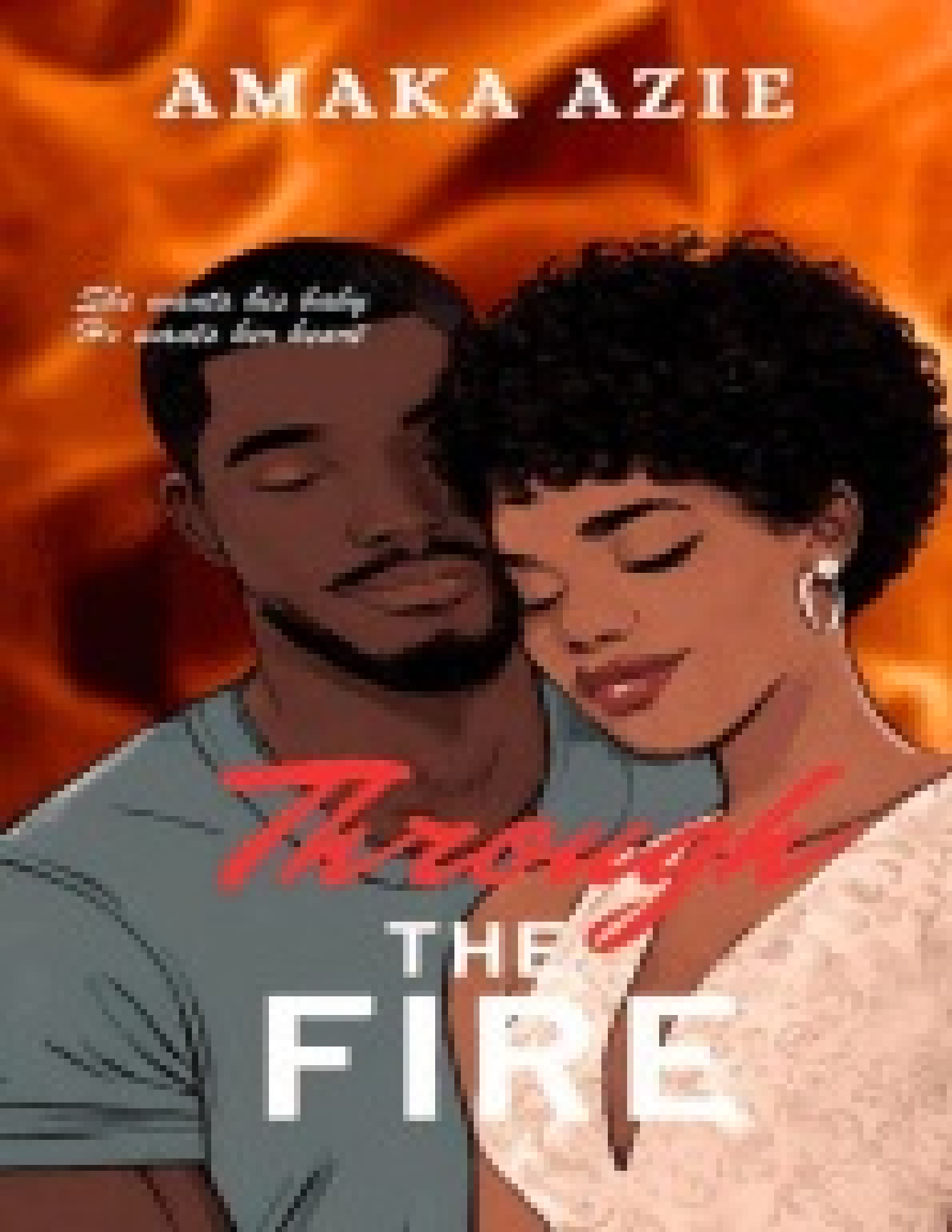
AMAKA AZIE
Through
THE
FIRE


AMAKA AZIE
She wants his body
He wants her heart
Through
THE
FIRE


AMAKA AZIE
She wants his baby
He wants her heart
Through
THE
FIRE

Through the Fire

AMAKA AZIE

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Through the Fire

By Amaka Azie

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First published in 2022

Cover Design: Amaka Azie

Edited by Stephanie Jones

Blurb

Busy plastic surgeon Oke Amayo lives life on her own terms. No husband, no children, no commitments. She prefers toy boys and freedom. Then, a breast cancer diagnosis changes her mind, but only about children. Oke wants a baby, and only one man will fit the bill as her baby daddy. Can she convince her friend Arinze to sign on to her co-parenting plan without the bogus happily-ever-after that everyone knows doesn't exist?

Widower Arinze Ibeh still grieves the loss of his beloved wife to cancer. When he discovers his friend now has the disease, he immediately offers his help. But Oke wants a little something extra from him. A baby?! Arinze has dreamt of having children, but certainly not according to the unconventional terms of Oke's proposal. Will she consider his counteroffer?

Francisca, your strength while dealing with breast cancer inspires me every day.

I'm pretty certain that there's nobody that can fully capture or understand the experience of anyone with breast cancer unless they've gone through it themselves. To all survivors, your fight is the fight of the whole world. One day, hopefully soon, there'll be a cure.

Note to readers

Thank you for purchasing this book.

Through the Fire deals with the delicate issue of suicidal ideation and intent, so if that's a trigger for you, I suggest you avoid reading.

I totally enjoyed this love story because of how different it turned out from what I had initially imagined when I plotted the trilogy last year.

I had a perfect outline to start off with. It was such a simple plan that I never expected to deviate from it during the writing process. But there's a saying, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans".

The characters took over, completely veering off from the neat map I had created for them. Oke and Arinze decided to tell their stories unapologetically using me as a vessel, and I hope you enjoy their journey towards love and redemption.

Please leave a review on the sites of purchase and/or Goodreads. I love hearing from you.

One



The sweet aroma of food sizzling in hot oil wafted in the air, coaxing Oke awake. Taking in a deep breath, she opened her eyes.

Just as quickly, she squeezed them shut, tight as drums against the early morning sunshine streaking through billowing curtains. Still half asleep, Oke delighted in the gentle breeze floating through the open window and waking her fully. Finally, she hauled herself upright in bed and tentatively opened her eyes again, blinking a few times and letting her vision adjust to the daylight.

She darted her gaze to the clock on her bedside table and shook her head. Damn … 5:45 a.m. Greg was already up and at it, playing boyfriend when he should be on his way to Uni Lag for his nine o'clock lecture. The traffic would build up in the next few minutes, making it almost impossible for him to get there on time if he didn't get moving.

She'd told him so many times that he needn't hang around in the mornings. She preferred solitary, quiet mornings and really didn't mind if he slipped out before she woke. Yet, the boy never listened. He was determined to prove a point to her. One that didn't interest her—and never would.

No matter how many delicious breakfasts Greg conjured up for her, even if he served them to her in bed and proceeded to lick her toes afterwards, it wouldn't get him what he wanted. Oke had no desire to be in a serious relationship with any man. Ever. No way would she end up like her mother, so desperate for a husband that she abandoned her children. No bloody way.

Inhaling and exhaling sharply, a shudder passed through her at the very idea of

tying herself to any man forever. God forbid. Greg would just have to get the message through his thick ’fro. Their current arrangement had nothing to do with forever.

Oke sighed. Maybe it was time to start cutting the strings. Three months with one man was long enough. His growing attachment to her was starting to feel restrictive—suffocating even. Time to set herself free, starting with ending his sleepovers and his next-morning breakfast extravaganzas.

A shrill crow from her neighbour’s rooster pierced the air, breaking through her thoughts. Oke shook her head. How on earth had she managed to escape the trenches in Benin, determined to live in a place where she would never hear this sound again, only to end up living in one of the poshest areas in Lekki with a neighbour who owned a damn chicken as a pet?

Unbelievable! Rich people really had annoying habits.

When you grew up among the poorest of the poor—like Oke had in Benin City’s Ekosodin area—you didn’t kill chickens lightly, but kept them for eggs to feed the family all year. Living with her grandmother, poultry was reserved for special days. Like Christmas and Easter. And you certainly didn’t keep roosters around just for fun as pets either. It was absolutely unheard of.

The farm bird crowed again, this time with enough gusto to summon the dead back to life. Oke hissed and sprang to her feet. No point trying to go back to sleep. The rooster wouldn’t quit, and she needed to start her daily morning routine or risk being late to work herself.

After dashing into the adjacent bathroom and brushing her teeth, Oke slipped out of her night shirt and donned yoga pants and a tank top. She made her way down the curved stairway and strolled into the kitchen to find Greg exactly where she knew he would be—in front of the cooker.

He turned to her with a bright smile on his face. “’Morning, Babe,” he said with a wink. “Making your favourite—fried yams and eggs.”

Oke’s gut clenched. Babe …. he’d started calling her that a month ago. She should have taken it as a bad sign and put a quick end to this, but —

Her eyes swept over his toned frame, and her abdominal muscles contracted.

Lord in heaven. Greg Okon was a pure work of art. Tall with smooth light-brown skin and muscular with a ripped abdomen that reminded her of the grooves on a tyre. Simply put, the man was a wet dream. And her greed for that sexy body had robbed her of all common sense.

Now, wearing just a pair of boxers that did very little to hide his impressive package, he looked even more delectable than he had the first time she'd noticed him working as a masseuse at Girls Ahoy, the women-only spa she often visited when she needed a relaxing evening.

As soon as she'd seen him, she had known that she wanted him in her bed. Although he'd been assigned to her friend Nkem, and she'd had to settle for the burly, overly eager man who had massaged her that evening, she'd vowed to get Greg's attention. Lucky for her, it hadn't taken much work.

A struggling medical student who had needed financial assistance, he'd readily accepted her generosity, and she'd automatically assumed the role of his sugar mummy. Such a shame that now, Greg seemed to be catching feelings.

Oke swallowed back a regretful sigh. Why did people always let emotions ruin a perfectly good thing?

"You should be on your way to Uni," she said, taking a step towards the cooker. "You'll be late for your lecture."

"I thought you would drop me first before you head for work."

"And why would I do that?"

"Well, I … I hoped you would."

Oke let out that sigh she'd just stifled. "Greg …" she began, then drew in another breath and let it out. A rush of words about terminating their relationship clamoured to burst out of her mouth, but a quick glance at the frying pan on the cooker halted her train of thought. "It's burning."

"W-what?" He turned back to the cooker and gasped, switching it off and lifting the frying pan off. "Fuck. I wanted this to be perfect for you," he mumbled as he tossed it into the sink and turned on the tap.

“Thank you, Greg,” Oke said, resting her hip against the kitchen counter. “But you don’t have to do all this. You don’t have to cook for me or make anything perfect for me.”

“I know that, Oke, alright,” he snapped. “I like … I do it because I want to. I wish you would be more appreciative.”

“I am … I just don’t want you to waste your time …”

“I love you, Oke. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Damn, damn, damn! He’d just gone and done it—said the three words she dreaded hearing from any man.

Oke swallowed hard, fighting every impulse to glance at her smart watch. So much for her morning routine and being early for work today. She needed to address this now or risk having this turn into something ugly. Thankfully, she had no surgeries booked until past noon and her paperwork could wait.

She took a deep breath in and tried to gentle her voice as much as possible. “Greg —”

“I know what you’re going to say, but please, I don’t need you to love me back this instant,” he cut in. “I just want you to give us a chance, give me a chance.”

“What chance? We talked about this at the onset, I’m not looking for a relationship. I thought you understood.”

“But we’ve been together for three months … I thought we were getting somewhere.”

“No, Greg. We aren’t, we’ll never …”

“So what am I to you? Your sugar boy? Your gigolo?”

“Nooo, Greg.” She brushed her palms down her face and shook her head. “I thought we were just being casual, you know … isn’t that what we discussed?”

“If I ask you to stop paying my rent, will you consider just being my woman? I can go back to my side hustle if that’s what you want.”

“It’s not about the money, Greg. I pay your rent because I want to help. You’re a brilliant medical student who will someday become a great doctor and save many lives.” Oke rolled her thumb over her forefinger, trying to stem her anxiety. She had to say what needed to be said the right way so that she didn’t hurt his feelings. She really liked Greg and didn’t want this breakup to be as ugly as the ones she’d had in the past.

The last man who had fallen in love with her had threatened to gulp down a glass of snipper when she’d broken up with him. It had taken a lot of persuasion to talk him out of consuming the insecticide, and she’d even had to involve his family before he was able to break free of his obsession with her.

Why did men fall harder for her whenever they discovered her aversion to relationships? She never understood that. They always seemed to believe they could change her mind, make her want marriage and children. So bizarre.

Of course, Oke knew it had nothing to do with her looks. Sure, she was pretty enough—with facial features people often referred to as cute, and smooth brown skin more than one man had remarked was the colour of warm honey. But she wasn’t supermodel tall, and neither did she have the kind of massive tits and ass that men often lusted after. Her compact five-foot-five height had just enough curves to fit her petite frame.

Was her elusiveness the culprit? Did they simply want her more because she didn’t want them? Or was there some other inexplicable male reason?

“Greg, you’re only twenty-four. I’m eleven years older. Do you really think there’s a future for us?” Not waiting for his answer, she carried on, determined to drive home her point in the gentlest of ways. “You’re a wonderful man with a lot going for you. You don’t need to be stuck with a much older woman who isn’t keen on relationships.”

Leaning forward, she stretched her lips into what she hoped was a warm smile. “There’s a woman out there that would worship the ground you walk on. You deserve that.”

“Don’t give me that patronising bullshit, Oke,” he gritted. “You’re the woman I want.”

“But why?”

“Why ...?” He dragged in a ragged breath before continuing. “You make my world fucking light up, that’s why. I don’t care about the age difference. I want to marry you. Have children with you —”

Children?! What the actual fuck? Oke’s insides curled up in a hard ball.

If there were a worse way to convince her to be with him, she certainly didn’t know what it would be. He knew she didn’t want kids. She’d told him several times that her sister’s kids were the only little ones she would ever need, or want, in this life.

She parted her lips to say just that, but shut it again when Greg dropped to his knees in front of her and pulled her to him, his face hopeful.

“Marry me, Oke,” he said, his eyes bright with determination. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

Speechless, Oke stared down at him—her arms hanging limply at her sides—still unable to believe how dramatic her morning had turned. Goodness. She would give anything to be back upstairs, listening to the neighbour’s rooster crow all the livelong day, rather than be in this kitchen right now.

“Just give us a chance, Babe. Please …”

The desperation in Greg’s voice struck such a chord that Oke’s throat choked up. She really liked him. Would being his wife be the end of the world? Maybe she could put aside her aversion to relationships and give them a decent go?

Her mother writhing on the floor and wailing as her husband walked out the door slamming it loudly behind him—the brutal images popped into her head. Oke closed her eyes and shook off the painful video replaying itself and the feelings it evoked.

No. Never. No way. No how.

“Greg, my answer is no,” she muttered, keeping her tone low and even, fighting against the onslaught of emotions squeezing her chest. “I don’t want to marry you or anyone else.”

“We don’t have to get married right away,” he said frantically. “We can just date

for a few more months before —”

“No, Greg. Stop this now!”

Her tone came out clipped and abrupt, startling him into silence. Oke’s face warmed, embarrassed at her rudeness. Lord, she didn’t want to break this lovely young man’s spirit. But what else could she do? She took a step back, her eyes glued to his.

“Stand up, Greg. I won’t marry you, and I think we need to end things between us,” she said in a gentler tone. “It has nothing to do with you at all. Just me.”

Rising to his feet, he brushed his palms down his face in frustration. “I don’t want to lose you, Oke. Can we start again, forget everything I said this morning? Let’s go back to how we were before I opened my big mouth.”

Oke shook her head. “I’m sorry, Greg. But I’m not the one you’re looking for.”

He ground his jaw. “So, you used me,” he said through his teeth.

Oke couldn’t deny that. She’d used him, picked him out not only for his good looks, but also his age. Having had dramatic endings to her previous relationships, she’d vowed to steer clear of men above thirty who seemed to want to settle down. Who would have thought that a 24-year-old, with his whole future ahead of him, would be thinking about that, too?

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, truly repentant. “I should have made it clearer —”

“Oh, you did. You said it countless times. You’re not the marrying or girlfriend kind. I get it. I’m the fool who thought … who hoped to change your mind.”

“You’re not a fool, Greg —”

His humourless laugh cut her off. “Yes, I am. I’m a big fool.” He pointed to the kitchen table with a resigned look etched in his face. “Breakfast is ready for you.” A crooked smile curved his lips. “The batch of fried yams that didn’t burn, I mean.”

“Greg …”

He waved his hand dismissively. “I’ll head out to Uni now.”

“Greg, please don’t be upset.”

“Save it, Oke.” He walked towards the kitchen door, and then, turned back just before he got there. “I’m done waiting for you, Oke. Done hoping for more. And it’s a shame, because I’m still young and can find another you quickly,” he said with a snarl touching his lips. Then, he lifted his shoulders in a half shrug and shot her a dismissive look with a shake of his head. “But you...? You’re thirty-five. A few more years and you’ll end up old and alone. Your loss, not mine.”

Oke remained silent, watching as he stalked out the room. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard that from a man she was dumping.

You’ll end up old and alone.

If she had a nickel for every time she’d heard that, or a paraphrased version thereof, from an irate man, she would have a large belt made of the silvery metal.

Funny, but it didn’t bother her one bit. Being old and alone was exactly what she wanted. Anything was better than being old and unhappy with a man who controlled her every move.

Blowing out a sigh, Oke waited a few more minutes until she heard the front door closing. She would need to change the locks. Some time ago, Greg had found her keys and made himself a copy without her permission. Although it had irked her, she’d allowed it because her three-bedroom house, sitting at the end of a cul-de-sac, was a tranquil place for him to study.

But now, who knew about him or what he’d do? It wouldn’t be the first time a guy turned vindictive. She hoped not, for both their sakes. Better he moved on quickly, and she would help by crediting his account with enough money to last him through his final year of medical school. He deserved that at least.

Several minutes later, after a half-hour yoga session, Oke hopped into the shower, eager to wash away the emotional and physical stress of the morning.

As bursts of warm water pelted her body from the shower head above, she scrubbed her skin gently with a net sponge, moving it round in circles. The

sponge slipped from her fingers, but she ignored it, determined to finish her wash quickly without it.

Her hand circled her left breast and moved to her right. Just as she dragged her palms to her under arm, she felt a hard lump at the outer corner of her breast. She halted, trailing her hand back and pressing it flat over the skin's surface. Yes. It was a hard lump alright.

At that, her heart pounded like a jack hammer in her chest as she moved her flattened palm over the fleshy globe of her breast. No matter how many angles she rotated it, she could still feel the lump. Small, but firm, at the side of her right breast. And unmovable.

As a doctor with more than eight years of clinical experience, she knew this wasn't anything to take lightly. She needed to see her family doctor as soon as possible and get it properly investigated. Cancer?

Oke's stomach plummeted. God. Could her morning get any worse?

Two



His eyes caught the time on the clock by his bedside, and he let out a long sigh. Four in the morning.

For the love of God. It had come back again. The waking up in the early hours of the morning for no reason at all.

Wearily, Arinze massaged his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and pulled himself upright on his bed.

Stretching out his arm, he pressed the switch by his bedside, and light flooded the room. No use trying to go back to sleep. All his attempts to shut his brain down and drift back into the land of blissful oblivion would only fail, leaving him even more exhausted.

The phenomenon had started shortly after Mary got her diagnosis. Cancer.

The words from the doctor's mouth—metastatic malignant tumour of the stomach—were like shards of ice piercing his eardrums. Other lethal words—terminal, palliative, and untreatable—had followed. And yet, he'd barely heard any of them, his soul already out of his body, floating off to an alternate universe where he and Mary would be safe.

They were not. Instead, they were thrust into a world of endless cycles of fear. Just six months later, his beloved wife had died.

From the day they received the final CT-scan report, sound sleep had eluded Arinze like a boxer dodging his opponent's blows. He would wake up suddenly

in the morning, no matter how tired he was, staring endlessly at Mary, worried sick that she would die while he was fast asleep, that he would miss her last moment.

His sleeplessness worsened when Mary's health deteriorated, turning into full-blown insomnia, and he barely caught an hour of sleep each night. The hell went on for six months, and then, she was gone. Which was when Arinze's real hell began.

Following her death, his brain seemed never to have recovered. Maybe he kept waking up hoping she would be there. Arinze didn't know. Whatever the reason, sleep and he had become strangers.

Arinze buried his face in his hands and shook his head. Would he ever get back to normal? Would his life ever go back to what it was before the love of his life fell ill?

He ground his jaw and hissed in frustration. He thought this shit was going away, that his sleeping pattern was getting better. A few months ago, he'd started dating again. His friend, Oke Amayo, had set him up with a lovely woman who looked and behaved just like his Mary. She'd been like a dream come true. A wonderful salve for his loss. After three dates with Nkem, a divorced single mother, he'd started to come alive again, slowly crawling out of the deep hole of heartache he had sunk into.

He'd even begun to sleep through the night again, gradually getting more than just four hours of slumber. But even that was short lived. It was clear that Nkem was still hung up on her ex-husband. That hadn't been the only reason, though. To be totally honest, he, too, was still hung up on his late wife. The match with Nkem had an expiration date before it even started.

Now, here he was again, back to being alone, his mind unable to shut down and his body laden with a deep-seated lethargy that had less to do with physical tiredness than with fatigue of his spirit.

Dragging in a laboured breath, Arinze stood to his feet. He lumbered over to the corner of his room and stood in front of a large painting of a young ballerina dressed in a white leotard and bright pink tutu, her arms and legs suspended in the air as she danced, her gaze intensely focused, as if competing for gold.

A tightness clutched at his chest as he stared at this prized possession—his last Christmas present from Mary. Neither a terminal cancer diagnosis, fatigue deep in her bones, nor pain beyond measure could stop her. She'd vowed to finish this painting. Her determination to carry on working, even in the face of such weakness, had upset him. But he'd tried to be supportive, telling himself maybe her love for her craft might keep her with him longer. Besides, when Mary made a commitment, she kept it. And she'd promised the client.

Not until Christmas morning, as they sat by the Christmas tree, and she watched him unwrap her gift to him, did Arinze know that her promise was to him. That he was her last, most beloved client.

He had broken down and cried like a baby, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly for several minutes. It had felt like a parting gift, and it really had been. She died only a week later.

Arinze swallowed hard, blinking back the tears in his eyes. Two years since Mary passed and this painting still had the power to reduce him into a quivering mess. He took a long breath in, stilling himself against the pain of loss, and lifted the painting. He pressed on the button behind it and angled his gaze sideways, watching as the wall parted to reveal his safe.

He punched in the code number on the embedded metal shelf and lifted the lid. His eyes locked on the shiny black semi-automatic handgun resting amidst all his important documents.

Arinze lifted the Glock and inspected it, turning it from side to side. He opened the bullet chamber and sighed in satisfaction. Fully loaded.

Reaching back into the safe, he flicked through multiple documents until he found what he was looking for. A final letter to his family.

He closed the safe again and walked back to his bed, gun and paper in hand. Sinking back onto the edge of his plush mattress, he eyed the gun one final time and inserted the muzzle into his mouth, closing his eyes as he curled his finger around the trigger.

One. Two. Three.

One. Two. Three.

One. Two. Three.

He pulled the gun out of his mouth and enabled the safety lock, tears rolling down his face. He couldn't do it. Couldn't bring such pain and grief to his parents or siblings. His body trembled as he cried. They didn't deserve to lose him like this. He had to find a less gruesome way. Maybe even make it look like an accident. That would be much better. They would never know how much pain he was in, or blame themselves for his death.

Arinze wasn't sure exactly how long he remained seated there, gun in hand and sobs racking his body. But the next thing he knew, he woke up again. He was sprawled out on the bed, the muzzle of the semi-automatic staring him in the face. He turned to the bedside clock. 8:15 a.m.

~

Seated at the executive chair in his office, wearing a black custom-made suit paired with a red-and-white silk tie, Arinze put on his game face. As always, he buried the pain in his heart deep down. He had to so he could function. And function he must. His entire family depended on him to run the Ibeh empire like clockwork, just as he had been doing since he graduated from university.

As the first-born child with a brother and a sister, he'd always been called upon to shoulder the responsibilities of the family. Especially during the years his father had been jailed by the military government for financially supporting the few newspapers bold enough to speak up against the government's tyranny. And so, at the tender age of twenty-two, he'd been expected to step up and take charge of the tech security company his father had started. He'd done so and expanded Standard Security Enterprise into an empire which now included real estate. Eventually his siblings had joined him in the business, but everyone still depended on him to run it.

"So what are you saying, Arinze? I'm not sure I understand," Nnanna asked, drawing him out of his musings.

Arinze smiled at his younger brother who sat on the sofa opposite him, amused by the younger man's incredulous facial expression. Although he was seven years older than Nnanna, they were close.

“I’m saying we have to take more risks. Use our own people to create these gadgets we keep importing from China and Malaysia.”

“But how can we be sure they would be able to produce quality products?”

“Why wouldn’t they be? Do the Chinese producing these have two heads with two brains that I don’t know about?” Arinze countered. “All we have to do is get an engineer from China to teach our top engineers here, and we can actually make the products ourselves. It would be cost effective for us in the long run, and we would be employing our own people.”

“Hmm … it’s like you’ve never been stabbed in the back before,” Ezinne, his younger sister, mumbled. Seated beside Nnanna, dressed in one of her typical multicoloured Ankara skirt suits, she fiddled with one of the blond locks that had escaped from the pile on her head.

Arinze turned to her. “What do you mean?”

“So, we teach our engineers to create state-of-the-art security technology that will make us millions, and we don’t expect one or more of them to use that expertise to start a competing company?”

Arinze shrugged. “That’s what non-compete clauses are for. We can have them sign one if we like.” Then, he lifted a pen from his desk and twirled it in his fingers while thinking. “But honestly speaking, competition is the spice of life. It makes people work harder and boosts creativity. Our family has monopolised this industry for way too long. Why not give others a chance?”

Two pairs of startled eyes stared back at him. Arinze suppressed a chuckle, completely understanding their surprise. He’d been cut-throat most of his adult life, doing almost anything to expand the family business. But after Mary fell ill, he’d begun to reconsider his values, what he found important in life. Feeling the need to change his way of thinking and make more room for others, he’d become involved in several charities, including founding Butterfly Children to help support orphans.

“Look, guys, we are blessed to have so much,” Arinze explained. “More than we need. Let’s employ more people, empower more of our citizens. If one of them decides to break free and soar on their own, I will consider it one of our great achievements.”

“Have you discussed this with Daddy?” Nnanna asked, eyes still wide as saucers.

Arinze bit back an annoyed retort. His brother knew all too well that their father had ceded all executive functions to him. “Since when do I need to ask his permission to make decisions?”

Nnanna raised a palm to Arinze. “I … I … sorry,” he stuttered anxiously. “Of course, I’m not saying you have to, but —”

“Forget it,” Arinze cut in. “Actually, I spoke to Dad about it, and he’s game. You know he’s always been about empowering the people. It’s a great way to do so.”

“You know what ...” Ezinne said, nodding her head several times as if still mulling over what she wanted to say. “I’m beginning to really like this idea. Nigeria has loads of brilliant electrical engineer graduates who are either unemployed or wasting their talent working in a bank. We would be putting their knowledge to good use and fulfilling their career dreams.”

“Finally, you get it,” Arinze said with a huge grin tugging his lips. “If we stop importing ready-made goods and make them ourselves, we not only empower fellow Nigerians, but we will also eventually save on costs.”

Silence ensued. Nnanna tapped his nails idly on the desk. Arinze could see that his brother wasn’t yet convinced. Typical. It would take time to win him over. As close as they were, Nnanna’s personality was way different. He lived his life precariously, indulging in fast cars and just as fast women. At only 27-years-old, he had showed no signs of slowing down. And for his extravagant lifestyle, he needed money. Boatloads of it. Any threat to his massive salary or bonuses would make him nervous. Arinze could understand that, but the young man needed to learn to curb his excesses soon. Life wasn’t always guaranteed. One needed to be more grounded and less materialistic.

“So, have you found the engineers to use?” Nnanna asked, breaking the silence.

Arinze shook his head. “Not yet. But I’m hoping to recruit the top five graduating students from the universities of Lagos, Nigeria, Abuja, Benin and Port Harcourt. We need about twenty to start off.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Ezinne said, giving Arinze a thumbs-up sign. “A really

good plan, brother."

Nnanna simply nodded without saying anything, clearly not yet on board. Knowing it would take time, Arinze steered the discussion to other issues and soon ended the meeting with plans to meet up again for lunch.

Several hours later, he stepped into Lighthouse Restaurant with his sister. The chilly air from the air conditioning soothed his skin.

"Damn, such a difference being indoors makes," Ezinne mumbled.

Arinze chuckled. "I swear, the heat outside could roast a complete turkey without any need to be in a kitchen."

"Honestly. This mid-March weather is from hell."

Laughter rumbled through him as the hostess led them to their table in a quiet corner. Arinze loved these moments with his siblings. Because they worked in the same building, they usually found themselves socialising mostly during lunch time. He cherished being able to laugh with his family without talking about business all the time. More so since losing Mary.

"Where's Nnanna?" he asked as soon as they settled down in their seats.

"He texted me to cancel. Didn't he text you, too?"

Arinze shook his head as he pulled out his phone from his trouser pocket and spotted the notification from Nnanna.

Sorry, have to cancel on you two. Having lunch with a hot mama instead.

"That boy and the girls, eh …" Arinze shook his head, twisting his lips in amusement.

"I swear. I hope he is double bagging sha. Because there are many desperate women hoping to become his baby mama."

"What?" Arinze's face heated up. Hearing his 25-year-old sister talk about sex always made him uncomfortable. He remembered holding her as a baby in his arms. Now, here she was, engaged to be married to a close family friend.

“Don’t act so shocked. His last girlfriend actually poked holes in a condom. He saw the packet she’d tossed in the bin, and she confessed. Thank God he talked her into taking the morning-after pill.”

Arinze’s mouth fell wide open. Na wa o. His siblings really were from a different generation. So freely talking about situations in which he couldn’t even imagine himself being in the first place.

Mary had been his first and only love. They’d been together since they met in the prep JAMB classes for the university entrance exams. The first time she’d walked into English class wearing a pair of shorts and a white t-shirt, her hair done into thick cornrows, her beauty had captivated him. He approached her during the lunch break, and she’d gifted him with the sweetest smile he’d ever seen. His heart melted.

They had become good friends before he’d allowed himself to think of her as more. When they finally crossed the line from friends to lovers, he was done for. He loved Mary so much that he’d not been with any other woman since then. He hadn’t attempted dating someone until eighteen months after her death, and it had been a disaster.

Listening to his sister talking about condoms made him feel so old and out of touch with the world around him. And he was only thirty-four.

“How are you?” Ezinne’s question, with a concerned lilt in her voice, reeled his mind back.

Arinze swallowed saliva. “I’m fine,” he said, offering his typical response to wade off any further questions.

“You … I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

Before she could answer, a young waitress stepped up to their table. Arinze waited patiently as his sister placed her order of roasted plantain, peppered stew, and fried turkey.

He knew everyone in the family had been concerned about him when Mary passed, but he’d assured them he was okay, and they’d stopped questioning him

about his feelings long ago. Why would his sister bring this up now?

She couldn't possibly know about his repeated suicidal thoughts. How would she? He'd never said anything about it to anyone, had made sure not to worry anyone with his challenges. Had she somehow found the gun he hid in the safe? Impossible. Nobody knew the password except his lawyer.

"And you, Mr Ibeh ... your usual?" the waiter said, turning to Arinze, halting his train of thought.

"You know my brother … of course, he always has fried rice and roast turkey. I don't think he knows anything else is on the menu."

Arinze chuckled. "My darling and annoying sister is right. Fried rice and roast turkey for me."

"Okay, Sir," the young girl said with a wide grin. "Your meals should be ready soon."

They thanked the waitress and remained silent as she walked away. He turned to his sister when they were alone again. "Why are you worried about me?" he asked, still concerned that she was aware of his suicidal tendencies.

"Well … I … you've been a hermit for months. You hardly socialise anymore."

"Oh!" Relief sliced through him. The last thing he wanted was to bother anyone in his family with his internal struggles. He was the first-born child, the one in charge of the family business. If they worried about his mental stability, all hell could break loose.

"I mean, you've been isolated. Driving from home to work and back again, and only briefly showing your face for your charity events. Nothing else." She gazed at him, eyebrows knitted, and forehead creased with worry. "What about the woman you were seeing? You seemed happier when I saw her with you a few months ago."

Arinze shrugged. "I don't need a woman to be happy."

"I'm not saying you do. I'm just … I'm saying you came out more and became more of your old self."

Arinze had to agree. The one month he'd spent with Nkem Edun had given him some hope, made him feel a bit more positive about dating again. But it had only been a mirage. Nkem reminded him so much of Mary, which was the only reason he'd chased after her. Not because he really wanted her. No other woman could hold a candle to Mary. How could he ever want someone else?

"We're done," he answered with a wry twist of his mouth. "She is back with her ex."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He made a non-committal sound. "It is what it is."

"But there are other women you could go out with … I can set you up —"

He stopped her with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Nope. Don't need any more setups. I'm too screwed up in the head to date anyone for now," he muttered. "I miss Mary so much. I'm just not ready to move on yet."

His sister released a resigned sigh. "I understand, Arinze, but it's been two years. You need to try and move on. Mary wouldn't want this for you. She wouldn't want you to be isolated and miserable."

"I'm not miserable," he objected in a low tone.

She huffed. "Yes, you are. And I believe you're depressed."

"Depressed? So now you're a psychiatrist?"

"I don't need to be one to know that you're not the same Arinze I knew before all this happened," his sister said in a matter-of-fact tone, as though reading an article. "You keep to yourself. You stopped playing golf. And you're always so distant, as if in your own world. Plus, I can't remember when you last went on vacation … or did anything for yourself."

Arinze opened his mouth and then pressed his lips back together. Much as he wanted to contradict Ezinne, he could not. He spent his days immersing himself in work, ensuring his mind stayed occupied. Because any time he allowed his thoughts to still, the pain of his loss flooded the empty spaces in his mind. He hated being around people, seeing everyone else happy when he was locked in

his grief. So, he avoided family gatherings as much as possible.

“Arinze,” Ezinne called out softly. “I think you need to see a doctor for depression.”

“What? I’m not depressed.” He shook his head vehemently. “I’m grieving. There’s a big difference.”

Without responding to his objection, Ezinne unhooked her sling bag from where it hung on her chair, reached into it, and fished out a card. “There’s the name of my family doctor,” she said, handing it to him. “She’ll know what to do to help you.”

Arinze glanced at the card for several beats, taken aback by the decisiveness of his sister’s approach. She really seemed convinced he needed help. Did he? Was he depressed?

“Please see a doctor, Arinze. The rate of suicide in men is higher because of denial of their mental health problems.”

His heart lurched as his gaze jumped back to Ezinne’s. Did she know? Had she sensed his frequent battle with the desire to end his life?

“Remember Alex? My classmate who didn’t face his depression until it was too late,” she said, her voice shaky, her eyes glossing over with a film of tears. “I wish he’d seen a doctor before … before …” She trailed off, wiping the errant teardrop that had rolled to her cheeks.

Arinze swallowed hard and glanced at the card again. Yes, he recalled how devastated Ezinne had been when she recounted the news about Alex. He’d committed suicide last year by jumping from a tall building. But was he in the same category as Alex? Surely, grief and depression weren’t the same thing. Was his sister right? Did he really need to see a doctor?

The waitress appeared at their table with their food, interrupting his thoughts. He tucked the card into his breast pocket, shelving his uncertainties for another time.

Three



Heart thumping and stomach roiling, Oke lay on the examination table, watching as the doctor pressed the ultrasound probe on her right breast.

She angled her head towards the screen in front of her, heart in her throat. Yesterday, her family doctor had confirmed the breast lump after a physical examination, and referred her for an immediate ultrasound in the same building. So here she was, anxiety eroding her digestive system as the radiologist Dr Uko sat beside her and checked for further confirmation of the nature of the breast lump.

“You can see from the screen, there’s a dark shadow surrounded by the dense grey area,” the doctor said, pointing to the ultrasound display. “It’s a solid mass which seems highly suspicious.”

Oke’s heart sank. She’d expected this. The lump she felt had been firm and well-defined. From med school, she already knew that was a red flag. When her family doctor had shared the same sentiments after examining her, Oke’s fears had been confirmed.

As certain as the logical part of her was about the impending diagnosis, she had to fight to accept it. Could there be a mistake somewhere? Maybe this wasn’t really happening. Maybe the ultrasound would contradict the physical examination. Still, she knew deep down that she was dealing with something serious.

She had asked that the family doctor and the radiologist be straight with her and give her their truest impressions of the situation.

Don’t mince words with me. I need to know everything.

As a doctor herself, Oke wanted to be involved in the entire diagnostic process. Straining her eyes, she concentrated on the grey-and-black image on the screen. It had been a long time since she reported an ultrasound scan, so she couldn’t tell the fine details of the breast tissue on display, but she could clearly see the area of concern. A well circumscribed opaque area in the centre of grey shadows.

She held her breath as the radiographer moved the white probe around her breast for several more minutes in silence before she lifted it from her body.

“You can get dressed now, so we can talk,” she said, withdrawing behind the curtain.

Oke sat up, picked up her blouse from the chair beside her and put it on, her fingers shaking as she did the buttons. This seemed like a dream, one she hoped to wake up from.

With leaden feet, she dragged herself back to the consultation table where Dr Uko was already seated, typing at the keyboard of her desktop computer. She looked up, flashing Oke a warm smile. The kind that showed empathy, but also a need to get on with the rest of her day.

“Please have a seat,” she said.

“Thank you,” Oke mumbled, pulling out the cushioned chair opposite Dr Uko and sinking into it.

“I read your file, and I know you’re a plastic surgeon with a medical background, so I would like to be as honest as possible.” She inhaled, fiddled with the desktop mouse, clearly hating to be the bearer of bad news. “Although you will need further investigations, like a diagnostic mammogram, some blood workup, and a biopsy, I believe we are dealing with breast cancer from today’s scan.”

There. The C word. Cancer. Breast cancer. As a medic herself who had been on the other side of the table, she knew that doctors didn’t throw around the word unless they were sure.

Oke remained mute, unable to utter a single word. She felt numb, like her mind

had evaporated from her body, leaving her present physically, but soulless.

“Of course, I’ll send a detailed report to Dr Adebayo, so she can coordinate all the further investigations you’ll need.”

Oke gazed at the slender, dark-skinned radiologist as she spoke, focusing on the large mole on the side of her lip. Would she want it removed? Should she offer the woman a consultation at Blossom Health for a cosmetic removal of the lobulated birthmark? Would the doctor take up that offer?

“Any questions?”

Dr Uko’s voice crashed through her errant thoughts. Oke shook her head. She knew the drill. Two years ago, she’d made the same diagnosis on a woman who came in for a breast augmentation consultation. During the typical clinical examination, she’d discovered that the 55-year-old woman had a lump on her left breast, which had unfortunately turned out to be cancer. The woman had survived only eighteen months after diagnosis because it had spread.

Would that happen to her? Was there now a time clock counting down to the end of her life?

Swallowing hard, Oke pinned her gaze on Dr Uko, whose eyebrows angled together in concern, the corners of her lips drooping downwards in a pitiful frown.

“Do you have family members who can come with you for your appointments?”

Oke thought about her sister and only sibling she knew—a busy bank manager with three children who was married to an equally busy entrepreneur. She couldn’t burden Ufuoma with her troubles. Not yet. Not until she knew all the details of her diagnosis for sure. She shook her head.

“Friends?”

The image of her best friend since university popped to her mind. Nkem Edun would drop everything to be by her side this instant. But she’d only just reunited with her ex-husband after a painful divorce, and was still basking in the ecstasy of that reunion. Bothering her bestie with her illness, when Nkem had finally found happiness again after years of living in misery, would be horrible. Bad

idea.

Her two partners at work were completely out of the question. She loved Segun and Tunde with all her heart, but she didn't want their pity. Besides, Tunde was her bestie's husband.

Plus, she wanted the two men to continue seeing her as their equal. Being the only female surgeon in the practice, she'd fought hard for patients to take her seriously. Any sign of weakness would only make her partners overprotective. They'd stop assigning her surgeries. She couldn't bear that. No. Until she dropped dead or became too ill to work, she didn't want them to know the details of her illness yet.

Her parents …? No, those two were a joke. Absent from her life since she was ten, they were the last people she would ever need support from. Heck, they'd never even attempted to contact her when she was healthy. They'd be completely unreliable if she became sick. Besides, she hadn't heard from them in forever.

The last time she had heard anything about her father, she found out he'd relocated to South Africa with his fourth wife. As for her mother … Oke knew exactly where she lived. But hell would freeze over before she sought any help from the woman who had shipped her sister and her off to live with their grandmother because her new boyfriend didn't want children.

"No," Oke murmured, shaking her head again, eliciting another pitiful look from Dr Uko.

"That's difficult," Dr Uko said. "For this kind of diagnosis, you'll need a lot of support."

Oke's throat tightened. Although hard to hear, she knew it was true. She had nobody she could think of to help through this turbulent period. Not a soul. And for the first time ever, she felt truly alone.

You'll end up old and alone.

Greg's parting shot popped into her head. Damn! She was already experiencing the loneliness he predicted. But it was even worse. She could end up dying young and alone.

~

I believe you're depressed.

Ezinne's confident diagnosis buzzed in his head like a mosquito trapped inside a net. Persistent and irritating.

Depressed? Couldn't be. He was grieving. He had a right to be upset, didn't he? Losing the love of one's life would do that to anyone. Nothing peculiar about that. He'd known Mary for more than fifteen years, been married to her for over a decade. Theirs had been a deep bond of love and trust which had been cut off abruptly and brutally. Any normal person would grieve like he was doing. That was expected, wasn't it?

"What the hell am I doing here?" Arinze muttered under his breath, glancing around the waiting room.

The moderately sized space contained several chairs in a U-shaped seating arrangement. A large, flat-screen television was mounted on the wall.

Three other people sat at various corners of the room, probably also waiting to see Dr Adebayo, the family physician Ezinne had referred him to.

For days, Arinze had balked at his sister's recommendation, completely aghast by the mere suggestion that he had a mental health problem.

Yes, he had picked up the gun many times, toying with the idea of ending his life. But he knew he would never do it. He had too many responsibilities to too many people. His parents, siblings, employees, the charities he ran. His death would cause too much upheaval, personally and business-wise.

His pseudo-dance with suicide didn't mean a thing. It was just his way of venting. He'd been doing it for more than a year. If he really wanted to kill himself, he would have done so by now, wouldn't he? His sister was dead wrong. He wasn't depressed.

So again, why the hell had he taken time off his busy schedule, and driven eight miles to Island Hospital to sit and wait for a doctor? Why had he allowed his sister's observation to get into his head?

Yesterday morning after waking up again in the wee hours and being unable to fall back asleep, he'd become restless, thinking about Ezinne's concerns, wondering if she was on to something. He'd pondered his sister's idea of seeing a doctor, even googling the symptoms of depression to see if her advice bore any merit. And what he found left him a little stunned.

Early morning waking.

Poor sleep.

Suicidal ideation.

Feelings of helplessness.

Anhedonia.

He'd had to look that last one up—loss of enjoyment of previously enjoyable activities.

All the symptoms were eerily reminiscent of his experience. So, he'd gone out on a limb and called the clinic to arrange an appointment for today. Not that he was at all convinced he suffered from depression, but it couldn't hurt to hear what the doctor had to say.

Arinze swept his gaze around one more time, feeling self-conscious as he studied the waiting room's two other occupants. One was a young woman dressed in a pale-blue blouse and a pair of jeans, her eyes glued to her phone. The man sitting two seats from her had on a black kaftan shirt and trousers, his focus pointedly on the wall opposite him, completely lost in thought. Were they here for the same reason?

Arinze never visited doctors before Mary fell ill. He'd been blessed with good health all his life and only ever self-medicated for malaria a few times. It had come as a complete shock to him how much he hated being in hospital after Mary's diagnosis. His every visit left him feeling even more anxious about the next one. Something about being surrounded with illness gave him the jitters. When Mary had insisted that she wanted no further chemotherapy, he'd been upset with her for giving up the fight. But somewhere deep inside, he'd also

been relieved. He'd arranged for in-home, palliative care, ensuring that her last months on earth had been as pain-free as possible.

Yet, here he was, sitting in another clinic, about to immerse himself in a world he disliked. What if the doctor agreed with Ezinne? Would she put him on medication? Recommend a psychiatrist? What if … my Lord, she wouldn't possibly admit him to a mental health facility, would she? His stomach plunged at the thought. No way. He needed to get out of here.

Just as he made a move to rise, the door to Dr Adebayo's office swung open and a woman walked out, her posture drooping and her head cast downwards.

Something seemed familiar about her. Although she didn't look his way, and he couldn't see her face, her long braids packed in a bun, her petite figure and the way she walked with a familiar boyish bounce, drew his attention.

"Oke?" he murmured with uncertainty.

She swung her head up and swivelled her body in his direction. Curious eyes turned toward him before registering recognition. They widened in horror and then snapped shut as if to block him out. Turning back in the direction she'd been headed, she quickened her feet and dashed out of the room without a word.

What the heck was that? Arinze sprang up and rushed after her. "Oke," he called out as soon as he spotted her in the hallway, marching with speed and determination as if the devil nipped at her heels.

"Please leave me alone," she snapped in a raspy tone, sniffling and wiping her cheeks.

She had her back to him, but Arinze had the distinct feeling that she was crying. Crying ...why?

Common sense told him to stop—to turn away and walk back into the doctor's waiting room. To leave her alone like she'd asked. After all, they weren't that close, and he should respect her privacy. But for the life of him, he couldn't seem to help himself. He kept walking, following silently behind her until she exited the building.

Something was terribly wrong with Oke. He could sense it. She must have been

crying because she swiped at her cheeks as she walked. Apart from her obvious tears, her uncharacteristically bowed posture as she rudely pushed to escape him was more than telling.

He'd known Oke Amayo two years now, and knew one thing about her for sure. She never cowered from anyone or anything. From the first day he'd met her at Mary's funeral, he'd known Oke wasn't like the women he was used to—demure and reserved—at least in public. Nope. She played by her own set of rules.

She had not been on the guest list, but his distant cousin's wife couldn't make it, so her sister—Oke—had accompanied him. Their first meeting had been way awkward. He'd just stepped out of the funeral venue's restroom and stumbled on a woman with her back to him and speaking on the phone.

"Damn, I hate funerals," she'd said. "Always makes me think about death and endings … and in a strange way, that makes me horny."

Shocked to hear someone talk so brazenly, he'd come to a dead halt, not entirely sure why he was eavesdropping, but unable to move a muscle.

"Honestly, everyone is wearing black and crying. And me? All I can think about is escaping it all to fuck. I mean, there must be something about dying that makes me think of orgasms." She let out a little laugh, her back still facing him and totally unaware that anyone was listening. "Are you available this evening? I'll send an Uber to pick you up and drop you off —"

He must have made a sound, because she suddenly turned in his direction. Her eyes got big, and her mouth fell wide open. He'd been startled, too. So embarrassing to be caught eavesdropping. Still, he'd remained immobilised, unable to do anything but stare back at her.

After seconds of the silent stand-off, she'd placed the phone back against her cheek, turned away from him, and continued with her conversation as if nothing had happened.

"So, Femi, are you game for a little toss and tumble tonight or what?"

