing to live for, nothing.”

“Don’t talk like that, Folu.”

Folu briefly closed his eyes, sucked in a deep breath, and turned to his friend. Ayo, who had been trying desperately to cheer him up, huffed at the look in his friend’s eyes—it was the face of death.

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TEN

Bekere watched him walk dejectedly towards his car, gasped when he threw one last look at the house, and then she turned away from the window.

She strolled down the plush carpeted floor of the white themed room, registered the white walls, potted window plants, marshmallow sofas furnished with large floral throw pillows, bookcases with glazed doors, and idyllic wall paintings. She made towards the pictures, fixed her gaze on one of them—an enthralling depiction of a lake—and allowed her thoughts and consciousness to get sucked into its aura.

She sniffed in the imagined calming air, tuned her ears to the chirping crickets, croaking frogs, and tranquil ripples of the lake. She gently swayed her arms on the still body of water, grinned as the tide deepened, savored the coolness on her skin, heard the locals speaking French, smiled to the sexy slur of their accent, and sniffed in his musky scent.

His breath fanned her face. His lips grazed hers. He gently nibbled her earlobe, took her lips in his, and whispered: *“It’s not for nothing that Paris is called a city of love, baby.”*

Bekere snapped her eyes open, frowned at the painting which bore an unsettling resemblance to the Canal Saint-Martin in France, and made towards the bed.

She didn’t acknowledge the door’s opening and didn’t respond when Fola asked if she was okay. She instead focused on curling up on the bed and pulling the covers over her head.

“Dammit! Talk to me, Bekere!”

She regarded his blurry image, closed her eyes to the stinging tears, and sniffled when they wet her face.

Fola groaned, paced, and stormed out of the room. Bekere flinched when he slammed the door, delved into the welcoming clutch of the dry, wracking sob gushing out of her, and bit down on her clenched fists.

She left the food brought for her untouched, ignored the bath the staff drew for her, allowed herself to sink deeper into sorrow until she glided into a fitful sleep.

She repeatedly jerked awake to scenes of the shooting, pressed the pillow to her ears when his continuous whisperings of her name harangued her, and screamed when she saw him lighting himself on fire.

“Shh,” a voice soothed, gathering her in brawny arms.

“He set himself on fire. He’s burning, save him,” Bekere said hysterically.

“It’s a dream, just a dream.”

She raised grief-stricken eyes to register Fola’s worried face and placed her head on his chest, taking solace in the steady beating of his heart.

“You’ll get over this, my love.” He kissed her hair and rested his chin on it, “You will.”

Contrary to Fola’s positive affirmation, Bekere sunk deeper in paranoia. She became afraid to sleep, screamed at the slightest, kept demanding that he took her to her mom, and continually calling for Alice. Fola clutched her to his arms on all episodes, wept with her when she broke down, and continuously whispered reassuring words to her.

Her therapy sessions with Dr. Obaje yielded little results. She ignored using the medication he handed her and stayed mute on all the sessions, doing nothing but stare into space and refer to herself as an adulteress.

After a week of Fola’s visit and a dozen sessions with Dr. Obaje, she was seated with him in the therapy room—a glass themed room with an uninhibited view of the beach—one sunny afternoon when Enya’s *Aniron* floated to her.

“Turn it off,” she said.

Dr. Obaje fixed a clinical gaze on her. “How does it make you feel?”

“I hate it, turn it off!”

The room turned silent when he turned off the music, then became filled with *Sumiregusa*.

She glared at him.

“Tell me, Bekere, do you dislike music?”

She got off the seat, strode towards the glass door, and pressed her face on it. The relaxed feel of the glass soothed her, made her close her eyes, and opened her mind to the calm ambiance of a long time ago when she sat with Folu in his car while he drove her to their first date at Intercontinental.

“Enya!” she’d gushed. “I love Enya.”

“No way!” he’d replied in delight, “I love Enya too.”

“Her Sumiregusa is my all-time favorite.”

Bekere pulled away from the door, returned to the seat, and stared forlornly at the doctor.

“I hurt him.”

Dr. Obaje fastened his gaze on her. “How so?”

“He was perfect, is perfect. I couldn’t breathe in his perfection, couldn’t handle it. I hurt him.”

“Do you feel undeserving of love?”

She swallowed a small sob, reclined in the armchair, and sighed.

“I resented him for a long time when I found out he lied about his reproductive health, fixed my thoughts on it, and lost interest in our marriage.”

“Was he aware of this?”

She smiled wistfully. “There was a time I loved my husband deeply, was afraid he would break my heart, cheat on me, become tired of me.”

She stood up, strolled to the glass door, and wrapped her arms around herself.

“I look at him sometimes and wonder how I got so lucky, marvel at how handsome he was, how successful, intelligent, and feel a deep fear that I’m

in over my head. How could he choose me, want to spend his entire life with me, want me?”

“Did you have these thoughts before marrying him or after?”

“I’d always considered myself unworthy of him,” she said in a sigh, “Chastise myself that I imagined his love. No man could love a woman the way he loved me. No man would go so far as to prove it. But he proved time and time again that his love for me cuts deeper than a double-edged sword.”

She turned away from the window, paced mildly, rubbed her arms, and paced.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Yes, please.”

Dr. Obaje poured her a cup of Ginger-Lemon Rooibos tea. The fruity smell filled the air, further enhancing its serenity. She wrapped her palms on the steaming cup, returned to looking out the window, and sipped.

“I’ve always loathed people who cheat.” She made a brief snorting sound. “Heck, I wouldn’t even read a book or watch a movie with a cheating character. Yet here I am.”

“If the possibility of your not having children were taken out, would you have done what you did?”

She turned to him. “You mean, would I have cheated on him?”

Dr. Obaje crossed his legs, rested his chin on his palm, and regarded her in keen interest. “Tell me how you feel about Fola.”

She gripped the seat, clasped her fingers, and jerked up the chair. “Can we not talk about it, please?”

“Sure,” Dr. Obaje said, walking up to her and handing her a fresh cup of tea.

“I’ve instructed the chef to serve you only cups of Chamomile or Rooibos tea,” he said when she accepted the cup. “They are better suited for your nerves.”

She smiled.

“No more caffeine, that includes coffee, black tea, or even decaffeinated coffee.”

She nodded, loving the soothing feel of the Rooibos tea on her palate.

“To aid for better sleep, I’ve prepared a special playlist,” he said, handing her an iPod. “You could plug it to your ear or connect it to the speaker in your room. But, it’s best listened to in an earbud.”

“What list of songs is in it?”

“White noise.”

“I’m sorry?”

Dr. Obaje smiled. His even white teeth shone in bright contrast to his coal-dark skin. Bekere smiled into his small pair of eyes hidden behind *Ray-Bans* spectacles, noted his flat nose, well-defined lips, neatly trimmed beard that lined up in a sideburn to his bald head. He stood a few feet taller than her, had broad shoulders, an athletic body, and refined taste in grooming.

“White noise,” he reiterated, twinkling at her. “It has been psychologically proven to help soothe even the most troubled of souls and allay the most raging of thoughts.”

She giggled, flashed an appraising look on him, and looked away when a small glimmer of admiration crept into his eyes.

“I have a feeling you’re only just seeing me,” he said. “I mean, really see me.”

She shrugged.

“I’m Obaje Idibia.”

“Are you related to the African Queen singer?”

“Who, Tu Face Idibia?”

“Yes.”

He chuckled, clasped his hand to hers, and said he wished.

When Fola came into the room, he found them smiling at each other and shaking hands. He looked from one to the other, raised an arched brow at Dr. Obaje, and returned his attention to her when he gave a small nod.

“Would you like to go out tonight?” Fola asked, walking to take her into his arms.

She pulled away from him, considered turning down his offer, but shrugged in consent.

“Perfect,” Fola said and squashed her in a fierce kiss. “Welcome back, baby. It’s good to see you smiling again. God, I’ve missed you.”

When he kissed her again, she swallowed a deep-seated revulsion and pulled away.



Fola listened in inquisitive attention as Dr. Obaje narrated his session with her to him, made a quick dinner reservation at the Eko Hotels, and enthusiastically thanked the doctor.

“One more thing, Fola,” Dr. Obaje said.

He arched a questioning brow.

“Do you think keeping her here is best for her?”

“How do you mean?”

Dr. Obaje poured tea into a teacup and handed it to him. “Talk to me about your feelings for her.”

Fola dropped the teacup on a stool and fixed an inquiring gaze on the doctor. “Is there something...”

Dr. Obaje interjected with a raise of his arm, “Tell me how you feel about her.”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“In all honesty, Fola, can you say you utterly and completely love her?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Obaje smiled. “Enough to stay faithful and committed to her?”

Fola twitched his legs.

“When a man goes after another man’s wife, chances are he has little or no moral boundaries.”

Fola huffed. “What’s this?”

“An expression of concern for my patient.” Dr. Obaje crossed his ankles. “Bekere’s mental and emotional health is my priority. You hired me to make it my priority, and here’s my professional advice...”

“Listen, Obaje,” Fola said in biting scorn, “I do not care for your professional advice if it doesn’t end with me deserving of her.”

“What makes you so sure she feels love for you?”

“You’re the shrink, aren’t you? Figure it out.”

“Do you want me to tell you how she feels?”

“By all means.”

“She loves him.”

Fola pushed up the seat.

“And I strongly believe...”

“After what you’ve just said to me, I don’t give a toss what you believe.” He paced, threw the doctor a scathing look, and paced some more. “What about my request on talking her into admitting her feelings for me?”

Dr. Obaje picked up his tea. “I’m afraid I can’t do it. It’s illegal, to say the least.”

“Then you’re fired.”

“What?”

Fola shrugged, reclaimed his seat, and picked up the teacup. “I don’t have any use for you if you have nothing, I’d use to win this war.”

Dr. Obaje sighed, fixed keen eyes on him, and sipped his tea. “What if she does the same to you?”

Fola gritted.

“What if you’re able to get her to marry you, and somewhere down the road, you find her in bed with another man?”

Fola dropped his teacup, got off the seat, and strode out of the room. “See yourself out, Obaje.”

He made straight for Bekere’s room, found her standing with her back to the door. He made slowly towards her, gently wrapped his arms around her waist, rested his chin on her hair, and kissed her hair.

“I love you,” he said, placing light kisses on her hair, “I love you very much. Please love me too.”

She turned to him, raised mournful eyes to his, and rested her head on his chest.

“Love me, too, Bekere.”

She sniffed and gazed fondly at him. “I want to go home.”

“Home?”

“I want to go to my mom,” she said. “She’ll be worried now. It’s been too long; I need to assure her I’m fine.”

Will that make you love me?

“Will that make you happy?” He asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded, “Then we’ll go home.”

Fola swallowed a raging need when she relaxed in his arms. He kissed her hair, grazed her nape, and gently ran his fingers on her breasts. He expelled a painful groan when she pulled away, shoved his arousal down his gullet, and took several steps away from her.

“We’ll dine at Eko Hotel tonight,” he said.

She flashed him a fleeting smile and nodded.

ELEVEN

Fola inwardly cried a river when she walked out of the room later that evening dressed in a royal blue gown that was snug around her bosom and freely flowed past her ankles. He raked a loving gaze down her flawless skin, bare from the shoulder down to her bosom nestled in the low bodice of the tube dress. A floodgate of possessive pride coursed through him, causing his throat to constrict.

“Are you alright?” She asked with a mild frown.

I’m not. I’m dying, Bekere, dying a thousand deaths from dread.

“Fola.”

“Do you love me?” He asked, walking up to her and clutching her in a possessive jerk. “Do you?”

“Fola.”

“Just answer it.” He swallowed. “Tell me. Give it a yes, no, or maybe. I don’t care. Just tell me.”

“I c-can’t...”

“When we made love.” He harrumphed to dislodge the tremor in his voice.

“That night, when you made love to me, you must have felt something. Tell me.”

She heaved a raspy breath, slightly parted her lips, and regarded him in eyes torn between dread and desire.

“I know you want to have sex with me, Bekere,” he said, noting the slight dilation of her pupils. “But do you love me?”

She pulled away from him to adjust her hair, then strode towards the door.

“I’m starving,” she said in a voice rich with determination, “Let’s go have dinner.”

Fola briefly shut his eyes, mouthed a series of curse words, and stomped towards the car. He didn’t bother helping with her side of the door. He simply jostled into the driver’s seat, purred the engine to life, and waited on her to get in.

The drive to Eko Hotel was filled with tension so thick it could cut through a slab of meat. The concierge greeted him heartily, took the key to his Porche, and greeted Bekere in warmth. Fola vaguely noticed some men leering at her, ignored the women sizing him up, and walked with her several steps behind him towards the bank of elevators.

Fola, hopelessly inebriated by desire, swallowed her scent when she joined him in the elevator. He gritted to quell the searing need to grab her and seal the hole thoughts of her had drilled into his head with a soldering kiss. He moved from side to side when he felt her questioning glance on him, pocketed his hands, swallowed audibly, and kept his gaze trained on the elevator’s digital screen—willing it to speed up its ascent to the rooftop.

“What floor are we going?” She asked.

He swallowed, shuffled on his feet, and cleared his throat. “I have reservations for us at *The Sky Restaurant*.”

She nodded, moved an inch closer to him, and raised a searching gaze to him.

Fola sucked in a deep breath and held it. *Don’t come any closer, Bekere.*

Bekere slightly grazed the back of his palm with hers. “Fola—”

“Screw this.”

He snatched her into his arms, pinned her to the elevator, and sucked her mouth in an arrhythmic kiss. A sluice of burning desires raced through his bloodstream as she let loose a loud moan, ran her hands wildly through his body, and fumbled with his belt. Fola shuddered when she stroked his blazing cock that was now bursting through the seams of his pant, raised the flaming kiss sky-high, and wrapped her legs around his hips. When he raced a feverish hand down the nexus between her thighs and found her blooming petals slightly damp, he deftly dipped two fingers into her nectar and feasted like a hummingbird on her scrumptious pollen.

He wanted her, he thought with burning hunger. If all she wanted from him was sex, so fucking be it.

The elevator dinged.

“Shit!” She gasped, pulling away from him and hurriedly pulling down her dress.

Fola pulled her back into his arms, crazedly scanned the hallway, and began ripping her towards a secluded part of the building.

“Where are we going?” She frowned. “The Sky Restaurant is that way.”

He regarded her bemusedly, pulled her hand to his rigid cock, “This is the food I want.”

She snatched her hand away from his, gave him a remonstrative look, “I need food, Fola. I’m starving.”

“We can eat after.”

“No, I want us to eat now.”

He gritted, ran his hand on his head, “Fine.”

Fola felt shame when he saw how she attacked the food. He scanned his, picked some of it, and mainly sipped his wine.

“Tell me about you, Fola,” she said after dinner, and they sat enjoying the cool scenery at the rooftop and sipping on champagne.

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me what it was like growing up,” she smiled. “I’m an only child. I’ve always wondered what having siblings is like.”

He shrugged. “It’s overrated if you ask me.”

“How so?”

Fola refilled their wine glasses. “You know my story, Bekere.”

“I still want to hear it. All of it, if that’s possible.”

“When she found out about my brother’s condition, my mom dedicated her life to him.” Fola smiled sadly into her bright eyes, pried her hand off the table, and interlocked both their fingers. “Folu became the center of her universe. She doted on him, took him on endless medical trips, gave him all her love and attention.”

Bekere furrowed her brow in a consoling frown.

“Don’t get me wrong, though, I wasn’t entirely alone. I had nannies at my every beck and call. But I guess...” He picked up his flute with his free hand. “I guess I wanted her love, craved it.”

Bekere sighed.

“When I think about it, I think the reason I wanted it so bad was that she didn’t give it. She hardly saw me,” Fola laughed bitterly, “All she saw was Folu.”

“That’s so sad.”

“When my nanny began molesting me, a part of me prayed we would get caught, hoping that, more than all else, would make her see me. But they never caught us.” He gripped the flute. “My nanny sexually molested me for years, she and a bunch of servants, right under her roof. And mom didn’t know.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I spent years hating her for it, loathing Folu for it, and wanting them dead.”

“What about your dad?”

“My mom was the boss in her marriage,” Fola spat, “Dad wasn’t interested in anything other than computers. He only started noticing us in our late teens.”

He laughed, emptied his wine, and fetched another.

“Folu caught his attention in a good way, though. He always came first in class and won every academic award there was to be won.”

Bekere tenderly squeezed his hand.

“I wasn’t as smart as my brother was with academics, but I was very good at basketball,” Fola said, his gaze locked on their entwined hand, “I won a thousand awards, pushed myself at it to get dad’s attention. But he wasn’t interested.”

She sighed.

“Whenever I came home with a trophy and showed dad, he’d grunt and tell me in unequivocal terms that Bade Incorporated was not a Basketball

company.”

Fola laughed, took his hand from hers, and picked up his wineglass.

“I’m so sorry, Fola.”

“My son of the year rating hit an all-time low when they found out I tried having sex with a classmate in school. That was when they, mom and dad, handed me over to the devil by washing their hands off me.”

Bekere gasped. “What?”

“And that was when I stopped giving a fuck how they or anyone saw me,” he scorned, fixed his gaze on her. “Until now.”

“Now?”

“Now I care...desperately care to know how you see me, feel about me.”

Bekere sighed forlornly.

“But I get that you don’t love me. I know you see me as one lothario bent on ruining your perfect life.”

“Fola.”

“I get it. You love Folu. I mean, he’s perfect. What’s not to love?” Fola swallowed bile, “He’s a smart financier. So, I get why you chose him over me.”

Fola stood up to lean on the balustrade, looking out and taking in the nighttime view of Lagos’ beautiful city. He flinched when Bekere placed comforting hands on him.

“Don’t apologize, Bekere,” he said. “I should be the one to apologize. I seduced you, made you have sex with me out of your will, and goaded Folu into doing what he did to you.”

“It’s my fault. I was too...” She paused.

“Too what?” He turned to gaze longingly at her.

“I was sick with jealousy when I thought you married Ivy and almost ate my heart when she told me she was pregnant.”

Fola’s breathing raised several notches. “And?”

“I wanted to...” she swallowed.

“Wanted to what?” He prodded, moving close to her, “Tell me, please. Tell me.”

“I wanted to make love to you.”

Fola huffed in disappointment. “And?”

She regarded him in a puzzled frown. “And what?”

“How do you feel about me, here,” he touched her chest, felt the singe on his finger, and slightly ran it on her cleavage. “How do you feel about me, Bekere?”

“I’m sorry, Fola.”

He glowered at her, snatched his hand away as though she’d burned them, and moved away from her. “For what?”

“I can’t love you the way you want, deserve to be...”

Fola took hurried strides to the table. “Finish up, let’s leave.”

He ignored her when she kept throwing worried glances at him during the drive home, turned on the radio, and pumped the accelerator.

Dave Koz’s *This Guy Is In Love With You* filled the car. Fola held tightly on the steering wheel as the lyrics flowed through his cerebrum. The singer’s smooth and mellowed voice filled him with longings and made him give her a sideways glance, hoping the deep meaning of the song affected her the way it did him. Hoping she caught the song’s message and sees it as a total reflection of his need for her.

Fola chanced a look at her when Dave’s saxophone’s acoustic sound serenaded the car’s ambiance. As their gazes locked, he registered the soft, pitying glow of her eyes and gritted.

“Fola.” She reached for him.

“I don’t need your pity, Bekere. I want you to fucking love me. If you don’t, then you don’t deserve me.” He brusquely turned off the stereo and fixed his glowering gaze on the smoothly paved road of the expressway.

She sighed and returned her attention to looking out the window.

When he dropped her home, he drove straight to a private club, made to the VIP lounge, and scanned the room.

The amoral brio of the clubs' ambiance was made lewder with the DJ blasting off songs with vulgar lyrics. A naked girl with skin ridden in glitters artfully danced on a pole to *Chris Brown's Privacy*.

Fola watched in glazed eyes as she locked her gaze with him and shook her enormous breasts in his face, then she threw her legs apart to afford him a full view of her beaver.

"Hey, handsome boo," a server attired in a sheer gold dress, red stiletto, and bright orange braids said as she dropped a tray of Hennessy on his table.

"I didn't order this," Fola said.

"Oh, it's been paid for, honey," she said in a giggle and motioned ahead of her. "You caught her eye."

Fola followed her motion and noticed a middle-aged woman smiling sultrily at him. He waved at her in a small smile. She giggled into her palm, whispered to her friends, and began making towards him.

"Hi, I'm Candace," the woman said.

"Folarin," he said, shaking her hand. "Thanks for the drink."

Candace giggled and sat next to him. Her face in the club's pallid red lights was a full mass of makeup, long lashes, green contact lenses, and purple pouty lips. She fell into a knack of placing light touches on varying parts of his body when she spoke and giggling at the slightest. Fola concentrated on taking shots after shots of Hennessy as she prattled on about her job as a financial analyst, her boring marriage back in Abuja, and how she was thoroughly enjoying her business trip to Lagos.

"It's true what they say about Lagos," Candace said, "The city is pulsing with life!"

Fola rolled his eyes. "Yeah, tell me about it."

"So, what's your story?"

"It's long and boring. Trust me, you don't want to hear it."

She giggled and suddenly pulled his hand to her enormous boobies. "I like you, Folarin."

Fola scoffed, helped himself to yet another glass of *Hennessey*, and downed it.

“Do you know what I do to men I like?”

“Fall in love with them?” He supplied, breaking into a tipsy chuckle.

Candace held his gaze, ran her tongue around her lips, and slither her hand into his pants. “I make them feel good.”

Fola stilled her movement and pried off her hand. “And your husband is okay with that?”

“My husband has his hobbies. I have mine,” Candace said, pushing her hand further in when he kept stilling her movement.

“You’re cute, Candace, but I’ll pass. I’m done getting caught up in marital shit.”

Candace regarded him sourly, the glue on her false eyelashes shooting small darts at him. “You’re such a party pooper.”

Fola laughed, picked himself off the seat.

“I thought they say Lasgidi boys are sex gods?” Candice said in a pout.

He chuckled. “Where did you read that from, *Nairaland*?”

Candace slightly part her lips and spread her legs. “Come on, Folarin. Don’t spoil the fun. What happened to the phrase ‘Ain’t no party like a Lagos party’ hm?”

“This ain’t a Lagos party, madame,” Fola snickered. “It’s a strip club. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it was *tipsy-o-lic* knowing you.”

Then he gave her a small bow and staggered out of the club.

He found Bekere standing by the window, robed in a peach nightdress, and clutching a cup of tea. She moved out of his reach when he tried taking her in his arms.

Fola snickered as he watched her stroll towards the bed and settled on it. “I slept with someone.”

She raised her teacup to her mouth.

“Did you hear what I said?”

She shrugged and strode towards the window. “What you do with your free time is all up to you, Fola.”

“So, you don’t care? It doesn’t bother you that I slept with another woman?”

She raised amused eyes to him and sipped her tea.

“So... so I can go out there and fuck another woman, and you wouldn’t bother.”

“You and I are nothing, Fola. You don’t owe me your fidelity.”

Fola swallowed audibly at the bludgeon of her words on his heart. “We’re nothing.”

“Yes.”

He scoffed, threw crazed eyes around the room, and strutted towards her. He continued boring down on her even as she took several steps back. “Repeat what you just said.”

“We’re nothing. I don’t feel anything for—”

Fola roughly hauled her to him and crushed her lips to his.

Liar! He thought when she greedily responded to his kisses, wrapped her arms around him, and uninhibitedly wrapped her legs around him when he took them to the bed. He slowly peeled off her lingerie, feasted his eyes on her smokey gaze, glowing skin the shade of liquid gold, voluptuous breast, and supple hips.

My woman. Fola sighed. *My goddess of redemption.*

Fola slowly dropped his head to take her lips back into his, nibbled at it, and stroked her pallet with his tongue.

