

"A well-intended art to take you on a whirlwind romantic journey!"
-Leyi Cuz

When Love Visits



From the Reviews of When Love Visits

"This enchanting tale masterfully weaves together emotions that tug at your heartstrings. The author's spellbinding storytelling left me utterly swooning with every turn of the page, as they crafted a love story beyond imagination!"

Abiola Ogunremi

"I lived and journeyed through this book like I didn't want the story to end. The infusion of current trends and banters was really spicy. I especially love how the author dismantled the stereotype of finding love in your twenties and letting people know you can be in your thirties and experience butterflies in your stomach!"

Annie

"I was completely engrossed in the lives of the characters. The authenticity of their interactions, and the depth of emotions Comfort infused into every scene made it impossible to put the book down."

Faith Oluwale

"As a lover girl, I'll rate this book a proper 10/10! A well-intended art to take you on a whirlwind romantic journey."

Leyi

"My favorite parts of the book are the captions at the beginning of each chapter. I loved them so much and must have taken screenshots of a ton of them!"

Chidinma

"This book is a beautiful and solid testament that the kind of love you want exists. The story encapsulates everything true and genuine love should be."

Damilola Abiodun

"I love the softness of this book. It is proof that love can be soft without toxicity. I love that the book shows that as a woman, you can have it all: love, career, friendship... I love how the author showcased friendship and family ties in a healthy manner, not taking away challenges that are also faced. A job well-done!"

Happiness Ogwamhenlu

"This was an amazing read! Very well written and intriguing! It was so heartwarming to see a 'show me how good it can get' progression of events. A feast for all hopeful romantics!"

Gorshio

"What I love the most about this book is how it doesn't pretend to be anything other than Nigerian!"

Femi

"This is such a green flag romcom with proper communication, respectful displays of attractions, and healthy romancing!"

Nneka

When Love Visits

Comfort Omovre

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To all my hopeful romantics. May you find the kind of love that makes your heart soar from being so full and wholesome. May it be everything you've dreamed of and so much more.



“I’ll tell you a secret,” he said as he pulled away, drawing her to his chest instead.

Uju didn’t know whether to celebrate or mourn the loss of that air-snatching moment. “What is it?” she asked, her voice, a breathless whisper.

“Deep down—scratch that—even on the very surface level, I’m kind of glad you’ve never been in love before. This way, I have a real chance of stealing your heart and making sure you never have to experience what heartbreak feels like, for the rest of your life.”

Uju’s world spun on its axis, a myriad of emotions rose like tides within her. “Is that a promise?”

Tade lifted her chin with a finger so he could dig mushy wells in her eyes. “No babe, it’s a vow. I’m going to make you love me, Njay. It’s only fair. I can’t possibly be alone in this. So, get ready to be stormed off your feet.”



One

Life is a rebel. You want one thing from it, it gives you another. Sometimes, though, another can be better...

Uju's Christmas was officially ruined.

She groaned in frustration—and to be quite honest, a lot of pain—unable to believe her poor luck. It was difficult to wrap her head around the fact that this was actually happening to her. Never could she have thought it possible. Feeling her emotions become even more tempestuous, she swallowed hard and shut her eyes tight, throwing her head backwards to push back the storm before it overwhelmed her. The hours spent in therapy must have meant something. She couldn't let an issue like this ruin all the hard work she'd done this year to learn how to regulate her emotions better, not to mention all the significant progress she'd actually made so far. No, she wasn't a psycho on a short fuse who had had to take anger management classes, so she wouldn't lose her mind. It was the complete opposite, actually. She'd been holding so much in and had become afraid that if she didn't learn how to let it all out in healthy, manageable bits, she'd someday explode. Yeah, being a wedding planner for the past eight years of one's life could do that to your mental health.

She shook her head as memories tried to drown her, intent on keeping them at bay. If anyone thought wedding planning was a glamorous job, then they certainly had never had a reason to deal with Lagos' brides. Those women? They would drive even sweet Jesus crazy with how wild some of them got during the entire wedding preparation period. And one had to swallow and smile through it all because '*customer is king*', right? Uju paused, stopping herself. Not that she would ever badmouth her clients, absolutely not. After all, she wholeheartedly loved her job. And though many of them could be safety pins knocked out of place inside her dress, she understood what the pressure of wanting the biggest day of one's life to be perfect, could feel like—or at the very least, she liked to believe she did. Because how could she possibly truly know? She'd never been

married. Whilst she derived immense pleasure from witnessing the unfiltered happiness and fulfillment on her brides' faces as they step into their wedding venues, and go on to enjoy their dream ceremonies, the quintessence of love was one that continued to elude her.

Another heavy sigh left her lips. Besides, there were several exceptional brides who were cooperative and pleasant to work with. She even had a couple of favorites with whom she'd stayed in touch, over the years. Her latest bride, Abisola, would have been top of the list as well—if she hadn't called Uju earlier that morning to inform her that they'd decided to postpone the wedding. Who in the heavens and the earth, and the entire solar system, postpones a wedding barely two weeks to? Trust fund kids with old money, that's who.

"Uju, hope you won't be mad at us?" Abisola's soft voice had pleaded. It was the kind you couldn't refuse. *"We just figured that with Grandfather's health failing fast, it would be nice to have one last Christmas where it's just us, family, without the noise and funfair... You know, take a long moment to soak it all in before we have to say our final goodbyes? We worry that the wedding activities would be too much hullabaloo, and we wouldn't be able to spend much time with him. It wouldn't be a lot of trouble to move things around, would it? Oh, I know!"* Excited clapping. *"We could have a spring wedding instead! In Ibiza! I've always loved how beautiful it often is there, that time of the year!"*

Of course, what could Uju have said other than, *"I'll make it happen."*? A client who used the word *hullabaloo* so smoothly in everyday conversation was exactly the kind of client that had kept her in business, all these five years since she said heartfelt farewells to Sapphire Events, and tried to make a name for herself in the same industry, as a hopeful twenty-six-year-old. Fifty-eight months down the line and she was well on her way to building her own dynasty, with a beautiful home, her dream car, two company sedans plus one really cozy staff bus, a glamorous office space, and a full team of brilliant employees to show for it. Life was good, and it was thanks to clients like Bisola.

That aside, it wasn't like it was sweet Bisola's fault. She was about to lose a grandparent. Uju understood that pain all too well. So yes, Uju had smiled, murmured reassurances, and sent her well-wishes to the family. Then, she had spent the entire day making calls, muttering apologies, and promising compensations, as she tried frantically to reschedule EVERYTHING! Thankfully, it was Christmas. The change in plans would make a lot of brides happy, she was certain, and the vendors wouldn't really run at a loss. Nonetheless, that didn't mean it had been any less hellish.

And what about her?

Tears stung her eyes as she looked at her P.C screen. The pain in her heart curled into a tight fist once more. How could there possibly be no single flight available to Enugu? Even Asaba! In fact, after much ado, she'd tried Port-Harcourt and Akwa-Ibom, but her luck remained elusive.

"Hian! I never see this *kain* thing before o," she wondered aloud. "Inside this Timbuku economy that everyone keeps complaining of dollars and petrol? People are still flying, even with the exorbitant cost of flight tickets?"

Restless and unsatisfied with the way things were unfolding, she hugged her Mac to her chest and nestled into her comfortable beige sectional sofa. Since the morning call, she had been in her downstairs living room. Once she found a comfortable position, she crossed her legs under her thighs, and as soon as the heat of her MacBook warmed those same thighs, she tapped the refresh icon for the umpteenth time, hoping that something would change. Minutes passed and there were still no available flights. Her frustration worsened.

"People have money in this country o!" she ranted again. "We just like to lie anyhow! Small time now, we will all go on Twitter crying about the economic situation, but offline, flights are getting fully booked! *Nawa!*" Uju honestly couldn't think of anything more upsetting. She'd finally gotten a work-free Christmas for the first time in five years, thanks to this postponement. Alas, at this rate, there was no way she would make it home to the family she'd missed so much!

Just then, her iPhone rang, granting her momentary reprieve from the '*a lot*' she was going through. Even better that the name that flashed across her screen belonged to someone she would always be thrilled to hear from. Smiling, she picked up the phone and swiped left.

Two

Romantic love isn't the only kind of love that's beautiful, you know? I mean, friendships literally exist...

“**H**ow far?” Uju chimed as she came face to face with her bestest friend in the entire world, Sarah.

From the bonnet on her head to the cream robe wrapped around her body, Uju could tell that Sarah was already preparing to turn in for the night.

“Fine girl!” Sarah responded just as excitedly, her soprano voice making her pidgin sound funny as always. “I *dey* o! You *nkor*? How are the preparations for senator’s daughter’s wedding going now?”

Uju’s eyes were rolling before she could even process the question. *So much for a reprieve.* “Senator’s daughter’s wedding, *ke*? You don’t even know the pepper I’ve seen today. If I tell you what that babe did to me, *ehn*?”

“*Hanhan*, *wetin* come happen? I thought she was one of your favorite brides?”

“Hmm, my dear! Wait *na*, let me gist you!”

Uju spent the next eighteen minutes catching Sarah up on everything that had gone wrong since Bisola called. “So, you see my life? The life of a business owner. Assuming I had a regular nine-to-five job now, wouldn’t I have planned my trip home since April, knowing that my Christmas break would be guaranteed?”

Sarah cackled on the other end of the phone.

“See this girl, o! You are laughing? *Wetin dey muzz* you? I tell you my pain, you *con dey* use me play.”

“*Osheeyy!* Bars! Uju Rhyme! Enter studio, no worry! I will buy all your records! Platinum gold straight up!”

Despite herself, Uju broke into her first genuine fit of laughter of the day. “You’re just a fish! You know that, right? A very big fish!”

Sarah stuck her tongue out. “You like me like that, o! In fact, you love me! You fit die for me!”

“Who is deceiving this one? *Mtcheew!* My friend, get out! I’ll just end the call now.”

Sarah’s confidence was a pillar of concrete as she snickered. “*Sio!* We both know you can’t, now. So, just forget that one. No dey whine yourself.”

Pregnant silence settled as Uju stared at the other woman, her soul sister of twenty-three years, wondering what she ever saw in her, yet knowing the precise answer. Sarah was light. It was that pure and simple. She loved hard, failed fast, bounced back just as quickly, defended her loved ones fearlessly, and forgave easily. Hers was a heart of gold, and Uju had been the biggest beneficiary of that wealth all these years. As such, Uju would gladly throw herself forward in the face of danger, if it meant Sarah could get away without harm. So, she supposed to a very large extent, the girl was right—that didn’t mean Uju had to admit it, though.

“You see! You no fit do am! *Na* we dey here!” Sarah’s gloating cut through Uju’s thoughts, bringing her back to the moment.

The satisfied grin on that beautiful face would have been annoying if it wasn’t so endearing. So once again, Uju found herself chuckling, her attempt at feigning annoyance barely lasting two minutes. *So much for being a hard girl.*

“It’s good to see you laughing,” her best friend murmured, voice and gaze gone soft. “You know I never like it when all these your bridezillas trouble you.”

“Ah, no o. Abisola is actually sweet. As much as it sucks, I understand this is a peculiar situation. I can’t really fault her for it. But awww, my *chwest!*” Uju clutched said chest for dramatic effect. “You don’t like to see me sad! Ouuh!” Pouted lips, puppy eyes. “Who’s the artist here now? Sarah Bieber, my love! You cry, I cry...” she ended in a singsong voice.

Sarah’s eyes were already working their muscles, scanning her friend up and down, and Uju only laughed harder, grateful for yet another comic relief. It was always this way between them: easy, tender, banter filled. She could count the number of times they’d had reasons to fight over the past two decades, and she wouldn’t exhaust the fingers on one hand. Those scarce moments had often felt like hell, but they’d quickly kiss and make up, waxing even stronger.

“Go away, *jhor!* You’re an irritant!” Sarah declared as she finished eyeing her.

“See who’s talking! I learned from the best o! Besides, you too, you love me like that!” It was Uju’s turn to wag her tongue now.

Sarah was shaking her head as she sighed, “Two thirty-plus women, behaving like teenagers.”

“Hanhan, why not? We might be old according to our birth certificates, but at hearts? We’re forever young, my dear!”

“Hmm, preach!”

There was more giggling between them before Sarah spoke again. “So, what’s the plan now? *Abi* you will enter motor—?”

Uju didn’t wait for those words to finish dropping. “And go where now? I should enter these dangerous roads all the way to Enugu? If my Papa hear am, the poor man fit collapse from heart attack. God forbid, make person no go meet kidnappers for road. Even if I manage to get home safely, I’d definitely break down from all those potholes and terrible traffic. I mean, have you been seeing the recent pictures on social media? It’s like everyone is in Nigeria for Christmas this year o. *Bikonu*, I’m not going anywhere.” She returned her MacBook to the table so she could stretch out on the sofa; her head resting against the arm cushion, neck supported by pillows. “I will see them during Easter. I’ve already crossed out that week from my calendar. Nothing will make me miss it.”

“True *sha*,” Sarah replied. “All those dangerous roads. If no be emergency, better make person *sidown* for house.”

“*Gbam!*”

“Hmm, nawa o. Traveling in Naija has really become an extreme sport.”

“You *don* see am now.”

Comfortable silence reigned for a moment before Sarah broke the spell. “So, you’ll spend Christmas alone as usual? I mean, you don’t have any other event planned for December. You wanted to focus all your energy on Abisola’s. What will you be doing without work to keep you busy? It’s never nice to be alone for Christmas, you know.”

Uju rolled her eyes. “Don’t even remind me. Then again, you know your babe now, best in solitude. I’ll probably invite some friends over *sha*.”

“Uju?” Sarah called softly.

“Mhm?”

“You only have six friends. Four of us have relocated. Yemi and Jessica will also be traveling for Christmas. Tell me, which friends do you want to invite?”

Uju’s face twisted into a scowl. “*Bia*, you didn’t say when you became Lot’s wife o. Rub it in now, as if I’m not pained enough already. Besides, who told you I haven’t been expanding my circle? Ehn? Are you people the only friends I’ll have for the rest of my life? *Chai!* See what see finish has caused o. It’s not your

fault at all!”

Sarah was struggling and failing to hold back her mirth as she apologized, “*Oya*, sorry, sorry! Anyway, the way me I see it ehn, this might actually be a blessing in disguise o. You’ll be free for the first Christmas in years! My dear, this could be your chance!”

“My chance to do what?” Uju asked, adjusting so she could lie on her side. Her hands instinctively went to smoothen her ‘fro. She had a feeling she already knew what was coming and Sarah didn’t disappoint.

“Hanhan! To go outside now! Enjoy yourself, mingle, celebrate, let your hair down! Who knows? You might just run into one fine *bobo* and finally fall in love. Before next year ending, I’ll be selling *aso ebi* for your wedding.”

This time, Uju’s hilarity was a gradual progression: it started with a soft chuckle, then another, and another, and before she knew it, she was snorting and giggling. “Babes! I no know say you believe in my ministry like this o.”

“Argh! See this woman! What do you mean? You’re gorgeous! With that smoking body and sexy fupa—”

“Side eye!”

“—You usually have sense from time to time, you’re successful, not to mention an overall sweet girl, even if your head dey touch sometimes. The *koko* is any man would be lucky to have you, and the few you’ve let in have all been indeed. So, why won’t I stand on your mandate?”

“*Na* so. If they were so lucky, why didn’t they stay then?”

“Lagos men? Are those ones capable of staying in one place?”

“Is it not the same Lagos men you want me to mingle with this Christmas? Or a different breed?”

“Hanhan! Them I.J.G.Bs are coming now. Who knows? You could get lucky.”

“L.M.A.O!” Uju held her stomach as she fell to the plush fur rug. I.J.G.B was an acronym for ‘*I Just Got Back*’, and was used to refer to Nigerian-Diasporas who often came home for the Christmas holidays. The men had a reputation for pursuing love interests just to keep their bed warm for the length of their brief stay. Soon as they left the country, that whirlwind romance was quickly forgotten. Sometimes, they got renewed the year after, but most times, never again. “Babe, you funny die! Are I.J.G.Bs not worse than our beloved Lagos men? All those boys that are just looking for December flings. *Abeg!* I no dey do!”

“And you can’t tell o,” Sarah shrugged, getting up on her end to go to the

refrigerator. With her petite frame, she could barely reach the top freezer. “You might just find someone who’s looking for something serious.”

“Indeed! I’d sooner pick twenty million naira from the floor in this Ikoyi.”

This earned another bark of laughter from Sarah as she fetched a can of malt. “You did not lie, sha! Then again, even if you find someone who’s willing to be serious, will you allow yourself to be loved? You this asexual woman.”

“Hian! Sarah Unyime Mfon-Abasi, I’m not asexual o!”

“Okay, you don’t believe in love.”

Uju raised her left forefinger in objection as she rose to sitting once more, its movement mirrored her shaking head. “I don’t not believe in love. Don’t misquote me. I believe it exists. I’m just indifferent because it’s something I’ve never experienced before.”

“You see, that’s one thing I’ve never understood. You mean to tell me that with all the millions of weddings you’ve planned, you still haven’t caught the love flu? I mean, let’s discuss now, for real, for real. When you see couples being all sweet and mushy, you don’t get all teary-eyed? You never start thinking, *‘Oh, I wish I had that!’*?”

Uju actually pondered for a moment. She ended up shaking her head. “I guess I feel touched. My heart warms seeing two people who are so sincere with each other, especially when it’s couples who remained sweet and affectionate towards each other throughout the entire wedding planning ordeal. I’m always like, *‘You know what? I’m happy for you and what you’ve found!’*, but that’s about as far as it goes. I’m too busy working to get my bag up, to be wishing for something that might not even exist for me. Good thing I’m not a hopeless romantic like you.” Those last words were said with a playful sneer.

“Well, someone has to be the life of this friendship,” Sarah countered swiftly. The fact that she hadn’t taken offence to the jab was evident in her lighthearted tone.

“I concur. And you’re doing such a great job at it all by yourself. You definitely do not need my help.”

“Before! That’s a given now! Nonetheless, I maintain that you shouldn’t be so pessimistic about the prospect of finding love. What do you mean, love isn’t for you? My whole best friend? Babe, love is for you, jhor!”

A small sigh escaped Uju’s lips. “Sarah, see eh, as much as I believe love is real, I’m realistic enough to know it won’t find everybody. And honestly? I’m okay with not being one of the lucky ones. Not sure I’ll ever get married, but if I decide to, finding a man who respects me and is kind to me, someone with

whom I share a keen sense of friendship? That would be more than sufficient, really.” She meant those words with all of her heart. It had always been her stance. “I mean, if we truly deep it, what more is there to love?”

Sarah’s head moved from side to side, echoing her disapproval. The conversation was playing out as always. “*Tsk, tsk*, you are living a very sad life, my dear. If you truly believe that’s all there is to a union between two people that’s supposed to last a lifetime? I’m not sorry to say that you’re just a really sad girl.”

“And you need to get back to your own exciting love life, so you can stop worrying about the lack of mine, *my dear*,” Uju retorted, also knowing not to take those words to heart. “How’s Tega, by the way?” she asked, stylishly switching the focus of the conversation. Enough about her. Tega was Sarah’s fiancé, and they’d been together for two years. He was totally smitten with her, and Uju really loved that for her bestie.

Sarah’s features instantly softened. Her brown eyes sparkled with sentience as she replied, “Out with the boys. It’s game night, so they’re at Stamford’s. I’m just going to soak myself in a bubble bath and go to bed before he arrives. Not sure I can wait up, considering how exhausted I am today.”

“Oyaaa! Bubble bath! Na you dey reign now! Enjoyment minister!”

They moved on to talk about other things like life in the U.K, preparations for Sarah’s wedding in May—which, of course, Uju was handling, her business, Sarah’s work as a project manager, and everything in between. As they were rounding up, Sarah called her attention once more.

“Uju?”

“Hm?”

“You know another good thing about not going home for Christmas?”

“Not that I acknowledged the first, but go on.”

“You don’t have to get hoarded by all those aunties in your *umunna* about when you’re finally going to get married.”

Uju shuddered, reliving the horror that often went down every Easter when she got the chance to visit home. In Igbo culture, *umunna* referred to the members of one’s extended family, and hers were particularly nosy. It didn’t help that they had only gotten worse over the years. Thankfully, Uju had grown just as capable of dealing with them.

Heaving a dramatic sigh, she finally got her revenge. “That’s how you know you’re truly getting old, my love. Because look at you, taking the mantle from them and doing such a good job at it, all by yourself!”

Sarah's outburst was so predictable. "Uju! You're a big fish! A very big fish! C'mon *getat* of my phone, you nonsense girl!"

There were smiles on both their lips as they ended the call.

An hour later, Uju was turning in for the night after having religiously followed her skin care routine, and said her prayers, when Sarah's words floated back to her. For the first time, she found herself wondering what it would feel like to actually experience love this Christmas. Would it truly happen to her if she gave it an honest chance?

Maybe I'll let my hair down after all. I mean, what's the worst that could happen? This was the last thought on her mind as the lures of sweet rest won her over.

Three

There is always love at home; a concept I wish many more people would experience...

Tade paused to take in a deep breath, as he climbed down the last steps of the airplane that had brought him all the way from Atlanta.

Ah! There it is! The fumes in the air, the honking sounds... Lagos! Home, sweet home!