Her carefree, totally brash question breezed past Arinze's ears as he continued on his way to his other guests.

Finding out she was the sister of his cousin's wife became even more mortifying icing on the cake. He'd hoped to avoid her whenever they bumped into each other in the future, but she hadn't allowed it, making sure to smile and say hello to him each time.

In the most unlikely turn of events, he finally let go of his reticence and they'd become friends. Nobody could call them close. But for some reason, maybe because there was zero risk of a romantic relationship between them, given her views on the subject, they could just enjoy each other's company with no complicated underlying subtext.

So why on earth was she running from him like he really was the devil … trying to drag her into hell?

"Oke, what's going on?" He made one final attempt to get her attention, to find out what was going on with her.

She came to an abrupt halt and whirled back to him in a puff of annoyance. "I said, leave me alone, Arinze," she hissed. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why do you always have to act like everyone's big brother? Don't you have a life of your own?"

Completely taken aback by the attack, he recoiled both physically and emotionally. Her eyes were red and puffy, her full lips quivered, and the fingers clutching her purse trembled, but there was something haunting about the glare in her eyes that gave him pause. Something that sent dread snaking up his spine.

"Find a hobby or go back to playing golf. Get yourself a girlfriend or even someone to screw," she spat out, still heated up. "You can't continue to use Mary as an excuse. She's been dead for two years. Get a fucking life, and stop trying to fix everyone else's."

"W-what?"

"Yes, stay away from me and get back to the land of the living, Arinze. Do you want to be surrounded by death again or attend another funeral just two years after Mary died?"

Her comment stung him like he'd been sliced open with one of her surgical tools without the benefit of anaesthesia. He took a step back, a surge of annoyance

bellowing inside him. How could Oke talk to him like this? With so much venom.

They'd hung out only two Saturdays ago at a comedy show listening to Bovi cracking jokes on stage. He'd been given an extra ticket by the owner of the lounge, and had invited her to attend with him. A lovely evening which ended up with them having dinner afterwards. What could have happened between then and now to precipitate such an outburst?

"What are you talking about, Oke? Why are you acting this way?"

"Don't you get it? Stay far away from me."

"Why? Please tell me. What's going on?"

His earnest question seemed to have finally broken through her cloud of charged emotions, because her shoulders fell, and she began to tremble all over. Several seconds of silence followed. Her chest heaved as she took rapid calming breaths.

"I have breast cancer, Arinze," she murmured finally, her tone low, all the fight seemingly drained from her. "I may be dying soon, too."

Four



“You have absolutely no evidence it’s terminal, Oke. Don’t go borrowing trouble.”

Taking a sip of her coffee, Oke cast her eyes on the man seated opposite her. For the hundredth time since she’d revealed her illness to Arinze, she cursed herself inwardly. He had watched one person die of a similar ailment. Someone he loved dearly. Was it really fair to burden him with her own possible morbidity, too? She should put a stop to this ridiculous conversation and spare him the trauma.

After her bombshell revelation at the hospital, she’d told him to walk away and leave her alone. Instead, he’d insisted on making sure she was okay, at least well enough to drive herself back home. So, here they were in the hospital café for a drink, giving her some time to get herself together.

For the past fifteen minutes, while they nursed instant coffees, she’d been filling him in on how she’d discovered her breast lump and the diagnostic investigations she’d had so far.

“I usually don’t have any luck with this kind of thing,” she said, then took another sip of her drink. “I know when the CT-scan report comes back, it will be bad news. I just want to prepare myself mentally for the worst.”

“But they may have caught it early. It’s possible it hasn’t spread yet.”

“Possible, but unlikely.” Oke lowered her coffee mug onto the oval table and pulled her lips into her mouth. Could she be that lucky? Was it possible for her to escape the devastation of terminal cancer? She knew what was in store for her if

her breast cancer had spread. A long, protracted period of anguish both physically and emotionally. She'd seen it all before.

Years in medical school seeing the pain of sickness and disease had taken their toll on Oke. She'd been quite a studious student, highly involved in clinical work and had been privy to the difficulties of sick patients and their families. Children born with deformities, people in agony after ghastly accidents, babies suffering from terminal illnesses … every experience with her patients had beaten her, knocking her down emotionally one blow at a time.

She'd always considered herself a strong person, a fighter. Heck, she was the elder of two children abandoned by both parents. Moved from a luxurious home in the city to a dilapidated house in the village with her maternal grandmother and zero financial support from her mother or father.

She'd promised herself she would break out of poverty and look after her sister and grandmother. And she'd done it. She'd worked hard in school and helped her grandmother manage the poultry farm that provided their main source of income.

The decision to become a doctor had been simple. She was a natural when it came to sciences and had discovered that medical doctors were some of the most highly paid scientists in Nigeria. So, she'd applied for medicine in University of Benin after scoring a whooping 299 in JAMB. She'd been thrilled to begin her medical courses, enjoying the basic sciences of med school.

But then came the clinical aspect of the training, and she soon realised how deeply dealing with others suffering from pain and disease affected her. Sometimes, Oke found herself crying with patients, sitting by their bedside and holding their hands as they sobbed, or giving some of her pocket money to patients who couldn't afford treatment. She gradually began to feel way out of her depth, drained by the toll it took on her emotions. She had even considered dropping out. Until she attended a career course in her final year of university, where her entire perspective changed.

She'd been blown away by the vast variety of medical sub-specialities available. The idea of plastic surgery intrigued her. It had been an easy decision to follow the path of reconstructive medicine. She would rather use her medical skills to adorn and beautify patients, than hold their hands and watch them slip away no

matter what she did.

“When is your CT report due?” Arinze asked, drawing her back to the present. She glanced up at him, watching as he lifted his coffee to his lips and sipped.

His large hands seemed to cover the entire mug, as his long and slender fingers with well-trimmed nails caressed the ceramic, moving in slow circles that mesmerised her for seconds. Embarrassed to be concentrating on his hands, she catapulted her gaze to his face.

“Next week,” she replied, a slow flush creeping up her neck.

This wasn’t her first time ogling him. Nope. For the two years they’d known each other, she’d occasionally found herself admiring him. She couldn’t help it. Arinze was a handsome man.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he had a sexy athletic build. And kind of like her, his smooth brown skin shone like warm honey. And that face … high cheekbones, full lips, and the sexiest eyes she’d ever seen on a man. His pupils were light brown, but seemed to occasionally change to a mesmerising darker chocolate shade, and his eyelashes were long, perfectly curved like the false ones she stuck over her own getting ready for a party. Thick, well-trimmed eyebrows rested atop his stunning eyes like tempting icing on a cake. In short, Arinze Ibeh was worthy of a romance movie lead, and she found him insanely attractive.

And yet, for someone who never hesitated to pursue an attractive man, Oke had never once considered making a move on Arinze. Talk about a train wreck waiting to happen. He was just way too intense, too serious about relationships. Completely different from her. He constantly talked about his late wife, how much he loved and missed her. It wouldn’t be right to lead him on, knowing his history and that she had no intention of a serious relationship. So, she’d tucked away any physical attraction she felt for him, and they’d settled into a casual friendship instead.

Besides, she probably wasn’t his type either. She reckoned he preferred sugary sweet, family-oriented women. Genetic traits the good Lord hadn’t seen fit to equip her with.

She and Arinze would be a match made from hell. And now, with her cancer diagnosis, there was an even stronger reason to keep the relationship platonic.

He’d been there before, catering to a sick woman. She couldn’t drag him back to that misery.

“So, wait until then to face the hurdle instead of anticipating the worst,” he said, his reasonable advice floating into her ears like velvet on the skin. His voice had always possessed a soothing quality. Even and firm, like a man used to relaying calm-inducing solutions to team members.

Unfortunately, her cancer may have spread, and none of his attempts at reassurance would be enough to save her. She could be dying right now.

“I can’t help it, Arinze. I’ve been imagining the worst … like what if it’s gone to my brain, my bones? What if I have mere weeks to live?”

“Don’t think like that. You have to take things one day at a time.” He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “Trust me, it’s always better to face each hurdle as it comes.”

Oke’s heart bumped into her chest as their eyes locked. His warm brown eyes dulled, as if he’d just transported himself into a dark place, somewhere she couldn’t share with him. Was he thinking about Mary? About her fight with cancer and how it affected him?

She longed to pepper him with questions about it all. How Mary and he coped with knowing the end was near for her. Did they resign themselves to her fate? Did they fight until the last day? Oke worried about the possibility of medical treatment just to prolong life, not to cure a disease. She’d thought about the possibility of palliative treatment and revolted violently in her spirit. She didn’t want any of that. Instead, swift death would be preferable. If dying was the final destination, why not travel there on her own terms?

From the agony reflecting in Arinze’s eyes, she knew asking him about Mary’s death wouldn’t be a good idea now. He was trying to be positive for her, and she didn’t want her fears and pessimism to ruin that. She’d already started thinking about the end of her life.

Today, she’d had a CT scan, and tomorrow, she would be coming in for her biopsy. The final stage of the diagnostic process. Soon, she would know the verdict … whether, and how soon, death was in store for her.

“I know,” she said instead, trying her best to keep the tremor from her voice. “I just wish I knew everything now so that I could plan.”

“Plan ...?!” Arinze’s eyes shot open in astonishment. “You can’t plan this sort of thing.”

“Well, I know for sure that if I’m going to die, I’d rather do it on my own terms, find a way to end it myself instead of waiting for cancer to finish me off —”

The sharp withdrawal of his hand from hers halted Oke’s words. He became very still, his face clouding over into a mask of torment. “Don’t you ever say that,” he growled.

So low and tortured came the rumble of his voice, it made her insides churn. Had she hit a raw nerve? Was he thinking about Mary now? Oke’s stomach tossed and turned. Right now, she was annoyed with herself for dragging Arinze back down that hellish rabbit hole. He really had not moved on, and she had no right to pull him into her own health troubles.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I shouldn’t be bothering you with my bullshit.”

He sighed. “You’re not bothering me, Oke.” Leaning forward to get her complete attention, he added. “I believe that I saw you today for a reason.”

Oke quirked a brow sceptically. “I don’t believe in that kind of stuff.”

“Well, I do. And I want to be here for you throughout your cancer jour —”

She cut him off with a fierce shake of her head. “No … no, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking me to do anything. I would like to help in any way possible while you’re going through this.”

“I … I …” Her lips remained parted as her head readied her mouth with all sorts of objections to his offer. She should tell him that she had enough support. Good friends that loved her. And her sister and best friend who would gladly leave everything to be here by her side.

With a sigh, she clamped her mouth back shut. In all honesty, she knew that she

really didn’t want to involve anyone else just yet. She didn’t need them worrying about her until they had to.

“We’re friends, Oke. And you can’t deny I have some experience dealing with this,” he pressed, as if sensing her weakening. “Yes, I know you have many other friends and family who can step in, but I'd like to help, too. Cancer can be an isolating sickness, and you need more people in your corner. Not less.”

Oke remained silent, a ball of emotions forming a wedge that lodged in her throat. Arinze had always been a kind person. The kind of friend one wanted in their corner. Another reason why she’d fought her physical attraction to him. She’d never wanted to destroy the easy rapport they shared by crossing the line with him. They were not the best of friends, but they hung out every now and again and always had a great time whenever they did.

He’d invited her a few times to accompany him for his various charity events, and they’d also gone on a couple of other fun outings. He was still grieving the loss of his wife, and she had even tried to help get him back on the dating scene by introducing him to her friend. That hadn’t worked. In fact, it actually seemed to have set him back further, so she’d decided to leave him be and let him find his own way out of his grief. And his disposition had improved since then. Did she really want to take the chance of her cancer journey setting him back?

“Whatever you need, I’ll be there.”

His deep voice reverberated within her. She couldn’t resist this offer. Not when his warm, brown eyes were bathed in such earnestness, such kindness. The ball of emotion wedged in her throat receded, finally allowing her to swallow. What harm could it do to let such a good man in her life?

Maybe she’d been looking at it the wrong way. Maybe being here for her during her battle with cancer was his own way of returning the favour for all the times she’d been there for him. Why take that away from him?

“Okay,” she said finally, nodding her head.

Five



Using a 15 blade, Oke sliced the skin under the breast of the unconscious woman on her table, and used a sterilised gauze to dab away the blood that seeped through.

With a skill owing to years of experience, she kept the surgical knife at the appropriate angle, putting just the right amount of pressure on the skin so that she cut through the marked area adequately.

This was her second breast augmentation surgery today. The first one had been smooth sailing, lasting just under two hours. Hopefully, this one would go without any glitches, too.

Keeping her focus on her task, she clamped her jaw tightly, trying her best to curtail any worries about her own health from springing to mind. It hadn't worked during the earlier surgery, and wasn't working now. Her brain just wouldn't stop going there. Soon, she would be the one lying down on someone else's surgical table, her right breast being hacked away from her body like a dead branch off a tree.

She swallowed hard, digging a gloved finger into the exposed breast tissue to check the depth of incision she'd made.

Just her luck that today of all days, the only two breast augmentations scheduled were assigned to her. If her partners had any inkling what she was going through, if they knew that she had an appointment with Dr Adebayo later in the day to discuss her CT scan and biopsy results, they would have pulled her off this surgery.

Segun and Tunde were way too overprotective. They would have coddled her, sent her home, and even worse, forced her to take sick leave. Never. That would make things worse. She needed her mind busy, a diversion from her anxieties. What better distraction than performing surgery to enhance other women's breasts instead of thinking about the impending loss of hers? She'd rather spend all morning making women happy about their looks than thinking about losing a part of her body or worrying about dying.

"Hey, Oke, need me to assist? I'm done with all my liposuctions for the day."

Oke turned towards the theatre room door and smiled at Tunde, one of her partners at Blossom Health. They'd met at university when he began dating Nkem, her roommate and best friend. He had been in the class ahead of her in med school, and the three of them had become quite close. When she'd found out that he also wanted to specialise in plastic surgery, she'd been thrilled. They had worked together to get admission to NYU Presbyterian for their training.

On returning to Nigeria, they'd agreed to set up this practice with Segun, a fellow Nigerian they'd met in their residency program in New York.

So far, Blossom Health was booming, fast becoming one of the best reconstructive surgery centres in West Africa. She liked Tunde and Segun's work ethic, and they functioned well as a team, working together to ensure their clients were well looked after.

"Yes, please," she said. "I started thirty minutes ago. You can help with the left breast."

"Let me scrub in, and I'll be with you soon."

"Thanks."

Turning her attention back to her anaesthetised patient, she instructed the theatre nurse to hand her the tissue forceps and carried on with her work.

A short time later, a sterile-gowned Tunde stepped into the room and settled opposite her. He glanced down at the patient and shook his head. "Only twenty-two years old and already changing her body. For what?"

Oke twisted her lips. "You're the only plastic surgeon I know who judges his

patients."

Without responding, Tunde stretched his hand to the theatre nurse, a middle-aged woman perched at the corner of the operating table, a tray full of surgical instruments in front of her. "15 blade please, Bisi," he said.

He collected the thin scalpel from her and pulled open the sterile cloth covering the patient's left breast. Making a similar incision along the marked blue line under her breast, he let out a low grunt. "You have to admit she's way too young to have breast implants," he said, dabbing at the blood oozing from the incision with a gauze. "I mean, what ever happened to simply wearing a padded bra? Who is she trying to impress?"

"Oh, stop being judgemental, Tunde," Oke countered. "She doesn't need to impress anyone. She's over eighteen and well in her right mind to make this decision. She wants this so she can have the confidence to pursue a career in showbiz."

"So, you're saying that one needs big breasts to be an entertainer now? That's pathetic."

"It's the way it is, Tunde. The world looks for outward perfection first." Oke separated the incised skin apart with a retractor and reached for the silicone implant. "This larger D-cup is likely to give her that shot in a movie before her talent is even noticed."

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"It's not. Many women are judged first by how they look. We may not like to hear it, but it's the truth."

"The real truth is that the majority of men don't give a fuck about all that. Natural tits are always better."

"And you think women always undergo cosmetic surgery to be attractive to men?" Oke shook her head. "For someone who is usually open-minded, you sometimes surprise me with your archaic way of reasoning."

"Well, isn't it about attracting the opposite sex? Why else would any woman put herself under the knife to alter her body?"

“Maybe because she wants to look good in clothes. To increase her confidence. Or even appreciate her nakedness. There are numerous reasons a woman would undergo plastic surgery that have nothing to do with a man.”

“I … I just don’t get it.” He glanced at the client lying on their theatre table. “This young woman has her whole life ahead of her. She should be showcasing her talent as an actress instead of getting bigger boobs to land a role.”

“It’s not that simple.” Oke suppressed a frustrated sigh. She loved Tunde. Had become an instant friend to him because he was a wonderful partner to her bestie Nkem. Even during the rough patch he and Nkem had gone through because of his infidelity, she’d not taken sides. She’d been there for them both. He’d not only taken full responsibility for his role in the demise of their relationship, but he’d also been putting extra effort to make amends after their reunion.

Without a doubt, she knew Tunde had a heart of gold. Oke couldn’t be happier that her best friend had reconciled with him. His dedication to his job and their partnership was another reason why she loved and respected him. However, there were times she wondered why he ever chose to become a plastic surgeon. His aversion to cosmetic surgery irked her.

How could he not understand that some people wanted to alter their bodies to improve their mental health and self-confidence ... that not all cosmetic surgery was because of simple vanity?

“Would you have noticed Nkem if she wasn’t tall, light-skinned, with a lovely hour-glass figure and long hair? Would you have looked twice at her that day you met her in UniBen?”

“Of course. It wasn’t just her looks that attracted me to her.”

“But her looks played a part, didn’t it?”

“Well …”

“This actress wants that opportunity first. And having no tits in an industry filled with well-stacked women would put her at a disadvantage.”

“I get a bit of what you mean. But still, I find it silly. Look at penile enlargements for example. I’ve done three this week. I have one scheduled for

next week. I wish I could have talked them all out of it."

Oke raised her head to glare at him. Although she couldn't see half his face, which was covered with a surgical face mask, she could almost picture the annoying smirk he usually made when discussing phalloplasty. "Please don't. That's not our job. We're here to safely make our clients happy."

"I won't, Oke. I don't want you or Segun to crucify me." He gave a little laugh. "I'm just saying that many men should know that size isn't really what matters to women, but how they use it. What's the point of a big dick that can't fuck properly?"

Laughter rose in the air. Oke chuckled, too, shaking her head at the anaesthetist Dr Ajao and Bisi, both of whom seemed so thoroughly amused by Tunde's comment that they shook as they bellowed.

"But it's true nau," Tunde insisted, still chuckling. "They spend all that money getting big dicks, yet wonder why their women still aren't having orgasms."

"And here you go again thinking men have penile augmentation to please women."

"Unless they are gay, who else are they trying to please?"

"I give up," Oke muttered in exasperation. "If you can't understand that there are many reasons people may want to alter how they look that have nothing to do with attracting a sexual partner, I can't help you."

"Trust me, Oke, I get your point. It's just sad that the world is gradually changing to the point where the outward overshadows what's inside. It's pathetic."

Several minutes later, Oke finished up the last stitch and tossed her instruments to the pile of used ones beside her. She stood back to observe her handwork with a proud smile.

On some level, she agreed with Tunde. Many of their clients booked cosmetic surgery because of a new partner in their lives, the fear of looking older and less attractive to their spouse, or even because they were searching for a new love interest. Many believed that a change in their physical appearance would

increase their desirability.

At first, that had put her off, too. But she'd come to accept that the reason really didn't matter. Ensuring their patients were of sound mind to make an informed decision mattered … period. Which was why they had Dr Hussain, the in-house psychologist, vet all their patients. She made sure that anyone who eventually had their surgical request accepted was emotionally stable enough to make the decision.

Nancy Orabile, the twenty-year-old Nollywood actress on their surgical table, had been vetted. She'd claimed her A-cup breast size had been the main reason she lost a vital role that involved semi-nudity, and she didn't want that to happen again. She wanted to feel more confident auditioning for parts, without worrying that her small breasts would disqualify her.

Looking at the perfect globe of Nancy's right breast that she'd just created, Oke couldn't be prouder. She'd given this woman what she wanted in a safe way. Exactly what she signed up for when she went into reconstructive surgery. Being paid a hefty 5.5 million Naira fee for her surgical skills? Talk about a slam-dunk situation.

"I'm done," she announced to Tunde. "Want to finish up yourself, or should I stay back and help?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm almost done here. I'll pack her chest when I'm through. Go home, and enjoy the rest of your day."

Oke's heart leapt to her throat at his words. She might be receiving bad news today. In a few hours, she would know if her breast cancer had spread. Enjoyment might not be in store for her at all. Would this surgery be her last? Would she have to face weeks of illness, waiting for death, instead of being in a theatre doing what she loved?

Tears formed behind her eyes, but she blinked them back, averting her gaze from Tunde.

"Thank you. And you, too," she murmured, turning away from him abruptly.

She scurried out the room, hoping he didn't sense anything amiss. He was way too perceptive, and she didn't want him finding anything out until it was

absolutely necessary.

Six



Arinze steered his Mercedes Benz E-class to a stop in one of the free parking spots of Blossom Health's large compound. He pulled out his phone from his jeans pocket and unlocked it.

Scrolling through his contacts with his thumb, he searched for the number he was looking for, then dialled. He anchored the phone against his ear.

"Hi, Oke, I'm here," he said when the line connected.

"You really came? I can't believe this." A brief pause with her breathing against his ear. "You don't have to do this, you know. I'm sure you're very busy."

"I want to. And it's not a problem for me at all."

"Thank you. I'll be down in a bit."

"Great. See you soon."

He ended the call and leaned forward to tap the central console touchscreen to turn on some music. Seconds later, Simi's soothing voice belting out the ballad Joromi filled the air.

He shivered slightly as he glanced around. The chill from the blasting air conditioner belied the scorching heat from the late March sunshine. He could literally see the mist from evaporation of the asphalt roads. Although he felt slightly cold, he was reluctant to change the thermostat. Any rise in temperature would cause him to sweat and increase the anxiety from his already charged

nervous system.

Since Oke told him about her possible cancer a week ago, he'd been distracted. Worried sick about her really. He called every day to check up on her, knowing that she was also worried about the result of her CT scan.

Waiting an entire week for the verdict about one's illness was no mean feat. He'd been through it with Mary. Two excruciating weeks they'd had to wait for the complete results of all her investigations for cancer—one of the worst times of his life. He'd found it difficult to eat, sleep, or concentrate on anything else.

The morning of Mary's doctor appointment to discuss the biopsy and CT-scan results, he'd vomited twice, his body trembling with dread. It had taken several minutes for him to compose himself enough to drive her to the hospital. He couldn't even imagine how much the waiting had affected Mary. Must have been a million times worse.

As he waited for Oke, the same anxiety that had consumed him back had hold of him again. But why? Oke was just a friend. Not even a close one at that, yet he seemed unable to contain the constant worry about her. Within the past week, she'd come to mean more to him than in the years he'd known her.

All he could think about was the outcome of her health investigations, hoping and praying that all would be well. That her cancer wasn't terminal. For days, he'd scoured the Internet, hunting for information about breast cancer, googling survival rates and other possible outcomes of the illness.

Why it mattered to him so much, he couldn't tell, but he desperately wanted Oke to be alright. Last night, when he'd called her, she'd told him she had an appointment today to get her results. When he heard she planned on going alone, he'd insisted on driving her there and being with her to get the news. No one should be alone under those circumstances.

She'd initially tried to dissuade him, but he didn't let up, and she eventually conceded it would be comforting having someone there with her. The fact that she was even at work today simultaneously impressed and baffled him. He'd been useless in his office all morning, unable to focus on anything. As if he was the one dealing with the illness.

A movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he turned to find

Oke strutting towards him, wearing a brown knee-length skirt, a flowery yellow blouse, and her long braids packed in a bun. She walked with her usual springy steps in black pumps whose heels seemed to protest from the impact of her forceful movement.

A smile tugged at his lips. No matter the crowd size, he could spot Oke from her walk in pitch-black darkness. Her gait gave her away—a graceful tap-tap of her feet on the ground, reminiscent of a horse's graceful prance in a parade. Amusing and very cute.

Arinze fought the instinct to get out of the car and open the passenger-side door for her. He'd get zero thanks for it. She despised that kind of chivalry, and would surely read him the riot act. Again.

The first time he'd done so, she'd muttered a quick thanks before stepping in. But several minutes later, she'd turned towards him and said, "So, do you open the door for men, too?" She nodded and flashed a smug smile at his "of course, not." And then, broke out into a long, rather excruciating dissertation on the virtues of treating women no differently than men.

Sometimes, remembering her passion on the topic still amused him. He'd never given the customary gesture a second thought. Instead, he'd always automatically done so for his mother, his sister, and Mary. He'd grown up watching his father do so, and the custom had become ingrained in him—something every man should do. Or so he'd thought.

"Hey, Arinze, thanks for being here," Oke said when she reached his car, pulling him from his musings. "I'm ever so grateful."

"No worries," he said. "It's really no big deal."

She gave him a warm smile that exposed gleaming white teeth. He loved when Oke smiled. Her whole face lit up, reminding him of sunflowers in bloom.

"My appointment is in forty minutes," she said, rushing towards the car's passenger side. She opened the door and slid in. Fastening her seatbelt, she added, "If we don't get moving, I'll be late."

Arinze switched on the engine. "Yep, better head out before the traffic builds up again."

As soon as Oke settled in her seat, he steered the Mercedes back towards the main road smoothly, making sure to avoid the large pothole on the side of the tarred road. He'd almost driven through it on his way here, so forewarned was forearmed.

"We've tried several times to get the government to fix that," Oke said, drawing his attention to her.

"The pothole?" he asked.

"Yes. It's unsightly near Blossom Health, and frankly, a huge hazard for our patients."

Arinze sighed in annoyance. "Ridiculous that the government doesn't consider bad roads a danger." He put on his left blinker and steered the car towards the fast lane. "This really should be fixed, especially being near a health facility. Who'd you contact?"

"My partners had meetings with the local government chairman three times about it, then even had a telephone call with the deputy governor. Lot of good that did."

"I know the governor's brother quite well. We went to Kings' College together. I'll speak to him about it."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "It's something I can easily ask him. Let's hope his brother cares enough about him and the rest of Lagosians to listen."

"Oh, that would be a godsend. Thanks." Oke clapped her hands in delight like a child. "Hmm, Arinze Ibeh. You dey chill with the big boys o. And I like how you always use your connections for good things, not to intimidate others."

Arinze lifted the corners of his lips into a smile as heat flooded his face at the tone of her voice. Oke sounded impressed. Which she rarely ever was. From their numerous conversations, he'd gathered that she had a somewhat pessimistic viewpoint of the world around her. That his small offer of help made her almost giddy with appreciation caused a flutter of joy in his belly.

Silence fell between them as the car ate up miles. He concentrated on the road while she fiddled with her phone. He liked their silences. They never felt uncomfortable. She was the only woman he knew who didn't feel the need to fill up those quiet moments with words. However, for some reason, today he wished she would talk.

She must be feeling anxious. He could see the tension in the way she gazed intently at her phone … the screen had long since gone black from inactivity. Her mind must be miles away. He looked over and noticed a deep crease between her eyes, and his heart plummeted. If only he had a magic wand to wave and erase all her worries.

Fixing his attention back on the road, he ground his jaw. Should he bring up the giant elephant in the room? Ask how she was feeling about the meeting with her doctor today? Would it help, or make things worse?

With Mary, he'd not needed to say anything. She had filled the car with endless chatter, obviously trying to distract herself from her own fears.

He may like Oke and his silences, but this particular one saturated him with trepidation, eating away at his insides. Still, Arinze held his tongue. From what he knew about her, feigned optimism would only upset her more. So instead, he leaned forward and changed the music to her favourite hip-hop playlist.

Moments later, she tossed her phone aside and began bobbing her head to the beat of a Megan Thee Stallion tune. Arinze curved his lips into a smile.

It had worked. Oke was temporarily distracted. They'd worry when they needed to, thanks to the rather crass lyrics from the track titled Freak Nasty blasting through the car speakers.

Frankly, he despised rap. Had never listened to it … until Oke had accompanied him to a charity event, and complained about his choice of music ballads the entire way there. On the way back, she insisted he add her choices to his phone music library, and since then, he played them whenever they went out. A small price to pay to see her face brighten up and her body sway in time to the music.

Now, seeing her bouncing up and down on the seat as she rapped along, his heart swelled with contentment. He'd chased away her fears. Even if only temporarily.

~

“Oke Amayo for Dr Adebayo please,” the teleprompter on the office wall announced, slicing the silence in the air. Oke stiffened, her heart galloping like it would explode from her chest.

Damn, they’d barely settled into their seats in the waiting room of Island Medical Centre. She had hoped to catch her breath, have at least a few minutes to collect herself before being handed a death sentence. But no such luck. Instead, her doctor was running on schedule today.

Oke turned to Arinze. His large hand reached over and engulfed hers. The warmth comforted her. Slowly, she rose to her feet, her pulse pounding in her ears, blocking out every other sound around her. Arinze’s lips moved, but she couldn’t hear a word flowing from his mouth. All she could do was nod. And cling to him for support.

With legs which seemed alien to her body, she put one foot in front of the other, holding onto Arinze’s hands tightly. A sort of light-headed wooziness assailed her, as if cotton wool had replaced her brain cells. If not for the firm hand holding her, she would have collapsed into a heap on the floor.

Not entirely sure how she’d managed it, Oke found herself seated opposite Dr Adebayo, her stomach churning and sweat gathering in her armpits.

“Good afternoon, Dr Amayo,” Dr Adebayo said, her voice deep and husky.

The first time Oke had heard her talk, she’d been shocked. Everything about the woman appeared so feminine—her soft, rounded frame and a sweet, gentle face. Then, she spoke, and out came a voice with a booming masculine lilt to it. At first, it confused Oke, but later on, she came to understand—from an article the doctor had written—that she’d had a vocal cord tumour resected as a child and it had changed the quality of her voice.

“Good—” Oke had to stop. Fear clutched at her chest and clogged her throat. She tried again. “Good afternoon.”

“I have your test results here. Do you want me to discuss it now?” Dr Adebayo cast a questioning glance at Arinze.

Oke nodded. “Yes. He’s my … my friend.”

As Dr Adebayo glanced at the screen in front of her, studying the information on the display, Oke could swear the acid in her gut had singed through the linings of her intestines, scorching her from inside out. Her entire body burned with the dread that engulfed her.

She felt the pressure of Arinze’s hand squeezing her tightly and drew comfort from his touch. How had she ever imagined that she would be able to do this alone? Absolute insanity to think she could have come in today without any support. She swallowed hard. Without Arinze here, she was pretty sure that she would have imploded before the doctor had a chance to reveal her fate.

“This is great news, Oke,” Dr Adebayo said as she turned back towards her. “Your CT-scan report shows no evidence of metastasis, and your biopsy shows a grade one tumour with only a single nodal involvement.”

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in. Had she actually heard what she thought she had? Her ears started ringing, which made her unsure. Maybe she was hearing things … hearing what she wanted to hear … not what Dr Adebayo had actually said. Her body felt encased in ice.

“We are dealing with stage-one breast cancer, Oke,” Dr Adebayo confirmed. “So, as you well know, the prognosis is excellent if we start treatment as soon as possible.”

No, she couldn’t be dreaming up all those words. They were real. Oke’s heart leapt with profound joy, and a sigh of utter relief erupted from her. She actually had a fighting chance.

“Oh, God!” she burst out, shaking from head to toe as she broke into a fit of sobs. “Oh, God!”

Arinze reached across and gathered her in his arms. “This is wonderful news, Oke. I’m so happy … so happy for you,” he crooned, holding on to her tightly.

Still weak with relief, Oke clung to him, shedding tears of sheer joy. She couldn’t believe it. She had spent the past few days with her heart in her throat, worried sick that her time was running out. That she might have no chance against cancer. In all the scenarios she’d painted in her head, she’d not once

allowed herself to dare to hope, never considered that she would really have a shot at beating this horrible disease.

Hearing now that she would not only have a chance, but a damn good one … well, her world felt like it had righted its crazy trajectory and come back into orbit.

“It’s good news, but we have to act fast.” Dr Adebayo’s voice crashed through her musings.

Oke leaned away from Arinze. “I know,” she said, wiping away tears with her handkerchief. As a doctor herself, she knew that every day she waited, the risk of spread doubled.

“It’s great that we have choices in your case,” Dr Adebayo carried on. “Including a lumpectomy or a mastectomy. What are you —”

“Mastectomy,” Oke said, slicing through the doctor’s words. She didn’t need options, her choice was clear. No way would she afford cancer the slightest opportunity to take root somewhere else in her breast. This was war.

“Do you want to take a bit more time to decide? It’s just a grade-1 tumour. We don’t have to remove your entire right breast.”

“No.” Oke shook her head vehemently. “I want it gone.”

“Okay.” Dr Adebayo tapped rapidly on the keyboard in front of her. “You’ll also need chemotherapy after the surgery to ensure all cancerous cells are destroyed.”

Oke nodded. “I know the drill. I know I have to fight … not to the death, but to the life. And I will.”

Dr Adebayo’s face broke into a grin. “I’m pleased,” she said. “Believe me, it’s always a relief talking to patients willing to go with medical advice. Too often, I’ve had to convince cancer patients not to rush off seeking alternative treatment or healing from religious houses.”

Her entire body buzzing with pleasure, Oke smiled back. She knew all too well how denial made many people seek answers from untrustworthy sources.

Even as a medic familiar with the facts, she'd found herself on Google, searching for answers having nothing to do with medical treatment. She'd even watched an hourlong video of a woman claiming that drinking water from the Indian ocean had cured her of breast cancer. Although she hadn't believed it a single bit, Oke couldn't help her fascination with the woman's total conviction in her methods, or the following she had gathered.

Such a relief to be able to fall back on the science she'd come to rely on for so long. She'd been given a chance to fight cancer, and she would give it everything she had.

Seven



Oke jumped out of his car and leaned in, peering at him through the open window. “C’mon, don’t go home now, Arinze,” she said with a little pout. “Come inside, let’s celebrate. I have several bottles of wine we can down tonight, including your favourite champagne.”

He hesitated, scanning her face intently. He was happy for her. Ecstatic that her cancer wasn’t terminal, that she had a good survival chance. Yet, a sliver of worry had burrowed deep inside him. Much as he wanted to hope she would go into complete remission, he was terrified to do so unreservedly.

How could he, given the horrific outcome of his only other experience with the disease? When she was diagnosed, Mary’s stomach tumour had already spread to her bones, liver, and brain. She was gone within six months of the devastating news.

So, Arinze found himself still reeling from the possibility that Oke’s case might turn out vastly different. He hadn’t fully digested the information, and could sense that she hadn’t either really. Wouldn’t it be better for him to leave her to savour this moment by herself?

“We could go out if you prefer,” she pressed. “But I’d be glad if we stayed in to drink the evening away. I’m so hyped about this that I want to celebrate.”

“I’m thrilled for you, Oke ...” he began, trying to come up with a plausible excuse. He didn’t want to intrude on her space, or on a moment she may want to share with close friends and family.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight … please?”

He pressed his mouth back shut. The pleading lilt in her voice struck a sympathetic chord. As far as he knew, she still hadn’t revealed her diagnosis to anyone other than him. He wasn’t entirely sure why she was keeping her health struggles hush-hush, but he’d promised to be there for her. If she needed his company to celebrate this breakthrough, he damn well wouldn’t object.

“Okay,” he said, switching on the car’s engine. “Tell your gateman to open the gate so I can drive in.”

She let out a sharp squeal of joy as she stepped back. “Thanks, Arinze. And I promise not to be too much.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Like that would ever happen.”

“Scout’s honour,” she said with a salute to him. “I’ll not suffocate you with my strong feminist beliefs tonight.”

“Yeah, right.” He twisted his lips into a snicker. “We’ll see how long you can resist the urge.”

He enjoyed Oke’s company because he found her engaging. She had a good sense of humour and a vast knowledge about topics that interested him, like politics, social issues, and even true crime. Her concern for the underprivileged impressed him, and the fact that her reasoning was sometimes outside the box often sparked lively discussions between them.

However, she really could go on fierce rants about gender inequality. She’d told him about her struggle to be taken seriously as a female surgeon in a speciality dominated by men. He respected her strength and willpower to push through despite the obstacles, but it had made her a bit militant about her views on gender discrimination. She loved a good debate, while he pretty much shied away from arguments. Arinze believed if he couldn’t change a situation, talking about it wouldn’t help much. Oke, on the other hand, would go on until she wore you down.

With a sigh of satisfaction, he watched her dash towards the front gate. He was glad to see that her spirits had lifted again. She’d been withdrawn the past week, not as animated as she usually was during their telephone conversations. Even

though she now appeared bubbly and on top of the world, worry niggled at his gut. Her emotions had done a complete 180, and somehow, the switch-up just seemed a bit suspicious. Was something more than simple relief at play?

The scraping of the metal gate as it slid open hauled his mind back. Arinze guided his Mercedes into the compound, bringing it to a halt right beside Oke's white Rolls Royce.

He smiled as he stepped out of his car. Even though she'd sounded indifferent about his offer to pick her up for today's doctor's appointment, she'd actually trusted him. It pleased him to see that she had left her car behind and taxied to work.

Stretching to his full six-foot-one height, he let his eyes sweep around the compound. For the two years he'd known Oke, he'd never been inside her home. Sure, he'd picked her up a number of times for various outings, but he'd always parked outside the gate to wait for her. She'd never invited him in, and knowing that she cherished her privacy, he'd never asked to come in.

"Beautiful home," he said, taking in the white duplex building he surmised from the size likely had three or four bedrooms. It had a simple Mansard-style roof with louvred bay windows both upstairs and down. The vast space had a well-manicured lawn with multiple flower pots lining the periphery of both surrounding walls. Quite a surprise, because he hadn't pegged Oke as a garden lover. "I love the landscaping."

Oke glanced around the area and a proud smile lit her face up. "Thank you. I enjoy gardening."

"First time I'm hearing that. I'm pleasantly surprised."

"Really? I usually gush about tending my potted plants. A fave pastime of mine."

"Well, you've certainly done a fantastic job. The abundance of colourful flowers enhances the beauty of your home."

"Yes indeed," she affirmed. "I'm glad I decided to buy this place despite all the discouragement I got. Best thing I've done for myself."

Arinze strolled around the car towards her, scrunching up his forehead in bewilderment. “Discouragement? From whom?”

“My sister. She worried it would drive away potential suitors if I purchased a house as a single woman.” Oke rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why Ufuoma won’t believe that I’m not interested in having a man.”

Arinze snorted, a tad irritated by Oke’s remark. Yes, she’d said several times how marriage, or any committed relationship, was not for her. He never quite understood her reasons, but he knew something deeper must be hiding underneath—something she didn’t want to admit.

He had never pressed the topic, simply because he hadn’t cared enough whenever it came up. But now, for some odd reason, a jolt of annoyance flashed inside him at her comment. Why on earth would anyone be repulsed by the idea of being happily in love with someone?

“Any man intimidated by a successful woman isn’t the type to be in a relationship with,” he said in a low tone. “Doesn’t mean that all men are like that, or that relationships should be off limits.”

“Oh, I don’t keep men off limits,” she said with a cheeky smile. “I just don’t want to date or get married.”

Before he could delve deeper, she turned towards the front door and inserted a key from the bunch in her hand into the keyhole.

Arinze swallowed back his response. Why was he pressed about her desire to be single all of a sudden? It was her life, and frankly, this wasn’t news. She made no bones about being a woman who played the field. In fact, she had just split with a much younger man whose mistake was to fall for her. Oke didn’t do committed relationships. It was as plain as the colour of his grey shirt.

Good for him that he had zero desire to date her.

Yes, she was attractive and smart, a great catch for any man. And sure, he could see why men easily fell for her. But Oke was not his kind of woman.

They had polar opposite views on relationships. She hated commitment, he thrived in it. She didn’t want children. And while he’d felt the same long ago, he

now longed for a family. If he ever found a woman he could love like Mary, he would be eager to start a family with her.

He should end this conversation and talk about something else. After all, they were here to celebrate Oke's good news.

"What's so bad about being in a relationship, Oke?" he asked. So much for following his own good advice.

For the first time since they'd met, her aversion to relationships and the real reason why piqued his interest. He couldn't explain it, but an intense need to know surged inside him. Maybe it was because she'd let him into her private life and revealed her illness to him. Or maybe her welcoming him into her home, her personal space, pushed him to deepen the friendship. Whatever the reason, he wanted to peel away the layers covering Oke, find out what was underneath all that aloofness she typically presented to the world.

"It's just not for me," she said with a half shrug, leading him along a corridor and into the sitting room. "I just don't like the idea of needing anyone."

"We all need someone."

"Not me. I have a system that works for me, and I don't want anyone messing that up."

"What system?"

"A system where I don't let anybody close enough to hurt me."

That gave him pause. Like he suspected, her reasons had a lot to do with a maladaptive self-protective mechanism. She'd surrounded herself with a hard shell, like a lobster or crab.

"I've seen too many relationships end badly for me to want any of that," she said, motioning for him to have a seat as she made a beeline towards the mini-bar in the corner of the room. "I'd rather be alone than unhappy."

Arinze parted his lips to refute her comment, say that his own relationship had left him fulfilled for more than ten years. Then he remembered he was in no position to dole out any advice about matters of the heart. He'd put a gun into his

mouth just a few days ago, struggling not to pull the trigger, because he was hurting from the loss of a woman he loved dearly. Oke was right about one thing —falling in love came with a massive risk of hurt.

Did it mean he wasn't willing to try again? Hell no. His time with Mary had been worth the pain. Their relationship had been great. Not perfect—it had its ups and downs. But that only drew them closer together.

Maybe for Oke, things were a little different and avoidance worked better for her. Having no real counter to her argument, he pressed his mouth shut again.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said with a half-smile as she opened the mini-bar's glass door and peered inside. She lifted a champagne bottle and her smile widened. "Ever since you introduced me to this Veuve Clicquot brut, I'm hooked."

"Told you … the drink of the gods."

"For sure, but I've got another fave you should try. Maybe spread your wings, and give your taste buds a challenge for once."

Arinze chuckled at the jab. Granted, he had a penchant for sticking to things he liked. No one would call him adventurous, which was another vast difference between Oke and him. She loved taking risks. Him not so much. Okay, not at all —after all, he had a sensitive stomach, so he limited his palate to familiar food and drinks. She, on the other hand, could eat and drink anything.

"We'll see," he said as he settled on the sofa opposite the TV. He watched as Oke retrieved two champagne flutes. "Can I help?"

"Nope. I'm good," she said as she strolled towards him. "I cooked some jollof and roast turkey. Should I warm it up?"

Arinze peeked at his watch and shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Let's drink to celebrate your health first. We can eat later. Maybe around eight?"

She nodded as she dragged the tea table forward and lowered the contents of her hands on it before plopping onto the sofa beside him. "Pop the champagne, please. I'm ready to celebrate."

Stretching his lips into a wide grin, Arinze lifted the bottle and unscrewed the cork effortlessly. He filled both their glasses halfway and raised his. “Let's toast to good health.”

She beamed as she raised her own glass. The sheer joy on her face caused his heart to flutter. Seeing her happy pleased him. One could never put a price on good health, and Oke’s countenance proved that she’d really felt like she'd been given a second chance in life.

“Here’s to you about to beat the shit out of cancer,” he said tilting his glass towards her. “I know you can, because you’re a fighter.”

“Cheers,” she said, clicking her glass with his. “And here’s to knowing that a second chance in life is possible.”

They clinked glasses again, and he took another sip. “So, what is next with your treatment?” he asked.

Although he’d been there for the big news, he’d stepped out when the doctor wanted to examine her further and discuss the management of her breast cancer.

“First, to get a second opinion of the CT scan and biopsy.”

“Why do you need one? Don’t you trust your doctors?”

She chuckled. “I do. But we doctors are the most difficult of patients—classic know-it-alls. I just want to make sure nothing’s been missed before I commit to treatment.”

“And when will you do your operation and chemo?”

“Dr Adebayo made arrangements for my mastectomy next month. They’re flying in a renowned breast surgeon from the UK.”

“So soon?” His eyes bulged. “I thought you’d have some time to … you know, adjust to the information.”

“I really have to be quick about this. Every second I delay, the risk of spread grows.”

He took a gulp of his drink at that. The thought of the cancer spreading sickened him. For some odd reason, Oke's fight with cancer had also become his personal fight. He wanted her to win. His final way to say, fuck you, to cancer.

"Well, I'm here to give you all the support you need. You'll beat cancer's ass."

"Thank you. I hope so."

They fell silent as they nursed their drinks. Arinze studied Oke's sitting room decor. Tasteful and elegant, but minimalist … and kind of impersonal.

The cream-coloured walls had very few ornaments adorning them. Three to be precise. All replicas of ancient Benin artwork carvings. The furnishing was grey, and the centre table was made of glass.

No family pictures hung on the wall. Not even a photo of her sister Ufuoma. Curious.

He knew almost nothing about her family background and ties. Oke wasn't the type to share stories of her childhood. At least, not with him. The only reason he knew about her sister and their close bond was because Ufuoma was married to his cousin. But what about their parents? Why did Oke never talk about them?

"When are you going to share your health concerns with your family?" he asked baldly.

As soon as the question left his lips, a flash of shame hit him. He shouldn't pry into her personal life just to soothe his curiosity. Especially not when she was dealing with a serious illness. They'd gotten along well for two years because their relationship had been on a surface level. Simply for companionship. No deep expressions of emotion between them.

"I'm sorry." He mumbled his apology with a gulp of his drink. "I shouldn't be so nosey."

"It's okay," she said, refilling her own champagne flute. "I just don't want to trouble my sister. I'm all the family she's got. She'll be worried about losing me. And she has a lot to deal with having a huge business venture, a busy husband, and three kids."

“And your parents?” he asked tentatively.

She shrugged. “They aren’t in our lives.”

He remained silent as he poured more champagne into his glass, hoping she would elaborate. Oke’s evasiveness about her past was noticeable. Something was definitely amiss with her family.

Fighting the urge to prod her to carry on, he watched as she sipped her drink idly, staring blankly ahead. Disappointment twisted his gut. Clearly, Oke didn’t want to open up to him. Why did this dishearten him all of a sudden? He’d never been this curious about her personal life before.

“My father left my mother for another woman when I was ten,” she said, her gaze fixed on one of the ancient Benin art carvings. The eyes of the chief’s bronze head looked like they stared back at her. “I remember the scene so vividly. My mother lay crumpled on the floor in tears, begging him not to leave, saying she would do anything to change his mind. She looked so pitiful and heartbroken … but my father, the man I’d grown up loving and counting on, simply walked out, suitcase in hand and not one backward glance. That was the last time we ever saw him.”

Arinze remained very still, soaking up this information about her—committing it to memory like a student in a lecture hall. Her openness startled him. She usually brushed off deep conversations with a joke.

“I’ll never forget that day. Or the weeks after. My mother shrivelled away. She cried all the time. Didn’t eat or drink until she became a shadow of her former self.” Oke shook her head and curled a braided strand, which had fallen loose, around her finger. “I felt so pained by her sorrow. But also disgusted.”

She paused, her jaw muscles clenching as if annoyed at the recollection.

Arinze couldn’t understand why her mother would disgust her. Just when he was about to ask, Oke continued.

“She’d stopped being a mother, forgetting to cook, clean, and take us to school. I had to step in to look after Ufuoma because my mother simply gave up. And for what? A man? One who didn’t show any remorse after cheating on her and marrying the housemaid he’d knocked up.”