Taste me, baby. He sighed, ferociously riding her mouth with his tongue. *Savor the sweet taste of my love.*

He muffled a low groan when she encircled his neck, fused her lips with his, and thirstily drank from his flowing fountain of love. Starved of oxygen, Fola unclutched her mouth and began trailing ardent kisses along her jawline. He slowly traveled the length of her body with his tongue, flirted around the rosy bud of her fully aroused nipples, and smirked when she impatiently raised them to his mouth.

“This is wrong.” She sighed in bliss as he clasped her breasts together, took both nipples into his starving mouth, and flickered his tongue on them. “Yet

it feels so right.”

Yes, he basked in euphoria. *Yes, it does.*

Fola traced her body with a finger that was as light as a feather, circled it around the smooth-shaved skin of her vagina, took her lips in his when she gasped, and continued tormenting her with flitting touches.

“Say you love me.”

“I want you.”

“Say you love me.” He slowly pulled away from her.

Bekere arched her back, dragged his lips to hers, kissed him with numbing intensity, and kneaded his rippling muscles with hands heated with yearning. Fola gasped when she flipped him, trained sad eyes on her blurred image, and swallowed a sob.

“Is that all you want?” He asked, fondling her nipples.

“What?”

“Sex. Is that all you want from me?”

Bekere stilled.

Fola laughed bitterly. “It’s an innocuous question, Bekere. Why are you evading it?”

“It’s not that simple.”

Fola tightened his hold on her breast and closed his eyes to the torturous pain of having his heart broken again by someone whose love he craved. “That’s fine. That’s what I want tonight, too. Sex, just a good old meaningless sex.”

“I love you.”

He threw his eyes open, blinked her face back into focus, and cringed at the tears flooding her eyes.

“I love you,” she cried, letting the tears flow wild and free. “And I love him too.”

Fola gaped at her, swallowed the enormous lump that lodged in his throat, and pulled her weeping form into his arms.

“I want to forget,” she wept. “I want to get the thought of him out of my head, hate him for what he did to me. But I can’t.”

Fola paid half attention to the rest of her statement. The joyous croon of his heart was louder than her sobs or utterances.

She loves me, he grinned. *Bekere loves me*.

“Bekere loves Fola,” he muttered, testing out the phrase. He ran it along the ridge of his mouth and savored the sweet flavor that burst into his palette. “She loves me.”

He turned to her when he felt her snuggling close to him, held her firmly in his arms, and caressed her hair.

“Am I a bad person?” She whispered.

“You’re God’s gift to me, Bekere.”

“What about him?”

“My brother is stronger than he lets on.” He pulled her atop him and cradled her in his arms. “He’ll be fine.”

Bekere sighed and snuggled closer.

“Mind repeating how you feel about me?” He teased.

Bekere gave a mild chuckle.

“Better yet, I think I’ll record it, so I listen to it for the rest of my life.”

She laughed and then sighed when he took her laughing mouth into his. When their kisses grew heated, he slowly laid her on the bed, unhurriedly and painstakingly placed light kisses all over her quivering body.

And so it was, that in the clement, unflustered room of his beach house, while the world of one Ajibade twin continued spiraling into a dark abyss, another happily lit candles and worshiped in love’s temple.

TWELVE

The weeks following Bekere's love avowal to him were indescribable. Unable to bridle his excitement, Fola took several pictures of them. Some of which had her draped in a white bedsheet, wearing his T-shirt, and having his arms around her.

"This is so beautiful," he said, grinning at a selfie shot of them kissing.

"It is."

"I'm posting—"

"No!" She said in a panic.

Fola gently took her into his arms. "He'll find out one way or another. I prefer it now."

"Not yet, at least let's keep it between us until I'm done with my divorce."

"And then we'd be together?"

"And then we'd be together."

Fola took her lips in a swift kiss. A plethora of ecstatic thoughts flowed through his head as he watched her move around the idyllic beach house. She'd lost most of the anxious edge that had earlier clouded her face. In its place was a resolute serenity, almost like she was inwardly grappling with maintaining a positive outlook. On most evenings, he took them out to private clubs and restaurants, places he knew she would be comfortable at, and where their chances of running into people they both knew zeroed to none.

Despite his promise to keep their relationship a secret, Fola couldn't hold off talking about her on his social media pages. Seeing as he couldn't post pictures of them on Instagram yet, he contended himself to Twitter. Making

the lines as leading as possible and using hashtags he was sure would pique his follower's interest. On one evening, a balmy late summer day, a week after she'd proclaimed her love for him, Fola suggested they had a picnic styled dinner by the beach. He'd stared in open admiration at her when she descended the stairs dressed in denim shorts, floral tunic top, a Gucci flip flop, and a silk scarf wrapped around her neck. Her toes painted a glossy blue made his teeth ache to bite them.

Fola whirled her into his arms and swept her off her feet. Her delightful giggle was to him, better than a well-composed symphony. In the somnolent hue of the beach, while the bright orange sun slowly dipped into the skyline, and the twinkling stars mildly freckled the flaming sky. Fola watched her lean with both elbows on the foldable carpet that was their picnic mat, suck in a cleansing breath, and closed her eyes. Her hair caressed by the wind played him a soothing lullaby. Her enchanting profile and serene aura pleased him more than gazing upon a thousand Mona Lisa. Unable to stop himself, Fola brought out his phone, took a picture of her, and uploaded it on Instagram captioned: "My haven of happiness."

Life with her was better than he'd imagined, scenic and perfect. He employed a specialist to cater to her antenatal needs, was painstakingly attentive to her needs, and showed her how happy she made him in every way he could.

Bekere's sessions with Obaje pleased him. What irked him was Obaje's insistence on keeping what they discussed a secret. He'd eagerly asked for updates on what they talked about because whenever she came out of each therapy session, she always had a restless edge and sullenness about her.

"What's her status?" Fola asked when he could no longer bear watching her slip into sullenness.

"She's stronger than any patient I've met. Guilt, on the other hand, is voraciously gnawing at her."

"Guilt?"

Obaje pulled off his glasses and sighed. "Are you both happy? I mean in the deepest sense of the word."

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Obaje guardedly regarded him for a full minute and heaved a sigh. “Keep her safe, Fola. She’s still very raw with vulnerability.”

Fola pondered over Obaje’s statement for the rest of the week and the next weeks to come. He concentrated on making her happy, didn’t think much of it when she gradually lost most of her earlier zest with each passing day, and waited with stilled patience for her to confide in him.

“Have you told your mom about us?” She asked.

“Not yet. I’m waiting for you to be ready.”

“What about the divorce papers?”

“Ejiro is still pushing.”

Fola recalled his last conversation with Ejiro wherein he learned Fola had not only shredded every paper sent to him, but he’d also frozen all her assets. Fola wasn’t bothered about the latter. He didn’t want her having anything that was his twin’s anyway. He’d already gotten her a new phone, although, for some reason, she’d been reluctant to use it. Claiming she couldn’t recall any of her contacts, not even her mother’s number. Half of him believed she was evading the real world because she was afraid of how they’d perceive her, while the other half saw reasons for her continuous hibernation from reality.

“I think we need to give him an incentive,” Fola said, “Let him know without words that it’s over.”

“How do you mean?”

“Tell him the baby is mine.”

Bekere slowly got off the bed, strode to the window, and wrapped her arms around herself. Fola waited for her to respond to his statement, then slowly sat up on the bed when she remained silent.

“It’s mine, isn’t it?”

She heaved a loud sigh and poured herself a glass of water.

When it became apparent she wasn’t ready to give him an answer yet, he traipsed towards her. “We’ll be fine,” he whispered, nibbling her earlobe and turning her towards him. “We will be, I promise you.”

As positively affirmatory as it sounded, his words were soon tested when the couple woke up one morning to an angry dark cloud on their sunny horizon.



Waking up to a mild cramp the following morning, Bekere nuzzled her stomach and grinned at her reflection in the mirror. Despite the chronic discomfort peculiar to first trimesters, she glowed in deep-seated joy at the little gift budding inside her. She hadn't allowed herself to think about the circumstances of her baby's conception or the event that led to her isolating herself from friends, family, and even keeping the news of her pregnancy a secret. She'd, instead, strove to disassociate herself from crippling thoughts as suggested by her therapist and focused on the good—her baby. Her baby was the recompense, the relaxing shower after an arduous day, the glass of cold water at the end of the marathon, the gift that came out of love's mistake.

A flitting recollection of her meeting with Folu pushed through the fissure of her thoughts as she pulled out a dress to wear for the day, but she shut her mind to it and concentrated on dressing up. Theirs was a failed union, a marriage built on lies, an error she was ready to let go of. Though she still woke up most nights quaking from a nightmare of the shooting, she'd slowly found reasons to forgive him.

In most parts, she knew that she had a significant role in making him react the way he did. If she'd pondered on the reason behind his fears, tried to understand the reason behind his trust issues, or forgave him for keeping his reproductive issues a secret, she knew she would have protected the sanctity of her marriage and prevent all of this from happening.

It's all in the past now, she muttered under her breath—*time to forgive me and move on.*

As simple as that sounded, moving on felt like a farce, a shiny trinket whose luster was about to peel off. Tucking her hair into a gold-colored turban, she gazed musingly at her reflection in the mirror. The woman that stared back at her had her eyes, lashes, nose, mouth, similar features she'd recognized in herself. But the soul behind that body was a stranger to her. She didn't recognize the woman who, though ruined her marriage, still

continued her affair with her lover. She couldn't wrap her head around the part of her brain responsible for secreting toxic hormones that lustily pants after twin brothers or why she desperately wants to forget her life with the first and begin a new one with the other.

What I feel for them is a lethal sin. A sin that is assuredly plunging me into the ninth circle of hell. But I've paid the piper, might as well call the tune.

A slight knock on the door made her wipe off a tear and run a powder puff on her face. Opening to see a maid smiling a greeting at her, she came out into the brightly lit hallway and walked with him to the dining room while he informed her Fola was at the gym, and Mama Ajibade awaited her at the sunroom.

A sudden chill raced through her spine. "When did she arrive?"

"She just came in, ma."

When she saw her mother-in-law's silhouette, Bekere stopped to calm her racing heart and arrange her features. Sucking in a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, she stepped into the room and forced a bright smile.

"Good morning, ma."

The older woman fixed her a penetrating stare and chuckled, "You're bold; I'll give you that. Marrying one twin and fornicating with the other, very audacious."

Bekere kept her smile in place as she sat across from her, "How's your health, ma?"

"Stand up, let me see you."

"I'm sorry?"

"What you are is pregnant, not deaf. *Mo ni ko di de!*"

Bekere slowly got off her seat and stood through sixty seconds of the older woman's scornful scrutiny.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine, ma?"

"How bad are the morning sickness?"

"They're manageable. The doctor has helped with most of them."

Mama Ajibade walked up to her and nudged her shoulders into making her twirl, “I hope you’re eating well?”

“I am.”

“It is imperative that you focus on your health and keep the baby safe. Once he’s delivered, we’ll take it from there.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by ‘take it from there,’ ma.”

“We’ll want full custody.”

Bekere gasped, “I’m sorry?”

“It’s obvious that your marriage with my son is over, and when Fola realizes the baby isn’t his, I’m sure that’ll douse whatever tenderness he thinks he feels towards you.”

Chagrined at the deadpan face and unfeeling tone of her mother-in-law, Bekere huffed, scoffed, and clenched her teeth.

“You were not expecting I’d allow you to carry on with this abominable act, were you?” Mama Ajibade sneered, “I mean, do you plan on marrying them both?”

“Ma—”

“Is polyamory a common practice in your tribe?” She snorted in derision. “I understand promiscuity is common amongst your kin, so I can understand your innate desire for multiple partners, but you picked the wrong boys to explore your appetite for *ménage à trois*.”

Bekere sprang up, “I will not—”

“*Wo, joko jor ko gbenu oshi soun!!!*” Mama Ajibade spat. “*Ehn, e ma sanu mi ke! Iwo!* After all my niceties, my taking you as my daughter, making you feel comfortable, and treating you like one of us despite your economic status. You dare bring this shame upon my family?”

A small tear raced down Bekere’s face.

“Your job was simple, Bekere, keep his home while you enjoyed the luxury that comes with being an Ajibade, yet you royally botched it.”

Bekere gritted, clenched her fists, and lowered herself on the chair. “Ma—”

“I understand Folu’s job can be demanding, and he may have left you all by yourself on most days, hence the need for something to distract you. You’re

not the first woman or the last to give in to the whims of pleasure-seeking by scouting a lover, but you chose his twin!”

Mama Ajibade suddenly sprang up to her feet and, in two strides, landed a smack on Bekere’s face. “You little tramp!”

Bekere looked daggers at her and slowly rose to her feet to look down at her.

“After everything he did for you and that piss poor mother of yours...”

“Ma...”

“*Mo ni ko dake!* You had just one task, one task, and you fouled it up. Oh, Folu sure as hell should have aimed better.” Mama Ajibade pressed her temple and strode the room. “I knew you weren’t good for him the very day I set eyes on you.”

Bekere sniffed, brusquely brushed the tears gushing down her face, and sat slowly on the chair. “I’ll leave.”

“That’s exactly what you should do as soon as you bring this baby to term, leave!”

“What?”

“The only reason I’ve allowed you to stay as long as you have is that you’re carrying my grandchild. Other than that, you are dead to me.”

Bekere began walking out of the room when she saw Fola standing by the door.

“What’s the meaning of this, mother?”

Mama Ajibade ignored his question, sat caustically on the sofa, and poured herself another glass of wine.

Fola pulled Bekere back when she brushed past him. “What did you say to her?”

“What common sense and decency should have spelled out to her.” Mama Ajibade said spitefully.

Fola threw Bekere a look filled with regret and rage.

“It’s fine,” she sniffled, “There was nothing she said that wasn’t true.”

Then she ran out of the room.



Mama Ajibade furrowed her brow and continued sipping her drink when Fola slowly sat on the chair Bekere vacated and glared at her. “What do you hope to achieve with this?”

“I should be the one asking that question, Fola. What do you hope would come out of your carrying on a relationship with her?”

“What I do with my private life is none of your business.”

“*Wo, Fola, jẹ ki n sọ fun ọ*, if you think she loves you, you’re shoddily mistaken. That woman is nothing but a hustler. A two-timing bitch.”

Fola sprang up and bore down on her. Mama Ajibade got off her feet and stared him down. “*Ki lo fẹ ẹ?* You want to beat up your mother?”

“Please leave.”

Mama Ajibade threw her head back in laughter. “What is it about Fola’s leftovers that give you the kicks?”

“Mother!”

“First you wanted all his toys, now you want all his women.”

“Maybe if you had done a proper job as a mother, I wouldn’t be so messed sideways or feel so love-starved.”

She hit him across his face. “*Lenu e!* Oh, so you think because she threw her legs open for you, that counts for love?”

Fola seethed, his shoulders heaving in uncontrolled pants.

“*Ode ni e, Fola, ode*. That woman doesn’t love you. With all your years of experience as a womanizer, you ought to recognize a skank when you meet one.”

“You’re not welcome here, mother.” Fola brushed past her. “Please make yourself disappear.”

Mama Ajibade tutted. “*Omo oni baje ni e, Fola!* All you’ve had is a privileged life, yet you want to throw it all away.”

Fola halted mid-stride and squared his shoulders.

“*Abi*, what did you do with your side of the company when it was handed to you? Did you not squander it on loose women and parties? Yet here you are

throwing yourself a pity-party.”

He resumed walking out of the room.

“I was an exemplary mother, Fola. I did my best for you, and if you think I’ll allow you and that tramp to bring down my company, think again. Because I’ll do everything within my power to obliterate you lot.”

After her son left, she imperially lowered herself on the armchair and set to make good on her promise.

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THIRTEEN

With eyes streaming with angry tears and heart burning in vehemence, Bekere hurried into jeans and a t-shirt. A quick scan of the mirror assured her the turban, though in contrast with the blue jeans and yellow sweatshirt, was perfect in holding her hair in place. Satisfied with her reflection, she pulled a bag pack out of the closet and stuffed it with whatever clothes she could find when Fola walked in.

“What are you doing?”

She brushed past him into the bathroom to pick up her grooming kit.

“Mom didn’t mean anything she said, Bekere, you know that.”

“I need to visit my mother.”

“She said those things out of anger, soon she would accept us—”

“Fola!” She briefly shut her eyes and swallowed, “I just need to see my mom.”

“How about I bring her here? I don’t think you’re fit enough to go out.”

She strapped the bag pack and walked out of the room.

“Stop, Bekere, please.”

She halted when he stood in front of her, “Let me go, Fola, please!”

“Not when you’re angry, Bekere. There’s no telling what you would... if you would return.”

“Are you holding me hostage?”

“What? Of course not!”

“Then let me go.”

He slowly took her hands in his and pressed firmly when she tried prying it off, “I’ll take you to her.”

“No.”

“I insist, please.”

Realizing there was no getting past him, she fixed him a frosty gaze and muttered in clenched teeth, “Let. Me. Go!”

“No.”

She held his gaze for as long as was possible and then broke into a giggle, “You’re just like him, after all; tyrannical and controlling.”

“I’m nothing like him, Bekere. You’re being irrational and thinking about yourself. Stop for once to think about me, us, and our baby!”

“Out with the ‘us,’ Fola, there is no us!” She winced when his grip turned vise-like, “And right now, you’re hurting me.”

“You’re not leaving.” He breathed, “Without me.”

“Okay, okay, fine!” She gasped from the pain of his firm grasp and rubbed her wrist when he released her.

“I’ll be just—”

She bolted.

“Bekere!”

She ran through the kitchen, bumped into a kitchen staff, and hurriedly muttered an apology as a loud crash of broken plates hit the floor, followed by streams of curses. When she pushed through the door leading to the backyard, she made straight for the beach and halted when she realized the only way out of the island was by boat. Determined to get away from the Ajibades and everything surrounding them, she plodded into the water and began wading through.

“What are you doing?”

She kept plodding through the wavy body of water until she was knee-deep in it.

“Stop, God! Come out of it, please!”

“I’m leaving, Fola, even if it means swimming across. I’m leaving!” She increased her pace when she heard him splash into it and tried steadying herself when the wave’s tumult threatened to hit her off balance.

“I can’t swim.”

She waved her arms to steady herself and turned to regard him in befuddlement.

“I can’t, but I will if I have to.”

“How will you try to stop me if you can’t swim?”

“Maybe I’ll drown...” His arms flailed as he struggled to steady himself, “But it won’t stop me from coming after you if you keep at this madness.”

“I just need....”

“Come out of the water. I’ll get the boat to take you across.”

“Alone?”

He winced, “Alone.”

She sighed, pulled up her bag pack to keep it from getting wet, and trudged back, then gasped when he kicked through the wave and carried her across his shoulder.

“Fola!” She shrieked.

“You should weigh your actions, Bekere. You’re carrying my baby, for God’s sake!”

“Put me down now!”

He kept wading through the now wavy sea and didn’t stop or put her down regardless of her verbal attacks until he’d carried her back into the house. She stilled her rants when she heard him making transport arrangements, then heaved a relaxing sigh when he informed the captain she was traveling alone.

“Thank you,” she said.

He regarded her morosely, “You’ll be back, won’t you?”

She gave a curt nod and quickly went aboard the boat, fervently hoping it set sail in time enough to keep him from changing his mind.

“I’ll expect you back in two days, Bekere.”

Like hell.

“Two days is enough time to visit with your mom.” He called out when the boat pulled away from the shore. “Otherwise, I’m coming to get you.”

She nodded and gave him a parting wave.

She met his driver at the jetty and told him she needed to pick up a few things at Bade’s lair when he asked for her mother’s address. He regarded her in reluctance, said he’d like to confirm the change in the destination but gave in when she pleadingly assured him she would only be a minute at the lair.

As she waited on Bade’s Lair security to grant her entrance. She keenly noticed Boniface, a dark-skinned muscled man, speak covertly into a phone and threw cautious eyes around. Then he gave a brisk nod and marched towards the vehicle. The driver, a young man in his early twenties, pulled the glass open.

“Good afternoon, Bonni,” the driver said.

“Hello, Jubril. How’s life at Bayero Island?”

“It’s the dream, my brother. It’s the dream.”

Boniface chuckled and threw a flitting gaze at Bekere. “Madam. Good to see you up and about.”

“Thank you, Boniface,” Bekere said with a smile. “Is my husband in?”

“No, ma.”

She exhaled in relief and stiffly alighted. When she approached the door, she swallowed fright at the icy finger of dread that clasped her heart, then jutted out her chin and walked into the apartment.

“Welcome back, ma,” Derrick said in a hearty greeting. “Good to have you back.”

Bekere nodded, unable to find her voice. The mansion’s splendor, the sharp memories of her time in it, and the dreadful turn of even that surrounded her leaving hit her like a bucket of ice water.

“Good afternoon, madam,” Bisi greeted timidly.

Other staff, who had come into the foyer, joined in greetings of their own. Most thanked God for her full recovery, wished her well, and said they

missed having her around.

“Thank you, everyone,” Bekere said, an ersatz smile fixed on her face. “I appreciate your good thoughts.”

They didn’t fool her for a second. She knew they all mocked her behind her back, scorned her in derision, and called her an ungrateful whore. Bekere willed her emotions into steel as she mounted the stairs in legs made of wood.

Who’s to blame them? They all had their lives wrapped in Prada. They lived in a fancy house and had a generous boss who was hardly home, cater to their financial bills. So why wouldn’t they feel the need to chastise her, the woman who churlishly howled to the moon, dressed in *Vera Wang and Jimmy Choo*?

The trophy wife, who didn’t acknowledge her good fortune, decided to not only piss on it but try to drag them into it too?

Who would blame them?

Bekere sunk into the sofa in her bedroom and burst into tears.

She had strived to fight it, been afraid to face it, sought to blot out the memory, but now, as she sat in her bedroom, they all came loose. She was the iceberg that sank her Titanic, the chief culprit of her misfortune.

Mama Ajibade was right, Bekere fumed as she went through the closet. She had no right living in the Ajibade properties, living with Fola, continuing her despicable act, trying to hide from reality by burying her head in the cloud.

To think I’ve spent weeks having sex with him, professing love to him. Fell in love with him. God! If only Fola aimed better. If he’d just killed me. I’m such a filthy whore!

Bekere transferred her anger to attacking the clothes in the closet.

A slut who, though broke her home, still returned to feasting on the pus of her gross misconduct. There has to be a special place in hell for me. I ought to burn alive for this filth I call a body!

She went into a fit at the last thought, dragged every item from the closet, ripped them apart, and kept at it for half an hour. Bekere continued

clenching her teeth, ripping clothes, snatching things out of the wardrobe, and allowing the despairing thoughts to run amok in her head.

He wanted to buy me with designer shit! She gritted, garb me in finery, dine me in luxury, spoil me with diamonds. He didn't know I was a pig. Ha! Shame on you, Folu. Bekere laughed maniacally. *Shame on you for wasting your resources trying to adorn a pig.*

After forty-five minutes of lashing out on the closet, she collapsed on the pile of clothes on the floor and burst into heart-wrenching sobs.

“Take me away from this misery!” She cried. “How did I end up in this dilemma? How does someone like me get to draw another breath!”

Bekere curled up on the floor, her body jerking in hiccups and fits of sobs. “Just let me die, please!”

After draining her tear duct, she ripped off her clothes, stood naked in the room, raised her head to the heavens, and tried to pray.

“Dear God.” A loud hiccup asphyxiated her next word. She went into another round of tears and forced the words out. “I fucked up. I forgot about you, depended on my stupidity, stayed angry at my lack instead of focusing on your blessings upon me, and royally fucked up!”

She sniffled, wheezed, and wrapped her arms around herself. “I fucked up. Please look past my fuck up and help me.”

Bekere felt a deep calm sweep into her when she bowed her head. The feeling was so intense, so complete and sizzling that it creased her brain in goosebumps. She fell to her knees, pressed her head to the ground, and cried out.

“Hear my cry. Help me, comfort me, and fill my heart with your love. Complete me with your goodness, wash away my iniquities, and fill me... fill me with your peace.”