As always, it felt amazing to be back again, especially when he considered that he'd decided to stay for much longer, this time around. Nothing of those *two weeks in, then next available flight out*, he'd been doing for the past years. No, this time, he intended to spend at least three months in Nigeria; enjoy the food, the people whom he'd so deeply missed, soak in the wholesome moments with family, and perhaps finally fulfil his mother's wish of becoming a mother-in-law while at it. Of course, he wasn't actually contemplating marriage just to make her happy. It was more of the fact that these days, with age thirty-five looming around the corner, and all his peers celebrating the birth of their little ones, he was starting to feel that maybe, just maybe, it was time to give love another try. After all, it had been too long, had it not? *Three years. Yeah, definitely too long.*

And if he was being honest, it was getting lonely. He missed it all: having someone, loving someone, being loved by someone... He had realized a long time ago that he wasn't made to do life alone, especially when he had so much love in his heart to give. However, that didn't mean he was desperate. He didn't plan on seeking a wife in every woman he encountered. He was simply going to keep his mind open. If it happened, awesome! If not, fine. There would always be other opportunities. For now, he was content to enjoy a premium Lagos Christmas with the people who already owned his heart. This was the thought on his mind as he climbed onto one of the airport transit busses. They soon arrived at the terminal and after hours of custom checks, "*Anything for your guy?*", and waiting to get his bag, he stepped out once more into the mid-afternoon air.

The atmosphere was dusty, as well as dry, and the sun beating down on everyone unlucky enough to walk under it was cruel. Alas, it was only to be expected, considering the harmattan season. Besides, after the past few weeks of shoveling snow, he honestly had no complaints. Transitioning between two extremes always required a few days of adjustment, but he'd be fine. His body could give *Kal-El* a run for his fame. Eager to get home, he began to make his way to the car park where his chauffeur for the day, Benjamin, was waiting. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he checked the message Benjamin had left, and reconfirmed the exact parking spot. 3-C-8.

"Third floor, column C, stall 8, got it!" he muttered to himself. He had just tucked his phone back into his pocket when cab drivers and their lobbyists alike rushed him.

"Oga, I get fine ride for you! I go do you well!"

"Oga, Lekki, V.I, Ikoyi, anywhere, even London! I fit carry you go!"

That one made Tade's lips crease. *London indeed.*

"Oga, my motor fine well, well! And my A.C dey cooooll! I even get cold water. You go enjoy your ride!"

Keeping that smile on his face, Tade simply waved them off, shaking his head to let them know he wasn't interested.

When a young girl who looked to be no older than twelve said, "Uncle, my daddy can drive o. And he'll give you a good price," his smile deepened as he answered, "I'm sure. It's just that someone is already waiting to take me home."

"Ah, okay! Wishing you a safe trip then, fine uncle!"

Truly touched by how adorable she was, he paused, gave her two soft pats on the head, then tucked out a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and squeezed it into her hand. Before anyone could grab what was happening, he was half running to the car park. He'd just taken his first steps in when he heard the men call,

"Ah, Oga! This one no good o!"

"Oga! Me, nkor?"

"Oga, I get *pikin* too o!"

Tade's cheeks were still hurting as he got off the elevator on the third floor. He immediately spotted a familiar black Audi A4 and began to walk towards it.

Benjamin was out of the car the next moment. "Shun, sir!" he saluted, then rushed to get Tade's box. "Welcome back to Nigeria, sir!"

Tade couldn't help shaking his head at his chauffeur's shenanigans. "You're not serious. What's wrong with you? Who are you doing all that one for?"

Benjamin's smile was warm, brilliant; it filled his brown eyes with mischief, making them glimmer against his carton skin as he answered, "Hanhan! My boss came all the way back from *obodo oyibo*, and you said I shouldn't salute him."

Tade side-eyed the other man as they both walked towards the open trunk, not one bit surprised by his quirks. *Obodo oyibo* was a popular Igbo slang which directly translated to *the land of the white man*; it was loosely used to refer to the overseas. He waited until they'd fitted his sole luggage in and closed the hood, before finally pulling Benjamin in for a hug.

"It's good to see you, bro," he sighed, meaning that with all of his heart. Benjamin might be the Maxwell family's chauffeur—a very self-designated one at that—but he was also Tade's childhood friend. They'd grown together in the same house as brothers, with Benjamin's father being their butler, God rest his soul. By implication, Benjamin had gotten the best of everything alongside Tade. Although he was now the CEO of a flourishing, exclusive chauffeur company—which was the only chauffeur company the Maxwells and their circle of friends patronized—he still insisted on personally driving any member of the Maxwell household whenever he could.

"IDK, man. I could have done without having to put up with your ugly face this Christmas," Benjamin jabbed in response. Actions really did speak louder, because his arms were tightening around Tade as he said those words.

Tade's only retort was a soft chuckle as they broke apart. Then, together, they got into the car.

"How was your trip?" his best friend asked as they pulled out of the car park.

"Same as always. Smooth, long. Too long. But good."

"Glad to hear it. I was hoping to wait for you just outside the terminal, but I had to quickly attend to something at work. Was just rounding up the meeting when I spotted you."

"You're a busy man na. I don't even know why you insist on making these airport runs, yourself."

"Because you're family, and there are some things you just do for family. What's not clicking? Now, stop complaining. Instead, you should thank me for being your sweetest, dearest fri-end." Those last words were said in a singsong as he leaned closer to Tade.

A deep, exaggerated sigh preceded Tade's response. "I see you're still as unbearable as always."

"And I see you'll never stop being Lord 'Oh, I'm too gracious and modest. The world is sooo lucky to have me!' Maxwell."

"I don't talk like that," Tade interjected, flinching at the squeaky imitation Benjamin had done.

"Of course, you do."

"No, I don't."

"You do, too!"

A second ticked, and they were both breaking into chuckles.

"You're a mad man! You know that, right?" Tade asked as they recovered.

"Bolanle will beg to disagree. I'm the next best thing after ice cream to her."

Tade's eye roll was so heavy, it made his eyes hurt. "Of course. I've only been back a few hours, and this man is already rubbing his happy marriage in my face. Please, let the singles *breeeffff*! Before we know it now, pyjamas pictures will be all over my timeline. Let me even block you guys ahead, so I can embrace peace of mind."

Benjamin's nose squeezed as his lips jutted up. "*Yinmu*! You better get used to it. Your mother has given me the mandate to get you married before you leave. What better way to ensure that, than to rub the sweetness of holy matrimony in your face at every chance?"

"As always. Would she be my mother if she wasn't trying to find a daughter-in-law every other day? Anyway, you don't have to try too hard, sha," Tade's voice softened as he angled his elbow over the open window. Hoping the wind would drown out his words, he added, "I've decided to settle down."

Turned out the winds weren't strong enough, and thank God for Benjamin's excellent driving skills, else they would have crashed from his friend's shock.

"What? Did I hear that right?" Benjamin asked as he pulled back from the brakes.

"You absolutely did. Now eyes on the road before you make my lovely sister-in-law a widow."

Ben promptly obeyed, continuing their journey without a hitch. However, that didn't stop him from marveling aloud. "Wow! Waaohh! Tade actually wants to get married! I can't believe it! My bro is finally back in the market! Whooo!" His excitement was so infectious, Tade was soon grinning, unable to resist. "Well, it's certainly going to be an interesting Christmas. Bro, don't worry, eh? Just leave it to me. I'll find you a good woman, trust!"

Aware that Benjamin was being absolutely serious, Tade was quick to firmly protest. "I'm capable of finding my own woman, thank you. Now, enough about me. How about you? How have things been? How's the family doing? Any latest I should know about?"

And because his bro was a man who enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice all too much, Benjamin was soon yammering away happily, as they drew closer to Banana Island, a suburb for the top one percent in Lagos.

Four

Twenty children cannot play together for twenty years, true. That's why we have reunions...

It was a whole day later that Tade finally got the chance to leave his family home, and settle into his penthouse suite in Ikoyi. As always, they had insisted he spent the entire December with them, but he'd held his ground, maintaining that he would rather live at his place, then visit from time to time. His family was amazing and sweet, and he wholeheartedly adored his charming mother, his kind, reserved father, and his naughty twin-sisters. However, as much as he enjoyed their company, God bless their hearts, they had the habit of becoming overly excited and forgetting the entire concept of boundaries. Besides, if he was going to be getting to know a woman over the next few weeks, he didn't want her feeling uncomfortable because of his folks, whenever he got in the mood of spending quality time together in his own space.

"So, where are we headed?" he asked Ben as he stepped out of his apartment building, ready to go have some fun for the night. Tade already had access to his cars and could now drive himself around, but Ben was still insisting on playing chauffeur. He was in that very moment, standing by Tade's jet black convertible Chevrolet, his hips against the driver's door.

"X Bar Lounge," Ben responded, turning to face him. "It's a cozy space here in Ikoyi, really chill. Not too loud or crazy this time of the week. You'll love it!"

Tade bobbed his head. It was just his kind of medicine. "All right, now. How about Bolanle? She's still joining, abi?" He opened the door on his side and got in.

"Before!" Ben did the same. "I even asked her to bring some of her friends along. I figured if we're going to get you hitched, we might as well start from within the circle."

Tade winced, but he wasn't surprised. It was exactly the kind of thing Benjamin would do, and his friend had threatened as much, hadn't he? "I hope

those girls wouldn't end up being disappointed o. I told you, I like to find my own women. And it's not as if you didn't already know."

"Mr. Man, calm your horses! Bolanle didn't mention anything about meeting anyone. She only said we were organizing a get together to welcome some of our friends back for the holidays, and asked if they were interested in coming along. Besides, the other guys will be there as well. Chuks and his wife, Ore, Aminu, Mustapha, Emmanuel, even Wale... Those that have babes will bring them. Those that don't, will mingle with Bolanle's friends. I'm just saying, if you see anyone wey enter your eye, go for it! If not, no pressure, man!"

Tade couldn't deny the logic nor the goodwill behind Benjamin's actions, so he simply held his peace. It certainly wouldn't be bad to end up with one of Bolanle's friends. He'd met some of them at B.B's wedding, and they were just as lovely as the woman he thought of as his sister-in-law. Besides that, Benjamin had been right. Tonight was mostly about reconnecting with old friends, and that, Tade was thrilled about. This thought kept a hum in his chest as they drew closer to their destination.

They soon arrived, and there were shouts and hugs of welcome, as well as shakes of introduction. Almost everyone Benjamin had promised would be there was already present. The ladies were just as punctual, but as nice as it was to see beautiful, familiar faces, Tade immediately knew the woman for whom he was searching wasn't in this circle.

"Tade, my love! It's wonderful to have you back!" Bolanle sighed as she drew him in for a tight embrace.

Tade wasted no time returning the hug. In his eyes, Bolanle was just like the two rug rats he had back at home. He would take a bullet for her in a heartbeat. "Ah! I've missed you, o, Bolly baby! Especially that your mean *ofada* sauce!" It was a native Nigerian dish made with assorted peppers, bleached palm oil and locust beans. Bolanle's always tasted best.

She was laughing and slapping his shoulder playfully as they pulled apart. "Of all the things about me you could miss! You chose my *ofada* sauce! Yeye man! Sha, come over sometime, I'll make you a pot."

"Hanhan! Bolly Baby! You see why I love you? You spoil me too much! Always delivering!" He raised two hands in the air and threw his left foot down in salute. "Mama, the mama!"

She was shaking her head as she returned to her seat, but couldn't hide her smile. "Nigerian men and food! I'm super convinced you people really starved in your past lives. See what *ofada* sauce is making you do. If I didn't know you

so well, I'd have thought you're from the streets, meanwhile you're a full American citizen. And I've told you, I don't like being called *Boli*. What's that?"

"Look at this local woman o. It's not Boli, jhor. It's Bollyyy," Tade emphasized, wiggling his brows. "Doesn't it sound hippy? Like Bolly mama!" Whilst the former was Yoruba for roasted plantain, the latter was really just a short form of her name. It was what Tade had been calling her since they met seven years ago. And even though she liked to pretend she didn't like it, it was an open secret that she actually didn't mind at all.

Bolanle's lips twitched, no doubt preparing to give him a stinging retort even as she wrestled against the deeper curve her mouth was trying to form. Alas, in that moment, Wale Ogunsina, the life of every party, arrived.

"My boy, my boy!" Wale chimed, slapping Tade's back. "So, na your face be this? Na two of us gather dey that America, but we no dey ever see!"

"Because you're always too busy chasing the next big contract now," Tade teased in response as they exchanged handshakes.

"You, nkor? A whole tech bro! Founder extraordinaire! You dey get time? Sha, show us the way o, make we *sef* born unicorns!"

As roars of laughter went up around their cozy circle, ushering in more banter, warmth settled into Tade's heart. Words could simply never suffice in describing just how much he'd missed this. It was the first time in years the entire squad would be complete, and he was beyond ready to savor every single moment, ecstatic to be reunited with the people who always felt like home.

○○○○○

Uju released a stream of satisfied air as she stepped out of her GLK 350 4MATIC. After an entire day of trying to get herself out of her Kdrama slump—and failing—then getting exhausted from being bored out of her mind, she'd finally heeded Sarah's advice and stepped out.

The past few days since Abisola's bombshell had been spent tidying things up at the office and closing for the year, as there wasn't much to do. Their next event was scheduled for the second Saturday in January, and things were as good as settled where that was concerned. Beyond that, she'd figured her employees would be grateful for the early holiday as they hadn't been able to go on their month-long break this year—they were. With no luck yet finding a flight home, she was officially free for the holidays. So, tonight, she was ready to let her hair down and mingle.

She'd chosen a shimmery black, single-sleeve sequin drape dress which she'd gotten on her last visit to the U.K. It hugged her pear figure loosely, flowing around her until the hems came to a stop just below her knees. As far as she was concerned, it was the perfect dress for the night: free enough to hide her stomach pouch, yet revealing just the right amount of curves. On her feet were a pair of hot red, six-inch stilettos, and her purse mirrored the glimmering black of her dress. From her ears dangled more sparkly silveriness. She'd gone with a soft, natural glam for the night's look to complement her caramel skin, letting her dress do all the talking. As for her hairdo, the styling she'd had gotten done at Dasala's, just the week before with her natural hair, was still holding well. It was a slant, flat twist, *shuku* style, with the fingers of each cornrow kneaded together to form a nice corn cob atop her head. With a quick brush and spray, she had been ready to go. She truly loved the hairstyle. It was simple, elegant, original, her. That's why she often cackled when she heard people talking down on natural hair. As far as she was concerned, she hadn't seen one place she couldn't proudly wear her nappy curls to.

Taking one last look in the mirror of her car window, she bobbed her head. Yep! She was good to go. She was finally going to do it! For the first time in forever, she was out for the sole purpose of having a good time and mingling with anyone who caught her fancy. No decorative meetings or events planned by her, just a gorgeous girl, in a gorgeous dress, at a sweet lounge, ready to have a great time! Dragging her eyes away from her window, she looked up at the neon signpost.

"X Bar Lounge," she read aloud. *Not bad.* From the looks of it, it was exactly what she'd been going for. Uju still remembered her call to Chidera earlier that evening. Chidera was among the four who had relocated and now lived in the Netherlands, but she used to be an outside babe. She knew all the popular spots on Lagos Island and hadn't let Uju down.

"*Hanhan, you're actually taking yourself out? Wow! Has Rapture occurred? Did we miss the trumpet?*" her friend had teased as they spoke on the phone.

"*Go away, jhor! I'm just bored out of my mind, and it's not like I really have work tomorrow. Help a girl out here. I just need to do some activity before I lose my sanity.*"

"*Okay, okay, okay. What vibe are you going for?*"

"*Sane, fun. Somewhere overlooking the sea would be nice. Bonus if it comes with good food. Typically, a place where one would least attract a bad crowd.*"

"*Ah, I got it!*"

Chidera had made some recommendations then, and after checking them out herself, Uju had settled on this one. The pictures had been impressive, and though the place looked very busy on their IG profile, Uju was convinced that since it was a Thursday night, she wouldn't have to deal with the craziness from their regular Saturday *'Wild and Free'* event.

Adjusting her gown as she shivered from the night's air that was quickly turning chilly, she took another deep breath. "Well, ready or not, here I come!" She'd just begun to make her way into the lounge when a man dressed as Father Christmas waved at her.

"Merry Christmas, ma'am!"

"Merry Christmas!" Uju waved back in response, smiling at the realization that this was the second time she was running into Father Christmas in one week. It seemed more and more, Lagos was incorporating the tradition of having Fathers Christmas visit famous spots. It was something she'd been noticing in recent years. Those thoughts flitted out of her mind as hurriedly as they'd fluttered in, and soon, she was stepping through the lounge's doors.

A waiter was by her side in a minute and the next, she was being led to her seat.

"Thank you, Charles," she muttered to the young man who'd led her over, spying his name from the tag he wore. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to order."

Bowing, he took his leave, and she took her time to settle in. The lounge was exactly as she'd hoped: chairs spaced out and arranged in an orderly manner, colorful neon lights adding to its appeal and infecting her with the season's joy, a cozy crowd... Without trying, she could hear soft afro beats booming through the speakers, but the best part had to be the cool sea breeze that mesmerized her face. It was all perfect! Satisfied that she appeared to have indeed chosen right, she picked up the menu and began to read.

A few moments later, she'd just ordered her first glass of cocktail and was enjoying the cookies they'd brought alongside for her to snack on, when she felt a presence by her side.

"You seem lonely. Can I keep you company?"

Five

Sometimes, life gives you unripe oranges, but you end up thinking they're lemons. Patience, people, patience...

Uju's first reaction was irritation. What kind of a pickup line was that in the year two thousand and twenty-three? Did anyone still equate a woman sitting by herself in a lounge, with loneliness?

Her smile was starched as she raised her gaze to the intruder. In truth, he wasn't bad looking. He was dark-skinned, at least three inches taller than her, with a clean haircut and beards to go, and he actually smelled nice. He also appeared to have made an effort with his look for the night: a fashionable white shirt, grey chinos pants, a pair of brown Louboutin... *Not bad*. Not bad at all, but he wasn't her type. Given, she didn't exactly have a type. Nonetheless, if one thing was certain, it was the fact that she wasn't interested in this man, not in the least bit.

"Aw, it appears you've misunderstood," she began. "I'm not lonely. In fact, I'm meeting someone." Uju scolded herself the moment those words left her lips. Why had she felt the need to lie? He would eventually find out when no one showed up and would think her a loser. *Damn!*

His brows rose in a cocky arch, his smirk, just as annoying. "Really?" he asked, switching his stance to that of an arrogant man who was evidently confident he'd found his prey. "That makes it even worse. What sort of gentleman keeps a beautiful lady like yourself waiting?"

The force of Uju's eye roll threatened to expunge her eyes from her sockets. *Is this really what the dating scene is like these days? This is the best men have to offer? Wow. It appears I haven't been missing out on anything, after all.*

Already over this, she leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms. "And you're so sure I'm meeting a gentleman, how?" When his eyes flecked with glee, she knew she'd made yet another mistake. Now, he was drawing closer to

the chair in front of her.

“Well, if you’re expecting a lady, I suppose I could join you two. Or at the very least, keep you company until she gets here.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” Her words were curt. “I specifically arrived early so I could have a moment alone.”

“Come on now,” he drawled as he pulled out the chair. His lips stretched further into a grin that could have been charming, but she only found increasingly aggravating. “No one really likes to be alone. I’m sure deep down, you’re craving my company.”

Uju wanted to barf. “Ugh! I assure you, I certainly would not like to be entertained by *you*.”

“Why? Afraid you’d end up falling for me?”

“Oh, God!” Her head spun as she looked up, then down. She reached for her glass of cocktail, needing to hold something, anything. This was wild, freaking wild! Mr. *Company* was so conceited, he truly believed any woman would fall all over his feet because of beard gang, white shirt, and oud. *God* abeg! She pulled her thoughts together, ready to shut things down—she’d already entertained this for long enough. Only, as she prepared to give him a piece of her mind, she suddenly felt slender arms wrap around her shoulders. The act was closely followed by squealing in her ears as the perpetrator leaned over.

“Hey, babe! OMG! I’m so sorry I’m late! I hope I didn’t keep you waiting for too long? Pleaaseeee, forgive me! Pretty please?”

Uju grew dizzy. She couldn’t see the person’s face, so running her brain’s facial recognition software would be futile. The voice didn’t sound familiar either, so she couldn’t place it. Who exactly was this woman?

As though her savior had heard her thought, she pulled away from Uju then, and gave her a knowing wink. Uju could only stare in marvel for the next few seconds. New girl was a stunning, tall woman with the most beautiful ebony skin Uju had ever laid eyes upon, and she was undoubtedly no one Uju knew. However, the reassuring squeeze on Uju’s shoulder and the wink she’d gotten moments earlier, finally put all the pieces together. This was a random woman rising to a sister’s aid because she’d been watching the scene play out. Uju’s heart soared with both pride and gratitude. *This is why I love women!*

“Hanhan, baby girl!” her rescuer chimed once more. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing someone. Who’s the catch?”

That was Uju’s cue, and she grabbed it. “No one I know o. He popped by a few minutes ago, being all persistent about keeping me company, even though I

kept reiterating I was waiting for someone.”

“Aww! Mr. C.E.C.K, chief executive company keeper! "Don't worry! We're all good here, you hear? You can hurry along now. Your volunteered services were never needed.”

There must have been something about the way the other woman stared him down, because Mr. Company actually cowered. Uju watched, amused, as he scrambled away, no hint of smugness to be found, but every symptom of shame present.

“Thank you!” Uju heard herself exhale as her rescuer took the seat in front of her. She could finally let her lungs do their job.