Arinze's throat tightened at the hurt in her voice. Now, he could see a glimpse of the genesis of Oke's aversion towards relationships. It ran deep, and must have stemmed from that childhood experience, even if she didn't want to admit it.

"It carried on for months. Her negligence, her depression, and my acting as a surrogate mother to Ufuoma," Oke said, her lips twisting into a cynical sneer. "Then suddenly, my mother had a complete turnaround. Her mood drastically improved. She started eating, gaining weight, resuming her motherly responsibilities. To my young mind, it was a dream come true, a miracle."

Didn't take a crystal ball to know the miracle turned sour fast. Oke's tone and fiery eyes spoke volumes in advance. Arinze remained silent, waiting to hear more.

"Only it was far from a miracle. More like a nightmare." She squeezed her eyes shut, as if trying to push back the painful memories. Finally, she opened them again. "One day, my mother told Ufuoma and me to get ready for a surprise trip. I was so excited I didn't even bother asking where we were going."

Oke filled her champagne glass again. Her third glass, Arinze noticed. Was that why she was being open? Should he stop her? He was on his second glass and feeling a lot more relaxed himself. He wanted her to continue talking, keen to know more about her, so he said nothing.

"She took us to her mother's farmhouse in Benin and dropped us off, telling us that she would come back to pick us up later." Oke shook her head bitterly and blew out a mirthless laugh. "Fool that I was, I believed her and kept my hope alive. But weeks turned to months, and then to years, and finally, I realised that she lied. She never had any intentions to come back for us."

Arinze gasped in shock. "That must have been heart-breaking."

"Devastating," she said with an angry twist of her mouth. "But you know what's worse? Discovering why she never came back … she had a new boyfriend. Our dear mum had gone off to marry a man who didn't want to raise another man's kids. She abandoned us for a man. Imagine that … not much different from my father really."

"Good Lord … that's terrible," Arinze said with a nod of understanding. Oke had every right to be pissed off. He'd been raised in a tightknit family with a

mother who would die for her kids. Even during the years of his father's incarceration, she'd done everything in her power to keep the family together. He couldn't imagine his mother behaving like Oke's mum.

"Exactly. I was just twelve when I found out. My sister only nine. I became Ufuoma's instant mum, trying to shield her from the truth until it became unavoidable."

"Oh, no," he muttered, still stunned by her revelation. How confusing for such young children to realise that their mother chose someone else over them.

"Did she ever visit while you stayed with your grandmother?" Arinze asked Oke.

"Nope. Never once came back. Didn't bother sending money for us either. She simply abandoned us like we never existed. I haven't spoken to her since I was ten."

"Damn!

"Uh-huh. Double damn. And I don't want to speak to her or my father again. Ever."

Eight



She was feeling light-headed and a bit buzzed. Three glasses of champagne on an empty stomach would do that to anyone, but Oke couldn't help herself. She was having a great time talking with Arinze. Right now, they were playing I Have Never, and she was totally loving how liberating it was to talk about herself without having her usual guard up. He, too, seemed a little more relaxed.

"I have never been naked in public," Arinze said, sliding onto the plush grey carpet beside her.

Oke's cheeks heated up as she raised her glass slowly and sipped her champagne.

"Ha! Doctor!" Arinze erupted, his eyes bulging. "You've been naked in public before?"

Oke giggled, covering half her face with her palm in embarrassment. "It's not what you think. It wasn't sexual at all."

"Why else would anyone be naked in public if not during a shag?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Mr Ibeh," Oke commanded, her eyes flashing sparks. "I did it because my friends dared me to run around the ladies-only hostel butt naked … twice."

"Damn! And you did? With everyone watching?"

“I had to. The alternative was eating a cockroach.”

“The silly games we all played when we were younger,” he said, shaking his head. “I once jumped from the roof to prove to a friend that I could join a gang in secondary school.”

“What?”

“Yep. Luckily, I landed on the soft grass and only sprained my ankle.”

“Did they still let you in the gang?”

“No. And thank the Good Lord. I think I came to my senses that day and decided to become an upstanding member of the community.”

Oke chortled. “Good for you. And the community.”

“Now, your turn,” Arinze said, bringing them back to the game they’d being playing for the past thirty minutes or so.

Oke heaved a deep breath in, thinking of something she’d never done and hoped Arinze hadn’t either. The answer came to her immediately.

“I have never smoked a joint,” she said.

Arinze flashed her a guilty look as he took a sip of his drink.

“What?” Oke gulped, completely shocked. “Mr. Prim and Proper has smoked marijuana before?”

He flung back his head and bellowed out a hearty laugh. Oke’s stomach jumped. She loved watching him laugh. The deep, rich sound he made, his luscious mouth parting to reveal even white teeth, and the way his firm neck muscles tensed whenever he laughed, always sent a jolt of awareness through her. Damn, such an attractive man. If only he wasn’t so dogged about commitments, she’d gladly swing her legs astride him and pull him into her arms for a taste of his full lips.

“Yes, when Mary’s cancer became very bad, she was always nauseated, unable to eat because she feared vomiting.”

Talk about being hurled back to earth from heaven. No better way to bring her back to her senses than mentioning his late wife. Yet, Oke held her breath as she listened. He talked about Mary often. This wasn't new for her. She knew he still grieved her death. But he'd never gone into detail about her cancer struggles.

"We tried almost everything, including medication given to her by injection, but none worked," he continued, his eyes becoming distant, as if he'd been transported back in time. "One of her friends who worked in an art gallery in London visited us and suggested she try weed."

Oke nodded in support. She knew of the plant's medicinal value, had no doubt about its potential good if used as intended instead of just to get high.

"Her friend got some for Mary to try, and it made a world of difference for her."

"How did you end up having some?"

"Well, she wouldn't try it without me, so …"

"How did it feel?"

"Great. Really helps to clear my head." He gave her a mischievous wink. "I've called the dealer back a few times since Mary's death."

"Naughty boy! I'm speechless. Never would have pegged you for a pothead."

His face broke into a wide grin that captivated her. "The government should put more effort into researching the benefits instead of completely condemning it. It's a natural God-given plant which made a huge difference for Mary in the last few months of her life," he said.

They lapsed into silence, both lost in thought as they sipped their drinks. Oke wondered what those few months were like for them. Yes, her cancer was still in its early stage and had a great prognosis, but what if it had started to spread? What if things changed before she had a chance to fight the disease?

"I'm scared my cancer will spread before I start treatment," she mumbled, her anxiety getting the best of her.

Arinze turned to face her, earnest eyes drawn to her as he lowered his

champagne glass onto the tea table. “You have stage-1 cancer, Oke, it won’t,” he said in a deep, reassuring voice.

“But it could.” She shook her head. “I have to wait five weeks. Five whole weeks before I start treatment.”

“That’s not a long time. Your doctor is only trying to arrange the best treatment available for you.”

“I know. But still … I worry.”

“It’s normal to worry. But I’m positive that it will be fine. Look at the miracle news we got today. Let’s focus on that.”

She nodded. He was right. Things could be a lot worse. The doctor could have said the tumour had already spread and she had no chance of survival. But she hadn’t. She could actually live through this disease.

Oke gulped down her drink, letting the buzz of the alcohol flood her senses. “I’ll miss my breast,” she murmured.

Arinze’s eyes immediately lowered to her chest, and as if embarrassed to be looking there, they jumped back to her face.

“They are going to take my right breast out soon, and I’ll be left with only one boob,” Oke continued, drinking some more champagne. “It’s such a shame because I love my breasts.”

She noticed Arinze’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard. The way his facial muscles tensed, she could tell he was fighting the impulse to look at her breasts again.

“I may not be tall and slender with the biggest ass or breasts, but my tits are fantastic. Round, soft, and upright. And my nipples, thick and prominent,” she said.

Oke was aware she was being provocative with her words, but she couldn’t seem to shut up. It was like watching a train wreck about to happen but being unable to prevent it. “Want to see them?”

She noticed Arinze stiffen, his eyes widening as he swallowed again. He seemed dumbfounded by her suggestion, yet he didn't respond. Taking that as a yes, Oke lowered her glass on the tea table and began to unbutton her blouse.

"You …" Arinze cleared his throat. "You shouldn't."

His objection sounded weak, even as his gaze dropped to her chest, a resigned expression crossing his face as if he'd given up the fight not to look.

"Just look, Arinze, so you'll see what I'll be losing," she said as she pulled her blouse off her body. She unhooked the front clasp of her bra and raised her head up proudly as she rid herself of the black lacy material covering her chest.

A low groan escaped Arinze's lips as he fixed his attention on her chest, his breathing becoming laboured.

"See, I told you," Oke said with pride, her brain whirling from a mixture of alcohol and exhilaration. She loved that Arinze seemed mesmerised by her tits.

"Want to touch?" she breathed.

"I … I shouldn't," Arinze croaked out, his tone taking on a raspy lilt, his gaze still fixed on her breasts.

"I want you to feel them, Arinze," she urged in a desperate tone.

This had long ceased being a teasing game. She wanted him to feel her up, squeeze her, touch her breasts before she lost one of her tits and became unattractive to any man. She needed them to be worshipped one more time. "Please …"

His gaze jumped to hers, searching her face. Probably noticing the desperation in her eyes, he nodded and leaned forward to touch her left breast. First, his fingers grazed it tentatively, slowly moving over her nipple, then he moved closer and cupped both breasts in his hands.

Heart racing like a speedboat, Oke held her breath, savouring the sensations firing through her nerves as Arinze began to explore her breasts with more confidence, his gaze fixed on hers as he squeezed them, rolling his thumb over their turgid tips.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, moving his palms around her breasts with earnest appreciation. “You’re absolutely right, Oke. Your breasts look and feel wonderful.”

Heat surged in Oke’s blood at the thrill of his touch, sending waves of desire pulsing between her thighs.

“Oh, Arinze, please taste it, suck it, lick it,” she begged, completely out of her mind now with a desperate longing for him to continue the sweet caress of her breasts.

A low growl tore from him as he stilled his fingers, his eyes once again searching hers. He swallowed hard. “Are …” He dragged in a deep breath as if to calm himself. “Are you sure? You drank a lot tonight.”

Oke nodded vigorously. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m not drunk ...” Giving him a shaky smile of encouragement, she added. “Just tipsy.”

His brown pupils narrowed, turning a dark colour that blazed with lust as he hesitated for several more moments … his breathing shallow, jaw tight, and brain clearly contemplating his next move.

Anxious that he would turn her down, Oke waited, gaze fixed on him, her pulse beating at a frenzied rate.

For days, she’d not allowed herself to think past her cancer diagnosis, had been so anxious about dying that she’d not really thought about living, about the aesthetics of having one breast taken away. Now, with a good chance of survival, she was beginning to see the future after treatment. Yes, she knew about reconstructive surgery, but that wouldn’t be her real breast and her nipple would lose all sensation. Not the same at all.

“I’m going to lose my breast soon, Arinze,” she whispered, eager to spur him on. “Please touch them, show them some love before …”

Face a dark mask of acquiescence, Arinze nodded. Then, with a slowness that almost drove her out of her mind with impatience, he lowered his head and latched onto her right breast.

A whimper erupted from deep inside Oke’s belly at the thrill of having his warm,

wet mouth surrounding the tip of her breast. “Oh, God,” she moaned as she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, pulling him closer, arching her back and offering him more of herself.

Moisture seeped from her core, dampening her panties as she revelled in the sweet sensation of Arinze suckling her breast. Almost torturing her with exquisite pleasure, Arinze sucked, licked, and feasted on both breasts, making love to them with devoted attention, like a fervent worshipper receiving communion.

Oke thrashed around on the plush carpet, her legs spread wide as she craned the lower half of her body upwards, seeking the warmth of his. She was so turned on that she wanted more of him, his body on top of hers or under hers, his dick inside her, his mouth and tongue tangling with hers.

Letting out a deep throaty moan, Oke pulled his head up, primed with profound desire. “Kiss me,” she whispered. “Make love to me.”

All shame had evaporated from her. She wanted this man. Needed him. This had long stopped being about her breasts only. No. Her entire being needed to be possessed by this wonderful man in her arms.

Nine



His heart was beating so fast, it might burst through the confines of his ribcage. Holding himself still, his penis swollen with his need to spread Oke's legs wide apart, rip off her panties, and bury himself deep inside her, Arinze simply stared at her.

Her request pounded in his brain with the intensity of a migraine, making him almost dizzy with lust. Nearly three years since he'd had sex. More than that since he'd felt the almost unquenchable need to overcome all inhibitions and plunge in with no thoughts about the future, no thoughts about tomorrow, only raw and primal need.

He should get up now, leave before he did something one or both of them would regret tomorrow. This was Oke. His friend. A woman who had just received significant news about her health. Surely, she didn't want this. She wasn't herself now. Maybe she was still reeling from the euphoria of finding out her cancer wasn't terminal. Plus, three glasses of champagne … she was probably drunk. He shouldn't take advantage. No. This is crazy …

She curled her fingers around his neck and pulled him closer, her warm breath fanning his right cheek. "I need you," she whispered in a sultry, and oh, so seductive voice.

His dick jumped. God, this was a losing battle. The desire burning in her eyes as she looked at him, the closeness of her warm, soft body, the alcohol firing in his system, and his blatant desire all combined to weaken his resolve to be sensible. To think for both of them.

He cleared his throat, which seemed suddenly parched. “Are … are you sure?” he asked in a hoarse whisper, allowing himself one more attempt to do the right thing, to make the right decision.

“I’ve never been surer of anything,” Oke said, pulling his head down and fastening her lips on his, effectively snatching away any control he had left.

Erupting with a deep growl, Arinze kissed her back passionately, his mouth hot against hers, his tongue sliding in and tangling with hers in a fiery rhythm that made his blood boil with desire. God, Oke tasted so good, like honey and spice. Sweet and flaming. He wanted to devour her, swallow her. It had been too long since he felt like this. Way too long since he lost all control, acting instead of thinking, feeling instead of reasoning. He loved this heady sensation, wanted more.

“Oh, Arinze,” she moaned, tugging him downwards with her as she rested her back completely flat on the plush carpet. She ground the lower half of her body against his pelvis while her mouth continued to do delicious things to his, driving him out of his mind.

“Good grief, Oke …” he ground out, his dick painfully hard. “We need to slow down ...”

“No,” she whimpered. “I want more … I want everything you have to give.”

“Woman,” he grumbled. He didn’t want to fuck her here on the carpet, but it seemed increasingly likely that they would end up having sex right where they lay.

Completely overtaken by his lust, he stroked his tongue inside the dark recesses of her mouth as their lips meshed, savouring her sweetness and the warmth of her naked torso on his chest.

Suddenly, she pushed him away, her eyes blazing, her chest heaving as she pulled herself upright. For a split second, fear slammed his chest. Was she going to stop? Now?

“Get on your back,” she said in a low, husky tone with a sly smile parting her lips. “I like being on top.”

Arinze hesitated. It had been too long since he'd done this. He needed to maintain some control, otherwise he risked exploding prematurely like a teenager. He was already so aroused … his balls tight with the need to nut.

Fierce, determined eyes locked on his, causing his body to shudder. He was powerless, completely unable to fight the consuming need that tore through his being. Without uttering a word, he did as he was told, lying back on the carpet.

Her face broke into a wide smile as she straddled him. "Good boy," she whispered, trailing her fingers over his jaw. She reached for the ends of his shirt and tugged it upwards.

Lifting slightly off the ground, he helped her take it off, then relaxed back onto the carpet, his heart thumping wildly inside his chest in anticipation.

"Lord, Arinze, you're sexy," she murmured, her gaze fixed on his torso as she slid her soft palms down his chest and stomach. "Firm in just the right places …"

Arinze sucked in a deep breath, his abdominal muscles clenching in response to her feathery touch. His groin grew heavier with need, his entire body charged with tension. Goodness … he needed her to show him mercy, treat him with caution. It had been too long; he wasn't sure he could last long enough to make this pleasurable for her.

Oke obviously had no intentions of doing any of that as she lowered her head to his chest, swirling her tongue over his hardened nipple before pulling it into her mouth.

"Shit," he growled, squirming against the pleasurable assault to all his senses. This felt too good, too bloody good. He tried to sit up, to gain some control, but she pushed him back down.

"No … no … just relax and enjoy," she murmured, continuing her sensual exploration of his chest with her mouth and tongue. Sucking, biting, and kissing his upper body and abdomen until he felt he would explode.

Her fingers moved to his belt, and Arinze squeezed his eyes shut, weak with desire. She undid the buckle and unzipped his jeans. He opened his eyes. Lord, she was moving too fast and too wickedly, as if determined to drive him out of his mind.

“Help me take this off,” she said. And once again, Arinze obeyed her soft command, lifting his hips off the carpet, aiding her to rid him of the rest of his clothes.

Dark eyes wild with purpose gazed at his hardened shaft which curved close to his belly button.

“Ohhh … I like,” she cooed, fisting him in her soft palms and then massaging his penis, moving from base to tip, her fingers swirling around the thick mushroom head.

Arinze writhed on the carpet, completely out of control with the pleasure that spiked his blood. And just when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore, he heard her soft voice.

“Can I taste?”

“Ah!” Arinze groaned, nodding his head vigorously.

His voice box must have malfunctioned because he couldn’t seem to speak, but good God, he wanted her mouth around him, sucking him … he wanted to ease some of the tension pulsing in his dick.

Another sly smile spread across her lips as she lowered her mouth and closed it over the tip of his shaft.

“Oke … fuck…” He lifted himself slightly off the carpet.

Lids heavy and eyes half closed, he watched as she expertly blew him, her head bobbing as her mouth moved up and down his thick length, her tongue swirling around the swollen tip. Pushing his hips up repeatedly, his hand on her head to gently guide her rhythm, he fucked her mouth, revelling in the sweet sensation, the sheer pleasure surging through him. It all felt sensational, way too good. If she didn’t stop now, he would erupt inside her mouth. His eyes widened as he became rigid. No way! He couldn’t, wouldn’t let their first time end like this … with his cum in her throat. No bloody way.

“Enough,” he cried out, twisting away. The pop sound his dick made when it slipped out of her mouth echoed in his ears, sending waves of pleasure down his spine.

“Awww,” she murmured with a sulky pout. “I wanted to suck you off.”

“Thanks, but I prefer you riding my dick.”

“Oh, yes, Sir.” She blew out a girly giggle that pleased him so. He loved how fun and light-hearted this was. Yet every cell in his body was fired up, filled with a desperate longing for her.

A sexy smile curved her lips as she hiked up her skirt and divested herself of her panties, exposing her fleshy mound to him. Lord above, such a delightful sight. Her pussy was so plump and pretty, with sparse curly hairs dusting just the lower half—just the way he loved it. He didn’t like completely waxed pussies. No. He liked a full-blown woman not afraid to flaunt her womanhood.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, sitting up and pulling her closer to him. He brought their lips together for a hot, wet kiss.

She moaned, parting her lips and kissing him back with ardour as she rubbed her body against his. It felt exquisite to hold her in his arms, feel her tongue tangling with his, so exhilarating that he couldn’t take it anymore. He needed more of her, to crawl into her skin, to make love to her.

Spanning his hands around her narrow waist, he raised her a little higher above him until her wet centre came flush against his throbbing penis. Moving a hand to the base of his shaft, he held his turgid erection upright and gazed into her eyes. “Sink onto me,” he murmured in encouragement.

Eyes glazed over with lust, she nodded, her arms gripping his shoulders as she slowly lowered her body, impaling herself on his dick.

Her eyes widened and her mouth popped open as she slid her wet core inch by sweet inch downwards, accommodating his thick, swollen length.

Arinze sighed in pleasure as her soft moan rose in the air. It sounded like half pain, half pure pleasure. Letting out a low groan, he massaged the soft globes of her ass, his hands sliding up and down her back soothingly. He knew he was well endowed—a bit more than necessary maybe. It had been the bane of his sexual relationships in the past, but Oke took him in like a champ, her dripping pussy sinking onto him with determination until he was buried almost to the hilt inside her.

Before he could gather himself together, Oke began to move, sliding up and then slamming back down on his dick. Arinze released a helpless moan of ecstasy.

“Damn, Oke,” he rasped, moving his palms upwards to cup and caress her breasts. Goodness. This woman could fuck circles around a man. She had him. Body and soul. He was so gone, at her mercy… unbelievable.

His touch on her breast seemed to drive her wild, shifting the equilibrium slightly to his favour.

“Ohhh …” She flung back her head. “Yes, Arinze, touch them, squeeze them, suck them,” she whimpered, alternating between bouncing on his shaft and grinding on him with an increased tempo.

He did exactly as she asked, sucking, nicking, swirling his tongue around her nipples as he worshipped both breasts with equal devotion.

He was so close … so close … God … it had been too long. And her wet, warm pussy felt too good. “Slow down … I’m going to come …” he begged, trying to gain some control.

She didn’t listen, instead, she moved with more vigour.

Up and down.

Forwards and backwards.

Up and down again.

Sideways … left and right.

“Ahhhh,” he ground out, losing the fight as a strong climax claimed him, squeezing his balls and shooting his cum deep inside her.

Not ready to throw in the towel just yet, he closed his mouth over her nipple once again and bit down gently as she continued to bounce on him, milking him dry. That seemed to trigger her orgasm. She suddenly stilled, her grip on him tightening and her vaginal walls spasming around his dick as she flung her head back with a sharp cry. He continued to suckle her breasts until her shudders quelled.

“God, Arinze …” She blew out a long sigh of satisfaction as she fell against him, pressing her body to his. “You’re a pleasant surprise.”

Arinze burst into laughter, relishing the mingling of their rapid heartbeats and sweat-sleeked bodies as they clung to each other.

“Surprise?” he murmured in a lazy drawl. “Why?”

“Well …” She chuckled. “You’re so prim and proper. I never expected the size of your dick or even a good fuck.”

“Just good? Well, you’re the one who fucked me,” he grumbled, smacking her ass playfully. “Let me catch my breath a bit, and the next round, I’ll be doing the fucking. Intense satisfaction guaranteed.”

She giggled, stroking him idly on his arm. “Promises … promises. Give me more orgasms, not just promises.”

“You bet your ass, I will,” he bragged with a big grin on his face. “Just five more minutes, and I’ll be ready to fuck you ’til you scream out my name in pleasure.”

“Okay, Sir.”

Her soft purr of contentment caused his heart to swell. This moment right here, after the race to orgasm, was his second favourite part of sex. He loved to cuddle, and enjoyed the pillow talk afterwards. Being here with Oke was the happiest he’d been in a very long time.

Ten



She woke up with a start as a sudden wave of nausea hit her. Oke jumped off the bed and dashed to the bathroom, making it just in time to empty her stomach in the toilet bowl.

After flushing, she moved over to the sink and turned on the tap. She splashed some water on her face and rinsed her mouth.

When she straightened her back to look at the bathroom mirror, a sharp pain struck at her temples. Oke squeezed her eyes shut. God, her head hurt so bad, like someone was stomping their large feet on her brain repeatedly.

Slowly, she peeled her eyes open and gasped when she saw her reflection. Damn! Without a stitch of clothes on, her braids scattered in all directions on her head, and bite marks on both sides of her neck, she looked like she'd been dragged naked through granite during an orgy.

A dull sting from her lower limbs turned her attention downwards. She dipped her gaze and discovered carpet burns on both her legs. She sucked a breath in. Tsk Tsk. What a wild night she'd had. Crazy! She and Arinze? Now she'd gone and done it—messed up the easiest, most beneficial relationship she'd ever had with a man by having sex with him.

Oke pressed her fingers against her temples to tamp down the pounding there. What the hell have I done? Why had she plied the poor man with alcohol and seduced him. She'd pretty much taken advantage of him.

They'd had sex multiple times. Wild and enjoyable sex. Twice on the carpet,

once in the bathroom, and then, another on the bed. Geez, they'd gone at it like two horny rabbits.

Arinze had been surprisingly passionate, not his typical reserved self. He'd proven that saying about quiet people being low-key freaks. His stamina and sexual skills—definitely a surprise. Mr. Prim and Proper certainly knew his way around a woman's body. And yet, he'd been earnest about finding out exactly how to please her. He actually asked what she liked and checked if she was enjoying whatever he was doing. Such a mind- and body-bending experience! She'd orgasmed four explosive times from the expert use of his hands, mouth, and huge dick.

The dull throb between her thighs and the aching of all her muscles attested to the wildness of last night's sexual marathon. She palmed her face as embarrassment flooded her senses at the memory of how she'd behaved all night —wanton and carefree. And reckless.

Blood surged into her brain as another bout of pain slammed into her head. They had not used condoms. Not once. Another bout of shame shuddered through her, and she let out a low groan. She'd not only taken advantage of a caring man like Arinze, but she'd pretty much destroyed any respect he had for her by having sex without protection.

No, she never hid her love for sex. She enjoyed it, but she always made sure that her partners used condoms and that she was on the pill. Her intention never to get pregnant ensured her careful calculation of every sexual encounter. She usually called the shots during sex, and that's why it never embarrassed her. She made sure she chose partners whom she had minimal respect for, men she could easily give the boot without any concern for their opinions of her.

Oke hazarded another glance at her dishevelled image in the mirror. Arinze was different. She respected him—his love for his family and others, his philanthropy, the way he usually went out of his way to help others, and how he managed to keep his father's security tech business from going under during the older man's incarceration, even expanding it to a construction and real estate business.

Arinze was the exact opposite of the kind of man she would typically go for. He was the kind any woman would want as a husband and father to her kids. But

she neither wanted a husband nor children. Why on earth did she have sex with him … without any protection? Multiple times! Made no damn sense.

Oke reached across and opened the cabinet beside her. She pulled out her oral contraceptive box and sighed when she counted the tablets left in the pack. She'd missed two pills this week. She'd been so worried about her diagnosis that sex had been the last thing on her mind.

She pressed her lips into thin lines. God. She could have gotten pregnant last night. There might be a mini-Arinze ready to germinate into a human in the next few months. How could she have been so reckless? And why?

This had never happened before. She'd always been militant about protection. Now, she'd exposed a decent person to the chance she was pregnant and that she might not want to keep his baby.

She'd not only taken advantage of him, she'd likely hurt him if she had to terminate this pregnancy … not to talk of STDs. No, she wasn't worried about him giving her anything. He'd not had sex since several months before Mary was diagnosed with cancer. Nearly three years ago. But he knew she'd had three partners in that space of time. Lord. He would not only be anxious she'd given him a disease, but also stressing about an unplanned pregnancy.

Whoa! Oke shook her head vigorously, halting that train of thought. No need to go that far. She regularly screened herself and her partners for STDs. Her last test was only a month ago. She would show him those results. And she'd only missed two pills. Nothing to be too worried about. She was thirty-five years old, not a fertile twenty-something girl. Surely, her ovaries were not that active. Besides, she would be having chemo quite soon. Not a great situation for any pregnancy. Hopefully, her monthly flow would come, and this particular worry would be out the window.

"Hey, Oke, you've been in there so long. Are you okay?"

Arinze's deep voice crashed through her thoughts, causing her heart to skip a beat. He sounded concerned. The typical caring man he was. Why the fuck had she done this to him? Why?

Oke cleared her throat. "Yes … I'm just using the toilet."

“Oh.”

“No … not for number one …” Her cheeks heated up. Damn, why was she feeling so flustered around him all of a sudden? “I eh … I’ll come out now.”

Quickly snatching her towel from the railing attached to the wall, she wrapped it around herself and arranged her hair into some semblance of normalcy before she opened the door.

Goodness. The man was standing there in all his naked glory, unapologetic and confident. Like he was used to walking around without any clothes on. Oke fought every instinct not to look downwards and catch a glimpse of his beautiful dick once again. She’d admired it too many times last night.

No way could she get away with doing so this morning and concentrate on the talk they needed to have. Nope. She’d clamp her neck with iron to keep it from moving if she had to, so that she didn’t look at it and lose her focus. Arinze was the marrying kind. She didn’t want to give off any mixed signals.

“Ehm ... good morning,” she murmured, feeling tongue-tied. This was strange for her. Usually, she was the one with all the confidence after sex, telling her lovers to get out of her house. Why did she suddenly feel the urge to rush towards Arinze, wrap her arms around him, and thank him for last night? Why did she feel that inexplicable urge to cook him breakfast for sexing her so good? Something she’d never done in her life before—cook for a man.

“Hey, Oke,” he said with a lazy smile. “How are you feeling? I woke up with a harsh headache this morning. Must have had one too many last night. Are you okay?”

“Yes … eh, thanks. About that …” She lost focus as her gaze dipped to his long and thick dick. It hung curved and semi-erect. God almighty. What a distraction.

“Please can you put something on while we talk?” she said, her tone coming out a bit breathless.

“Oh.” His gaze searched hers curiously for several seconds, then he nodded, turned back and walked towards the bed. That brought her wayward attention to his tight bottom. Firm brown buns. Recollections of squeezing them in her palms as he moved powerfully inside her, flashed inside her head, causing her fingers

to itch with the need to clutch them again.

She shook her head rapidly. Focus, she chided herself for her silly distraction. Who on earth with newly diagnosed breast cancer goes about ogling sexy men? Apparently, only Oke Amayo. She needed serious help.

It took several minutes of him rummaging the room for him to find his boxers and slip them on. After donning his shirt, he walked back to her. For the first time ever, she noticed his slightly bowed legs. Oke swallowed hard as a small spasm squeezed her core. Bow-legged men were her thing. For some inexplicable reason, their gait did something to her, turned her on.

“Okay, what do you want to talk about?” There was a slight edge to his voice, as if he was dreading whatever she had to say.

She, too, dreaded this. She hated that she’d put him in this position because of her selfishness, her need to have her breast adored one more time before surgery. She could have called any of her past lovers or found a man she could easily get rid of this morning. Now, here she was, about to do something she’d never anticipated doing to Arinze. She swallowed the spit that seemed to clog her throat.

“First of all, I'd like to apologise for taking advantage of you last night,” she said, keeping her tone low and as contrite as she could. “For getting you drunk and seducing you, and for treating you like a sex object.”

His body became rigid, shock registering on his face as he gaped at her, but Oke couldn’t seem to find the common sense to study her audience’s response and react accordingly by shutting her big mouth.

“You’re a good man, Arinze, and you don’t deserve that kind of treatment,” she continued, her heart pounding in her chest. “We didn’t use protection, and I’m sorry I put you in that position.”

She heaved a deep breath in, trying to calm her nerves as she adjusted the towel tighter around her. “I’ll send you the results of my recent STD test, which I did less than a month ago, and I promise you don’t have to worry about a pregnancy because I’m on the pill.”

Having got all she had to say off her chest, she exhaled sharply. Silence followed

for several seconds as he stared at her, his face rigid with shock. Then, he burst into laughter, a belly laugh that shook his entire body and rumbled through hers, producing a rush of awareness between her thighs.

Damn, she loved when he laughed. But why was he amused? She was being dead serious. Not sure if she should be upset or relieved, Oke remained standing as she waited patiently for his amusement to pass.

"You must think I'm one of your 22-year-old boyfriends." He shook his head and chuckled once again. "Took advantage of me? Used me as a sex object? Got me drunk? Like I'm some kind of mumu man any of that applies to."

Oke's lips parted into a soft gasp. "That's not what I meant at all," she protested. "I never called you a mumu man, and neither have I ever assumed that about you."

"Oh, yes, you just insinuated that I wasn't in control last night," he said with a snicker.

He took three steps towards her until he invaded her personal space. "I was in full control of all my faculties last night, my dear Oke. And so were you." Lifting her chin up with his thumb and forefinger until she looked him squarely in the face, he added, "Don't blame the explosive night we had on alcohol. Neither of us was drunk. You know it. And I know it."

Her skin tingled from the touch of his long fingers on her face, and Oke fought the instinct to kiss him, to ask him to spend the morning downstairs and have breakfast with her as they talked about nothing in particular.

What the hell was happening to her? She was sick with breast cancer. She needed to face her illness, work towards the long journey of recovery she knew would be coming, not thinking about kissing Arinze or wanting to hold on to him a bit longer.

"Now, Oke," he said, releasing her face. "I know we didn't plan for last night to happen, but it did. And it was fantastic for me. And for you. So many orgasms between us. It was magical."

Her mouth fell open, but he ignored her. "You can deny it all you want, try to push it under the rug, say whatever you want to disprove that something shifted

between us last night, but like I said earlier, it did," he carried on in a gruff voice and an intense gaze that caused her lower belly to quiver.

The truth of his remark surged through her ears and caused a rippling explosion in her chest. Indeed, their entire relationship had shifted last night. No way could they remain the uncomplicated friends they'd been. All because of her selfishness. His next comment reeled her mind back in.

"The discussion we should be having is about where we go from here."

Oke swallowed hard. She'd not really anticipated talking about this with him. Not today. Not when her head was still so jumbled up.

"I know you have so much to deal with," he said as if reading her mind. "I don't think it's fair for us to have this discussion today or while we're trying to sort out your healthcare needs."

A small smile tugged his lips as he brushed a tender hand over her bare shoulder. The gentleness of his tone and gesture, his absolute understanding and reference to facing her breast cancer together with her, made Oke's stomach roil with guilt. Arinze was such a wonderful man. She didn't deserve him. She was way too broken, too jaded.

"I'll leave now because I have a meeting this morning," he said, planting a soft kiss on her forehead. "Call you later today. Is that okay?"

Oke's throat tightened as a ball of emotion squeezed her gullet, making any speech difficult. She'd never experienced such conflicting feelings for a man before. Not since her father left when she was a child. A part of her wanted to imagine possibilities of happiness and security with Arinze, to go with the flow and see what the future brought for them. But deep inside, she knew she wasn't wired that way.

Since the day her father shattered her image of what a perfect family looked like, she'd developed an aversion to allowing herself to depend on anyone else for her happiness.

She despised how broken her mother had been after her husband's departure, and how much the woman she'd once adored had allowed another man dictate whom to allow in her life. No way did she want to be remotely near to feeling that

much for any man. Her freedom, her independence, her ability to enjoy men without any sentiments—she never wanted to give that up.

Arinze deserved a woman who believed in love, marriage, and babies. Not someone like her who was completely damaged emotionally. She didn't think she had the capacity to be the kind of woman he needed.

She cleared her throat to get her voice box working again. "Okay," she said, offering him a small smile as she nodded.

Her heart sank at the thought of what she needed to do to protect him from her.

Eleven



Blocked. She'd blocked him. Arinze grunted as he lifted the 10kg dumbbells above his head. He held them up, counting to thirty in his mind before he lowered them, exhaling slowly.

Sweat soaked his shirt, making the cotton material cling to his skin. His biceps ached from overuse, but he welcomed the distraction of exercise from his growing annoyance.

Who the hell did Oke think she was? And what did she take him for? Did she really think that one night of sex with her would make him beg for her attention? Did she really lump him in the same category as all those silly juvenile guys that usually went crazy after she fucked them?

Drawing in a harsh breath, Arinze lifted the weights again, holding them above his head for several beats, then blew out air from his mouth as he lowered them back to the ground.

He loved to exercise because he didn't like to feed into the overweight, big-bellied CEO stereotype. The fact that he ran two successful multi-billion Naira companies didn't mean he should look like he didn't care about his health. Being fit had always been a huge performance booster for him at work. He believed looking after one's physical health improved productivity … which was why he'd installed this gym facility at the headquarters of their family-owned enterprise—Solid Constructions Ltd and Standard Security.

He had insisted every member of the team be entitled to take advantage of the free gym membership, not just the executives. And he encouraged all to take

advantage of the amenity.

Puffing out a sigh, he glanced around. Like the many times he came here to exercise before work, it was totally empty except for the gym staff sitting at the reception area. But for some reason, he didn't feel annoyed being alone today. He'd hoped to have some time to himself to think while exercising. This was the perfect place to silently vent his frustrations, nurse his bruised ego.

Grimacing as he lifted the weight again, Arinze allowed his mind to wander back to Oke. How could she treat him this way? With so much disrespect?

Several hours after their night together, he'd received a text from her with an attachment which opened files that showcased the negative results of STD tests she'd taken three weeks earlier. And while he'd been relieved to find out that she was completely clean, the business-like manner in which she'd sent the message had irked him.

It had literally said: I apologise once again for being reckless. Please find attached my recent health screen. If you wish, I'll repeat it and send you updated results. Best wishes.

He grunted, curling his lips into a snarl.

Please find attached. Best wishes.

Like he was some goddamned work colleague. Like he hadn't been all face down between her thighs sucking the juice out of her pussy while she moaned and cried out her orgasm in his bloody ears.

"Please find attached, my foot!" he growled.

"Any problem, Sir?"

Arinze froze, darting his gaze sideways at the young lady sitting at the reception desk, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

Had he really spoken that loudly? Bloody hell! For real? Had thinking about Oke somehow managed to get him all worked up and shouting at himself in the gym?

Lowering the dumbbells, Arinze shook his head. "No, everything's fine," he

said, giving the woman a reassuring smile. “I’m just pushing myself a bit more than necessary this morning.”

“Well done, Sir,” she said, smiling back, her gaze lingering on his chest and dipping a little lower to the front of his sweatpants before jumping back to his eyes. He could see admiration written all over her face, had always noticed how she ogled him anytime he worked out. Even when he’d been married.

“Thank you,” he said, turning his attention away from her briskly. He didn’t want to give her any ideas. He wasn’t one to take seriously adoration from starry-eyed employees barely out of their teens. From an early age, his father who had been married for over thirty years, had warned him about the temptations being a successful man posed.

He knew deep down in his heart that most of the women who showed interest didn’t want him for anything more than the luxurious lifestyle they imagined he could offer. He’d never entertained their efforts and had been quick to dismiss any flirting instantaneously.

Mary had loved him for who he was. A young, skinny, awkward boy who became a buff, good-looking, and successful man. No amount of pussy thrown his way could replace that feeling of making love to the woman he loved.

For him, sex had always been a sacred act. He’d had only two partners before he met Mary, and when he’d fallen in love and married her, it had pretty much closed the door on any desire to seek sexual fulfilment outside his marriage.

His love and devotion to his wife had kept him focused on her, and even though it had been awkward between them at first, they had grown to learn how to please each other sexually until sex between them became more than satisfactory.

Even several months before Mary’s diagnosis, when she’d been ill and completely gone off sex, he’d not looked elsewhere. He’d remained faithful. It was just not in his nature to cheat. And though his younger brother teased him a lot, he’d never bothered to hook up with any woman or engage in casual sex after Mary died.

Until Oke. What they’d shared several nights ago had nothing to do with love or emotions. It had been carnal and visceral, a lust-filled coupling of two sexually

charged bodies. And yes, they should have been more cautious and used protection, but he didn't regret it one bit. Not a moment of it.

Being with Oke had been just the push he needed to break out of the sexual limbo he'd slipped into since way before Mary's death. It was absolutely life altering. His body had come alive. Uninhibited. Unhinged. It seemed like she'd struck a match on him that ignited a blaze of unquenchable lust. And something else. Something primal that appeared to control his body. And mind.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. For two weeks straight, she occupied his every thought. He wanted to hold her again in his arms, to see her and touch her smooth, soft skin. He longed to hear her voice and her husky laugh. Fight her cancer battle with her until they could spit in the disease's face because she'd won. And yes, he wanted to fuck her over and over again.

But he couldn't do any of those things. She'd blocked his number and every avenue he could use to contact her, including all her social media platforms. Yesterday, he'd been so frustrated by her abrupt dismissal that he'd driven to her house. Her gateman had poked his face through the square slot at the centre of the pedestrian gate and said with the most irritating voice, "My madam says I shouldn't open the gate for you."

He'd been so outraged that he'd felt an almost irrepressible urge to reach through the small space and knock the man's teeth out. Not sure how he'd managed to keep his composure, he'd stormed back to his car and zoomed off, cursing himself for stooping so low and driving uninvited to a woman's house. Talk about out of character.

Her silent dismissal had wounded his pride, irritated the hell out of him. Imagine Oke treating him like this? Like a thirsty man craving her attention. Such an insult! Did she expect him to beg, to cry? Never. Arinze Ibeh didn't beg anyone.

"Fuck her!" he grunted under his breath as he lifted the dumbbells with so much force his biceps twitched. He could have any woman he wanted. Darting his eyes sideways, he caught the young receptionist's gaze fixed on him, her eyes sparkling with sensual awareness. His ego inflated like a balloon.

See … women threw themselves at him all the time. He just didn't give any of them the time of the day because his focus had been on Mary. Why was he getting all hot and bothered because a woman had blocked him?

How had this happened all of a sudden? How could things change so dramatically? Could that one night with Oke really be the reason? Or had there been a smouldering relationship developing between them through the years that had burst to the surface following their lustful romp?

Arinze tightened his jaw as he brought down the dumbbells and placed them back on the rack. Chest heaving, he turned his attention to the treadmill and strolled over to the machine.

A run would do him good. He needed to work out until his body was exhausted and his mind emptied of all thoughts of Oke. He had to forget her, wouldn't allow her to treat him like one of the horny boys she usually dismissed without a thought. No bloody way. After this exercise, he'd be damned if he entertained further thoughts of her.

Still full of steam, Arinze adjusted the settings on the machine and stepped onto it. He pounded his legs on the running belt with so much force, his thighs ached.

"I won't think about her anymore," he said to himself between pants. "I won't beg her. Ever."

But seconds later, her image floated into his head once again like an apparition he couldn't shake off. It had been happening for a fortnight, the crazy way he couldn't keep her out of his mind.

The memory of their night together, of how good it felt holding her in his arms, how right it felt being in her house … it all kept coming back to him. He'd relived the entire evening several times, including the non-sexual moments when she'd opened up about her family.

It had been such fun being with her, so relaxing. He'd felt more alive in those moments than he'd felt in years. And he'd longed for more, hoped to have more of those carefree moments with her, to share her cancer journey with her.

Arinze blew out a sigh. Oke's scheduled surgery was fast approaching. How was she? Anxious? Prepared? Had she told her friends and family, or would she stick to her typical Wonder Woman act and attempt to brave it alone?

He had no clue what was going on with her, and it ate at him. It all seemed so awful. So damned frustrating that he didn't know, couldn't be with her. Why did

it matter so much? She was the one who blocked him, cut him off like dead weight. He should be able to let it go easily, shouldn't he?

Arinze had his suspicions on why she'd blocked him. Oke didn't like needing anyone. She'd told him that repeatedly. If she let him hang around after their night together, it would somehow blur the easy-going, platonic line they'd toed for months. From what he knew about Oke, she kept sex strictly physical. A soulless joining of bodies, never allowing any of her lovers to hang around for important aspects of her life. She'd pretty much admitted to him that she chose much younger men precisely for that reason. In less than subtle words, she'd admitted they were much easier to get rid of.

His jaw tightened at the memory of the way she'd laughed after saying that.

"I now understand why men go for younger women. Easier to call the shots. I prefer doing that in relationships myself," she'd said with an amused twist of her lips. "More mature people find it harder to walk away."

Well, he was a mature 34-year-old. He'd show her that he could also walk away easily. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing him like this. Ever.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Arinze sighed in frustration as he reached forward and pressed the pause button on the machine. Pulling out the mobile device from his sweatpants, he glanced at the screen. A text from his brother.

Nnanna: Chu Mai is here. I'll direct him to the boardroom.

Arinze drew in a ragged breath as he stepped down from the treadmill. Time to head out. He'd need a quick shower first and then a change into his work clothes. Thankfully, his office had all the amenities he required for that.

This meeting with the Chinese engineer was something he had worked on for months. A positive direction for the expansion of the already successful family-owned security firm. He needed to focus and stop thinking about a woman that didn't want him in her life.

Typing a quick text to his brother and secretary, he instructed both to ensure they provided top notch refreshments for their guests. In thirty minutes, he should hopefully begin negotiations for what he believed would be a mutually beneficial agreement between Chu Mai and Standard Security's mechanical

engineering training centre.

Twelve



Oke glanced down at the red stain right in the centre of her underwear. Her period had come. As she stood staring at the bloody mess, relief erupted inside her, then spread through her entire body like the warm glow of a bursting star.

Thank you, God. She looked over at the pregnancy test kit sitting on the bathroom cabinet. She'd been five days late, her anxiety going through the roof yesterday when she'd checked her panties repeatedly and saw nothing. Beyond panicked, she'd rushed over to the supermarket to buy it.

With a deep sigh, Oke peeled off the lacy material of her underwear from her legs and tossed it into the laundry basket.

She lifted the now unnecessary pregnancy kit and stared at it. Why hadn't she used it yesterday? That would have clarified her situation quickly and released all her tension … unless two bright pink lines had stared back at her. What if she'd discovered she was pregnant?

Oke inhaled slowly, contemplating the possibility. A baby. Another little human. Someone belonging to her. Half her DNA. Closing her eyes, she let her imagination run wild for the hundredth time since her night with Arinze.

The image came to her with the clarity of a high-definition picture. A cute little boy with smooth chocolate skin, warm brown but intense eyes gazing up at her and calling her Mummy as he fluttered his thick eyelashes coyly. The perfect blend of Arinze and her—brains, street smarts, humour, and beauty. Her son. It had to be a boy, because the universe knew better than to give her a daughter.

Oke chuckled. She knew how to handle boys. But a girl? What could she possibly teach her? She was a screwed-up woman who had no business raising a girl.

Peeling her eyes open again, she gasped in surprise. Were those tears falling down her cheeks? Was she really crying? Why? She should be jumping for joy. Her period had finally arrived. She wasn't pregnant. No need to worry about an abortion. The storm had passed. The blood flowing between her thighs and down her legs was a miracle. She could face her surgery and chemotherapy now without worrying about harming a foetus inside her. All those chemicals would surely not be healthy for a developing baby.

Oke clutched the sides of the sink as she broke down in tears, her body trembling from silent sobs. Disappointment. She knew this feeling that saturated her senses for what it was. But why? Everyone who knew her could attest to the fact that she didn't want children.

From the moment she realised that her mother had been willing to walk away from her own children for a man, she'd made up her mind that she would never bring another human into this world. If her own mother could desert her, that bond clearly didn't mean a damn thing. Even seeing her sister successfully manage motherhood effortlessly hadn't swayed her convictions. She just didn't think she had it in her to be anyone's mother. Especially not when she loathed her own.

Like the blood trickling from her womb, the tears ran a steady trail down her cheeks. For reasons she didn't want to analyse yet, a feeling of great loss overwhelmed her. Somewhere in all her disconcert about the possibility of being pregnant, she'd also hoped that she was. And for the life of her, she couldn't understand why. This was certainly not the right time to suddenly develop the maternal gene.

Cancer was a serious illness. If it spread before she began her treatment, she could die. Did she really want to abandon a child in this world, force another human to live without the love of a mother just like she had? Wasn't that selfish?

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth and worried the moist inner membrane with her teeth. For the first time in her life, she allowed herself to think about the possibility of motherhood. If she died tomorrow, would she have missed out on

the unconditional love that women gushed about, the kind her sister and friends shared with their kids?

A mother. Oke turned to her side, uncaring about the mess that the drops of blood flowing between her thighs made on the white terrazzo floor. She ran her palms down the front of her flat stomach while gazing at her reflection in the mirror, picturing it swollen with a baby. A human with half her DNA.

“I want it,” she murmured with a small smile.

Scarier than dying of cancer, she realised that she could leave the world without experiencing the purest of love, the bond of mother and child.

“I want it,” she said louder, her face breaking into a wider grin. “I want a baby with Arinze.”