Or better yet, take me away from here, her inner bitch added.

Bekere choked on the thought and tried forcing her mind back to her supplications.

What you feel for them would forever torment you. It'll slowly plunge you into the ninth circle of hell until you gouge out your eyes and gnaw out your skin with gnashed teeth.

“Dear God...” Bekere sighed. “Dear God!”

It’s hopeless. Save your prayers.

“I need you, Lord! Please look upon me with favor and pull me out of this tumbling mess.”

Why does Fola have to be so darn good in bed, though!

Bekere collapsed in more hysteria and beat her chest in anguish. “End me! Please, just end me already! I can’t live this life. I just can’t!”

Bekere didn’t know how long she stayed sobbing and lamenting on the ground, but when she came to, she felt lighter than she’d felt in a long while and the beginning of what looks to be a killer headache. She rose slowly off the floor, regarded herself in the mirror, smiled serenely at her reflection, and ran herself a hot bath.

When she was done and cleaned up, she pulled out a loose-fitting dress, swept her hair up in a bun, put on makeup, diamond earrings, and slipped on a stiletto heel.

Then she began searching out her things. She found her phone first. A quick sweep of her call and message log saw her responding to Alice’s messages. She whimpered when Alice shot a “Can I FaceTime you?” message. She wasn’t ready to face her yet. But Alice, being Alice, made the call when Bekere didn’t respond. She smiled despite herself at Alice’s prepossessing face and waved when she carried Tyler into the camera so he’d say hi.

“Babes, it’s been forever! Are you still angry?” Alice asked.

“No, Alice.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t even try to call me throughout your stay in Paris, like not even a beep. That’s unlike us, now. Me your main chick?”

“I got swamped, Alice.”

“Anyway, hope you had a blast, though? Did you get the Polène bag I asked for?”

“Er, no, I didn’t get around to doing much shopping.”

“No, wahala.”

Bekere allowed Alice to prattle on about her latest soiree, Tade’s plans on a girl’s trip to Dubai, and her plans to start a business. She turned down

Alice's offer of a WOLB hangout, promised to call back when she was ready to socialize. Bekere's call to her mother raised a fresh ire when she learned Folu also spun her the "Vacation in Paris" tale.

"I was so worried, *tuboh*, why haven't you called me?" Mrs. Bodmas said, her voice shaking in unshed tears, the deep tilt of her Hausa accent acutely pronounced. "I kept asking your husband to give you the phone, but he refused. Even when I came to the house, they didn't allow me to enter—*Na rantse da, Allah*. If I'd known these people would be like this, I would not have allowed you to marry that man, *wallahi*. How will they keep me from my daughter?"

"Don't worry, mama. All will be well from now on, I promise you."

Bekere spent a few more minutes pacifying her mother, then finally got off the phone after a repeated promise to visit her the coming weekend.

After spending two hours in her bedroom, in which time she'd reached out to all concerned family, friends, and well-wishers. Bekere booked an Uber ride and exited the room.

"Wow," Bisi said. "You look amazing, ma."

Yes, Bekere thought in pride.

I look amazing.

I am amazing.

God's amazing grace is upon me.

Now it's time to utilize that grace and amazingly put up a fight.

It's time to show the world that I'm an Izon girl. The true daughter of Perekeme Bodmas.

Then she got to the bank and discovered she was precisely what Mama Ajibade called her; piss-poor broke.

When she'd sidestepped Fola's driver and sneaked out the house in an Uber, Bekere had her thoughts wrapped on closing her account, taking an unannounced trip out of the country, and... and...well, her ideas on what she'd do when she left Nigeria were not very clear to her.

She was, nevertheless, entirely determined to cash out of the country. But when she pulled out her purse to pay for her Uber ride and found it bereft of

her ATM cards, driver's license, and significant cash, Bekere felts gobs of smacks hit her face in repeated blows.

This can't be.

She frantically sieved the content of her wallet but only found POS and shopping slips—a habit she'd picked up in college and never broken out of—and some few five hundred-naira bills. She heaved a relaxed sigh when she noted the money was enough to cover her Uber ride.

Upon getting to the bank, Bekere assertively argued with the bank clerks and managers when she was informed of her frozen account.

"Please call your husband, ma'am." The bank manager, a tall, plus-sized woman in a well-tailored suit, said to her.

"That can't be right," Bekere said in a voice laden with panic.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

No, Folu. Don't tell me you'd do this too!

After returning to Bade's lair and frantically searching the wardrobe, she let out a piercing screech when she came out empty. Bekere resumed tearing the closet apart and beating her chest in misery.

Recalling she'd earlier felt peace from praying, she tried uttering a few lines of supplication but gave up when all she could squeeze out were:

"I regret the day I met him... God... oh God... I regret the day I met him."

Resolute to not let him decide her fate, she plucked off her phone to call Alice and ask for a quick loan when it began buzzing. The caller identity wasn't known to her as only a line of numbers flashed across her screen. Bekere contemplated disconnecting the call when she recognized the caller's voice as Fola but stayed on when he asked:

"Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That you returned to Bade's lair."

"Yes. I came to pick up a few things."

"I take it you're done picking up, then?"

"Yes, but I have some things I need to sort out."

“I’m parked outside. Come downstairs.”

“I’m currently trying to fix up some things.”

She heard him gritted a moan. “Don’t make me come upstairs to haul you out, Bekere. Come out of that house now!”

Bekere gave a short laugh of disbelief. “You’re both full of it, aren’t you? Barking out orders.”

“Last warning.”

“I don’t have time for this, Fola. I’ll call you back.” She disconnected the call and turned the settings to ‘Flight mode.’

Wild with anxiety and a desperate need to put distance between herself and the Ajibade twins, she pulled out the number of the only neutral person her mind could call up, someone she knew her husband couldn’t reach, hadn’t reached. She called Obinna.

She moaned in frustration when she realized Folu had blocked his number, hurriedly unblocked him, then groaned when he didn’t take the call after three dials and shrieked in relief when he finally did.

“Your last message was loud and clear, Bekere. You don’t have to call to spell it out.”

“Obinna,” she cried, “I need your help.”

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FOURTEEN

Taking his eyes off a news notification on his iPad, he swiped his thumb across his cellphone to connect the call. His musing eyes still fixed on the news report of a brewing trade war between the US and China, continued flitting through the news article as the caller furnished him with Bekere's return to the mansion. Unperturbed by the information, he gently dropped the iPad to pick up a pack of tic-tac—a habit he'd picked up after his suicide attempt—popped a few candies, and picked up a cup of coffee. "Thank you, Bonni," he said when Boniface finished his report. When he got off the phone, he casually strode to the door, locked it, and pried a wall painting hanging beside it off the wall. A mild tug of the faux wall revealed a safe that beeped open after he punched in some numbers. A quick rummage of the safe's content saw him pulling out a laptop and walking back to his seat.

Powering the laptop, he reclined on his chair and casually flicked through footages until he settled on one.

There you are.

He reached for the pack of tic-tac when she began ripping through half the content of the wardrobe and screaming inaudibly.

I knew you'd tire of him; knew you would come back.

His veneer of composure cracked a notch when she ripped her clothes off and stood naked before him.

Oh, Bekere.

He ran loving eyes down her body that was ripe with his baby, fastened his hands on the pack of tic-tac when they twitched to touch her, and resumed

popping more candy cones when she collapsed in hysteria on the floor.

What are we doing to each other, baby? What are we doing?

He closed his eyes from the pain of watching her hurting and being unable to do anything about it. Fixing his mind on his therapist's admonishment to pick a relaxing object to ponder on when distressing thought arose, he threw his eyes open and set them on her. Images of her mouth fused with his, her body glistening in the heat of their lovemaking, flashed before him in vivid colors. He placed a finger on the screen, ran it across her face, and smiled when she got off the floor and sashayed into the bathroom. The acute numbness of her absence from the camera made him wince in pain.

Recalling there were no cameras in the bathroom, he knew he'd have to wait for her to return to the bedroom. While waiting, he called Bash, clearly stated a set of instructions he insisted Bash carried out to the letter, then he called Iyke.

"I'm aware of her presence, sir," Iyke said.

"What's her itinerary?"

"I've not spoken to her yet, but I will as soon as she comes downstairs."

"Do not let her out of your sight."

"Yes, sir."

A full blast of excitement coursed through him when she emerged from the bathroom dressed in a baby-pink robe. He allowed the ripples of desire flow freely through him, sighed when his cock slowly hardened until he had to unbuckle his pants to accommodate them, and near gave in to the temptation to pleasure himself when she began creaming her body.

In the weeks following their separation, he'd been unable to find release from his sexual need for her. Though he'd try masturbating on some nights when the feeling became too strong, he'd lost steam halfway through it when her astounded face at his shooting her beclouded the sexual images he'd conjured up.

Now, watching her slide her palm all over her body filled him with a need so intense his hand moved of its own accord to his starving cock.

Bekere, he sighed, slowly gliding his hand on his phallus while the other stroked his screen. *Oh, Bekere.*

When the tremor of his release hit him like a ton of bricks, he groaned, grabbed the desk, and almost slid off his seat. Buckling in clenched teeth, he reined in on his self-control, swiftly grabbed a Kleenex, and wrapped it around his penis in time before the creamy squirt could spritz his entire office desk and floor.

Fuck!

He slumped on his seat, fought hard to regain his breathing and still his booming heart, then returned his gaze to the screen to find she'd finished dressing up and was applying makeup. He made a quick dash to the bathroom, hastily cleaned up, and returned in time to her sliding on a pair of flats and exiting the room. He called Iyke.

Folu gritted when Iyke called him five minutes later to report that he couldn't find her.

"How did she get out?"

"The emergency exit, sir. Bonni said he saw her Uber drive off."

"Be on standby. I'll call when I understand what she's trying to do."

He tracked her cellphone, watched the monitor flit through expressways, and stopped at a bank. He made a quick call to the Bank manager, instructed them on ensuring they made her call him, and relaxed when they called back thirty minutes later with a favorable report.

When Derrick called him thirty minutes later that she'd returned to the mansion, he clicked up her image on the CCTV footage and gave his security team extra sets of instructions. Then he called her mother and waited.

Iyke's call came an hour later. "She's at 1004."

Obinna.

He exhaled, reclined in his seat, and donned on a mask of indifference when Linda informed him Fola just got out of the elevator.



When Obinna alerted her of his arrival at Bade's lair, Bekere picked up her handbag that contained a few clothes and personal items and unhurriedly descended the stairs. She smiled a response to Bisi's greeting, chatted

briefly with another domestic staff milling around the lobby, doing all she could to keep from alerting them of her escape. The buzzing phone in her pocket reminded her of Fola's threat to haul her out of the mansion, her leaving the bag pack she brought with her from the beach house in the car, and that she was running out of time. Stealthily walking towards the back exit, she gasped when Derrick suddenly emerged from the door and grinned at her.

"Are you looking for Ekanem, ma?"

"No, Derrick, I'm uh, in need of a walk in the garden."

"That's great."

"I've been looking for you, ma," Bassey said, "What would you like for lunch?"

"I'm not hungry."

"In that case, I'll make you a light meal, say... shrimp salad?"

"No, thanks. I'll let you know when I'm hungry."

Bassey nodded and walked away.

"There's a call for you, ma," Bisi said.

Bekere threw Derrick, who was still standing by the back exit, an exasperated look, and turned to Bisi, "From who?"

"Your mother, ma."

She frowned at her mother calling the house line instead of her cellphone, "Tell her I'll call her from my cell."

"Okay, ma."

She resumed walking out of the room and into the garden, turned to Derrick when he slowly walked beside her, "I don't need a chaperone, Derrick."

"As you wish." He gave a small bow and turned towards the house.

Looking around her to ensure no one was in sight, she snuck out of the gate and sighed in relief when she saw Obinna parked across the street. She threw her head from left to the right to be sure there was no oncoming vehicle, scurried across the road, and jostled into the car.

"Thank you for coming, Obinna."

“Sure. You okay?”

“I’ll explain everything later. Just drive.”

Caught in the relief of escaping her unwanted reality, she didn’t notice the silvery-gray corolla that surreptitiously drove behind them.



If he hadn’t spent two blissful months with her, took pictures of her sleeping peacefully on his bed, and others of them smiling into the camera with arms wrapped around each other, Fola would have felt he imagined it all. As the elevator made an ascent to the twentieth floor, he redialed her number and flexed his shoulders to let out a simmering irritation when the call bounced. He couldn’t fathom how she did it. How does she get off making love to him with such volcanic intensity one minute and going MIA the next? Having spent most of his adolescent and adult life being the ‘wham-bam-thank you, ma’am,’ kind of guy, Fola sometimes mulled over the fact that his love for her was a punishment of a sort. Karma coming to collect on an overdue debt. Hence, he’d endured every burn, sting, and throbbing pain of his sentence in good stride. But her returning the Bade’s lair, hanging up the phone on him, and giving him the impression that she was putting him on a string bared the fangs of his intolerance.

Fola was ready to move anything, mountains or a freight-train, for her. What he would not be was her plaything. That was why he’d reshuffled his game cards and pulled out an ace. Getting out of the elevator, he flashed Linda an indulgent smile and, in a quick, purposeful stride, pushed open the door to his brother’s office and slapped two files on his table.

Then he sat languidly on a swiveling armchair, kept an amused gaze on Folu’s deadpan expression, and steepled his fingers. “Going by how you and I parted ways, bruh, I didn’t think you’d grant my request.”

“Make it good.”

Fola motioned to the files. “Before you, Folu, are two pills—Red and Blue. The red pill contains a full confession of what actually happened in the library and a couple of recordings. Most of which had you pegged to illegal stalking and making deadly threats.”

Folu scoffed.

“When I discovered my baby had a fighting chance, I knew I had to take you out of the picture. So, I made Effiong tip the detective.”

A slight tremor ran through Fola’s face, which was immediately replaced with blankness.

“The Bleachers may have cleaned up the crime scene and your sins buried. A confession from me, however, puts a whole new ring to your cacophony of bullshit.”

Folu smirked. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“Nah, bruh. That’s just froth. I’m getting to the beer.”

A triumphant glint crept into Fola’s eyes as he reclined on his chair. “I’m listening.”

Fola casually got off the seat and strode self-assuredly towards the minibar. He half expected Fola to leaf through the file while he fixed a glass of Cognac but bridled a sudden burst of disappointment with a smile when he discovered his twin hadn’t altered his position.

“I remember how you’d often brag about how impregnable the security of Bade’s database was.” Fola swirled his drink, a cocky smile on his face. “Dad, you said, designed a breach-proof system. Funny how far from the truth that was.”

“Your point?”

“Effiong not only infiltrated its wall of defense, but he also allowed me access to every investor’s private record, and I, for the right price, will use said information for good.” Fola grinned. “Or evil.”

Fola matched Fola’s staring contest with an arsenic smile. He adjusted his blazer when his twin broke the stare and flashed him a derisory grin.

“What’s on the other file?”

“The blue pill.” Fola winked. Then he placed a file on the desk. “In here are divorce papers and an affidavit stating your complete withdrawal from chasing her.”

Folu’s face that had earlier been a beacon of inscrutable now grew dark.

“If you take the Blue pill, I, like everyone else, will keep your sins buried.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then prepare for war.”

Both men sat staring at each other long enough for the second’s hand on a clock to go full circle.

“Where is she?” Folu asked.

In response, Fola slid his phone towards him. Folu gave the phone—a picture of Bekere and him smiling gaily into the camera draped under a floral duvet—a brief look, and the dark look that Fola had earlier witnessed evaporated. In its stead was an enigmatic expression, a look that mildly flustered him.

“You could have any woman you want, Fola.”

“Yeah, but I need the one—her.”

The brooding storm on Folu’s face coated every melanin tint a deeper shade of toffee. “Are you sure you want to pull this card, Fola?”

“I love her, Folu. I spent a long time doubting her feelings for me, but after what we shared these past months, I’m ready to do whatever it takes to keep her.”

“So, you slept with her... been sleeping with her?”

“Yes. Once you sign the papers, we’re getting married.”

“Ambitious, aren’t we?”

Fola snickered. “You had your chance, bruh. Now it’s time to bugger off and let her be with the man she truly loves, me.”

“You’re barking orders your fangs can’t bite, Folarin.” He scoffed and slowly pushed off his seat. “Do you know what I did when I learned she spent the night at your place?”

Fola shrugged.

“I looked into Ivy. I wanted to know more about the woman that’d allow her husband to carry on an affair with another in her very own house.”

Fola mildly adjusted on his seat as his brother casually strode towards the window.

“When my findings came back disappointing. I blamed myself for buying into your lies and upped my ante.” Folu paused, filling the office’s luxurious ambiance with tension so profound it could collapse a brick wall.

“I had my men scout out Effiong. Turned out the bloke is not only a mercenary but also a compulsive gambler and everything else in between.”

Fola sprang up to his feet. “What did you do to Effiong?”

Folu snickered. “I didn’t come this far as a hedge fund manager, Fola, to not be able to recognize bullshit when I smell one.”

Fola tried but failed to decipher his brother’s look.

“I don’t know what you stacked in that file, bruh, but I’ll wager it’s nothing but NEPA bills.” He laughed at his joke. “So, I’ll tell you what I told the zillion idiots that had tried blackmailing me. Bring the entire squad.”

“Check the file, Folu.”

Folu sat crossed-legged on an armchair, a blank stare fixed on his twin, “In the last weeks of my losing her to you, I’ve had a bit of an epiphany. I’ve thought out your every action and strove to find reasons you do what you do. Why you became who you are.”

Fola roared, “What is this, Folu, a confessional?”

A flitting smile flashed across his face, “A reason, Fola. A reason to understand why. If I hadn’t been so caught up in the mire of my genetic flaw or been so bent on proving myself to mom, dad, and the world that I was every bit a man, I’d have seen it. But I didn’t, and I guess that means I owe you an apology.”

Fola pranced up from his seat, “Cut the cheesy act, Folu and sign the damn document.”

“I understand now, Fola. I know why you do what you do, know why you’re the way you are.”

“What?”

“I understand why you pulled the Danjuma heist. You were jealous of my relationship with Ayo.”

“Quit patronizing yourself, brother!”

“I also know why you felt you needed to have all my women, toys, and everything I own. You blame me for what happened to you.”

Fola glared at him, “If this is the point where you tell me you’ve found Christ, Folu save it!”

“Christ was never lost. I was the lost one. I gave my soul over to loathing and got scathed.” He strode to the window. “I almost killed the only woman I’ve ever loved, attempted suicide, and lost a friend.” He turned to him, “You.”

Fola slowly approached him, “I’m ready to put whatever differences we’ve had in the past, brother. I’m willing to forgive all if you let her go.”

Folu snickered, “Don’t confuse my waving a white flag for stupidity, Fola.”

“You won’t sign it?”

“Bekere and I are bound by the vows of matrimony that can only be broken by death.” He pinned his twin with a frosty glare, “So unless you plan on killing me this instant, my wife will be and always be what she is, my wife.”

Fola growled, “Oh, you despicable...” He clenched his fist and stormed out the door.

FIFTEEN

Bekere turned to look over her shoulder while Obinna scorched down the express. Save for a few other cars matching his speed, the expressway looked nothing out of place. She caught his questioning glance when he slowed the Range Rover to a traffic light and flashed him a small smile. The thought that the questions he had to ask were nothing she would enjoy discussing heightened her guilt for dragging him into her mess. When she'd given to the whims of calling him, she hadn't considered the consequences. She'd simply acted in desperation. His swift grant of her request and her unease at having to put him off when he repeatedly asked probing questions made her blurt out the first phrase that popped in her head; "I'll tell you everything when we get out of here, just drive."

Reflecting on that statement and the urgency with which she said them, Bekere realized she'd heightened not just his curiosity but his conviction that she was running away from something that scared her, something life-threatening. After throwing her another questioning sideways glance, Obinna veered the car off the express and pulled into a street with gated, multistory buildings.

"I figured we should have lunch," he said.

"I'm not hungry, Obi."

"Whatever it is you're running from, Bekere, I'm certain you'd do it better with a full belly." He grinned. "Besides, I'm hungry and in the vicinity where they have the best native food restaurant."

She did a quick sweep of the area when she got off the car and walked with him into a lively restaurant called 'Hot Amala,' noted the rich décor and colorful booths with *Ankara* table covers. He walked them towards a corner

booth, suggested meal ideas she agreed to, and regarded her in muted patience while she struggled to keep her anxiety at bay.

“What’s up?” He asked in a voice that brooked no deferring. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No, why?”

“You’ve been frantic and looking behind you like you’re expecting to see someone chasing you.”

She gave a nervous chortle, “Nothing of the sort. I’m just nervous, is all.”

“Of me?” He winked.

She laughed at his quip and shook her head.

“What is it?”

“I need a way out of the country.”

“Okay?”

“I can’t go into details now, Obi, but I need to leave ASAP.”

“You’ve got me worried since you called Bekere. What is it? What’s going on?”

“I’ll get around to telling you everything, but for now, just know that I did something terrible and need to get as far away from my husband as possible.”

“What did you do?”

“Something bad.”

Their meal’s arrival hushed his voicing a response. Nevertheless, she read it in his puzzled frown and probing gaze that he was trying hard not to hazard a guess, or worse, jump into conclusions. The story behind her disgraceful whirlpool still made her cringe in shame and strive to push the thought into the deepest recess of her mind. Other than her therapist, she’d promised herself no one would know of her abominable act, not even Obinna in all his earnestness and concern.

“Is it about your being pregnant?” Obinna asked as soon as the server walked away.

“What?”

“Is he opposed to having kids and blames you for foisting one on him?”

She snorted, “No, Obi, it is nothing of the sort.”

He relaxed in a heaving sigh, “Then what is it?”

She pushed her steaming plate of food aside, rested her elbows on the table, and leaned her chin on steepled fingers.

“Obinna,” she said in an assured voice, “I’m sorry I dragged you into this with no intention of letting you in on all the details, but I need you to trust my need to keep what led me into calling you to myself. Perhaps I might tell you about it in the future, or I might not. All I need, for now, is your help.”

Obinna sighed and nodded.

“Can I trust you to help me, Obi?”

“In all the years you’ve known me, Beks, have I ever said no to you?”

She grinned, “Thank you, Obi.”

“But I’ll add that you report the matter to the police if it’s a life-threatening situation.”

“It’s not.” She harrumphed, “My leaving Lagos is just something I need to do for me.”

“What about his baby? Is he aware of it?”

“Obinna!” She cried in exasperation.

“Fine, fine. I won’t ask, know that I’ll worry, though. But I’ll help you.”

She mouthed an appreciation and began eating her meal, which, to her delight, was as delicious as it looked. He teased her for the speed at which she wolfed it down and nodded when she turned down his offer of a second helping.

“I have a country home at the outskirts of Lagos,” he said when they drove out of the restaurant, “I’ll call the caretaker to get it ready for you. I’m not sure there’s food in the refrigerator, but I’m sure he’ll arrange that.”

“This arrangement is only for a while, Obi. So, whatever I find there would be just fine.”

“You can stay there for as long as you like.”

She relaxed on her seat and resumed looking out the window.

“How’s the little girl?” She asked a few minutes later.

“Ezinne, she’s fine now. We’ll discharge her sometime this week. Although she would need crutches for a while, she’s young and would heal enough to return to her old self.” He turned to her, “You did a good thing bringing her in when you did. Had you not done so, she’d have lost the use of her leg and even her life.”

“I did what I had to.” She sighed, “It’s so sad that our medical system is a big let down. Imagine all the lives lost to poor medical infrastructures and the ineptitude of the doctors and nurses at the state hospital.”

“You really can’t blame the medical staff, Beks. There’s so much to do and very little to work with.”

“True.”

“Which still makes me wonder why you were there that day and why you’re here now.”

She turned away from him.

“I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk. I may have lost my chance with you, but I’m still your friend, you know that, don’t you?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And I—” He plodded on the brakes when a corolla suddenly skidded past him in blaring horns. “Look at this foolish man!”