“Oh, it's nothing,” *Savior* replied, waving her off. “Happens all the time. It's like these men never understand that sometimes, women just want to be left alone. That's why us sisters have got to stick together, huh?”

“Of course! Thank you so much once again! I was just about to lose my calm. That man was truly aggravating!”

The other woman's smile dazzled. “Oh, I could tell from a mile away. Good thing I arrived just in time. Men like that are never worth the trouble, you know? And the moment you respond that way, they brand you an angry, bitter...”

“Feminist!” Uju completed, causing them both to burst into laughter.

“Ahh, exactly! As though there's anything to be happy and sweet about, concerning being a feminist in the first place.” *Savior* rolled her eyes, then she was extending her hand. “Hi, I'm Bolanle.”

Uju wasted no time in accepting the gesture, and as soon as fingers clasped over fingers, she felt a sense of kinship begin to form. “It's nice to meet you, Bolanle. I'm Uju. Please don't sing the song.” By *the song*, she meant a popular jam by the Nigerian artist, Duncan Mighty, basically using her name.

Bolanle giggled. “I wasn't going to, but seeing as you mentioned it...” She actually started to sing, “Obianuju bikooooo! Na only you, ewooo!”

Now Uju was chuckling as well. Yeah, she liked this woman. Perhaps she might just end up making another friend, after all. *Take that, Sarah!* “It's really nice to meet you, Bolanle. I hope I'm not taking you away from much.” She looked around as she said those words, trying to see if she would spot Bolanle's date. “Or are you here alone?”

Bolanle shook her head. “With a couple of friends, actually. But not to worry, they'll survive without me. I'll keep you company until your friend comes along.”

Uju clasped her teeth, sucking in air through them. “Yeah, that's the thing.

I'm actually not expecting anyone. I'm here alone."

Bolanle's eyes were star works of approved mischief. "I knew it! I had a feeling! Go, gurl! Really good thing I came around then, eh? Well, if you'd want me to leave you alone—"

"I actually like the company," Uju interjected. "I'd come here to have a good night and possibly meet... *people*." The way Bolanle's head bobbed in understanding, told Uju she knew exactly what Uju had meant by the emphasis on that word. This gave her the reassurance to continue. "However, I certainly wasn't expecting to be forced into it. I guess it's true what they say, '*Be careful what you wish for, you might just get it.*'"

"I know, right? But who says the night has to conclude with such a sour taste? Ahh... You know what? My friends and I are a fine bunch, if I do say so myself. A bit rowdy sometimes, but we're all good people, and I'm sure they'd love to have you join us—if, and only if you're open to it. Besides, I have a feeling someone is dying to meet you."

Uju leaned forward, her attention immediately arrested. "Someone?" Her brows arched.

"Yes. Over there."

Following Bolanle's pointing finger, Uju turned her head until she locked eyes with her third stranger of the evening. Only this time, what she felt in her heart wasn't irritation or confusion. It was... it was something she couldn't even put words to, something she didn't think she'd ever felt before.

"He was the one who called my attention to what was going on here," Bolanle explained. "He was going to make it over himself, but figured you'd feel more comfortable if it was a lady who came to your rescue."

Uju swallowed, still unable to tear her gaze off this strange man. She couldn't really make out his features from the distance, but she could tell he was *fooiinneee*. He stood out easily among the rest, and goodness! Now her heart was thumping loudly, moving faster with every new beat. It was such a peculiar new experience, and it made her nerve endings all tingly.

"So, what do you say? Would you like to join us?"

Uju nodded. There was only one answer on the tip of her tongue. Only one answer she could give, really. It was as though she had no choice. There was a force pulling her, compelling her towards the man whom she still couldn't look away from. And when she breathed her response, it felt like she was agreeing to something more, something she couldn't even begin to comprehend yet.

"Yes."

Six

You meet someone, and you just know. You just know there could be no other person for you...

Tade startled, sitting up straight as the woman who'd rendered his lungs useless from the moment she walked into the bar, finally broke eye contact, rising to her feet alongside Bolanle.

Is this? Is she? No way! She couldn't really be coming over, could she?

His questions got answered as she and his sister-in-law linked hands and began to walk towards them. *Goodness! She's actually coming here!* Frantic, he fuzzed, smoothening his brown shirt, adjusting his collar, and swiping his hands through his hair before remembering he'd cut off his fro two weeks ago, because he hadn't been ready to argue with his Nigerian mom about what a responsible man should look like.

I really can't believe Bolanle is bringing her over! Yes, he'd had every intention of walking up to her before she took her leave. It was that or simply leave it to chance and see if the universe would bring them together again. Nowhere in those plans had he envisioned her joining them, but he supposed he couldn't complain, could he? Quite the contrary, his heart was thrumming alive at the prospect of being close to her, of getting to know her before the night ran out.

Play it cool, Tade. C'mon, you're no longer a teenager finally getting to talk to his crush. Play it cool! With those words in mind, he threw one leg casually over the other to give off an air of relaxation, and in hopes that it'd make him come across as chill, as he endeavored—and failed—to look anywhere else but at her.

It had taken him everything not to saunter up to the guy who'd been harassing her, and respectfully drag him off (*perhaps not so respectfully*), maybe even teach him a couple of lessons on how to be a gentleman and walk away when a woman said no. Thankfully, Bolanle had been more than willing to rise

to the occasion when he'd called her attention to it. He'd watched the scene play out, heaving a sigh of relief when the guy, whom he'd first thought was her boyfriend, finally left. However, the fact that his mysterious lady hadn't known that man didn't mean a woman like her was single, did it?

"Hi guys!" Bolanle's alto rang as they finally joined the group. "I brought over a new friend. Hope you don't mind?"

Everyone looked up instantly, warm welcome on their faces. It was Emmanuel, the architect, who spoke first. "Of course not! The more the merrier! Oya, you people should create space o."

They started shifting around as introductions ensued, and Tade could do nothing but gawk. She was even more magnificent up-close. Stunning features he could stare at all day held him spellbound. The firsts that arrested his attention were her full, lush brows that she'd simply brushed into a dome. He loved how well they complemented her soft makeup, but most especially, he was stricken by the pair of gleaming obsidian orbs they arched over. Those eyes reflected great intelligence, and he couldn't help but wonder what other secrets they held. His gaze naturally fell to her cute, pert nose, and before he knew it, he was staring at the most luscious, glossiest lips ever. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to look away as something stirred within him. Apparently, he didn't look far away enough, because he soon found himself appreciating the perfect curve of her hips, how they flowed out from her snatched waist and extended into the sexiest legs that seemed to go on forever.

Tade swallowed hard. Everything about this woman was stunning. Her beautiful hair, that dazzling skin he bet the sun was envious of, and the endearing smile that wouldn't stop teasing the corner of her lips. She was gorgeousness embodied, and goodness, she smelled so good! It took all his willpower to restrain himself from drawing in a deeper breath, lest he made a fool of himself earlier than necessary—with the way he was reacting to her, it was bound to happen at some point. *What in the Anthony Bridgerton?* His eyes continued to follow her as she took the now available space right in front of him, yet he didn't hear a single word until he felt an elbow in his side. Pulled back to reality, he tore his gaze away from her to stare Benjamin down. His brows rose in question, 'What was that for?'

"It's your turn to introduce yourself and stop staring, Oga! Abi, you never see fine girl before?"

Another bout of laughter went around the table and Tade's face fell, mortified as hell. His cheeks had never felt more on fire. *Perfect, just perfect!* Their first

meeting and he couldn't even think or act straight. He was blushing! *Good Lord! What proper Yoruba man blushes?* His friends would never let him hear the end of this, he was certain.

"Hi, I'm Uju," her sonorous treble tickled his ears as she reached for a handshake.

Tade glanced upward, first at her delicate fingers, then at the shy smile in her eyes: those same glimmering orbs that had held his spellbound, from across the lounge. And there it was again, that shifting in his heart, the guarding of the muscles in his stomach. Nah, he was in trouble, real trouble!

"Tade," he responded softly, eagerly accepting the handshake. The first contact singed, then tingled. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever felt, and right there and then, Tade knew he had found his wife. He just had to convince her of that fact as well, because now that he'd held her, there was no way he was ever letting her go. "I'm Tade," he said again, clearing his throat. "Tade Maxwell." *Memorize that surname because it's going to be yours soon. Or maybe not. You could choose to keep your surname, that works too. Whatever you want, baby. I mean, I could even take yours.*

Her head cocked to one side. "Maxwell Holdings?"

He nodded, used to the reaction. Although, he had to admit it didn't come with the usual awe, neither was there any calculative glint in her eyes, just intrigue. Often, when he introduced himself, people would respond with those same words, and he could instantly see the wheels in their heads turn, no doubt scheming how best to take advantage of the connection. He'd gotten used to it over the years, but this lady, his wife to be, simply took the information like it was yet another announcement of dollar rates reaching the skies.

"Interesting," she said sweetly. "I know the family, some. I've planned a couple of events for both the family and company."

"A-ha! I thought you looked familiar!" Bolanle chirped from across the table. "Blossom Events?"

"The one and only!" Uju bobbed her head in response, and Tade relished having those words wash over him. He could listen to her speak forever! There was just something about her voice, something that felt like home.

"I must have seen you and your team around a few times during some of those events," Bolanle continued. Then she was turning to him in explanation, "Uju owns an insanely successful events planning company. Your mother is so in love with her services, she hires Uju for almost everything these days."

"Yes!" Benjamin exclaimed, joining the conversation as well. "I remember

now! You are indeed familiar! I've been trying to place the face, and in this moment..." He too directed his gaze towards Tade. "I seem to recall Mummy has been trying to make Uju her daughter-in-law since forever. Hanhan, small world! What do we call this? Fate or coincidence?"

"Really?" Tade asked, pleasantly surprised by the unfolding events. He returned his attention to the woman before him, and for the second time that evening, he momentarily forgot how to inhale air. *Oh my goodness, she's so freaking beautiful!* It definitely had to be fate. No way coincidence was that hardworking. This was meant to be. He knew it as well as he knew his name. The thought put a smile in his heart. It appeared things were going to be even easier than he'd reckoned. Uju already knew his family, and if his mother had indeed been trying to play matchmaker, that meant she already had their approval. Some memories fluttered back to him.

"Wait. Don't tell me you're the J.J she's always raving on about me meeting?" His mother had been filling his ears with tales of the extra capable events planner for the past two years. He'd been uninterested in meeting said planner last December, and upon his return this time around, had made it clear to his mom that he was going to find his own woman, himself. Who would have thought that lines would end up falling into place like this?

"I believe I am," Uju responded, her cheeks creasing with the loveliest smile. "She prefers to call me that, J.J."

"I see." Tade's excitement brimmed. He couldn't wipe the smitten grin off his face even if he tried. "And what do you always tell her? Whenever she pesters you about becoming her..." He wiggled his brows, eyes twinkling with glee and a healthy dose of mischief. "Daughter-in-law?"

Uju's chin rose, accepting the challenge he'd issued. "That if the son in question ever comes to Nigeria, and agrees to meet with me, if I so happen to just have free time lying around, then I'd see for myself," she answered sweetly.

Tade's heart expanded as he shifted in his chair, drawing closer still. He realized then that her soft hands were still in his since their handshake, but rather than let her go, he held on more firmly. "And now that you've met him?" He drew closer still. Those words were almost a whisper, cocooning them in their own little world, as everyone else simply ceased to exist.

He watched as her breath hitched. "Well..." As she forced down a lump of non-existent morsel. "I guess I am seeing..." And as her voice became devoid of air. "For myself."

A long moment passed, and they said nothing, did nothing, only continued to

gaze into each other's souls. Tade wondered if she felt it too, the magnetic pull, the certainty that this moment right here was no coincidence. It was a divine orchestration, a higher power had ordained it to be. Just then, a waiter arrived, pulling them back into the real world, and that was when Tade realized he'd been almost falling out of his seat, their faces mere inches apart. Aware that he could simply no longer bear to be so far from her, he stood up and crossed over to her side of the table. Then, clearing his throat, he leaned over and murmured softly to the lady who was occupying the spot he most coveted. She was one of Bolanle's friends, and she must have understood what was happening because she eagerly agreed to exchange positions. There was a knowing grin on her face as she stood up to take the seat he'd just vacated. Utterly grateful, Tade readily replaced her by Uju's side. Her hand was still in his.

"So, tell me, Uju, what kind of drinks do you like?" They had a lifetime together, he was convinced. Nonetheless, he couldn't wait to know her.

"Anything that wouldn't have my head hurting the next morning from a terrible hangover," she replied, making no move to end the physical contact still. This pleased him to no ends.

"Ah, a lightweight then." He placed the back of said hand against his left palm and began to trace slow paths across her fate lines. A small whisper as he held her gaze once more, "First thing we have in common."

And so it began, the start of the evening, and he hoped with all his heart, the rest of their lives.

Seven

The craziest thing about falling in love has to be the fact that you don't even get to decide when you take the leap. It decides for you...

Uju couldn't remember a time when she'd last had so much fun. Bolanle hadn't been lying when she'd said her friends were a great bunch. They'd made her feel wanted and welcomed, everyone easily cracking jokes and effortlessly sustaining the conversation around the table. They talked about everything from work, to business, to the present, saddening state of the Nigerian economy, the japa wave, even love and friendship. It was such a wholesome experience, getting to meet new people and instantly hitting things off with them. However, she couldn't deny that the actual star of the night was the man sitting by her side.

Uju had lost count of the number of times she'd blushed that evening, or the thousand new emotions she'd found her body, heart and mind experiencing. Tade Maxwell differed from all the men she'd ever met. He was sweet, charming, humorous, respectful, and so interesting to speak with. In moments when she hadn't felt the need to join the general conversation, he'd easily kept her entertained all on his own. She'd found out that he was a tech expert who enjoyed starting companies, making unicorns out of them, then moving on to the next enormous challenge. She also got to learn he'd been living in the U.S for most of his adult life, and despite how earnestly he clearly held on to his Nigerian roots, the evidence of that still crept into his accent now and then.

Uju enjoyed talking with him. She enjoyed seeing his beautiful brown eyes light up whenever he spoke about something that truly meant a lot to him, like his mother and his twin sisters, whom he fondly referred to as rug rats. It was also as clear as the moon in the night's sky that he was passionate about his job. The best part? As much as he indulged her, letting her know all that she wanted to—and that was saying a lot, because Uju wasn't naturally curious about

people, but she found herself wanting to know every single thing about this man—he also ensured that she got her moments in the spotlight. And every time she spoke about herself, there was that twinkle in his eyes again, the one that made her stomach feel all warm and fuzzy, affirming that he relished listening to her, perhaps almost as much as he loved all the important people and things in his life.

Through their conversation, it had become obvious that they had quite a lot in common. They were both light drinkers, only he seldom took alcohol. They both were obsessed with cars and enjoyed car racing games. He'd confessed that he actually did some real life racing back in the States, but it was one secret he would be grateful to her for, if kept from his mother. When he had made that plea with the eyes of an adorable lost puppy, Uju had broken into laughter, and given a scout's promise that Mrs. Carolyn Ayomitide Maxwell would never hear of her son's dangerous hobbies from her.

They were both adventurers and enjoyed touring the world. They both loved reading books, but whilst she was more of a mystery and thriller kind of girl, he enjoyed getting lost in the worlds of fairytale romance. Now, that one had caught her quite off guard, and if there hadn't been the faintest blush on his dark cheeks as he admitted as much, she would have thought he was simply making things up to earn points.

As she stared at him, marveling at how endearing she found his occasional shyness, Uju stumbled upon yet another realization—she immensely enjoyed looking at his face. He was such a handsome man. And at least six feet, three inches tall, from what she'd seen when he'd stood up to come sit by her side. Reliving that memory now, caused the arteries in her heart to bulge and tickle. She'd found it so cute! He also had very broad shoulders and she would know because, at several points during the evening, she'd mysteriously found herself leaning towards him and placing her head on said shoulders. But those weren't all she liked about his looks. He was dark-skinned, and from how finely he glowed, she could tell he was the kind of man to moisturize; he evidently took his skin care seriously. Then again, what could she expect from the heir to a multi-million dollar conglomerate, who just happened to also be a multi-millionaire in his own right?

He was clean shaven, no beards in sight, and she was grateful for that because it helped her appreciate the chiseled cut of his jaw even better. Uju was certain God had taken extra time to sculpt that himself; Tade's chins lifted towards the heavens in high praises, were a clear testament to that. His brows, so

full and perfectly arched, almost put hers, which she'd always prided in, to shame. As for his eyes, from afar, they seemed to be the darkest shade of brown, but when she leaned in, she could spot the faint flecks of amber that were Mrs. Maxwell's signature eye color, thanks to her mixed roots. His hair was a proper low cut, one that would please every single Nigerian mother. And his lips... Uju absentmindedly touched her tongue to hers as she tried—and failed—not to stare at them. They were full, supple, they reminded her of pink roses, and she was a child of God, so pulling all her strength together before she started to think improper thoughts, she tore her gaze away. It only ended up falling to the dark jean trousers he'd paired with a brown shirt. And finally, gracing his feet was a simple-looking pair of casual shoes that complemented his overall look really well.

A dreamy sigh slipped past Uju's lips. What could she say? He was a gorgeous specimen of a man who knew how to throw on a fine ass fit.

As everyone rose from the table, a consensus that it was a good time to call it a night, she wished that the evening would last longer. *Sarah will certainly have a field day when she hears this. Her favorite 'asexual' friend finally understands what it means to be irresistibly attracted to someone, and an I.J.G.B for that matter!* Even Uju wanted to laugh at herself. What had Justin Bieber said in his song again? *Yeah, never say never.* Notwithstanding, it was what it was, and she was certainly looking forward to seeing him again. This was why as they all piled out of the lounge, exchanging goodbyes and numbers with promises to meet up soon, and he asked her what her plans were for the rest of the week, she happily told him about her present dilemma.

“So, you're saying you're suddenly free for Christmas, but unable to go home because you can't find any flights?” he asked, their fingers still clasped around each other.

He hadn't let go of her hand, not once all night, and the simple truth was, Uju was quite happy and content to remain like that. She loved the way her body trilled alive next to him, the way her palms continued to tingle, and how every part of them that came in contact: the shoulder brushes, the side leanings, felt so ticklish and exhilarating. They were feelings she wanted to hold on to dearly, for a while still to come.

“Precisely!” she exclaimed in response, letting her exasperation echo through. Although, after this evening, she wasn't so sure not being able to find a flight was such an awful thing any longer. “Strange, right? I mean, how can I possibly not find one flight?” She sighed. “I'll keep checking. But with

Christmas only a few weeks away, the way it's looking... I might just end up having a Lagos Christmas."

"Aww, I'm so sorry to hear about this," Tade comforted. "However, you can't be so sure yet. There's still time for something to come up, and I'm sure it will. Keep the faith, okay?" When she bobbed her head, he asked again, "Did you say you've closed from work for the year?"

"Well, officially. My staff have been working hard all year round. I figured they'd appreciate an early Christmas break. I was right, they were ecstatic!"

"Hmm. A boss who has the interest of her people at heart." A wink accompanied his compliment.

Uju lifted her shoulder in a smug shrug. "I try. They're the best hands I could ever ask for."

"I totally understand what you mean. It's always fulfilling to find a great team to work with. Makes things so much easier, eh?"

"Mm-hmm."

There was an infinitesimal moment of comfortable silence as they drew closer to her car. Tade was the first to break it. "It's an amazing feat what you've built for yourself, Uju. I truly admire you. Well done."

Uju wanted to joke that it was nothing like founding several unicorns, or being on the board of various Fortune five-hundred companies, but he was right: she was doing so great in her own right. Thus, she wholeheartedly accepted the accolades. "Thank youuuu! You're really kind. And if you must know, I think you're a badass too." She said those words with a tease in her voice as she bumped shoulders. That earned her a soft chuckle, one so wondrous it caused Uju to suck in her breath, letting the glorious melody wash over her. *His* timber voice was quickly becoming her roman empire.

"Why, thank you, milady!" he flattered as he sobered. "That's high praise, I tell you. I'd probably make a t-shirt with the inscription, '*Uju says I'm a badass too*', and wear it everywhere. Or perhaps I'd just use J.J, give my mother something to go crazy over."

Uju couldn't help shaking her head as her cheeks' creases inched closer to permanence. All the while, her stomach wouldn't stop rioting. "You strike me as the kind who has found the perfect balance between reassuring her and driving her insane."

It was his turn to lift one endless shoulder in an identical shrug. "What can I say? I try. I have to keep her on her toes, so she doesn't get jaded on me."

"Please! Mrs. Maxwell is the last person I know who's at the risk of being

jaded. Well-read, vastly intelligent, and delightfully eccentric, she's going to be having fun for many years still to come. Besides, that woman is a *sisi o*, she no dey gree for anybody. In fact, sometimes I wonder who's older."

Another warm chuckle as he stared at her as though she were the most interesting thing in the world. "Now, I see why she's besotted with you. You truly know her. Ahh, what can I say? Fela sang the song, *Lady*, for her. I can just see her in her nineties, still a stunning beauty and giving her grandchildren a run for their money."

"You adore her," Uju noted aloud.

"With all my heart."

Uju nodded. She absolutely approved. A man who loved his mother, but also had his own mind—a really fine blend indeed. "This is me," she whispered as they came to stand by her car. The reality of their inevitable separation dimmed her joy. However, his impressed whistle pleasantly surprised her, instantly boosting her mood once more.

"Whew! You really know your cars, eh?"

"I can't wait to buy the rest on my list," she answered sweetly, pleased by the approval she could see in his eyes, and hear in his voice.