And that’s when it hit her. The reason she’d blocked him from contacting her. He’d done it. That night with him had finally done the inconceivable—opened her heart to the possibility of more. She’d punished him for making her long for more.

Their sexual marathon had been reckless, fuelled by lust and alcohol. But somewhere deep inside, Oke knew she had ignored the warning bells ringing in her head to use a condom. She knew that she’d missed a few days of her contraception pills and wasn’t safe. Yet she carried on. She should be ashamed of herself for her selfishness, but she wasn’t. Even several days later, she still hadn’t mustered appropriate regret.

Until now. And only because it hadn’t worked. She wasn’t pregnant for Arinze. That’s what she regretted.

“I want it.”

This time, her declaration was filled with total acceptance of her desire as she parted her lips and drew in a long slow breath, pleased with herself for finally admitting the truth.

Pulling out sheets of wet alcoholic wipes from the pack she’d retrieved from the cabinet beside her, Oke cleaned the bathroom floor. When she was done, she strolled over to the bathtub, slid the glass door open and stepped inside.

She turned on the shower and squealed as blasts of water burst down her body. Excitement cascaded over her like the sprinkles of cold water on her skin. A mother. As soon as she finished her cancer treatment, she would start the journey in the quest to become one. God willing, she'd have a baby in her arms at the end of it. Someone with half her DNA, and if she could manage it, half Arinze's.

~

"I've been diagnosed with breast cancer, Nkem," Oke said baldly in a low tone.

She didn't mean to blurt it out in the middle of her lunch date with her best friend, but hearing Nkem talk about her fear of making relationship decisions had triggered her.

Yes, she knew that her friend's ex-husband had hurt her by being unfaithful. Oke had been there, witnessed the demise of that relationship years ago. She'd supported Nkem through it all. But recently, Nkem and Tunde were attempting to mend their relationship, and Nkem seemed much happier than when they'd been apart. The girl had pretty much been walking on cloud nine for the past few months since the two had got back together. So, why did her friend keep feeding her mind with all these doubts and negativity? Life was too damn short to keep flipflopping.

When her friend had asked her to lunch, Oke readily accepted, hoping to broach the subject of her illness sensitively so that Nkem received the news without breaking down.

They were settled at Tokunbo Restaurant, an eatery specialising in delicious traditional meals from the diverse regions of Nigeria. While Nkem had opted for bitterleaf soup and pounded yam, she had ordered the oily banga soup and starch.

They had only just dug into their meals, with their hands as was customary in this restaurant, when Nkem began spilling her guts like a water tap turned on at full force. All about her relationship uncertainties, because a woman Tunde had dated during their separation was contacting him—trying to rekindle their fling.

Oke had patiently listened, tried her best to alleviate Nkem's fears about Tunde and to give her some advice—talk to him about why he cheated, stop dredging

up the past, start your new relationship with a clean slate. “Life is too short, Sis. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. It’s too short not to be happy,” she had finally said.

And with that, Nkem had become suspicious, picking up that something was amiss with Oke and asking if everything was okay.

Hell no, it wasn’t okay and neither was she. Which is how Oke came to blurt out her cancer diagnosis sans the careful wording she’d practised so many times earlier in the day, and was now sitting here cursing herself.

“Oh, no.” Nkem gasped, her eyes wide in shock.

Guilt seeped down Oke’s spine at the devastation registered on her friend’s face. She hadn’t meant to keep her illness a secret from Nkem, but asking for support from others didn’t come naturally to her. She hated bothering people with her problems, even close friends and family.

From the moment she’d realised that she and her younger sister had been abandoned by their parents and dropped off to live with an ailing grandmother, Oke had needed to grow up fast. She’d passed quickly from the childlike state of trust, and rapidly developed an independent streak. Having to take on the role of parent, looking after not only her sister but also her grandmother Mama Joyce, meant she was the one people leaned on, not the other way around. So now, depending on others for help was alien to Oke.

“Is ... is it terminal? Are you okay?”

Her friend’s question cut through her musings. Oke waved a hand dismissively, determined not to worry her friend.

“No … I mean, yes, I’m fine,” she said with a half-smile, trying to remain as upbeat as possible, to downplay her own fears. “It’s only stage one. It’s still localised to my right breast and hasn’t spread at all, but I need a mastectomy and chemotherapy, then a medication that I’ll have to take for about ten years. The cancer specialist is very optimistic about complete remission if I commit to treatment immediately.”

“So, have you? What are your treatment plans?”

Oke nodded, taking a sip from her chilled bottle of Coke. “I’ll have the mastectomy in three weeks.”

“Three weeks? God …” Tears pooled in Nkem’s eyes, but she struggled to blink them back. “That’s so soon. It all seems so rushed. Have you asked for a second opinion? Must you have surgery?”

“Yes, Nkem. It’s better for me to do it as soon as possible to reduce the risk of spread. I’ve spoken to the best cancer specialist in Ibadan and another colleague who works in London, and they all agree that immediate surgery is the safest option.” She lifted her shoulders in a resigned shrug. “So, it is what it is. My beautiful right boob has to go.”

“Oh, God … I’m so sorry.”

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. So much for her tactic of not upsetting her friend. Nkem looked shaken, as if she’d seen a ghost. Oke scooped a small blob of starch in her fingers and dipped it into the oily soup in her calabash. She inserted the appetising mixture in her mouth and swallowed, relishing the flavours of the spices bursting in her taste buds.

See. This was another reason she’d been reluctant to tell Nkem about her cancer. She loved her friend dearly, but the woman was a worrywart and would make things seem more complicated than necessary.

“When did you find out about the lump in the first place?” Nkem asked, ending the silence between them. “And why didn’t you tell me sooner. I could have been there for you.”

Her friend sounded betrayed, and Oke could understand why. They shared almost everything with each other. Wanting to make up for being secretive about her illness, Oke launched into full disclosure, revealing every detail about her cancer from start to finish, including the results of her biopsy and CT scan.

“I’m so sorry I kept it from you,” Oke concluded, scooping another blob of starch and rolling it into a ball in her fingers. “You’ve been so happy, living on cloud nine with Tunde, and I didn’t want to bother you. Besides, Arinze has been there to support me through it all.”

“Arinze?” Nkem raised a brow, her eyes bulging as if she wasn’t sure she’d

heard correctly. “Arinze Ibeh?”

Oke laughed out, amused by the unceremonious way her friend tossed the piece of goat meat in her hand back into her calabash of bitterleaf soup. “Why do you look so shocked? Are you still interested in him?” she asked, still chuckling.

She’d introduced Nkem to Arinze many months ago thinking they would be perfect for each other. Nkem was the spitting image of Mary, and Arinze was obsessed with his late wife. Because she believed they also had a lot in common, especially their values about family and religion, she’d hoped the matchmaking would take wings, but it hadn’t. They’d dated less than two months before things ended rather abruptly between them.

When she’d questioned Arinze about it, he’d simply told her that they were both still stuck in the past. Shortly after that, Nkem reconciled with her ex-husband, and Arinze … well, Arinze was still stuck mourning his late wife.

“No. Never was. Never will be.”

Immense relief washed over Oke at Nkem’s response. She would really hate to have any conflict with her bestie over a man. “Good. Because he’s going to be my baby daddy.”

“Wait … what?” Nkem dragged her seat closer to the table and leaned in, amusing Oke. Her friend could never change. Always nosey. “Okay, tell me what the hell is going on, and start from the beginning. I need details. Every single detail.”

“Nothing o…”

“Start talking.”

“Okay, okay,” she murmured, chortling at her friend’s authoritative tone. The girl was serious o.

Heaving in a deep breath, Oke proceeded to let her friend in on all that happened between her and Arinze, as well as her newfound desire to have a baby with him.

“The only thing that scares me more than the possibility of cancer and of dying, is not having a child of my own,” she said in summary. “Arinze has been a

strong, dependable friend since I met him two years ago, a man who also wants a family desperately. He's the perfect candidate to be my sperm donor."

Nkem looked nonplussed by the entire conversation, and Oke had to press her lips firmly together to fight the laugh bubbling up inside her. She knew it didn't make sense to her friend yet. Truth be told, Oke confused her own damned self. After all, she'd blocked Arinze from contacting her after an amazing night of sex with him, and now, she'd suddenly turned around, deciding that she wanted to have a baby with him. Admittedly, to anyone listening, she must sound like a raving lunatic.

"But … do you have feelings for him? Do you also want him as your man?"

Oke shrugged. "I'm not sure I even know how to do relationships," she said with a little laugh, evading the question.

For the past few days, she'd asked herself the same question and couldn't come up with an answer. She liked Arinze a lot, respected him as a man, a friend, and an entrepreneur. He had a generous spirit and a warm personality.

Even though she found him very attractive, their explosive sexual chemistry had completely caught her off guard, further complicating her feelings for him. But what did that all mean? Did she want him as her man? Could she see herself falling for him? Did she even know how to let go and fall in love? She had no clue, had never contemplated this in her life.

Days of rumination had brought her to one clear conclusion. Arinze would be a fantastic father and she wanted to have a baby with no one but him. And no, she hadn't figured out the details, but she'd made up a sketchy proposal. All she needed to do was find out if he would go along with it. If only she could muster the courage to call him and apologise for the rude manner in which she'd cut him off.

For now, she would use her go-to method to avoid difficult subjects—deflection and humour.

"Look at me, I blocked a man who sexed me so good the very next day." Oke flipped her hands upwards in mock surrender. "If you were Arinze, would you want anything to do with me, let alone date me?"

Nkem’s lips twitched and then twisted into a snicker. “Hell no.”

“There you have it. I’ve not figured everything out yet, Nkem,” Oke admitted. “I’ll first concentrate on my cancer treatment. And only afterward, can I begin my journey of becoming a mother. Hopefully, by then, I’ll be able to convince Arinze to give me his sperm even if he doesn’t want me as his woman.”

Nkem shook her head. “Girl, you’re crazy,” she snorted, her mouth curved upwards into a teasing smile. “But if there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that you always achieve whatever you set your mind to.”

Nkem lifted her almost empty bottle of Coke and raised it in salute to her. “Cheers to that, my dear bestie. I know you’ll beat cancer and become the best mother in the world to you and Arinze’s baby … whenever you finally get around to unblocking the poor man.”

Oke flung her head back and bellowed in response. She was glad she’d shared this with Nkem. Her heart already felt tons lighter. She really should stop being so guarded about exposing her worries to loved ones. Tomorrow, she would invite her sister Ufuoma for a visit to her house and let her in on her health struggles. There was absolutely nothing like the support of good friends and family.

Thirteen



Oke's heart flooded with gratitude as she swept her gaze around. It was the morning of her surgery, and she was lying on the bed in one of the private rooms in Island Hospital's general surgery ward.

How lucky was she? The most important people in her world were here, surrounding her with love and support at this challenging time. On the right side of her bed stood Ufuoma and Nkem with her ex-husband—now boyfriend—Tunde, who also happened to be one of Oke's partners at Blossom Health. And resting his frame against the wall on to the left was Segun, her other partner … he'd cut his holiday in Las Vegas short and flown in yesterday to be here.

She had finally told everyone in her life about her cancer diagnosis. To her relief, they'd received the news better than she'd anticipated, rallying around her for support.

It all felt so wholesome, yet so incomplete. Arinze, the man who had been there with her at the onset of this journey, wasn't here. All her own fault, because she still hadn't reached out to him. So stubborn and silly of her, but every time she gathered the courage to pick up the phone and call, she froze and just couldn't go through with it.

Oke swallowed hard, shaking off thoughts of Arinze. She would not think about him now. Especially not when she was due to have major surgery soon. Giving herself grief for the awful way she'd treated him wouldn't do her any good. She needed only positive thoughts and energy today.

"Thank you all for coming. And for everything," she said, pointing around at the

various gifts they'd brought.

The room was swamped with colourful balloons, bouquets of flowers, and multiple well-wishing cards. They'd gone far and beyond to make her feel loved and supported.

"I know it's a Monday morning," Oke continued, her throat tight with tears of gratitude. "Thank you all for taking time off work to be here."

"Work? Who cares about that?" Tunde snorted, flashing her a mischievous smile. "I'd rather be here with you than sucking fat from yet another woman who thinks a slimmer waist will make her life easier."

"Tunde!" Oke protested with a little laugh, wagging an accusing finger at him. "You need to take our clients more seriously. Their surgical needs aren't always superficial."

"I know, and I do take them seriously," he said. "But you're far more important than any of that."

"Indeed," Segun affirmed. "So important that I left two hot babes who were eager to show me the best strip clubs in Vegas ... just to be here with you."

"You and strip clubs, Segun, eh." Nkem shook her head. "Don't enter one chance one day o. Too much nudity can lead you into trouble."

"Never, my dear Nkem," Segun said, winking at her. "Strippers are healers, not the devils society has made them out to be. They show the world that nudity is nothing to be ashamed of. It's what God intended in the Garden of Eden before we all sinned. I wish we could all be naked."

"Hian. What kind of yeye talk is that? Biko, let everyone leave their clothes on," Nkem said, making an elaborate sign of the cross on her chest and eliciting laughter from everyone.

Oke laughed, too, enjoying the carefree banter among her friends. She loved this group so much. They were always there for one another whenever it really counted.

"Don't mind Segun," Tunde said, wrapping an arm around Nkem's shoulders

and pulling her closer to his side. “He’s running around strip clubs hoping to find one woman. He thinks I don’t know about her.”

“About who?” Oke perked up, glad for the distraction of this juicy titbit. Anything to take her mind off the realisation that in a few hours, she would wake up from surgery without her right breast. “Which woman is Segun looking for?”

“No woman,” Segun answered quickly. So quickly that it raised Oke’s suspicions. He was a year younger than she and a little reserved, but they shared similar ideologies about sex and relationships. Neither she nor Segun had ever been the committing type. They both played the field unapologetically, refusing to be shamed for their unorthodox views.

Although she loved both her partners, she usually gravitated towards Segun whenever she wanted to party. Tunde’s prudish attitude sometimes dampened their fun during outings together. But Segun … he was completely different. The guy knew the best clubs, had connections to several celebrities, and generally knew how to have a good time. Oke loved hanging out with him for that very reason. Besides, he was the only one with whom she could freely share her sexual escapades without any fear of judgement.

“Oh, I think I know who you’re talking about,” Oke said, having a sudden epiphany. “That dark-skinned stripper that he kept looking at the day we went to Ozone. I believe her name is … eh … Rain. Yes, Rain! Na wa ooo. Segun couldn’t keep his eyes off her all night. Not even for a second. Tell me I’m right, Segun. Tell me.”

Segun’s light-brown skin seemed to go a little dusky around his cheeks. Oke’s interest piqued even more. Was Segun blushing? The guy who claimed that nothing could embarrass him. Without a doubt, Oke knew she had hit close to home. Who was Rain the stripper to him? Had Segun fallen for her? And why did Tunde insinuate that Segun went around strip clubs searching for her. Surely, they needed to talk more about this.

“No,” Segun snapped, fracturing her thoughts. “You’re wrong. And let’s change the subject.”

“Change the subject?” Ufuoma’s soft voice rang out. “Not when I’m just finding out that my sister, the doctor, goes to strip clubs. I can’t believe my ears.”

Oke laughed out, thoroughly amused by the scandalised expression on her sister's face. "Abeg chill, Ufuoma, it's not that deep," Oke said. "Like Segun said earlier, there's absolutely nothing wrong with strip clubs. They're a perfect place to relax. You should take your husband to one sometime."

"God forbid!" Ufuoma and Nkem exclaimed in unison and with such righteous indignation, that another bout of laughter rippled through the room.

When everyone quietened, Tunde placed a soft kiss on Nkem's forehead. "Don't worry, Babe," he said, pecking the same spot again. "The only person I want stripping for me is you."

"Mtcheeeew!" Oke hissed. "You guys' constant PDA is annoying as fuck."

"Abeg, Sis, before you start your swearing and piss Jesus off, let's commit this surgery into God's hands," Ufuoma said with a teasing shake of her head. "I know you don't believe in any of this, Oke, but I do, and I won't be comfortable if we leave you to go into the theatre without a prayer."

The room immediately became sombre at the mention of her pending operation. Oke swallowed back a sigh. She had hoped every second leading up to her surgery would be light-hearted and cheerful. She didn't want to think about the prospect of having her chest sliced into and losing one of her breasts. At least, not until she woke up from anaesthesia and had to face the reality. But she knew her sister was right. Everyone in this room wished her well. Even if she didn't believe in spiritual forces fighting for human beings, she understood the power of positive thinking through prayer. They needed to believe that she would be okay, and praying helped them do that.

"Okay," she said, nodding her agreement.

As if by mutual understanding, they all gathered closer to her, linking hands together and bowing their heads.

"Dear God, we come to you in the name of Jesus," Ufuoma began.

Oke closed her eyes and bowed her head, soaking up the uplifting energy around her as her sister prayed and everyone else joined their faith to summon goodwill for her.

~

Her eyelids seemed heavy as she peeled her eyes open. Her vision was blurry and her head fuzzy, but she could see him. Arinze. He was seated at the corner of the room with a book in his hand and his head resting on his shoulder as he snoozed away.

Oke's mouth slackened with the desire to speak, but the words wouldn't form themselves. All the questions that rushed to her were too jumbled up in her muddled brain to make it past her lips coherently.

Was she seeing clearly? Was Arinze really in her room? How did he get here? Who allowed him in here? And why was he here?

Certain she was imagining things and probably still under the influence of the anaesthesia, Oke closed her eyes and opened them again.

Indeed, it was Arinze seated on the chair. Sleeping and snoring softly like he'd been there waiting for ages. Although the seat looked too small and uncomfortable for his tall and muscular frame, the image before her seemed so natural and unforced. As if he belonged in her life, by her side. He looked tired. How long had he been sitting there? What time was it?

Oke turned her head slowly to the round clock on the wall. She strained her eyes, trying to focus, but she couldn't make sense of the time. Her brain was still too mushy from medications to interpret the positioning of the long and short hands of the analogue clock.

Frustrated, she reverted her attention back to Arinze and fixed her gaze on him. He was still fast asleep, his long legs spread out awkwardly in front of him and his left arm hanging from the corner of the chair. Surprisingly, the book in his right hand remained in the same position as if reluctant to fall from his grip. She couldn't see the title, but knowing Arinze, it would be one of the typical true crime series he loved to read.

Oke felt a smile tug her lips and a profound sense of relief flood her senses. She was thrilled that he was here. The details didn't matter. The fact that he hadn't let her silly behaviour keep him from showing up gave her hope. He didn't run away when things got tough. He was a dependable man. A great choice for a

father to her future child. Her baby daddy.

With a slow smile spreading on her lips, Oke closed her eyes, allowing herself to succumb to the sedating chemicals flowing in her bloodstream.

~

She woke up with a start and immediately darted her gaze to the chair at the corner. It was empty. Much more aware now, she swept her gaze around. Her heart sank. There was nobody in the room. She was alone. Arinze wasn't there.

Tears filled her eyes. Her chest felt hot and heavy with a numbing pain on the right side. It hurt so bad … her body, her mind. And there was nobody here to lean on, to hold her hand.

You'll end up old and alone.

Greg Okon was right. Everyone was right. Just in her mid-thirties, and his prediction had come to pass. She'd woken up from a major surgery to find herself alone and in pain.

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. Her close family and friends had their own lives to live. Ufuoma, Nkem, Tunde and Segun were probably at work. They had to go about their daily routines. They couldn't put their lives on hold just because she needed surgery. She had no one. Not even Arinze who she'd hoped would be here like he'd been when she'd woken up the first time. Or had she been dreaming? Had she imagined him here?

The sound of running water jarred her. Oke's eyes widened. Moments later, the sound stopped, and the door on the right side of her room opened. She whirled her head to find Arinze emerging from the adjacent bathroom, wiping his hands on a paper towel.

Intense, unadulterated joy erupted inside Oke at the sight of him, dulling the pain she felt in her chest. He's here! Arinze is here!

"Hey, you're awake," he said, crumpling the wipe in his hand and tossing it into the bin. "How are you feeling?"

Still gobsmacked, Oke couldn’t respond. She simply stared at him in amazement, ecstatic about his presence in her hospital room.

He walked over to her and sat at the edge of the bed, making sure not to trip over the wires of the machines monitoring her vital signs.

“You woke up several times last night, but you weren’t really conscious,” he continued, searching her face. “I called the doctor to check you twice, but he said it was expected because you were still under sedation. How are you feeling now?”

“F-fine …” Oke cleared her throat. “In a lot of pain, but fine.”

His eyes narrowed in concern. “Do you want me to get the doctor again? He told me there’ll be a ward round today by nine o’clock and he’ll check on you then.”

“No,” Oke said quickly to reassure him. “I have my patient-controlled morphine pump here.” She pressed the button attached to the machine beside her. “It delivers my pain relief instantly.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Silence fell between them as they locked gazes. Oke’s heart thumped fast, and she could also see the echoing pounding of the pulse at the base of his neck. She wanted to reach out and pull him into her arms, to apologise for the way she treated him after their night together, to ask him to stay here all day because she craved his silent strength. But it seemed so difficult to put all those complex sentiments into simple words.

“Thank you for being here,” she said instead, her throat croaky from both dryness and the tears choking them.

He leaned forward and brushed away the tears on her cheeks with the pad of his thumb. “No wahala, Oke,” he said. “I wanted to be here for you. It’s as simple as that.”

Oke’s heart leapt with joy. She loved how he said that with such earnestness, as if his being by her bedside was inevitable. Her entire body flooded with warmth at the thought.

It must have taken a lot of planning for him to be here. Yes, Arinze knew the hospital where she was insured, and her surgery date. He'd been with her throughout the majority of her clinic appointments. However, she couldn't explain how he'd convinced the hospital staff to put him on her visitors' list. They didn't share the same last name and he wasn't her next of kin. Her sister Ufuoma was.

"How did you manage to convince the doctor to let you in? Only close family can stay."

His lips twisted into a cocky smile. "You forget we have been attending appointments together," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "I simply told them I was your husband."

Oke's mouth popped wide open. "And they believed you? Didn't bother asking any questions?"

Arinze blew out a chuckle. "Why would they have any reason to doubt me? They've seen us together many times in this hospital. Besides, Ufuoma confirmed it with the receptionist when she spotted me walking in on her way out to pick her kids up from school."

Oke nodded. Of course, Ufuoma would. Her sister knew Arinze quite well. He was her husband's distant cousin, and they'd all socialised a few times. In a way, Ufuoma considered him family and wouldn't have thought anything of telling a little fib to have Arinze included on the visitors' list.

"Well, I don't care how you did it, I'm glad you're here." She pinned him with a sombre look. "And I apologise for my rudeness. I shouldn't have treated you the way I did."

He nodded, twisting his lips into a teasing smile. "Apology accepted. But next time, just remember that I'm not Greg, Femi, or any of your silly boy toys you can toss aside whenever you feel like it."

Oke laughed out, glad to have gotten that out of the way. Her fallout with Arinze had really weighed heavily on her mind.

"I have absolutely no plans to toss you aside, Mister Ibeh," she said with a mischievous smile. If only he knew all the plans her mind had conjured up about

having him in her life as her baby daddy, he’d run as far away from her as possible.

Fourteen



From his usual corner of the room, Arinze sat watching Oke sleep. Her vibrancy had returned since her surgery nearly two weeks ago. Her smooth, chocolate colour had regained its lustre, and she'd tended to her braids packed into a neat bun above her head. Although she was without a stitch of makeup on, and had lost a little weight, she looked to be well on the way to recovery.

The doctor had promised to discharge her in a few days barring any unforeseen complications. This relieved Arinze a great deal, because he'd been worried sick about her.

Every day of her hospital stay, he'd driven here immediately after work to visit. As a rule, he spent the night, staying until she woke up in the morning, then drove back home to get ready for work.

The first few evenings with her had been rough. He'd felt helpless watching her squirm and cry out in agony, needing a lot of pain relief medication to cope. She'd not cared a damn about her appearance and had looked quite scary—her complexion pale, her hair scattered toward the four corners of the globe on her head, and dark bags under her eyes.

However, when he'd walked in three days ago, he'd noticed a vast difference. The tension in his chest unwound itself when he found her upright in bed without a single drip attached to her, dressed in a red cotton tank top and denim shorts instead of the depressing pale blue hospital gown she'd been wearing. She'd also styled her previously tangled and messy braids into a cute ponytail. Obviously in less pain, she'd had a cheerful smile on her face.

Watching her sleep peacefully now filled him with contentment. She'd kept him abreast of all her treatment, and he was thrilled to find out that her surgery had not only been successful, but also that there was no evidence of metastasis from her post-op CT scan.

Although the doctor had told her it wasn't necessary, Oke insisted on undergoing chemotherapy in the coming weeks to ensure all the cancer cells were destroyed. He applauded the decision. Yes, chemo was tough, but she was a fighter. No question that she would weather chemo's side effects. Going through it with Mary, he knew what to expect and would do everything he could to be there for her.

"Stop watching me sleep. It's creepy."

Oke's voice cut through his musings. He smiled. She held her eyes closed, but her lips curved into a smile.

"And how do you know I'm looking at you?"

Her eyes fluttered open, and she hauled herself upright in bed. Arinze noticed a slight grimace as she did, and his stomach churned.

Sometimes, Oke appeared completely pain-free. But when she changed positions or moved about on the bed, she would groan, clench her jaw, or squeeze her eyes shut, and he knew her postoperative wound still caused her discomfort. She was wearing a pink cotton nightgown, but the heavy bandage draped over her chest peaked out, giving a clear sign that she still had a long way to go to full recovery.

"Because I felt your eyes on me," she said, giving him a warm smile.

"You're right, I was looking," he admitted with a little laugh. "I'm glad you're feeling much better, but do you need any pain relief? I know you haven't taken any medication for two days now."

"I'm fine. I don't want to get addicted to morphine. I'd rather just take paracetamol and the occasional ibuprofen."

"It's not addiction if you take it for pain."

"I'm fine, Arinze," she said with a subtle sharpness designed to end the

discussion. “Stop fussing.”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded, flashing her a cheeky smile.

He had a tendency to be a bit mother hen-like when it came to Oke, but he couldn’t help it. From the moment he’d refused to accept her shutting him out and shown up to the hospital, he’d been all in. Unable to keep himself from caring.

Yes, her family and friends visited and helped out daily, but somehow, as if by mutual understanding, or maybe because he usually came over when everyone else needed to leave, he’d taken over as primary carer.

He saw to her simple needs, like ordering lunch and dinner for her so she didn’t need to eat the awful hospital food, and driving to her house and back to bring the bits and bobs she needed for her personal care. Just like he’d done yesterday when she asked him to bring her hair dryer so that she could wash and style her braids.

“I ordered roasted plantain and peppered stew like you wanted,” he said, pointing a finger. “It’s in the bag on the cabinet beside you.”

She flicked her gaze sideways, and her face broke into a bright smile. His heart lurched and began beating wildly. Whenever she smiled at him like that, he felt like superman, the rescuer of all humans.

“Thank you!” she squealed, reaching for the paper bag. “You’re the best.”

He grinned. “Glad to see your appetite is back. You’ve been quite irritable, and now I know why. You’ve simply been hangry.”

“Shut up.” With a playful glint in her eyes, she stuck out her tongue at him. “A hungry man is an angry man. Or in my case, woman.”

Arinze chuckled as she tore off the paper wrapping to free the bowl, and then, plucked off the plastic lid and inhaled deeply.

“Smells amazing,” she said, eyes beaming. With the plastic fork, she stabbed at a piece of the plantain. “Want some?”

Arinze grimaced. “Hell no,” he said. “You know I don’t eat that kind of shit. I’ll be in the toilet all night if I do.”

She chuckled. “You need to explore more, Arinze. I’ve never seen anyone with such a limited palate. Only rice, chicken, turkey and a few soups and garri. It’s not normal.”

“I have a very sensitive stomach.”

“Because you haven’t trained it. Here …” She held out a slice of roasted plantain she’d dipped into the hot stew. “Have a taste.”

Arinze shook his head. “Never. Unless you want this room smelling of my farts, I suggest you put that away.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be an aje butter,” she snorted. “Train your stomach with street food, and you’ll thank me later.”

He twisted his lips. “You’re probably right, because it looks so good, but … no.”

She shrugged. “Okay, sit back and watch me demolish this juicy, fleshy plantain,” she said, inserting the fork into her mouth. She closed her eyes and moaned, a slow, drawn-out moan that shot straight to his dick, making him instantly hard.

Damn! Visions of Oke making identical sounds as he spread her legs and thrust into her flittered through his brain clear as a motion picture.

Arinze’s face heated up, and he shifted in his chair. How could he be having such raunchy thoughts now? And while she was still lying in a hospital bed. God, how totally crass. He shook his head, shame flushing his skin.

He’d tried and failed many times to banish thoughts of their night together from his head. At odd times, a tantalizing memory would crop up, producing an intense sensual awareness within him. Repeatedly, he relived the sweet moments of anticipation, the erotic moments when they fucked, and the sexy pillow talk afterwards.

Even when he’d been annoyed with Oke for giving him the cold shoulder, he’d been unable to get that night out of his mind. No matter how much he tried to

deny it, she had given him one of the best nights of his life. He couldn't remember ever feeling so free, so relaxed and uninhibited. Not even with Mary, whom he loved beyond measure.

Admitting it to himself had shocked and embarrassed him. Making love to Oke really had been the most exciting experience of his entire life. No wonder she had younger men making fools of themselves and falling at her feet.

That night had rocked his world, spun him into an orbit of pleasure he'd never imagined possible. And that confused the hell out of him.

Mary and he had had a beautiful, supremely satisfying sex life. And he'd loved her … with everything he had. So, how could one night with Oke—who was just a friend after all—blow his mind like never before? Make him obsess and ache for someone … like never before.

Someone please explain that to me.

Arinze hated what the realisation was doing to him. Never in a million years could he have ever imagined himself questioning the depth of the intimacy he and Mary shared. Or making comparisons between Oke and his beloved Mary. It sickened him, filled him with guilt.

And still, he couldn't deny the seismic impact that his sexual experience with Oke dealt his psyche. Plus, he had zero regrets.

Oke and he weren't in a romantic relationship, had never even kissed before that night. Theirs had been a very casual friendship. Now, he had no clue where things stood between them. They'd not talked about it.

Indeed, she'd seemed happy to find him in her hospital room despite having blocked him. And even though she'd apologised, they hadn't discussed why she'd done it. They simply carried on their platonic relationship, leaving that whole episode unsettled, which confused him.

They'd had sex. Amazing sex. Multiple times. Without protection.

Was she pregnant? If so, would she want to keep the baby? Could she even safely do so, given that she'd need chemotherapy in a few weeks?

And other questions plagued him.

Like where did they go from here? A romantic relationship or just fuck buddies. Or would they simply slip back into their previous casual friendship permanently—was that even possible? He doubted he could manage acting like nothing had happened between them, because all he could think of was a repeat performance. Doing it again and again. And again.

He desperately wanted to discuss it all, but he couldn't. Not yet. Not when she was dealing with such a serious health issue. For now, he needed to focus on her, being here for her.

The night before her surgery, he had tossed and turned on his bed, trying to convince himself that he didn't care … that she didn't matter. Obviously, a total failure. His anxiety had been through the roof, worried sick about how she was doing, if she had told her family about her illness, or if in her normal pig-headed way, she'd decided to brave it all on her own—and was there all alone.

When he'd risen from bed early that morning, he'd made up his mind that he couldn't stay away. He was her friend and genuinely cared about her. Their night of passion didn't change that one bit. If he didn't go there, he would regret not showing up for her, no matter what she'd done. So, he'd purchased a bouquet of lilies and a card and driven to Island Hospital.

Finding her room hadn't been as challenging as he'd expected. Running into Ufuoma in the lobby had definitely helped.

Sitting here now, watching Oke devour the food with such relish, he was at peace with his decision. He wanted to be here with her, to be there for her. Simply put, he wanted her.

Of course, she had some say in the matter. And knowing Oke, convincing her to give them a chance would be like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. Oke didn't do romantic relationships. Her relationships with men were either black or white—purely sexual or totally platonic. Nope, no messy grey areas for Oke Amayo. Nothing involving complicated emotions.

Before their night together, he'd not really cared about her take on men and relationships, because he'd never contemplated more than a platonic friendship with her anyway. But now, things had changed. He wanted more.

She shifted her attention from her food suddenly, looking up. The instant her gaze met his, her entire body stilled, and her eyes flashed with embarrassment. She covered her mouth with her palm and broke into a fit of giggles.

“What?” he asked, unsure what tickled her.

“I just realised that I sound like I’m having sex with this food,” she said, still quaking from laughter.

Arinze curved his lips into a half smile. Thank goodness she couldn’t see his crotch from her angle. His dick had grown so damn hard, she would think he’d joined in the fun of her food porn.

“I know you love plantain, but biko, take it easy on the food o,” he teased, wishing he was the fleshy pulp in her mouth making her moan like that.

God! Get your bloody mind out the gutter, he chided himself. He needed to get a grip. Quickly. Oke was in hospital after major surgery, for goodness' sake.

“I can’t help it,” she murmured, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Tastes so good. And thanks once again for bringing me food and … for everything.”

Arinze nodded, pleased with how much healthier she looked. “You’re most welcome, Oke. Like I told you earlier, there’s no place else I'd rather be.”

And he meant it.

Fifteen



“Are you sure you don’t need me to stay?” Nkem asked, strolling over to settle on the bed beside her. “You’re just out of the hospital and may need help getting around. I can spend the weekend here. Tunde and Jide will be fine without me for just two days.”

Oke gave her best friend of more than fifteen years a warm smile. They’d met in their first year at University of Benin. Nkem had tripped accidentally in the cafeteria—she and her food sprawled all over the tile floor. While everyone else found the sight amusing, Oke had rushed over to make sure she was alright. From then on, they’d formed a fast friendship, even deciding to become roommates the next year. And they were still as close as ever.

Nkem had been the one to drive her from the hospital after her discharge. She’d got things ready for her at home, even preparing a fresh pot of beef stew and banga soup so that Oke didn’t have to cook anything for days if she didn’t want to.

“No, thanks, Sis,” she said, tapping Nkem’s shoulder. “Go back home to your man biko, before Tunde blames me for cock-blocking. The man has been without you for four years. To him, every night counts.”

Nkem flung her head back and bellowed out a laugh. “Hian! If that’s the reason, let him suffer without me for a bit,” she said, wiping tears of laughter from the corner of her eyes. “He’s the reason we split up in the first place.”

“Haba! Free that man jare. He has more than paid for his sins. And I can see your reunion is doing you both a lot of good.”

“It is, my dear. I love that man with all my heart,” Nkem Admitted with a soft sigh. “I swear, I’m my happiest when I’m with him.”

Oke smiled at her friend, a little envious of Nkem’s blissful face as she spoke about Tunde. She’d never felt like this about any man. Never thought she could. Or even wanted to. This kind of feeling came with pain and disappointment. She couldn’t give room in her heart for anyone to hurt or abandon her like her parents had done. Growing up, knowing that her own parents chose other people instead of her sister and her, had done that to Oke.

She recognised the source of her antipathy to romantic relationships—what had destroyed her ability, or even desire, to be vulnerable enough to open herself to anyone completely. The only people capable of hurting her right now were her sister and Nkem. And Oke knew that, so she tried not to rely on them too much, even when she should.

“Do you need anything? Some food? Pain meds?” Nkem’s concern brought her mind back.

Oke shook her head. “No, I’m totally fine,” she said, nudging her friend up from where she sat on her bed. “You can go home now, Nkem, seriously. You’ve been more than helpful.”

Nkem stood up reluctantly, adjusting the quilt around Oke, who was propped up on pillows stacked against the wooden headboard. “I hate to leave you alone in this big house, Oke. You just had major surgery.”

“I’m fine,” Oke insisted. “Really. I’m no longer in that much pain, and the sooner I get back to my daily routine, the better for my mental health. I don’t need y’all fussing.”

“Okay, okay,” Nkem conceded, raised palms in the air. “I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

“No wahala.” Nkem swung her purse over her shoulder and lowered her head to plant a kiss on her forehead. “Don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything, Oke. I don’t care what time of the day or night, okay?”

A lump of emotions wedged inside Oke's throat, making it feel tight. Greg, Femi, and her other exes—if she could even call them that—were all wrong. She would never be old and alone. Not with friends like Nkem and Arinze, and a sister like Ufuoma. They'd all pretty much put their lives on hold to look after her for the three weeks she'd been in hospital after surgery.

"Okay," she croaked out. "And thank you."

Nkem nodded, then turned around and ambled away. Oke could see the reluctance with each step her friend took. Nkem was still worried about leaving her, but Oke really wanted things to get back to as close to normal as possible. And her friends and family doting on her would do the opposite.

Oke blew out a long sigh when she was alone again. She rose from the bed and strolled around her bedroom, relishing the feeling of the plush carpet against the soles of her bare feet.

Home sweet home. Such a long stay in the hospital had made her irritable. She'd been at the mercy of the nurses and doctors, unable to do what she wanted how or when she wanted. Granted, she'd been too weak to do much anyway, but the freedom of being in one's home could never be underestimated.

At home, she didn't feel like a burden to her friends and family. Although none of them had complained about having to drive up to Island Hospital to visit her daily, she knew it had to be tasking for them.

She was ever so grateful for all of them. Especially Arinze. He didn't need to be there for her. In fact, after the rude way she'd treated him, the last thing she'd expected was him showing up. But he had. And he'd done way more than simply sit there to mark his presence. He'd been hands on, helping her with the little things like driving back and forth from her house to the hospital to get stuff for her, buying anything she wanted to eat. He'd even helped her with dressing once when she couldn't zip up her top.

A small smile tugged Oke's lips as she recalled how his fingers had lingered on her skin seconds after doing up her zipper. Those few seconds had fired charges of awareness through her, causing a longing for a more intimate touch of his hands. She'd also heard his uneven breathing, and it struck her that she wasn't alone in the profound and unexpected sexual attraction that had developed between them.

Their relationship had become complicated. Oke wasn't sure she wanted to deal with it just yet, and judging by the way Arinze seemed content not talking about it, she assumed he didn't either. Maybe he regretted having sex with her and wanted to get back to how things were before between them. She couldn't tell. However, one thing was for sure—he had shared what she'd experienced in that moment when he zipped up her dress. Sensual tension.

Oke heaved in a long breath and walked towards the open bathroom door. She strolled inside and moved towards the rectangular mirror above the sink.

For the first time since her surgery, she wanted to have a proper look at what had been left of her. While in hospital, she'd shut her eyes tight every time the nurses changed her dressing, unwilling to look down and see her chest without her beloved right breast. She'd been very anxious about looking at it, afraid of her response to the deformity she knew had replaced the breast she'd loved so much.

Holding her breath, Oke quickly undid the buttons of her blouse and pulled the pink cotton material away from her chest like she was ripping off a band aid. Best to get it over with as fast as possible.

She released a harsh breath as her gaze caught her reflection in the mirror. A flood of horror rose from her stomach and burned her throat as she fixed her attention on her chest. She swallowed hard as tears pricked her eyes.

As a doctor, she'd seen this many times. She'd reconstructed the breasts of more than fifteen women who had needed surgery after a mastectomy. She knew what to expect. But knowing didn't prevent the agony of actually seeing herself without a breast.

Oke broke into a sob as she traced the dressing covering the surgical wound on her chest. Beside it, her left breast looked lonely and out of place. Deformed. She looked deformed.

Wiping the tears that poured freely down her face, Oke fixed her gaze on her torso. "Is this my punishment?" she mumbled as bitterness engulfed her.

Was losing her breast to cancer a punishment from the universe for not using what nature had given her to nourish babies as she should? Was she being punished for not bringing children into the world and breastfeeding like most women her age had?

A burst of mirthless laughter erupted from her. Even through her devastation, Oke recognised the absurdity of her thoughts. At medical school, she'd learned that breastfeeding was protective but not preventive, that women with children could still end up having breast cancer. She'd also learned that many other factors played a role. Like genetics, the environment, aging ... and a good amount of fate.

She'd found out, after performing the grossly expensive test recommended by her family doctor, that she didn't carry the BRACA gene which predisposed women to breast cancer. So she'd opted for a single mastectomy instead of removing both breasts. Hers was just a case of bad luck. Not even genetic. Yet, she couldn't help blaming herself.

Oke sniffled, then pulled out a wet face wipe from the cabinet and swiped the snot from her nose. She should be grateful her surgery was successful, that she had caught the cancer before it spread, that she had a good fighting chance.

So many reasons why she should stop crying and celebrate. But Oke couldn't. Not at this instant, when she looked at the deformity left on her chest. Her breasts had always been an integral part of her sensuality, playing a role in her confidence. Now, one of them was gone. Would that confidence ever return?

The ringing of her phone crashed through her thoughts. Oke froze. She knew from the ringtone who it was. After she'd unblocked Arinze's number, she'd assigned his favourite song—Lifted by Lighthouse Family—to his number. That way, she would never miss his call again. Her way of atoning for her terrible behaviour toward him.

Did she really want to speak to him now? When she was feeling down in the dumps and not so confident in herself?

Her feet quickened as she dashed out of the bathroom, the answer clear as crystal. A whooping Yes! She snatched her phone from her bedside table and swiped to answer.

"Hi, Arinze," she said, a little breathless from her brisk movement.

"Hey, Oke," he said in a deep voice that made her tummy flutter. "I'm at your front gate, and I brought suya and frozen yoghurt."

“Oh, Arinze, you rock!” she squealed.

Her chest expanded with joy. This man was the most wonderful person in the world right now. How did he know exactly what she needed this instant? Food therapy with her most treasured barbecued street food. And his company.

“Don’t I know it?” His voice brimmed with laughter. “Just tell this yeye gateman of yours to open the gate and stop eyeing me with suspicion as if I haven’t come here many times before.”

“Okay … okay I will,” she said, smiling from molar to molar. “He’s just overprotective of me because of stalker exes.”

Arinze’s hiss made her laugh out loud. “Like I said, I’m nothing like your puppy-eyed 20-year-old exes,” he quipped. “Make sure he gets the memo.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll be down in a bit to set him straight.”

His resultant chuckle flooded her senses with warmth, making her giddy with happiness. If she didn’t take extra caution and stop falling helplessly for Arinze, she’d be the one stalking him in future.

Sixteen



His heart did a little somersault as soon as he spotted her walking through the front door. She was wearing a pink, short-sleeved blouse and a pair of bum shorts that exposed glowing honey chocolate skin. Her hair had been redone into thick cornrows with long ends hanging past her waist, caressing her hips as she moved towards him. A warm smile lit up her pretty face.

Arinze sucked in his breath, just taking her in. He'd always considered Oke beautiful. She was petite and cute, with enough curves to fit her small frame. Enticing curves. He knew from his night with her how plump her ass was, soft and juicy to touch. His dick twitched at the flash recollection, and his cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

He was really out of control these days. Thinking constant sexual thoughts about Oke just after one night with her. Like a hormonal teenager. The woman just had surgery, for goodness' sake. He shouldn't be thinking about her plump ass or any part of her body for that matter. How was it that he'd managed nearly three years without having sex, and now, that's all he could think about? But he desired nobody else. Only Oke.

"Hey, Arinze," she said when she got to the gate. "You should have come into the compound."

"Yep, I should have. But I want your gateman Idris to know I'm not the enemy."

Oke's laugh tickled his senses. He loved hearing it, wished he could keep saying things that would produce that pleasant sound.

“Okay, I’ll let him know.” She turned towards the kiosk by the gate and called out Idris’ name.

The lanky man rushed out, alarm etched on his face. “Madam, any problem?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “I just want to let you know that you should always open the gate for this man, Mr Arinze Ibeh. He is always welcome in this house.”

An unexpected, immense thrill stormed Arinze’s chest at her comment. The word ‘always’ produced a strange longing within him—one he’d not felt since meeting Mary. A desire for permanence, a wish of forever.

The gateman grunted in protest. “Yes, Ma,” he said. “But I tell am to enter before. He no agree.”

“Well, I preferred to wait here until she had this talk with you,” Arinze said, explaining his reason for staying back by the gate despite Idris opening it. “You’re going to be seeing a lot of me, so please, let’s not do this dance again where you pretend not to remember me.”

Without bothering to respond, Idris turned to Oke for confirmation, which irritated Arinze even more.

“Hey, Idris, she already told you what’s up. Just confirm that you understand,” he said, unable to check the ire in his voice. He’d had it up to here with Oke’s gateman. Something about being put in the same category as her stalker exes pissed him off. He hoped that he’d stood out to Oke, to those around her.

Idris twisted his lips wryly, and Oke laughed. Arinze still couldn’t see the humour. Of course, he appreciated how the older man looked out for Oke, but he wasn’t the enemy here. He would never hurt Oke. Not knowingly anyway.

“He’s right, Idris. Always let him in whenever he shows up,” she said.

“Yes, Ma,” Idris said, evading his gaze.

Arinze didn’t mind a single bit that the man didn’t seem pleased with this. As long as there would never be a hindrance to seeing Oke again, he was good.

Satisfied the message had been passed and acknowledged, Arinze stepped into the compound. Unable to resist, he hauled Oke into his arms. “Oke the babe. Glad you’re back home,” he said, planting a kiss on her forehead.

She chuckled. Her warm breath against his neck spread goosebumps across his skin, making him want to linger and inhale more of the coconut scent of her body lotion. But he pulled back, leaning away to just look at her face. Holding her this close did something to him, heightened all his senses.

His gut plummeted as soon as he properly assessed her. Her eyes were slightly red and puffy. She’d been crying. Why?

“Are you okay?” he asked, the need to erase anything that upset her so palpable, it made him nosier than usual.

Oke nodded. “I am now,” she said. “Let’s go in before the yoghurt melts.”

Arinze nodded, although he wanted to dig deeper, find out what had made her cry instead of celebrate coming back home after spending such a long time in the hospital.

“I don’t see why you like your yoghurt frozen in the first place,” he mumbled, brushing the tip of her cute button nose with his thumb. “I had to leave it in the freezer for over five hours to make sure it’s the way you like it.”

“Thanks, Arinze. But if you can’t see why, maybe you should give it a try.”

He shook his head vehemently. “I can barely stand ordinary yoghurt, not to talk of having to punish my teeth by biting into blocks of ice.”

She barked out a hearty laugh. “I swear, I am going to get you to train your stomach to explore more.”

“Maybe.” He winked at her. “But don’t hold your breath.”

As they strolled towards the front entrance, Arinze cast a sidelong glance at Oke, fighting back his curiosity about her earlier tears. He would probe later. For now, he would concentrate on cheering her up.

A little over an hour later, she was seated on the sofa beside him, their eyes glued

to the television set on the crime channel.

Oke scooped up the last piece of barbecued beef and plopped it into her mouth. She'd demolished the frozen yoghurt within minutes, but had taken her time with the suya, eating slowly as they watched TV.

"I can't understand your fascination with serial killers," she grumbled for what seemed like the hundredth time since they began watching a documentary on Ted Bundy.

He grinned. "Neither can my mother," he said. "She thinks my true crime obsession is crazy. She's a staunch Catholic who believes that I need prayers to deliver me from demons."

Oke laughed out, sitting more upright and casting her full attention on him, eyes flashing with interest. "Are you staunchly Catholic, too?" she asked.

Arinze shook his head. "I love God and most things about the church, but I don't follow everything blindly like my parents. I tend to dissect and analyse what I believe about Christianity."