A week after his squabble with his twin and a few hours after learning, Bekere, with Obinna’s help, moved into a four-bedroom bungalow at a remote village in Epe, he went on Instagram to begin another aspect of his new habits, scrolling through her timeline. He watched the video he made of them at the Louvre on her IGTV, grinned openly at their carefree ways, steamy kisses, and uninhibited joy.

“Hey, boss.”

Folu grunted a greeting at Ayo as he continued watching her speaking excitedly into the camera with her arms flung around him.

“You’re good?”

“Sure, why?”

“Just asking.”

He arched a brow at his friend.

“Are you sleeping well? Eating well?”

“I am.”

Ayo regarded him quizzically, “You look flushed. You’re not stoned, are you?”

“Once, Ayo,” he scoffed, “I abused drugs once, suddenly I’m an addict?”

“I’m just checking. You know you never really got around to seeking help at a rehabilitation center.”

“I fought the demon here, bro.” He tapped his head, “Plus, my sessions at therapy really helped.”

He recalled his first brush with withdrawal symptoms from his addiction, how he’d gone into fits of rage and fervent need for the meds. The only thoughts that had slowed him down and made him listen to reason were Ayo’s mention of taking him to Bekere. When Ayo took him to Abosede Williams instead—a renowned therapist with a specialty in helping people overcome addictions—he’d again lost his cool. He strongly reprimanded the chubby therapist, who all but smiled openly at him throughout his episode.

It took weeks of therapy to get him to break his dependence on the meds, another to curb the moods and wild thoughts of Bekere drowning in a pool of blood and eloping with Fola, and months to get him comfortable enough to open up to his shrink. Admittedly, he knew he wasn’t there yet concerning talking freely about his feelings and emotions with his therapist, but he basked in the relaxed feel his sessions with her brought about.

“What about the cravings? How are you dealing with it?”

He rattled the pack of a tic-tac.

“Right.” Ayo smiled. “If you need to talk to someone, be with someone, you know Toyin and I are always available for you, right?”

“Sure.” He rose slowly to his feet and strode towards the window. “I don’t know how long I can hold out, though. I don’t know how much of her absence I can keep enduring.”

“Letting her go is for the best, Folu. It may not seem like it now, but I assure you you’ll find peace and maybe meet someone who would love you right.”

“I’m thirty-nine. In a couple of months, I’ll be forty. Do you honestly think I believe that fairytale bullshit?” He rested his head on the windowpane and shoved his hands into his pants, his musing eyes glazed in reflection. “What do you think about love charm, Ayo?”

Ayo gawked at him.

“You’ve heard about it, haven’t you?”

“You *really* are stoned, Folu. Is that truly tic-tac or Meth?”

Folu laughed. “Come on, bro. Answer my question. What do you know about love charm? Do you think I can find someone to fix me one?”

“I’m sure we can get a prophet to cook up a potion or two from the book of Psalms,” Ayo said snidely.

“The book of Psalms,” Folu laughed and pushed off the window to stride back to his seat. “I’ve read that book, you know, it and several other books of the Bible. I didn’t enjoy the book of Lamentation. I feel it had a lot of damning proclamations, but I enjoyed the rest.”

Ayo raised his palms heavenwards and threw disbelieving eyes to him.

“Oh, and that book of poetry, what’s the name again...” He tossed a few cones of candy into his mouth and swiveled his chair, “Yeah, The Songs of Solomon, oh, I thoroughly enjoyed that book.”

“Right.”

“I plucked off a line or two from it and sent it to Bekere. I can’t recall the exact lines, but it reads thus...”

“Shall I pass on having to listen to it?”

Folu chuckled. “No, you shall not.”

“Oh, boy.”

Folu grinned, gazed adoringly into space, and intoned the poetic lines in a voice rich with melancholy.

*Turn your eyes away from me
For they overwhelm me
Your hair is like a flock of goats
Streaming down the slopes of Gilead
Your teeth are like flocks of sheep
They have come from being washed.*

“Wait, what translation are you quoting from?” Ayo interjected. “Aren’t you supposed to use ‘Thou’ and ‘Thy’?”

Folu chuckled. “I’m quoting from a translation that used modern English.”

“Right.”

“I couldn’t read the old English translation. Shakespearean or not.”

Ayo scoffed, “Yeah, tell me about it.”

Folu smiled reflectively and sucked in a deep breath. “I can’t recall the rest of the lines, but that part stuck because I said it to her.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you know she loves flowers? Roses are her favorite, not red. Oh, she loathes red roses, felt it was too common.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ayo asked with a smile.

“Yeah... She loves white roses... my Bekere... God, I miss her, Ayo. I miss her terribly.” He arose from the seat, broke into a spirited pace, took several relaxing breaths while flexing his shoulders, and sauntered to the window. “Do you believe in God, Ayo? Do you believe there’s a higher power, someone above everything and up in the celestial heavens?”

Ayo kept a watchful gaze on him. “I believe we’re not alone in the universe.”

“Yeah, but do you believe in God?”

“Toyin and I go to church every New Year’s eve.”

Folu chuckled. "I don't believe in churches, Ayo. Most of them are steeped in corruption and run by entrepreneurs."

"Some of which brings good money for us, I might add." Ayo snorted.

"I sometimes feel someone watching me." Folu sighed. "I hear Him, feel His aura around me, hear Him urging me to reach out. Envision Him sitting on a celestial throne of lights with His face hidden in the clouds and bright lights."

"Hmm."

"Do you think I should reach out? Do you think I should pray, ask Him to make her love me?"

"I don't think He grants requests like that."

Folu scoffed. "You're probably right. I mean, look at that king in the *Songs Of Solomon*. He blessed him with wisdom, riches, and abundance, but deprived him of what he truly desires; the love of the Shulamite Maiden."

Ayo snickered.

"Do you think that's why King Solomon loaded on the women? Do you think he wanted to... was desperate to fill the void his love interest created in him when she spurned his love for that pauper shepherd boy?"

Ayo shrugged. "Hell, if I know."

Folu sighed, pressed his head on the windowpane, and exhaled. "I want to see her."

"Come on, bro, she has hurt you in more ways than any man deserves to withstand. I feel it's best to let her go."

"Let her go?" He snapped, whirling around to fasten Ayo a withering glance, "What would you know, Ayo, hm? What would you know? You have a perfect life, you have Toyin, two adorable kids, what would you know about my struggles!"

Ayo made slowly towards him, "I understand, Folu."

"You understand? Please! How will you possibly understand when you're wrapped night after night in the arms of the woman who loves you while I'm left with nothing!"

Ayo sighed.

“Every day I spend without her feels like I’m gasping for air, feels like I’m drowning.”

“I’ve got your back, you know that. I’ll help you in any way I can to find happiness. Just say the words, and I’ll make it happen.”

He didn’t know what undid him, couldn’t tell if it was the earnestness in his friends’ eyes or the echoing hollow of his heart. But when Ayo uttered those words, Folu heard himself opening up about his struggles and letting someone other than himself into his deepest emotions and darkest secrets. Ayo’s stunned look when he finished talking and his solemn vow to help him get his happy-ending filled him with a relaxing serenity and convinced him more than ever that it was time to find his way back to her.

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SIXTEEN

Two days after moving into Obinna's country home, Bekere finally got around to turning her phone back on and settling into the relaxed feel of being free from Folu's spies. The phone's persistent buzzing didn't faze her or keep her from flicking through Netflix and settling with a romantic comedy. She laughed at a funny Rebel Wilson's scene in 'Isn't It Romantic,' forced the pull of her curiosity to check the phone's notifications, and resolutely immersed herself in the colorful movie. Then the phone rang.

Determined to ignore it by turning up the television's volume, she made a swift glance in the phone's direction to pick up the television remote lying beside it and read the caller ID as 'Private.' Her curiosity got the better of her.

She furrowed her brow when the caller stayed mute after she'd said a series of 'Hellos.' Getting off the phone, she started towards the kitchen to rinse off her cereal bowl, and it resumed ringing.

"Who is this?"

Silence.

"Hello?"

Silence, then a disconnect beep, followed by an iMessage.

Thank you for taking the call. The sound of your voice was all I needed to quiet my storm.

Bekere sucked in a gasp, massaged her nape, and leaned on the couch. Although the sender wasn't registered on her phone, she needed no clarification that the message was from Folu. A discomfort in her stomach

brought her startling reality to mind, the reminder she was a pregnant woman running away from facing her disgrace. The stark recollection of her ruining a good thing, breaking a good man's heart, and being unable to meet him, let alone forgive herself for the ruin she brought to his name.

Her wild, desultory thoughts leaped to their wedding in Dubai, the vows he made, the words she uttered, the promise she made to love him: heart, body, and soul. She swallowed a sob and swiped her thumb across her phone when another text rolled in.

I know you're not at your mom's, and I know you're avoiding me. I won't keep running after you, Bekere, and I won't pine away waiting on you to love me. You either want to be with me, or you don't. Meet me at Oceanna at noon, let's talk about us. I'll wait till 1 pm. If I don't see you, then I know we're done.

She clicked her tongue and made to drop the phone when another rolled in:

You may not want to be with me, but I won't let you cut me out of my baby's life. Meet me, please. I'll wait for as long as I can. Don't leave me hanging.

Bekere groaned at the swift wave of mortification that flowed through her. How did she go from being a random girl who couldn't stomach having sex with her college sweetheart to being the sexual vixen lusting after twin brothers? How did her heart become so weak that it unwittingly tethered itself to two people who'd spent their entire life brawling with each other? How would she untether herself from this web of forbidden desire? God, if she would just erase them from her head! If she'd simply unfuck her mind from the toxicity that had become her life.

To worsen the queer, unethical feel of her forbidden desires, her rampant thoughts of Folu's visit to the beach house still filled her with longings. Seeing him weep heartbrokenly on bended knees filled her with raging intensity. The vivid mass of pain in his eyes, the desperation in his stance, and the slight tremor of his hands and voice when she brought up a divorce filled her with maternal worry.

I miss him. She sighed. He needed me to be there for him, help quiet his storm, fight his battles. Too bad I wasn't strong enough to be all of that to him. Too bad I hurt him so.

To keep her sanity, she took a walk down the gated compound, weeded some wild shrubs growing on the terrazzo flight of stairs, and sat on it. When Obinna brought her to his exclusive home, as he called it—a four-bedroom bungalow—he’d made her promise to tell him everything about her marriage and called his caretaker to stock the house with supplies. He also made the caretaker, a middle-aged man, come by the house to clean, weed the grass, and help with whatever domestic chores she felt the need for. So, though alone in the house and having the entire compound to herself, she had very little to busy herself with and became increasingly aware of budding loneliness.

Hours after pacing, flicking through channels, and several failed attempts at reading, she sent a reply to Fola’s text:

Fola, thank you for all you are and all you’ve been. At the most gruesome era of my life, you were there, holding my hands and keeping my demons at bay. Words can’t express how thankful I am to you. However, Folarin, it’s time we both face the truth we’ve been hiding from. It’s time we realize that we’ll never be each other’s everything. As much as I love you and would want nothing more than to pretend my life was uncomplicated so I’d be with you, I can’t. There’ll always be a part of me that would slowly and continuously wilt away until I’m nothing but a shriveled stalk. When that happens, I’m afraid you would resent me, and I’d resent you too. I wish you happiness.

A few seconds after hitting the send button and seeing the twin-marked icon turn blue, she sent another:

Please don’t wait for me or feel the need to provide for my baby. We’ll do just fine.

To keep from adding more lines and going into irrelevant explanations or worse, give in to the desire to make a voice note, she archived his chat and summoned up the courage to send another text, a text to Folu. While the one to Fola was lengthy, the one to Folu was curt, precise, and a two-word sentence:

Let’s talk.



The twin's reaction to her text was incongruent to their identical features. For Fola, it involved brimming with irritation and inviting Ejiro over to a café at Ajose Adeogun.

It's him instead of me, he gritted while sipping coffee. She loves me but can't seem to bring herself to be with me because of him. Let's see how she feels when I take him down.

A hopeful glee flashed through him when he thought the buzzing phone was her calling to rescind her break-up text but evaporated into disdain when he saw the caller was Iyeunna Whyte. Ever since he learned of Bade Inc's successful closing of the Dangote business deal, he'd blacklisted Iyeunna. As much as it irked him to reflect on, Fola knew trusting Iyeunna with a plan as grand as The Dangote scheme was a wrong call. He'd only given him the benefit of the doubt out of desperation. Now he knew better.

He listlessly took the call when the cellphone resumed buzzing and languidly reclined on the chair when Whyte broke into an animated dialogue and business offers.

"I'm going to pass on your offer, Iyeunna."

"I understand you're distressed, Fola. But hear me out, okay, get to know why I did it."

"I know why you did it, alright. You're a backstabber."

Iyeunna chuckled. "When you understand my reasons, Fola, I guarantee you would sing a new tune."

"I'm in the middle of something, Whyte. Let me call you back."

"Let's have drinks on the weekend. There's a proposition you might be interested in."

Fola reluctantly agreed to the meeting, mostly because he wanted to get off the phone and partly because his lawyer just walked in.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Ejiro said when he settled in a chair, "Traffic."

Fola shrugged and ordered Café Mocha while Ejiro took Cappuccino. They engaged in half an hour of legal discussions with Fola asking questions concerning rights to press charges, the legalities around Fola's crimes, and the likely areas opened to him in getting justice.

“You said the best way out of getting my brother to sign a divorce is leverage,” Fola said, “How do you propose I do that?”

“Are you ready to push this battle to court?”

“I am.”

“What about her?”

Fola shrugged, “She isn’t.”

“Is there a way you can make her?”

“Not that I can think of. That notwithstanding, I’m taking legal actions against my brother.”

Ejiro brought out a notepad, “On what grounds?”

“Malicious contempt and attempt to kill my child.”

Ejiro swallowed a sip of coffee, regarded Fola musingly, and clasped his fingers. “Are you ready and willing to play this game, Fola?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your pushing for Fola’s arrest will rouse a lot of media attention. Will Bade Incorporated be able to withstand the heat?”

Fola regarded him caustically, picked up his mocha, and gulped it. “Not only do I want him arrested for almost killing my child, but I’m also calling to question his sanity and proclaiming him unfit to run Bade Inc.”

“What makes you question his sanity?” Ejiro probed, his shrewd eyes fixed on Fola.

“I saw the look on his face when he shot her. It was.... Triumphant. Like he wanted to kill her, was happy he killed her.”

“Are you saying he carefully thought out the crime? Like he planned on shooting her?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. My brother had enough time to douse the rage he may have felt when he learned about us, yet he saw through carrying out the act.”

Ejiro gave a puzzled frown, “How do you mean?”

“I mean the time it took for him to scout out a gun and return to the library. That’s enough time to stay his anger. Yet he stoked the flames enough to

shoot her. If that isn't premeditated, then I don't know what is."

"Other than you, is there anyone willing to corroborate your story?"

Fola sighed, "I don't know if I can get the staff to talk, seeing as they're under his employ, but I'm willing to pull every resource to get justice."

Ejiro reflectively sipped his coffee in a pregnant pause that lasted for a minute, "Do you have proof of the baby being yours?"

"I don't need proof. My brother is incapable of impregnating a woman. She'd been with him for three years without success and suddenly became pregnant after spending the night with me. It adds up, doesn't it? The baby is mine."

Ejiro nodded, "What about the gun? Can you get it?"

"I'm not sure. But like I said, I'll pull every resource I have in seeing this case gets a fair hearing."

"With what you've listed, it's very possible." Ejiro pulled out a notepad and scribbled on it. "Is he a licensed owner?"

"Yes, we both are. My grandfather was ex-military. Hence, he made us licensed to carry. But I've never seen my brother use it. The house is teeming with security. He did not need a loaded gun. I have a gun too, but I can assure you it's not loaded. That he took the time to load that gun and shot her even after she begged him." He gritted in a clenched fist. "Even after she begged him not to, he still did it."

"The first thing would be to get a staff that will come forward and, if possible, get the gun. Then help you draft a complaint, so it is officially on record."

Fola nodded.

"I don't make any promises, Fola. But if this case gets a judge's attention, it'll not only drag a lot of media attention and spell doom for Bade Incorporated. It'll also die in the water if she denies the claims or none of the staff corroborate your story."

"I'll give it a shot."

Ejiro assured him he would pull every resource available for getting a court injunction and then encouraged him to get Bekere to agree to press charges. Fola mulled over the information, listened to Ejiro's plans, and left the

meeting to Bade's manor, a hopeful man. A beep on his phone reminded him of her break-up text.

Fola wanted to spend eternity with her. He was prepared to be a new man for her. What he would never do was keep pining over her. Love was a new feeling to him, something he'd rather do without. An emotion he felt he had killed long ago when he got his heart crushed by his parents. He didn't know how Bekere penetrated his shields or how he would school himself to unlove her. What he knew was that he still loves her deeply, and if she didn't feel the same about him, then she wasn't worth his love.

Women were available at his beck and call. While driving home, he'd initiated contact with his old paramours, took one out for dinner, brought her home, and made fierce love to her. It didn't bother him that his conscious mind kept calling out Bekere's name, didn't surprise him in the least when he called out her name while thrusting his starved cock into his sexual partner, and he sure as hell didn't waste time explaining to the girl when she asked who Bekere was.

"Thank you for a splendid night," he said to her when he dropped her at her place, "I'll call you sometime."

Ejiro's call informing him he'd emailed a draft copy of the complaint he was to sign appeased him a little. His mother's call inviting him over for dinner irritated him thoroughly, and Ivy's FaceTime at her London apartment made him laugh, talk freely, and laughed some more.

Therefore, it was with a body sated from a night of mindless sex and a heart filled with plots to bring an end to Folu's reign in the Bade Empire that he read Alex's message.

Location: House 1, Carters Gardens, Lekki- Epe, Lagos.

SEVENTEEN

For Folu, reading her text was a cocktail of euphoria, dread, need for calmatives, and a host of other emotions that made him took spirited paces. He read and reread the message until his wits stretched out in splitting spikes. His call to confirm her choice of meeting point met with repeated disconnected beeps.

Can we meet at Jazz Mart? He typed, I'll make reservations for us.

It took three hours of pacing, redialing of her number, cursing the day he met or even fell in love with her, and emptying a pack of tic-tac and several glasses of green juice to get him screaming for joy when a notification from her beeped on his phone.

There's a new spot in Ibeju. I'll text you the details shortly.

Can you do it now? You know I worry easily.

I'll send it tomorrow.

Tomorrow? I thought we're meeting now.

No.

He gritted and broke into a fevered pace.

Besides, I need to rest. She typed, Been on the road for a while.

On the road? He frowned. Where did she go? Is she stressing herself doing chores? Is Obinna living with her, making her cater to him?

Folu uttered a frustrated growl and hurriedly grabbed his suit jacket, determined to drive down to Epe and give her slave-driver, 'college sweetheart' of a friend a piece of his mind, and maybe some part of his fist.

It's bad enough I'm letting you house her, you slimy piece of shit, now you want to domesticate her?

He halted halfway to the door when he read another message from her.

I know what you do when you worry, Folu, so don't try anything funny. I'll see you tomorrow.

The fight floated out his body and filled him with mortification. When he began making progress in therapy, he'd resolved to curb the violent part of him that reacted without thinking, the part that was enslaved to wrathful emotions and driven to actions he later regretted.

Yet here he was, inflamed by unfounded thoughts and acting on them.

Taking a relaxing glass of apple juice, he left the office and drove with Andrew on the wheels to his therapist, then he called a florist to have freshly cut white roses delivered to him the following day and impatiently counted down to his date.

When the time came for him to meet with his Bekere, Folu painstakingly saw to his grooming. He used the cologne she bought him on their third anniversary and rebuffed Andrew's offer at driving him when he brought Bekere's Mercedes Benz S-class around.

He arrived at the venue—a low-priced fast food diner in Ibeju—an hour to the meeting time and resumed rehearsing his speech. He'd composed it last night, most of which were steeped in poetic phrases and love declarations. Saying them now in the relaxed ambiance of the car, scented with the flower he'd picked up on his way, it sounded perfect to him, made him smile, and got him excitedly alighting the car.

Then he caught the scent of her perfume, heard her soft “Hello, Folu,” turned slowly to behold her stunning magnificence in a peplum jumpsuit, and his well-crafted poetry vaporized in a white whiff of smoke.



Bekere saw him drive into the diner in her car. To be in the position of strength and composure, she'd decided on arriving at the venue an hour to the scheduled time. Whatever prospect of maintaining a relaxed and collected composure she'd entertained flew out the window as soon as she

saw him. She visited the bathroom, rechecked her makeup, and frowned at the pad of fat on her cheeks and the extra puffy chin.

I have to lay off the carbs. That I'm pregnant doesn't mean I'll turn into a pumpkin.

Brushing off the dumpy feeling of looking fat and unprepossessing, she pulled the helms of her peplum as if trying to shield her bulging stomach, pulled up the bodice to cover her voluptuous cleavages, and adjusted her hair to cover her bare shoulders.

This will have to do, she thought, walking away from the mirror. Besides, she wasn't here to seduce him or make him think her pretty. She only came so they would talk about beginning a divorce proceeding. It shouldn't matter that she felt doughy or that she was nervous as fuck.

Bekere sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

She would keep the meeting brief and precise. Let him know she'd employed a lawyer and would send the documents soon. Good thing he came early, she muttered under her breath while making towards his car. That would make their meeting brief, no point sitting through lunch and forcing themselves to make small talks. Her breath caught in her throat when he sprightly emerged from the car dressed in fitted jeans, a matching denim jacket, and white *Nike* kicks. The smell of his perfume flourished a sudden surge of piercing desire that bubbled within her stomach and floated to her *honeypot*.

"Hello, Folu," she said in a voice that sounded foreign to her.

He slowly turned to her, took off his Tom Ford sunglasses, and fixed her with a gaze so intense it popped the lusty bubble into a hot rush of *pre-cum*. Convinced her face was a full mass of conflicting emotions, she turned to walk back into the diner when he said.

"Hello. My name is Folorunsho Ajibade. What's yours?"

She whirled around to regard him in perplexity, "I'm sorry?"

The sides of his lips twitched in a small smile that deepened the shades of his stunning handsomeness and heightened the sensual wreath he'd weaved around her.

“You can call me Folu. It’s shorter and saves a lot of breath.” He grinned.
“What’s yours?”

What is he getting at?

“Bekere.” She breathed, then swallowed, then stretched her hands to his.

Two can play the game.

He took her hands in a friendly handshake, “Hello, Bekere.” Then he reached into his car and brought out a bouquet of sweet-smelling roses. “I got you this.”

She reached for the roses, making sure their fingers didn’t touch, and flinched when he slightly brushed his thumb across hers, “Thank you. They’re pretty.”

“Not as pretty as you, Bekere.”

She gave a derisive snort and basked in the sweet smell of the flowers.

“Will you like to go for a drive?”

“Why the restaurant I picked is not to your liking?” She shifted when he slightly moved towards her.

“I love it.”

“Good.” She turned away from him and hurried into the restaurant. When a server walked to their table to collect their orders, she instinctively waited for Folu to do the ordering, as was their routine, then requested for *Small Chops* and *Pepsi* when he stayed silent.

Bekere placed the posy of flowers on the table and swiftly cast her glance around the crowded diner to arrange her thoughts. She had distinctly chosen this place because she knew it was often crowded at lunch hour and would cushion her from whatever feelings meeting him again would stir. But catching his penetrative gaze that was naked with remorse, hunger, raw need, desire, and other emotions she couldn’t read, she found she was oblivious to the bustling crowd.

As far as feelings go, it could very well be just the two of them confined in a closet.

“I’m a twin.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m a twin. The name of my twin is Folarin.” He gently took her hands and flinched when she yanked them off. “My twin might come after you with intentions of getting you to be with him instead of me because we always seem to fall in love with the same woman.”

“What are you doing, Folu?”

He reached for her hands again and exhaled a pleasurable sigh when she didn’t pull back, “I’m asking for a chance, Bekere, a chance to go back in time, begin again, and do right this time.”