"I'll handle the bottle of champagne for each buy, and we'll toast to more!"

Her heart soared, turning her smile into a radiant beam. "A supportive partner in cars affinity, I rate it!"

He winked at her, eyes reflecting the stars in the sky. "Anything for you, darl." It was only then that he finally let go of her hand—no doubt because he knew she'd be needing it to rummage through her purse for her car key.

Nonetheless, understanding the rationale behind that act didn't stop Uju from mourning the loss of warmth. Thankfully, she managed to keep her disappointment hidden as she fetched said key, unlocked her car, then turned to face him once more, her left side now leaning against the driver's door. "I guess this is where we say goodnight." Her voice was tender, almost filled with regret.

"I guess," he replied just as softly. Then it happened again, the world fading away as they got lost in each other's gaze.

At five feet, eight inches tall, it wasn't every day Uju met men who made her raise her chin when speaking to them, but Tade easily towered above her. She liked the height difference, really liked it, especially for moments like this. Alas, nothing lasted forever, especially good things. He soon broke the spell, clearing his throat.

"So, I don't really have anything on my itinerary until the new year."

Easily grasping the implication of those words, Uju pushed away from the car, giving him her full attention. She nodded, urging him to continue, as her heart began to thud in anticipation.

“And you just happen to be free as well.”

She bobbed her head once more.

“I really enjoyed hanging out with you tonight.”

“Me too!” There was no reason to lie when it was the simple truth. Besides, she’d never been the kind to hold back, when she was really interested in someone. And it was fully established that what she felt for this man standing before her, was more than just genuine interest. It was something far more potent. The force of it both frightened and ensnared her.

His lips broke into a dazzling grin at those words, and Uju found herself needing to regain her footing. *My gracious! How can anyone be so attractive? Is this even normal? Being so drawn to someone after only the first meeting?*

“I’m glad to hear that you did, and now I’m hoping that you had enough fun to convince you to hang out with me again?”

Yes! Of course, yes! Uju cleared her throat, bidding her heart be still. “What do you have in mind?”

“Can I surprise you?”

Her eyes searched his for another long moment, then she nodded. She wasn’t one for surprises, but she had a feeling she could trust this man, that he would actually outdo himself. He just gave off that air of excellence. “When do you have in mind, then? If you won’t tell me what, and I’m also guessing where, I should at least know when, don’t you think?”

His smile deepened. She hadn’t thought it was possible for it to be any more charming, but apparently, she had been wrong. “How’s Saturday? Would that work for you? Or maybe... tomorrow?”

Now Uju was giggling. It wasn’t so much what he’d said. Rather, it was the way he’d said it: head bowed in shyness, gaze lifted in soft hope, and voice absolutely smitten. “Tomorrow? You want us to meet tomorrow?”

“It’s okay if it’s too soon, or if you already have plans,” he rushed, clearly worried he had dropped the ball. It was so endearing to watch.

Uju shook her head, zealous to reassure him. “It’s not too soon, and I don’t have any plans. I was just going to stay in all day watching Kdrama. So...” A deep breath as she affirmed she was truly doing this. “Tomorrow is fine. I’d love to meet with you.”

Her heart soared as he pumped his fist into the air. His glee was as winsome

as it was infectious. “Yes!”

Seeing him so openly and genuinely thrilled about the prospect of spending more time with her, it weakened her defenses—not that any of them had really held since her eyes first met his from across the lounge earlier that evening—but yeah, if she had been the day’s bread before, now she was marshmallow.

“All right, I’ll do this,” he began as soon as he barely collected himself. “I’ll give you my number, then you can choose to call me, so I’d have yours. I’ll need some time to set everything up, but I’ll definitely send the details across to you latest by tomorrow morning. How’s that?”

“I think that sounds great,” Uju replied, unable to keep the smile off her voice. Over the next few minutes, she took his digits. She was going to call him right away, but an idea came to mind, so she decided against it, saving it for later instead. As if to remind them both that this was borrowed time, his friends began to call out to him from the other end of the small park right then.

“I guess that’s my cue,” he smiled at her.

“We’ll see tomorrow,” she promised, comforted by the thought that he seemed just as reluctant to say goodbye.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered in response. Then, ever so slowly, clearly giving her time to repudiate him, he reached for her face. When she wouldn’t stop him, he drew a tender, single-finger caress across her cheeks. “Goodnight, Njay, dream of me.”

He was gone before Uju could finish recovering from the breathtakingly affectionate moment that’d wrapped a fist around her beating organ and refused to let go. It wasn’t until she was in her car and halfway home that it registered: yet another member of the Maxwell household had given her an extra nickname.

Njay... Obianuju.

Her cheeks hurt like crazy. She loved it. She loved it very much.

Eight

First symptom of the love flu: you can't stop thinking or talking about them. Oh? Did someone come to mind? Oops!

Uju's heart was still chiming in tune with the season's bells when she drove into her estate, half an hour later. She paused as soon as she was behind the gates. Then, according to their tradition whenever she came home this late, waited for Alfred to walk down to her.

"Madam, welcome o! Since that time wey you *comot*, you just dey come back? *Ehyah*, body go don *taya* you well, well."

She smiled as she reached for the nylon of *suya* on the passenger seat. "Ehn, I say make I go find husband now, as you always dey disturb me for oga." Oga meant male boss, but was also used to refer to male romantic partners.

Alfred's grin was instant, large, and before Uju knew it, the distance between the corners of her lips was growing as well. She had always been fond of him. Despite his young age of twenty-one, he outworked all the other estate security men. He was good-natured, warm, and whenever you gave him a moment or two, he often had stories that would have your ribs cracking by the time you drove off. There was also the fact that he respected boundaries, was always eager to help, and could usually tell when she just wanted to get home after a long day. On nights like that, he happily sent her off with soothing words of encouragement.

"Ah, madam, you big pass that one o," his baritone boomed. "No be you suppose dey go look for oga at all! Na big ogas suppose dey rush you."

"Abi?" Uju laughed. "As them no *wan* come rush me nkor? If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed will go to it, no be so?" She handed him the *suya* nylon through the open window. "Oya, take this one. As I was entering the street, I saw that mallam was still selling, so I got you some." Although, the mallam today was different. He'd claimed he was Aliu's brother, and the *suya*

had tasted the same, so Uju didn't think there was much to it.

"Ah! Madam, the madam! The only one Madam Uju! Na only you I salute! Any other Uju is a counterfeit!"

Uju was still laughing as he accepted her gift and began to display theatrics. She watched him untie the nylon, unwrap the newspaper that had been used to serve the peppered grilled meat, carefully select his first piece, and throw it into his mouth. He was dancing around now, giddy as a child who just unboxed his newest favorite toy.

"Hmm! Mallam no dey disappoint at all! E too sweet! Hope say you buy for yourself too?"

Uju shook her head. "I'm full abeg. I just want to get home and sleep."

"Chai! Ehyah! Okay now, if you go dey house tomorrow evening, I go buy come give you." That was another thing about Alfred. He had a generous heart and was always happy to return one good deed with another.

"For what now? If you have that kind of time on your hands, take your girlfriend out and have fun, jhor! Me sef, I dey go meet bobo." Uju winked as she said those words, and Alfred started to dance again.

"Ah! Madam, the madam! So, you were not pulling my legs when you said you went to meet oga? Congratulations o! Just let me know when it's time for the wedding. Trust me now, me and my boys go show! Na we go handle the drinks, make sure say e go round!" He was about to say more when someone else started honking at the gate. Immediately, his playfulness vanished, and he was back into work mode. "Madam, abeg, make I go open gate. From the car, e be like say na Oga Peter from house six. We go dey talk later now."

Uju revved up her engine, ready to drive off as well. "Of course. See you tomorrow."

"Ooo, bye, bye! Help me greet oga o!" Then he was running off.

Uju watched him get into the security station before continuing her journey home. Three more turns, and she was driving into her yard. The conversation she'd had with Alfred was still playing in her mind as she got out of her car. She couldn't believe she'd told him about Tade, unprovoked! Was she really that smitten? Before that evening, she'd always been the type to keep new romantic interests private until she was certain it was leading somewhere, as they rarely ever did. And now, what? She'd all but introduced someone she just met a few hours ago to her security man! *Uju, what if this is how madness usually starts? Could you be losing your mind?* She didn't get the chance to answer that question because just as she finished pressing her passcode, her purse began to

vibrate. She waited until the door had beeped open and she was safely behind it, before reaching for her phone.

Her heart sunk when she saw the name on the screen, and she immediately scolded herself. *How could he be the one calling you? You didn't give him your number, remember?* That was something she intended to rectify that night, though—as soon as she was done speaking with Sarah.

“Halloo!” she chimed, kicking off her heels and sighing in relief. Suddenly in the mood for chilled water, her first stop was the kitchen.

“Ah, finally!” Sarah exclaimed on the other end. “I was just about to call your parents and ask if they knew their daughter was missing!”

Uju stopped in her tracks. She had a ‘*What the hell do you mean?*’ look on her face, as her head jerked to her phone screen.

“What? Abeg, abeg, don’t look at me like that! Chidera said you were going out tonight to catch some bobos, although I wonder why you didn’t tell me, but we can always get to that later. That’s how we started messaging you for progress report since nine p.m. o!” She snapped her fingers. “Two hours passed, no response. We said okay, maybe you were having a superb time and had simply forgotten to check your phone. Until we started calling since around eleven p.m., believing you’d already be heading home, and you still wouldn’t pick up. With all the bad news in the country these days, and especially considering the season, hian! We feared the worst o.”

Uju heaved a deep sigh. Minimizing the WhatsApp call screen, the first thing she saw were the missed call notifications in her call center. They were all of twenty-seven, and from all her girls; Sarah, Jessica, Osas, Hauwa, Yemi, Chidera, no one had been left out. She instantly felt bad for having made them worry.

“Aww! Chai! It’s not like that o,” she explained as she found her way to their group chat. “I didn’t even realize my phone was on vibration, and I hardly held my purse all night. At first, it was on the table, then it was on the car seat as I drove home. I had no idea you guys had been calling. I’m so, so sorry!”

“It’s all right,” Sarah responded quickly. “I’m just glad you’re actually fine. You scared us there for a minute. I was already regretting suggesting anything to you at all. Who knew you’d actually take me seriously? I mean, what has gotten into you? You never minded me before.”

Uju rolled her eyes. “Maybe I’m just tired of living in this big house alone, and want to experience something like what you and Tega have. Or maybe at thirty-one, my biological clock is finally ticking.” She placed her phone down

for a moment to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. She could hear Sarah muttering something, but couldn't really make out the words as she gulped. Soon, she was putting the bottle down on the counter, then finding her way to her bedroom. "You were saying?"

"I was asking who you were deceiving o, you that like being on your own too much."

Uju shrugged. "I guess I just never felt the need to mingle since I was always working, anyway. Spending countless hours with strangers and fresh faces every other day takes its toll, you know. Home was always my place of reprieve, a place I could be alone with my thoughts, and I liked that. However, with this Christmas being free of work, I got bored really quickly. So, I figured, why not take your advice and go see what's happening in town?" She placed her phone on the vanity as soon as she stepped into her room. Her bra was the first thing to come off. Next was her dress, then her jewelries. Too exhausted to worry about cleanliness, she simply flung both clothing items on the teal green accent chair she tried to keep empty on most days. The jewelries found their spot atop her vanity. A sigh of relief filled the air as she plopped on her bed, phone in hand.

"Ew! Wetin be this way you dey show me so?" Sarah asked when they came face to face once more.

"Nothing wey you never see before," Uju retorted, throwing her blanket over herself. She reached for her AC remote control, then turned it on. Back against the mattress and phone held above her face, she began scrolling through their girls' group chat named *Forever Young and Getting It*. They'd all thought the name was quite fitting when the group chat got formed six years ago. Nothing had changed since.

Chidera: *Guys, guess what?*

Hauwa: *What?*

Jessica: *What?*

Osas: *How far? Wetin dey happen?*

Chidera: *It's Uju, o! Uju went out tonight to mingle and have fun! Is our baby girl all grown up or what?*

Osas: *Tah! Same Uju wey we know? That one sabi wetin them dey call fun? E even dey her dictionary?*

Yemi: **laughing sticker* What do you mean? Our whole bestest events planner ever liveth? She dey try now!*

Jessica: *Na so! Uju that hasn't been on a date in ages! The*

only thing that one knows is work. Her matter don taya me.

Chidera: *Well, that might change soon o. She went out for real! She refused to send me a picture of what she wore sha, but she went to the X bar lounge.*

Osas: *Eiii! Isah lie! It's like you really mean this thing o.*

Chidera: *Ehen now, would I just be making stuff up for fun?*

Jessica: *Lmaoo. Waawu! I can't believe this!*

Hauwa: *Trust Uju to be the only person to visit X bar on a Thursday, when Saturday is actually the happening day for that place.*

Chidera: *You dey mind her? Anyway, the koko is she went out o! Me, I'm thinking we should do a video call, and ask her how it went when she gets back.*

Sarah: *I just messaged her for an update, she's not responding. I have to admit, this is truly surprising. I suggested it to her some days ago, after her latest bride canceled on her and her Christmas suddenly became free. I never thought she'd actually consider it o.*

The chats that followed were more opinions about Uju's apparent penchant for a dreary life, before the panic eventually set in. Uju sighed for what must have been the hundredth time as she finished catching up on the messages. Indeed, she'd always been a bit of a workaholic compared to the rest of them. Notwithstanding, it surely couldn't be as terrible as they were painting it to be. Right? Heaving yet another sigh, she typed her response and hit send.

Hey, babes! I'm so sorry for making y'all worry. My phone was on silent, and I didn't know it was ringing until I got home. I'm back now and safe. I actually had the time of my life and even met someone new. So much for 'no-fun' Uju, huh?

There, she thought to herself, *that would definitely give them something to talk about.* And it did! As soon as the message got double ticked, her phone buzzed. It was a group call from Chidera. Even Sarah who had been distracted by Tega, was suddenly hyperventilating and demanding answers.

"You know what? End this call now, now, and join the group one! Let's all

get this tea together!”

Smiling smugly, Uju did just that.

Nine

Sisterhood, when practiced in truth, is the most beautiful gift a woman could ever receive. A girl needs her sisters...

Uju's heart warmed as she took in the faces of her soul sisters. She couldn't remember the last time all seven of them had actually been available for a video call. The fact that this extraordinary moment was happening because of her, filled her chest with fuzzy clouds. She really loved her girls. They were the second most important set of people in her world, after her family. This was why she was truly grateful that though they were spread across the globe, and the distance often tried to flex its muscles, they were still as tight as ever. On any day, all of them would drop everything else to be there for whoever was in need. That definitely topped the list of her favorite things about them.

"Oya, oya, spill!" Osas demanded. Osas was a doctor in the U.S, and had always been known as the '*no-nonsense mama*' of the group. Back then, at the university of Lagos, she had single-handedly ensured that no one ever succeeded in messing with any of them. Eventually, people had gotten the cue and had simply stopped trying. That had significantly improved their university experience and they would all always be grateful for it. Yes, Osas was hard by nature and difficult to deal with sometimes, but the ladies loved her to death, aware that behind her metal ribcage was a bag of marshmallows.

"You people should bribe me o," Uju teased, wondering if she'd made the right decision, telling about Tade this early. Knowing her friends, they would never let it rest. Then again, she reasoned, if she'd been so eager to share the news with Alfred, there was absolutely no hope that she would have been able to keep it from her friends—not for long, anyway.

"You should be happy that we held back from disturbing Prof. and Honorable Chief Judge this night. Now, talk *jare*, so I can finally go back to work. I've been

restless for the past two hours and haven't been able to get anything done." That was Hauwa, the most well-tempered one amongst them. Hauwa was charming, an ambivert who enjoyed her own company, but was also always down for a good time. She was incontestably the scholar amongst them, with only a few years away from becoming a professor. Already, she had three Masters' degrees and, most recently, a PhD. She lived in Canada with her husband and kids; two adorable boys who drove her to nuts, but whom the girls enjoyed spoiling rotten. Suffice to say, she was the epitome of '*women can do it all.*'

And then there was Yemi, a sweet, easygoing babe, and one of the biggest fabrics traders in *Eko* market. Almost every designer, every prominent person in Nigeria, and even West Africa, bought fabrics from Yemi's store. In fact, you'd not successfully thrown a luxurious party if you weren't adorned with *Fabrics by Yemi*. Her ever growing Instagram presence of over two hundred and seventy thousand followers was a testament to how globally prosperous she'd become. She was presently spending the holidays with her in-laws in Port Harcourt, whilst her exceedingly capable staff continued to hold things down in her absence.

"What Hauwa said o," Yemi drawled. "Drop the gist, jhor! Me, it's sleep I want to sleep. You should have seen the hard labor these people put me through today. It's like they've forgotten I'm Yemzi oo. Number one..."

"Fabrics trader, worldwide!" they all chorused, completing her sentence. Many of them couldn't resist rolling their eyes. If only they had a dollar for every time Yemi said those words. Their dearest friend was almost as proud as they were of her success. In all honesty, Uju loved it for her. Yemi worked insanely hard and deserved to give herself all the flowers in the world.

That left Chidera, a highly sought-after business analyst and consultant. Chidera could simply be described as a chill babe. She was down to earth, super friendly, and was always ready to turn up! She was also great with kids, so it was no surprise that she was the favorite aunty of the group, as far as the kids were concerned. After Sarah, Uju was closest to her.

Finally, there was Jessica, the big-time influencer of their group. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Podcast, name it! Jessica was massively blown and loved! She was also the baby of the group, and it wasn't really because she was the youngest. There was mostly the fact that she had this '*I'm fragile, please pamper me*' air about her that made people, especially men, want to give her everything she could ever ask for. Of course, it didn't help that she was a lover girl and kept falling in love with any man who showed her the slightest bit of

kindness. One would think that after all the heartbreaks, she would have learned her lesson about Lagos men, but for where? At some point, the girls had grown weary of supporting her against anti-fans who enjoyed trolling her over her six-monthly relationships, because one thing Jessica would never do? Love in secret. Notwithstanding, they were always ready with their burner and main accounts, to drag anybody necessary, whilst counseling her to be a little more discrete and cautious with her love life. In truth, they'd given up on hoping she'd listen ages ago. These days, they focused more of their energy on praying that one of those frogs she kept kissing would end up turning into her prince charming, real soon.

Yup, Sarah included, those were Uju's girls. All of them, insanely successful, utterly stunning, amazingly brilliant, all flawed, but no one loved any less than the other, despite their personality differences. Besides, when it came to the things that truly mattered, core values and belief systems, they were mostly in agreement. This was why their friendship had continued to thrive for so long.

"So, are you going to tell us, or are we going to have to force it out of you?" Osas asked again, evidently losing her patience.

Uju wasn't intimidated in the least bit. "Calm your tits, Madam! I will talk, jare. But only because seeing how worried y'all were about me, really melted my heart. I mean, aww, you people really like me o." When they began to hiss and act as though they'd sooner end the call, Uju sat up. "Oya, oya, I'll gist you guys. Let me go and wear something first. Cold is starting to catch me."

They waited as she slipped into one of her nightgowns. Then, returning to her bed, she began to recount the evening. From her arrival to the encounter with Mr. Obnoxious, Bolanle's rescue, and finally, meeting Tade, Uju didn't leave out a single detail she considered important enough. They all listened with rapt attention, the only sounds she could hear from them, dreamy sighs, occasional gasps, and girly giggles as she got to the part about Tade. Even after she finished, silence reigned for a long moment. Judging from the sketches of astonishment on their faces, Uju could tell they were soaking it all in.

"Soo???" she prodded, needing them to say something, anything. "You guys are all looking like you just saw a fairy."

It was Sarah who broke the spell. "Well, we might as well have! Is that you, blushing when speaking about a man you couldn't stop gushing over? Are those stars in your eyes, my dear?"

"OMG, guys! She's in loveeeeeeeeeee!!!" Jessica squealed. "It's finally happening! Our friend is finally experiencing her first love!"

Love? That word filled Uju with wonder. Surely, it couldn't be. For one, it

was way too soon! For two, she would be foolish to give her heart to a man she'd just met. She couldn't even tell if he could be trusted. For all she knew, he had two girlfriends back in the U.S, plus a baby mama he kept well-hidden from even his own family. Her entire body revolted against those thoughts as soon as they formed. It was as though the core of her being couldn't grasp the faintest idea of Tade being anything other than a proper gentleman; one who'd only been sincere with her all night long.

"It's certainly not love, Jessica," she argued weakly. "I can't be in love with a man I just met tonight." *Could she?*

"Why not? There's something called love at first sight, honey!"

"A phenomenon I'm sure you're very familiar with, Jess, but is really not my thing. He was nice to talk to, I really enjoyed my time with him, and I think I can admit that I... I like him, but it's certainly not love."

"She likes himmm!" Hauwa pealed, wiggling her brows.

"Yes, is that a problem?"

"Do you realize how long it often takes for you to admit that you *like* someone?" Chidera asked.

"I don't understand. I like people all the time now. What about all the men I've dated?"

Yemi was shaking her head as she responded. "You'd always say, '*I think he's a cool guy*' or '*He seems decent*', whenever we ask you about them. The likeness sometimes came after a couple of months together, and other times, never at all! Yet, look at you, swooning over a man you just met and admitting you really like him on the first night! Wow, he must have really been something, eh?"