He loved how she glued her gaze on him as if wanting to soak up every little piece of information about him. He, too, wanted to know all he could about her. And not on the superficial level they'd coasted on since he met her a little over two years ago. He wanted to peel the layers that made Oke who she was, get to the very pulp of her essence. And he intended to.

"And you?" he asked. "Do you believe in God, in the church? Any religion at all?"

She remained silent, mulling over his question. "I never thought I did," she admitted. "For years, I believed that all living beings were a product of some inexplicable scientific occurrence and not created by a superior being. Like the Big Bang theory …"

Afraid that any movement would interrupt her train of thought and stop her from revealing a depth to her he'd never seen, Arinze kept very still, absorbing her earnest confession.

"But when I was on the surgical table waiting for the anaesthetist, I did

something I'd never done before." She lowered her lids and then lifted them again, as if reluctant to reveal it. "I prayed. Arinze, I looked up from where I lay and said a prayer to God, asking him to look after me."

She regarded him thoughtfully for several beats, then added, "I really believed at that instant that I was talking to someone greater than me, someone who could make a difference. It must mean that I'm not as faithless as I would like to think."

Arinze nodded. "I understand," he said. "When Mary first got diagnosed with cancer, I was so devastated that I lost my faith. I didn't want to believe that a God who allowed Mary to be that ill could ever deserve my time or attention." He sighed, thinking back when he'd stopped praying and had distanced himself from anything related to his faith. He'd been so upset watching Mary suffer that he couldn't entertain the thought of believing in a higher power that didn't stop it from happening.

"So how did you deal with it? Get back to believing again?"

Arinze shrugged. "Watching Mary hold on to her faith, despite being the one suffering the pain, touched me deeply," he replied earnestly. "The fact that Mary never wavered in her devotion to God, to the church, even on her last day here, restored my own faith."

Oke reached out and placed her soft palm on his denim-clad thigh. "Mary must have been a wonderful woman. I understand why you miss her so much."

Arinze swallowed hard, forcing back the guilt that churned his stomach. The slight pressure of Oke's hand on him charged through his senses, awakening every sensual cell in his body. He shifted in his seat, glad that her eyes were on his face and not his bulging crotch.

For the past few weeks, Mary had not been on his mind as much as Oke. In fact, he'd started to picture a life without his wife in it—which he'd never been able to do since her death. He'd begun to really consider the possibility of finding true happiness with another woman. This filled him with a kind of guilt he couldn't quite place, yet the prospect of moving on in his life with Oke excited him.

His gaze locked with Oke's. Should he tell her this? That even though he loved

and would forever miss Mary, she'd rarely been on his mind for the past few weeks. That instead, the possibility of moving on with Oke had replaced his melancholic existence since Mary's death. He'd begun to hope again. Would that frighten Oke? Send her running for the hills?

"Yes, Oke, Mary was a wonderful woman, and I miss her terribly," he said, chickening out from saying all that was on his mind.

Her face shuttered for a split second. As if his response displeased her. But the reaction was so fleeting that before he could make sense of it, she turned from him and fixed her attention back on the TV.

Arinze watched her, his heart beating at breakneck speed. He wanted to continue with the conversation, broach the subject of their night together. At least talk about their feelings, not keep brushing it under the carpet.

"Oke, can we talk about what happened between us nights ago?" he asked softly.

She stiffened, jerking her gaze to him. "I'm not pregnant, so you don't need to worry," she blurted out.

It was Arinze's turn to freeze. "Wha—" He broke off, taking a deep breath to gather his thoughts. Was it relief or disappointment he was feeling? His emotions were so jumbled up that coherent speech seemed almost impossible.

"I got my period three weeks before my surgery. We're in the clear," she went on, her tone chirpy like she was trying too hard to be carefree. "We got lucky. Imagine if you'd knocked me up?"

Silence followed her question. Arinze had imagined it. But not in a negative way at all. In fact, if he was being totally honest with himself, he'd imagined it in quite the opposite way, projected his thoughts way into the future. He'd envisioned her being ecstatic about her belly swelling with his child. He'd gone as far as trying out names in his head. Rowland if a boy, and Adaku if a girl.

Her expression of relief on not being pregnant felt like being doused with a bucket of cold water, a hard slap back to reality.

He cleared his throat, swallowing back his disappointment. "I guess we got lucky," he echoed her sentiments, his gut still rumbling with unease.

“Yep. Absolutely lucky.” She turned to face the television again.

Blowing out a sigh, he refocused his attention on the TV screen, but he could no longer see anything. His interest in Ted Bundy’s documentary had suddenly evaporated.

“I cried.” Oke’s soft voice snagged his attention back to her.

“Cried? What do you mean?”

“When I got my period. I cried.” She swung her leg sideways until she was facing him squarely. “I was disappointed. Imagine, Arinze. I was scheduled for major surgery in three weeks, and I cried because I wasn’t pregnant with your baby. Isn’t that crazy?”

Arinze’s entire body stiffened hard as a block of concrete. Blood pounded in his ears, making him almost light-headed, her revelation shocking him to the core and snatching away his ability to speak.

“I wanted it so badly, more than anything, I wanted it.” She blew out a sharp breath. “I want it.”

“A baby?” His voice suddenly came back. “Or my baby.”

“Your baby.” She dragged her fingers through the ridges of her cornrows. “I know I sound crazy, and I don’t blame you if you walk away now, but it’s all I can think about, Arinze. I’m shocked by how much this desire has possessed my soul, especially since I never wanted children, but I can’t seem to shake it off.”

There was a time he, too, had not wanted children. Early in their marriage, Mary and he had very busy schedules and didn’t think they could fit children in. Several years passed with their agreement not to have kids, until eleven months before she became ill. He’d begun to change his mind, seriously reconsidering their plans to remain childless. But by the time he and Mary finally decided to try for a baby, she’d become too ill to even have the desire to have sex with him. Shortly after, she’d been diagnosed with cancer and, of course, children had taken a back seat.

Hearing now that Oke wanted a baby with him left him confused as hell. What did that mean? Did she want just his sperm or to have a family with him?

“Arinze, you’ve told me countless times that one of the things you regret is not having children, and how you are now very keen on having a child of your own. I know you’ll make a wonderful father,” she said, her eyes distant and twinkling with excitement, as if she could already picture the future. “And one thing I know about me is that when I set my mind to something, I do my best to achieve it. And I want to be the best mother to your child.”

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth, then ran her palms down her bare thighs as though suddenly nervous. “After my chemo, I would like to visit a fertility clinic to see what my options are. And if you’re open to the idea, we could take that leap of faith, have a baby together.”

The answer to the question in his mind came in her next words, making his gut plummet. “We are both mature people able to co-parent without being a couple,” said Oke in a matter-of-fact tone, like she was reading out a grocery list. “We can draw up a legal contract that gives us both equal rights to the baby, share joint custody —”

“Okay, Oke, I’ve heard enough,” he said, his voice coming back to him in full force. Of all the things he’d expected to hear tonight, this wasn’t it at all.

“Arinze, please don’t shut it down immediately,” she said in a desperate tone. “I know it’s not a conventional way to have a child, and you probably want to be married first. But things have changed. Many men and women are successfully co-parenting without being in a family unit. Why can’t we?”

“And what’s wrong with us being a family first?”

His question stilled her into silence. But she recovered quickly. “You mean get married?”

“Yes. What’s wrong if we do?”

“B-but we’re not … we’re not even dating? We’re just friends.”

“Friends? Do you really believe we can erase the night we spent together like it never happened?” His tone became harsher than he intended, but Oke’s refusal to face that their relationship had shifted annoyed him. Why did she want to sweep it all under the carpet? “Well, it did happen, Oke. We had sex. Amazing sex. Many times. Sex that I can’t stop thinking about. Sex that I still want to

have with you."

Her jaw dropped, and a gasp flew past her parted lips. He ignored her shock, now on a roll and determined to force her to face the fact that they couldn't continue to act like things hadn't changed between them. "So, you can pretend all you want, Oke, but it's clear as daylight. We had great chemistry. And with the good friendship we have … well, there's a strong foundation for a stable relationship."

"What about love? The way you feel … felt about Mary. Don't you want that again with someone else?"

He heaved in a ragged breath. Indeed, he loved Mary with his whole being, but could he love another woman the same way? He wasn't so sure. Should he be honest with Oke about this? Wouldn't that be somewhat demeaning? Asking her to get involved with him, knowing he may never love her the way he did Mary?

"I'm not sure that's possible. I don't think I can ever love anyone that much," he said earnestly. With Oke, honesty was the best policy. He respected her too much to lie. "But we can marry, have a child together, and share a wonderful life as a family. Love isn't really that important as long as we respect each other. You told me yourself how crazy about each other your parents were. Look how that ended."

He paused, searching her face to see if he'd repulsed her with his counter proposition. Oke had told him marriage was not an option for her. But having children hadn't been either. If she could change her mind about that, why not aim for the full package?

He certainly was tired of being alone and wanted a family—a wife and maybe a child or two. At the ripe age of thirty-four, it was time for him to take that bold step. His mourning Mary needed to come to an end. He needed to move on. Who else better to do that with than Oke? He liked her drive, compassion, her honesty about life and her passion for her job. He also enjoyed her company tremendously. And to his uttermost shock, sex with her had been monumental, an awakening of pleasure he'd never experienced.

Well, she hadn't laughed at his suggestion, so he continued. "We don't need all the complex emotions that complicate things. We respect and care for each other. Plus, we have great chemistry. That should be enough, shouldn't it?"

Oke's eyes flashed, but she didn't respond. From the intensity of her gaze on him, he could tell she was ruminating.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "Let's not rush to make any decisions. Let's focus on getting through your chemotherapy as a couple, with me and you attempting a proper relationship. If after that, you still want to have a baby with me, we could discuss how we could do that in a way that satisfies both of us. And our future child. Does that sound reasonable?"

Oke said nothing for several moments, the tiny muscles at the sides of her lips tight as she considered his proposition.

Arinze held his breath, waiting for her response, anxiety building up inside him. He'd not expected their discussion to end like this, but he was glad that they had both laid their cards out on the table. Better to deal with honest expectations than to pretend. Could they find a reasonable common ground?

"Okay," she said, finally. "Let's do this. But I must warn you, I have no experience with being in a relationship. You'll have to teach me how."

Arinze released a relieved breath. "Awesome," he said. "But in some ways, neither do I, Oke. It's been a long time since I started a new relationship. Obviously, I need more help than you do."

She smiled up at him. "Maybe we'll teach each other."

He grinned back at her. "Sounds good to me," he said. Then, he reached across and hauled her onto his lap. "Can we seal this with a kiss? I've been longing to do that again since the morning I walked out of this house after our night together."

She giggled. A girly sound that tantalised his senses. "Really? Even when I looked like a monster in the hospital?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh! You were a very delectable monster."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny."

Lifting her chin with his thumb and forefinger, he fixed his attention on her full, succulent lips. Pouty and inviting, like colourful candy to a toddler. "So … can I

kiss you?" he asked, his tone several octaves lower.

She nodded. "Yes, please."

Arinze angled her face towards him and dipped his head, claiming her mouth in a firm kiss, slow and teasing at first, relishing the touch of her lips after several weeks of longing for another taste. His tongue flickered over her lower lip, then delved in as soon as she parted her lips.

With a fierce hunger gripping him, he tightened his hold on her and deepened the kiss, her soft moan in his ears fuelling his passion. She tasted so good. Like the heat of the spicy suya she just ate, mixed with the flavours of her essence. Fire and Ice. He could kiss her forever.

"Oh, Arinze, you're such a good kisser," she moaned against his lips, causing his already hard dick to twitch almost painfully against the stiff zipper of his denim trousers, aching to burst out and seek the heaven he knew he would find between her thighs. But he pushed the thought back with all his willpower, continuing to savour the sweet sensation of her mouth mating with his.

He wanted the beginning of their relationship to be different this time. Without the sudden plunge into sex. To take his time to get to know her better … slow and steady.

They remained like that, locking lips for what could have been minutes or hours —he really couldn't tell—until the electric power suddenly went out and darkness blanketed them.

They both froze, their gazes locked and the sound of their heavy breathing louder in the silence. Arinze could make out the faint outline of Oke's face but couldn't see the details of her facial features except her bright eyes which gleamed with pleasure. She wanted more. And so did he.

Purely by instinct, their mouths found each other again and they continued the dance of lips and tongues, even long after the rumbling generator announced the return of electricity and flooded the room with light a few minutes later.

Seventeen



“Oh, Nkem, I’m in trouble, big trouble,” Oke grumbled, staring at her outstretched hand as the manicurist filed her fingernail tips.

“Stop panicking, Sis,” Nkem replied in a tone that sounded a tad amused. “It was bound to happen at some point. You don’t play with fire and not expect to get burnt.”

Oke huffed, shuffling her feet restlessly. It was a Saturday morning and her best friend had whisked her away to Nails R Us, their favourite nail spa in Lekki, for some much-needed girl time. They’d only just started their manicures when Oke blurted out her troubled thoughts.

“How can I have fallen in love with him … and so soon? In just two weeks. This is not me at all. I need my brain examined,” Oke continued, her panic quite overwhelming.

It had hit her yesterday evening when Arinze gave her a key card to his mansion on Banana Island. He’d slid it across the dining room table after they’d shared a delicious dinner that he’d ordered in. “So that you can use the Jacuzzi whenever you want,” he’d said, then lifted his glass of wine and continued sipping his drink like nothing significant had happened.

But to her, it had been a huge deal. He was pretty much trusting her with his home, his privacy in his absence. As she picked up the card and placed it in her wallet, Oke’s heart had filled with all kinds of warm sensations that made her giddy. And right then and there, she realised that she’d fallen in love with Arinze. But the realization had come with a heavy dose of panic. So, as soon as

she could get some time alone, she'd called her friend and poured out her heart, unable to keep the anxiety from her voice.

She'd never expected to fall for him so hard, never anticipated she could. Now, she was sunk, head over heels in love. The kind of love that could make her a stalker. Oh, Lord. How could she have let this happen to her?

Since they agreed to give their relationship a go, they'd spent every evening and night together. He usually came to her house after work, picked her up for dinner at various fancy restaurants, and then drove her to his mansion where they spent the night talking, exercising, eating, kissing and making out—lots of kissing and making out without going all the way.

It had been terrific getting to know him better on a much deeper level, and she enjoyed all the kissing and touching, but she wanted sex. Oke wanted the familiar. She could handle the banging of sweaty bodies. That had been all she'd known in her past relationships. She'd never spent time conversing or making out with any man. She had sex with them and sent them on their merry way. No pillow talk, no delving into their hopes and dreams … or feelings. Nothing else but a lusty knack.

With Arinze, it was different. She enjoyed all the conversations, all the ways he touched her intimately, kissed her … it drew her closer to him. No wonder she'd lost her head. Maybe a good old-fashioned shag would jolt her back to reality.

"I can't believe how much I miss him when he's not around," Oke carried on, shaking her head in frustration. "And because I'm on sick leave, all I do is roam the house, thinking about him, sniffing the clothes he left over at my place, dreaming about him. I've lost my head, Nkem. I think I've gone insane."

Nkem laughed. "Stop being dramatic, Oke."

"This isn't funny, Nkem. I need help. I don't know how to handle how I feel."

"It is funny. I remember you teasing me a lot about Tunde. Can't believe the almighty Oke has fallen in love." Nkem shook her shoulders in a little dance, dislodging her hand off the table, and getting an irritated glare from the manicurist.

"Sorry," Nkem mumbled, keeping her hand still again.

“Please help me, Nkem,” Oke begged in desperation. “I don’t know how to be in a relationship. Do I tell him I love him? He hasn’t told me how he feels yet. He says he’ll forever love Mary. Isn’t it better if I don't let him know how I feel to protect myself?” She brushed her free palm over her face. “And the worst part is that we’ve not actually had sex since we decided to give the relationship a go. I can feel that he wants to. I see his dick get hard, but why won’t he go all the way? Is it my right breast … or lack thereof? Does he find it repulsive? Or is having less sex what you people in relationships do?”

Nkem burst into a fit of giggles, once again drawing a hiss of displeasure from the middle-aged woman tending to her nail. After another quick apology, Nkem angled her head sideways. “Calm down, Oke, take a deep breath,” she said in an authoritative tone.

Oke instantly obeyed, trying to calm her nerves while keeping her hands steady for the young manicurist who was now painting the first coat of an aqua-blue nail polish on her index fingernail.

“Yes, that’s it, Oke. In and out … in and out ...”

Nkem’s voice combined with her breathing exercises calmed Oke to a reasonable degree. She slumped back against her seat again, letting out a final puff of air.

“You don’t have to do anything right now, Oke,” Nkem said. “Just enjoy the feeling of falling in love, of being with Arinze. Don’t overthink or overanalyse. Just feel. You’ll know the right time to admit how you feel about him to him. It will come naturally, if ever.”

Nkem’s advice seemed simple and reasonable. No need to freak out just yet. She’d just realised how deep her feelings for Arinze ran. She needed time to process it before telling him. Like her friend just said, all she had to do now was simply enjoy being with him like she’d been doing for two weeks, not put pressure on herself ... or on Arinze for that matter.

“And about the sex thing … if he’s hard, he wants you. You know this as well as I do, a hard dick is brainless,” Nkem said, a sly smile playing on her lips.

“Then what’s stopping him? I’m not used to that at all. The men I’ve been with —”

“Only wanted to fuck you for favours. You know you were their sugar mummy nau,” Nkem cut in. “I believe Arinze is different. He is probably holding out because he doesn’t want sex with you to be purely physical and meaningless like the last time you guys did it.”

“I still don’t get it. It wasn’t meaningless for me. Or for him. We came many times. It was out of this world fantastic.”

The women doing their nails glanced up simultaneously, shock registered on both their faces. Oke’s cheeks heated. She’d not realised she’d spoken so loudly.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. Then lowering her voice, she asked Nkem, “Do you really think it has nothing to do with me having only one breast? That it’s not because he doesn’t find me desirable?”

Nkem shook her head. “A hard dick is a definite sign of arousal. So, a man not having sex despite that usually means there are many other thoughts going through his head.”

Oke sighed. “See … that’s why I don’t do relationships. All these mental gymnastics stress me the fuck out.”

“Welcome to the complexity of emotions, Oke,” Nkem said with a chuckle. “And to be honest, I’m thrilled that Arinze is the man you fell for. He’s a good man. And you’re in good hands.”

Exhaling slowly as she offered her second hand to the woman tending her fingernails, Oke had to agree. It could be a lot worse. She could have fallen for one of her juvenile boyfriends. That would have been quite laughable. At least, her heart decided to go cuckoo on her with a man of integrity. Hopefully, he would treat her with caution and not trample on her feelings like her father had done to her mother.

~

Arinze strolled into the living room of the home he’d grown up in from the age of twelve up until he’d left for Uni Lag. It was an eight-bedroom duplex perched on several acres of land.

The marble walls, dome-shaped roofing and high-arched ceilings, showcased its pricey and sophisticated architectural design, yet the interior was far less ostentatious, consisting of pine wood furnishing in most rooms, soft cushioned sofas, and simple, yet tasteful artwork, three of which were painted by Mary.

Just like his own home, this house appeared flamboyant and formidable from the outside, but contrastingly welcoming whenever anyone walked through the front door. He disliked the idea of interior décor that made houses look less homely, as if nobody lived inside. Overtly expensive furniture and decorations, purely for aesthetics rather than actual use, turned him off. Which was why he'd procured the services of the same company that decorated his family home for his own house.

"Hey, son," Arinze's father greeted cheerily, glancing up from the newspaper in his hands.

"Good afternoon, Sir." Arinze strode over to where his father sat, waited for the older man to rise, and then, embraced him briefly with a pat on his back.

"Long time, no see," his father said before reclaiming his seat. "Glad you could finally make one family luncheon."

Arinze cackled, a slight guilt for his recent absences at the regular family gatherings gnawing at him. His mother usually hired caterers once a month, inviting him and his siblings for a feast at home.

He'd missed four of them in a row. Not because he didn't enjoy being around family. He loved them all immensely. But for the past six months, his mother and siblings had begun trying to set him up with women they imagined as suitable replacements for Mary. All of them were damn near clones of his late wife—light-skinned, Igbo, and Catholic.

At first, he'd gone along with the blind dates, meeting three women. By the third date, he realised they were all handpicked as duplicates of Mary.

He couldn't fault his mother or sister. His sorrow after Mary's death had been deep. And he, too, had subconsciously sought out women who reminded him of her. Hence his excitement when he met Oke's friend, Nkem, who could serve as a doppelganger for his late wife. That relationship had been doomed from the start because they both had other people in their heads.

Today, he'd decided that he was missing too much of being with the people he loved because of their misguided matchmaking attempts. And since Oke had an outing with her friend, his schedule was wide open. It couldn't hurt to enjoy some overdue quality time with his family. Hopefully, they would have a great lunch without any matchmaking antics.

"Where's Mum?" Arinze asked his father.

"Upstairs with your sister getting ready. I don't know why she insists on dressing up each time. It's not like you guys are strangers visiting."

Arinze laughed. "Mum likes looking fabulous at all times. It's her thing. We have to let her be."

"How else do you think I've survived thirty-six years of marriage?" snorted his father. "By letting her always do exactly as she pleases."

Arinze grinned. His parents were the typical match made in heaven. Two people who loved each other despite their different personalities. While his father was quiet and reserved, his mother was flamboyant with a flair for the dramatic. Most people considered them an odd pair, but Arinze could understand why they worked as a couple. They allowed each other to be themselves.

Instantly, his mind went to Oke, like it usually did. She was quite the opposite of him in many ways. A free spirit who cherished her independence, not the typical nester he preferred in a partner. She loved loud and raunchy music, while he preferred mellow rhythm and blues. Her fashion style was hip, while he typically dressed conservatively during outings. She was a happy morning person, full of energy as soon as she woke up, while he needed at least two cups of coffee to draw him out of his morning funk. She swore like a sailor. He rarely swore. His lips twitched as he fought a smile. Well, maybe rarely was a bit too extreme.

Like his parents, Oke and he could also be considered an unlikely pair. Yet, these past two weeks with her had been more than awesome. He'd felt happier than he had been in a long time. He'd begun to look forward to coming home after work again, to seeing her. So much so that he'd given her a key card to his home last night. He wanted her to be free to come over anytime, even in his absence. She was the first woman since Mary's death that he felt comfortable exposing his privacy to.

Life was a lot livelier with her around. And he was sleeping much better, too. In fact, he'd woken up several times in the morning, surprised he'd slept soundly beside her through the night.

His early morning waking had happened only twice these past two weeks. And only from the hard-ons he experienced whenever her body wandered closer to his on the bed. On both occasions, it had taken sheer willpower, and possibly a good amount of assistance from supernatural forces, for him to go back to sleep instead of reaching for her and having his way with her.

Boy, he wanted her sexually. More than he could curtail. And each night with her proved more difficult than the next. Yet, he wanted to abstain from going all the way—until he could ascertain that their relationship would stand the test of time.

It was still early days, and even though he was becoming closer to her with each moment they spent together, he didn't want to jinx it by having purely lustful sex with her. The last time that happened, she'd shut him out of her life without any explanation. He didn't want that to happen again. More than anything, he couldn't afford to lose her as a friend. That would devastate him far more than the constant blue balls that threatened to kill him every night.

"My first son, dimkpa, ebubedike!"

The string of overzealous hailing that crashed through his thoughts could only come from one person. Arinze sprang up and dashed to his mother standing at the sitting room's entrance.

"Mumsie!" he greeted, gathering her into his arms and twirling her around.

"Put me down before I fall," his mother squealed, giggling as she threw her arms around him. "Why have you abandoned your mother, eh, Nze, my son?"

Arinze smiled. Only his mother called him Nze, the short form of his full name. He gave nobody else the leeway of taking him back to the little boy who followed his mother around sucking his thumb.

"I haven't abandoned you, Ma. It's been very busy at work, and I —"

"Busy indeed! Don't I also work in the same building as you?" his sister cut in, drawing Arinze's attention to Ezinne for the first time since his mother strolled

into the room.

Arinze lowered his mother gently to the ground and curved his arm around his younger sister's shoulders, pulling her in for a hearty hug. "Not nearly as hard as I do, Sis," he said, flicking the tip of her nose playfully. "You all leave by 5 p.m., but I stay almost two extra hours sorting out the admin details."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown," their father called out from his corner of the sitting room. "But I have to give it to my kids, you all are doing a great job keeping the business going even in this terrible economy. I'm proud of you."

Arinze beamed, always happy to hear praise from his father, a man he respected deeply for his work ethic and integrity. The man whose character he'd modelled his own on by emulating him from childhood.

"Thank you, Dad," Ezinne said.

"Thank you, Sir." Arinze said in unison with his sister.

As they strolled into the room, the doorbell rang. Arinze flipped his gaze back towards the entrance of the sitting room and shook his head. "Nnanna is always late," he grumbled. "I hope he'll make it to heaven on time."

They all laughed at his playful dig at his younger brother, who strolled in a few seconds later.

"What's so funny?" he asked, his forehead crinkled in confusion.

"We were just wondering if you'll ever be on time for anything, even on Judgement Day," Arinze quipped, eliciting another bout of cackles from everyone, including Nnanna.

"Why be early when you can be fashionably late?" Nnanna asked in his typical lazy drawl.

"Fashionable?" Mrs Ibeh gave him a baleful onceover. "Not with those ripped jeans and yahoo boy t-shirt," she said, a snarl of disapproval on her lips. "Why can't you dress decently like Arinze for goodness' sake? Why do you —"

"Biko, Mum, free the guy," Arinze interjected, wary of the direction the

conversation was heading.

It was a well-known fact in the family that their mother often wished that Nnanna would conform to the strict idea of decorum she had in her head. And the irony was that she couldn't see what everyone else easily saw—his younger brother took after her completely. His eccentricities came directly from her.

"Let him dress as he wants. It doesn't make him any less intelligent or responsible than anyone else," Arinze advised his mother.

"Tell Mumsie o," Nnanna said, kissing her on both cheeks, clearly not offended by his mother's criticism. "I look good, and I know it."

He'd grown a thick skin. Years of having dreadlocks and several tattoos on his arms and neck in the corporate world had toughened him, making him immune to the disparagement of shallow-minded people.

Arinze smiled, proud of the man his younger brother had become. "Biko, let's go and eat before I faint from hunger," he said. "I can smell Mama Amaka's wonderful cooking from here, and I'm about to stuff my face like a madman once I see the food."

"Yes o," Ezinne echoed. "Our ever-efficient chef made her famous ofe onubgu and pounded yam. I can't wait to dig in."

They strolled together to the adjacent room and settled around the oval dining table. Arinze inhaled deeply, savouring the aroma of spices that hit his nostrils, igniting his palate at the same time.

After a short grace by his father, his mother pulled open the dome covering the ceramic dish. "Happy feasting," she said with a self-assured smile.

Arinze's stomach grumbled at the sight of the juicy fish inside the hot soup. He would have pepper soup for starters and then focus on the bitterleaf soup for the main course. He couldn't wait.

Before long, as they tucked into their meals, pleasant conversation flowed freely. Just when Arinze began to relax, thrilled that none of his family members had brought up setting him up with a woman, his mother turned to him.

“Arinze, don’t you think it’s time to marry again? Eh?” Mrs Ibeh said in a casual tone, as if it wasn’t a topic she constantly talked about. “You’re still very young. It’s not good for a man to be alone. Don’t you want children?”

“Mum, na wa o,” Arinze protested. “Can’t we have one meal together without you badgering me? I’m happy with the way my life is.”

“It’s not natural, my son,” she insisted. “More than two years have passed since Mary’s death. That’s more than enough time for anyone to expect you to grieve.”

“But I’m not grieving, Mum.”

“Yes, you are.” It was his sister this time. “You rarely go out and socialise like you used to. You didn’t even attend our cousin Kambili’s wedding.”

Arinze frowned, annoyed that his sister had brought up her concern about him again. “I told you I had work to do that weekend. Remember the engineers from China training our engineers? Besides, I sent Kambili and her husband a terribly expensive gift which should more than make up for my absence.”

“Still, Arinze, this isn’t only about you missing the wedding. It’s everything. We rarely see you out and about like when Mary was alive …” his sister said.

Ezinne had adopted the same demeanour she had when she’d suggested that he was depressed several weeks ago. He feared she would bring it up here again, and damned if he wanted his mother joining that bandwagon.

“I’m fine. And I’ve been going out,” he said through gritted teeth. “I just don’t roll in your circle, and that’s why we don’t run into each other.”

“Please, just listen to us, Nze,” his mother rang out, her lilt a tad desperate. “I have a young woman I’d like you to meet. She’s a 29-year-old pharmacist from our neighbouring hometown of Ukpo. She’s a very beautiful and decent Catholic woman like Mary. She can cook and clean. Wife material.”

Arinze huffed, but remained silent, turning his attention to his father for support. The man conveniently turned away to avoid being involved, just like always during these conversations.

Arinze then flashed his gaze to Nnanna. Same thing. His brother had his

concentration trained on his food, as if his soup might get up and walk away if he weren't careful. Clearly, they were all on the same page about this bullshit.

A strong desire to tell his family about Oke sprang to his throat, but Arinze swallowed it back. His mother was very religious. And extremely critical. He needed to protect Oke from the judgement he knew his mother would relentlessly dish out.

Mrs Ibeh had two major requirements for her children's spouses. They must be from the Igbo tribe and good Catholics. While Mary had been the perfect choice for him in his mother's eyes, Oke was the polar opposite of what she would want for him. Oke hailed from the Isoko tribe of Delta state, and she was the furthest thing from a good Catholic his mother could likely imagine. She barely even believed in God.

His relationship with Oke was going so well, and it was still so fresh and wonderful. He didn't want to expose it to any negativity. Certainly not from his family. Not until he'd given her enough time to trust that he would protect her from every adversity, even if it came from his family.

"Okay, Mum, I'll meet her," he said, barely believing his mouth uttered the words.

But agreeing to the blind date was the only way to end the discussion and get them off his back. Meeting the woman didn't mean he would have anything more to do with her. He would make the encounter as brief as possible.

His mother released a loud, relieved breath. "Excellent, my son," she said. "You'll love Chinwe Okoye. She's just like Mary."

Arinze swallowed back an annoyed sigh. If only his mother knew how much that comment repulsed him now, she would never use it again when trying to set him up with any woman.

Eighteen



Oke pulled open the oven door and shook her head as a blast of hot air hit her face and the smell of charred dough wafted through her nostrils. Who the hell convinced her to try baking? And what on earth had her trying to be Chef Chi for a man? A man who might still leave her the same way Davido skipped out on Chef Chi.

Cooking, cleaning, and endless domestication didn't keep a man's interest. A front-row seat to her mother desperately trying to hold on to her father had been proof enough. Yet, here she was baking a cake for Arinze. And doing an awful job at it.

"Why is it burnt on the outside but still soft inside?" she cried out in frustration, adjusting the air pod in her left ear.

"Maybe you added too much milk. Did you mix it exactly as advised in the recipe?"

Oke grunted at her sister's question. God, she missed flip phones. If she had one in hand right now, she'd gladly slam it shut in Ufuoma's ear and end this ridiculous phone conversation.

"Of course, I did," Oke snapped. "Did you give me the correct recipe?"

"Of course, I did," her sister said, parroting her own words. Ufuoma's laughter from the other end of the line irked Oke even more. "Maybe you didn't follow it the way you should have."

Oke dragged in a deep breath and blew out slowly, trying to tame her irritation. No point arguing with Ufuoma about this. She needed to get it right before Arinze got home. The point of all this was to surprise him with a home-baked cake to celebrate their one-month anniversary as a couple.

She'd never felt happier spending time with anyone as much as she did with Arinze. He was intelligent, knowledgeable on a wide range of topics, and had a great sense of humour. Funny how she never realised all these qualities in him when they were casual friends. She now appreciated almost everything about him. Except how grumpy he was in the mornings. And how he obsessively cleaned up after her like he couldn't stand to see anything out of place.

Nevertheless, everything about being with him made her long for more of his time, and even though they hadn't had sex again yet, she'd experienced more intimacy with him than she'd ever done with any other man.

So, this morning, as soon as she realised that today marked the first month of their relationship, she'd jumped from bed and called her sister for advice. She had no clue what to do to celebrate, or whether she even should. Having never been in this situation, she was totally clueless and panicked.

After much effort to calm her down, Ufuoma had suggested a cake for Arinze. But it had to be homemade, she'd said, to showcase the effort it took. Now, looking at the literal hot mess in the oven, Oke's heart broke—this was some showcase alright.

She was no good at relationships. Not at all. She couldn't even manage to bake a cake for her man. Something that most women did effortlessly. Apparently, she was completely useless. Arinze deserved a woman who could do shit like this easily. Someone like his late wife.

"Is there anything I can do to rectify it?" she asked Ufuoma on the wings of a sigh. "It's been baking for over forty minutes, and still, the middle is not done while the edges are now going black?"

"I doubt it, Oke," Ufuoma replied. "Just order a cake for same-day delivery. If you pay extra, they could get it to you in less than an hour using an okada. Those motorcycles can weave through traffic faster than any car."

With a defeated slump of her shoulders, Oke switched off the oven and slammed

the door shut. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll order from Cake Haven.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Oke. Arinze knows you don’t cook or bake much. I’m sure he isn’t expecting any of that from you.”

“And that’s why I really wanted to get it right.”

“Sis, listen, I’ve been married for eight years, and I can tell you this with confidence. Men are very simple. They really don’t give a rat’s ass if you cooked the meal yourself or ordered it. As long as it tastes good and they get fucked good, they are happy.”

Oke’s lips twitched with the threat of a smile. Trust her sister to make things sound so uncomplicated. Typical Ufuoma. While Oke had grown bitter about their parents’ abandonment, Ufuoma had not spoken about it much. It seemed not to have affected her really. The girl simply lived life as if she’d never experienced any childhood trauma. In a way, maybe she hadn’t. Oke had shielded Ufuoma from the pain, doing everything she could to be a surrogate mother to her. No wonder her sister always had a positive attitude.

“Fucking? Oh, well, even that isn’t happening,” Oke murmured. “He always stops our smooches midway … like he’s afraid of going all the way.”

“Have you spoken to him about it? Asked him why?”

“Nope. I just can’t bring myself to. What if he tells me it’s because of my one breast?”

“Well, if you don’t ask, you’ll never get the answer.”

“Maybe I don’t want to know.”

“Or maybe Oke should get back to being Oke and stop overthinking things too much. You’re bold and confident. A woman who has always enjoyed her sexuality without concerning herself with the judgement of others. You know exactly what to do to get your man in bed. Do just that.”

Her sister had a point. Why on earth was she feeling this way? She never used to worry about being attractive to any man. No. She simply lived her life not playing by the rules. And she didn’t intend to change now. Not even for Arinze.

He would either accept her the way she was, or they would have to call it quits so that she could move on with her life. Second-guessing herself all the time wouldn't do her any good. She just needed to take the bull by the horns and go for it. His rejection was the worst that could happen. And she was grown enough to survive that. Hell, she survived a mastectomy without going off the deep end.

"Hmm, Sis … you know what?" Oke squared her shoulders. "I think you're right."

"I know I'm right. Go and get your man and put the Oke flavour on him, Sis. Happy One Month Anniversary."

"Thanks, Sis. I'll let you know how it goes."

"I will hold you to that. Talk to you later."

Oke ended the call and glanced at her wristwatch. Damn. Arinze would soon be back from work. She had only three hours to surprise him for their anniversary. She dashed out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. Snatching up her handbag from the sofa, Oke quickened her feet. Time to go shopping.

~

Arinze eyed the beautiful jewellery pieces displayed on his table, inspecting each one with concentration.

"This one is a bestseller, Boss. It's 24-carat gold. The diamonds are a solid 6.4 carats, too. No woman could resist it."

Arinze glanced up and fixed his attention on the diamond-encrusted necklace Mustapha held up for him to see. It was a stunning bejewelled piece, but a bit too showy. Not Oke's style. For as long as he'd known Oke, she rarely wore jewellery. And whenever she did, they were simple gold chain necklaces with tasteful pendants.

"That's not the one for my lady, Mustapha. I want something simple but with very high-quality gold. One that would stand out, but not in a flashy way."

"Ah, Boss, I know what you mean," he said, reaching for one of the briefcases

he’d brought with him.

Arinze watched silently as Mustapha placed it on the table, unlocked and opened it. After his first scheduled meeting of the day with the training engineers in the boardroom, he’d called his jeweller friend Mustapha to come in urgently with samples of his creations for women. Thankfully, Mustapha had attended to him promptly.

Arinze would have missed a significant landmark in his and Oke’s relationship if he hadn’t looked at his office organiser this morning. Damn, how could he have forgotten that they’d been dating for a month? He should have kissed her this morning and told her how happy she’d made him these past four weeks instead of dashing out the door in a hurry so that he wasn’t late for work. When he realised his faux pas, he decided to change the game, to surprise her with an anniversary gift. And what better gift than jewellery?

“Aha!” Arinze said as soon as he spotted the piece he had in mind for Oke. “That’s the one.”

“Excellent choice,” Mustapha enthused, delicately lifting the chain in the suitcase off the hook. “28-carat gold and silver intertwined into a tasteful design. Not too demure, not too flashy. Noticeable, but not in a vulgar way.”

“And with the pendant of the eagle wings, how much will it cost?”

“2.88 million Naira.”

“Ouch!”

Mustapha threw back his head and laughed. “Quality ain’t cheap, my friend,” he teased.

“You’re lucky I love this woman,” Arinze blurted out, then stilled himself.

Love? Did I just say I love Oke? After only a month of dating? Is that even possible?

Blood pounded in his ears, and the room seemed to spin around him, bringing on a wooziness.

Love? Could it be that somewhere deep down, his amorous feelings for Oke had morphed into something deeper? Had he really fallen in love with her, or had he just used the wrong words?

Arinze's skin felt hot and tight. He undid the top button of his shirt and breathed in and out rapidly.

"Are you okay, Boss? You're sweating profusely."

Mustapha's concern reeled his mind back into the present, but Arinze still felt shaky and unable to respond.

"Is it the price of the chain? I can take off 50k, but not much more," Mustapha said, his eyebrows knitted together in concern. "Besides, when have you ever been bothered about the cost of anything? What's going on?"

"It's not the cost, Mustapha. Not at all."

"Then what is it?"

Arinze heaved in a deep breath and exhaled to slow the racing of his heart. When he was much calmer, he pinned Mustapha with an intense look. "I think I've fallen in love again," he said. "I never believed I could feel this way again after Mary, but …" He trailed off, unable to vocalise exactly how he felt.

The loss of the woman he'd spent so many years loving had devastated him. He had somewhat shuttered himself up—like a house prepared for a hurricane—unwilling to make himself vulnerable to another loss. So, he'd told himself repeatedly that he would never love anyone as much as he loved Mary. But now, he'd begun to feel more than he should for Oke.

Being with her filled him with happiness, made him look forward to spending more time with her. She was the first person he wanted to talk to about significant events at work. Even mundane things, too. Just yesterday, he'd taken a picture of the beautiful rainbow he'd seen while walking to the restaurant for lunch, then sent it to her with the caption, reminds me of your beautiful smile.

Her response—I hope you're not trying to tell me my mouth is that wide—had tickled him. He loved her sense of humour, the fact that she didn't take herself too seriously, and the way she made him feel relaxed and content.

Mustapha cracked a smile. “That’s how it is with love, my friend. It always creeps up on you when you least expect it.” He reached out to pat his shoulder. “It’s a blessing to find someone you can love. Trust me, I’ve been with so many women, none of whom I’ve ever felt more than just sexual attraction to. I envy people like you, Boss. And to have this experience twice in one’s lifetime … Alhamdulillah.”

Arinze lips spread into a slow smile. Indeed, he was lucky to have this chance again. To be with a woman he respected and had now fallen for completely.

“I’ll take that at full price. No discount for my woman needed,” he said, pointing to his choice of jewellery.

“Nah! I insist on a discount since she’s so special to you. Use the extra 50k to buy her flowers, too.”

Arinze laughed. “Of course, Mustapha. I forgot about flowers. I’ll need to make an urgent call to my florist.”

“Do it quickly o. The traffic will soon build up and it will be near impossible to get the delivery on time.”

Arinze paid for the chain and pendant via instant bank transfer. As soon as Mustapha confirmed the transaction had gone through, he placed the items in a box, then inserted it into a gift bag with a red ribbon tied into a heart-shaped bow.

“Thank you, Mustapha,” Arinze said when he was done.

“No wahala. Have a wonderful anniversary celebration with your woman.”

After Mustapha left, Arinze placed a call to Petal World and ordered a dozen roses to be delivered ASAP to his office. He paid extra for priority delivery to ensure it got to him in less than two hours.

By the time he was walking to his car, he had the bouquet in one hand and the gift bag in the other. It was 5:33 p.m. and he’d managed to rush through meetings fast enough to leave an hour earlier than usual.

He’d texted Oke to find out where she was, and his heart had skittered like a

train run amok when he saw her immediate reply—waiting for you—under a picture of herself in his hot tub.

The image had shot his concentration all the way to hell, so he'd quickly ended the follow-up meeting with his team of engineers and wished them a wonderful weekend.

As Arinze opened the passenger door of his Mercedes Maybach, he noticed a movement from the corner of his eye. He turned sideways to find his brother trotting towards him.

"Hey, bro, just wanted to catch you before you leave."

Arinze's heart sank. He didn't need any more delays. He needed to go home to his woman, tell her he loved her, and make sweet love to her like he'd been longing to do for weeks.

"What is it now?" he asked, unable to keep the irritation from his voice.

"Nothing serious, bro. Calm down." Nnanna snorted, the corners of his lips unfurling into a wry smile. "I just need your advice about the land I want to purchase."

Arinze quirked a brow, surprised and impressed that his brother had finally decided to invest instead of squandering his money on women and fast living. "What's the land for? For building?"

"Yes. I'm thinking of investing in a dog grooming service."

"Wow. Impressive. That's quite unique. And your love for dogs should make it worthwhile for you. But why build instead of just renting a place?"

"The kind of service I'm looking to provide would be almost like a hotel for dogs. I've looked everywhere, and I can't find that kind of structure."

Arinze nodded. "Makes sense," he said. "Send me the details of the land you have in mind first, so I can assess the location and see if the price is reasonably matched."

"Thanks, bro." Nnanna turned to leave, then swivelled back around. "Are those

flowers I see in your hand? And a gift bag, too? Must be for a woman. Who?"

Arinze's cheeks warmed as he placed the items gently on the front passenger seat. "Mind your business," he mumbled.

"Now, I'm getting curious. Are you blushing?" Nnanna stared at him like a mechanic studying the engine of a car, trying to figure out the source of its malfunction.

"No, I'm not, and don't you have something better to do? Some woman to chase around town?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do. But we're talking about you here. For the past two years, I've not seen you buy flowers for any woman. Who is she? Is it the woman Mum tried to fix you up with?" He gasped, his eyes widening in excitement. "Did she get it right this time?"

Arinze grunted, annoyed by his brother's persistence. And to be reminded that he still had to go on that ridiculous first date with Chinwe, just to pacify his mother, irritated him all the more.

He parted his lips, the desire to refute his brother's claims gripping him, but he clamped them shut again. He refused to be goaded into revealing anything about Oke to his family before necessary. It really would be like throwing her to the wolves. He wanted to protect their new relationship for as long as possible.

"Yes, it's totally right," he said, rolling his eyes, but pleased he hadn't lied. Things with Oke were totally right. "Now, can I now go about my business, Mr?"

His brother laughed. "Of course, big bro," Nnanna said. "I'm just so glad to see you dating again. You deserve to be happy."

Arinze smiled as he got into the car and switched on the ignition. He did deserve to be happy. Yes, he'd loved Mary, but she was gone. Now, he'd found someone else to love. He couldn't be happier.

It took him an hour and a half to get home due to the heavy traffic, and he'd texted Oke throughout, making sure to keep her updated on his progress, but resisting every impulse to reveal he had a surprise gift for her. As soon as he

parked the car in the garage, he jumped out, retrieved the bouquet and gift bag from the seat, then strolled towards the front door. Unlocking it with his key card, he stepped into the corridor.

He stopped dead when he noticed rose petals arranged strewn in a linear path along the floor. Breaking into a wide grin, he followed the trail leading to the sitting room. His heart skipped a beat at what he saw—Oke wearing lacy black lingerie and sinfully high-heeled red stilettos. She held two glasses of wine, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Happy One Month Anniversary, Arinze,” she said. “And welcome home.”

All the blood in his brain seemed to head south to his groin, hardening his dick instantly as he fixed his gaze on the woman before him.

Lord Almighty, she looked so sexy, so beautiful. Her hair had been redone into thick braids which were packed into a ponytail, the curly ends caressing her shoulders. Her face was lightly made up, although a nude shade of lip gloss made her full pout more alluring. And damn it, he could see her prominent nipples. He knew she’d been wearing a bra with a prosthetic right breast inserted into it, but he’d never seen it through sheer lingerie. Goodness. It looked so real and tempting ….

Everything about her captivated him, pulled him in.

“I tried to bake a cake for you. Well, that turned into one big mess, so I ordered one,” she said, pointing to the tea table beside her.

His eyes followed her lead. On the table stood a decadent chocolate cake with an inscription piped in white icing—Thank you for a wonderful month, Babe.

Babe. He’d never liked that term of endearment. But seeing it on the cake she’d got him made him want to hear her call him that over and over again. Her babe. Arinze swallowed hard as he returned his attention to her.

“I love you,” he blurted out.

“Wh-what?”

Clearly startled by his admission, her mouth fell open, her eyes widened. He

could understand it. He'd surprised himself, blurting it out without any leadup or preamble. He'd planned to tell her he loved her in a more romantic way later tonight after presenting the gifts he bought her. He'd hoped to use more poetic words rather than this flat-out confession. However, now that he'd said it, it felt so liberating.

"I said, I love you, Oke." He was more confident this time. "I have fallen in love with you. I know it may all seem too soon, and you don't have to feel the same way yet, or say it back now, but I'm hoping that you'll get to feel even half as much for me as I do for you. And please don't panic, I promise I'll not turn into one of your stalker ex —"

"I love you, too," she cut in, the corner of her lips tilting into a wonky smile. "And I may be the one stalking you soon, because I've never felt this way about any man before. I realised how I felt two weeks ago, and it freaked me out."

Arinze's heart leapt in his chest, sending pure joy throughout his body. He wasn't alone in this wild, exhilarating feeling. "Two weeks? Why didn't you say something?"

"I … I asked Nkem, and she advised me to wait until the right moment."

He beamed. "Well, this certainly seems like it, Oke," he said, moving closer to her.

He took one glass of wine from her hand and replaced it with the bouquet, then replaced the second glass with the gift bag. "Happy One Month, too," he said, lowering both glasses onto the tea table. "It has been an amazing four weeks with you."

Oke smiled as she sniffed the roses. "These are gorgeous and smell divine. Thank you. And I feel the same way."

Her eyes twinkled as she read out the words from the card tucked inside. "To the woman who makes my mornings more bearable. Love, Arinze."

She swiped her tongue over her lower lip, an achingly sexy gesture that made him want to fling her over his shoulder caveman-style, bound up the stairs, and toss her on his bed so he could bury himself inside her sweetness. "Awww, but I thought you hated my morning chirpiness."

He grunted. “Annoying, yes … but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She cackled. “Well, that’s a start. Next, I’ll have you joining me for morning yoga.”

“Don’t push it.”

She laughed out, producing a bark of laughter from him, too. The way she laughed, with her entire face, always enchanted him.