She swallowed.

“A chance to show you the depth of my love and maybe, just maybe, find a way back into your heart.” He entwined their fingers and raised his earnest eyes to hers. “A chance to make you see me.”

“Folu.”

“I was born with an ailment that made me lose my testicles at an early age.”

“Stop it, please!”

He regarded her with eyes ablaze with burning entreaty, “It drove every woman I dated into his arms, made me struggle with inadequacy my entire life. Made me lose you.”

The loud bang the lunch tray made when the server dropped it on the table startled her into pulling her gaze from his mesmerizing eyes. She slowly unclasped her hands from his and tried to eat. Unable to taste her meal with him watching her while leaving his untouched, she gave up trying to cover the awkwardness of her jumbled mass of emotion and got up.

He followed suit, pulled out his wallet to pay for their meals, and nodded when she insisted on paying.

“Are you up for my offer of a drive now?” He asked when they stepped into the parking lot.

“Folu,” she said in an infuriated sigh. “I only asked us here so we could talk...”

“We can talk more on the drive.”

“But you did what you do best, what you’d always done since I met you, hijack the situation.” A few people turned in their direction when the last

three words came out louder than she wanted.

“I’m sorry.” He sighed.

“Not everything needs micromanaging, Folu. Some things are best left to follow a natural course.”

“What do you want me to do?” He asked in a restless shuffle of his feet.

“I’m calling a cab home.”

A mournful look crossed his features but was quickly replaced with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “Can I please drive you home?”

“No.” She sighed, “Our lunch didn’t go as I planned it.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing, Folu, do nothing. Quit trying to control everything!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Dammit, quit apologizing!” She gritted.

He huffed, tried to take her in his arms, and uttered a low groan when she evaded him. “I’m sorry.”

She started for the gate in an agitated stomp while pulling out her phone to book her Uber.

“Bekere, stop, please. Tell me what you want me to do, please!”

A sudden whirling around to reprimand him threw her into his muscular arms and filled her ears with the rapid beat of his racing heart. Swallowing a mammoth-sized lump that lodged in her throat, she pulled off him, “Folu.”

“Baby.” He breathed, his head hung low, and eyes earnestly gazing into hers. “Please.”

“Let me go, please.”

“I can’t.”

She pried off him, shoved down a woozy feeling that engulfed her, and took shaky strides towards the gate.

Dear God. She muttered as she hailed a taxi, *dear God.*

The tears that singed her eyes dropped in grand torrents when the cab drove off with him staring forlornly after her.

Feeling spiteful at herself for her utter lack of self-control with her lady parts sticky from sexual desire, Bekere hurried out of her clothes and burst into wracking sobs as the shower rained down her body. When she was spent from tears and her skin tingling from the brutalized scrub, she dressed in a bathrobe and began scouting out a lawyer.

Her search presented her with various law firms, blogs, and contacts to begin her divorce journey, but she settled with a private firm name Balms & Guild. On further research, she learned the firm specialized in helping women get a divorce, significant settlements, and child custody.

When she called the firm, a secretary scheduled her with the firm's director and assured her their firm was the ultimate solution to her marital entanglement. To live through the rest of the day, Bekere picked up a paperback copy of Chimamanda's *Americanah* and curled up in bed to read. When the phone chirped, she ignored it. She continued flipping through the pages of the novel and gritted when her chirping phone started ringing.

"Babes, why have you been avoiding me, now?" Alice said as soon as Bekere connected the call.

"Hey, Alice. I got busy with a lot of activities and lost track of time."

Alice went into a catalog of how drab her life had been since their last lunch date at Prime Chinese. Excitedly talked about Tyler's admission into Lekki British, her taking a digital and social media marketing course, and her plans to become an Instagram Influencer and blogger.

"Chick, in a few years from now, I'll be giving Linda Ikeji a run for her money."

"I'm happy for you, Alice. That's an excellent move."

"How far now, the girls and I are planning a weekend trip to Dubai o. We're taking Tade's Jet. Did she tell you?"

"Not yet."

"Well, it's happening next month. We'll leave on a Wednesday and spend the rest of the week there," Alice said in excitement. "We initially wanted to

do it in Vegas, but Tade said it was too early to make her babies travel all that distance.”

Despite herself, Bekere felt a small tingle of excitement course through her at the possibility of spending an entire weekend doing nothing but drinking glasses of wine with her girls, gisting, laughing, and soaking up life’s riches. She listened to Alice’s plans for the event, racked her brain on clothes to pack, and agreed to have lunch with Alice the following day.

“Girl, I hope Folu would allow you to spend the entire weekend with us, o?”

“How do you mean?”

“*You know, say that your husband put an eagle eye for your matter,*” Alice giggled. “Are you sure he would be okay allowing you away from his sight for four whole days?”

“That’s nothing for you to worry about, Alice,” Bekere said solemnly. “I am my own woman; I come and go as I please.”

“Preach! No *Wahala* chick, it was fun talking with you, and I’m glad we’re chummy again.”

Bekere burst into hearty laughter. “We’ve always been chummy, silly.”

“Okay, babes,” Alice smiled and blew her an air kiss.

Bekere smiled sincerely when she got off the phone. She switched off her phone, conked out of her reality, and disappeared into the world of Ifemmelu and Obinze—the lead characters of *Chimamanda’s Americanah*.

EIGHTEEN

Fola vaguely noticed the florist smiling coyly at him while he sent a reply to Iyeunna's text.

"Would that be all, sir?"

"Yes," he said. "Please see she gets it delivered fresh and on time."

"Sure, sir. Would you like us to spice it up with a few colors, or would you rather a full red?"

Fola racked his brain on her flower choice and said, "All red" when he came out empty.

"Okay, sir."

"Add this to the card." He handed her a few lines of poetry—Love Sonnet XI by Pablo Neruda—he'd plucked off google. Fola rephrased the verses of the original lines of the poem, which reads:

I crave your mouth, your voice, your hair.

Silent and starving, I prowl through the streets.

Bread does not nourish me. Dawn disrupts me all day.

I hunt for the liquid measure of your steps.

I hunger for your sleek laugh,

your hands the color of a savage harvest,

hunger for the pale stones of your fingernails,

I want to eat your skin like a whole almond.

*I want to eat the sunbeam flaring in your lovely body.
the sovereign nose of your arrogant face,
I want to eat the fleeting shade of your lashes,*

*And I pace around hungry, sniffing the twilight, hunting for you
For your hot heart like a puma in the barrens of Quitratue.*

To just the first and last verse that talked about the poet's desire to eat the lovely body of his love interest. Fola wanted to eat her, alright. He wanted to feast on every part of her body and keep eating until she screamed nothing but his first and last name.

"She's a lucky girl," the florist, a chubby girl with cute dimples, said.

"You think?"

She nodded, smiled more, and stared at him in frank admiration.

Oh, boy. Fola thought wryly. If I didn't have my heart so coiled up in Bekere, I'd have asked you out, sweetie, cos you sure look like my type.

His buzzing phone got him pulling his probing gaze from her and speaking into the phone. Iyeunna told him he was waiting on him at Crust and Cream.

"I hope you're close, Fola. You know I dislike waiting."

Fola chuckled, finished with the florist, and took hurried strides to his car.

"Baddest guy!" Iyeunna said jovially, slapping his back.

"Don't fluff me, Whyte. You fuck up, *I swear.*"

"Guy, relax. Why pass on a chance like Dangote just to piss off your twin? That deal was too tight to pass on. Do you know how long I've been looking for a way in?"

"And you finally got a pass when you threw the Ajibade name their way."

"*Gbam!*" Whyte laughed. "Money has to be made, bruh!"

"Whatever," Fola chuckled. "So, what's this proposition you have for me?"

"Whyte oil is expanding, Fola. We're setting up shop in Dubai."

"That's a good move, bro."

“Yeah, but it’ll be made perfect if I could get someone I can trust to run it.”

“The Nigerian labor market is hungry, Whyte. Send *Jobberman* a memo. I’m sure they’d fill out that position in a blink.”

“Yeah,” Whyte chuckled. “I could do that. But the thing is, I don’t want just anybody. I need someone I can trust.”

A server interrupted their conversation by filling out their orders, politely asked if they’d need anything else, and jotted the request in a notepad when Whyte asked for extra cheese on his pasta carbonara.

“I need a partner,” Whyte said as soon as the server left.

“Okay?”

“Let me cut to the chase,” Whyte said in a slight chuckle. “I need you.”

Fola drew his brow into a cynical frown.

“I’m not saying work *for* me, Fola. I’m saying work *with* me.”

“I appreciate the offer, Whyte. But I’m not job hunting.”

“Come on, you and I both know the reason you couldn’t stomach being at Bade Inc is that Folu is the boss of you.”

“That he’s CEO doesn’t make him my boss.”

“Yeah?”

Fola regarded him in a mild glower. “I have full access and wield as much control on that company as he does. And going by the new turn of events, I’m calling for a change in the dictatorship.”

“Are you sure you stand a chance of trouncing Folu?”

“I’ll shoot my shot.”

“When he presents the successful closing of the Dangote investment at the shareholder’s convention, you would be as good as barking up a dead tree.”

Fola flashed him a withering smile, arranged his cutlery, and set about having lunch.

“Think about it, Fola.”

He scoffed.

“How are things with Bekere?”

Fola shrugged, spooned basmati rice into his mouth, and slid his phone down when it chirped. He smiled in satisfaction at the delivery notification, turned on WhatsApp, and noticed her status showed she was online.

“Are you still keeping up your fixation with her?”

“I’m sorry, Whyte. But you’ve lost the right to be in on my plans or private life.”

Whyte chuckled. “Whatever, man.”

He spent five minutes contemplating sending her a message or merely waiting for her to text him when she got the flowers.

Fola shrugged and set about typing

Hey, princess—he struck off the *princess* and used *beautiful* instead. To his tingling delight, her reply came almost immediately.

Hey.

Are you good?

Yeah.

What are you doing?

Reading.

Let me guess it’s an old classic English novel.

It’s a classic novel, alright, but not old, and definitely not English.

Fola chuckled delightfully when a laughing emoji followed the message.

Okay, I give up. Tell me the title.

Americanah by Chimamanda.

Oh, really. I didn’t think you were an Adichie fan.

I’m a fan of great literature.

Fola smiled whimsically. He partially heard Iyeunna grunted as he typed.

So... Ah... How are you?

I’m good.

You’re sure? No more nightmares?

She replied with a smiley emoji.

Obaje was sad to discover you'd left the beach house. He said he still has more sessions with you.

I'm fine now. There's no use taking any more of his time.

Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't mind giving out his time, seeing as it is profitable.

Her response was a laughing GIF.

God, he missed her. Fola sighed.

"Earth to Fola," Iyeunna said.

Fola rolled his eyes at him and continued typing.

Are the morning sickness still bad?

No.

Okay, I hope you're seeing a doctor, though?

I am.

When can I see you?

Did you send me flowers? She replied.

Fola's heart skipped beats. Yeah... I hope you like them?

So, you have my address?

I have my ways, Bekere. You mean more to me than I'd ever thought possible. Did you honestly think I wouldn't try to find out where you were?

Her responses ceased after that.

By the way, I'm sorry for mum's outburst the other day. She didn't mean them.

He sighed when she didn't respond.

And I'm not accepting your break up text, so we must meet and talk about it.

Fola resumed eating his meal when she went offline but kept his gaze fastened on his phone.

Do you like the note? He typed when she came back online.

Poetry. Very colorful. I didn't take you for a poet.

Remember what I said the first night we danced?

Man of many talents.

Fola smiled. *Very astute of you.*

You did an excellent job in rephrasing the verses, though. I'm sure Pablo Neruda would be proud.

You know.

I do.

Fola roared in laughter. *You're too damn smart.*

She smiled.

I'm glad you liked the flowers, Bekere.

Thank you for sending them.

I hope to see you again.

She went offline.

"Earth to Fola," Iyeunna said with a slight nudge.

"Eat your pasta in peace, Whyte."

Whyte snorted. "Your phone has been ringing all twenty-something minutes."

"What?"

"Seriously, you didn't feel the vibration?"

Fola dropped the phone he was chatting with and picked up his ringing phone.

"I got it, Fola!" Ejiro cheered in delight.

"You got what!"

"A subpoena for a deposition. We'll present him with our offers and leave him the option to accept or refuse, then we proceed from there."

"Sounds good." Fola harrumphed and adjusted on his seat.

"Get ready to get justice, man. Stay strong, 'kay, cheers."

"What's up?" Whyte asked.

"It's happening?"

"What is?"

“I’m taking Folu down, Whyte. Taking back what’s rightfully mine.”

Iyeunna dropped his cutlery in stunned disbelief and regarded Fola in lethal scorn. “That’s your brother, man.”

“And that’s my company, my woman, and my child he tried to obliterate.”

Whyte pushed his plate aside, reclined on his seat with clenched teeth. “That’s a wrong move, Fola. Even the good book abhors taking one’s family to court.”

“And you would know because you’re a devout Christian.”

“Because I believe in such things as family ties. Pushing for a legal war will bring Bade Incorporated to its knees.”

Fola ran a napkin across his mouth and pushed up his seat. “Thanks for lunch, Whyte. Great food, poor company.”



A week after he met with Bekere, and sixty hours since he’d been trying to get her to talk to him, Folu was at his wit’s end. He listened in controlled anger as Linda ran through his schedule while scrolling through her timeline. He saw she liked a picture Tade Badmus posted of her twin babies, liked her comment on it, and posted a photo of them—an oil painting of them about to kiss—on his timeline with a hearty caption of “There’s no me without you, #FoluLovesBekere.”

Folu smiled in satisfaction when the post got half a thousand reactions, a few hundred comments, and reposts. He waited patiently, hoping she would react to it, and sighed when she didn’t. When Ayo called to remind him of a planned business trip to Kuwait, he muttered a distracted response and resumed scrolling his phone.

“How was your meeting with her?” Ayo asked.

“I can’t say for sure, bro. But the feeling is still strong. She still hungers for me as I do for her.”

Ayo smiled reflectively.

“Do you think I should...”

“I don’t think you should do anything, Folu. Let the outcome follow a natural course.”

“Funny, that was exactly what she said to me.” He snickered.

“I feel the reason your marriage failed was that you always try to control the outcome.”

“You know I loathe not being in control, Ayo. I consider it weak.”

“Women these days are repulsed by controlling men, bro. They like a man to take charge, all right, but not try to control them.”

“There was a time when that was considered manly valor, man.”

“When, the medieval era?”

He snickered just as Linda walked in with an envelope. Ayo was still making jokes about the modern woman’s pros and cons when he pulled out the envelope’s content and stiffened.

“What is it?”

Folu sprinted off the seat and slammed the document on the desk, “Fuck it. I’m done letting her control this shit.”

Ayo read the signed divorce petition, the deposition date, and raised astonished eyes to regard his friend’s animal-like pace. “What now?”

“I’ll give her what she wants.” Folu huffed.

“What’s that?”

“Control.”

In the days following his path to redemption, he’d struggled with guilt, dread, and despair. Now, looking at the signed document of a divorce petition just six days after he’d tried making peace with her, Folu felt the rumbling of rage.



Ifeoluwa Bankole, seen by many as a fierce, formidable prima donna of divorce lawyers, was a six-foot-tall, dark-skinned woman with large hazel eyes, aquiline nose, full lips coated in red lipstick, jet black hair neatly packed in a bun, and arresting face adorned in mild makeup.

She sat in an elegant calm at the conference room C of Bade incorporated and kept her sharp gaze on Folu as he tried to stare her down in an intimidating glare while her associate set up the recording equipment.

“What’s the name of your firm again?” Folu asked, his sarcasm not lost on her.

“My credentials are in front of you, Mr. Ajibade. You can take all the time you need to peruse it,” Ifeoluwa said.

Folu snorted and read the files she’d passed on to him.

“While we wait for you to go through the terms, please note the following guidelines to this deposition.”

“Why bother parroting the guidelines when it is one of the documents I’m to peruse?”

“Very well.”

Folu noticed Bekere’s flitting smile, willed her to look in his direction, and snickered when she kept her gaze trained on the video recorder placed on the table.

“Let the record show that I am attending this deposition without my lawyer,” Folu said. “So, anything said on or off the record will and shall not hold in a law court.”

“Would you like us to reschedule?”

“What’s the point? You’ve taken my money; you might as well put it to good use.”

All three women raised bemused eyes to him.

“I beg your pardon?” Ifeoluwa asked.

“I said my statement in the simplest terms, didn’t I? Bekere is my wife. She employed you, so by inference, I as her husband pay you for your service.”

Bekere regarded him in scorn.

“Or did you think she coughed out your bill out of her sweat?” Folu chuckled. “My wife has not worked a day since we got married. So, that you’re here to fleece me of my money and property is out of my benevolence.”

Bekere rose slowly to her feet, “How dare you, Folu!”

“How dare I what, Bekere,” Folu fired, ecstatic that he’d roused the attention he’d been gunning for. “How dare I challenge you for spending my money on divorce lawyers? How dare I point out the fact that I’m doing

everything to save our marriage while you seem bent on throwing it all away?”

“Mr. Ajibade,” Ifeoluwa said, “May I remind you that this deposition is...”

“I don’t give a twat what this deposition is or isn’t. I didn’t sanction it, and I sure as hell didn’t agree to it,” Folu spat. “Did she tell you why she wants to divorce me? Or did you just print out an overused template from your archives to make a quick buck?”

Ifeoluwa bristled.

“I’m sure you did. I mean, how often does a firm like yours, Balm & Guild, or whatever Girl’s Guide bullshit you call yourself, get to add a name like mine to your credentials?”

“Refrain from raising my ire, Mr. Ajibade, or I’ll sue you for defamation.”

“Defamation? Oh well, that’s better,” Folu scoffed, “Way better than getting charged for killing your husband and spending all those years in a mental institution.”

Ifeoluwa flinched.

“Oh yeah, I’ve looked you up, woman, I’ve looked you up alright.” Then he turned to Bekere, “This is the best you could do, hm? Bringing a deranged woman to cook up papers to be rid of me?”

“Fuck you, Folu!” Bekere shrieked.

“Fuck me?” He scoffed, “Fuck me for not wanting to allow you bring further ruin to our marriage after you damned well fucked my brother!”

“Oh, since we’re coming out the closet, why don’t we add the fact that your response to my one mistake of unfaithfulness was to kill me. A mistake, might I add, that was your fault!”

“My fault?”

“Yes! Your fault.” She edged close to him, bent on slapping the smug look off his face. “Your trust issues and need for control thrust me into his arms. Oh, and let’s not forget you also freeze my account, further proving my point that you’re a sick fuck!”

“Sick fuck, huh?” He snickered, “Well, since you’ve fucked him, you might as well throw me in, babe, ‘cos I’d rather have half of you than nothing.

That's how sick a fuck I am."

She huffed.

"Don't deny the fact that you want it, Bekere. You fantasize about a threesome with my brother and me. You touch yourself to the thoughts of us fucking you six ways from Sunday."

She smacked him hard across the face.

Folu huffed, swept her off her feet, and crushed her to him. His kisses were hard and tormenting. He squashed her tighter when she tried prying off him, deepened the kiss when she scratched his face, and encircled her in his arms when she gasped for air.

"I'll be damned if I let you leave me, Bekere," he said hoarsely, drawing her face to his and sucking her tongue. "Damned."

They faintly heard the clink of metal scratching the floor and a door coming open as they tore each other's clothes and feasted hungrily on both their mouths.

Folu didn't recall the exact moment she responded to his kisses or how he came to have her strapped astride his waist. All he felt was the sweetness of the kiss, the discomfort in his slacks, the heady taste of her nipples in his mouth, and her hurriedly fumbling with his belt buckle.

Bekere let out a deafening moan when Folu rubbed slowly on her nipples, sucked hungrily on it, lovingly ran his fingers down her smooth pregnant bulge, and eased a finger into her ravening bloom. As she feverishly unbuckled his pants, she pressed her breasts to his mouth and breathe out a pleasurable hiss when he bit hard on her areole. His thrusting fingers increased its urgency when she held his iron cast cock, and he near had a heart attack when she rubbed the head of his penis.

He gave a throaty growl when she lubricated his penis with his pre-cum and deftly glided her palms across it in measured strokes. The mind freezing rush of feelings in his groin buckled his legs, made him shift on his seat to allow her full access to his cock, and, unable to hold out any longer, pushed her panties wider apart and plunged in a swift stroke into her.

Fuck! Folu shuddered in a soul-shattering frenzy

He let out a shuddering moan when she sheathed him further into her scalding heat and sucked hard on her nipples.

“Oh, God,” she cried, moving her hips in fast strokes, throwing her head back in a trance. “Oh, God.”

Folu’s heart pumped in pinpricks of rapture as he repeatedly slammed into her. He tried but failed to keep from clamping hard on her nipple, hold firmly to her hips, and rode her hard and fast until he came in petrifying numbness into her.

“Bekere,” Folu moaned in anguish, pulling her tightly to him and resting his face on her bosom. “Baby, come back to me, please, baby, please.”

Bekere stilled in his arms, stared in shell-shock speechlessness at her half-naked state, and threw distraught gaze to the room. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,” was all she said as she leaped off him and adjusted her dress.

“Oh, Jesus,” Bekere cried, pulling up her blouse and racing towards the door.

“Let’s give up this irrelevant battle and return to the way we were.”

“You demonic demon!” Bekere screeched, then she began hurling things at him. “How dare you!”

“Bekere!”

“Don’t you dare come close to me, you... beast!”

She threw one more crazed look at him and made a mad dash for the door.

Folu let out a loud exhale, threw amused eyes to his sated cock, and gave a sharp bark of laughter. When he left the conference room to his office, he was whistling to Fire by Babyface, snapping his fingers and cutting a caper.

“What’s up,” Ayo asked when he found him minutes later, smiling deliriously into space.

“I just got my life back!” Folu said, got off his seat, and broke into a moonwalk and more whistles.

“What is it this time, Folu, Rohypnol?”

“Dopamine.” Folu leaned on his seat and swiveled it. “Good old hot romp!”

“With who, Linda?”

Folu gave him a caustic look. "Get your mind out of the gutters, Ayo."

Ayo chuckled. "I'm just saying."

"I had sex with my wife, you idiot."

"What?"

"I know right," Folu chuckled. "I'm still pinching myself to be sure it happened. But it did! My d..."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture," Ayo said and took quick strides out of the office.

Folu slumped into his seat, threw his head heavenwards, and uttered a resounding "Yes!"

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NINETEEN

Fola paced the carpeted floor of his hotel room while Ejiro flipped through a series of files. He tried but failed to curtail the exhilarated feeling coursing through him at the thought of being close to victory. “You’re still up for this, aren’t you?” “Sure.”

Ejiro regarded him quizzically and continued leafing through documents.

He heaved a sigh when Ejiro stated what might come out of it if they got a court to sign the hearing. As much as he tried to ward it off, an icy finger of dread clasped his heart when he considered the fact that if the event blew out of proportion, his brother might get sucked into a series of criminal indictments and court battles that would forever mar him.

Fighting Folu, competing with him, and trying to prove he was the better man had been what gave Fola’s life purpose. When he discovered eons ago that he came second in his parent’s eyes, he had blamed Folu for it and had felt no qualms in openly displaying his contempt.

When he failed in getting Folu riled up at his pranks and theatrics, Fola had employed the art of outwitting him. The emotional high he derived from outsmarting his twin more than anything spurred him into more competitive battles.

Inventing ways to anger his twin was his drug of choice, until Bekere did what he’d always loathed, picked Folu over him. Made him second. That’s a feeling he’ll never tolerate. Women always wanted him. Even if they met Folu first, they end up choosing him because they knew he was the better man. That Bekere chose his twin and kept on choosing him even after what

he did to her, was even willing to steal his chance at starting a family with her, and giving his baby to Folu more than anything drove him mad.

All the more reason why I have to take him down.