Uju found herself back at Tade's side in the lounge, sitting hip to hip, hand in hand, eyes getting lost in each other's... Her heart tickled, her blood seared, and her stomach squirmed with that same delicious sensation from earlier that suddenly felt deeply familiar. *Is this what love feels like?* "He just struck me as a really interesting personality, is all," she argued again.

"You mean a really interesting, dashing personality," Jessica teased, her dark eyes twinkling.

Well, he is quite handsome. Perhaps, the most handsome man I've ever laid my eyes upon.

It wasn't until Osas shouted, "Chai! Them don carry our friend go o! See as cheeks dey red, *Jesu!*" that Uju realized she'd actually said those words aloud.

Said cheeks burned hotter with mortification. Now she understood exactly

how Tade had felt all night, knowing his friends were watching him lose control. She wondered if it had been as much of a first for him as it was for her.

“You really hit the jackpot, huh?” That was Chidera. “Filthy rich, handsome, and a gentleman on top of all of that! Every disappointment is indeed a blessing! Imagine that arrant nonsense boy hadn’t been trying to rob you of your peace of mind? Tade wouldn’t have had a reason to send his friend’s wife over, and you two might have just ended up missing each other for good.” She threw a piece of popcorn into her mouth. “God truly works in mysterious ways!”

“Yes, o!” Jessica heartily agreed. “See how everything turned out well? In fact, thank Abisola for canceling o. Sarah as well, for convincing you to go out. You didn’t know it then, but lines were actually falling into places for this very moment! Won’t God do it?”

“He will!” Yemi chimed in.

Uju couldn’t help shaking her head as she stared at her friends. Yes, a huge part of her was excited, but there was also that little voice of caution in her head. “Guys, aren’t we moving a little too fast? I mean, I just met the man, o. We don’t even know what could happen tomorrow. I could wake up and suddenly not be interested again.”

Hauwa was in agreement. “That’s true. Maybe we should calm our horses. Besides, the fact that his mummy is our dearest Mrs. Maxwell doesn’t mean the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. After all, he’s still an I.J.G.B.”

“That is stereotyping, please,” Sarah interjected. “Not all I.J.G.B’s!”

They all burst into laughter, each of them fully understanding the reference to the *‘Not all men’* brigade. Uju’s heart leapt in gratitude to Sarah for that ice breaker. It wasn’t until they’d recovered, that her number one best friend spoke again.

“True, true, there’s no telling where this would lead yet, and it wouldn’t make sense to get ahead of ourselves. However, just seeing you so happy and excited...” A warm sigh slipped past her lips. “It fills my heart with so much joy, Juju! I truly hope you allow yourself to live in this moment, ride this wave, and see where it takes you.”

“Yes!”

“That’s right!”

“Help us tell her o!” Jessica, Chidera and Yemi commented in that particular order.

“But be careful sha, because men are not to be trusted,” Osas chirped in.

“Says the person who’s been with one partner for the past ten years of her

life. When will you people finally get married, sef?” Hauwa countered.

As always, Osas had a ready response. “You guys know exactly how Kelvin and I feel about marriage. What we have is real and good enough for us.” She waved her fingers in the air. “We don’t need a piece of paper or some jewelry to validate us.”

Aware that the conversation was a futile one, no one said anything else. In all seriousness, they’d unanimously decided to let her be, ages ago. After all, Osas had the most long-lasting relationship amongst them, despite not being married. Its dynamics were quite healthy as well. If she continued to insist that, that was what worked for her and her Armenian boyfriend, then it certainly had to be.

“So, what are you going to be wearing for the date tomorrow?” Jessica asked, skillfully changing the subject. The tension that had been brewing in the atmosphere instantly dissipated.

“I have no idea. I don’t even know where we are headed. I suppose I’d be able to make my choice when he sends the address tomorrow.” Uju gasped. “Which reminds me, he still doesn’t have my number! Where will he send it to?” She was jumping out of bed the next minute, anxious to take a shower and finally put that call through. She wondered if he’d also gotten home safely, if he was at that very moment thinking about her. “Babes, abeg, we go dey continue this gist another day. I need to call this man. But first, I have to take my bath.”

“Mm-hmm! Our Uju has joined the ‘*this man*’ gang o! Who would have thought we would ever see this day?” Chidera teased.

“Small *yansh* sef don dey shake oo!” Jessica chimed, joining in.

Accustomed to their ribbing, Uju easily held down her own. “Tah! Say anything about my *yansh*, but it’ll never be small abeg. You sef, you no see wetin I carry? E fit reach two people share o. And e go still remain. Unlike some persons I know.” The side eyes she gave Osas and Jessica threw the others into a fit of laughter. They were still cracking up as they bade one another goodnight.

Minutes after, Uju stepped out of the bathroom. Before long, she was done applying her skin care products. Then came the dilemma of choosing her night dress. She wrestled between too revealing, and too conservative, before settling on one that seemed simple enough to look like she’d just thrown it on, yet sufficiently stylish to make her look good. It wasn’t until she’d sat on her bed and picked up her phone that she caught herself. *What am I doing? I’m not going to call him, am I? Especially not a video call. Nah, a text would certainly be safer.* Bobbing her head as she decided, she crawled further into her bed so her back would rest against the headboard. Then she went to her iMessage.

Hii, Tade. It's me, Uju. Here's my number.

She stared at those words for a long second and ended up erasing them. They sounded too formal, too serious. Clearing her throat as she crossed her legs and hugged her pillows, she typed again.

Hii, Tade. Guess wh...

She couldn't even finish typing before deleting this time around. It sounded too corny. What was she going to say? 'Guess who?' She might as well tell knock-knock jokes.

Hey, fine boy. Congratulations, you finally have my num...

Arrghhh! Oh my God, Uju! What are you doing??? Type something normal, forguhsek! Play it cool!

Finally, the best thoughts so far came to mind. Convinced this would do it, she hurriedly typed and hit send before she'd overthink again, and end up losing her mind.

Hey, Stranger. Got home safe?

She shut her eyes tight, pressed her phone to her chest, then bade her wildly racing heart be still. Next thing she knew, her phone was ringing, and indeed, it was none other than Tade calling. It was as though he'd been keeping watch on his phone, waiting to hear from her. Uju's body hummed at the thought of hearing his voice again, and even though she'd hoped to get her nerves a little more together before picking the call, she found herself impatiently swiping left.

"Hiii, Stranger!"

Ten

How long does it take to fall in love? Months? Days? Hours? Coz I think I kinda, maybe, do really like you...

Tade felt his knees grow weak with relief as he heard that voice he was now certain he could never forget again. Finally! It felt like he'd been waiting centuries for this.

He'd been very careful earlier, not wanting to risk attempting anything that would only make Njay recoil from him. He had wanted her to see, feel, and know that he would only ever ask for things he truly believed she'd be most comfortable with. And if she was ever not interested, she only needed to say no once, just once was all it would take for him to shut it all down.

Tade couldn't recall ever feeling this way about anyone else, probably because he never had. This fragile thing that had begun to brew between himself and Njay, he wanted it to last for as long as possible. He was intent on doing everything in his power to ensure he didn't ruin it before it got a proper chance to sprout. This was why even though he'd been so sad to part from her, so devastated that he'd desperately itched to drive her home—if only to delay their parting a little longer—he'd kept those thoughts to himself. He knew a self-sufficient woman when he saw one, and had been deeply aware that Njay would not have taken lightly to him being so forward after only their first meeting, noble intentions or not.

Besides, what would she have thought of him wanting to know where she lived on the *kinda* first date? She definitely would have considered him a creep, regardless of the history she shared with his family. It was the same reason he hadn't offered to pick her up for their date the next day. Tade was beyond grateful she'd even agreed to meet with him at all, and so quickly at that. Moving forward, all he had to do was ensure he didn't drop the ball in any way. Thus, as they exchanged numbers, he'd only offered to give her his. Still

wanting her to feel as much in control of what was happening between them as possible, it had just made sense to leave the decision of whether she wanted him to have hers—or not—in her court. Of course, his heart had fragmented a little when she hadn't instantly put a call through. Then, he'd spent the entire ride home, as well as the past hour, staring at his phone, waiting for something, anything, that would indicate she hadn't forgotten his existence and changed her mind as soon as he was out of sight.

Even now, as he let the smooth velvet of her voice wash over him, he couldn't help but wonder if it wouldn't have just been better to have replied with a text. *I really hope she won't find my calling too presumptuous.* Alas, there was nothing to do other than apologize, if that was the case. Crying over spilt milk wouldn't make the glass full again.

"Njay, hiii!" he breathed. "It's a delight to hear from you!"

"You sound as though you'd feared you never would again."

Tade could hear the smile in her voice. Before he knew it, he too was grinning. He stretched on his bed and drew his pillow close. "Well, I won't deny the thought did cross my mind. I was afraid I hadn't done a good job of leaving a lasting impression, after all." He was rewarded with a warm chuckle this time, and his tummy did a little backflip. He still had the ability to make her laugh! He was definitely still in the game! *Gosh! I really want to see her face!* Alas, he had already surprised her with a call, he wasn't about to ask for more.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to have taken this long. Got back to realize my girlfriends had been trying to reach me, but I wasn't aware because I'd mistakenly switched my phone to silent mode. There was also the fact that I'd been engrossed in the most delightful conversation I've had in a long while. I totally forgot I'd brought a purse along."

Tade's tummy broke into a full-blown gymnastics choreography, doing a thousand flips per hour. He couldn't wipe the grin off his face as he turned to lie on his chest. His legs bent at their knees, crossed at their ankles, and swung. Of course, he was holding on more tightly to the pillow now. "Indeed, Bolanle is a natural at making great conversations, and the guys have always been a delightful bunch. I'm glad to know you enjoyed your time with them." Tade wanted to smack himself as those words left his lips. He was no longer a child. Why was he fishing for compliments? Of course, he knew she must have been talking about the private moments they'd been able to steal for themselves. *Still wouldn't hurt to hear her say it.*

This time around, her laughter was loud, full, and it made him giggle as well.

She was quickly becoming his medicine. *Is this what it's like having feelings, these days? Or is it simply because it's been too long for me?*

"Yes, I immensely enjoyed my time with your friends. However, I was actually referring to the conversation, or should I say conversations we had. We discussed a myriad of things, did we not?"

His heart soared. "Indeed, and that was how we got to know how much we both have in common."

"Right? I mean, what are the odds? An events planner and a tech bro?"

"I suppose God just has a way of bringing two people who are meant to be, together." The moment those words left his lips, Tade froze. Had he really just pulled the fate card on her? *Great!* Now she was going to think he was a weirdo. If she chose to take to her heels after that, he would have no one to blame but himself. Pillow forgotten, he sat upright, scratched his head, and began to fumble with words. "Argh... What I meant was that... Uhm... I meant to say, it's not... You know..." he closed his eyes and pressed his lips together, truly pained. He could never forgive himself if he'd truly just thoughtlessly botched this. "Errm, what I meant to say was that," he tried again. "It's not entirely strange that we have so much in common, despite being in contrasting professions. I mean, at the end of the day, we aren't our jobs, are we? Career paths are one thing, and hobbies are another."

"I agree," came her response.

"Yeah, so I wasn't trying to insinuate that I think this was divinely orchestrated or something—not that I'm saying it wasn't—I'm just... Wait, you do? You agree?"

She was back to chuckling, and that was when Tade released a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding.

"Yes, Tade, I agree that it's not so strange we have similar hobbies. Like you said, our jobs might be career paths we're truly passionate about, but they don't make up our entire personality."

"Precisely! You got it! Ah! I'm so glad you understood me."

She let out a giggle this time, and Tade found himself twisting into pretzels as the sound tickled his ears. *Seriously, guy, get it together! You're a thirty-four-year-old super-accomplished man whom many people look up to. What would they think if they saw you acting like a love-struck idiot?* As Tade returned to his former position, rekindling his love with the pillow, he realized he didn't care what anyone thought of him at all. Feelings like these gave life its worth. Living was often a journey of worries. If a person found someone who made them float

on cloud nine, those worries forgotten, it was only right to indulge and be grateful for the experience while it lasted.

“And about the whole divinely orchestrated thing,” she continued. “I suppose we’ll see about that.”

Tade gave into a half-hearted wince. “You just weren’t going to let that go, were you?”

He could feel her shake her head. “Not when you were being so adorable about it. I almost hurt my tummy, quiet-laughing. I honestly never thought I’d see the day a well-spoken man like yourself would only be able to ramble in explanation.”

Accepting the jest with his full chest, Tade dropped his left hand over his eyes. “I deserve that. I just... I don’t want to do or say anything that would turn you off, Njay. I really like you. I know it sounds silly that I’m saying something soo... *heavy* after only the first meeting, and this isn’t me trying to move fast or anything. We can take it as slow as you want. I’m just saying, I want to get to know you better and spend more time with you. And I don’t want to ruin things before they even have the chance to properly start. I want to be able to do everything right.”

There was a long moment of silence and Tade would have feared he’d messed things up again, if her steady breathing on the other end of the phone didn’t prove to be such a soothing tune. How had things gotten so serious again?

“I don’t bite, you know,” she finally spoke, her voice soft.

“What?”

“I mean, I’m quite certain I don’t look like a masquerade, so I just thought to clarify that I don’t bite either. You don’t have to walk on eggshells around me. I... I really like you too, Tade. I want to get to know you more, as well. So, I guess what I’m saying is, let’s breathe and let things flow, okay? Except you turn out to be an obnoxious jerk, which I very much doubt, you’re not going to ruin this. You don’t have to be overly careful and overthink everything. I’m trying not to do the same.”

Tade was floating. He couldn’t believe what had just happened. This was better than anything he could have hoped for. They’d affirmed that they both liked each other, and she’d given him the reassurance he needed to go all out and stop holding back, or being excessively concerned. What could he say? The ship had indeed set sail! He was one lucky man, and he would do everything within his power to ensure she never had cause to regret this decision.

“Tade, are you there?”

“Mhm? Yes! Yes! Sure! I was just... replaying that moment when you said you really like me, over and over again in my head. I guess I’m trying to convince myself that I didn’t make it up.”

They both broke into laughter then. It was a harmoniously perfect melody that filled Tade’s heart.

“I know what you mean. I probably wouldn’t get any sleep tonight because I’d keep thinking about that exact moment *you* made your confession.”

“Please! It was hardly a confession,” Tade joked. “Just one small talk, you’ve turned it to confession of sins, hanhan. Better sleep o, we have a date tomorrow. I don’t want to hear you slept off and forgot.”

Her response was just as lighthearted. “It was definitely a confession, and you know it. Besides, don’t worry about me. I will sleep and even snore. Once this call ends...” She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “I’ve forgotten we discussed anything.”

“If you insist. I have a mother and two sisters. I know better than to think I could ever win an argument against any woman.”

“Smart man,” came her response, and they were cackling once more.

A spell of silence held before Tade spoke again. “Are we moving too fast?”

“I don’t know. To be quite honest, all of this is new to me. What do you think?”

“I think I’ve never felt this way before, and there’s no point trying to deny it or dragging our feet. We’re adults, aren’t we? Old enough to know what we want and go for it?”

He could feel her bob her head again. “I agree. As long as there’s no girlfriend anywhere that will come and break my head, sha.”

Tade laughed out loud. “And as long as there’s no fiancé that will challenge me to a duel by six a.m. tomorrow morning. As for me, I’m as single as a tripod stand. Notice they never come in twos? Besides, do you think Bolanle would have hooked us up if I had anyone in my life? She and her husband have been in cahoots with my mom, trying to get me married for the past three years.”

“So, you’ve been single for three years?”

“Yes. You?”

“Eighteen months, I think. I just got tired of getting into relationships that never felt fulfilling, so I decided to take a break and focus on work.”

“Hmm. Seems like there’s a story there.”

“Well, we’d definitely have to leave it for another day, so we don’t exhaust all the topics of conversations tonight, don’t you think?”

It wasn't a shutdown, it was more of a *'Too tired to get into that right now'*. Tade could tell from the yawn in her voice that she was already losing the battle with sleep. He really needed to let her go to bed, but he wanted to keep talking to her as well. "I agree," he responded. "We can't get boring too quickly."

"That's right. So, have you decided on where you'd be taking me tomorrow?"

"I knew it from the moment you told me your name, Njay. Preparations are already underway. I'll text you the address in the morning, or would you like for me to pick you up?" Now that she'd given him permission, he dared to ask.

"Nah, I'll find my way," she answered easily. "I like driving."

Once more, she didn't say it in a way that made him feel like he'd spoken out of turn, more like a matter-of-fact thingy. This further helped him relax. "All right, then. Let me let you go to bed, Njay. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure..."

Her lingering told him she was contemplating saying something more, so he simply waited, breath bated.

"Do you like... want to switch to a video call?"

The hesitation in her voice, the way it'd gone so mellow; it appeared he wasn't the only one who'd been taking the cautious path. Tade was a man of action, so he simply did as she'd asked, letting that answer for him. In another moment, he was staring at her bare, sleepy face. She looked even more beautiful than she had with makeup on. Beautiful and adorable. She was in a cream-colored silk night dress. It had thin straps for sleeves and a laced neckline that plunged into her cleavage but revealed little—not that he was looking. With her blanket covering her torso, that was all he could see. It was enough for him to conclude that the wear was lovely, despite its simplicity.

"You look like you're a minute away from falling asleep," he whispered. For some reason, it felt like the right thing to do.

"I think I am. I'm so exhausted. But I don't want to say goodnight."

All of Tade tingled, and his pillow embrace tightened. "I know what you mean, but you need to get some rest. It's already two a.m. Morning will come before you know it, and we'd get to see again."

"True."

"Goodnight, Njay. Dream of me."

"Na'night... Shleep sight," her voice slurred as her eyes fluttered close.

Tade remained on the phone, unable to stop watching as she drifted farther away from him. It was only when he heard her breathing get deep and even, that he finally ended the call.

He laid in bed, head facing the ceiling, and arms crossed behind his neck for about an hour later, replaying the entire events of the night over and over again. And each time he finished, there was only one conclusion. He more than liked Njay. In fact, he was falling for her. The craziest part? He didn't even mind if she wouldn't be there to catch him when he finally reached the end of the cliff.

He heaved a heavy sigh. *Lord help me!*

Eleven

Effort is the biggest proof of love. It's also the sexiest thing ever, especially when it has 'intentional' written all over...

Uju was in high spirits the next morning, and for a good number of reasons. First, despite having only gotten a few hours of sleep, she felt refreshed. Then there was the date with Tade to look forward to. Most importantly, she'd woken up to the sweetest good morning message ever.

Heeyy, sleepyhead. I hope you had a good night's rest, howbeit short. I also hope you dreamt of me. I want you to have a wonderful morning, so I thought to send this message to brighten up your day. You've been on my mind. I had a really amazing time with you last night, and I look forward to doing so again today. Have a light breakfast, please. There'll be plenty to eat this afternoon, I promise. And oh, I'll also be sending the address soon. Do me a favor? Don't google it, just dress for a sunny, breezy weather. Have I mentioned how I can't wait to see you again? No? Well, I can't. Don't worry, I'll look pretty for you, too.

—Your Ken.

Uju must have read the text a thousand times because now, as she floated—and yes, floated because she wasn't really sure her feet were touching the ground—around her kitchen in her white robe, making a light English breakfast of toast, omelet, and tea: the milo and milk kind, those words repeatedly played in her head. She didn't even realize when she began to hum.

So, this is loveeeee... So, this is what makes life divine...

She was still basking in her euphoria when her phone rang as she sat down to dine. This time around, the caller ID didn't disappoint her.

“Do you finally know where you guys are going?” Sarah asked as soon as they exchanged pleasantries.

Uju had sent updates to her best friend earlier that morning, catching her up on the late-night conversation with Tade. Sarah had swooned, squealed, and fawned a million times, not to mention the countless, “*Oh, my friend! I’m so happy for you!*”

“No, I have still not checked o. He asked me not to google it, remember?” Uju spread her eggs atop her bread.

“Since when did you start listening to people, just because?”

“We’re here because I listened to you, aren’t we? Imagine I hadn’t gone out yesterday evening? Anyway, he says to dress for a breezy and sunny weather. I’m thinking it might have something to do with the sea. Maybe the beach?” She folded the slice of bread into two, and bit.

“Or a beach house? They have one, don’t they? The Maxwells?”

Uju rolled her eyes as she chewed. She waited until she’d swallowed before responding. “They have seveeeerrraall, my dear. The twins had their birthday party at one of them earlier this year. I don’t think he would take me to a beach house for our first date, sha. He’s a complete gentleman, not one of those, ‘*When will you come and visit me, now?*’ kind of guys.”

Sarah was cackling as she answered, “I think you’re right. It would most probably be a private beach. Maybe lunch at the seaside?”

“Ouuhhh! Then I should definitely wear a cute sundress. Thanks to all the events I keep planning, I have many of those.” When Sarah wouldn’t immediately respond, Uju turned to her phone to find her best friend typing with all concentration. “What are you doing?”

“Calling for backup. It’d be nice if the girls can help you pick your outfit for the day.”

“Hian! Please, I’m a fashionista o. Have you guys forgotten? I can put my outfit together, jhor.”

“Shut up, jare! Since we can’t be there in persons, let us do this one, at least. It’s the first time you’d be going on a date with someone you really like, so we’ll play dress up and act like we’re teenagers all over again.” Silence reigned for a moment before she continued. “Sent! Those who are awake and available will join us. Let’s get this party started!”

Despite her objections, Uju couldn’t deny that deep down, she was grateful for, and thrilled at the thought of doing this with her girls. She truly loved how seriously they were taking the entire situation, how most of them wanted to be as

involved as possible. She'd woken up to countless messages on the group chat asking for updates, as well as reassurances that she only had to say the word and they'd all come through. As though she needed to be told.