Chest expanding with pleasure, Arinze watched Oke release the ribbon on the gift bag and pull out the box inside. She lifted the lid and broke into a wide grin. “Oh, this is gorgeous. I love it!” she squealed, doing a shimmy dance.

Arinze couldn’t help the smile that threatened to split his face. Her reaction was all the proof he needed to confirm that he’d been right to pick that jewellery piece.

Placing the bouquet on the couch, Oke fished out the necklace embedded in the box. “Eagle wings,” she whispered, trailing her finger over the gold and silver pendant.

“Yes, because you always soar high and above in everything you do.”

“Oh, how sweet of you, Arinze. Thank you.”

She rested the chain on her neck and turned her back to him. “Help please.”

Arinze fastened it, letting his fingers linger on her skin. Suddenly hit by an intense bout of desire, he flipped her around and hauled her into his arms, embracing her heartily, inhaling her sweet fruity scent. A mixture of coconut, citrus and some other fragrance he couldn’t quite place. He loved how she used natural scents for her skin and hair, reminding him of nature, warmth and peace.

The softness of her body melted into his, igniting his own body with desire. “Ohhhh … this feels so good,” he murmured, squeezing her tightly. “I need you, Oke … I want to make love to you. I’ve wanted to so badly, and for a long time.”

“And why didn’t you?”

He pressed his lips to her temple. A simple answer. He'd been afraid … scared that sex with her would make her defensive like the last time, make her shut him out again. With Oke, he wanted to establish intimacy first. So that it wasn't just a physical act. "I … I worried it wouldn't mean as much to you as me."

"Why would you ever think that? I've longed for you so much, too. And when you always insisted on pulling away whenever we kissed, it made me anxious. I kept wondering if it was because of my mastectomy, if you found my one breast unattractive."

"Never." Arinze tilted his head back slightly, pinning her with an intense look. He enunciated his next words so that she not only heard him but also assimilated his message. "You are the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world to me. It would take you being doused in hot human faeces from head to toe for me to ever find you unattractive. And even then, I would just wipe it off to find the woman I love beneath."

Oke giggled, her eyes sparkling with delight. But he had to let it sink in. "Your one breast is more than enough for me to play with, give all my attention to. It's perfect. You're perfect."

"Oh, Arinze," she cried, pressing her lips to his. "You amaze me. It's so unreal…"

"Oh, it's real. As real as the hard dick pressing on you right now." He lifted her in his arms. "Let's go to our bed, so I can show you how much I want you."

"Our bed? Not your bed?"

"It's ours now, hon. And boy, the way I'm about to put it on you … you'll never want to leave our bed again."

Oke chewed her lower lip, running her fingers through his cropped hair. "And what about the cake? It's made from pure Belgian chocolate. Plus, I ordered Indian food. Your favourite curry ..."

"Put all that on pause. I want to eat you first."

She let out a hearty laugh that warmed him like a cosy blanket and flooded his senses with sheer bliss.

Nineteen



His mouth was hot and wet against hers, thrilling her beyond measure. Oke clung to Arinze as they both fell on the bed, kissing passionately.

He rolled to his back and pulled her on top of him in one swift move, their lips still locked together all the while.

Oke sighed in pleasure. She'd never really liked kissing. Too much intimacy swapping saliva with anyone. But kissing Arinze had long since changed her mind about that. The sensual way his full lips moved against hers, the sweet dance of his tongue with hers, the way he groaned and caressed her while their mouths mated … oh, kissing him always took her to cloud nine.

And it was time to finally reach the finish line. Pulling back a little, Oke began unfastening the buttons of Arinze's shirt, her impatient fingers unsteady and clumsy.

Apparently impatient himself, Arinze gripped the ends of his shirt and tore it away from his body.

Oke gasped as his buttons flew out in various directions. "Eager much?" she murmured with a low chuckle.

"Oh, you have no idea … no idea how much I've wanted you," he said, pulling her back down to him and meshing his mouth with hers once again. "Even when you were in the hospital …" He sucked on her lower lip, then moved his mouth to the angle of her jaw, nibbling the flesh close to her ear. "I felt like a pervert … constantly thinking about fucking you right on top of your hospital bed."

A flood of moist arousal gushed from her core, dampening the V area of her lingerie. God, Arinze knew just what to say to get her juices flowing. Who knew that mere words could turn someone on so intensely?

“Really?” she whimpered, the sensation of his tongue flickering inside her ear driving her insane with lust.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured, trailing his hand down her back and clutching her ass. “I couldn’t forget how soft these felt in my hands. How they jiggled as I fucked your pussy from behind…”

“Ahhh … Arinze…”

The tiny nub between her thighs tightened with need as Arinze squeezed the soft globes of her ass, while his mouth continued to whisper dirty things in her ear as his tongue flickered inside it. “Or the way you bit down on your lower lip, closing your eyes tightly when you came on my dick.”

“Ohhhhh …” Tiny spasms shook her core. Goodness. This man should get an award for his dirty sex talk. A freaking A+ in any exam on the subject.

“Uh-huh … and the way your breasts bounced as you rode my dick like a pro.” He held onto the spaghetti straps of her lingerie, attempting to slide them over her shoulders. “I want to see your gorgeous tits again, to feel them in my han —”

Oke stiffened, pulling away from him, quickly snapping out of her lustful fog. He didn’t just say, “them”, did he? She had only one breast now. Not two.

Arinze also froze, his eyes bulging as he gazed at her in confusion. “What—” he began, then stopped abruptly, his eyes clouding with remorse as if he suddenly realised his error. “Oke … I’m sorry.”

She pressed her lips together as tears flooded her eyes. This was her first try having sex after her mastectomy. It felt strange and awkward showing her incomplete body to a man. Especially one she’d fallen in love with.

“It’s not you, it’s me … I … I can’t ...” She sprang up and fled to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

Immediately, she cast her attention on the mirror, staring at her reflection. Oh, how pathetic. How could she expect Arinze to want her when she still struggled to look at her own bare chest?

Oke broke into a silent fit of sobs. Just before he'd come home, she'd looked into the same mirror and summoned all the courage she needed to put on the lingerie she had on now. And she'd succeeded in feeling great about herself, positive that her seduction plan would work tonight.

Why on earth had she allowed a rush of anxiety to make her flee when she finally had Arinze on a bed, ready and willing to make love to her? Of course, Oke knew the answer. Fear of rejection. She'd never let him see her chest without her special bra on. The one she constantly stuffed with the breast prosthesis she'd ordered online.

What would happen if he actually saw the linear scar on her chest that had replaced her right breast? Would he lose interest? Or would he continue to fuck her out of pity.

Oh, no! A pity fuck?

Oke shuddered, breaking into another fit of sobs. That would be worse than no fuck at all.

"Oke, I'm sorry for being insensitive," she heard Arinze call out from behind the door. "I was so in the moment … I just didn't think."

She snatched the face towel hanging on the railing. One of the many personal effects that she'd moved into Arinze's large, pristine white bathroom. As his girlfriend. His woman. What was she thinking? Could they even work as a couple when she was running away from making love to him?

"It's not what you said, Arinze," she said, swiping her cheeks with the towel. "It's me … I'm not sure I can have sex with only one breast. It's ugly … I hate it …"

"It's not ugly."

"Don't patronise me," she snapped. "You haven't seen it. How do you know how it looks?"

“I don’t need to see it to know, Oke,” Arinze said. “Because you’re the person I want, everything about you is beautiful. Every single thing.”

“I … I find it hard to believe.”

“I know,” he said. “And that’s why I waited for so long to do this.” She heard his sigh from behind the door. It was a tortured sound. As if the distance between them frustrated him.

“Oke,” he called out in a low voice, so low that she barely heard him. “You and me, we view sex differently. For me, it’s not only about two bodies lustfully pounding on a bed, but also an expression of emotions, a form of joining of souls.”

Oke shook her head in disbelief. Was there really any man who thought this way?

He emitted a low grunt. “I know you’re shaking your head.”

Her lips twisted into a crooked smile. He was spot on. “But can you blame me? It all sounds like total bullshit,” she said.

Arinze’s heavy sigh penetrated through the wooden door. “I’m not your father, Oke.”

“I know that.”

“Well, I don’t think you really do. Not every man is a brainless, horny dog with no sense of family or responsibility.”

She laughed out. Again, he’d hit the nail on the head. That’s why she’d always steered clear of relationships. Her belief that falling for a man would leave her vulnerable to heartbreak just like her mother when her father ran off with their barely-out-of-teens housemaid.

Oke would never forget how devastated her mother had been. At first, begging her husband to reconsider his affair with the young woman. And then, doing everything she could think of to please him ... cooking, cleaning, keeping the house squeaky clean and quiet, even up to the point of providing other women to distract him. Yes, Oke had been aware of everything happening. She may have

been only ten when it all went down, but she saw it all, because the adults in her life were too self-centred to protect their kids from the fallout.

When her father finally left, Oke heard her mother constantly lamenting under her breath for weeks. She'd caught a few choice phrases from the ramblings, a few of which she'd never forgotten.

Men are dogs. They'll sleep with anything. Never take men seriously.

Except that several months later, her mother had done the exact opposite and married a man who told her to abandon her kids in order to be with him.

"I'm scared you'll not want me if you see my chest without one breast," Oke admitted, deciding to be upfront about it.

"I understand your fears," he said, his tone deep and earnest. "And it's okay. We could just fuck with your bra on if you want, because I still want to. How else am I going to do away with my hard dick?"

Oke barked out a laugh. "You're silly, you know that?"

"I know."

Oke could hear the laughter in his voice.

"My point is, while I don't want to dismiss your feelings, the fact remains that you're sexy to me, and I want you," he said, his humour replaced by earnestness. "I really don't give a shit about your mastectomy scar, if you grow bald, or if your face suddenly begins to melt. I'm attracted to you as a person. That's what gets my dick hard."

Her heart lurched at the ferocity of his tone. Could she really trust this? That the absence of one of her breasts didn't make a difference to him. His explanation put a pin in the balloon her doubts had formed, popping it into non-existence.

"That's why couples in their 70s to 90s still have sex with each other. For many people in love, sexual attraction is more than two perfect bodies gravitating to each other, it's more than just physical. That's the way it is for me, too. Yes, there will always be one or two women who look hotter out there, but they aren't you."

His long speech flooded her senses with warmth and calm. It all made sense to her now that she'd heard him break it down. That's why monogamous couples in relationships that stood the test of time still found each other attractive.

Lord, she needed to change how she viewed relationships and sex. Maybe Arinze could teach her the true meaning of sexual intimacy.

"Okay," she said, pulling down the string sleeves of her lingerie and exposing her bare chest. Breathing in and out slowly, she divested herself of the flimsy material completely and stepped out of it. "I'm coming out naked."

"Oh … exciting …"

Holding her breath, Oke opened the bathroom door and stood in front of Arinze. His eyes roamed her body up and down greedily, like she was a piece of meat in front of a hungry carnivore.

He lingered on the scar on her chest, causing her stomach to flutter with anxiety for a split second, but the growing of his dick right before her eyes erased all her concerns. She exhaled.

This man wanted her. Full stop. The tenting of his trousers to accommodate his burgeoning erection couldn't even hide it. Oke's confidence came flooding back with full force. She eliminated the distance between them and grabbed his swollen crotch as she leaned towards him.

"You'd better fulfil the promise you made downstairs and put it on me until your bed becomes ours," she whispered in his ear.

"Ahhh!" Arinze hissed, his eyes blazing with lust as he lifted her naked body in his arms. "Now, this is my Oke with whom I'm well pleased."

He lowered her gently on the bed, then joined her. With reverence, he kissed her mouth, his tongue twirling with hers in a slow and sensual dance, heating up her blood again and making her wet with need.

Slowly, his mouth moved away from hers, trailing kisses along her jaw, the hollow between the muscles of her neck, then dipping down to her left breast. He covered her pebbled nipple with his mouth and sucked deeply. A deep groan of satisfaction and what sounded like relief rumbled through him, firing the bundle

of nerves between her thighs.

The sensation of his mouth on her breast drove her wild. God, he lapped at the sensitive globe with such gusto, like his life depended on it.

Oke arched her back and spread her legs wider apart, grinding the lower half of her body against his, seeking to ease the throbbing between her thighs with the hard bulge nudging her centre.

“Oh, Arinze …” she whimpered, unable to curtail herself as he tugged her nipple with his teeth, biting down gently. “It feels so good … so good …”

It had been too long … way too long since she felt like this. Like a woman desired sexually, instead of a sick woman with cancer.

“Yes, because you taste so good …” he rasped, continuing the sweet torture on her breast.

Finally satisfied with savouring her left breast, he raised his head and moved his attention to the right side of her chest, fixing his gaze on her scar.

Oke held her breath and watched as he trailed his finger along the thickened flesh, her heart pounding inside her chest. What would he do next? A tiny sliver of fear pricked her skin as she waited for his next move.

Unexpectedly, Arinze dipped his head and flicked his tongue over her scar, moaning deeply as he did.

Oke totally lost it, a sharp cry ripping through her very being and a stream of moisture dampening her vulva.

She wanted him now. Inside her. Fucking her. “Make love to me now,” she begged, canting her hips upwards in the most carnal invitation.

Arinze groaned, lowering his head, and kissing the skin down her body. “That’s what I’m trying to do,” he murmured in a slow, lazy drawl as he swirled his tongue over her belly button.

He moved his mouth even lower, sucking the soft skin of her upper thigh, and then biting down gently.

Oke let out a cry at the sting that drove intense waves of pleasure right into her core. She quivered with unadulterated lust. “Please …” she moaned, needing an orgasm so badly she would beg for it with everything she had.

Arinze pried her thighs further apart and sniffed her centre. “I love your pussy, Oke,” he murmured. “It’s plump and fleshy with just the right amount of bush that makes me want to bury my face inside and suck you dry.”

“Ohhhh,” she whimpered. The imagery his words produced, combined with his warm breath fanning her pussy made her core clench and unclench with a small spasm.

Arinze’s tongue swiped across her feminine folds and Oke closed her eyes, clamping the back of his head and shoving her core into his face.

With expert determination, Arinze made love to her vagina with his mouth and tongue, sucking, licking, drinking all the juices that flowed from her, all the while moaning out his own enjoyment of his sensual feast between her thighs.

“Oh, you taste so good,” he groaned, flicking his tongue repeatedly over her clit, then swiping the sensitive flesh right under the tiny nub in rapid succession with it.

Oke squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on the orgasm building inside her womb, bringing her nearer and nearer to the edge. She felt like she was floating in space.

Higher and higher.

Lighter and lighter.

And just when she was on the crest of blissful oblivion, the pressure of his finger inside her, stroking her most sensitive spot, drove her over the cliff.

“Yes, Arinze … yes,” she cried out as she erupted into intense spasms that shook her entire body from head to toe, snatching her breath away. He continued to suck her as she trembled, prolonging her orgasm and lapping her dry like he promised.

Oke blew out a long sigh of satisfaction as she fell back on the bed. “How are

you this good at head?" she muttered, still a bit dazed.

He laughed out, rising to his feet. "It was that good, huh?" he asked, a wolfish smile on his lips as he undid his belt buckle, unzipped his trousers and pulled them down.

"I won't even lie, it was phenomenal," Oke said with a wide grin. "Now, come back to bed so I can feel that …" she pointed to the massive erection poking his boxers. "Inside me."

Arinze removed his boxers and stood confidently in front of her, clearly proud of his very impressive size and girth. "Condoms?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not necessary. I put the coil in because my chemo is starting soon," she said. "Besides, shouldn't we be practising baby making for when I have to take it out after."

Arinze's eyes widened as his dick visibly jumped. "You still want my baby?"

Oke spread her legs wider in invitation. "Absofuckinglutely."

"Oh, God," he groaned, his face lighting up like a Christmas tree. "I love you, Oke," he said, a sudden seriousness in his tone as he climbed on top of her and kissed her firmly on the lips.

Oke's chest swelled with all her love for him, and tears gathered behind her eyes. "I love you, too."

While locking gazes with her, he thrust into her, inch by sweet inch, continuing to profess his love for her.

Oke flung her arms around him, absorbing the pleasurable thrill of his dick moving inside her and the sweet words he spoke to her. This wasn't just sex. This was exactly what it meant to make love. And she revelled in the blissful intimacy of this physical union.

Twenty



Arinze reached sideways and clutched Oke's hand in his, hoping to calm her nerves. They were in the Oncology Department waiting room of Island Hospital for the follow-up meeting with her doctor to begin chemotherapy.

He knew what to expect with chemo. He wished it were not so, but he'd been there, done that. An awful experience. Nothing had prepared him for the devastation of dealing with the side effects of the medications. Not the videos he watched or the doctor's warning. Absolutely nothing.

Mary had become so sick—constantly vomiting, barely eating, losing weight, shedding her hair. She'd become a shadow of herself. He hated to see the same for Oke, feared he couldn't stomach her in any pain.

For days, he'd wanted to discuss all this with her, talk about her fears and expectations, but in typical Oke style, she'd avoided the topic, brushing it aside whenever he brought it up. So, he'd taken his cue from her and let it go. He would do whatever she needed. His role in this situation was to support her however she wanted. And he would do just that.

Arinze squeezed Oke's hand gently, keeping his focus straight ahead. Her palms were slippery with sweat … a good indication of her anxiety. However, he knew talking about it would only make things worse. She liked to handle her emotions herself, only sharing when she felt comfortable. They had this in common, and he couldn't fault her for it, even though he desperately wanted to be there for her, to shield her from it all.

It had been exactly three months since her mastectomy, and now that the wound

had completely healed, it was time to embark on the next part of her treatment. A new phase for her—for them. Because he knew that this journey involved not only the person receiving treatment, but everyone else who cared. And he did. He more than just cared. He loved her.

Their relationship had grown stronger these past eight weeks. It seemed that their sexual intimacy deepened their emotional connection even more. He couldn't believe how much his life had turned around since being with Oke. He'd gone from a suicidal train wreck to a man who couldn't wait to wake up every morning just to see her face.

He spent most of his free time with her. And though Oke had gone back to work last month, they made an extra effort to see each other as much as possible. Either he spent the night at her house, or she at his. It didn't matter to him where, as long as they were together.

Of course, it wasn't always peaches and roses. They had different personalities, so disagreements happened frequently, but they were never serious.

In fact, he could only remember one serious enough that they didn't speak for an entire day. After a meal out, Oke had brought out her card and insisted on paying. Not used to that at all, he'd been embarrassed, calling her out on it in the car as they rode home. That argument had gone downhill when he once again reminded her that he was neither one of her ex-sugar babies nor her father. It had been a low blow—she left the house in a taxi that night.

Throughout the rest of the night, he'd felt like trash, unable to concentrate on anything. Early the next morning, before the crack of dawn, he'd driven to her house to make amends, determined never to have a fallout with her that lasted longer than a few hours.

Oke's independence and tenacity were two of the many qualities he admired in her, reasons why he'd fallen in love with her. He couldn't expect her to be any different because she was now in a relationship with him. He just had to relax and let her be herself with him.

Like now. Being silent and ruminating—instead of open and talkative—was her anxiety management style. He understood it. No, he couldn't erase her cancer journey, but he would damn well support her through it.

“Oke Amayo to Room 5 for Doctor Eke,” the teleprompter opposite them announced.

Arinze drew in a deep breath, still holding her hand as she stood up. He felt her fingers tighten against his and heard the jaggedness of her breathing. His throat constricted with emotion. No one knew better than he the difficult journey she was about to embark on.

“God give her strength,” he prayed inwardly. “Please help me to help her as best as I can.”

~

Her meeting with the doctor had been brief. Just a quick explanation of the medications she would need. Two combined. The first one given every two weeks for a total of four doses, and then, the second every two weeks for another four doses. If her blood work wasn’t affected by the treatment, she had a minimum of four months of chemo.

Oke knew the drill. Both as a medic and from personal research, she understood all the technical aspects her treatment entailed, including the laundry list of side effects Dr Eke had rattled off.

She barely listened while the slender, light-skinned man with a freckled nose and thick-rimmed glasses detailed what to expect. Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, weight loss, hair loss, blood disorders … yada yada yada. She knew it all.

But how could she combat it? How could she remain well enough so that she could keep working and carrying on with her daily activities? Of course, typical of medics like herself, there was no clear answer to that question. Dr Eke’s answer was the pat response …

Not everyone will have side effects, so we’ll have to deal with them as they come.

Damn it, she wanted to get on with her life, her job. She’d loathe taking another four months off. Plastic surgery was her passion, what she loved. And even though Segun and Tunde had insisted she continue her sick leave, she really didn’t want to.

Oke worried the inner surface of her teeth with her tongue as she peered at the drip attached to her right forearm. The chemicals flowing through her veins had both the potential to heal and hurt her. Which would it be?

She was settled on a cushioned chair beside the window in a private oncology ward, and her treatment had only just been put on a few minutes ago by a male nurse who promptly left.

Turning her attention to Arinze, her lips curved into a smile. He sat on a sofa opposite her, pretending to read his crime novel. He wasn't reading—he hadn't turned a page since her drip went up. And his posture was rigid and tense.

"You don't have to stay with me, Arinze," she said to him. "Chemo is a long, boring hour of doing absolutely nothing. You could go back to work and be productive."

He closed the book in his hands and lowered it onto his knee. "I took the day off."

"Why?"

He arched his brow. "Why? Because my woman is in the hospital."

Oke's lips twitched. "Saying girlfriend doesn't make you childish, you know."

Tossing back his head, he guffawed. "I'm a grown-ass 34-year-old man. I don't have 'girlfriends.'" He air-quoted the last word with a wry twist of his mouth.

She stuck out her tongue at him. "Igbo man."

He grinned. "Proudly."

They fell silent. Oke turned her gaze to the window. Being on the third floor of this modern six-storey private hospital, Oke had a prime view of the street below. Typical of a busy Monday morning, people crammed the area going about their day.

Cars caught in heavy traffic moved at snail speed. Impatient motorcycles snaked between them, like their drivers were cats with nine lives.

Oke kept her attention on a woman dressed in a short, red gown that barely covered her bottom. Almost every man she walked by did a 180, nearly breaking their necks to catch a view of her back side. Appearing oblivious to the commotion she caused, she trotted on confidently until she disappeared into a car. Oke sighed. If only her chemotherapy would breeze by like that. Without any side effects or distractions. Could she be amongst the lucky few?

She turned back to Arinze. “Tell me how it was with Mary.”

He closed his book again, his eyebrows angled together in confusion. “Pardon?”

“How was chemotherapy for her? How did you cope with it?”

He hesitated, his facial expression uncertain, like he wasn’t sure he should really respond. “I don’t … not everyone goes through the same thing with chemo, Oke. The doctor said —”

“I know that, Arinze. I just want to hear about it, to hear a personal account of what to expect.”

He nodded. “It was horrible as fuck,” he began.

Oke smiled. For Arinze to swear so readily, it must have been.

~

Three days later, Oke still felt like her usual self. She couldn’t believe it. It was as if she hadn’t had any chemo.

“I don’t understand why you’re at work instead of resting,” Segun mumbled, settling in the seat opposite her.

“Abegi, I’m tired of being idle and waiting for my man to come home like a bloody housewife,” Oke replied, lifting her coffee mug off the table between them. She took a slow sip and twitched her nose as the steam scorched her skin. “You know that’s not me.”

“And you can’t stop yourself from constantly reminding us that you have a man,” Tunde quipped, pulling out the chair beside her.

After a busy day of surgeries, the three of them had agreed to meet up in the staff room to debrief and plan for the next quarter.

Although the practice had a manager who handled the business aspects of running Blossom Health, and an accountant who managed the books, the three partners had made a pact to be actively involved. There were just too many stories about embezzlement to do otherwise. Being good doctors didn't mean they couldn't be shrewd with business, too.

Oke flung her head back, howling in laughter. "I don't do that," she mumbled, still laughing.

"Oh, yes, you do," Tunde persisted. "All the time, it's, 'I'm going home to my man' or 'My man is coming to pick me up' or 'It's my man on the phone.' Blah, blah, blah." He flapped his hands about in an overly effeminate way, batting his eyelashes as he spoke.

Oke flipped him the middle finger. "I don't sound or act like that."

"You're right, it's even worse, Oke," Segun said. "You now act like the people we used to hate. The lovey-dovey peeps like Tunde and Nkem who used to make us sick."

"What? Really?" Oke blushed. She couldn't believe that even Segun had noticed this. But she couldn't help it either. She was happy. And head over heels in love with Arinze. If she had morphed into some love-struck and starry-eyed teenager in the process, well, her friends just had to accept it.

"Yep. I miss the old Oke who used to sneer at happy lovers," Segun said with a sigh. Then, he smiled. "But I'm glad you've found someone. It must be nice."

Something about the way Segun spoke and the wistful look in his eyes gave Oke pause, and as if sensing the same thing, Tunde appeared to have gone still, too.

"Is everything okay?" she asked Segun.

"Yes. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, you looked a bit sad just seconds ago."

Segun shrugged. “It’s really nothing.”

“It’s something. Please tell us.” It was Tunde who spoke this time.

“There’s this woman —”

“This woman ...?” Oke echoed, completely flabbergasted that Segun, the self-proclaimed bachelor, had such a serious face talking about a woman. Very unlike his normally roguish attitude toward women. “Are you in a relationship? In love?”

“What? Of course, not.” Segun’s eyes widened and he squeezed his face, clearly appalled at the mere suggestion. “It’s not like that at all. She’s a stripper for goodness' sake.”

“And?” Oke raised a brow, still confused. It was no secret that Segun enjoyed regular visits to strip clubs. His outrage about the possibility of dating a stripper seemed a bit hypocritical to Oke.

“Well, I’m a doctor. I may be a werey when it comes to women I hang out with, but I have standards.”

“Hmmm,” Tunde murmured.

“Hmmm what? The fact that I enjoy going to see strippers doesn’t mean I’d marry one.”

“Who said anything about marriage?” Oke asked, dumbfounded. “Seems thou doth protest too much.”

“Abegi,” he grunted in annoyance. “See, that’s why I didn’t want to say anything in the first place.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Oke said. “Just tell us what’s on your mind.”

Segun sighed. “I saw her … the stripper … being physically assaulted by her manager, and I felt really bad. I want to help her, to buy her out of her contract. But I can’t find her. I’ve looked everywhere. I’m thinking of getting a private investigator. Do you think it’s wise for me to get involved?”

“No!” Oke and Segun both said in unison, shaking their heads vehemently.

“Why not?”

“It’s dangerous to get caught up in stuff like that,” Oke said. “You don’t know how ruthless that world can be. She’s an adult, right?”

Segun nodded.

“Then let it go,” Oke said. “Many women who strip for money are there because they have debts to pay off. It’s hardly ever because they want to dance naked in front of a bunch of leering strangers.”

Segun sighed. “Rain doesn’t appear to want to. The times I saw her on stage, she looked unhappy. And even though a mask covered half her face, her eyes ... they looked … dead.”

“Rain … aha!” The image of the woman wearing a feathered mask on the strip club stage came back to Oke with shocking clarity. She also remembered how spellbound Segun had been that evening as Rain performed her strip routine, sliding gracefully up and down the pole like a ballerina. There had been a form of art to her movements that made her stand out.

“If you want to help her, stay out of her way,” said Tunde in a firm, authoritative tone. “She can probably take care of herself and most likely doesn’t need a misguided hero swooping in to mess with her life.”

Segun mulled Tunde’s advice silently for several beats, then nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s change the subject. How are you feeling, Oke?”

“Great actually. I may be one of the few people lucky enough to have no side effects from chemo.”

“That’s great to hear,” said Segun, reaching out to pat her on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re fine.”

“Thanks. But enough about my cancer and my chemo. Sick of all of that talk. Pun intended,” Oke said as she pulled open the laptop on the table. “Let’s get to work and plan for the next few months.”

Twenty-One



He felt like a fraud, sitting in a restaurant waiting to meet up with another woman when he had a woman at home. A woman he loved with all his heart, that brought him joy and happiness.

Arinze sighed as he fiddled with his wristwatch's gold band, fighting the impulse to stand up and walk away before Chinwe arrived. He still had a chance to end this before it started, go back home to Oke, wrap his arms around her, and inhale her sweet fruity scent.

He couldn't believe how lucky they'd been so far. Two weeks had gone by since her first dose of chemo without a side effect in sight. She had been chirpy as ever, going about her usual daily activities easily.

Her blood tests yesterday, before her second dose of chemo yesterday, came back normal. What a blessing. He should be home celebrating with her. Instead, here he was at Silver Linings restaurant, awaiting a woman he had no wish to meet. All because he didn't want to offend his mother.

Arinze knew better than to cancel. If he did, his mother would double down on her efforts to fix him up. She'd make life unbearable for him, and that would force his hand—make him reveal his secret involvement with another woman. And then, the Hunger Games would start. He would have to introduce Oke to his family and watch them gnaw her alive.

Nope, that he could not do. Not yet. Not during her cancer treatment. Later, with no distractions, they could both face his family, and he would make sure to protect her from them. Right now, Oke might look tough and in control, but she

was too fragile, too vulnerable. And they had no idea about future treatment needs yet.

His parents' unending religious and tribal bigotry, usually subtle, could blow up to an embarrassing point. Especially when it came to their children's romantic relationships. His younger sister had experienced it first-hand with her ex who was Muslim. It had eventually ended the relationship.

Mary had been a perfect choice for him in his mother's point of view ... until she realised that Mary didn't want children. His mother had suddenly become quite hostile to her, trying to get her to change her mind.

Although Arinze had done everything in his power to intervene, repeatedly telling his mother that Mary and he had made the decision together, it didn't change anything. His mother remained cold and distant towards her, forcing him to alienate himself from his own family.

When his mother found out that they'd changed their minds about children, she'd started warming up to Mary again, but by then, things had become a bit strained between them. However, their bond had been restored when Mary became ill with cancer. His mother had been more than supportive during that difficult time.

His family would worry about him being involved with another woman with cancer. His mother might outright reject Oke. Truthfully, he just wasn't ready for that kind of negative energy around him. He loved his family. But like every other household, they weren't perfect.

Arinze glanced at his watch—6:30 p.m. He had been waiting only fifteen minutes, but the way his stomach was churning with guilt, it felt like hours. Lying to Oke had gutted him. Yet, he saw no other choice. How could he reasonably explain going to a restaurant to meet up with another woman that his mother had set him up with. Why ...? Because he didn't want her to know about their relationship.

Oke would get up and leave him straight away. She didn't play second fiddle to anyone. Wouldn't tolerate it. And he couldn't afford to lose her. Selfish? Probably. But he was operating in survival mode. Their relationship meant so much to him that he couldn't jeopardise it by thrusting her into the world of his critical family. It required baby steps first, and he needed to buy them time.

So, while Oke believed he had a late meeting at work, he intended to meet up with Chinwe and politely dismiss her. And if luck was on his side, he could even get her on the same page with him. Get her to pretend that the date went so well, his mother would back off her matchmaking hobby. How he would achieve the second part of his plan, he had no idea. He would gauge Chinwe's response and see if he needed to add a financial incentive. He wasn't above shelling out money for her to pretend to be his girlfriend for a while.

Arinze brushed his palms down his face in frustration. This was all getting too complicated. Not something he liked in his love life. A smile tugged his lips. But had anything about falling in love with Oke been easy? Nothing. And yet, he wouldn't have it any other way.

A movement at the restaurant's entrance caught his attention, and Arinze turned his head just in time to see Chinwe walk in. He rose to his feet.

Wow. His mother was right. Her picture hadn't prepared him adequately for how much she looked like Mary. Good Lord, had someone cloned his late wife? The same smooth caramel complexion, large doe eyes, thick full lips on a pretty, heart-shaped face. She was also tall and curvy and had long jet-black hair. If he wasn't sure that Mary was dead, this woman could easily have fooled him into believing otherwise.

Arinze's heart began to pound as she strolled over to him with a wide smile on her face. She looked pleased after her brief appraisal of him. Not good. She was beautiful, stunning to be totally honest, but he didn't want her. And neither did he want her thinking they could have a chance together.

"Hello," she said as soon as she was inches away from him. "You must be Arinze Ibeh. I'm Chinwe Okoye. I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

Arinze beamed as he shook her hand. "Not at all. I was way too early. You're right on time."

She smiled back, her rouge-coated lips parting to reveal even white teeth. Even her smile was just like Mary's. Eerie.

"Thank God," she said. "My mother called me this morning and warned me not to be late."

He laughed, waiting for her to settle down on her chair before reclaiming his seat. “Ah, so we have both our mothers’ matchmaking, huh?”

She nodded. “It’s embarrassing how she goes about trying to fix me up as if I can’t meet people on my own. The way she acts, one would think I’m fifty instead of just twenty-eight.”

“Oh, no, typical Naija mums,” he said with a snort. “Same with my mother. She thinks she’s a natural matchmaker.”

Chinwe shook her head. “And they have no idea how badly they suck at it.” Her face clouded with embarrassment the second the comment left her lips. “I didn’t mean that you’re a bad match … that you’re not a good …” She covered her face with her palms, clearly mortified.

“No, don’t worry, I’m not offended at all,” Arinze said in a gentle tone, trying to reassure her. “Let’s face it, they suck at matchmaking.”

She gave him a warm smile as she looked at him. “Well, not this time,” she said. “If only I were straight.”

Arinze’s pulse skipped a beat. Had he heard correctly?

“I just want to get this out of the way first, because you seem like a really nice person and I wouldn’t want to waste your time,” she said. “I’m gay. Have been since I turned sixteen and started dreaming about other girls instead of boys.”

Shock spiralled down his body. Not about her sexual orientation. No, he’d worried sick about how he could gently turn her down for days, and here he was, being handed a perfect gift.

“I only agreed to this to get my mum off my back so that I can continue to enjoy my relationship with my girlfriend Victoria,” she continued. “I’m sorry I deceived you, but —”

Arinze suddenly burst into laughter, interrupting her words. She gaped at him, her forehead creased in confusion, but he couldn’t stop laughing at the fortuitous turn of events. Damn. Life had a way of changing in a heartbeat at the oddest of times.

“What’s so funny? From my first impression of you, I didn’t peg you for a homophobe, but if you —”

“I’m sorry, I’m not one. I’m so impressed by your honesty. In fact, for the first time, I think my mother matched me with the absolutely right person.”

She eyed him sceptically, still looking confused. Arinze took a deep breath, trying to curtail his amusement so he could explain.

“I’m also in a relationship with someone I don’t want my mother to know about yet. This is actually perfect.”

“Oh.” Her eyes lit up. “Are you gay, too?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Straight as a ruler,” he said. “Only trying to avoid the religious and tribal wahala. My partner is not Igbo or Catholic. My mother’s worst nightmare.”

“Oh.” She nodded in understanding. She sighed ruefully. “Mine, too. If only she knew that she has more than just that to worry about.”

“Then why can’t we be bold, come out to them,” Arinze said. “We are both adults capable of making our own decisions.”

She gazed at him for several seconds, then they both burst into laughter. “Wimp,” she said, shaking an accusatory finger at him.

“I confess that I feel like one,” he agreed. “It’s just that I’m enjoying being with Oke so much that I don’t want to rock the boat. Not yet.”

“Same way I feel about Victoria.”

Arinze grinned, still unable to believe his stroke of luck. “Let’s order, and while we eat, we can discuss how we may be able to help each other out.”

She nodded. “That sounds like a great idea.”



With a big grin on his face, Arinze stepped into his car, glad he'd actually agreed to this blind date. He'd made an arrangement with Chinwe to pretend to their families that they would carry on dating. Hopefully, that would effectively suspend any further matchmaking attempts.

They had also agreed to end the charade if either of them decided to make their relationship public, but for now, it was the perfect solution to their problems.

Their dinner date had ended only minutes ago, and he'd enjoyed himself thoroughly. Chinwe was intelligent and hilarious. He'd made a wonderful new friend tonight, and later, when he could finally show off Oke to his family, he would introduce her to Chinwe, too. They both had a sharp sense of humour and should get along quite well.

Whistling softly, he turned on the ignition and reversed out of the restaurant's car park. He steered his Mercedes towards the main road, his chest bursting with joy. All was well with the world again. The blind date he thought would be horrible had been quite the opposite. He could finally keep his mum off his back while enjoying his relationship with Oke.

Leaning forward, he touched the dashboard display screen and turned on the music. Tina Turner's Simply The Best filled the air.

Singing along to the lyrics in his baritone voice, Arinze drove down the road. Traffic was surprisingly light today. Excellent. He couldn't wait to get back home to his woman and hold her in his arms. Thankfully, her chemotherapy was going well. He couldn't be happier.

A few minutes later he found himself tangled in traffic. Oops. So much for this optimism.

It wasn't until much later that he arrived home ... to find Oke in the bathroom, bent over the toilet bowl and puking her heart out.

"Oh, my God!" Arinze cried out.

He rushed to her, fell on his knees, and held her braids away from her face as she vomited again. "So sorry … so sorry," he murmured, rubbing her back.

She turned to him when she seemed a bit settled. Her face was shiny with

perspiration, and dark circles shadowed her eyes. God, she looked tired and ill.

Guilt squeezed his chest. He'd been out with another woman when he should have been at home looking after her.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked in a weak voice. "I've been calling you all evening."

Another bout of guilt struck him. Damn, he'd turned off his phone. How stupid. But he'd done it to avoid his mother's requests for updates on the blind date.

"Sorry, it was so busy at work that I turned it off to keep from distractions," he lied, disgusted with himself for every word that spilled out of his mouth.

She heaved in a deep breath and twisted her lips into a smile. "Please don't do that again, I need to be able to reach you," she said. "Apparently, I'm not among the lucky few with no side effects from chemo."

He cracked a smile, which faded as quickly as it came when Oke retched again and erupted into another bout of vomiting.

Twenty-Two



Oke felt like shit. Three days post her second chemo dose, and she could barely keep anything down. Feeling this way—constantly nauseated and tired—sucked big time.

Pulling out a bucket from beside the bed where she sat, she retched again, but only small amounts of bile came out. Not surprising. She hadn't eaten for more than twelve hours.

"I can't stand seeing you like this," Arinze lamented. "I'm calling my dealer."

Oke shook her head, retrieving the mouthwash she put on the bedside table and twisting open the top. "What if I become worse? Or paranoid."

"You'll be fine. It's known to help cancer patients, you know."

Arinze shifted closer to her on the bed and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He planted a peck at the top of her head.

"Ewww, I must smell like hell. Don't come so close to me." She took a swig of the mouthwash, swished it in her mouth and then spat into the bucket.

"Never," he said, kissing her forehead again. "You smell like heaven."

She huffed. "Liar. But I love you for lying."

"I love you, too," he whispered. "And that's why I'm calling my dealer."

"Don't. What if the police catch you? You could get into trouble. Your fantastic

reputation could be ruined."

"I won't get caught. My dealer is a respectable lawyer."

Oke's jaw dropped. "Goodness, you sound like Ghost from Power," she said, her lips unfurling into a half-smile. "I can't believe you're talking about buying weed while you're dressed in a business suit."

He rose to his feet and took off his suit jacket. "Well, I'll be putting on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt in a minute. I can't leave for work knowing you feel this way. We need to try something else. Obviously, the anti-nausea medicine the doctor prescribed isn't working. After three injections, you're still vomiting."

"Just go to work, Arinze. I'll be fine."

"Nope. I've already taken the morning off. And don't deflect. Why are you so afraid of trying weed?"

"I don't know," Oke said, lifting her shoulders in a half shrug. "I … just don't want it to make me feel worse than I already do."

"Trust me, you'll feel fantastic after. Marijuana can be medicinal. You of all people should know that it's now being prescribed for severe pain and nausea."

Oke knew that. But she also knew the propensity for weed to cause irrational behaviour. What if it affected her adversely? She'd never used it before. It could make her paranoid or crazy. She couldn't afford to add mental health problems to her cancer.

"What's the harm in trying?" Arinze pressed. "I'll smoke it with you. And don't worry about the police. I'll hide it in my safe. Even if they come looking in the middle of the night, they'll never find my stash."

Oke laughed. "Jesus, you really do sound like a gangster," she mumbled.

He wriggled his eyebrow. "You should already know by now that there's more to me than my suits and ties."

She winked at him. "I realised it the first night we had sex. Lord, was I in for a surprise the way you handled me, eh. Damn … I could never look at you the

same.” She snapped her fingers. “And the way you got the Lagos government to fix the road leading to Blossom Health only a few weeks after I told you about it? Nah! Such a superstar move. There’s certainly more to you than suits and ties.”

He laughed. “Never judge a book by —”

A wave of nausea struck her. Oke pulled out the bucket just in time to vomit into it instead of on the plush white carpet.

“That’s it,” Arinze said, his lilt urgent as he fished out his phone from his trouser pocket. “I’m calling my dealer.”

Nearly an hour later, Oke held the rolled-up joint in her shaky fingers, still hesitant to try it out even though Arinze had done so twice.

“Come on, just do it,” he said, his deep voice rumbling through her. He was seated beside her on the rug in the sitting room. The TV was tuned to a news channel, but on mute.

“I’ll kill you if this makes me worse,” she said.

“And if it makes you feel better?”

“I’ll still kill you for not telling me to try it sooner.”

“Ha! So, it’s a lose-lose situation for me, fa?”

“Absolutely.”

Closing her eyes, Oke inserted the joint into her mouth and took a long drag. She blew it out through her nostrils slowly.

“Wow, look at that. Just like a pro,” Arinze teased. “You’re sure you haven’t done this before?”

Oke gave him a crooked smile and took another drag, then exhaled. “Never. But I dabbled with cigarette smoking in my rebellious teenage years.”

“How do you feel?” he asked, stroking her shoulders.

“Not sure yet. But it’s not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“Give it time, and soon, you’ll be thanking me.”

“You’re pretty confident about that.”

He accepted the joint she passed him and took a long drag. “Absolutely.”

Arinze was right. In fact, he was more than right. In less than three hours, she’d managed a peanut butter sandwich and a cup of tea. Her nausea had totally disappeared. She felt light-headed and in a chill mood.

“How are you feeling? Better?” he asked, snuggling up to her on the bed and spooning her.

Oke nodded, burrowing herself deeper into his warm embrace. Tears of gratitude choked her throat. She loved this man with her entire being. For the first time ever, Oke could understand how devastated her mother had been when the husband she’d loved dearly left. If Arinze broke her heart, she would be equally, if not overtly, distraught.

“You were sent to me by God, Arinze,” she murmured, her words slightly slurred from her exhaustion. She was drowsy, and if how she felt right now was any indication, she would be sleeping soundly in a few minutes for the first time in three days.

His loud bark of laughter shook the bed. “Ha! Weed has got Oke believing in God,” he teased. “Miracles really do exist.”

Beaming, Oke pulled his hand towards her mouth and kissed his palm. “Yes, Babe. And you’re my miracle.”

He pressed his lips to her neck. “As you’re mine.”

~

After learning how to combat her nausea, chemotherapy became less daunting for Oke. She’d successfully gone through four doses of the first medication and took the final dose of the second one yesterday.

Four months had breezed by without any major glitches in her treatment. Apart from noticing patches of hair falling out, which made her shave her head completely, things seemed almost back to normal.

She felt great, healthier than ever, and had even returned to work. Her scheduled surgeries at Blossom Health had increased again almost to their pre-chemo rate.

Now that her treatment was finally over, she couldn't wait to get back to her normal routine in every other aspect of her life. She was tired of hospital appointments, needles, and drips.

"Get some weed from your stash, Arinze," she said. "I had my last dose of chemo yesterday, and I want to get ahead of the side effects.

"Ha, I think someone is now a little too eager to smoke weed," he said with a snort, flashing her a teasing smile.

"Abeg, bring it here and stop acting like you hold the keys to the gates of heaven."

Arinze laughed as he pulled aside the painting on the wall, opened the safe and fished out the bag of weed. He winked at her. "I do have the keys, darling, and they're in these green herbs also known as Mary Jane."

The lyrical tone from his mobile phone pierced the air. Arinze's eyebrows crinkled. "Who the hell?" he mumbled, digging into his trouser pocket and retrieving it. He glanced at the screen and frowned.

"I have to take this," he said, tossing the bag to her. "It's from my lead engineer. Hope you don't mind."

Oke waved a hand dismissively at him. "Go ahead."

"Hi, James, I told you I'll be in later today. This had better be urgent," Arinze said as he rested his phone against his cheek.

His face changed into an irritated scowl as he listened. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and clenched his jaw.

"Okay, I'll be there ASAP. Just tell him to wait for me," he said, then ended the

call.

Oke's heart sank when he met her gaze with regret clouding his eyes.

"You have to leave?" she asked, unable to quell the disappointment engulfing her. She'd really looked forward to having a lazy morning with him, their new routine after each dose of chemo.

Arinze usually spent the first half of the day sharing a joint with her and waiting until her stomach settled. Then, he went off to work. Most of the time, they ended up having wild and satisfying sex fuelled by the euphoric substances flowing in their blood streams.

"So sorry," he whispered, strolling over to her. He brushed a firm kiss on her lips. "Our foreign engineers are leaving by the end of the week, and they've noticed an issue with our security cameras. I need to be there to make sure it's resolved adequately."

"I understand." She peeled open the bag containing the weed with a pout on her lips. "I'll just have to smoke these by myself ... boring!"

He laughed. "Don't be like that," he said, massaging her shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Do you want me to roll it for you?"

Oke shook her head. "I can do it myself now. Thanks to you, I'm now a pro."

Arinze raked his fingers over her bald scalp and grinned. "Still can't get over how cute the shape of your head is. You should remain bald forever. Gives off a sexy vibe."

"Huh? Never! Once my hair grows back to an acceptable length, I'll braid it with long-as-hell hair extensions."

"Braids or not, you are gorgeous. And I still believe you'll grow to love your bald head as much as I —"

His phone pinged with a message, cutting him off. Arinze twisted his lips as he read it. "Got to run," he said. "See you later this evening. I'll buy dinner on my way home."

She nodded. “See you soon.”

Alone in the bedroom, Oke sighed. She’d really come to depend on his presence more than she should. How could his temporary absence leave her feeling so bereft?

She rose to her feet and began making her way towards the bedside table in search of papers to roll up a joint, when she spotted the open door of the safe. Oke stopped dead in her tracks. Damn! Arinze had left it open in his hurry to leave the room.

A sudden, overwhelming dose of curiosity descended on her as she fixed her gaze on the safe, her feet unmoving as if glued to the floor. She’d seen Arinze open and close it many times and had often wondered what he kept in there. Should she have a quick look or walk away?

Oke shook her head. She should do the latter … turn her head in the opposite direction and carry on with what she’d planned to do. Better yet, she should walk over there and close the safe. Arinze trusted her with his privacy, which is why he’d given her a key card to his home. Violating that trust would be downright disrespectful. Nah. Nah. Nah. She wouldn’t do that.

Moving briskly, Oke crossed the room with the sole intent of shutting the safe door, but paused again when her eyes caught the handgun resting inside. Her mouth parted open into a wide O.

A gun? Arinze has a gun?

She picked it up and held it in her hand. A gasp escaped her lips as the weight kinked her wrist. Damn, it’s heavy.

Gently, she lowered the gun back into the cabinet. She knew nothing about guns and wouldn’t want it firing by accident. As she held on to the handle of the safe door ready to slam it shut, she dragged in a deep breath, still hesitating.

Was there really any harm in looking inside the safe? Would it be wrong if she looked inside? After all, he’d left it open himself. Obviously, there wasn’t anything in there he wouldn’t want her to see. Besides, it wasn’t as if she’d been the one that had gone snooping around.