“I’ll mail the subpoena to him first thing tomorrow. I need us to be fully ready and neatly tidy our affairs.”

“Got it.”

“You okay?”

“I am, just slightly nervous. I can’t get the sick feeling that I might be making a mistake off my stomach. What if this destroys my company. I’m not sure...”

“It’s just a deposition. A move to let him know we have something to make him give us what we want or face the consequence.”

As clear-cut as Ejiro’s statement sounded, it did nothing to still his dread-filled heart.



At the comfort of her room, Bekere hurriedly stripped her dress, went into the bathroom, and ran a sponge in a vigorous scrub across her body. When the sponge did nothing to assuage the shame she felt, she baptized her body with the hot stream of water jetting out of the shower.

Oh, Bekere, she cried in self-loathing. How did you become this insatiable woman? Why do his kisses make you so brazen? Jeez, you can’t even summon up the will and self-control to resist him...them! Save me, Lord.

Mama Ajibade’s scathing remark of marrying one and fornicating with the other flitted to her, further deepening her indignity. She threw on a house gown, went out into the kitchen to pluck out a bowl of Blue Bunny ice-cream from the fridge, then sat with tucked legs on a large sofa in front of the television.

The large screen was on African Magic and aired a rerun of Tinsel. She watched the muted screen as Ireti Doyle regally acted out a scene, put scoop after scoop of ice-cream into her mouth, and started when her phone rang.

“*Me ke damunka, dāna.* What is wrong with you? I’ve been calling you since!” Mrs. Bodmas admonished. “Why have you not called or even try to

visit your mother?”

“Pardon me, mama. I’ve been swamped.”

“I thought you traveled with your husband again when I couldn’t get you on your house phone.”

“Yes. We’re back now.”

“So why are you not at your house? The people there keep telling me you’re not around when I call.”

“My husband went on a business trip, mama. He won’t be back for a while. I don’t want to live alone in that big house. So, I went to live with a friend nearby.”

“Humph,” Mrs. Bodmas sighed. “*Da yardar Allah*, you will have children to keep you company. Allah will not fail me. I have been praying nonstop. I know he will not fail. It will happen soon.”

Bekere got off the seat to return the ice-cream to the fridge. She endeavored to make her conversation with her mother hearty, laughed at some of her anecdotes, and promised to visit as soon as she can.

“Ah, toh. Thank Allah, your husband renovated this house. Your room now has an air conditioner and a comfortable bed.” She laughed and broke into a song in Hausa. “When my sister came to visit me from Kano, she did not believe her eyes at how my house has transformed.”

Bekere smiled tepidly.

“I made *Kunu*. Should I bring some for you? I know you like it.”

“No, Mama. I’m dieting.”

“*Toh shikenan*, you are always so picky. *Sei Gobe*.”

She switched off her phone after her mother’s call and felt well relaxed and sleepy.



After enduring weeks of not touching her, tasting her, feeling her consuming love inflame him, and finally able to when she came undone in his arms, Folu knew trying to return to his new normal would be an impossible task. He couldn’t last the rest of the business hours without

zoning out into thoughts of her. Couldn't keep his body from wanting more of her. He sat through hours of meetings, talks, strategies, and several onerous tasks. Appeased some stakeholders that called in to ask about the US/China trade war's effect on their investments.

"Will you be returning to Bade's Lair?" Andrew asked when he started towards the elevator a few minutes to 8 pm.

Bade's Lair stopped being a home when she left. He stopped looking forward to it, stopped bothering where he spent the night.

"No, Andrew. I'll be spending the night elsewhere."

"Okay, sir."

"Please take the night off. I'll drive myself."

Andrew nodded and bade him good night.

The deluxe ambiance of his Brabus still filled him with longings of their first date. How he drove down to Alpha beach road to pick her up. The glint in her eyes when she regarded the car, and the twinkle of her laughter when he joked about her beat-up Camry, creased his face in a wistful smile. Although the apartment he bought in her name was ready, Folu had been reluctant to decide on its use. It was hers to see to and use as she saw fit, so it only fitted that he waited for her to decide what she wanted to do with it.

When he pulled into the express, Folu turned on the radio to their favorite station and drove. His destination was still vague to him, but he assuredly took every turn, waited out every toll gate traffic, sped through every fast lane, kept driving, and didn't stop driving until he slowed into a neatly tarred road with a road sign that read 'Welcome To Carter Garden, Home Of Royals'

A gatekeeper approached his car and muttered a warm greeting. "Do you have an appointment, sir?"

As though spending nights-after-nights without her wasn't bad enough, now he'd needed an appointment to see her.

"I don't."

"Visitors are not allowed into the estate after 10 pm, sir." The security, a portly man whose face he couldn't see clearly, said. "Please call the person you want to see."

Of course, he couldn't call her, Folu snorted. Going by his new resolve to make her believe he was a changed man, he had to pretend he didn't have her address, didn't know how to reach her. He thanked the security and started out of Carter Gardens.

That he could easily bribe the guard or pull the weight of his name wasn't lost on him, but he chose not to do it, partly because he was uncertain his impulsive drive here would please her, and mostly because he'd lost his nerve.

Another day, another time. He muttered under his breath as he checked into a hotel close by the estate.

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TWENTY

The desolation in Ayo's voice echoed in his head when he pulled out of the hotel and drove to Bade Towers the next day.

"It's Fola. He filed a lawsuit."

"What's the basis?"

"Malicious contempt, attempt to kill, and a host of other counts I can't go into right now. Where are you?"

"I'm close."

"I'm at Bade's Lair, and Andrew said you insisted on driving last night."

"I'm close."

"Did you go to see her?"

"And if I did?"

Ayo sighed and admonished him to hurry back, "The deposition is tomorrow. Hopefully, we would come to a settlement."

"Call Chuks & Ortega and bring them up the speed."

"Okay."

Chuks & Ortega was Bade's Legal advisor. The company was run by two Stanford lawyers with a bloodhound nose for winning.

"Tony is a criminal lawyer. Get him on board too."

"Are you sure?"

"His wife, Alice, and Bekere are best friends. It may not happen now, but I'm confident she'll eventually find out the exact detail if she doesn't already."

“How do you mean?”

“She’s cozy with Fola.”

Ayo hummed in agreement.

“I know what my brother wants, and I’ll be damned if I let him have it. So, I need all my aces on this. Chuks & Ortega is perfect as Bade’s legal counsel, but I need someone willing to go deep in the dirt on this one. I need Tony.”

The hours he spent going over plans and strategies with his lawyers and Ayo emotionally drained him. Chuks, one of Chuks & Ortega’s lawyers, was an average height, dark-skinned man with a neatly cut afro, smooth shaved oblong face, and acerbic wits. He asked pointed questions and made him recount the entire incident.

“Other than Iyke, who else saw you shoot her?”

The hidden camera.

He twitched his fingers, “No one.”

“Is there any evidence that your twin might use to further push his claim?”

A flitting reminder of hearing his mom inform him The Bleachers had removed every camera in the house, including the one in the library, made him blink. The only camera they didn’t remove was the one in his bedroom, and that was because he didn’t tell them about it. Not because he didn’t want to, but because he couldn’t stomach strangers going into his bedroom, sieving through her things, invading her privacy. The bedroom was their sanctum, a private place with memories he didn’t want anyone tampering with.

“None,” he said.

“What about the gun?”

“Derrick accidentally destroyed it when he thought I was going to use it on myself.”

“And the doctors reported the incident as a robbery. So, the police have it on record as a robbery incident.”

“Yes.”

“The bullets?”

Folu reclined on his seat and picked up a glass of water to wash down his unease, “Fixed.”

“What about your wife?” Ortega, a light-skinned man in his mid-thirties, asked.

“What about her?”

“Is she in support of your twin pressing charges? Does she want to press charges?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“I’m certain she doesn’t,” Ayo said.

“What makes you sure she wouldn’t?” Ortega asked.

Ayo threw Folu a flitting glance, “Because she won’t.”

“Are you sure?”

“Focus on why we employed you, Ortega,” Ayo snapped, “Focus on Folu.”

All three lawyers sighed and resumed another barrage of questions, discussions, and well laid out strategies.

It was midnight when he collapsed in exhaustion at his suite in Bade Tower.



If you walked into the conference room scheduled for the Ajibade twins to fight their first legal battle, you would pull your coat tighter at the frostiness of the room, cringe at the confrontational vibe both men exuded, and feel your skin sizzle at the blazing intensity of their hateful stares.

Folu, seated on one end of the broad glass desk, was sandwiched between his three lawyers and their paralegals, while his twin sat next to Ejiro, accompanied with his associate. Since they set the meeting in Bade Tower, Folu’s lawyers arrived earlier and set the room equipped with recording devices and refreshment for the deposition.

Having exchanged pleasantries and stated the purpose of the meeting, Ejiro’s associate passed files around. Whatever file was dropped in front of the Ajibade twins went untouched. They were too busy lethally eyeballing each other to bother.

“Before you, gentlemen, are documents containing pieces of evidence of my client’s claims,” Ejiro said. “While he is unwilling to make this matter public as it would be detrimental for his company, he is, however, requesting that Mr. Folorunsho Ajibade agrees to his demands. And as you may have already read in the documents, we’ve clearly spelled all demands.”

“Your client asking for a public apology for the emotional trauma he suffered from the experience is calling for an admission of guilt to the alleged crime,” Chuks said. “That is not something we’re interested in offering.”

“We’re ready to provide all evidence to show that he did it. We’re asking for a simple apology because we do not want the attention your client’s crime would rouse. We want to settle this discreetly.”

“By asking for a public apology?” Ortega asked.

“By public apology, we mean before the company board, and people my client deem fit to have present.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Tony asked. He was a tall man with a bulky frame, smooth round face made striking with an iconic straight nose, full lips, and small eyes drawn in slits.

“Then we’ll be forced to take legal actions.”

Folu briefly whispered to Chuks.

“My client has nothing but respect and brotherly love for his twin.”

Fola snorted.

“He’s willing to offer said apology to his brother. But.” He regarded the two men and a woman seated across from him, “You must let him know the attending parties to this ‘public apology’ session.”

“Done,” Ejiro said after Fola whispered to him. “Following your client’s apology would be a full reinstatement of my client to Bade Incorporated, a return of the shares accrued to him, and a vote in the board’s dictatorship.”

“A vote?”

“As the first son, my client wants his rightful place in the company. He wants to be made Director of the company and President of the board.”

“Son of a—” Folu muttered and clenched his fist when Ortega patted his thigh. “Done!”

Tony turned to give him a remonstrative glance and sighed when Folu reiterated his decision.

“Finally,” Ejiro said in a vibrant tone, “That your client agrees to a peaceful divorce.”

Folu sprang up from his seat and groaned when his lawyers deftly pulled him back. He pinned a frosty stare at his twin’s smug look, “I knew that was your intention. Why didn’t you just save us all precious time by cutting to the chase?”

Fola stroked his beard and heaved his shoulders in a silent chuckle.

“We’ll agree to all offers, Ejiro, but that,” Chuks said.

“It’s a packaged offer.”

“Answer is the same.” He bent his head to listen to Folu’s whispers. “And I strongly advise you not to push your luck. Take all offers we’ve agreed to and move on.”

“Like I said, it’s a packaged deal. If your client doesn’t agree to this, then all previous settlement offers are void.”

“Take the deal, Folu,” Fola said in a mocking tone.

“Please do not address my client,” Chuks said.

“You tried to kill her when she made it clear she wanted to be with me. Why bother holding on to her when she clearly doesn’t want to be with you?”

“Ejiro, warn your client to decrease from making accusations.” Ortega barked.

“Keep it together, Fola!” Ejiro cautioned in a subdued tone.

Fola snatched the jug of ice water and poured himself a full glass.

“As we were saying, my client will agree to all requests except the last. He will not divorce his wife,” Chuks said.

“Then our settlement deal is off the table.” Ejiro arose from his seat and adjusted his navy-blue bespoke suit, “You’ll hear from us soon.”

“Take the deal, Fola!” Folu snarled.

“Not as long as you still have control over the woman I love—”

“The woman you love!” Folu spat and jacked up his seat, “The woman you stole from me, you condemned piece of filth. The woman you seduced to accomplish your wicked pact of always trying to prove you can fuck up my life.”

“You can keep talking shit, Folu, but it changes nothing. She’s carrying my child, and it’ll be a frosty day in hell before I let you manipulate her into choosing you over me!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She chose me; that’s what I’m talking about. She desires to be with me because I can give her what she wants, and yeah, I’m the better man, so quit being a sore loser and sign the divorce papers.”

No one saw him move until he clasped Fola’s lapel and delivered three blows to his face. “I should have killed you when I had the chance!”

“Did you hear that!” Fola shrieked, yanking himself off him, “Did you get it on record that he admitted to trying to kill me?”

“Calm your client down, Ejiro!” Chuks said.

“I’m done with this!” Folu said and started toward the door in quick, angry strides.

“I’m on to you, Folu, so you better make good your promise to kill me. You better do just that!”

He took hurried strides to his office, yanked off his tie and blazers, and for the first time since his nervous breakdown, he fixed a glass of scotch. When the telephone on his desk buzzed, Folu ignored it. He made himself another glass of drink and stood looking out the window. He lost track of how long he stood looking out the window. All he thought and muttered while he stood there was:

Make it go away, please make it go away.



While the twin brothers fought for control and went from one legal battle to the next, the center of both their fixations taxied to a lunch meeting with her

divorce lawyer. When she arrived at the venue, a café close to *The Palms*, she sashayed to the bathroom to ease herself and do a makeup refresh.

Getting Ifeoluwa to agree to a luncheon after her disgraceful behavior still felt surreal. Though she had initiated the call after sending a series of apology emails and calls answered by Ifeoluwa's secretary, Bekere resolutely pushed for a meeting with the woman and was elated when she agreed to a lunch meeting a week after.

When she arrived at the café to find Ifeoluwa already seated, Bekere broke into a series of apology—one for her tardiness and the other for the disaster of a deposition.

Ifeoluwa hushed her with a wave of her hand. "Trust me; I've seen worse. I've been in this game long enough for any spousal behavior to surprise me."

They settled into the business of ordering, with Ife having green tea and Vegan salad, while Bekere took Cappuccino and Bagels. Ife engaged her in small talk, shared a few law anecdotes, and urged her to share a little of her life.

"Do you still entertain the dream of owning a preschool?" Ife asked.

Bekere shrugged. "I'm not sure what I want. I think I just want peace. As soon as all is done, I intend to leave the country."

"Yeah? Where do you plan on going?"

"Seychelles, maybe?" Bekere shrugged.

"You picked well. Spending endless days on an island is the best way to get over life's travails." Ife smiled whimsically. "You know, as damning as Folorunsho's statement was, he spoke the truth."

Bekere frowned, "How so?"

"Several years back, I was charged with manslaughter. Although my lawyers were able to get me down to insanity, they confined me to a mental hospital." She chuckled. "I'm what you call 'a Yaba-Left Psycho'."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Three years into therapy, I convinced my shrink I was fit enough to leave the institution. He whisked me to Seychelles." She grinned. "Maybe I'll

write a memoir one day, my story of a sort. Let the world know what really happened.”

Bekere nodded.

“What everyone sees when they look at me is a woman on a cliff. They feel I’ll fall off the wagon any time and display madness.” She laughed. “But they’re wrong. I’m not mad, was never mad. I only had multiple personalities and had to fight to become the personality I feel serves me best.”

Bekere regarded her cautiously. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m a split, Bekere.”

She blanched. “Is that...”

“Real? Yes, it is. Very rare, but real. My therapist and I, mostly I, work to keep the others under a tight leash, while this one, the woman seated before you now, takes the wheel.”

“Oh, my...”

“So, I understand what you’re going through. Spousal abuse does that to you.”

“No ah, Folu wasn’t...”

“Abusive?”

Bekere swallowed in mild trepidation when she noticed the woman gripping her coffee cup tightly.

“He ah, didn’t abuse me.”

“That’s what they all say, Bekere.” Ife cackled. “He didn’t abuse me. I made him do it. It was just a small slap. Well, that’s bullshit, Bekere, and I’m here to see that you’re the last woman that man ever abuses!”

Bekere cleared her throat and dropped her cup with shaky hands.

“I’ll sue him for everything he’s got, and rest assured that when I’m done with him, he will never degrade any woman.”

Bekere pushed the seat backward. “Um, thank you, Ife, for ah lunch. I have a...”

“Don’t worry about my bills. I’ll do this, Pro bono. Consider this my gift to you, my contribution to your emancipation from male dominance.”

“Thank you, Ife. I’ll call you.”

Ife nodded and broke into a bright smile. “You do that. He needs to pay for what he did to you. And I’m the woman to see that he does.”

Bekere half ran out of the door, turned to see Ife regarding her in a serene calm, and increased her pace.

Folu was right. The woman was indeed special.

Pulling out her phone to book a ride home, she spun around when she heard her name called.

“Ayo?”

He smiled assuredly and strode towards her, “Hello, Bekere. You’ve been expecting me, haven’t you?”

“Expecting you?”

“I told you I would come for you if you hurt my friend.” He scoffed and looked around the café, “This is me keeping to that promise.”

Bekere set her chin and turned away from him, “I will not bother asking how you happen to be in the same café as I, Ayo, but as you can see, I was just leaving.”

“Are you aware Fola is pressing charges?”

“What?”

Ayo held her arm and gently nudged her towards a corner booth, “Let’s have coffee.”

“I just had that.”

“Tea then.”

She woodenly followed him towards the cozy booth, noting it was secluded from all the other seats in the café. A mild gesture saw a server smiling familiarly to Ayo and promptly filling out his order. It was apparent they knew him in the café.

“What do you mean press charges?”

Ayo picked up his coffee mug and regarded her in a look she couldn't interpret. "You sound concerned, Bekere."

"Of course, I'm concerned."

"Are you *really*?"

She huffed.

"You didn't seem interested in the outcome when you cheated on him with his twin now, did you?"

"Are you here to judge me, Ayo?"

Ayo firmly clenched his mug and immediately released it with a flitting smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, "You were supposed to be different, Bekere. When I saw you that long-ago afternoon when I came to pick up Wale, I wanted you to meet Folu. I wanted you to meet him because you looked different from all the other girls he'd dated. I mean, you had, not just that fresh vibe of a woman who's got it together, you also had that uprightness I felt was lacking in all Folu's women."

"Out with the ruling already, Ayo. You've already judged and condemned me. No need to rub it in."

"That was another thing I liked about you and felt my friend needed; your sharp wits." Ayo resumed sipping his coffee. "Turns out I was wrong. You turned out to be just like them."

"Them?"

"All Fola had to do was crook a finger and wink, and you asked how high he wanted you to fly."

She jerked up her seat, "I don't have to listen to this."

"You weren't the first of Folu's women he'd seduced, Bekere. You were simply one of many."

She stiffened.

"Folu and I were classmates in secondary school. In all the years of our being classmates and best buddies, Fola has not only bullied him but also slept with all his women."

"What?"

"It's a game for him." Ayo sighed. "Something he takes pride in."

Bekere slowly lowered into the seat.

“Folu wanted to propose to Ese, would have had he not discovered she’d cheated on him with Fola.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Every relationship he lost to his twin bent him. However, none broke him.” He raised mournful eyes to her. “None broke him as yours did.”

A boulder settled heavily in her stomach, “Ayo... what are you saying?”

“The reason Folu was overprotective of you and seemingly possessive was that he feared losing you to his twin. And do you know what hurts me the most, Bekere?” Ayo smiled bitterly, “I assured him his worries were unfounded. Told him you were different.”

She choked to the tears that surged in her throat and did nothing to stop their torrential stream down her face and nose.

“Whatever Fola may have said or do to make you do what you did with him, know that he did it not out of love, but out of an age-old need to prove he is better than his twin.”

Ayo’s face blurred out of focus as the tears flooded her eyes. His voice turned into a hum when an internal scream deafened her ears. Her vision brimmed with flashing images of the constant fear she’d often seen in Folu’s eyes and mistook for his possessive need to control her, the tremor in his voice whenever he told her to stay away from his twin. His repeated pleas and admonishment that she’d vehemently kicked against.

Fola is not your friend, Bekere, and I will not share you with anyone. Do well to remember that.

What do I have to do to keep you, Bekere? Tell me, please.

“No,” she said in a gasp that dissolved into a loud hiccup.

I can’t bear the thought of another man doing this to you.

I told you there was a shitstorm heading your way, bruv. Wait, what’s that smell? Yeah, that’s the steaming bowl of shit I’ve just handed you.

“Oh, God, no, please!”

Oh, so you heard Fola knocked up his wife, and you wished you’d married him instead, right?

Bekere flinched when Ayo nudged her, “What have I done, Ayo? What have I done!”

Ayo rushed over to her side and took her sobbing form in his arms. “Shh, sh.”

“What have I done?”

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

The drive to Epe went in a blur, for all she did when she strapped herself in Ayo’s car was stare woodenly into space and immerse herself in guilt and memories. Theirs would have been a perfect romance of two people finding love after all the hurt, she getting burned from Obinna’s betrayal, and Folu getting hurt by Ese. It would have been her fairytale, her happily-ever-after. Now it’s all gone.

She hiccupped to the tears gushing down her face.

“He needs you, Bekere,” Ayo said when he pulled into the estate, “He needs you now more than ever.”

“What can I do?”

“Convince Fola to give up this legal battle he’s bent on starting. Right now, he feels Folu is the obstacle keeping you from being with him. Hence he’ll keep using whatever means is necessary to get Folu out of the picture.”

She alighted the car and walked on legs made of wood up the small flight of stairs. Obinna’s bungalow had hitherto been her oasis of calm. A place to retire to while leaving the cares of the world behind. Now she couldn’t see past the dark cloud of her mistake. Couldn’t get the echoing recall of the depth of her betrayal.

“Thanks for the drive, Ayo,” she said when she unlocked her door.

Ayo made to say something but clamped his teeth instead. “You know where to find us.”

She trudged into the house and softly shut the door in his brooding face.

TWENTY-ONE

Something lurked in the shadows. It was cold; it was dark. Her skin tingled from the swift spread of its chills, yet she snuggled into its seductive pull, immersed herself into its harrowing croon, and allowed it to dim her cheer with its ghoulish vibration until she mentally flaked into a husk.

While the basal part of her subconscious mind shored up vibrant reels of happy times, beautiful places, and futuristic images of the life budding inside of her, the piercing fangs of gloom bit deeper into her entire being, made her sink deeper into depression.

Bekere knew she could chronicle her thoughts as suggested by her therapist, pour out her feelings in words. Still, she couldn't bring herself to do more than eat to stay alive for an overwhelming amount of days and collapsing into an exhaustive sleep after hours of weeping. She'd put up a smile for Obinna when she visited his clinic for her antenatal, monotonously responded to all his questions, and smilingly shook her head when he asked if she was ready to share her story with him.

She wasn't ready to share her story with anyone. Not Alice, whose call she'd repeatedly rejected, Tade whose invitation to dinner at her house she'd continuously turned down, and definitely not her mother who always broke into prayerful dialogues for her becoming a mother.

No, she couldn't tell them, couldn't bear the pain. She'd stopped going on social media, deleted her IG account, signed off Facebook, and stopped surfing the internet. They were all a reminder of her failings, for whenever she went online, topics on infidelity seem to feature on her timelines, with content creators and commenters outrightly condemning those guilty of it.

Cheat.

That was the label, a *cheat*.

She'd read it once, or was it heard it said? That a marriage stops being pure when one spouse defiles the marriage bed. Not even the offended party's complete forgiveness is strong enough to restore it to its original state. For the crime would forever rear its ugly head, build in them a lack of trust, and assuredly drift them apart.

She sighed, rising from the bed and sauntering towards the front porch, a mug of tea in hand.

It is unsalvageable. I will forgive myself. I will move on, start anew, forge a new path for myself and my baby.

She raised her tea to her mouth, taking solace in its warmth.

But first, I must help him. It is the least I can do for the hurt I've put him through. Then I will convince him that divorce is our best course of action.