Soon, she was up in her bedroom with her entire closet looking like a yard sale. Her phone was set on a tripod stand, and four of the girls who'd been able to show up—Sarah, Chidera, Yemi and Jessica, were helping her decide which to wear, and which to trash. Uju must have tried on a million dresses at the behest of their nods, head shakes, finger waggling, and endless commands. She heaved, and sighed, and dragged her feet, but there was no concealing the fact that she was actually having so much fun! Finally, they settled for a sky blue chiffon dress which she'd gotten from one of the Nigerian designers she loved. They unanimously agreed that she would rock it with a pair of low-heeled raffia sandals, coupled with an identical raffia clutch, and a classic beach hat.

"Hoops! Definitely hoops for your earrings," Jessica declared.

"And bangles, big bangles! We don't want your wrists bare," Yemi chipped in.

"What about my neck? Should I wear anything?" The dress was a plunging V-line that dipped all the way to her under bust, where a wide band joined its bodice with the flared, flamboyant high-slit skirt. The sleeves, just as flowy, parted in the middle so they'd fall on both sides of her arms. Altogether, the gown didn't get past her mid-calves.

"What do you guys think?" Jessica asked, studying her intently.

"No neck piece," Chidera responded. "You have such a lovely, spotless neck. Let it do all the talking. We don't want to draw focus away from it."

"Besides, he might even get you a jewelry gift like in the movies! You don't want to have to worry about removing a neck piece you already had on," Jessica chimed.

At her words, the rest of them exchanged knowing looks. She was ever the romantic.

"What?" she defended. "It could happen! Never say never."

Yemi was quick to answer, diffusing the situation before Jessica would get teary-eyed. "Indeed, Jessica, indeed. But this isn't the movies, or a romance novel for that matter, it's real life. Personally, I agree with no necklace. That would suit the overall look better."

"In that case, switch the hoops for dangling earrings," Sarah interposed. "I think they give a beachier vibe."

They all concurred.

“Light, waterproof makeup o!” Chidera sounded.

“I know, I know. Thank you all sooo much! Ugh!” Uju sighed, falling to the floor. “My blood is not flowing again, mehn!” She’d definitely have to apologize to her housekeeper for the mess, because heavens knew she had no strength left to put anything back in its rightful place.

It was Yemi who consoled her. “*Pele*. Don’t worry, you’ll be glad you went through the trouble.”

“Ah! Keeping my fingers crossed, my love. Keeping my fingers crossed.”

∞∞∞∞

Three hours later, Uju pulled into an empty parking spot at the sequestered harbor she’d just arrived in. It was so private that the security personnel had asked to confirm her name and I.D, before letting her through the gates. Now, she marveled at the sight as she stepped out of her car. She hadn’t known a place like this existed in Lagos, and that was saying a lot because her profession took her places. This was certainly no beach. However, from all the yachts and boats she was seeing, she could guess what Tade had planned. A boat cruise. *Rich people really do move different, do they not?*

She began to make her way to where the boats and yachts were anchored, via a wooden bridge that was as sturdy as it looked. Certain that Tade must have arrived and would be somewhere close, she brought out her phone and put a call through. He picked up almost immediately.

“Heeyy, Ms. Bluey!”

A sweet tingle licked down her spine as that voice filled her ears. She knew instantly that he’d already seen her. “Hiii! Where are you?”

“Right here,” he replied. Then, he was stepping out of one of the yachts, all dashing in a pair of grey shorts and a blue Hawaiian print shirt.

Uju’s lips melted into a smile. What were the odds that they’d end up color-matching? He looked amazing, and she was certain he smelled even better. Begging the butterflies in her tummy to quiet, her pace quickened. As he too had begun walking towards her, they stood face to face in no time. Uju instinctively drew in a deep breath. *Yup, he smells darn good!* There were notes of lavender, cedarwood, and nuts, and it almost drove *her* nuts.

“You look stunning,” he said, relieving her hands of the small bag she’d packed. It contained a change of clothes, a pair of bikinis, a towel, sunscreen, and body lotion—just in case she got wet.

“Thank you,” she replied. “You don’t look bad yourself.”

When he simply did nothing but stare into her eyes for a long moment, Uju forgot what it was to breathe.

“Can I give you a kiss on the cheeks?” The question came out of nowhere, and her eyes widened. “Just a little peck,” he added quickly. “Nothing serious.”

Faced with the adorable boy he became whenever he wasn’t sure of something, Uju’s heart tickled, kicked, then broke into a stampede. Before she could process what was happening, she was rising on her tiptoes and pressing a soft kiss against his chin. “I did you one better,” she teased, a wreck of nerves as she drew back. It felt great to be on firm footing once more, although she feared her suddenly wobbly knees wouldn’t afford her that luxury for much longer.

If Tade had been taken aback by her kiss, he gave no hint. He simply grinned as he took her hand and led the way. “I’ll let you have this round,” he said. “But don’t think I won’t steal mine, as well.”

A wink followed those words, and Uju trembled with anticipation. She’d never thought the day would come when she’d be looking forward to a threat being carried out, but there she was, already wondering how long he’d make her wait.

“Hope it wasn’t much trouble finding this place?” Tade asked as they drew closer to the yacht he’d stepped out from.

She took her head. “Not at all, thanks to Google maps.”

“Are you sure you didn’t google the address?” He shifted his hold so they could lock fingers.

The intimacy of that contact made the butterflies in her belly riot harder. *A thirty-one-year-old woman suffering from butterflies! You’re in real trouble, Uju!*

“Well, you pleaded so nicely, so I chose to let myself be surprised,” she replied easily, revealing nothing of the tumult happening inside her.

“And were you? Surprised?”

Uju nodded. “I thought I’d end up at some private beach.”

“Well, this is a sort of beach, isn’t it?” He winked again, causing her neurons to scramble.

Thankfully, she managed to find her voice. “Beach indeed.”

He chuckled at that. “In any case, you’re dressed just right. In fact, we are even matching. Is God showing off or what?”

Uju understood that to be a reference to his slip-up the night before: him implying that he believed whatever this was between them had been ordained by God. And because that memory got unlocked, she was soon replaying the

confession that had followed.

“I really like you.”

“I really like you too, Tade.”

She wanted to cover her face in mortification. Had she really said that to a man after only one date? And it wasn't like it had even been an official date o! Uche, her last ex, would be shocked if he saw her now. He had called her a coldhearted, wicked Igbo woman because she hadn't been susceptible to his charms, and as such, had never gotten foolish enough to fall for his scams. Turned out she'd only needed the right man to turn up the heat. She got pulled back to the moment as Tade abruptly rocked to a stop. Her head jerked up with a question in her eyes, only to find concern in his.

“Njay, are you with me?”

“Sorry?”

“I was asking how your morning has been, but you wouldn't respond. Then I started calling out to you, but you seemed out of it. I was worried something serious had happened.”

His genuine concern was a warm hand around her beating organ, it squeezed softly. “Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any worry at all. I simply got lost in thoughts for a moment there.”

“A penny for them?”

“Asking price starts at two million dollars.”

“I'll offer five. Where do I make payment to?”

She was chuckling now, unable to help herself. It was turning out to be something she did often around him. “To my Swiss account, before E.F.C.C breaks down my door in the middle of the night.” E.F.C.C was a Nigerian governmental organization that fought against economic and financial crimes.

“Don't worry, when they see the account the money came from, they'd understand.”

“Hanhan, *osheyy*! God when? This is the kind of flex I want for my kids! A surname that carries power. That's one of the reasons I'm working so hard, you know?”

“Well, you can just marry me and give them mine. Or we could hyphenate both of ours.”

He'd said that so smoothly, so naturally, that Uju didn't even get the chance to be taken by surprise. He was already moving her bag into the yacht when the implication of those words fully dawned. And even at that, before she could collect her thoughts to form a response, he was introducing her to said yacht.

“Meet my baby girl, Wind.”

So, *this is what people mean by Yoruba men rizz?* She wondered, still dazzled. *Wow, this boy is carrying me to where I don't know o!*

Forcing herself to stay in the moment, Uju chose to tango. If he wanted to pretend he hadn't said those words, she would pretend she hadn't heard them. “Wind? Wow, that's very original.” Her sarcasm was loud.

“I know, right?” he smiled in response. “It just seemed fitting. I was going to name her Freedom, but it didn't quite feel like a nice name for a belle as gorgeous as she is.”

Uju bobbed her head, taking in the sheer magnificence of the cream-colored yacht. She was truly stunning, the epitome of luxury fit for someone like Tade. Just how wealthy was the guy? He hadn't said *the family's*, he'd said *his*. This belonged to him, and he'd brought her here on their first date. One million points!

“She is beautiful,” Uju commented honestly. “I believe the word that actually comes to mind is breathtaking.”

Tade's smile was approving now. “Real definitely recognizes real, 'coz that happens to be something you both have in common. Come onboard, will you? The crew would want to meet you.”

Twelve

The art of true romance is one that must be kept alive, preserved, reinvented, and passed down from generation to generation. True romance is everything...

Uju's head was still reeling from the fact that Tade had talked about them being married like he had been making weather commentary. Now, she was just supposed to ignore that he'd also implied he considered her breathtaking?

"You have a crew?" she asked, taking his hands so he could lead her off the bridge and onto the yacht.

"Well, just two members, really. There's a helmsman and someone else. I'd usually steer the ship myself, but I want to give you my undivided attention today, so I called in a favor with one of the family's steersmen. Idris," he called out. "Come meet my new friend!"

A caramel-skinned man wearing a classic sailor's uniform materialized in front of her then. He was about her height, thick build, and kind blue eyes. That wasn't the first indication that he wasn't Nigerian, though. His curly brown hair had immediately given him away. Then there was his accent. Because she was well-traveled, Uju easily placed it as Algerian.

"Ah, Ms. Uju, yes?" He greeted, extending his hand. "Mr. Tade has told us much about you. Pleasure to meet you. I'll be your helmsman for today. Idris."

Uju accepted his handshake gingerly, easily returning his infectious smile. "Nice to meet you too, Idris. And please, just call me Uju. I wish I could say I'd heard a lot about you too, alas..." She gave Tade a meaningful glance. He simply looked away, guilt admittance and all.

"Hahaha! No worries, Ms. Uju. Me? I don't really matter. What's important is that Mr. Tade is very excited to have you here today, and so are we! Welcome onboard once again! I hope you enjoy the ride!" With those words, he took off.

"He's a peculiar character," Uju observed aloud, as soon as she and Tade

were alone again. She was still smiling.

“They all are. I wonder how my mother finds them. Perhaps they gravitate to her because she’s an eccentric herself.”

“Ahh. That certainly seems likely.” Uju looked around. “So, who’s this other person you want me to meet?”

“In a moment,” Tade answered. “First, how about a tour?”

He took her around the yacht then. The luxury machine was a one-bed, two-story ensemble. The bedroom and lounging area were below deck. There was also a kitchen, which he promised to show her later. Then, of course, the helm where Idris was happily steering as he whistled along to the soft music that had been blaring from the speakers since they set sail minutes ago. Finally, he led her to the sitting area above deck. Just like the rest of the yacht, it was tastefully designed. Luxurious leather seats, a small tent to shield from the sun, and a cozy date arrangement. Said setting encompassed a small square table covered by a red satin tablecloth with napkins arranged atop. Though no food had been served yet, a single sunflower stood pretty in a crystal vase, and a charming moon lamp manned the other side of the table. The entire scene was covered in rose petals, from chairs to floor, and it all smelled so heavenly! It was simply magical!

A gasp escaped Uju’s lips as she took it all in. How had he managed to put all of these together in such a short time? Talk about an intentional man!

“So, how did I do?” he asked quietly. “Did I successfully pull off a decent surprise?”

“Uh... Duuh! Everything is so beautiful! I love it all! This is honestly the most special date I’ve ever been on!” She meant those words with all her heart. Of course, she’d been on a yacht before. Over the years as an events planner, she’d put together countless at-sea events, even on ships. However, this was entirely different. No one had ever invited her sailing on their first date, or any date for that matter. She felt truly spoilt. She honestly hadn’t known what to expect from Tade, but this was nothing she could have ever imagined.

“Music to my ears,” he chimed, beaming from ear to ear. He was evidently proud of his accomplishment, and rightfully so. Uju would be too.

“How did you even think of this?”

He was still smiling as he drew out the dining chairs. “I only aim to please, my lady. Now, let’s sit. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I haven’t had anything to eat all day.”

“Because you were busy putting this together?” she asked as he helped her into her seat.

“Maybe,” he replied, taking his own.

Uju studied him intently. “Why do I have a feeling you’re only trying to downplay it because you don’t want me thinking you missed breakfast for me?”

Lifting his shoulder in a careless shrug, he repeated, “Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. I guess we’ll never know for certain, will we?” He winked at her again and Uju was beyond grateful that she was finally sitting down. No risk of her wobbly knees embarrassing her any longer.

Deciding to let the matter go, she replied sweetly. “I guess. So, what’s for lunch?”

“Oh, you’ll see.” Tade rang the small bell she’d missed on the table then. Before long, another man in a chef’s uniform began to climb up the stairs from below deck, tray in hand.

“*Annyeonghaseyo!*” the chef greeted in Korean as he dipped in a bow, reaching them.

To say that Uju was dazed, was putting it mildly. Speechless, she could only bow her head and continue to stare in awe as the chef filled their entire table with food. Before she knew it, there was rice, side dishes, *japchae*, and assorted marinated meat! He’d even brought along an electric stove for grilling. The most amazing part? He also served *soju*, Korean beer!

Uju didn’t know when she began to cackle, her joy overflowing. “I can’t believe this! You actually brought a Korean chef, and not just any, *thee* Korean chef!”

“Well, you mentioned how much you love Kdramas, as well as the Korean culture, a couple of times last night. I figured, what better way could there be to cement myself in your heart, other than this? They say the way to a man’s heart is his stomach, but I truly believe that statement was originally meant for women.” His eyes were twinkling as he made the introductions. “Uju, meet Richard Lee. He’s the head chef of the best Korean restaurant in Lagos. It wasn’t easy getting him here today, but he’s half in-love with Zen, so all I had to do was promise to create an opportunity for them to meet.”

Uju shook her head, still unable to believe what was happening. “Does she know you’re making bargains for your love life, with hers?”

“Well, she wouldn’t if you don’t tell her,” he responded with yet another wink.

Uju was starting to think he was doing it deliberately because he knew just how much he affected her, but at that moment, she was too stunned and happy to care. “I really can’t believe this,” she heard herself say again. “I mean! This...”

She threw her hands in the air. “Everything! It’s amazing!”

Her girls were going to go wild when she gave them this gist later. Tade had managed to pull *thee* Richard Lee from his top celebrity restaurant? For an afternoon in the sun? Just how much had it cost for him to put all these together, last minute? In truth though, it wasn’t even about the money for her. It was the thoughtfulness behind it all, as well as the attention to details. She hadn’t even known this man for a whole twenty-four hours, yet here he was, bursting her brain! She pinched herself and swallowed the cry of pain. It had hurt, so no, she definitely wasn’t dreaming.

Tade must have caught that because he was suddenly laughing. “I promise you, Njay, this is real.”

“Yes, it would seem so,” was all she could say as she looked up at Mr. Lee. “Forgive my manners, Richard. We meet again.”

“Indeed, we do, Ms. Uju. I had a feeling we both had the same person in mind when Mr. Tade started going on and on about his Uju.” Richard had no Korean accent. He’d been born in the U.S, and had lived there for most of his life before his family moved to Nigeria as expatriates. Everything else about him spoke of his heritage, though.

One evening at a princess’ birthday dinner, he’d told Uju a little of his family history as they bonded over the fact that they’d both been hired to do great jobs. That night, Richard also shared his eight-year-long journey to becoming a renowned chef after embracing his passion for feeding people. Over the years, they’d built a splendid professional relationship and worked well together. Uju frequented his restaurant as much as she sought his services for her clients.

“Well, good thing you were not disappointed, yes?”

“Absolutely! It’s always a pleasure to see you,” Richard smiled warmly in return.

“The pleasure is all mine.”

Tade was shaking his head as he reached for his glass of water. “Of course, you two know each other. Is there even anyone in this Lagos that doesn’t know you, Njay? Because you’re starting to look like a celeb o.”

Uju rolled her eyes in response. “That’s what happens when you plan dream events for the big movers in the hottest city in West Africa, duhh!”

“Oshey! Big woman! *Gbogbo* events planner!”

She was giggling as she thanked Richard for the food. Gracefully accepting her gratitude, he bowed and retreated to the kitchen. Then, she was back to facing the feast in front of her. “*Kamsahamnida!*” she chimed, bowing her head.

It was formal Korean for ‘*Thank you.*’

“Ye,” Tade answered in like manner. “You’re welcome.”

Dancing excitedly in her seat, Uju dug in. The meals were just as delicious as she remembered, and the BBQ, even more so! There was so much to eat. Richard kept coming with more food until she begged him to stop. Suffice to say, she had the time of her life.

Beyond the delightful treat though, Uju was most grateful for the company. She watched, heart full, as Tade cleared his plates with vigor. When he began to regale her with more tales about his tourist adventures, she listened with rapt attention. Those tales soon shifted to other conversations about life in general. With every word he spoke, Uju got more insight into the person he truly was, and she found herself wishing she’d met him eons ago. It was a classic case of, “*Where have you been all my life?*” He was a profoundly intelligent man, and it was plain to see how he’d achieved so much success at such a prime age. He spoke from a place of deep reasoning, empathy, as well as fairness. From his narrations and opinions, it was also quite apparent that he was a man of strong morals and principles. Indeed, words were cheap, and anyone could lie, but the conviction in his voice, the way his eyes firmly held hers as though he had nothing to hide... Everything about him screamed honest.

However, what most endeared him to Uju was the fact that he seemed to have great respect for women too. Of course, she knew it was most probably too soon to truly be able to tell, but there was evidence of that everywhere. The way he treated her, the way he’d communicated with the women at their table the night before, the manner in which he spoke of his mother and sisters, as well as the encounters he’d had with various women in his life. As far as Uju was concerned, there were green flags everywhere. No wonder Mrs. Maxwell was so proud of her son. She had to know she had done an excellent job raising him into this wonderful man.

The last streaks of golden rays had just begun to disappear behind the horizon when Uju’s phone buzzed with a text message. It was from Sarah.

How far?

Not wanting them to worry like the day before, Uju quickly typed a response and hit send.

I’m living a fairytale o, babes! No worry, gist bookkuuuu! E

full ground!

Now, I'm curious! Call me as soon as you're on your way home abeg!

I don't hear you! I'll call. Oya, bye bye. I'm watching the sunset.

"Should I be preparing to meet at an open field tomorrow with my pistol and a second?" Tade asked as soon as she put her phone aside.

It took her a minute to get the reference. "No, jhor," she replied, chuckling. "I already told you there's no fiancé. That was my girlfriend, Sarah. She wanted to know how the date is going."

"You told your friends about me?" His brows shot up. "Already?"

"I hope you don't mind?" She looked up at him. Lunch had ended hours ago, and they were now seated back to shoulder, watching the sunset. His right arms curved around her waist loosely, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

The twinkle in his eyes told her he thought the exact opposite. "Not at all. In fact, I am quite delighted! And curious, of course." His gaze narrowed as he cocked his head in question. "Obianuju Victoria Chimezie, you really do like me, do you not?"

"Well, I'm not the one who put together this fancy date, last minute. Am I?"

"Deflection. Spoken like someone who has something to hide, and I wonder why. After all, we already confessed as much to each other last night, no?"

Uju didn't know when or how it had happened but suddenly, they were leaning so close to each other, the only distance between them, a breath of air.

The waves stood still. Her chest rose and refused to fall. Her eyes dropped to his lips, lush, full. Hers instantly became dehydrated, as though it had been starved for days. For what it was worth, in truth, it was more like months. Mindless, unable to piece together a single coherent thought, her tongue slipped out, and then she was wetting her lips, willing them to moisten again. It had been so long, and it had been such a perfect day. Surely, one kiss wouldn't hurt? Just one to say thank you?

She heard a groan then. It was so quiet, but she heard it nonetheless, and she knew it had come from him. That was when she saw the veins popping out of his neck. It was also the same moment she noticed that his hands had curled into fists. Her eyes widened as revelation dawned. He wanted to kiss her too! But for some reason, he was holding back. Uju guessed it was most probably because he didn't want to offend her. And yes, she would have taken the lead if she didn't

think it was such a terrible idea. As much as she wanted it, it was simply too soon. A kiss right now would lead to avoidable complications, and she didn't want that. So, recalling her senses, she forced a lump of stone down her throat and gathered all her willpower. Slowly, ever so reluctantly, she pulled herself away.

Christ, that had been close! she sighed as she got out of the danger zone. *Uju, we are on this abstinence journey for a reason, please. We will not be dashing kisses around as thank you gifts for a wonderful date. Absolutely not!*

Clearing her throat, she searched frantically for distracting topics with which to banish the awkwardness. Tade's mind must have been resonating on the same frequency as hers, for he easily rose to the rescue.

"Speaking of telling your friends about me, I meant it when I said I was curious. What did they have to say afterwards?"

Grateful for the change in conversation, Uju quickly grabbed onto the lifeline. "That I should be careful of Yoruba demons, especially the ones with proper *rizz*."

"Ha! So, you admit I have *rizz*!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize when this turned into a court of law where I'm required to admit everything."

A bark of laughter filled the air. It was boisterous, rich, it made her body hum, and before she knew it, she was joining in.