After several seconds of justifying her intent to herself, Oke lifted the first pile of documents in the cabinet. She flipped through them one after the other, scanning the texts, not entirely sure what she was even looking for.

She kissed her teeth after getting to the last paper in the pile. Nothing but boring stuff in there. Just legal documents about Arinze's family's business.

After combing through another batch of files and finding nothing of interest, Oke put it back neatly. She grabbed the safe's handle again, ready to call off her nosey search, when she noticed a note scribbled in Arinze's neat handwriting. The strange heading caught her attention.

Final note to my family.

Oke's heart careened in her chest and began a frenzied beat. Fingers trembling, she pulled the A1 sheet out and immediately began reading.

Dear Mum, Dad, Nnanna and Ezinne

I am so sorry to leave you in this terrible position of reading my suicide note. I know that you are hurt and disappointed that I took the coward's way out. You're right to feel that way. But please try to forgive me. And if you decide not to forgive me for taking my life, I understand.

My reason for this letter is to attempt an explanation for what I've done. Yes, it sounds even more selfish to think that I could give any reason to justify my actions, and it may not make sense to anyone, but it's my truth.

It's as simple as this. I'm completely worthless without Mary. My life has lost all meaning. Her death essentially ended my life. Almost every day I wake up, I stare at the muzzle of my gun, trying to muster the courage to end my life. If you're reading this, I've succeeded.

It all sounds very dramatic and poetic, I know, but this is my truth. I can't sleep, I don't truly enjoy anything. Not food, drinks, or life. Nothing makes me happy. Genuinely happy.

People always tell me that time will take away the pain. Well, time hasn't. It's made it worse. I've tried to move forward with my life, even tried dating again, but now I know that all I've been doing is searching for Mary's replica in the women I dated.

The reality is that I don't want to carry on living like this, sleeping with a heavy and bitter heart and waking up just the same. That isn't a healthy way to live. So, I thought, wouldn't it be better to disappear to a place where I can see her again?

I'm sorry. Please, I beg you, don't mourn or cry for me.

If you can, forgive me. I understand if you can't.

PS: My lawyer has the combination to the safe in my bedroom which contains all the important documents and details about what to do when I die. You should all be very financially okay.

With love

Arinze

A strong wave of nausea erupted inside Oke as soon as she finished reading. Without a second to spare, she tossed the letter aside and dashed into the bathroom, making it right on time for all her stomach contents to empty into the toilet bowl.

Sinking onto the cold tiled floor, she waited for her nausea to settle, but the bile rising to her throat seemed like a volcano spilling molten lava from its core. Oke vomited again.

Placing a palm on her lower abdomen in a feeble attempt to quell the unease that had settled there, the words in Arinze's suicide note buzzed in her head like angry wasps searching for skin to sting. Her ears rang and her temples throbbed.

That letter had been dated—written just last year. A few weeks before she and Arinze started dating. Could he really have gone from being suicidal to falling in love with her in such a short time span? Was she setting herself up to forever play second fiddle to his late wife … a substitute for Mary like the other women he'd dated?

Obviously, she didn't look anything like Mary. She was much darker, not nearly as tall or curvy, and definitely not as pretty. Despite her self-confidence, Oke never deluded herself about that last part. She couldn't compete with Mary in the looks department.

But what if it wasn't about looks this time for Arinze? What if her cancer diagnosis had drawn him to her? Maybe in a twisted way, her breast cancer had reminded him of Mary's stomach cancer, and that's why he wanted to be with her.

"Oh, God," Oke gasped, the very idea causing her stomach to rumble. Had he only got involved with her because of her cancer?

Rising on unsteady feet, Oke flushed the toilet and rinsed her mouth. She went back to the bedroom, picked her phone up and took several snap shots of the suicide note.

She placed it neatly back inside the safe and closed the door, pushing it until the automatic lock clicked. Massaging her temples with her thumb and forefinger to try and ease the sudden onset of a headache, Oke unlocked her phone and scrolled until she found the number she was looking for.

With a sharp inhale, she hit the call button and placed the phone against her ear, waiting for it to connect. Her heart was thumping at breakneck speed, her chest throbbing with a dull kind of pressure. She literally felt like she was on the verge of a heart attack.

Lord, maybe curiosity would indeed kill this cat.

Twenty-Three



Oke exhaled with relief when her friend walked into the wide lobby at the ground floor of the Ministry of Finance, Lagos. She'd been hanging in the corner of the large space waiting for Nkem to come down from her office on the third floor.

The longer she stood there watching people stroll in and out of the room, the worse her anxiety became, the negative thoughts revolving in her head gaining more and more momentum until she began to feel claustrophobic. Two seconds more of waiting and she would have bolted out the front door and into the street for some much-needed fresh air.

"Sorry for showing up at your workplace and interrupting your day, but I needed to see you," Oke said once her friend got closer.

"No, don't apologise," Nkem said with a wide grin as she pulled her into her arms for a brief embrace. "I wasn't busy at all, and besides, you know you can call me anytime."

"Thanks for meeting up with me at such short notice."

"Stop thanking me, Oke. Tell me what's wrong. You sounded so distressed over the phone. What's happening? Is it about your illness? Any complications with chemo?" Nkem's forehead wrinkled as she eyed her curiously. "I thought you said the weed had made things a lot better. What's going on?"

"Can we go outside and talk? I need some fresh air."

Nkem regarded her for a few more seconds, eyes narrowed in concern, then she nodded. “Okay, let’s go for a walk. I was about to buy lunch anyway.”

“Thanks.”

They left the building and strolled beside each other in silence until they were out of the gated compound.

Oke scrunched up her face as the rays of sunlight hit her. The midday sunshine was at its peak, piercing and terribly uncomfortable. A quick side glance at her friend revealed that she was experiencing the same discomfort.

Her heart flooded with gratitude at the devotion of her friend. For Nkem to be willing to leave her comfortable air-conditioned office to stroll in the hot sun while wearing three-inch pumps showed that she would always have her back, no matter what.

Nkem slowed her pace and turned towards her, confirming her exact thoughts.

“Now, tell me what’s going on with you, Oke? You know I’ll do anything I can to help.”

Oke gave her a grateful smile. “I know you will, and thanks for always being there,” she said, slowing her own pace, too. She pointed at the cafeteria opposite where they stood. “Can we walk over there and have a seat? It’s damn too hot out here, and there might be fans or an AC in there. I’ll buy lunch.”

Tears suddenly filled Nkem’s eyes. “Why are you stalling, Oke? Talk now. Is it your cancer? Has it come back?”

Oke shook her head rapidly to reassure her friend. “No, no, it’s not my cancer. I’m fine,” she said. “In fact, I feel foolish for being this dramatic about a man. God, I feel like my mother, completely lost and crazy.”

“A man? You mean Arinze?”

“Yes, Nkem. I’ve disturbed your busy day at work because of a bloody man. A male human! How pathetic am I?” Oke covered her face with her palms and groaned, her face on fire from shame. “In fact, go back to work and ignore me. It’s probably not that deep.”

Nkem pried her hands away from her face gently. “I don’t care if you call me in the middle of a meeting to talk about the moon, I’ll always have time,” she said. “Remember how crazy I was when Tunde broke my heart? How many times did I call you to cry, to vent? You were always there for me. Why do you expect less from me? What else are friends for?”

Nkem swiped her thumb across Oke’s cheek in a gentle caress. “You’re not pathetic,” she said, her tone soothing. “Being in love can make anyone a bit cuckoo. It happens to us all. So, let’s go into Daily Bread Café and find whatever we can eat there while we talk. God knows that the name alone is a sign that we would be eating there at our risk.”

Oke laughed as she cast a glance at the kiosk with the white paint chipping off from every corner of the walls. “It may surprise you. Such places frequently have the tastiest food.”

“We’ll see,” Nkem said, her tone drenched in disbelief. “But I sincerely doubt it.”

The first bite Oke took of the meat pie she’d ordered at the café proved Nkem right. “Gosh, this tastes like crap. Is there even any meat inside this meat pie?” Oke grumbled, looking into the gap in the pastry created by her bite.

Nkem chuckled. “What do you expect from a meat pie you bought for only 450 Naira? Do you know how expensive beef in the market is these days?”

“Chai!” Oke tossed the pie back on the plate, her appetite gone. She picked up her bottle of Coke and gulped. “At least this is chilled. And there’s a fan above us. It’s not the worst-case scenario.”

Nkem, clearly not perturbed by the tasteless meat pie, took another healthy bite. “It’s not o,” she said through a full mouth. “Besides, I’m too hungry to care how it tastes. I skipped breakfast to be at an early meeting.”

Companionable silence fell between them as Nkem wolfed her first pastry down and Oke nursed her cold soft drink. Calling her friend to get her perspective on Arinze’s suicide note had been a spur of the moment act, not something she’d have readily done if she hadn’t been feeling so discombobulated. But now that she was here with Nkem, she didn’t regret it. She desperately wanted to hear what she thought about it all.

“Arinze has a gun,” she said without preamble.

Nkem paused her chewing, her eyes widening, but didn’t say anything.

“He wants to kill himself with it. He’s even written a suicide note.”

“Wh-what?” Nkem swallowed, lowering the rest of her pastry onto her plate and grabbing her bottle of Maltina for a quick swig. “You’re joking, right?”

Oke shook her head. “I saw a gun and a suicide note in his safe. He wrote the note late last year. Just a few weeks before we started dating.”

Still appearing flummoxed, Nkem gaped at her, her eyes bulging almost like a surprised cartoon character.

“I have the note here,” she said as she reached for her phone and lifted it from the table. She unlocked it and opened her photo library.

“Read it,” she said, handing her phone to Nkem.

A cloud of dread surrounding her, Oke kept still, watching as her friend read the words of the image on the screen. She keenly studied the changes in her friend’s facial expressions. The exact same way she must have looked as she’d gone through Arinze’s suicide note earlier.

“So, what do you think?” she asked when her friend looked up from the phone. “And I don’t want you to sugar-coat anything. Give it to me straight? I want your honest opinion.”

Nkem heaved in a long breath as she handed Oke back the phone. “I … I’m speechless.”

“Exactly! How does one go from that …?” She pointed at her phone. “To loving someone else in mere months? I find it hard to believe.”

Nkem sighed. “When you’re with him, do you feel happy? Does he treat you well?”

“Yes,” Oke answered without a thought. Arinze made her feel loved, protected, and happy. She could never deny that, but could he really love her? Oke had

serious doubts now. Nobody went from being suicidal over another person to falling in love that quickly. It all seemed so strange. “But that’s not the point, Nkem. My feelings aren’t in question. I love him. He’s the first man I’ve ever given my heart and soul to. I spend my days thinking about him, looking forward to seeing him again …” Her voice broke as tears choked her throat, making speech difficult. “But what if he only sees me as a weak substitute for Mary? What if I’m not really who he wants?”

The skin between Nkem’s eyebrows crinkled. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t we read the same suicide note? He clearly said he’s been looking for a substitute for Mary.” Oke massaged the right side of her neck trying to ease the tension knotting her muscles there. “What if my cancer is the only reason that Arinze is with me? Because having to care for a woman with cancer reminds him of being with Mary.”

Nkem’s mouth gaped as understanding dawned on her. “You remember the brief time I dated Arinze when you introduced us?” she said.

Oke nodded. “Of course. He told me you were not compatible because you were both still stuck in the past.”

“Yes. I was stuck in the past with Tunde, and he with Mary. He said he wanted me because I looked like her.”

“I know,” Oke said. “He told me that’s why he wanted me to introduce you to him.”

Oke palmed her face and shook her head, annoyed with herself. “I should have seen it as a red flag when he suddenly became interested in me after my cancer diagnosis. I should have put the two together in my mind. But because I look nothing like Mary … I thought … I thought …”

“Don’t beat yourself up? It may not even be the case —”

“I said, total honesty from you, Nkem,” Oke interjected. “I don’t want you saying things just to make me feel better. I’m almost thirty-six. I’m not going to die because the man I fell in love with really wants his late wife instead of me.”

Nkem nodded. She snatched up her drink from the table and sipped twice, the

corners of her lips drooping as if suddenly hit by a bout of remorse. “I have to tell you something,” she said.

Oke stiffened, her heart leaping to her throat as a sense of foreboding engulfed her. Nkem’s facial expression worried her. The girl looked like she’d been caught stealing the last piece of meat from the cooking pot.

“I wanted to tell you as soon as I found out, but Ufuoma begged me not to,” Nkem said, eyes appealing for understanding. “She warned me that upsetting you while you were on chemo would be terrible, and I agreed that it would, so I kept my mouth shut.”

“Ufuoma? What’s going on? What do you guys know?”

Nkem blew out a harsh breath. “You know Arinze is Ufuoma’s husband’s distant cousin.”

“Go straight to the point, Nkem,” Oke snapped, now annoyed by her friend’s hesitancy. She needed to know what this was all about without a second’s delay.

“Well, Dike told Ufuoma that Arinze was cheating on you with another woman,” Nkem said in a low, rueful tone. “At first, Ufuoma didn’t believe it until Dike showed her photographs of Arinze with a woman who wasn’t you. In one of the photographs, he was holding her hand in a family picture. It seemed like the woman had taken him to meet her parents.”

Oke’s pulse raced as she listened to her friend, unable to believe what she was hearing, yet knowing that neither her friend nor her sister would lie to her about anything, let alone something so serious.

“Ufuoma still doubted it until she heard Arinze’s own sister confirm he is dating someone his mother introduced him to. A woman named Chinwe Okoye.”

Nkem picked up her mobile phone from the table, unlocked it, and tapped on the screen. “I have the pictures Ufuoma sent to me.”

Oke snatched her friend’s phone and looked at it. Her heart plummeted and a cold chill spread across her skin as she saw the photo of Arinze standing beside a beautiful woman, his arm draped around her waist as they beamed at the camera. The other smiling faces in the family picture faded away as she zeroed in on the

woman beside him—a carbon copy of Mary.

God! He really was on a mission to find an exact replica of his late wife. And she was a damn fool for allowing herself to be swept into his bizarre web of deceit.

Twenty-Four



“We need to always ensure we keep on top of these kinds of issues, James,” Arinze said to his lead engineer seated across from him in the office.

After five whole hours spent fixing the problem with the surveillance system that his team had constructed from scratch under the guidance of Mr Chu Mai, he’d decided to have a conversation with James alone.

The success of the entire operation rested on Arinze, and he couldn’t afford another mistake like this again. It cost him money … and time. Time away from the woman he should be with, making sure she was okay after her chemo.

“We have no room for error because Mr Mai and his team will be leaving for China in four days,” he reiterated. “So, please, test it again tomorrow, and the day after, until you are completely certain that when we bring it to the market for our consumers, it’s the same standard as the one we’ve been importing, if not better.”

“Yes, Sir, I promise this won’t happen again.”

Arinze inhaled and exhaled slowly, letting the tension of the past few hours seep out of him through each breath. Damn, he was tired.

“I understand you’re doing your best, James,” Arinze said in a gentler tone. “But that’s why I hired you. I want more than that. I want the brilliant mind you have up here.” He tapped his own head to buttress his point. “We depend too much on foreigners in this country, importing almost every damn thing. Why don’t we set the standard for other Nigerians? Show them that we can provide high-quality

technology. We certainly have the brains to do it. Add the willpower, and we're golden."

James nodded his head vigorously in agreement. "You're right, Sir. Won't slip up again," he promised.

"Great. Because I believe in you."

"I appreciate that, Sir."

Arinze rested his back on his seat. "How's your wife? And daughter?"

"They are fine, Sir. Morenike is about to start preschool. We're all so excited."

"Wow, that's wonderful, James. How old is she? Wasn't she just born yesterday?"

James laughed. "It seems like that to me sometimes, too, but she's four now."

"Four? Wow! Time really does fly." He drummed his fingers on his desk, gazing wistfully into thin air. He would really love a child. A daughter or a son—didn't matter. Someone he could take to school, read bedtime stories, and pass on his knowledge about business to. A child of his own to love. "You're so blessed to have a lovely family," Arinze said, unable to keep the longing from his voice. "I want one, too."

"You'll have one when it's the right time," James said. "Just keep positive."

Arinze nodded. "Thanks, James. For everything."

"It's my pleasure to have the opportunity to work in such a progressive establishment. And for you."

With a brief handshake, they exchanged farewells and James left his office. Arinze reached for his phone as soon as he was alone and dialled Oke's number. He'd not texted or spoken to her since he rushed out for work this morning. Hopefully, she was okay and hadn't experienced any side effects from her chemotherapy.

Waiting in anticipation as the phone began to ring, Arinze swivelled his

executive chair around. He couldn't wait to hear her voice. To hear her tell him how her day had gone.

The phone rang out and went to voicemail. Not keen on leaving a message, Arinze redialled. And just as he settled back on his seat to wait for her to answer, a knock sounded at his door.

Frowning, he ended his phone call attempt. "Come in," he called out.

The door opened and his sister walked in, her large handbag hanging on her shoulder. "Hey, bro, I just wanted to check up on you before I leave," she said. "I heard there was a problem with the surveillance camera. Did you manage to get it fixed?"

Arinze nodded. "Yes, thanks, Ezinne. Our engineers found the problem and corrected it. They are smart people. We have so much untapped potential in our country. It's a shame."

She nodded as she pulled out the chair opposite him and plopped onto it. "A damn shame. And I'm proud of you that you took this initiative."

"Thank you. But it's also a joint effort. Everyone involved deserves full credit."

His sister studied him for several moments, searching his face intently as if trying to solve for X in a complex algebraic equation.

"You seem different, Arinze," she said. "Happier, more positive … more like yourself before … before Mary …" She trailed off, her finger stroking the angle of her jaw as if in deep thought. "Did you see Dr Adebayo, the family doctor I referred you to? Are you now in therapy?"

Arinze arched his brow. "Therapy?" He shook his head. "No, I'm not in therapy. Like I told you when you suggested it, I don't need it. I'm totally fine. You were just seeing things that weren't there."

"No, I wasn't. I'm pretty certain there has been a change in you recently. You're laughing again, joking, just generally looking brighter. The light in your eyes is back." She stiffened as her mouth fell open. "Wait a minute. Is it Chinwe? Are you in love with her? Did we get it right finally?"

Arinze laughed, shaking his head. “You’re crazy, Ezinne. My happiness isn’t tied to any woman.”

Even as he said it, he knew that wasn’t entirely true. He loved being in love, having a woman he trusted and could share deep affection with, one he could come back to after a long day of work, and feel safe and at home with.

For years, he’d been told by several male friends and acquaintances how completely different he was from many other men because going out at night and prowling for women wasn’t his thing. He didn’t agree with them. He believed that people were a product of what they absorbed from their environment.

Growing up and watching how his father’s devotion to his wife had created a happy family, Arinze had simply morphed into a man who wanted that exact thing. On the other hand, his brother had found their monogamy all quite boring and had sought the opposite kind of lifestyle. It simply showed that two people exposed to the same background could adapt differently.

“We all know you’re the type who is happier when in love,” Ezinne said. “There is no shame in that.”

“Okay, what’s your point?”

“Nothing. I’m just happy you’re happy. And that Chinwe worked out for you.” She clapped her hands in excitement. “As a matter of fact, Chuka is throwing a pre-wedding party to celebrate our union with family and friends unable to attend our destination wedding in Rome. I’m inviting everyone we know, and I want you to bring Chinwe. It would be a perfect way to integrate her into the family.”

Arinze shook his head vehemently, repulsed by the idea of going that far with his deception. No way would he introduce Chinwe to his family. In fact, the charade was beginning to get out of hand.

Two weeks ago, she’d managed to convince him to meet her family and pretend that they were getting even more serious. He’d accepted what was supposed to be a one-hour dinner date, only for it to end up being nearly three hours of her entire family grilling him about their relationship.

Arinze couldn’t believe how many lies he’d told that evening. The very first one

to Oke, about his whereabouts. It was all taking a toll on him now. He needed it to stop. All of it.

“Chinwe and I aren’t dating at all,” he blurted out. “We’ve been lying to both families to get you all off our backs.”

His sister’s jaw dropped as she emitted a gasp. “I don’t understand. Why would you … why lie?”

He shrugged. “Well, we are both seeing someone we aren’t ready to share with our families, so we decided to help each other out.”

“So, you’re seeing someone other than Chinwe?”

“Yep. For the past seven months.”

“Seven months?” She cried out in disbelief. “Why are you keeping her from the family? Who is she?”

“Her name is Oke Amayo, a 35-year-old plastic surgeon who lives in —”

“Wait a minute, that name sounds familiar. I’ve heard it before … from Ufuoma.”

“Yep, that’s it. She’s Dike’s wife’s sister.”

“Oh, my,” Ezinne said. “If it’s the same Oke I’ve seen and heard about, I’m surprised. She’s so different from the kind of women you normally go for.”

A bit peeved by that remark, Arinze sat up. “What do you mean?”

She flipped her hands upwards in helpless surrender. “Let’s face it, Arinze, you have a type. Mary. And everyone who looks like her—light-skinned, tall, curvy and a warm sweet, innocent smile.”

“I find that comment very insulting.”

“Well, I don’t mean to insult you, but you know I’m telling the truth. So, it leaves me to wonder why you don’t want us to meet her.”

“Because she’s not Catholic and Igbo like Mum and Dad keep insisting on. I

really want this relationship to work. I don't want Mum's wahala."

"Bullshit," Ezinne snorted. "We all know that nobody can stop you from being with whomever you choose. You cut Mum off for more than two years when she became hostile to Mary. Can't be simply because of that. Be honest. Why are you worried about introducing Oke to us? What are you truly worried about?"

Arinze drew in a sharp breath and let it out just as quickly. "She has breast cancer."

His sister's eyes bulged as her lips parted wide. And at this moment, Arinze felt small. He'd finally admitted the truth. What he really feared, and it was awful.

He'd been so concerned that his family would compare Mary's devastating cancer journey with Oke's cancer diagnosis, certain that they would be completely against it because of how it had affected him the last time. An utterly selfish reason, which made his skin crawl every time he acknowledged it inwardly.

"Why on earth would you want to be involved with another woman with cancer? After what you went through with Mary. Are you insane?" His sister gaped at him, waiting for his response, incredulity etched in her face.

"It's not terminal cancer, Ezinne. She's had a mastectomy and chemo and it has all gone so well. She's completely healthy now." He dragged his fingers through his cropped hair. "Besides, it's not like I planned to fall in love with someone who has cancer. It just happened."

"You're in love with her? Oh, no! You were right not to introduce her to us. Mum will go ballistic. She will never accept her."

"Well, I don't give a fu—" He broke off, took a calming breath, and continued. "I don't care what Mum or anyone else accepts. I'm a grown man. And I love Oke. Her cancer diagnosis makes no difference to me."

His sister didn't respond. She pressed her lips tightly together, eyes narrowed in concentration, likely thinking about what next to say to discourage him. He didn't care. Nothing she could say would make him feel any differently about Oke.

The months he'd been with her had filled him with pure joy. He loved her with every cell of his body. Now, speaking to his sister, he realised he'd made a huge mistake hiding her from his family like she was some dirty secret. As if her cancer was some sordid infectious disease.

He'd been selfish, lying to himself that her tribe and lack of religious beliefs were the main obstacles. When he knew deep down that it wasn't. He could always find a way to dismiss his parents' bigotry. But to introduce cancer to his family again after the horrible time they had with Mary's cancer? That was a different matter altogether. They'd all been affected by it, watching Mary suffer, seeing his own devastating reaction to it. How could he explain that he'd fallen for yet another woman with a similar disease?

What a chicken he'd been. Instead of proudly showing off his woman to everyone, educating them about cancer and the different stages of the illness, and how not every cancer diagnosis was terminal, he had been hiding and secretly waiting until Oke's chemo was over and she'd recovered completely before introducing her to his family. He'd failed Oke, and she didn't deserve it at all.

"Oh, now I know why!" Ezinne suddenly jerked upright in her seat, her eyes sparking with discovery. "Now, I understand why you picked Oke. She may not look like your type physically, but she definitely is. In a twisted kind of way, you want her because her cancer reminds you of Mary."

"Now, you're out of your bloody mind, Ezinne," Arinze huffed, rising to his feet. "I won't let you reduce my love for Oke to her illness."

"I didn't do that, Arinze. You did. If you don't think it's significant, why are you hiding her from us?"

"End of conversation. Please leave now before I say something I'll regret," he snapped, pointing to the door.

Ezinne gasped. "You're putting me out of your office?"

Arinze didn't respond. He turned his back to his sister and strolled towards the window. He held on to the blinds and peered out absent-mindedly, unable to appreciate the beauty of the setting sun, or the rowdy scene of people going about their business in the streets below. "I love Oke. Not because she has cancer or because she reminds me of Mary, or any other stupid shit you might come up

with."

Still keeping his back to his sister, he shut the window and the blinds. "I love her because she makes me happy, makes me laugh, makes my stomach clench with excitement at the thought of hearing her voice, of seeing her. At the end of the day when I lie beside her and hold her, I feel like I've come home, really come back home."

The rapid clicking of heels on the hardwood floor resounded in the room, and for a second, regret flooded Arinze's chest. His sister was walking away from him angrily after only just being told about Oke. Already, the negativity he'd feared had started.

A surge of relief replaced his regret when his sister's arms wrapped around him from behind. "Arinze," she called out in a soft, contrite tone. "I'm sorry for … I'm sorry for doubting your love for Oke. I just … I just worry about you so much."

He nodded, his throat tight with all the strong emotions from the conversation he'd just had with Ezinne. "I know. But I'm the happiest I've been for a long time. And I have Oke to thank for that. I really would like for you all to meet her. You'll understand why I love her, and how much she means to me."

Ezinne nodded. "I will do everything I can to act as a buffer for you when Mum meets her." She smiled. "We both know Dad and Nnanna won't be the problem. But with me on your side, we'll tackle Mum together and win her over."

"Oh, Sis," he enthused, pulling her into his arms. "I'll need your support. Thank you."

Shortly after, Arinze left the office with his sister. He bid her farewell in the parking lot and drove home in good spirits. Now that he'd told a family member about Oke, he felt tons lighter. Like a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He no longer needed to pretend. He would call his family up and arrange a gathering where he would introduce her to them. He would also call Chinwe and put an end to their charade. It would be difficult for her, but she was strong. She would survive.

When he got home, the first thing he noticed was the absence of Oke's car. Strange. Her Rolls Royce was usually parked in his garage right next to his other

Mercedes.

Furrowing his forehead in confusion, Arinze called out to his security guard who was standing by the front door as if waiting for someone.

“Sir?” The middle-aged man ran towards him, wheezing loudly like he’d just run a marathon.

“Where is Madam?”

“She packed out and left the house. Told me to give you this,” he said, pulling out a key card from his breast pocket and handing it over to him.

Shellshocked, Arinze took the card he’d given to Oke from Timothy. His heart started to drum heavily inside his chest. “Packed out? What do you mean?”

“Sir, she went out this morning, came back with her friend, and then, I saw them leaving with her suitcases. She gave me the key before going. That’s all I know.”

“And you didn’t think to call me? To warn me that she was leaving me?”

“Sorry, Sir, I thought you knew —”

Arinze broke into a run before Timothy finished his statement. He used the key card to open the front door. In a mad rush, he dashed up the stairs and opened the bedroom door.

Oke was not there. But that wasn’t what made him dizzy, his brain shutting down on him like he’d been struck on the head with a sledgehammer. It was the unusual silence of the room. And something else … completely free of the random little messes Oke usually made. Everything appeared squeaky clean. The bed was neatly made as if nobody had slept there for ages. The closet he’d cleared out for her was totally empty. Arinze rushed to the bathroom and opened the cabinet. All her personal effects had vanished. Even her toothbrush.

Shoulders slouched and his heart sinking, Arinze strolled back into the bedroom. Everything that made this room theirs had disappeared, leaving it bereft of life, of warmth and joy.

Why had Oke left? He glanced around in confusion. What could have happened

in such a short space of time? Their morning had started so well before James's interruption.

Breathing heavily, his chest burning with anxiety, Arinze reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out his phone.

He unlocked it and redialled Oke's number. Just as it began to ring, he caught the picture frame on the wall. It was askew, but the safe door was closed.

Oh, no! The answer to his previous questions suddenly struck him. He'd left the safe open when he rushed out this morning. Now it was shut.

Damn. Oke must have seen my suicide note.

His heart jumped as the line connected. "Hello, Oke —"

"Who the fuck is Chinwe Okoye?"

Arinze's gut plummeted and cold sweat suddenly dampened his underarms. Double damn, this is worse than I thought.

Twenty-Five



“You think I was born yesterday, don’t you?” Oke huffed, squeezing the phone pressed against her ear tightly as if it could absorb all her frustrations. How could Arinze come up with such an elaborate lie and expect her to buy it hook, line and sinker? Did he have zero respect for her? “You really expect me to believe that she’s gay and you’re her fake boyfriend. Do I look like a silly 20-year-old to you?”

“Oke, please listen to me—” Arinze’s desperate tone came from the other end of the line.

“Actually, I don’t need to do that,” she said as she paced the length and breadth of her sitting room, the plush carpet cushioning the heavy thumping of her angry feet. “I don’t need to listen to another thing you have to say. I’m not who you really want, and I won’t be sucked into your bizarre games.”

“What do you mean by that? That’s not true, Oke. You know I want you. I love you.”

She halted mid-stride and burst into a mirthless laugh that shook her body. “You don’t have to lie any more. You can be honest. What you want is a replica of Mary, and you managed to get it by dating Chinwe and me at the same time. You have someone who looks just like Mary and another with cancer just like she had. Absolute genius.”

Arinze’s shocked gasp resounded in her ear through the speakers of her phone, but Oke didn’t care. “In fact, I don’t blame you at all for this. I don’t. You told me right from the start that you couldn’t love anyone else, and I should have

believed you. I have myself to blame."

"Oke, please stop saying all these things. We need to talk in person instead of over the phone. Let me come over."

"No!" she barked. She couldn't afford to see him now. Not when she felt so fragile. Not while her face was swollen from the tears she'd cried all day. Seeing him would reduce her into a pitiful bundle of sorrow.

"Please, Oke. I'm already on my way to your house. We need to sit down and talk like adults. I can explain everything."

"I'll not let you in. There's nothing to explain. The suicide note I saw was clear. And I don't blame you, really."

"I wrote that note months ago, Oke. Before we became involved. I really felt like that at the time. I wasn't sleeping much. I was stressed. But being with you turned things around —"

"Stop. Don't do that. I don't believe a single word."

"Please, Oke, let's talk. Face to face. Just hear what I have to say. At least, I deserve that."

Oke paused. Arinze wasn't a bad person. In fact, she'd known him long before they became involved. Even though she would not forgive him for lying to her, and had no intentions of reconciling with him, she could at least hear him out. They didn't have to part as enemies. After all, he'd been there for her during the most difficult time of her life as she battled cancer.

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you."

As soon as she hung up, Oke glanced at Nkem, who was perched on the sitting room sofa, her eyebrows arched in question.

"He's coming over," Oke explained.

"Do you want me to stay?"

Oke shook her head. "I can handle him. Don't worry."

“Are you sure? I can be in another room while you talk.”

“No, I’m fine. Really, Nkem, I need to do this alone. Look him in the eye and tell him it’s over,” Oke said, her arms enfolding her midriff in a defensive stance. “Besides, I have to return all the things he left in my house to him, too.”

“Okay,” Nkem conceded, still appearing hesitant. She stood up. “I’ll leave now. But call me if you need anything. And I mean anything. At any time. Okay?”

Oke nodded. She strolled over to her friend and embraced her tightly. “Thank you for being here. For calming my craziness.”

Nkem smiled at her. “You aren’t crazy, Oke. When emotions are involved in relationships, it becomes a lot less straightforward. You’ll be fine, okay?”

“I know I’ll be,” she said. “I am fighting cancer. I think I’m strong enough to handle Arinze.”

“That’s the spirit, Babe! Nothing can break you.”

“Thanks, Sis.”

After another quick embrace, Nkem left. Oke dashed upstairs to her bedroom, washed and dried her face. She powdered her cheeks, forehead, and nose, then applied a nude lip gloss.

Strolling back into her bedroom, she lifted her bob-style black wig from the stand and placed it on her bald head. She wouldn’t face Arinze looking like a sick, heartbroken woman. Never. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing her shattered by his deceit. Not like her mother did when her husband left. She would bounce back, bigger and better, stronger and smarter.

She perused her reflection in the bedroom mirror and let out a pleased sigh. She did look much better than she had minutes ago. Without another moment to spare, Oke crossed the room to the wardrobe and slid it open.

A few of Arinze’s shirts and trousers hung neatly at the far end corner. Evidence of the space she’d created for him in her life. Something she’d never done for any other man.

Tears prickled the back of her eyes, but Oke blinked them away. She would not cry again and ruin her makeup and the outward façade she wanted to present when he showed up. She wouldn't let him see that he had ripped her heart from her chest and shred it to pieces, that his infidelity had devastated her. Never.

Stilling herself to prevent another meltdown, Oke pressed her lips together and pulled out his large suitcase. She unzipped it and began hurling his clothes in with force, fuelling her energy with rage so that she didn't have to think of her pain.

Her phone buzzed with a text message just as she'd completed her mission to remove every trace of his existence in her home. She fastened the zip of the suitcase, fished out her phone from the pocket of her denim shorts and glanced at the screen.

Arinze: I'm at the gate. Idris won't let me in.

Despite her downtrodden emotions, Oke smiled. Her ever-faithful gateman never disappointed her. The man always had a way of stopping unwanted guests from entering her house.

Although this time, it wasn't really the case. She wanted Arinze. That's why it hurt that he'd lied to her. It didn't matter how furious she was with him, she loved him. She could never deny that. If only he loved her, too. If only.

Oke inhaled slowly, squaring her shoulders, then let out a long, slow breath. Time to say goodbye to the first man who made her believe in falling in love.

She found Arinze standing by the gate, still in the clothes he wore to work. Although his eyes were a bit bloodshot from fatigue and possibly tears, he looked as stunning as ever.

Tall and broad shouldered in a fitted black-and-white striped shirt that clung to his firm muscles in an enticing way. His flat stomach and narrow waist enclosed in the rich cotton material made her want to pull it away from where it was neatly tucked inside his black trousers and touch his skin.

No matter how angry she was at this moment, she still felt that pull to him, the

potent attraction that she couldn’t fight.

Oke halted her progress, needing to maintain some distance between them. Any closer and she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from reaching for him.

His gaze raked over her hungrily, knotting her stomach and tightening her clit with need. “I love you,” he murmured. “You have to believe that.”

His words snapped her back to reality. “More lies, Arinze? Is that what you came here to say? You think that simply telling me you love me will erase your lies and betrayal?” She dumped his suitcase on the ground. “You think I’m that needy for a man that you can cheat on me and say those three fake words and I’ll fold like a flimsy tent? Take your stuff and leave my house.”

“I didn’t cheat on you, Oke,” he said. “Chinwe and I were only pretending. We never even kissed.”

“Clap for yourself for your self-control. How honourable that you dated another woman while we were together, but managed to never kiss her.”

“I was wrong for lying to you, for pretending to be with another woman instead of telling my family I was with you. I know that.”

“Then why did you do it? Are you ashamed of introducing me to them? Do I embarrass you? Am I not the ideal woman for you? Someone like Mary who can cook and clean and is perfect? Is that it?” Oke sighed. “I’m proud of who I am. I never tried to be someone else, nor do I want to be. It’s okay if you don’t want me. We were friends for two years before we became involved. You could have respected me enough to keep me as one instead of lying to me.”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“So why did you? Why am I not good enough for you, for your family?”

Arinze scrubbed his face with his palms. “It’s complex. I … I…”

“I’m listening. Because I have thought about it a lot. Even if you pretended to be dating Chinwe, which I still find hard to believe, why did you choose her?” She needed the answer to this question for there to be any chance between them. The truth. “Is it because she reminds you of Mary? Isn’t that why you dated my

friend, Nkem? Isn't that why you are with me, too? Does my cancer diagnosis do the same for you? Maybe somewhere in your twisted mind, even if I don't look like Mary, I have the same disease that reminds you of —"

Without any warning, Arinze rushed towards her and pulled her into his arms, ending her tirade. "Mary is gone. I loved her, but she's gone. Now, you're the one I want. Nobody else. And your cancer diagnosis makes no difference to me."

Oke clung to him, flinging her arms around his shoulders. "I want to believe you, but …"

He pressed his mouth to hers, shutting her up. "Please believe me," he whispered, kissing her again and again. "I'm so sorry for lying to you, for faking a relationship with Chinwe, but I wanted to keep my family away for a while so that I could concentrate on our relationship. I worried about putting you in the middle of any negativity."

Oke tried to think, to poke holes in his apology, but his tongue began a slow seductive dance inside her mouth, his hands roaming her body and squeezing her flesh. Her brain turned to mush.

"Please, forgive me, Oke. I love you."

Arinze's deep voice reverberated inside her, his mouth against hers ignited a fierce path of longing down her body. Oke let out a sharp moan, wrapping her legs around his waist. She kissed him back with ardour as she gave in to the desire that exploded inside her, the fight completely drained from her.

Twenty-Six



Arinze peeled his eyes open. He blinked twice to adjust his vision to the dim lighting. Oke wasn't on her side of the bed.

Bolting upright, he darted his gaze about as a wave of panic struck him. She was nowhere in sight. "Oke," he called out, hoping she would respond from the bathroom.

No answer. Arinze swung his legs across the bed and planted his feet on the ground. He snatched his phone from the bedside table and glanced at the time. 5:04 a.m.

Dread snaked inside him, causing a slow spread of goosebumps all over his skin. He couldn't tell why he knew it, but Oke's unusual wakefulness this early in the morning showed she'd been unable to sleep. He didn't like that one bit.

He trotted across the room, picked his shirt from where it was hanging and swung it over his shoulders, not bothering with the buttons.

"Oke," he called out as he dashed down the curved staircase.

"In here."

Arinze followed her voice to the sitting room. She was in a purple silk nightgown seated on the sofa with a cup of coffee in her hand.

His stomach twisted in knots as he looked at her face. Her lips were pressed together, instead of the warm smile she usually greeted him with. Her eyes

looked dulled and shuttered, instead of sparking brightly like they usually did in the mornings.

Arinze's heart sank. He knew then and there that their night of lovemaking hadn't changed anything. His packed suitcase beside her was a bold confirmation of his innate fears.

"You're already awake," he said lamely.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. "Please take a seat."

Swallowing hard, Arinze moved farther into the room and settled on the sofa opposite her. He wanted to rush over to her, get on his knees and beg her not to say whatever she was about to say, but he rested his hands on his knees, fighting those instincts. He knew Oke. She was a woman who made her own decisions. He loved her for it. Now, he had to accept whatever she wanted.

"Arinze, I spent last night thinking about us," she said. "And I think our relationship is unhealthy."

"No, it's not —"

"Please let me finish," she cut in. "I need to say this exactly how I mean it."

Arinze swallowed back the rest of his rebuttal. Deep down, he'd known that they hadn't resolved anything yesterday. They'd just allowed their carnal needs and the fear of losing each other to consume them. Oke was right, they needed to talk honestly.

"I watched my parents, who loved each other so much, end up hurting each other so deeply," she said. "And I vowed never to put myself in that position where I allow anyone to hurt me. But I did."

Bile burned Arinze's gut as he listened. How could he not have seen the disaster he'd set himself up for? How had he managed to mess things up so much? To hurt a woman he adored?

"I heard you tell me that you didn't believe it was possible to love any other woman but Mary," she continued. "I knew it was a red flag then, but I wanted love and a family with you so much that I didn't use the sound judgement that

I'm well known for. Now, it's all so clear to me that I have only myself to blame. I should never have put you in that position. I'm sorry."

"S-sorry?" Arinze couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had to stop her right there. No way could he let her continue with this line of thinking. "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm the one that lied to you about … about Chinwe. I'm the one who should be sorry. Not you. And I apologise from the bottom of my heart. It was foul of me to deceive you and my family. Quite a senseless move on my part."

"So, why did you feel the need to lie about her? Why?"

Arinze dragged in a deep breath. Time to come clean. "I took Mary's death very hard. Her illness broke me. I stopped eating, couldn't sleep, lost weight, lost my faith, I just generally faded away," he said. "I became a fraction of my former self."

The memories came flooding back. How his mother would come over and find him crying in his car for hours, unwilling to accept the fact that he was going to lose his wife of more than ten years. He'd been devastated, and even though he'd put up a brave front for Mary, behind the scenes, he'd been traumatised by it all. And his family had witnessed those devastating meltdowns.

"I worried about telling them that I had fallen in love with another woman who has cancer," he admitted. "So, I allowed my mother to think that her matchmaking attempt had worked. Chinwe needed the same kind of cover-up for her family because she's gay, so we stupidly took the coward's way out."

Oke breathed in and out slowly, her face clouding with hurt and tears filling her eyes. "But that doesn't change the fact that I have cancer," she snapped. "You would have had to tell them at some point."

"I know … I didn't think it through. I … I…" He trailed off, dragged both palms over his face and shook his head at his own foolishness. "I guess I was waiting for your chemo to be over so I could tell them your treatment had finished, and that you were in complete remission."

"And what if my cancer comes back? What if for some reason the chemo doesn't destroy all the cancer cells … what would you do then? Find another woman to play pretend with? Or actually screw around behind my back?"

Faced with a question he'd repeatedly avoided asking himself, Arinze had no response. He knew he would always love Oke. Her presence in his life had brought him so much joy. Without a doubt, he wanted a future with her. However, he also knew that there was a chance that her cancer could return. Even though he'd constantly fought the very idea in his mind, the thought of going through that pain again was unbearable.

"This disease isn't my fault," she murmured, wiping away the teardrops that fell down her cheeks. "I will not be shamed, or hidden away like a dirty little secret, as if I brought it upon myself."

"I know." He rose from his seat and knelt down in front of her. "I'm sorry for being stupid. I can't even believe I thought it was a good idea."

Oke's lips curved into a sneer. "I think it was a good idea to you because on some level, you only wanted me because my cancer reminded you of Mary, the only woman you've ever loved. And secondly, in some twisted way, that same experience you had with Mary makes you ashamed of me having cancer. The central message to me is that you are still not over Mary." Oke shook her head. "This … you and me ..." She pointed her index finger at him and then at herself. "Is a recipe for disaster. We were better off as friends."

"No," he snapped, panicking. Oke was now looking backwards instead of forwards. Dangerous. "I don't want to be your friend. I can't be just your friend. I love you. I'm not ashamed of your cancer. In fact, I'm proud of you. The way you've fought it with dignity and grace. I want to show you off. To bring you home to my family today if you want. I'll call my parents now and tell them about us, I'll —"

"Stop it, Arinze. You don't need to do that now. It's too late." Her arms gripped the armrest of the chair, her eyes blazing. "Let's not do this. We are both good people. We just don't work together."

"Not true," he said, jumping to his feet. "Last night, we worked quite well together. Actually, well enough that you clung to me, moaning my name as you came apart in my arms. Our sexual chemistry is undeniably intense. And we connect emotionally, too. We always have a good laugh together; we always have a great time whether indoors or outdoors. We're perfect together."

Oke blew out a regretful sigh, "But still, you managed to hurt me. Don't you get

it? I won't put myself in that position ever again." With a steely determination that sent shivers of dread down his spine, she pinned her eyes on him as she pointed to his suitcase. "I'm done. Don't forget your stuff. And please, leave your keys."

He stood there, still as a statue while his world came crashing down around him. Were they really over? Was he really going to lose Oke, the only woman that had managed to break him out of his despair, a woman he'd fallen so hard for? No way could he accept this.

"What about all the things we talked about? Getting married? Having a family. What about the many times you said you loved me? Doesn't any of that count? Are you really saying it's over?"

"Yes, Arinze. I do love you, and I still intend to try to have a child. That has not changed." Oke rose to her feet. "But I watched my father hurt my mother, then my mother hurt me and my sister. All because of love, marriage and relationships. I won't do that to myself, to you, and certainly not to an innocent baby," she said, a solemn expression on her face. "You obviously have some issues from your past to deal with, and admittedly, so do I. But we can't do it together. And I won't have a child born in a relationship with parents who would ever hurt each other so badly."

With that, Oke walked out of the room, every step she took away from him, ripping his heart piece by piece.

~

Sitting by her bedroom window overlooking the front of her compound, Oke watched as Arinze walked out of her house, dragging his suitcase with him. She only allowed the tears to come pouring down when the gates closed behind him.

Dear God, it had taken all she had inside her to end things. Every second in his presence shaking her resolve, she'd forced herself to leave him standing there and walk away. She loved him beyond measure, but never could she allow herself to play second fiddle to any woman, not even one who'd died.

Last night after they'd made sweet, passionate love and Arinze drifted off to sleep, she'd lain awake staring at him, wishing away the tumultuous feelings still

rumbling through her. But wishes didn't always come true, and those feelings remained rooted. As did the truths revealed in his suicide note—no amount of wishing had whisked them away either.

He'd been so despondent about his late wife's passing that he'd contemplated suicide. There simply was no way Arinze had suddenly gotten over Mary or those suicidal feelings in such a short space of time. Heck, he'd been dating Mary lookalikes. So why would he want her when he clearly preferred his wife's doppelgangers, and she looked and behaved nothing like his wife? Oke hated admitting it, but only one reason made sense—her cancer transported him back to his time with his wife.

She didn't hate Arinze for it. How could she? But she also couldn't accept being a substitute for someone else … and a poor one at that. When those thoughts began to chip away at her self-worth, Oke knew it was time to let Arinze go.

She loved him, and he would always have a place in her heart. After all, he was the first man she'd let into that heart. The one who supported her throughout her difficult cancer journey. He made her laugh, listened to her when she needed someone to lend an ear. He was a good man with integrity, and she knew he really hadn't meant to hurt her by lying about Chinwe. He simply had not moved on from losing Mary, and she needed to set him free to find himself.

He was everything she wanted in a man, but she was just a replacement for who he really wanted in a woman, and Oke couldn't continue to live like that. It wasn't fair to herself or to him for that matter.

Staring at the closed black gate, her tears flowed freely down her face, soaking her nightgown. She remained there until her alarm went off. Lord, she didn't feel like going to work today, but she had two liposuctions booked and she couldn't cancel either.

With a loud sigh, Oke stood up and slunk towards the bathroom, still wiping the tears away from her cheeks.

~

Something about the wall painting intrigued Oke. She fixed her gaze on the lone swan in the middle of a pond, its white feathers spread out in such exquisite

detail that it seemed poised for escape from the four corners of the frame—ready to take flight into the real world.

Oke had seen it countless times while seated in Dr Adebayo's office, but she'd never really studied it with this much concentration. The swan looked lonely, lost, desolate. Yet the artist had captured the long-necked bird's strength in the intensity of its eyes. Strength. She needed a lot of it. Like this swan, she felt isolated, locked in a form of grief that transcended any disappointment she'd ever had.

Oke pulled her chair away from the table, clenching the muscles of her jaw so that she didn't turn her neck sideways to the empty seat beside her—Arinze's seat.

Today, she had her first follow-up with her family doctor to discuss the results of her first CT scan post chemotherapy. From the second she took the seat opposite the doctor, waiting for her to read through the report informing her if she was cancer free, Oke had glued her eyes on the painting, refusing to move her neck.

She needed to focus on her future, not endlessly long for the past. It only brought her misery. And she couldn't allow herself to drown in sorrow when she was fighting for good health.