"This too shall pass," she said, "We shall both heal."

You weren't the first of Folu's women he'd seduced.

Bekere tightened her hold on the mug at the recollection.

"And as for him, as for you, Fola." She gulped more tea, unsure what her plans concerning him involved.

Thoughts of his all-consuming kisses and lovemaking still ravaged her dreams, inflamed her body, and make her cringe in unbridled shame. It was cancerous. This lust she feels for him. A nasty, addictive habit she was resolute to break.

"I've walked the path of destruction," she said, "Toed the line of self-destructing. Now it's time to redirect my steps. Clean up my mess and exit the stage of my tragic drama with a bow of accomplishment and head held high."

When she left Obinna's house in Epe, two weeks after Ayo's visit, and boarded her Uber, she turned on her phone to a barrage of notifications, sieved through all of it, and pulled out the one that mattered, Folu's text.

Come back home, Bekere.

She deftly typed with stilled fingers and a face creased in calm.

I'm on my way to you.



Mama Ajibade, like Bekere, felt the icy fingers of the gloom lurking in the shadows. It filled her aging bones with dread and weariness so deep she often struggled to get up the bed each day. But unlike her daughter-in-law, she didn't sit in mourning, nor did she immerse herself in the seductive embrace of melancholy. She took decisive action to correct every wrong, kept tabs on her sons and daughter-in-law, read daily reports from the eyes she'd placed on them, and knew it was time she invited her boys over for yet another tête-à-tête.

Her missive to them, hand-delivered by her staff, was set to make them arrive on different days. To Fola, she wrote:

Have Lunch with your mother at 3 pm tomorrow. Let's discuss my gift to you.

To Folu, she wrote:

The fate of Bade Incorporated lies in your hand. Attend a private luncheon at 3 pm today. Let's deliberate.

To her delight and immeasurable relief, both boys honored her invitation. She swallowed a gush of despair at Folu's hunted eyes, drooped shoulders, and gaunt look.

"You've neglected your health routine, Folu," she remonstrated, "You look harried."

He scoffed and lowered himself on a cane sofa across from her, "You're stunning as ever, mother."

"Are you still..."

"Popping pills? No, I told you I've broken the habit."

"But you're not eating right or even resting. Your eyes are bloodshot." She winced, "I can barely see past the eye bags in your eyes."

"Am I here for a medical exam, mother?" He grimaced, then reached for a glass of freshly made guava juice.

"Oda," Mama Ajibade sighed. "I heard about Fola's legal barks. I've made The Bleachers look into his lawyer and make him see reasons he shouldn't

concern himself with our affair.”

Folu adjusted his blazers. “When Fola’s lawyer stood him up at the last meeting, I figured you played fairy godmother.” He chuckled at his quip, gulping more of his juice.

“That being said, I want you to give Fola what he wants.”

Folu stiffened, “And that is?”

“Grant him shares big enough to make him chairman of the board. Give him the respect and position he feels is rightfully his.”

Folu raised eyes that were devoid of a fight to her, “I have no interest in competing with Fola for control over Bade Incorporated. I can abdicate my role as CEO at this very moment without flinching. God knows I have enough investment to last me twenty lifetimes. So, if he wants the entire company to himself, he can have it. But you know that’s not what Fola wants, mother. All he wants is to see me crumble, see me fail. That’s what keeps him pumped.”

Mama Ajibade gently squeezed his hand when she noticed his agitation, “We’ll take it one step at a time. First, we’ll announce his appointment to the board, give him full reign, and take the rest from there.”

Folu shrugged.

“It’s no longer news that our key investors are panic selling their shares.”

“I’m unperturbed by that. Our profit margin still trumps all, and most of the business dealings are yielding massive returns.”

“We need to present a united front before our stakeholders. They may not come out to say it, but they’ve all noticed the crack between you two and are openly picking sides between you and Fola. I don’t want this discord between you two seeping into the board.”

He scoffed and dispiritedly pulled out his phone from his pocket.

“That being said, how do you plan on handling your marital crises.” She saw him stiffen. “*Kilode?*”

He sprang up from his seat and started out of the garden.

“Folu!”

“I’m sorry, mother.” He placed a swift kiss on her cheek, half grinned, slightly laughed, and twitched excitedly, “I need to attend to this.”

“Attend to what? Why not wait until you at least eat...”

The rest of her statement was lost on him as he’d already raced out. Filled with motherly worry for him, she made her spies investigate his odd behavior and bristled in annoyance when they reported back to her he went out for dinner with his wife.

Pushing the disturbing event of her daughter-in-law’s reentry into her son’s life to a dark corner, she entertained her first son the next day. She listened to him rant and blame Folu for most of his unhappiness, make further threats to him, and mellowed when she presented her gift to him.

“It will give you the control that’s rightfully yours.”

“Transferring the bulk of your shares to me will leave you with very little voting power, mother.”

“You and Folu are all the family I have. What good will it do me if you end up destroying each other with this never-ending battle?”

He sighed.

“So, I’m doing what I should have done all these years, give you a chance to prove yourself. Bade incorporated is yours now, pull your weight by making it better than what it already is.”

“What about Folu? Does he support my being at the helm of affairs?”

“Your brother wants nothing more than to sustain the Bade Empire. I have every confidence that he will support you in every way.”

He twitched his legs, “What about her?”

She picked up her wineglass, “Her baby is all we should concern ourselves with. Once she brings it to term, we’ll take it from there.”

“That was not the question I asked?”

“Oh?”

“Did your offer to get him to relinquish his role include releasing the mother of my child to be with me, or is he still entertaining thoughts of pretending the baby is his?”

“You seem convinced of the baby’s parentage, Fola.” She snickered. “What if it’s his?”

“It’s not. I know Folu is incapable of getting her pregnant.”

“Even with the special IVF procedure?”

“Even with that.”

She grinned and crossed her legs, “Do you recall the medical trips Folu and I took? Trips you were convinced were to Disneyland?”

He regarded her in a deep frown.

“The trips were to correct his condition.”

“Which failed.”

“Did it?”

“I know it did. I heard you tell dad.”

“What exactly did you hear, Fola?”

“You told dad to reconsider his decision to grant Folu full right of Bade Incorporated in the event that he’s unable to produce an heir.”

“I’m surprised you remembered the words verbatim, Fola.” She grinned, “I recalled using that phrase ‘in the event,’ which, as you and I know, is a subjective clause.”

He arched a cynical brow, “Please. Don’t tell me you entertained hopes that your trophy son would, one day, father children.”

“Why not? He is a young, virile man. What’s wrong with my hoping he would?”

“Don’t bullshit me, mother. I know Folu is sterile.”

“What he had was a temporary condition that the doctors rectified. If you’re in doubt, I can point you to the hospital we used.”

“You’re lying.”

“I birthed him, son, don’t you think if anyone would know about his reproductive health, it’d be me?” A flitting smile crossed her features.

“Besides, if you need further convincing, perhaps you might ask him to take off his pants, so you’d see for yourself that his male organ is complete with every essential part.”

She regally placed her wineglass on the coffee table and regarded him amusedly, “So, I’ll ask again, are you sure that baby is yours?”

Like his twin, Fola suddenly sprang up from the seat. Unlike his twin, however, he didn’t bother parting ways with a kiss; he threw her a scathing glance and stomped out.

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TWENTY-TWO

From the time Folu raced home to Bade's Lair to when he met her for dinner at Jazz mart, he had conjured up a million connotations for:
I'm on my way to you.

Should he dare hope she was returning to him? He thought as he walked into the stylish restaurant and threw a fevered look around. The reservation he made for them was at a private VVIP lounge that afforded them a magnificent view of the ocean. He spared no expense in ensuring the ambiance was set to not just two of them in the room but the music carefully selected to appeal to her.

Seated at the table set for two, he watched her walk into the restaurant dressed in a free-flowing Ankara gown and look uncertainly about her. Her bright smile dimmed when a server pointed her towards his side of the restaurant.

Folu firmly held on to her gaze when they met his, hoping for a glimpse into her thoughts, soul, or a denotation to 'I'm on my way to you.' Her warm smile when she arrived at the table relaxed him into initiating a hug.

"Thank you for agreeing to dinner." His darting glance took in the flitting shadow of worry that crossed her feature. Knowing she, as his mother, thought him emaciated and stressed looking, he gave a self-conscious snort, "I've been putting too many hours at work and less at sleep."

"What about your diet? You're not eating."

Is she worried about me?

"I'm fine, I assure you." He dropped his head close to hers and grinned openly into her worried eyes. "Seeing you, though, makes me feel better."

She gave a small nod and smiled her appreciation when he pulled back her chair. Not one for small talk, he did not attempt starting one. Instead, he sharpened his attentive regard of her, poured her freshly made organic wine for her, and charmingly assured her it was Nonalcoholic.

No wine for my baby yet. He grinned but dared not say it for fear he would make her uncomfortable.

“How do you feel?” He asked after a few glasses of wine, and the anxious look on her face had evened out into an appreciative calm.

“I’m tired most of the time.” She looked away from him to gaze longingly at the ambient sea. “And mostly feel fat.”

Fat? He snorted; she doesn’t look a skin out of place. If for nothing, she glowed brighter than he remembered, looked more arresting.

“You don’t look fat,” he said, picking up his glass of wine, “And even if you did, you’d still look perfect to me.”

“Yeah? I thought you didn’t like me ballooning into a fat woman.”

“That was the ramblings of a madman.” He chuckled. “I’ve since ditched him.”

She flashed him an unreadable look and reclined in her seat, “We made a lot of mistakes, Folu. Mistakes that fouled our love story.”

“Bekere...”

“Let me finish, please.” She raised pleading eyes to him, “I need to get the words off my chest before I mix them up or lose the nerves to say them.”

He rubbed his fingers in a nervous exhale.

“I loved you the very first day I met you.” She smiled wistfully. “I wasn’t willing to admit it or even give voice to it, but the feeling was unmistakable. Being one who seldom thinks much of herself, your interest highly flattered me. It scared me at first, of course (she scoffed slightly) but it also excited me in ways I never knew was possible.”

Folu tried taking her hands in his when she stared forlornly into space, but she rebuffed it with a sniff and a sip of her wine.

“I sometimes replay our lives and wonder what I’d have done if you’d come clean and told me all about you. I wonder if I’d still love you or feel blessed

to be called your wife. And every time I reflect on it, my answer remains the same; yes. Yes, I'd have married you and fought your battles with you had you trusted me enough to let me in on your secret."

"Bekere..."

"Let me finish, Folu."

He threw an agitative glance around and twitched his legs.

"I'd have loved you if you'd told me about your failed relationships..."

"They all left when I told them, Bekere."

"They, Folu, not me!"

"I loved you too much to risk it, Bekere. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you to him when you found out I have nothing to offer."

"You had the chance to come clean when I eventually learned about it, yet you chose to give me half information. You chose to withhold your dark past, business dealings, and even the fact that I had shares in Bade Incorporated."

"What?"

"You didn't let me in, Folu, that's what. You shut me out, left me in the dark, tried to control me like I was some kind of... dim-wit!"

Folu pried the wine bottle off the ice bucket in shaky hands and poured himself a full glass. He waited for her to resume laying bare his crimes, draining the essence of his being, and upping the ante of his already stretched out nerves. He paused, but she didn't. He observed a brooding silence engulf her, saw her face fell in a mournful frown, and her throat continuously contracts to stay the tears she was trying hard not to shed.

"All that is in the past now," she said a few minutes later, blinked rapidly, sniffed, and cleared her throat. "I can go on outlining your crime and summing it up to being the lead cause of our failed marriage, but that wouldn't be fair. I can't exonerate myself from it. I, for the most part, had a significant role to play in it. If I had..."

"The reason I didn't tell you about Fola was that I thought I could manage the situation. I know now that I was wrong." He held her hands, "I was wrong, and I was desperate. Yes, he'd seduced all my women, and yes, it

was one reason I held back from telling you about my medical condition, but it doesn't change the fact that I left you in the dark. For that, I'm sorry."

She arose from the seat to lean on the railing.

"I'm sorry, Bekere." He stood beside her, drinking in her scent, her essence, "If I can, I will go back in time and change it all, make it alright."

"We can't change the past, Folu."

"We can't, but we can correct the now." He dropped slowly on one knee, "And I'm asking for a chance to do just that, correct every mistake."

"Folu." She sighed and tried to snatch her hands from his.

"I stopped living when I lost you, Bekere." He edged closer to her. "I'm not saying this over some need to be poetic, baby. This is me baring out my soul and telling you how I really feel. Your absence bore a hole in my ship and set it adrift. I'm a drowning man, baby, and I don't know how long I can hold out before I finally sink."

He got up to his feet when the tears she'd been holding back fell in a grand stream down her face.

"We may not change the past, baby, but we can rewrite the now and create an alternative path for ourselves."

"It's too late, Folu."

"It's not." He swallowed the constriction in his throat, "It's never too late."

"I don't know if I can live with myself for what I did; I don't even know if the baby is yours."

"Bekere," he said in a tone steeped in desperation. "I don't care what you did with him or if the baby is mine. I don't. You're all that matters to me, you and the baby. Let's fight this darkness that's desperate to keep us apart, baby. Let's come together and fight it."

She gave a tearful gasp and gazed at him in eyes that were as red as freshly squeezed beetroot juice.

"My love for you transcends time and realms." He drew his lips close to hers, slowly kissing the tears off her face. "I can't hold out any longer, baby. I can't spend any more millisecond without you."

"What about your uncontrolled anger and need for control?"

“I’m a changed man.” He kissed her swiftly, his breath coming out in hissing gasps, “I’m a changed man, baby. Give me a chance to prove it to you, please.”

The groan that escaped him when she pulled out of his reach echoed in the air, bounced off the sparkling sea, and returned like a boomerang.

“I need a few days to plan my next course of action.”

Folu, with fever-pitched skin and shaky hands, broke into a frantic pace, “How long?”

“I don’t know. It’s a deep mess. I need some time to detangle myself from it.”

“Will you return to the house at least?”

“No.”

“Bekere...” He cradled his head and muffled a scream. Then he sucked in a deep breath and slowly returned to his seat. “I’ll give you all the time you need.”

The rest of their evening went uneventfully slow. He robotically escorted her to her Uber and placed a dispassionate kiss on her cheek.

“I’ll be home when you’re ready to return.”

Then he returned to Bade Tower and buried himself in work.



Folarin’s patience with her ran out as soon as he drove out of his mother’s compound. He’d waited, courted her with flowery texts, sent gifts, and even composed love notes. He’d done all that shit and more. Yet, she remained holed up in her self-imposed exile.

No more.

While driving to Epe, he tried her cell, tossed his phone when the call rang out, and floored his Jaguar on the express.

You either tell me where we stand, or I force you to; your call.

His fuming grew into full-scale wrath when he met an empty apartment in Carter Gardens.

“Where the fuck is she?” He muttered, throwing crazed eyes around the neat lawn compound. A quick look on his cell to track her location saw it beeping at a hotel in Igbo-Efon.

What is she doing there?

He dialed her number and exhaled in triumph when she took the call. Her calm voice doused some of his anger, then when she assured him she would text a place he could meet her, he breathed out the steam of his fury and beamed.

“I’m on my way.”

He loathed her choice of the meeting on sight, frowned at the crowded restaurant, crappy servers, and stifling ambiance.

“Can we go someplace quiet, please?” He said as soon as they finished exchanging pleasantries.

“I prefer it here, Fola.”

“Why...”

“I’m leaving the country.”

He stiffened. *“What do you mean, leaving?”*

“My last visit to the doctor raised some worrying issues that might put my baby at risk. He recommended I spend the rest of my pregnancy term resting and...”

“Excellent, I’ll arrange our travel plans. I’ll recommend the Maldives; it’s got the best beaches in the world and will afford you all the air and—”

“Did you have sex with Ese?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ese. Did you have sex with her?” She raised sad eyes to him. *“Answer the question, please.”*

“Yes.”

She gripped the desk and drew her lips into a thin line, *“And the others?”*

“What has he been telling you?” Fola said in a low growl.

“Just give me a straight answer, Fola.”

“None of them meant anything.”

She laughed bitterly, “So, it was a game for you, a conquest you added to many.”

“Bekere.”

“Something, you and your friends, talk about and laugh over bottles of beer. A locker-room joke.”

“Stop saying these things, please. You’re nothing like that.”

She slowly got up from the seat, “You’ve had your fun, Fola...”

“My brother is a prolific liar and manipulator, Bekere. Whatever he said about me is untrue.”

She regarded him frostily, “So you didn’t have sex with Ese?”

“Ese and I had too much to drink, and...”

“Or the other women?”

“Those other women meant nothing to me. It was just a fling, and they were willing. What you and I have is special, Bekere. It is nothing compared to the others.”

“The others.” She laughed. “That’s supposed to make me feel better, huh?”

“God... stop, please, listen, God... please listen to me, Bekere.” He desperately took her hands and held on firmly when she tried to pull away.

“I love you beyond words, Bekere. Yes, I started out wanting to rile Fola for what he did to me—”

“What he did to you?”

“He took everything from me the same way he’s about to do now!”

“So you decided to fuck all his women for payback?”

Fola ran a fevered palm across his face, “Bekere, darling, hear me out, okay? You don’t know my brother. He’s evil.”

“In what way?”

“Well, he shot you, didn’t he? Isn’t that evil enough for you?”

“Me. He shot me. What did he do to you?” She spat. “What exactly did he do that was so bad you had to use me for revenge!”

“What’s between my brother and I have nothing to do with you. I met you first and fell in love with you. If it weren’t for him, you would be with me.”

“You make it sound like I don’t have a say in the matter, as though he coerced me into marrying him.” She snickered, “If I didn’t want to be with him, didn’t love him, did you honestly think I’d have married him?”

“That doesn’t matter now. It’s all in the past. You’ve seen the dark side of him, you’ve seen what he can do if pushed, use that to rid yourself of him.” He darted to her side of the table when she made to leave. “Do it, Bekere. If not for me, do it for our baby.”

“Our baby?” She scoffed, “This baby isn’t yours.”

“You’re...” He snickered, “I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work. I won’t let you cut me out of my baby’s life!”

A few heads turned in their direction, but he didn’t care. “The baby is mine. You are mine. I’ll give you a few days to get over this mad route you plan on veering off to, and then we’re leaving.”

She laughed and yanked herself off him, “Goodbye, Fola.”

“Bekere!” He gritted, then slammed his fist on the desk when she walked out of the restaurant.

TWENTY-THREE

Bekere angrily brushed the tears that streamed down her face as the Uber slowed to a halt. Now wasn't the time for tears. She didn't need tears now. She needed all her wits about her, especially to accomplish this last task. She squared her shoulders, set her chin, and walked with resolute calm towards the gate.

Her last conversation with her may have been caustic, but she was here to ensure she got a fair hearing.

"Good evening, madam," a staff greeted, "Please follow me. She has been expecting you."

Bekere faltered. How was she expecting her? She hadn't called to announce her coming, hadn't even reached out since their sordid session at the beach house. How then was she expecting her?

"Hello, child," Mama Ajibade said in a steely voice.

As she locked gazes with the eyes of the woman whose sons played a pivotal role in transforming her life from regular to a whirlwind, Bekere felt every well-rehearsed speech, thoughts, fight, and guilt-finding seep out of her.

None of this is her mother-in-law's fault. She cried as she hung her head low and slowly dropped to her knees. *I humiliated her when all she did was love me as her own, shamed her by hurting both her sons, and unruffled their pristine, well-arranged lives.*

"Forgive me, ma." A loud hiccup burst out of her. "Please forgive me."



The heaving shoulders of her daughter-in-law, her gut-wrenching sob, and the worry of what her quailed state might have on her grandchild cracked the thick wall of control Mama Ajibade had built up the years.

“Get up, child,” she said, “You’ll hurt yourself crying like that, get up.”

Bekere rose slowly, her head still hung low.

“Unbow your head and chin up. Never allow anyone to see you totally crushed. It’s an unprepossessing weakness. One you mustn’t encourage.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bekere sniffled and accepted the handkerchief the older woman handed her.

Mama Ajibade pointed her to a sofa, then waited in crossed legs and regal pose while her distraught daughter-in-law arranged her features. A small smile crossed her features when Bekere jutted out her chin and schooled her features into that of calm.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, ma’am.”

“The baby?”

Bekere nodded, “Fine, too.”

“Pour yourself a cup of tea. It’s a special brew made by one of my tea experts in London. Drink it. It’ll relax you.”

She smiled in satisfaction when Bekere commented on the tea, pour herself more cups, and responded to the rest of her questions with a face brighter than they were when she first came in.

“What do you want to do, Bekere?” Mama Ajibade asked an hour into her visit.

“I’d like a chance to go somewhere quiet. Where I can heal and bring the baby to term.”

“Is the baby distressed?”

“No, ma’am, but my last visit to the doctor raised some concerns that need looking into.”

An intense worry flowed through her, “Then you must make that trip. How would you like me to help?”

Bekere's shoulders drooped slightly, then she straightened them and looked her dead in the eye, "I need you to convince Folu to release all my travel documents, funds, and agree to a divorce."

Mama Ajibade pried the teacup off its saucer and grinned into her tea, "Do you know what divorcing my son entails, child?"

"I know it'll mean us sharing custody of the child."

Mama Ajibade's hold on her teacup slackened, but she soon arranged her features.

"And you know we would want full custody, don't you?"

"I am its mother. Requesting full custody means you want to cut me out, and I will not allow that."

"We'll allow you nurse the child, of course, then come collect him when he is weaned."

Bekere sprang up from her seat, "That will not happen."

"Cool your heels, child, and sit." Mama Ajibade dropped her teacup, "I have a better proposition. One, I believe, will benefit everyone."

Bekere lowered herself on the sofa and picked up her tea.

"I'll grant you your much-needed vacation. Provide you with the best medical care and every luxury that comes with being an Ajibade." She raised a hand when Bekere made to speak. "You will not have to worry about my sons invading your space. I'll see that they're not able to find you. But I need you to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"That you consider giving your marriage another chance."

Bekere gasped.

"I know I wanted you out of my son's life when I found out about the affair, but I'm a mother, and my concern is for the wellbeing of my boys." She shoved down the sudden grief that flooded her gut with a sip of tea. "My children are my weakness, Bekere. You're almost a mother now, so you'll soon understand. I will do anything for them, even put aside my prejudice. Anything to see that they're happy."

Bekere reclined in her seat and closed her eyes.

“Take your trip, heal, but do not shut your heart to love or second chances.”

Several hours after her daughter-in-law left the Victoria Island apartment to an undisclosed hotel, Mama Ajibade made arrangements that would set the path to changing the course of both her boy’s lives.



The forced chatters and exchanged pleasantries amongst the twelve board executives did nothing to rouse Folu’s interest. Given a chance, he would preferably be wrapped in the cocoon of his favorite hobby; work. The only reason he agreed to the meeting was that his mother foisted it on him.

“Fola’s continuous absence is raising a lot of concern with our key stakeholders,” she’d said. “It’s time we present a united front.”

Regardless of his disinterest in the meeting, he agreed to her plans. He’d held on too long and too tightly to the company, fought too hard to uphold his promise to his father, and remained attached to his ideals of running a global empire. It was time to let go, time to take a backseat and give his twin full rein.

His last session with his therapist had further confirmed his resolve.

“Sometimes, letting go of things we feel strongly about is how we heal,” Abosede had said.

It was time he let go of Bade Incorporated, his failed marriage, his loathing of his twin. Let go of the old to fully and ultimately embrace the new, being a better husband and father.

A mild murmur and opening of the conference room door announced his brother’s entry.

“About time,” Ayo, seated beside him, whispered.

Folu kept his gaze passively trained on his brother’s unhurried approach of his seat. He didn’t flinch or look away when his brother’s gaze met his. Neither did he acknowledge his mom’s remark on the purpose of the meeting. The pained look in his brother’s eyes, his drooping shoulders, and resigned stance was all that got him fixated.