"Oh, Njay, I truly do enjoy you. You are quick-witted and often keep me on my toes."

"If you ask me, you certainly have some catching up to do. You honestly make it too easy for me."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Call it what you want, baby."

Delight filled his eyes. "A swiftie?"

"Till my hairs grow gray!" Uju leaned back, more interested in him now than before. "Wait, you too?"

He stood up then. Left arm outspread, right hand raised to form a mic, he started to perform. "And all at once, you are the one that I've been waiting for, king of my heart! Body and soul, woah oh oh!"

Uju was on her feet the next instant, a mesh of awe, approval, and glee. She couldn't believe he actually loved her number one artist of all time! Would this man ever stop surprising her? Not planning to miss out on the fun, she began to sing as well. "And all at once, you're all I want! I'll never let you go, king of my

heart! Body and soul, woah oh oh!”

Before they knew it, they were having a full-blown karaoke fest, singing almost the entirety of Taylor Swift’s discography at the top of their lungs, as they contested intensely for the title of *‘Biggest fan’*. Uju was in stitches by the time they made dock again. He all but had to carry her out of the yacht.

“My goodness! That was the most fun I’ve had in ages!”

“Oh yeah? Well, stick around, baby girl. I promise you, we’re just getting started.”

“*Tsk*,” she clicked, as they drew closer to her car. “Somehow, I don’t see how you can beat today. What are you going to do next, fly me in a helicopter?”

“No. Unfortunately, I haven’t gotten one here in Nigeria—yet. Father thinks they’re frivolous and my mother doesn’t argue.”

“Your mom? I didn’t think she’d be opposed to them, considering her person.”

“Oh, she likes to have fun all right, only safe fun.”

“Then that’s no fun at all!”

“You see! Someone who gets it! My goodness!”

They were giggling once again as they finally got to her car. He helped her put her bag into the back seat, as well as the bottles of soju she’d decided to take home.

“So, what’s the plan now?” he asked, leaning against the driver’s door.

“The plan is I go home and get some rest.”

“Want me to drive you home? Not because I want to take the opportunity to know your house, but because I’d just rest easier, knowing you arrived safely.”

Uju searched his eyes, suddenly becoming serious. “Why do I have a feeling you were really worried about me last night?”

He matched her soberness. “Well, maybe because I was?”

“What happens to your car then, if you drive me home?”

“I can always come pick it up tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a lot of hassle. You know what? Let’s do this. You can drive behind me and see for yourself that moving around at nights in Lagos isn’t a foreign concept to me at all. In fact, I have mastered the art.”

“I do not doubt that for one second, but if you’re willing to indulge me, I’d be grateful.”

“So, you’d drive behind me?”

“Sure, why not?”

“All righty!” A fun thought occurred to Uju then. She wasn’t eager to end the

night's magic, either. "Let's stay on the phone all through. That way, it'd feel like we're riding together."

"Deal!" He waited until he'd helped her into her SUV. Then afterwards, he declared, "I'll go get my car."

Uju nodded as he walked away. A moment later, he was pulling out of his parking spot. Even though it was dark already, she didn't have to look too hard to recognize the Audi model as one she'd been eyeing for quite some while now. *Yup, he definitely knows his cars.* Smiling at this, she pulled out as well. Then, leading the way, they began to head to her estate.

They'd just gotten on the highroad when his call came in. Still surfing on the high from what a beautiful day it'd been, she readily accepted it. The drive turned out to be the shortest ever. There was more karaoke, more talking about work and family, and before she knew it, they were stopping in front of her gate.

"This is me," she said as they both got down.

He whistled, taking in the exterior. "Nice house you've got."

"Wait until you see the interior, you'd be wowed. I'd invite you in, but I know you have to get home."

He was already waving her off with his hands. "That's totally okay. I can always visit some other time."

"How about Sunday?" the words spilled from Uju's mouth before she even thought of them. Still, she pressed on. "I have to go make my hair tomorrow, but on Sunday, after church, I should be able to host you. What do you say?"

"Are you sure?" he asked, searching her eyes as though he knew all too well that she hadn't meant to ask.

Uju recognized it for what it was, a chance to take back her words. However, it was Christmas, and she was feeling things she'd never felt before, so why hold back? She'd already decided to ride the waves when she made that confession the night before. There was no point stopping now. So, releasing a deep breath, she bobbed her head once. "I'm sure."

It was all he needed to hear. He breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled closer. "All right, baby, count me in. Just let me know what time works best for you, and I'll be there."

"How's four p.m.? We could have an early dinner and see a movie?"

"Perfect!"

"All right! I'm going to let you go now. Safe trip back home, and let me know when you arrive. Okay?"

He nodded. "Wilco. I'll see you on Sunday, Njay."

There was something about the way he said those words, about the way he spoke her name, that made her want to throw herself into his arms and hold on for the rest of her life. Thankfully, self-control was one of the first arts she'd mastered, so she simply smiled up at him and responded just as sweetly. "Na'night, Tee."

He looked like he might say something else, but before she knew it, he was leaning towards her and stealing back the exact kiss she'd stolen earlier in the day: the softest, fastest peck to her cheeks. Before she could react, he was turning her around into her SUV, muttering more goodnight wishes. Uju was still dumbstruck as she drove into her compound and closed the gates behind her. Then she was racing upstairs to her balcony. She arrived just in time to see him turn around and head towards his car.

"Tee!" she called out, feeling like a sixteen-year-old with her first crush.

He rocked to a stop immediately, and spun to look up at her. Thanks to her balcony lights and the streetlights, they could see each other clearly.

"I had a really great time today!" she yelled. "Thank you for making the day so memorable!"

"Your presence made it so much better," he shouted in response. "You were the entire cake! My efforts were just the icing! See you soon, Njay! Stay safe!"

Uju could only watch, heart in hands, ready to offer it all to him as he drove away. *Christ!* How could she not fall for this man? And had it always been this easy to love someone? If so, how come this was the first time she'd ever come close?

It's because it's him, Uju, the voice in her head supplied. It's Tade. Everything about him. You might be a cake house, but him? He's an entire dessert buffet.

Thirteen

Some days are so good, you keep reliving them over and over again...

Second Saturdays were for family brunch in the Maxwell household. Everyone who was considered family and a close-enough friend knew that. Because of how warm and exciting the event often was, not to mention the endless supply of great food, whoever got an invite usually endeavored to put it to good use.

As Tade drove into the large parking space that surrounded his parents' mansion, he wondered for the umpteenth time, if he'd made the right decision not asking Njay whether she wanted to come along. After all, she wasn't a new face where his family was concerned. Though she hadn't said much about that particular relationship, he could tell there was a copious amount of camaraderie between his mom and her, and he was almost certain she would feel right at home.

Alas, just like all the other times the thought had crossed his mind, he came to the same conclusion: inviting her to meet the family only two days after they'd known each other wasn't just moving too fast, even Flash wouldn't be able to keep up with that speed. Tade already knew that he was in this for the long haul, the real deal, but that didn't mean he had to overwhelm her. Besides, he wasn't sure he was ready for what would inevitably follow once he got his family involved in his love life. Again, great people, good intentions, but they did know how to be nosy. They'd take over and start playing cupid, trying to get him and Njay officially together as soon as possible, and he didn't want that for either of them. They'd met outside of his family's influence, and he would like for their budding romance to continue to blossom in that same sphere—outside of his family's involvement.

Must be something about repeating a point over and over again, because this time around, he finally reached a place of peace and acceptance. It was a good

thing Njay wasn't here today. The time would come when she would meet his family, but not today. And even though he was desperately missing her already, even though he couldn't stop thinking about the day they'd spent together, those moments when he'd almost forgotten himself and pressed his aching lips against hers, and how she'd run up to her balcony to wish him goodnight one last time, he had to tell himself that the time apart was good. Not just to make their hearts grow fonder, but to give them the chance to think things over.

"But I really miss her," he muttered aloud to himself. The events of the day before remained a permanently rolling tape in his mind. He'd enjoyed every single moment with her; their easy banter, the way her eyes had lit up and melted as she devoured their heavy lunch, her beautiful alto voice as they sang along to Taylor Swift, her skin's ethereal glow under the golden-orange hues of sunset, how his body had kept reacting so viscerally to her every time they'd eliminated the distance between them—and that had been a lot of times—and the near-kiss. *Goodness! That damn near-kiss!*

Tade screeched to a stop, finally finding a place to park. Gripping the steering wheel, his head fell as he stepped back into that exact moment.

He could still remember it all. The unprecedented stillness that had descended, drowning his ears in the mixed tape of their labored breathing. Those measured breaths were all he had been able to manage, to keep himself from losing control. She had such gorgeous lips, and, as though he hadn't already been suffering enough, she'd chosen that exact moment to wet them. Did she have any idea what that had done to him at all? Everything had suddenly felt so tight! His throat, his shirt, his shorts... He hadn't even realized when the groan of frustration escaped his throat. Fortunately, it'd turned out to be his saving grace, the very thing that had rescued him from making a mistake he would have certainly ended up regretting. He'd mourned when Uju drew away, but had been able to acknowledge it was for the best. Somehow, they'd both succeeded at ignoring the entire incident, acting as though it'd never happened for the rest of the evening.

Tade smiled as he raised his head, releasing his grip on the steering wheel. He didn't remember dating being so exhilarating, but he was damn glad to be back on the field. The tension, the wanting, it added all the more to the thrill! Best part? He was willing to be patient until she was ready to take things further. Even if it meant waiting until marriage, she was totally worth it.

Just then, three knocks rasped against his car door, startling him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see Benjamin standing over him, face sketched into a

bemused smile.

“What? What are you laughing at?” Tade asked, taking off his sunglasses. He’d chosen his Chevrolet for the day and had the roof down, as the weather was wonderful that morning. Of course, he’d also rubbed on a generous amount of sunscreen. *Can’t be caught unfresh.*

“I should be asking you,” Benjamin quirked in response. He stepped back so Tade could come down. “You looked like you were remembering the best night of your life, ever!”

“Ha! Ha! So funny,” Tade replied drily, shutting the door behind him. He tucked his key into his pocket as he turned off the engine. “I slept in my home last night, Ben.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean you slept aloo-oneee.”

“Is this you fishing for gist? You really want to know how the first date went so badly?”

“Well, you wouldn’t say anything over the phone!” Benjamin countered as they began to walk towards the house.

“What? I told you it was a really great date, and we had so much fun. In fact, I remember saying it was the most fun I’ve ever had. And what are you doing here, by the way? Don’t tell me you’ve been waiting for me. Come now, we’ve only been apart for two days, Ben-ten. Keep acting like this, and I might start to believe you’re in love with me or something.”

That earned Tade a blow on his shoulder, and even though it didn’t hurt at all, he cried out, cradling the spot for dramatic effect. “Ouch! Okay, well deserved, but we both know I wasn’t lying.”

This time around, Benjamin jumped, effortlessly throwing his arm around Tade’s neck in a headlock. It was an act he’d perfected over a million attempts, and as always, Tade pretended to choke, tapping Ben’s arms as he begged for release.

“*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* I guess it’s true what they say, boys will always be boys!”

At the sound of Bolanle’s voice, they promptly ended their foolery, but that didn’t wipe the grins off their faces.

“Good to see some things never change,” she continued, looking from one man to another. The warmth in her voice and eyes spoke only of fondness and joy.

“Bolly baby! How far na?” Tade greeted, going in for a hug, followed by kisses on both cheeks, which she happily returned. However, not before giving him a side eye at the nickname everyone knew she secretly loved.

“I dey o. How are you? You’re glowing today o, and we all know why.” She stepped to his side then, hooking her right arm around his left. “Oya, gist me. How did it go? I want every detail! Benjamin could not even tell me anything useful.”

Benjamin’s protest was swift. “Hey! That’s because this werey himself didn’t tell me anything useful now!”

“Shhh! Let me hear from the horse’s mouth, jhor.”

And because there was very little Tade could deny Bolanle, he cradled her hand and began to do just as she’d requested. Of course, Benjamin remained by her other side, listening to every word.

“Wow, she invited you to her house?” Bolanle gasped as he finished. “Omo! That’s huge o! It’s obvious she really likes you too!”

“I know right?” Tade responded, feeling smug. Bolanle had praised him for putting together such a perfect date, and now, she was affirming with her woman senses that he was truly one whole leg in the door. He couldn’t wipe the grin off his face.

“So, what are your plans for tomorrow?” she asked.

“I was thinking I’d take desert along, wine of course, then flowers.”

“Good choice, good choice. Let’s leave this romance thing for you abeg, not like someone I know.”

“Chai!” Ben lamented, shaking his head. “A prophet isn’t appreciated in his own home true, true! This woman, this wasn’t what you were saying when I flew you to Puerto Rico this summer that just passed o. Definitely not what you said last night when I was...”

Bolanle was jumping out of Tade’s side to cover her husband’s mouth before he could finish that sentence, and this time around, it was Tade laughing and shaking his head as he watched the two lovebirds bicker on.

Moments later, they were joining his family and their friends on the expansive upstairs patio where brunch was being held that Saturday. There were sofas and accent chairs in strategic places to form a wide arch. Each sitting area had small stools around for guests to place their dishes and drinks. By the surrounding walls were lots of greenery, and smack in the middle was a small pool that had been designed to look like a natural pond, with a fountain flowing into it. Just right next to the stairway entrance that led directly from the parking area, was the unending buffet table filled with an array of delicacies and drinks. From the teasing aromas that stirred in the air, Tade could tell they were as delicious as they looked.

All around, people from different races stood or sat in twos and threes—at most, five—chattering, laughing over one thing or the other, whilst Rema's *Calm Down* featuring Selena Gomez filled the air. Tade was certain that most of those conversations were either about business, stocks, or recent trips to yet another exotic place in the world. As though confirming his speculations, the wind carried across one of those conversations as he stepped further into the crowd.

"Ah, it's terribly cold in Canada this time of the year," someone said. "I'd have loved to visit Montreal for a white Christmas. I hear it's really beautiful, same as BC, but I've never been. I was in Thailand, this time last year, though. I'm thinking of visiting Antigua in January after the holidays, with family. Maybe I'll make that trip to Canada during summer. The weather would be more bearable then, yes?"

Another answered, "Absolutely! And you definitely have to visit Toronto as well, for Niagara falls. Don't forget Alberta, for Banff."

Tade shook his head as he walked past the group of three. He recognized two of them to be his second and third cousins. The other face wasn't really familiar. *Just as I thought. Business, stocks, or travels.* It was often one of those three, for the people in their circle. Deciding that he needed a chilled drink to get through the afternoon, he changed course and made his way to the buffet spread. That was when his mother sighted him.

Her dore porcelain skin gleamed under the sunlight, and when her lips stretched into a beam, he had to squint a little, so he could properly see. He'd known her for thirty-four years and he still got dazed by how stunning she was. Today, she was dressed in a flowing brocade bubu, with golden and silver jewelries adorning her ears, neck, and wrists, as always. As for her hair, she'd chosen a simple sleeked back, middle-part bun, with soft tendrils flowing down her edges to frame her face. She almost always wore her natural hair, and that was because more than how much she loved it herself, she knew her husband and children were such big fans. And why not? It was a gorgeous mass of hair.

Arms outstretched, she rubbished the remaining distance between them. "Ah, there he is! I feared you'd forgotten what day it is, and wouldn't even bother to come see your poor, aging mother!" she gushed with theatrical flair as she engulfed him in a warm embrace, pressing soft kisses to his cheeks.

Tade both accepted and returned those gestures of affection. "Are we speaking in opposites now, Mother? Because if so, your *unfilial, terrible* son simply couldn't have missed this for anything in the world, seeing as you'd been sending reminders every morning and night for the past three days."

She was smug with her refusal to neither deny nor accept the allegations as they broke their embrace. “All that matters is that you’re here now, and there are so many people who have been dying to meet you. Also, don’t think about going back to that condo of yours, tonight. It’s the weekend! Spend some time with your family, will you?”

Because Tade already knew arguing was a lost cause, and he’d planned to do just that, anyway, he simply nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. I’m not making any promises, though. It all depends on how y’all treat me this afternoon.”

She glanced up at him through the side of her eyes, a stallion herself, brought down her lashes twice, and evidently made the decision to act as though she hadn’t heard those words. It was so Mrs. Carolyn Ayomitide Maxwell core, that Tade couldn’t help but chuckle.

“In any case, I need to cool myself with some chilled juice and fill my stomach with food before I start *media rounds*. I’d prefer not to have to meet anyone, but we both know that’s not an option.”

Her smile was brilliant, satisfied. “Good to know I succeeded in raising you right, after all! Don’t worry, after we chase them all away, it’ll be just us close family. Then we’ll spend the entire afternoon dancing and playing charades.” This part was said in a conspiratorial whisper.

That she was being sneaky about their Saturday after-brunch tradition, one only their nuclear family knew about, made Tade laugh out loud. Ah yes, he had certainly missed his predictably unpredictable mother. She started to catch him up on some gossip that would supposedly prepare him for the media rounds as he stuffed his belly. They were almost done when he felt two strong forces ram into his back.

Fourteen

The sibling relationship is quite amusing. You can't stand each other, but would thoughtlessly die for one another...

Tade didn't even have to turn around to identify the culprits. It could have been none other than Taiwo and Kehinde, or as they preferred to be called, Zaiah and Zendaya.

"You guys know I haven't gotten married yet, right?" he asked, turning around to face them. "So please, don't break my spinal cord for me. I still have a lot to do with it in this lifetime—namely, give you both a bunch of nieces and nephews that will finally pay you back for all the terror you've ever caused your big brother."

They scrunched their noses up at him at those words, and he had to remind himself that these were grown women, twenty-eight-year-olds with thriving careers where many also grown and intelligent people deferred to their authority. Alas, once they stepped their feet onto this property, they became his rug rats.

"Forget it, bro. If you're not yet married at age thirty-four, it's over for you! Just start preparing your mind to be tortured by your nieces and nephew. Zaiah would have to be the one to make that happen, though. We both know how I feel about those little maniacs."

"Kehinde!" their mother exclaimed.

"What?" the younger twin asked, throwing up her shoulder. "It's not like I've ever hidden the fact that I never want to get married, or have kids, for that matter."

Tade swallowed hard. And therein lied the problem. Richard was madly in love with a woman who didn't even care about starting her own family. How was he ever going to make that love story happen? Well, he only had to put them in the same space, just once. The rest was up to Mr. Lee. But yeah, that was Zen for you. She was the shortest in the family at five-foot-six, a little smaller than

her elder twin, Zaiah, and hers was the perfect blend of their father's dark and their mother's dore skin tone. Nonetheless, like Zaiah, she was the spitting image of their mother, even taking her amber eyes. The only reason both twins were not confusingly identical was because Zi was as fair as their mixed-race mother, taller and just a little bigger in stature.

However, it was Zen who was the mastermind behind all the atrocities they'd ever gotten up to, the one with the more domineering personality whom no one in their family liked to cross, and the same one who made all the boys who'd ever thought to ask her or her sister out in elementary and high school, pee their pants. She'd become less territorial as they grew older, but it was no secret that she barely tolerated Zaiah's long-term boyfriend even at present.

Despite her peculiarities, it was a well-known fact that Zen was a total softie inside. She cried the fastest, hurt the hardest, fought for her loved ones with all her heart, never backed down from whatever she believed and stood for, and always sought to protect those who were weaker and less privileged. It was why she spent most of her time *secretly* running charity organizations and hosting fundraiser events she believed no one knew she was behind.

As for Zaiah, she was more on the reserved side, but was as powerful a personality as her twin sister. At five-foot-eight, she was mostly easy-going, definitely more approachable, and though she shared a mutual penchant for torturing her elder brother, she never hid the fact that she also admired, greatly respected, and immensely adored him. Whilst Zen's passion laid in humanitarian efforts, Zi was a scientist through and through. Tade believed that was where her calm and observant nature stemmed from.

And yes, even though he often took their pranks and teases with complaints, and would never stop berating them over being ruffians every chance he got, everyone who knew him was well aware he didn't joke with either of them. He would jump in front of a moving train for them in a heartbeat, and would willingly go to jail for revenge if anyone ever dared to hurt a strand of hair on their heads.

"Well, you can choose to join the Coventry if that's what you wish, Zen," he said, quickly stepping in to diffuse a potentially explosive situation. Zen's adamance on the matter of marriage was often a sore subject for his mother, and that afternoon was certainly neither the time nor the place. "It's your life and you get to call the shots." He looked meaningfully at his mother as he said those words. Evidently understanding his meaning, she huffed and turned away. "However," he continued, returning his attention to his little sister. "You're not

God o, and you don't get to call the shots over my own life. I'm going to get married, you'll see. In fact, it might happen sooner than you think, and I'll be here to wag my tongue when my rug rats start giving you hell." He stuck his tongue out for effect as he finished saying those words, and he had to remind himself that he was a middle-aged man who wasn't getting any younger, either.

But first, he had to find out if Njay was even open to the idea of having kids. It was totally fine if she wasn't. Tade had no doubt they'd be just as happy by themselves. *I'd have to make a deal with Zaiah's kids to always take their uncles' side, though.* That way, he could make them do his evil bidding. *Hehehe.*

The silence that had descended after he finished his speech was suddenly so deafening, it pulled him out of his thoughts. That was when he realized how intently his women were staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"I told you him going sailing yesterday wasn't ordinary," Zen muttered, nudging Zi's side. "When Richard mentioned he'd booked a private dining experience, I instantly knew something was up."