Two months apart from Arinze had been pure torture. She'd not expected to hurt so much, to miss him so much. But moments like this—when she wanted him by her side, to hold her in his usual quiet and reassuring way—really upped the ante, rendering her sorrow almost unbearable.

Perspiration soaked her underarms and moistened her palms as she waited, trying not to panic. What if they'd missed something? What if her cancer had returned? What if the treatment wasn't enough?

"Great news, Oke," Dr Adebayo said, her husky voice breaking through Oke's frantic rumination. "I'm so glad to say there's no evidence of cancer in this scan and your blood results are back to pre-chemo levels. You are officially cancer-free."

"Oh, God!" Oke's heart leapt as bursts of joy exploded inside her. She released a relieved breath, tears of sheer happiness spilling from her eyes. She had fought this awful disease and had beat it. What an incredible feeling. She'd won.

“Amazing, Oke. I’m so proud of you for not giving up,” Dr Adebayo said with a smile. Then, she raised a hand in caution. “Although you’re clear now, this is a lifelong battle. You’ll be on Tamoxifen for ten years. We’ll also have yearly follow-up appointments during that time. And you must continue examining your other breast for any signs of change.”

Oke nodded vigorously. She’d done her research. She may be cancer-free now, but she didn’t have a lifetime guarantee. Still, she had a good shot at a near-normal life. Whatever that meant after such a serious disease. Nonetheless, she would celebrate this news and remain positive.

“Have you thought about reconstructive surgery?”

Oke paused at the question. Had she? Not since her mastectomy. She’d been in survival mode, trying to stay healthy. Undergoing another major surgery just for aesthetic purposes hadn’t been on her mind.

“You know you’re free to do that now. You’re a plastic surgeon. I’m sure you know colleagues who would do a good job.”

Oke nodded. Segun and Tunde were top-notch. They would look after her and make sure to give her the best replacement breast possible.

“I haven’t really thought about reconstruction,” Oke admitted.

“Why not? You’re still very young.”

She shrugged. “I’m just not feeling very sexual at the moment. Why undergo surgery just for beauty reasons?”

A hint of a smile touched Dr Adebayo’s lips. “This is the best time to do it,” she said. “When it’s not about sexual attraction. Besides, women have breasts for many reasons having nothing to do with men and babies.”

Oke sighed. The doctor had a point. Being a plastic surgeon had taught her many things about the human body. She had to feel excited about her own body first before expecting someone else to.

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” she said.

“I’ve written a prescription for Tamoxifen. It’s an expensive medication in Nigeria. I hope you have health insurance.”

Oke nodded. “Yes, I do, thanks.”

“Any questions before I discharge you until six months’ time when you’re due for another follow-up appointment?”

Oke hesitated, not sure she should ask. Having a baby had been on her mind since the first night with Arinze. The desire had not changed. She still thought about it a lot.

“Can I postpone tamoxifen for a while? I want to have a baby.”

The doctor’s eyes widened, then narrowed immediately as though suddenly aware she shouldn’t show too many emotions during consultations.

“Of course, Oke,” she said. “In fact, I should have discussed this with you when your coil was removed. “Tamoxifen may be harmful to foetuses. So, it’s best you don’t take it while you and your partner are trying for a baby.”

Oke’s cheeks warmed. “I don’t have a partner.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I assumed the gentleman who used to accompany you …” Dr Adebayo trailed off, fiddling with her fingers, her gaze shifting about in embarrassment.

“He was, but we broke up.” Oke’s heart sank, revealing the split to a stranger. Time for a change of subject to something joyful. “I still want a baby though, and I’m thinking of using a sperm donor and a fertility centre.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about your relationship, but —”

Oke lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “It is what it is,” she said. Although being away from Arinze hurt her, it hadn’t broken her. She would heal one day. In the meantime, she would pursue her dreams of becoming a mother.

“But the fertility treatment idea, I think that’s fantastic,” Dr Adebayo said, reeling Oke’s mind back. “I know a great centre in Abuja. OTH IVF and Fertility Centre.”

“I know it, too. My friend from the University of Benin works there.”

“Oh, so you went to UniBen, too?”

Oke’s eyes bulged. “Yes, I did. Graduated 2010. You?”

Dr Adebayo laughed. “You are still a baby to me, Oke. I graduated in 2000.”

Oke laughed. Seeing a fellow UniBen alma mater warmed her insides. Greatest UniBen,” Oke said.

“Great!” Dr Adebayo cheered.

Silence ensued, and Oke smiled at the family doctor who had been more than supportive during the most difficult part of her cancer journey. “Thank you, doctor,” she said, tears gathering behind her eyes.

“You are very welcome, my dear,” she replied. “Good luck … with everything.”

Oke nodded, rising from her seat. She could use all the good wishes she could get. She had beat cancer—pray God it remained so. And hopefully, in the near future, her wish of becoming a mother would come true.

Twenty-Seven



Loud applause resounded in the room as he cut the ribbon in two. Arinze smiled, handing back the scissors to the woman standing beside him.

All those months of hard work had finally paid off. And now, Standard Security had its own manufacturing facility, employing engineers from all over Nigeria. It didn't get any better than this.

"Congratulations to everyone who worked so hard to bring this to fruition. Pat yourselves on the back. It's been a joint effort. We did it," he said, holding the microphone in one hand. "Now, let's eat, drink, and be merry. We totally deserve this."

As he stepped down from the podium, he cast his eyes around the spacious hall, hungrily searching for Oke among the roughly one hundred attendees. He'd had a formal invitation delivered to her office, requesting the presence of her company at the opening of Standard Electronic Manufacturing Centre. She hadn't responded, but hope dies hard—maybe she would surprise him. Once, twice, three times around the hall his eyes scanned the guests. Wait … was that her?

No. And neither was the other woman he'd seen earlier. Or any of the countless women he'd hoped might be her since they'd broken up. Three months apart from Oke, and he still saw her everywhere, still longed for her to the point that he felt numb about everything else in his life.

"Congratulations, my son. I'm very proud of you."

Arinze swivelled around to find his mother dressed in an elegant red-and-gold ero and buba outfit with a flamboyant head tie over her head. “Thank you, Mum,” he said, embracing her and kissing both her cheeks.

“You and your siblings keep amazing me,” his father said, standing beside his wife. “I’m so proud of you all for working hard to get this place up and running. Now we can save the cost of importing, and produce quality security technology in our own country.”

“Thank you, Sir.” He shook his father’s hand. “That’s the idea.”

“Yes, you’re doing so well, Arinze,” his mother agreed. Then, she placed a gentle palm on his arm and brought him a bit closer. “But this would have been much more rewarding if you had a wife sharing this moment with you. I know you and Chinwe didn’t work out, but I have another friend’s daughter I would like you —”

“Stop it, Mum,” Arinze snapped, his voice raised.

His mother gasped, her eyes widening. His father stiffened beside his wife, also clearly startled by his outburst. A few heads turned in their direction.

Arinze’s face heated up as shame suffused his entire being. He’d never raised his voice to his mother this way, and certainly not in public, but he was tired of this bullshit. His mother’s constant matchmaking meddling—trying to pair him off with one woman or another—irritated him to no end. He didn’t want any of these women, and never would.

Only one woman mattered. Oke. All he wanted, or would ever want, was Oke.

“I’m not interested in meeting anyone you want to introduce to me,” he said in a much lower tone. “For your information, I was dating a woman for months, someone who made me very happy. And because I was worried about introducing her to you and the rest of the family, she ended things with me.”

“Wh-what? I didn’t know o.” His mother stood looking at him mouth agape, eyes big as dinner plates. “Why would you hide this from me?”

Her husband cleared his throat. “Because she has breast cancer.”

Arinze jerked his gaze towards his father, certain his own eyes now mirrored his mother's. "How do you know about Oke? Did Ezinne tell you?"

"Yes. You'd stopped coming to the family gatherings again, and I …" His father paused, and bit his bottom lip. "Well, I … I wanted to know why. Eventually, she gave in and told me."

Arinze nodded. After his breakup with Oke, he had isolated himself from his family again. Although he still met up with his siblings for lunch at work, he'd definitely avoided his parents. Especially his mother and her new fulltime business venture—finding him a wife. He just couldn't stomach the idea of meeting another woman when he couldn't get Oke out from under his skin.

"Maybe her ending things with you is for the best," his mother said. "You don't want to deal with another woman with cancer. You know how badly Mary's illness affected you."

Seeing red … Arinze had never really got the phrase. Until now. Was his mother waving a red cape in front of him? Because he felt very much like an angry bull.

"Could you please just stop? Every time I see you, it's Mary this or Mary that. I'm sick to death of it. She was my entire life, but now she's gone, and I need to move on with a new life." Arinze stopped, dragged in a breath, trying to calm his anger. "And no, Oke ending things with me is not for the best. I'm miserable without her, Mum. I love her."

"Then, go for her. You're a fully-grown man," his mother said. She twisted her lips in the typical sarcastic African Mama sneer and gave an exaggerated shrug. "Besides, when did my opinion ever stop you from doing as you please? If I had my way, you'd have given me five grandchildren by now."

Arinze chuckled, his annoyance dissipating a bit. He could tell that his mother was still hesitant about Oke, but the worst had passed. Even her half-hearted acceptance of the woman he loved was better than none. Plus, now that his family knew about Oke, nothing stood in the way of him going back to plead for her forgiveness … to ask if they could try again.

"Arinze, you are a smart man." his father said, the deep rumble of his voice above the noisy crowd instantly claiming Arinze's attention. "You know what you want in a woman. If Oke is the one for you, don't let anything or anyone

stop you. Just make sure she's who you really want."

Arinze nodded, pondering his father's words. Chief Okunna Ibeh rarely involved himself in his children's personal lives. He always allowed his wife to take the lead whenever family matters came under discussion. But right now, Arinze understood this was his father's way of giving him his full support.

"Yes, Sir," he said. "Thanks, Dad."

"Okay, my son. I see the Lagos state commissioner of police at the other end of the room. Let me go say hello to him," his father said, nudging his wife forward with his arm around her waist.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you for coming." He leaned forward and kissed his mother's cheek. "And you, too, Mum."

"Nze, please don't be a stranger in your own home. No matter what, we are family and we love you," she said.

Arinze embraced his mother. She was right. Isolating himself from people who loved him did more harm than good. "Yes, Mum," he said. "I promise to show up for the next family luncheon."

His mum gave him a warm smile. "Gisike, my dear."

As Arinze watched his parents snake their way through the crowd, he smiled to himself. Thank heaven for his father. He'd done a great job of subtly bringing the awkward conversation to a close. And hopefully, his mother would stay out of his personal life from now on.

His father had also given him the space to think about his next move. Did he want Oke in his life as his woman? Of course. But now was not the time to try to win her back. Not until he'd sorted out his frame of mind.

Talking with his parents about her without any massive fallout from their conversation proved only one thing. Oke had been right when she accused him of projecting his life with Mary onto her.

After many weeks of mourning their relationship, he finally understood her position. She'd seen a deeply troubling suicide note admitting he wanted to end

his life because of Mary. His family constantly brought up his late wife when trying to fix him up with other women. And even more important … there was a time he actually preferred Mary lookalikes. So really, why wouldn't Oke think that he had unresolved issues about his past with Mary? It made perfect sense.

And so did Ezinne's advice. He needed professional help, specifically someone in bereavement counselling. Maybe a visit to his sister's doctor would be the right first step after all.

With that resolved, Arinze inhaled deeply and squared his shoulders as he made a move towards the night's guest of honour, James Fashola, the chief engineer who helped make this dream come true.

~

A week later, Arinze sat opposite Dr Ighodaro, a trained psychologist, recommended by Ezinne's family doctor. She was a slender woman in her late forties with a PhD in adult psychology from the University of Nigeria.

He'd done thorough research regarding her skills as a specialist dealing with bereavement and was convinced by the glowing reviews of satisfied clients.

"Your doctor told me your wife died over two years ago, and you're still struggling with it. Is that why you're here?"

Arinze pondered the question. He wasn't struggling with Mary's death. Not at all. He was struggling with moving on with his life, and leaving her completely in the past.

"Yes and no," he said.

"Can you elaborate?"

"Yes, I struggled dealing with her death for a long time. Now, I've made my peace with it. What I'm struggling with at the moment is leaving her in the past, not letting the experiences I had with Mary interfere with my future."

Dr Ighodaro nodded, scribbling on her tablet with a stylus. "Can you tell me how you believe this is happening?"

Arinze pushed the recliner back. He was already warming up to Dr Ighodaro. She exuded a relaxed aura, and he could see himself revealing his deep thoughts to her.

“My wife died of stomach cancer,” he said, relaxing into his seat. “It was a difficult time for both of us. She became ill about some months before her diagnosis, and by the time she was diagnosed, it was too late.”

“I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” How many times had he heard those words since Mary’s passing? Countless. Initially, the comment would flood him with sorrow, then it started annoying him. Loss … the very idea that his beloved Mary’s death could be distilled into such a short, simple word had vexed him to no end. Now, however, he could respond without negative feelings. He’d been lucky to have loved Mary. But her “loss” no longer wounded him so viscerally.

“I don’t think I prepared well enough for her death, and I grieved terribly, became depressed,” he continued.

“Were you diagnosed with depression by a specialist?”

“No, but I read up on the symptoms online, and I ticked most of the boxes.”

“What were they?”

“Poor sleep, reduced appetite, weight loss, loss of enjoyment of previously enjoyable activities. For example, I used to like golfing on the weekends, but I haven’t played golf since she died.”

“Those are quite severe symptoms of depression.”

“There’s even one more,” he said with a small smile. “I had constant suicidal thoughts.”

“Hmmm.”

“Yes. I even wrote a suicide note.”

“And had you thought of ways you would kill yourself?”

“Yes. With a bullet in my head.”

Dr Ighodaro’s face remained impassive as she scribbled more in her tablet. “And are you still feeling suicidal?”

“No.”

“When did it stop?”

“A few months ago.”

“What about the symptoms of depression? Do you still have any?”

The question threw him off guard. He had overcome his problem with sleep since he began dating Oke. And even after they broke up, his sleep pattern remained normal. His mood was pretty good, except when he missed her. Which hurt, but that didn’t affect his enjoyment of life. However, he still hadn’t gone golfing.

“Yes,” he said honestly. “I still haven’t gone golfing. Still can’t bring myself to.”

“Why?”

“I was golfing the day Mary collapsed at home. She was diagnosed with stomach cancer a week after.”

“Hmmm.”

Dr Ighodaro wrote on her tablet, then looked up. “Have you had other relationships since Mary’s death?”

He drew in a long breath, a bit nervous about answering. “Yes, I went on three blind dates my mother fixed me up with, and dated another woman briefly. All the women somewhat resembled Mary. They were all tall, light-skinned, and Igbo,” he said. “My most recent relationship ended because my … ex-girlfriend, who looked nothing like my late wife, thought I was obsessed with Mary and was looking for a replica in her.”

“And why do you think she thought that?”

“Because she has cancer just like Mary did.”

Dr Ighodaro nodded. “Can I be direct with you, Arinze?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yep.”

“I agree with everyone who says you haven’t coped well with Mary’s death, and I believe I know why. Guilt. I believe that somewhere deep down, you feel guilty about her death.”

Arinze stilled himself, the doctor’s words echoing in his head. Like an epiphany, the truth dawned on him. Shortly after Mary’s diagnosis, he’d blamed himself for not pushing her to see the doctor as soon as she started complaining about her weight loss, nausea, and vomiting. At the time, he’d hoped she had fallen pregnant, and tried to convince her that her symptoms were pregnancy-related. He’d even been a tad disappointed when her libido dwindled away, her absent sex drive leaving him feeling neglected.

Her cancer diagnosis had come as a devastating blow to him, and he had spent many months condemning himself for not acting sooner. Now, sitting on this cushioned recliner opposite the soft-spoken psychologist, he allowed himself to accept the guilt he’d buried.

“And until you deal with that guilt, forgive yourself for whatever you think you did, you’re only going to keep looking for Mary in every woman you are with. You’ll only keep wanting to find her and fix everything.”

Phew! Deep. Oke was right to break up with him. He needed to fix himself first before he could love her the way she deserved. Tears choked his throat.

“You’re right, doctor. I need to work on forgiving myself. I need to give myself a break.”

“Exactly,” she said. “And I’ll be delighted to help you achieve that if you’re willing to put in the effort.”

“I am,” Arinze said without hesitation. He wanted to do this for himself. And for Oke.

Twenty-Eight



“Are you looking to go a size bigger or maintain the status quo?” Tunde asked.

Oke flung her head back and laughed. She gaped at her two partners seated opposite her in the Blossom Health’s consultation room. “Why are you and Segun treating me like a client?” she asked.

“Because you are a client, and even though we work together and are friends, we have to make sure we meet your expectations,” Tunde replied, drawing his seat closer to the desk in front of him. “Oke, please take this consultation seriously. You’d be surprised how many people regret plastic surgery after it’s done.”

“Hey, I came up with that line,” she protested with a little laugh. “Guys, don’t be too anxious. I just want another right breast.”

“Oke, we’re not kidding, please answer our questions so we know exactly what you need. Your breast tissue expander has been in place for three months now, so your surgery is scheduled for next week.” It was Segun who spoke this time, his sombre intonation surprising Oke. “I’m the lead surgeon for your reconstructive surgery, and I wouldn’t want to disappoint you.”

Wow, Segun actually looked a bit nervous. One eye twitched, he rolled his thumb over his finger repeatedly, and a thin film of sweat had settled on his forehead. This gave Oke pause.

How could he, a renowned plastic surgeon, be nervous? The man who had

performed the first successful face transplant for a burn victim in Lagos, and he was scared of giving her an extra tit?

“I love and respect you. And if anything goes wrong, I’ll never forgive myself. So yes, you’re a client, but more than that, you’re a client who is also a friend,” Segun elaborated with eloquence.

Damn. That said it all. Not doing her part meant her friends couldn’t do theirs. And they desperately wanted to.

“Okay,” she said, sitting more upright. “I haven’t really thought about size, but if I have to have breast surgery, I don’t mind going a cup bigger so they both look … similar.”

“Good. We’ll use the gel sizers to match your perfect size,” Tunde said, scribbling down on his notes. “And nipples. Tattoo or reconstruction?”

Oke hesitated. She really hadn’t given this much thought. Having performed a few post-mastectomy reconstructions herself, being on the other side of the process felt so odd. So vulnerable, even with all her expertise.

“Reconstruction, I guess,” she said.

“Guess? You know the pros and cons of each, Oke, so what would you want?” Tunde pressed.

She shrugged. “What’s the point of either? No matter which, I won’t feel a damn thing and won’t be able to breast feed, so …” She trailed off.

And therein lay her main disappointment with post-mastectomy breast reconstruction. Breast reconstruction restored a woman’s outward appearance—and the Good Lord knew that wasn’t to be underestimated. Outward appearance certainly boosted inward confidence. Still, the new breasts were more decorative than functional, unable to fulfil the very real, very important functions they’d been created for. Which bothered Oke—more study was needed to improve the practical outcomes for women.

“I can work with Professor Saket from Canada to transfer some nerves from your other breast and chest wall during a nipple skin graft,” Segun said quietly. “I’ve been studying his videos and working with him, hoping to bring this added

skill to our practice."

Oke's ears perked up, and her eyes pinned themselves to her partner. Could he really do that? The intensity and determination in Segun's eyes showed that he'd given this a lot of thought. Wow. The guy meant business.

"If it works, you'll have some sensation with nipple and areola stimulation. The worst possible outcome … the procedure fails." Segun gave a shrug. "But it won't change the quality of your breast augmentation."

Oke remained silent, ruminating. She knew professor Saket, an Indian plastic surgeon much revered for his philanthropy, who travelled the world performing free reconstructive surgery for the poor. She would be honoured to have him and Segun work on her.

"I trust you, Segun," Oke said, finally. "You have full permission to do anything you want to make my tits gorgeous again."

"Excellent," Segun said, a spark of excitement lighting his dark eyes. "But may your breasts not only look good, but also feel great, too."

Oke smiled as Tunde and Segun chuckled. This was a major step in her recovery, and she trusted no one in the world to handle it more than her friends and partners at Blossom Health.

~

Seven weeks later, Oke stood in her bedroom in front of Nkem and Ufuoma, ready to reveal her newly reconstructed breasts.

"Stop wasting time like you're trying to seduce us," Nkem grumbled as Oke unfastened each button slowly, as if performing a strip tease.

"Who says I'm not trying to seduce you?" Oke snorted. "I've been manless for months. Maybe it's time to switch to the other team."

"Sharrap and open your blouse before I rip it off," Ufuoma grunted in annoyance, rising from the bed where she'd been seated.

“Okay, okay!” Oke unfastened the last three buttons swiftly and pulled open her white shirt. “So, what do you think?”

They stared at her chest, their faces drawn in concentration, making Oke slightly nervous. But then, the awe in their eyes when they gazed back at her calmed her immediately.

“They look so natural. So beautiful,” Nkem gushed. “Can I touch?”

“God, Oke, they are gorgeous,” Ufuoma said with a delightful clap. “Do they feel normal?”

Oke beamed as her friend and sister prodded and squeezed her breasts, cooing in appreciation as they did. She liked looking at her new tits. Segun and Prof Saket did an amazing job. And once the pain settled, she started to feel some pleasant sensations in her right nipple. “Yep, they feel very natural. I walk around the house topless just admiring myself.”

“Now, it’s time to find you a man to admire them, too,” said Ufuoma. “It’s been more than six months since Arinze. I need the old Oke back.”

Oke smiled. She didn’t want just any other man. Arinze had been her one and only love. Now that she’d discovered how fulfilling a relationship could be with someone she loved, meaningless sexual encounters no longer interested her. She would wait until she found someone she could love like she loved him.

“No way. I’m focused on my full recovery and being a mother. Not men,” she said, pulling her shirt back together and doing up the buttons. Since her breast implants had healed, she rarely wore bras. She loved flaunting her new breasts as much as possible.

“And how is that going?” her sister asked.

“I have my first appointment with the fertility clinic in Abuja in two weeks. Already booked my flight. So excited.”

Nkem blew out a heavy sigh. “So, you are really thinking about being a single mother?”

Oke twisted her lips, annoyed by the scepticism in her best friend’s tone. Why

couldn’t she get it? “And what’s wrong with that?”

“Theoretically, nothing. But it’s damn hard. When Tunde and I split, it was so difficult being alone and looking after a child,” Nkem said, then poked her index finger out at Oke. “You were there, you saw it. I couldn’t even have had a social life without your help.”

“Well, there you go. Now, you’ll be here to help me,” Oke snapped. “Listen, Nkem, this is something that I seriously want. Not a spur of the moment decision. And I’ll do everything to try and have a baby naturally. And if I can’t, I’ll try surrogacy. One way or another, I’ll be a mum.” Oke inhaled deeply to calm her annoyance, then said in a gentler tone. “My child will be loved by me, you, and his Aunty Ufuoma. If a male influence is needed, I have Segun and Tunde.”

She’d thought this through, and no matter how many angles she tried to look at this decision, it didn’t change that she felt ready to be a mother. “I don’t need to be in a forced relationship with a man just to have a sperm donor. I’ve tasted what it is to be in love and will never settle for anything less.”

“I’m sorry for implying that you’re not making the right decision,” Nkem said in a contrite tone. “I just worry about you coping, that’s all. I know you’ll be an amazing mother.”

“I agree,” said Ufuoma. “We may not have the best examples from our parents, but that doesn’t stop us from doing better.”

Oke smiled at her friend and sister. “Thank you,” she said, embracing them each. She turned to Ufuoma. “Have you ever gone looking for Mum? Just to see how she is doing with her other family?”

Ufuoma scrunched up her face in disgust. “Why would I ever go searching for the woman who abandoned me as a child? Hell no! I don’t even spare her much of a thought. As far as I’m concerned, my mother died when Mama Joyce died.”

Oke couldn’t help the wry twist of her lips. Their parents’ desertion had indeed not affected Ufuoma much. No wonder she was well-adjusted.

“Well, I have done so from time to time,” Oke said.

Ufuoma pinned Oke with her eyes, and jutted her chin out—start talking, her gestures commanded.

Oke sighed, and it all started coming out. How once a year for a long time now, she would drive to Gbagada estate and park opposite the mansion where her mother lived with her new family. How she would spend a few minutes watching the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her mother, but never saw anything of note. Her mother had aged gracefully over the years, appearing content with her husband and three sons. They looked like a happy family.

“For what … why would you go looking for her?” Ufuoma said, drawing her out of her reverie.

Her sister stared at her as if she had two heads, completely flummoxed. Nkem, too.

“Well, out of curiosity. To see if she was happy ...” Oke raised both hands and let them flop back down to her sides. “And I suppose to see if she had any regrets … about abandoning us.”

“Did you go up to her? Speak to her?” Ufuoma’s question came out in a raspy tone as if betrayed by this information.

Oke lowered her lashes. She shouldn’t have said anything. Had really never intended to. To anyone. And now, here she was bringing up all that pain of abandonment for her little sister, who’d actually managed to move on from it all.

“Never. I always stayed in the car to watch her and her family,” Oke replied.

An awkward silence descended on the room. Oke supposed the least she could do is explain why she’d brought it up. And why going looking for their mother was relevant to the here and now.

“Do you know when it was that I finally realised many decisions I made in my life are because of her … because of her, but hurt only me?” Oke posed the question rhetorically, not really expecting an answer from either her sister or her friend. “After my doctor declared me cancer-free, I drove over to her house again. This time I parked and actually got out. As I contemplated walking over for a proper visit, the gate suddenly slid open. And she stepped out …”

Oke stopped for a second and drew in a deep breath, reliving the experience. Ufuoma and Nkem looked at her as if they would mine the words from the cavern of her mouth if she didn't go on.

"She looked directly at me, and I couldn't breathe, knowing this was the moment I would finally talk to our mother again. It wasn't though, because her face registered absolutely nothing. No surprise, no fear, no joy … absolutely no recognition in her eyes. She just looked away and kept on her way. Nothing, Ufuoma. My presence there got nothing from her."

Ufuoma gasped, her eyes wide. "Are you sure she wasn't just pretending?"

"Absolutely," Oke said. "It was an accidental encounter. If she knew who I was, there would have been some reaction before she looked away. And I tell you, I got nothing."

Ufuoma shook her head. "What a poor excuse for a mother."

Having watched her mother unobserved for years, Oke didn't agree. "Nope, Ufuoma. She's a wonderful mother to her three sons," she said. "Just not to us."

"Well, I don't give a shit if she's Mother Teresa to them, I only know her as a good-for-nothing mother and a coward."

"Exactly how I feel," Oke said. "And that's how I've been living my life because of her. Like a coward. I've been afraid of falling in love, scared of becoming a mother because I worried that I would end up like her." Oke swallowed past the lump of emotion that formed in her throat. "I gave her so much control over my life choices, yet she didn't even recognise me."

Oke could still feel the relief and clarity that had washed over her in the moment. How she'd wasted many years in pain, made bad decisions because of a woman who spared very little, if any, thought of her. "Then and there, I decided I'm done. I'm going to fall in love again. I'm going to have my baby. I'm going to travel the world. I am going to find my happiness. You know why? Because I can."

"That's the spirit!" Nkem cheered. "Can't wait to be an aunty to our little baby whenever he or she comes."

“I hope it’s a he,” Ufuoma chimed in.

“Me, too!” Oke screeched. “Can you imagine me raising a girl?”

She and Ufuoma looked at each other for several heartbeats and then shook their heads, bursting into laughter.

“Actually, I can,” Nkem said, interrupting their shared amusement. “Oke, you’ll be a wonderful mother to any and every child you have, boy or girl.”

Oke grinned from molar to molar, cherishing the support of both women. She would focus on the next phase of her life from now on. Being happy.

~

Arinze smiled as Dr Ighodaro read through his gratitude note for the week. He’d evolved so much in the few months of his therapy. He saw her three times a week for hour-long sessions.

Every evening, he wrote down something to be thankful for, and the ink in his pen had been overflowing with the words he needed to put down.

Learning to forgive himself and to love himself again had been the most exhilarating aspect of his therapy sessions. He was sleeping better, eating better, interacting with his family much better. He’d even started to play golf again. It had been wonderful returning to an activity he’d abandoned for so long.

When he tore his suicide note into shreds three weeks ago, he felt like he’d finally let go of the past. His outlook on life had turned dramatically to the positive, and he couldn’t be prouder of himself for seeking help.

“Lovely to read,” Dr Igodaro said. “No matter how horrible the day has gone, if one makes an effort to focus on even a single positive thing and write it down, it has the power to overshadow the negatives.”

“Pure fact,” Arinze agreed. “One of my engineers quit today to start up his own firm. At first, I was devastated, but then, I decided to focus on the positive instead of giving my negative feelings wings to soar. I made myself remember this had been one of my aims all along. To foster home-grown technology

manufacturing."

"Excellent." Dr Ighodaro's proud smile warmed Arinze's heart. He'd never given therapy much thought. In fact, he'd previously considered people who sought the help of psychologists weak in spirit. Now, he wished he could shout from a rooftop the benefits of seeking mental health help from trained professionals.

"So, have you done the last assignment?"

Arinze smiled at his therapist's question. A week ago, Dr Ighodaro and he had worked on taking intentional steps to move away from the past by doing something new each week—a task or activity he would never have considered when Mary was alive.

Arinze had thought long and hard about this, asking himself what would help him achieve this. His answer had come two days after the assignment had been given.

"Yep," he said. "I joined a dating site, and I have a date tomorrow."

"Oh, that's interesting. Why did you choose to do that?"

"The old Arinze would never have considered chatting up a stranger online. So, I figured, there's a first time for everything," he said with a wink.

His therapist's face remained impassive. Arinze didn't mind at all. He'd grown accustomed to her poker face. He knew she aimed to show an unbiased point of view, because displaying reactive emotions could undermine his process.

"And how did you find the experience?" she asked.

"It felt liberating getting to know someone without any baggage in my mind. She's a twenty-nine-year-old accountant who works at a firm in Victoria Island. She's hoping for a promotion soon," Arinze said. "She seems like a delightful person, and I'm looking forward to meeting her tomorrow evening."

"That's wonderful," Dr Ighodaro said, scribbling on her tablet with the stylus. "Do you feel ready to date again though?"

The question gave him pause. Did he? Yes! Absolutely. He was eager to move on, to start the next chapter of his life without the guilt and fear that had weighed him down.

“Yes, I am,” he said. And for the first time since his bereavement, he really felt it to be true.

The next evening, he sat in his Mercedes, waiting at the car park of Zazu Restaurant and Bar, willing himself to get out of the car.

He’d been excited about meeting Eleanor Azikiwe. From their chats on Cupidess, the dating site he’d registered with, he thought they’d get along well. She was ambitious, funny, beautiful, and intelligent. Yesterday, after many back-and-forth messages between them, they exchanged numbers and arranged a date.

“It’s not that hard, Arinze,” he murmured to himself. “Get out of this car, walk in, and wait for her.” He glanced at his wristwatch. 6:45 p.m. He had only fifteen minutes to spare before the appointed time. As a man who abhorred keeping women waiting, he preferred to be seated before she came in.

Arinze dragged in a deep breath. “Why am I hesitating?”

His gut twisted, and he let out a harsh grunt of frustration. He knew exactly why. Oke.

He didn’t want to meet anyone else, date anyone else. He wanted her. He’d tried to fight it, tried to run away from the truth. He wasn’t over her.

Eight months without Oke hadn’t erased how he felt about her. She constantly popped up in his mind at the oddest times, making him wonder how she was doing, where she was, if she had started dating again. The last thought always caused a violent negative response inside him that he couldn’t shake off.

Now, seated here in his Mercedes Maybach, dressed to the nines in a custom-made suit, smelling like a million bucks and ready to impress Eleanor, all he could think about was how he would rather be holding Oke in his arms, kissing her, telling her how much he loved her.

With a resigned sigh, Arinze picked up his phone from where it lay on the car’s centre console. He unlocked it and tapped a message frantically on the screen.

He pressed send and waited, his gaze steadfast on the text he'd sent.

Arinze: I have to cancel our date. I'm so sorry.

Her reply came seconds later, as if she had her phone in her hand ready for the exchange.

Eleanor: Why?

Arinze: I don't want to lead you on. I'm still in love with my ex.

Eleanor: Asshole

Arinze: I'm sorry.

His last message didn't go through. She'd blocked him. He smiled. He deserved it. He'd pulled an asshole move. But it was better he did it now than waste her time.

His blood pumping with renewed vigour, Arinze switched on the car and roared the engine to life. He pressed his leg on the accelerator and zoomed off with only one destination in mind. He'd tried his best to keep away, but it was clear as the bright moon hanging in the skies. He just couldn't stay away from Oke.

Twenty-Nine



Oke climbed into the backseat of the taxi and called out her address to the elderly man at the wheel. She relaxed onto her seat and picked up her mobile phone.

She tapped out a quick text to her sister and Nkem, informing them that she'd arrived back in Lagos, then tucked her phone back inside her handbag.

Her trip to Abuja to see the fertility doctor had been successful. Following her first consultation, her ultrasound scan showed her uterus and ovaries were intact and functioning adequately. She'd also had blood tests checking her hormone levels, and those, too, had been promising.

Chemotherapy hadn't done irreversible damage to her reproductive system. She still had a good chance of getting pregnant if she committed to the hormone treatment the doctor had laid out. Whenever she chose her sperm donor, she could return for the second part of the consultation where the hormones would be prescribed.

Oke sighed and shook her head. The first catalogue of sperm donors had been difficult to wade through. Most of the data had been incomplete, the donors remaining anonymous with little or no background history. Neither of the two donors with more than just vague information caught her attention.

Why had she assumed she would be spoilt for choice? It was laughable how many of the donors omitted vital information like their medical history, height, and weight. Even their race! How did they expect her to choose a donor if she didn't even know his race? Oke tapped on her handbag in frustration.

These expensive private hospitals needed to do better, ensure that they did due diligence. She was paying so much for their services. The least they could do was gather adequate information from their donors.

She rubbed her temples and chewed her lower lip. At least, she was healthy and able to carry a pregnancy. Everything would fall into place at the right time. She wouldn't give up. Somewhere, someplace, there was a perfect man to father her child.

Oke let that thought marinate within her as the car ate up miles, moving through the light traffic seamlessly. The slow music coming from the car stereo in a low volume soothed her senses, making her almost sleepy. However, she jerked upright as she approached the road leading to her front gate. Are two men fighting in front of my house?

Oke's eyes widened as the cab came closer and her view of the scene became clearer. She rolled down the window and peered out when the driver came to a halt.

Her heart leapt to her throat, for there in front of her gate, was Arinze with his hands gripping the collar of her gateman's shirt.

"Let me in now, Idris. I need to see her now!" he barked. "I'm not in the mood for your stupid games."

"I told you before. Madam is not around, so leave me alone."

"I'll be happy to … when you open this gate and let me in."

Oke froze. Her entire body went rigid like a witch's spell had turned her into stone. A burst of sheer joy exploded inside her chest at the scene before her. He was here. Arinze was here, attacking Idris just for a chance to see her. He looked so handsome, so distinguished in his well-fitted black suit and red tie, but was acting like a rogue, fighting in the street. All for her.

"Madam, isn't that your house?" the driver said, jarring her. Oke turned her head to find him pointing at the commotion she'd been staring at.

She beamed. "Yes, it is," she said, stepping out of the taxi. She pulled out a wad of cash from her wallet and slipped it to him. "Keep the change," she said as she

lugged her suitcase out of the back seat and hurried away.

“Arinze!” she called out when she was inches away from the two men. “Stop it. Leave Idris alone. I’m here now.”

He whirled around, disentangling his hold on Idris. “Oke,” he rasped, his chest heaving as he breathed rapidly in and out.

With an annoyed hiss, Idris scurried away, leaving them both standing alone in the cool, windy night. Time seemed to stand still as they greedily stared at each other, soaking up every single detail of the other they had missed in all the months, weeks, hours, and seconds of their time apart.

“You look … you look fantastic, Oke,” Arinze finally said, his tone raw with emotion. “Your haircut is stunning. Brings out your beautiful eyes and cheekbones.”

Oke smiled. “Thanks. You look great, too. And dressed up. Are you going somewhere?”

He glanced down at his clothes, then back at her. “Not anymore,” he said. “But I went out earlier. I had a date before I came here.”

Oke recoiled physically and emotionally, his reply causing a jolt of jealousy to surge through her. She tightened her jaw muscles. “Oh, that’s … nice.”

“Nice? No. It’s terrible,” he snapped. “I don’t want to be on a date with anyone.”

Oke gazed at him in confusion. “What are you doing here?” she asked him bluntly, needing instant clarification. “I thought you promised never to stalk me.”

Arinze took a step towards her. “Well, things change, and I’m stalking you. I’ve tried, but I can’t stay away. I love you. I want you in my life.”

Goosebumps spread all over her skin. The intensity of his gaze and his deep, passionate voice made her quiver.

“These eight months without you have made me realise one thing,” he said.

Oke swallowed hard, her heart beating at an almost dangerous rate. “What thing?”

He took another step towards her, stopping just an arm’s breadth from her. “My past experiences, everything I’ve ever been through in my life, led me to you, Oke,” he said, cupping her face in his palms. “This is where I want to be. Right here, looking at you, touching you, talking to you, and listening to your voice.”

He brushed his thumb over her jaw. “If you send me away now, I’ll only come back tomorrow, and the day after, and the week after, the month after. I’ll keep showing up, trying to find my way back to your heart. Because you’re the only one I want, Oke Amayo.”

Oke’s eyes flooded with tears, every word he uttered like music in her ears. For months, she’d longed to see him again, to hear him say this to her. That he wanted her. Only her. Not a ghost from his past, not as a substitute for someone else. Her.

“Oh, Arinze, I’ve missed you,” she cried, flinging her arms around him. She savoured the cocoon of his warm embrace as he enfolded her in his arms and lifted her off the ground.

His harsh sigh of relief reverberated in her ears, saturating her with warmth. She leaned back and gazed into his eyes. “I love you, Arinze,” she said breathily. “You’re my first and only love.”

With a guttural groan, Arinze lowered his head and captured her mouth in a searing wet kiss. Oke giggled, parting her lips for the intrusion of his tongue, uncaring that they were outside, in front of her house, where anyone passing by could see them. She could spend eternity right here in his arms.

Epilogue



Thirteen months later

Oke picked up the pineapple-flavoured mocktail beside her and sipped through the straw. She set the glass back at the edge of the tub and closed her eyes, letting the jacuzzi's warm water soothe her muscles.

From the secluded rooftop of the rented luxury apartment overlooking Trevi Fountain, she admired the cityscape before her. The stunning 18 th-century architectural design, spanning several square feet and over 150-feet high, took her breath away.

Turning her attention back to the man opposite her, her heart swelled with sheer joy. "This must be what heaven feels like," she murmured. "Being here with you in such a romantic setting."

Arinze's laughter boomed in the air, causing her skin to flush with pleasure. He moved through the bubbly water in the large tub towards her and placed a palm on her enlarged belly.

Her stomach jumped against his palm, drawing their attention to the rippling movement over the skin of her naked abdomen.

"This is the best feeling in the world," Arinze said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Touching our son through your body and seeing him respond to it."

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “I believe Ese is always pleased when his father laughs.”

Arinze laughed out, and Oke’s chest tightened with gratitude as her baby moved inside her again. Like always, this experience of feeling the life growing in her womb never ceased to amaze her. It didn’t matter how often it happened, it always felt brand new and meaningful each time.

Finally, after several disappointing menstrual cycles and a miscarriage, she was pregnant at thirty-seven years old, having a baby with the man she loved with all her heart. Many times, she woke up scared that she was in a dream, that it wasn’t real. Surely, nobody had a right to be this happy. This lucky.

In the early stages of her pregnancy, she’d been afraid to hope, worried that like the last time, she would end up in a pool of blood with her womb empty of the life she carried. But days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. Now, here she was, seven-and-a-half months pregnant and looking forward to the birth of their son.

Although they both agreed they didn’t want to know the sex of their baby, they’d both caved a week ago during a check-up scan, and asked the sonographer to reveal the gender.

Oke had almost danced with relief when she found out she was having a boy. Arinze was also pleased, although he’d put his money on a daughter … one as beautiful and joyful as his wife. But all that really didn’t matter to either of them now. They were eager to meet their baby, Ese whose name means gift in the Isoko language.

Arinze lowered his head below the water and kissed her bare belly. He caressed her stomach, his eyes wide in awe as he continued to feel the movement of her tummy.

“Even if I’m in a desert with nothing but sand under my feet, it would be heaven because you’re with me,” he said.

Oke smiled, covering his hand on her tummy with hers. “Very poetic, Arinze. I can’t get over how you easily come up with these smooth lines.”

“Lines?” He dragged his palm down her body until he reached the V between her legs. With lust-darkened eyes, he slid his thumb across her clit, then began

massaging the sensitive nub and the fleshy folds surrounding it.

Oke gasped, the sheer sensations of his touch causing her entire body to come alive with sensual pleasure. How could one man constantly bring her so much joy? It all seemed surreal. Yet, it wasn't. Every moment with Arinze was very real, true, precious.

Three months as his wife and she still had no misgivings about the abrupt decision they'd made to elope and marry at a lovely resort in Naraguta Village, Jos. Despite the disappointment of their friends and families for leaving them out of their plans, Oke would do it all over again exactly the same.

She'd never seen the point of lavish wedding ceremonies like the one they'd travelled here to Rome for. Arinze's sister Ezinne and her husband had spent more than eighty million Naira for this destination wedding.

Sensing that Arinze's family would push for something similar, she'd revolted inwardly, not keen on planning anything flamboyant or stressful during her pregnancy. She'd convinced Arinze to avoid all that hoopla and escape with her to northern Nigeria for a simple wedding. It hadn't needed much on her part to get him on board. He'd felt the same way. Their wedding had been a wonderfully sweet and poignantly private experience—a fitting milestone in their love story.

"Those are not lines, my darling wife," he whispered in a low, raspy tone that had only one aim. To seduce her out of her damn mind. "They are indisputable facts."

He brought his mouth down, claiming hers in an urgently passionate kiss. His tongue dove through her parted lips, executing a delicious dance with hers as he whispered flowery, poetic words in between each contact of their lips, all the while stroking her nether region.

His free hand moved to her right breast and began massaging it. He groaned as he flicked his thumb over the nipple. "So beautiful," he whispered, repeating the movement on the swollen tip of her other breast.

Oke let out a throaty moan which reverberated in the private rooftop sauna. Damn, several months of being with Arinze hadn't dampened her need for him. She craved him like a drug, even when she'd just had him.

Overwhelmed with the spine-tingling sensations cascading over her, Oke closed her eyes. This was just too good. His fingers working her pussy and breasts, his sweet and erotic words in her ears, his warm breath against her skin and his mouth on hers. Sheer bliss.

An intense orgasm suddenly overtook her. “Oh, Arinze!” Oke cried out as she stiffened, then shattered into tiny pieces of staggered pleasure that seemed to go on for ages.

She was still trembling from her climax when his hands pried her legs apart under the water and his penis thrust into her, ushering himself into her wet core, inch by sweet inch.

He held on to her, his face a tormented mask of pleasure as he rocked his body in and out of her, groaning and muttering Igbo words of endearment under his breath. “Nwunye mu, Asa nwa, Baby oku …’”

Oke wrapped her legs around him, receiving him, cushioning his hard dick with her moist pussy, revelling in the pleasure he brought her as they both chased their orgasms.

Already so aroused, it didn’t take long for Oke to reach the peak. She flung her head back and cried out his name, over and over again like an incantation as another wave of pleasure overpowered her.

With a guttural shout, Arinze climaxed, too, dropping his head to the crook of her neck as his body shook.

They remained silent, clinging to each other as they savoured their post-orgasmic fog. Then Oke felt a soft kick against her lower abdomen. They both froze, bodies still entwined.

Another kick, this time, more definitive.

They burst into laughter.

“This happens every time,” Arinze grumbled, still laughing as he took a step back. He gently lowered Oke’s feet back to the tub’s floor, warm water sloshing about them. “It seems Ese isn’t too keen on Daddy fucking Mummy.”

Oke flashed him a mischievous smile. “Do you blame him? Imagine being locked inside an enclosed place forced to listen to people having sex?”

Arinze bellowed out a laugh. “Ah! That explains it.”

“Or he may simply be telling us to get up and get moving. We have a wedding to attend today,” Oke said.

Arinze glanced at the clock on the wall. “Damn. Time really does fly when you’re having fun. We have less than an hour to get there.”

Oke angled her head sideways and peered at the clock. She shrieked. “Oh, Arinze! You should have told me to hurry,” she said, her eyes wide in panic. “We can’t afford to be late for your sister’s wedding. Your mother only just started liking me. I don’t want her to regress into thinking that I’m not good enough for her precious son.”

Arinze chuckled. “She actually likes you a lot more than she lets on,” he said, holding on to her hips to help her out of the tub. “You’re carrying the precious grandbaby that has displaced her precious son. You’re now like precious gold in her thoughts.”

Oke wrapped a towel around her naked body and flashed him a cheeky smile. “Precious gold? I seriously doubt it.”

Arinze suddenly flipped her around and pulled her into his arms. “You’re gold to me, Oke. I don’t care what anyone thinks about you or us. Not even my mother.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around him. “And I love you for always standing by me, defending and protecting me.”

His pupils darkened as his face became sombre. “It’s my honour as your man, Oke. I love you, too,” Arinze rasped, planting a soft kiss on her lips.

Oke giggled, pushing him away when he tried to kiss her again. “No. We can’t afford to be late for Ezinne’s wedding. That’s the only reason we’re in Rome.”

He laughed. “Not the only reason,” he said. “I called your partners, and they agreed for us to have an extended vacation since your mat leave starts soon anyway. We’ll be here, in this magical place, for an extra week.”

“Really?” she squealed.

Arinze nodded, pointing to her midsection. “Yep. We need as much time alone as we can get before Ese comes along.”

“Oh, you’re the best. The best,” she said, flinging her arms around him again and kissing him all over his face.

As Arinze laughed, nuzzling her neck, Oke felt at home, at peace with her decision to be with him. He was so thoughtful and kind, a man who went far and beyond for his loved ones.

She clung to him, revelling in her awesome luck having him in her life. At this rate, they wouldn’t make it in time for the wedding, but she didn’t care. She wanted to cherish this moment, tuck it inside her treasure chest of memories as one of many pleasant experiences of their lives together.

He’d been with her as she’d passed through the twin fires of cancer and fertility disappointments. Now, she was healthy and pregnant for him, a man she loved as much as he loved her.

Such a blessing to have made it through … together.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Stephanie Jones. I’m so grateful for the day I “met” you on Goodreads. Your constant encouragement boosts my creativity.

To my family, Jen, Michelle, Nicole and The General. You give me the space to write. Without you, I wouldn’t manage this. Thank you.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who reads my stories and even goes further to write a review. You guys are the real MVP. So grateful for you.

About the Author

Amaka Azie is an award-winning writer of romance fiction set in tropical West Africa. She explores the beauty and intricacies of the continent in her sweet and sensual love stories.

Born and raised in Nigeria, West Africa, she developed a passion for reading at the age of twelve. Her interest in writing began in secondary school when she joined the press club. Her active imagination has captured the interests of many.

Her books showcase bold and exciting female and male main characters with compelling storylines

She was named one of the most influential authors under Forty by the Nigerian Writers Awards (NWA) for the years 2017 and 2018.

Apart from getting lost in creating fascinating fictional characters, Amaka enjoys reading, painting and travelling with her family.

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