He drew his gaze off his twin’s to regard his mother when she announced his taking a much-needed vacation.

“You all know Folu has worked hard in enriching all our portfolios. However, as a concerned mother, I feel he works too hard and might crash and burn sooner rather than later.” She briefly winked at him. “In the light of that, I push for a vote in naming a new director and president of the board. I name my first son, Folarin—”

“Save it, mother,” Fola spat.

Everyone seated in the room threw astonished eyes to him when he suddenly sprang up from his seat and, in quick strides, approached Folu’s chair.

“You and I need to talk.”

Folu gave a curt nod and followed him amidst astonished stares out of the boardroom. When they pushed open a door leading to an enclosed office, they both sized each other up like two gladiators in a colosseum, figuratively brushed their feet on the pulsating battleground, unsheathed their swords, and wielded it in a battle of wits.

“Why did you marry her when you knew I wanted her too?”

“Love, Fola. When two people fall in love with each other, it only fits that they marry.”

“So, you didn’t force her or manipulate her to?”

“Of course, I didn’t. Does she look like someone that can be forced into anything?”

A brief smile crossed Fola’s features, “You know she loves me, don’t you?”

“Maybe, but I believe she loves me more.”

“Why, because you’re special?” Fola spat.

“I’m not special, Fola. If for anything, I’m utterly flawed.”

“A tool you expertly used to your advantage.”

“I’m sorry you felt I made mom ignore you all those years.”

“I don’t care about that anymore.”

“You do. I know you do, Fola. I know you blame me for mom’s neglect, the abuse—”

“Shove it! I don’t care about that.” He pressed his palms to his face. “All I care about is her, but for some fucking reason, she wants to be with you instead.”

“I want to be with her too.”

“You’re wrong for her, Folu.”

“I am?”

“You tried to kill her.”

“A mistake that will forever haunt me.”

“I can’t get past the image. I keep seeing her drowning in her pool of blood. Keep seeing you go into another jealous fit and put another gun on her.”

Folu stayed his pacing with a firm hold on his shoulders, “If I ever do that, Fola, then I give you permission to avenge her death by making sure I do not draw another breath.”

“Damn straight, I will.”

They paused to catch their breaths, honed their swords in a whetstone, circled each other in measured steps, and lunged forward.

“You know where she is, don’t you?” Fola asked.

“I do,” Folu replied.

“Mom tried to hide it, switching her phone to a dumb phone and all.” Fola snickered.

“Haruna has always been talkative.”

“Yeah, bet she doesn’t know we know.”

“She doesn’t.”

Fola regarded him queerly, “What are you going to do about the info, then.”

“I’ll give her two weeks to acquaint herself with her new home, then I’m going after her.”

Fola let out a loud sigh and then flexed his neck, “I’m doing you a huge favor, Folu. Letting you have my one shot at happiness. I’m doing it, not because I had a eureka moment, but because she chose you, and I love her too much to stand in her way of happiness.”

“Fola,” Folu swallowed.

“I’ve thought long and hard on it, fantasized about kidnapping her and forcing her to be with me, but in all versions of my fantasies, images of her weeping face and gloominess keeps me from carrying out my plans.” He slowly lowered himself into a swiveling chair. “I can’t live with myself knowing I’m the reason she’s not happy. That’s why I’m letting her go, letting you have her.”

“Ask me anything, Fola. Ask me, and it’s yours.”

“I want nothing you own. Not even this.” He waved his hands around the stately office. “I thought I did, but I don’t. The only thing I want desires you.”

Folu sank into the chair, buried his face in his palms, and broke into a wracking sob of anguish. “Oh, Fola... Fola.”

The sob intensified when he felt Fola’s hand on his shoulder. It shook him to a collapsing crumble into his brother’s arms and made him pour out his vulnerability before the mirror image of himself.

While Mama Ajibade charmed a group of individuals with million-dollar companies and significant investments in Bade incorporated into believing her company was sturdier than their fears, her sons remained locked in a long-overdue embrace.

They, as it were, continued in the path to set matters straight between them by beating their proverbial swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning shares. As was repeatedly proclaimed in the books of Isaiah, Micah, and Joel.

TWENTY-FOUR

Having spent weeks soaking up beach air and sun in Nice, Bekere lost all of her restless edge and anxieties. She'd learned to not only relegate weakening thoughts to a non-retrievable corner of her mind but to take each day as it comes and journals positive things she was thankful for. She spends most evenings going for long walks on the beach while reminding herself that her life, like her walks, requires focusing on putting one step at a time.

Standing by the beach, with hair windblown and a small smile on her face, she placed a hand on her stomach and gloried in the healthy development of her pregnancy. The doctor's report on the baby's health pleased her. His announcement that she prepared for multiples filled her with part dread, part exhilaration.

As much as she longed for a complete break from Folu, she couldn't deny the fact that she most times wished he was sharing her pregnancy moments with her. Couldn't help waking up each morning and reaching for his side of the bed. She'd often hold back from asking about him whenever she got on the phone with her mother-in-law and sometimes write him a letter she'd only rip apart when done.

When she left the shores of Lagos, Nigeria, she'd agreed to Mama Ajibade's suggestion of ditching her iPhone for a dumb phone.

"It'll be impossible for them to track you with a dumb phone," she'd said.

Although she'd agreed, half of her wished Folu would find her. Taking a deep sigh and reminding herself she'd resolve to not dwell on emotionally draining thoughts, she turned away from the beach and began a leisurely

stroll towards the house. A staff handed her an unmarked envelope when she entered the house.

“It came in this morning.”

“From whom?” She asked in a frown, wondering who she knew in France that would send her a note.

From a husband who misses his wife

The note read.

Grant me leave to see you, my love, for I fear I’m wilting away in wait.

Bekere gasped and scanned the note repeatedly. Then she threw her eyes around, half expecting to see him standing by the door.

“Who delivered this note?” She asked the exiting staff.

“I found it in the mailbox, ma’am.”

He’s here.

She half laughed, half sighed, and took nervous strides towards the bedroom. And as she’d rightly guessed, he stood with his back to her, hands in his pocket, and slowly turned to her when she gasped his name.

“How did you...Did your mom...”

He covered the distance between them in quick strides and slowly dropped to his knees.

“A rooster will always crow, a dog, its way home. While I... I’ll always find you, Bekere.”

“Folu.” She equally went on her knees, her face drenched with tears. “I’m sorry.”

He encircled her waist and slowly drop his head to hers, “You’re the reason I want to get off the bed to face a new day. The very air I breathe.” He grazed her lips, sucked in a deep breath when she hungrily mated her lips with his, and clasped her. “The priceless piece that completes me.”

“Oh, Folu.” She sighed, snatching her mouth from his.

“Kiss me, please, for I do not believe I can go another second without drinking from love’s fountain.” He nibbled her lips, sucked hard on her mouth, and deepened the kiss with a ravenous hunger that blew confetti of

stars in her head. Then he carried her astride him and slowly rose to his feet. “I love you.”

He drew his lips from hers, raced his tongue down her nape, and sucked her neck. Bekere bit her lower lip in a frenzy. Her nether region’s heat surged in a giant wave and slammed the pier of her thighs in a honied juice when Folu ran his hand down her belly, palmed her nirvana, and when he found her wet, hoisted her in one swift motion to feast on her dripping charm.

“Ohhhhhh!” Bekere whimpered as a headrush of goosebumps slackened her neck. “Oh, Folu.”

She pressed firmly on his head when he ravenously sucked her, threw her hands in a somewhat useless motion through her hair and his. Bekere wanted to touch him, nibble at the caramel hue of his glistening body, but the deep sensation of his rhythmic tonguing of her vulva made straight thought impossible.

“I love you.” She moaned, threw her head back in ecstasy, and bayed like a donkey in heat when the tempo of his stroking increased. The looming tornado started from the most bottomless pit of her stomach, spread in a paralyzing seizure to her legs, and detonated in a grand stream of gushing fluid.

Bekere lost total control of her limbs when the spasm of her orgasm rippled through her. She faintly heard him speak as he lapped up the flowing stream of honey and wholly surrendered into his arms when he wrapped her into it and carried her to the bed.

His lovemaking was intense. The tears continuously streamed down his face as he huskily whispered inaudible words. Bekere mated her lips with his, shivered as its icy chill raised down her spine, drank tastily from the cocktail of his kisses—a perfect combination of her feminine scent, tears, and pure Folu.

Folu tilted her chin when he came astride her, locked gazes with hers, and nudged her eyes open when she shut them at his gliding into her. She saw his lips moving while he thrust slowly, heard his feverish whispers, and finally made sense of it.

“You’re my heart, my body, and my soul.” He chanted, slowly grinding into her and holding her gaze firmly.

Bekere reached up to kiss him and urged him to increase the tempo by slamming her hips into his. When they both found release, they were heard chanting the assertion that would forever bound them together.

You're my heart, my body, and my soul.



Folu jerked awake to a foreboding feeling that last night was a dream, then relaxed when he saw her draped beside him with her hair sprawled on the pillow. He feasted his eyes on the bright play of the sun's beam on her face, and, unable to hold back, kissed her awake.

"Hey, wife."

She flashed him a beaming smile and slowly got off the bed.

"Stay put," he said, stilling her movement, "I'll attend to your every need."

She giggled at his chivalry in bringing her breakfast and insisting on feeding her.

"I never want to lose you," he said solemnly while scooping soupcons of oat into her mouth. "Not even to death."

She pushed the spoon he held to her mouth aside, "I did you wrong, Folu. I hurt us, failed to protect the sanctity of our marriage."

"I did you wrong too. I forced you into sacrificing your need to become a mother over my cowardice. I lied to you, manipulated you, kept secrets from you, and tried to control you." He swallowed the grief that flowed through him when her eyes pooled with tears. "I may have failed you in the past, baby, failed in my duty to love, cherish, and protect you. But from here on out, I solemnly vow that I'll be a better man, husband, and father to our baby."

"Babies," she sniffed.

"What?"

"We're expecting twins," she giggled, then wiped the tears off her face, "I found out a couple of days ago."

He placed the breakfast tray on a stool, slowly lifted her nightdress, and tenderly kissed her stomach.

“Thank you,” he said, flooding her stomach with tears, “For accepting me in all my flaws and making me the happiest man alive. Thank you.”

When he kissed her, he realized he couldn’t get enough, couldn’t stop, until both their bodies fused in one and they exhaled in writhing ecstasy.

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EPILOGUE

If she'd thought him attentive before, he became annoyingly so when her pregnancy advanced. He filled the house with staff, insisted on carrying her around the house against making her walk, and complained whenever he found her moving around the kitchen.

"You know it's just pregnancy, right, not incapacitation."

"I can't help it, babe," he said, "Please just do it for me. Limit your moving around. I don't know what I'd do if..."

"Fine, I'll take things slow."

Having left Ayo in charge of Bade Incorporated, he channeled his complete attention to her, gloried in the cordial relation between her and his mom, and engaged in several video calls with his mother-in-law. The news of her daughter's pregnancy threw her into a joyous fit. Though she bemoaned their decision to remain in France until the babies were delivered, she wasted no words in thanking God in her native tongue, halting English, and a bit of Pidgin English.

Bekere gritted in frustration when Folu completely stopped making love to her when she was six months gone.

"What if it affects the babies," he cried. "You know we're expecting twins."

"Sex won't affect them. If for nothing, it'll relax them," she said slyly.

"I can't risk it."

She gritted. "But I want it!"

Folu kept up his obstinacy and only agreed to it when she informed him she was losing her mind from her raging hormones. She'd contented herself with the slow and gentle way with which he'd made love to her but groaned

in frustration when her body kept wanting him to make passionate love to her. Folu bore her pregnancy mood swings with panache and continued treating her in the gentle and loving demeanor of a mother goose.

On the day of her delivery, he screamed louder in agony than she did. His screams got so loud the doctors repeatedly threatened to send him out of the room.

When their first child arrived, a healthy baby boy, Folu, stared shellshocked at it and broke into tears. Wanting to hold the baby and his belabored wife, Folu stared crazedly at everyone in the labor room, registered a nurse cleaning his son, then returned to his wife.

They had a baby girl next. Folu cradled his daughter in his arms, gazed lovingly at Bekere's tearful face, and raised his head heavenwards to offer prayers of gratitude. The boy he named Oluwatomisona, while their daughter, a spitting image of her mother, was named Oluwatoni.

Folu translated the meaning of all the names to the proclamation of God's greatness and sufficiency. Bekere said she loved the names, but she would use the shortened versions—Tomi and Toni to keep from biting her tongue.

"Fair enough!" Folu grinned.

As she breastfed her daughter, Toni, Bekere watched with the completeness of heart and appreciation to God as Folu spoke in a gibberish chatter to his son while he continued swaying him.

Six months after their babies' delivery and four months after returning to Bade' Lair, Folu made his planner begin setting arrangements for their first birthday. Although Bekere had laughed at him, he'd stated that he wanted the party done at the convention center in explicit terms. When she succeeded in convincing him they didn't need all that fanfare, he allowed the party to be done in Bade's lair.

Bekere, Tade, and Alice laughed loudly about it at the Pool Cabana one afternoon when Bisi walked into the room with a package.

"Ehen, babes, did I tell you that Obinna is married?" Alice said.

"Really?" Bekere squealed, tearing open the envelope.

"He married one of the nurses at his clinic, one girl like that *sha*. *She no too fine*."

Bekere eyed her friend. “Alice, I hope you’re not secretly crushing on Obi?”

“My dear.... He be like o. But Tony is my gee!”

Bekere laughed heartily and pulled out the content of the envelope. Her breath caught in her throat when she read Fola’s inscription on the note. When she’d asked Folu about him that long-ago morning in Nice, he had told her about Fola’s avowal to respect the bounds of their marriage. When she learned he’d gone away to Dubai, she’d been thrilled to find out it was to partner with Whyte Oil.

“It’s a merger of sorts,” Folu said. “Whyte Oil and Bade Incorporated are technically speaking sister companies.”

It was thus, with a wistful smile, that she read his note.

I know you’re happy. That, more than all else, makes me happy too.

Congratulations on the twins. They, like you, will always hold a significant part of my heart.

Fola’s note, the daily joy of gazing at the magnificent faces of her adorable babies who looked at her with unadulterated love and cheerful giggles, and Folu’s unflinching love drove her into spending more hours writing.

She wrote about her beginning, her love for twin men who were perfect in their separate ways, her mistakes, triumphs, and immense gratitude to find a love so pure. More than all else, she found release in pen, enjoyed a blissful sense of contentment in uninhibitedly sharing her story. She wrote and wrote, and when she was done, she read the draft, smiled wistfully at the miracle that was her story, and titled it:

RED LINES.



In her palatial mansion at Victoria Island, Mama Ajibade picked up the medical reports her manservant brought to her. On the cover were an emblazoned snake on a pole crest and a boldly written CONFIDENTIAL.

Unknown to all parties involved, she’d stealthily carried out a DNA test on her grandchildren.

“There’s no harm knowing,” she said, prying the document bearing Folu’s name in shaky hands.

She hurriedly scanned the written analytics of the method used in carrying out the test and zoning in on her grandchildren’s names and the accompanying remarks.

99% match.

She broke into an ecstatic laugh and took several sips of tea to soothe her frayed nerves. But her nerves soon jostled up when she checked Fola’s report and saw it read a similar report.

99% match.

“Oh well,” she sniffed, crossing her legs and sipping more tea, “All is well that ends well. They’re identical twins, after all.” Then she broke into a satisfied grin.

The excited giggles of her grandbabies floated through to her even before her manservant announced their arrival. Spending time with them for a traditional Sunday brunch had become her life’s highlights. She smiled brightly at her charming granddaughter, who was eagerly jostling in her father’s arms admits loud giggles, and childish babbles.

“Hello, mother,” Folu said, reaching over to kiss her and hand over the still giggling child to her. “She’s been excitedly looking forward to this.”

“And I’ve missed her greatly too.” Mama Ajibade nuzzled Toni’s rosy cheeks and jiggled her. Though a known fact that grandmothers often think their grandchildren the most gorgeous in the world, Mama Ajibade strongly believed that her granddaughter, with her mother’s stunning good looks and her father’s eyes, would hold a record in the Guinness Book of being the most adorable babies of all times.

“Hello, grandma.” Bekere, who’d just entered the sunroom with her son nestled in a baby carrier, greeted.

“Hello, child.” Mama Ajibade kissed her sleeping grandson and ushered them to the terrace where an array of pastries, wine, and freshly squeezed juice jugs awaited them.

She jollied in their conversations, beamed at the contented look on her son’s face when he leaned in to listen to his wife’s remarks, felt her heart sing

when he gave a burst of deep bellied laughter, and kissed her with love burning in his eyes.

Her baby boy found love in its purest and rarest of forms. She grinned. Though their love went through flames, swam through turbulent waters, and walked through death's valley, it still emerged glistening in refined gold. Mama Ajibade reclined in her seat with her granddaughter nestled in her arms, inflamed with a deep feeling of contentment.

A small fog of worry tinted her cheer when the face of her other son flashed before her, but she brushed it off with a small sigh and a solemn promise to pull out yet another trick, wave more wands until he too found his happily-ever-after.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

What are you waiting and trusting God for? Is it a soulmate? A baby?
A better life, job, health?

Well, whatever you're waiting for, I know there will come a time when you'd feel a deadening sense of hopelessness that would make you question your belief. Make you wonder if you would ever find it. Like a germ cell, I know the fears would multiply in your head until it becomes a swarming pool of crippling feelings.

When I got the inspiration for **RED LINES**, it was at the point in my life when waiting was having its toll on me. I mean, being a Nigerian wife and trying to conceive, there's always the constant worry and feeling of inadequacy. There's the silent gritting of teeth when a neighbor intentionally forgets my name and calls me "Iyawo" instead, though married for half a decade. The stealthily looking the other way when I run into an old friend with four kids of their own and seeing the, "Do you have kids now?" questions in their eyes. The ache of having them bid you, "Don't worry, God will do it."

If not properly checked, the wait can, like it did Bekere, push one to regrettable actions, or worse, into a dark, cold abyss of depression.

What has really helped me and *is* helping me is my love for penning down my thoughts? Highlighting them into "Good," "Bad," and "Ugly." Then critically asking myself if they're strong enough to control my life. My answer is often a resounding,

"No. They're not."

Whatever is holding you back from living your best life, I implore you to Let. It. Go.

Write it down, if you must, laugh about it (highly recommended) if you may, and let it go. You know why? Because God's got you.

Lots of love,

Timi Waters.

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Wattpad: @timiwaters

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TIMI WATERS

Timi Waters is a bestselling author who writes for the love of writing. Her genre cuts across a broad span of psychological thrillers with an erotic twist.

She is the creator of THOUGHTS UNSHED, a virtual diary where she chronicles thoughts and events relating to sexual, psychological, and emotional traumas (Available only on Wattpad)

When Timi is not writing, she's sipping on hot chocolate and reading classic novels.

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BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

RED LINES

Available on major ebook stores.

WAITING ON TWO RED LINES

Available on major ebook stores

TWO RED LINES

Available on major ebook stores

LOATHING: A HELL HATH NO FURY ANTHOLOGY

Available on major ebook stores

BRIDLED: A NIGHTS AT CLUB NOVA EROTICA

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Reviews are to me what grease is to an engine. I retweet, repost, and respond to tags. So, if you find this book exciting, please do a review on Goodreads or your socials of choice, as this would go a long way in spinning my literary wheels. Mwah!

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GLOSSARY

A

Abegi (Pidgin) Please Abeg (Pidgin) Please

Ah: An exclamation similar to “What?”

Aye mi: A Yoruba exclamation meaning my life. Used to express distress.

B

Biko (Igbo) Please

Blood dey hot (Pidgin) To blow a gasket or fuse. To become angry.

Bend down select (Pidgin) Flea market.

C

Chai: An exclamation common amongst the Igbo speaking tribe.

Chineke meh (Igbo) My God.

D

Daalu (Igbo) Thank

you Dey (Pidgin) Are. For example, “You dey craze.” means “You are crazy.”

Den or Dem (Pidgin) Them, they, they are (they’re). For example, “No be me den (dem) dey look o.” means “I’m not the one they’re looking at.”

Don (Pidgin) Have. Don start (Pidgin). Have started. For example, “You don start this your yeye ‘what if’ again.” Means “You’ve started this nonsense ‘what if’ again.”

Dake enu re (Yoruba) Shut up.

E

E sa ko ra in lo (Yoruba) Leave, please.

Enituboh (Ijaw) Good child.

Ewo! (Igbo) Wow! or oh no!

F

Fit change am for you (Pidgin) Might become angry or impatient.

G

Galala: A form of hip-hop dance move.

Gerrout (Pidgin) Get out.

Gbenu e soun (Yoruba) Shut up. For example, “Wo, joko jo, ko gbenu oshi soun.” Means “Shut up and sit down.

Gats: Pidgin, have to or got to.

I

Iranu (Yoruba) Nonsense

Ina kawana (Hausa) Good morning.

Iwo! (Yoruba) You.

J

Joko (Yoruba) Sit. For example, “Ah, le wa joko kale.” Means “Wow, and you’re sitting idly.”

Jor (Yoruba) Please or simply used as an exclamation. Jare (Yoruba) Please or simply used as an exclamation.

N

Na (Pidgin) I were. For example, “If na me, I for dey faint every day.” Means “If I were the one, I’d keep fainting daily.”

Nau (Pidgin) Now. It is often used in a pacifying tone, for example, “What is it, nau?”

Nor (Common with the Warri accent) or No be me (Pidgin), I’m not the one. For example, “Nor be me man go carry do yeye.” Means “I’m not the one a man will mess with.”

Ndo (Igbo) Sorry Nne (Igbo) Mother or can be used as an endearment for a female child. Na small remain (Pidgin) Almost. For example, “Na small remain I for drink piss.” Means “I almost drank piss.”

O

Oghene (Isoko) God.

Oko mi: A Yoruba phrase for “My darling.” It is also used to denote endearment.

Okwa ya (Igbo) Right?

Okrika (Pidgin slang) Used clothes or hand me downs. Oda, moti gbo

(Yoruba) “Okay, I’ve heard you.”

Ode o (Yoruba) Here you go again.

Oga (Pidgin) Sir or boss.

Ozugo (Igbo) Take heart, or It’s okay. Often used to console a bereaved person.

R

Run mouth (Pidgin slang) Boast. “Tade nor come dey run mouth here, everyone knows you’re not interested

in having kids.” “Tade, stop being boastful. Everyone knows you’re not interested in having kids.”

S

Shakara (Pidgin): Being coy, or showing coquetry. Shaku-shaku A hip-hop dance move.

Shikenan (Hausa) Okay.

Sora: Be careful or tread carefully.

Sidon (Pidgin) Sit. Sidon well (Pidgin) Sit well. Sidon well for this house (Pidgin), Sits well in this house. Often used to denote having authority or deep roots in a particular thing or place.

Suo A kind of hip-hop dance move.

Straf: Pidgin slang. Have sex with.

T

Tuboh (Ijaw) Child

Toh, shikenan (Hausa) That’s okay, or It’s okay, then.

U

Una (Pidgin) You, You guys or You all. For example, “I tell una, nau.” “I told you guys (you all) now.”

W

Wan (Pidgin) Want to. For example, “You wan fly?” means “Do you want to fly?”

Wetin (Pidgin) What.

Which water you use baff, na? (Pidgin sarcasm) “What’s so special about you?”

Y

Ya Allah (Hausa) Oh my God!

Yansh (Pidgin), butt or ass. For example, “Your yansh no go sidon well for this house.” Means you won’t be firmly fixed, or you won’t have full authority in this house.

Yawa1 (Pidgin) Nonsense

Yawa2 (Pidgin) Trouble Yawa gas (Pidgin) Trouble hits or Shit hits the fan.

Yeye (Pidgin) Nonsense.

You try (Pidgin). It can be used to connote a positive or negative affirmation.

You try1(positive) Well done

You try2 (Negative) You’re a disappointment.