"Well, well, well! What do we have here?" Zi took over. "For the past three years, you'd get all hot and bothered every time someone merely suggested the idea of you dating again. Yet, here you are, blushing as you gleefully boast about getting married soon. Could it be true? Is our lover boy really back in the market again?"

"Who is she?" his mother jumped in. "I was hoping you'd bring her with you today. How long have you two known each other? Have you been dating online for a while now? Why didn't she come with you?"

The urge to disappear grew inside Tade as they crowded him, so he did just that. Stealing one last piece of croissant, he dashed into the house. Alas, it was a futile attempt, because his sisters and mother stayed on his heels. A deep sigh broke free from his lips as he stepped into the lobby and realized there was nowhere to hide. How had they found out so soon? He'd hoped Richard and Idris would keep their mouths shut, but he saw now that he'd been asking for too much. Richard was a man in love, and Idris adored his mother. Accepting defeat, he turned around to face his pursuers, hands raised in surrender.

"Yes, I'm dating again—if you can call it that. No, I didn't ask her to come along with me, we only met two days ago. It's still..." He rolled his hands around each other. "Very, very new, and I didn't want to overwhelm her by introducing her to you guys—"

"What do you mean, overwhelm?" Zendaya queried before he even got to

finish his sentence. “Are you saying we were going to be too much for her to handle?” When Tade only gave her a pointed look, she fumbled. “Well, I agree, we can be a lot. But if she doesn’t have a spine, then maybe she’s not the one for you.”

“Zendaya Kehinde Maxwell! Would you listen to yourself? Your brother is finally trying at love again after being heartbroken for three years, and there you are, trying to discourage him! If you don’t want to get married, must you make everyone else remain single as well?”

“Hanhan, mummy, it’s not that serious now,” Zi grumbled, naturally taking her twin’s side.

“Before, nkor? It’ll never be that serious! Is it not you? If you don’t support her, who will?”

Sensing that things were starting to get heated again, Tade stepped in. “Mummy, calm down. I’m sure Zen didn’t mean it like that. As for my babe...” He turned to Zen. “Trust me when I say there’s nothing to worry about where she’s concerned. I assure you, Njay can hold her own.”

“Njay? Why does that name sound familiar?” His mother asked, her full attention on him now.

Tade winced, biting his tongue. He should have been more careful, but it was a good thing he hadn’t given much away. “I guess because it’s a common name? In any case, don’t ask me when you’re going to meet her. You’ll meet her when I say you will. Anything other than that, forget it.”

“You really like her, don’t you?” Zi asked, her voice soft.

Tade grew serious as he held his sister’s gaze. “Yes, I do. I think this might just be the real deal. I know it’s too soon, but I feel really certain, you know?”

“Well, you felt certain about that gold digger too, and look how that turned out.”

“Zen!”

Tade could only smile as he turned to his youngest sister. “It’s okay, Mum. Zen is only worried about me. She doesn’t want me getting hurt again. But I don’t think I will this time. Njay is very different from... *her*. You’ll understand what I mean when you finally get to meet Njay.”

“Very good!” his mother clapped. “In fact, this is such great news! I am sad you wouldn’t be getting to meet my J.J, though. I honestly believe you two would have been a great match! She’d often join us for Saturday brunch, but she says she has an appointment today. It would have been a great opportunity to meet. Nonetheless, I’m happy there’s someone in your life now. Maybe by the

time news of you dating again gets out, that Tonya girl will stop going around, disturbing people for updates about you.”

Tade froze as he heard that name. It’d been so long, so long since anyone had said it in his presence. His mother must have realized her error, for she was now covering her mouth with her hands, swallowing what was left of the gasp that had escaped.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry!” Her eyes filled with regret as she apologized. She was already drawing closer to him in comfort, but Tade simply shook his head.

“It’s okay.” And it really was. It had just been an initial reaction to hearing that name after so long. He’d healed, he was healing, and he would continue to do so. That woman no longer had any power over him, and he needed to prove that by learning how to say her name, hear it, and not feel anything at all. “She’s been asking around about me? T...” He swallowed hard. “Tonya?” It was barely a whisper, but it was progress.

“I suppose she’s finally rearing her head because she heard you’re back in town, and probably thinks enough time has passed for her to worm her way back into your life,” Zi explained. “Of course, she has no guts to show up here or contact any of us for that matter—not that she could, we all blocked her. But yes, she’s still hanging around.”

“I wonder why she wouldn’t just move on!” Zen burst out, her exasperation getting the best of her as she started to pace. “After all she did, you’d think she would have more shame, but no! She actually has the audacity to ask around about you? Does she really think you’d ever accept her back? After everything? And even if you did, what about us? What does she think would happen? That we would welcome her with open arms? Stand by and watch her try to ruin your life again?”

“I hear she keeps claiming she just wants forgiveness, a chance to explain herself better.” That was Zi, but Zen wasn’t having it.

“Forgiveness, my foot! She got more than enough chances and she threw them all to hell! She better stay far away from you, or I might just be contacting my lawyers about a restraining order.”

“I believe she doesn’t really think she stands a chance of rekindling anything again,” their mother tempered. She was now by Tade’s side, rubbing his back as she held him in comfort.

As for Tade, he simply focused on his sisters’ voices, trying not to think about anything else. Not the memories of how desperately he’d loved and trusted that woman, not the betrayal, and certainly not the disgrace that had followed after

everything because that... that had been the worst part. He could have forgiven her for the lies, and all she'd done whilst they were still together, but the smear campaign afterwards? Now, that one he could never let go of. Ever.

“She knows Tade has a good heart! She’s simply hoping he’d open the door wide enough for her to step in, and be considered an acquaintance at the very least. I’m sure she believes that perhaps, then, he would start to finance her once more.”

“That’s never going to happen,” Tade declared, finally breaking his silence as he succeeded in shoving the demons away one last time. His voice was hard, resolute. He was often an easygoing man, he joked a lot, and he extended so much grace to people, but once he made a decision and chose to be firm on it, he never went back on said decision. Tonya was out of his life for good, and there was no way she was ever coming back. When he said as much to his sisters and his mother, they all nodded in relief.

“Ah, there you all are! I was wondering where all the hosts went, leaving their guests alone.”

The atmosphere instantly changed from tensed to relaxed as their father’s baritone voice filled the room. They were all smiling as they turned to look at him. Olumide Adebayo Maxwell, the third, was a man who had started to hunch over with age, but was still as handsome, regal, and commanding as he’d been in his youthful days. To others, he was a ruthless, no-nonsense businessman who had managed to expand his family’s empire, despite the growing economic hardships in his time. But to them, in this home, he was simply dad.

He came to a stop, hands at his back, as he took in the scene from behind a pair of gray-rimmed glasses. They were identical to the tiny crop of hair that filled his otherwise bald head. That afternoon, he wore a simple navy blue senator attire, complementing the colors of his wife’s Bubu. It was his usual style, and it made him look good as always. Olumide Maxwell must have decided to let whatever it was he’d seen rest—and Tade knew his father had definitely sensed something was amiss; very little escaped that man’s keen perceptive abilities—for he simply broke into a smile, choosing to jest instead.

“You people are ganging up against my son again, aren’t you? Just because there’re three of you and two of us, doesn’t mean you can always get to bully him, you know? Son, next time, just tell me whenever they start closing in on you, and I’ll come to your rescue. Okay?” He finished with a wink that was very identical to the one Tade had become so fond of giving Njay, and only because he relished how beautifully it often made her blush.

Tade smiled as he went to stand by his dad. “Aye, captain! Although I’m capable of handling all three of them myself, it certainly would be nice to team up again like old times,” he said, returning the wink.

His father nudged his side, laughter on his lips. “Ah, I trust you! Now, if you guys are done giving him trouble, we have guests that need to be entertained.”

He might have said those words so softly, but they all knew it was an instruction that left no room for dissent. So, as he returned to the patio, his wife and Zi followed suit, leaving Zen and Tade behind. Because Tade could tell that his sister had deliberately stayed back to speak with him, he lingered as well.

“I find it hard to believe Richard didn’t tell you who I was with yesterday,” he said, breaking the ice. If Richard had, Zen wouldn’t be so worried. Tade supposed he had to thank the chef for having restrained himself from revealing it all.

“He didn’t.” Zen’s mien was sullen. She didn’t enjoy being out of loops. “But I have a feeling it’s someone we know.”

“Well, maybe, maybe not. I guess you’d have to wait and see.”

“Argh!” she groaned in frustration. Then suddenly, she was wrapping fond arms around her brother’s, and staring up at him with doe-eyes. “Just tell me? I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Tade chuckled at her attempt to look like an adorable kitten. “Nice try! But I haven’t fallen for that face in years! I’ve grown immunity, my love.”

“It’s not someone sketchy, is it? Could it be Sophia?”

Tade would have made a mess if there had been any drink in his mouth. “Soph? Please, Zen, give me some credit.” Sophia was the best friend of one of their close cousins, and she’d never cared to hide the fact that she was besotted with Tade. Naturally, Tade had been careful never to do anything that would erringly make her believe she stood a chance. He felt nothing for her at all, and he’d gotten weary of emphasizing that over the years. She was a sweet soul, just not his cup of tea.

His sister broke into laughter. “I know, I know. I just wanted to pull your legs. Besides, she finally moved on from you. She had her introduction two months ago, and her wedding is set to happen in March.”

“Wow, good for her! I’m elated to hear that. I mean it.”

“I know. Just as I am for you. I know how much you love to love, and it’s hurt me to see you deny such a huge part of who you are, these past three years.” Tade’s heart warmed as she continued. “I might or might not know your new lady, but you must know I trust you enough to make the best decision for you. If

she ends up breaking your heart though...”

“You’ll break her legs, got the memo! I’ll make sure she does as well—after asking her to be my girlfriend.”

“Great! And when would that be?”

Tade shrugged. These days, girlfriend proposals were a big deal, and he didn’t want to botch it. So, he was going to take his time and put something remarkable together. It was no less than Uju deserved.

“IDK yet. For now, I’m just basking in the newness of it all.”

The glimmering sheen in Zen’s eyes was all Tade needed to see, to reaffirm the depth of her love for him. He had never doubted that she cared. Earlier, it had been obvious she was only speaking from a place of concern. As though to confirm this, she threw her arms around his neck and drew him down for a smack kiss on the lips.

“There certainly is nothing like love when it’s real!” she pealed, pulling away. “So, enjoy it to the fullest, okay? I wish you the very best, big bro!”

“I know, Zen. I wish you the same too. That you find the kind of love that makes your heart float.”

She started to protest, but Benjamin called out to them for the toast then. Aware that the conversation would have to be finished later, Tade wrapped his hand around hers, and led them out.

Fifteen

Falling in love is like jumping off the edge of a cliff; you know it can end disastrously, but you jump anyway, hopeful, yet hopeless at the same time...

“**Y**ou say what is on the menu for today?”
“Onugbu soup and pondo yam.”
“Waawu! I can’t believe you actually went to market and took the time to cook for a man you met only a few days ago. Where is my best friend and what have you impostor done with her?”

Uju giggled as she gave the soup one last stir, then turned off the cooker. “Stop, jhor. You know me. I love cooking and I love feeding people. As long as I get the chance, I’ll definitely cook, so this shouldn’t come as a surprise now. Do you want to count how many times you’ve eaten my food in this life?” She picked up her phone just in time to catch Sarah snickering.

It was Sunday afternoon and with four o’clock only forty-five minutes away, Uju was giddy with anticipation. She’d thought long and hard about what to make for dinner, and had eventually gone with her number one special. She’d never flopped a single pot of her special bitter-leaf soup, and today wasn’t any different. Pleased with the fact that she’d finished preparing the meal in time, she started to clean up.

“As if I’m not the only friend you’ve known almost all your life. Yes, agreed, cooking is your thing, but I’ve never seen you this happy about cooking for a man before.”

“Hanhan, what do you mean? I used to cook for all my men now.” Aware that she could not continue to tidy up whilst holding on to her phone, Uju fetched her tripod and set it up. Hands free, she got back to work. According to her calculations, she should be done with cleaning in fifteen minutes. Then all that would be left to do was bathe, change into clean, fresh clothing, and wait for the doorbell to ring.

“Only the ones who survived the probationary period of three months,” Sarah countered. “And let’s be honest, I could count all of them on one hand and still not exhaust my fingers. Yet here you are... humming, whistling, unable to wipe that grin off your face! You’re even wearing an apron! My goodness! Again, I ask, what have you done with my friend?”

“Well, none of those men took me sailing on a yacht, hired a top Korean chef to serve me meals from my favorite country, then sang along to Taylor Swift with me in the middle of the freaking sea! Na man wey do good, go enjoy!”

“Preach, preach! You did not lie, sha. Mehn! My head still dey burst o! I really can’t believe he pulled that much weight for a first date!”

“My sister! I say ehn! I still pinch myself sometimes to know if it was real. I keep going back to the few pictures and videos we remembered to take and record. Ugh! It was such a beautiful day!”

“And she’s cheesing hard again. My friend, my friend! I’m happy to see you being romanced right o! It would turn out it wasn’t that you were incapable of love, you just hadn’t met someone who knew how to push the right buttons. Who would have thought it would end up being an I.J.G.B of all people? It’s like I’ll start prophetic ministries o. When I was saying it that day, it sounded funny. That’s how my namesake also laughed when God sent those angels to her.”

Love. The word tickled Uju’s heart. Of course, she didn’t think she was already in love with Tade—or that she’d started falling for him, for that matter. However, she suspected if things continued this way, it wouldn’t be long. It’d barely been two days since they last saw each other, and she missed him terribly, not minding the fact that they’d stayed in contact for most of their time apart. Morning calls, evening calls, chatting through the afternoon, sharing random pictures and short videos of whatever it was they were up to... And yes, it was also the third day in a row that she’d woken up to the sweetest good morning text. She didn’t know when a dreamy sigh slipped past her lips. What could she say? Tade was a pro at this romance thing, he lived and breathed it.

“I don’t know about love sha,” she protested weakly, as she picked yet another plate. “But yeah, he dey try. I’m not above giving accolades to whom it’s due.”

“Oshey, Oscars! I can help you order an award for him o. We’ll just imprint ‘*Best in Romance!*’ Or what do you think?”

“Gerout, jhor! You’re not serious!”

Sarah chortled. “Stale news,” she chimed, easily brushing the jab aside. “Anyway sha, let me leave you to finish preparing o. I’ll be waiting for gist after

the night is over, or maybe tomorrow morning.” She winked, the glint in her eyes spelling mischief.

“What? What’s doing this one? Wetin dey worry your eyes? You better open them so you can see well. Nothing is happening, o!”

“Hanhan, not even a kiss? With all the chemistry sizzling between you guys? Gurl! You’re killing me!”

“Please! I’m a daughter of Zion. It’s from clap that dance used to start. We start kissing now, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to control myself. This abstinence journey, we are pressing forward!”

Sarah burst into a gale, hearty laughter that soon graduated into a mocking, engine-refusing-to-start tune. “Okay now, Zion baby! Jesus baby! I wish you all the best in your abstinence journey o. As for me, I’m about to go on a date with my babe, and when we get back, we’re going to get down to really, really hot and—”

“I’ll be praying for your soul, Sister Unyime! May the good Lord arrest you and grant you the spirit of repentance!”

“Amen! Amen, sister! Please, don’t stop praying for me!”

They were both giggling as Sarah ended the call, and all Uju could do was shake her head.

Obviously, she was no saint, neither was she a prude, really. She’d just decided years ago, to leave sex off the table as it often muddled thoughts and choices—at least, on the side of the men she got involved with. They always seemed to have this magical idea that after one night of steaminess, she’d miraculously fall in love and begin to worship the ground they walked on. Uju had never been able to understand why, especially as she habitually made it clear from the start that, for her, feelings weren’t on the table. Unfortunately, when things never went the way they wished, the men often went mad with confusion, at which point Uju would either walk away or leave them to do the honors themselves. So yeah, she hadn’t had sex in a really long while. Hence, where the whole ‘asexual’ gist had originated from.

Of course, there was also her Christian journey. She’d grown up in a typical devout Christian home, and that had influenced her choices as an adult to a large extent. At the moment, she was trying to get to know God on a more personal level and do right by him. It wasn’t always easy, but once she’d discovered that after removing sex, little white lies, then maybe gossip from the table, she didn’t really sin like that, she’d started working on making her path to everlasting life a little clearer. So yeah, she was abstinent and determined to stay that way until

she got married, or at the very least, for some while longer. That didn't mean she couldn't kiss, though. She'd kissed a lot since she took that vow, and it had never led to anything more. And therein lied the problem.

Uju wasn't certain that with Tade, she'd be able to stop. It was becoming increasingly difficult to trust herself where he was concerned. He was turning everything she'd ever known upside down, walking through her walls as though they were made of paper, not the brick stones that had frustrated many men, and she had no power to stop him. What was she saying? Did she even want to? The answer to that was in the negatives. She was so darn attracted to him, near smitten with everything about him, and it was true what they said, the hormones definitely became maniacs once you hit your thirties. Put that next to the fact that he was going to be in her home today, her space... Lord, help her! This was a classic case of leading oneself into temptation.

Don't worry, Uju. You've got this, you can do this. Just don't cross the red line and you'd be safe.

By the time her doorbell rang thirty minutes later, and Uju felt her heart struggling to escape her chest as she went down the stairs to let Tade in, she found that her confidence had significantly reduced. Her shower thoughts had been consumed by the memories of his lips on her cheeks. Now, she couldn't stop imagining what those lips would feel like against hers.

"Hiii!" she chimed as she yanked the door ajar.

"Heeyyy!" he responded in like manner, his mega-watt grin causing the lights in her house to dim.

For a spilt moment, Uju's heart stilled, forgetting to beat. Then, it resumed with a force more vengeful than the one before, bruising her ribs with a kick. *Gosh! He looks good enough to eat! Father, help your daughter get through this evening and I'll not ask for anything for Christmas. Pretty please?*

There was something different about him. He seemed to be spotting a stubble around his moustache and chin. It made him look even sexier than before. And for the evening, he was dressed in a long-sleeve, form-fitting shirt that did nothing to hide his abs. Uju swallowed hard, forcing her eyes to go higher. That turned out to be an awful idea because this man had left the top three buttons of his shirt open, sneakily exposing a V of smooth, curly hair. Because she was already staring at his chest, naturally, her gaze climbed to his neck... *Since when did Adam's Apples become so attractive?* Her eyes geared away, intent on resisting temptation, only for them to end up falling on his lips.

Uh-oh.

Memories swarmed her. The lounge, when he'd leaned so close to her. At sea, when she'd almost forgotten her manners. In front of her home, when he'd kissed her goodnight... *Bad idea, bad idea! Restore protocol! Restore protocol! Great! Now, I'm speaking to myself in A.I language!* Uju shook her head as she forced her eyes to drop way below. Then she was taking in the rest of his fit. He'd styled the black shirt with a pair of identical pants. Shirt was tucked in at the waist, and the brown leather belt matched the Tom Fords he'd chosen for the evening. He looked like he had come straight from a function as his outfit choice seemed a little too formal for an evening house-date. He was speaking before she had the chance to ask.

"Would you like me to spin around so you can appreciate the specimen a little more?"

Ground, open up and swallow me now! Uju wanted to die! Of course, she'd been caught ogling! *Ugh!* And knowing this very self-assured man, he'd never let her hear the end of it. That didn't mean she couldn't deny the allegations and play ignorant, though.

"Was just wondering if you missed the memo," came her flippant response. "It's not a cocktail event, you know. We are having supper and watching a movie, that's it." She almost gave herself a pat on the back for how flawlessly she'd executed that. Her voice hadn't even wavered. *Good save, Uju!* Realizing then that she'd kept him waiting at the door for too long already, she stepped aside.

His scoff-turned-smirk told her he didn't believe her one bit as he followed her lead, crossing over the threshold. "It's okay to admit you were staring, you know. I was too. I mean, how could I not when you look so stunning in that dress? And your hair is gorgeous as well. I really love it. Suits you."

Uju's cheeks burned, so much so that she had to lift a hand to fan her face. Grateful that she had her back to him as she closed the door, she remained there for a moment, getting herself together. Instinctively, her hands ran through the long braids she'd let down for the evening. She'd gotten them done the day before, wanting to switch up her look. They were bum-length mini knotless braids woven to perfection with extension colors: gold, brown, and cream. Uju was obsessed with how beautifully the blended hues had turned out. They complemented her skin so well, and gave her that new-hair glow, braids never failed to give.

"Well, I just threw something on," she said, turning around only when she was certain she'd gotten herself together. "I wanted to be as comfortable as

usual, so I settled for something simple,” she added. Scenes of her taking the time to go through her wardrobe the evening before, trying on fits that would look both cute and effortless, and not announce her stomach pouch, especially after eating, played through her mind. She’d eventually settled for a loose-fitting brown dress that stopped mid-thighs. It was simple, but pretty, and she was ecstatic that Tade thought her beautiful in it.

“Hmmm. And I had to run a quick errand for my dad, hence...” He gestured at his fit with his left hand, and that was when Uju realized he’d been holding a cake, as well as a small fancy bag, all this while. His right hand was suspiciously hiding behind him.

“And you still made it here in time? A punctual man, very impressive!”

“Well, what can I say? I do try to impress.”

Lips curving as he made it impossible to be mad at him—not that she ever was, Uju stepped further into her living room, leading the way to her dining hall.

“Welcome to my humble abode. I hope you love it here.”

She heard him whistle, no doubt taking in the space. She’d had her housekeeper deep clean the day before, so she was confident all he’d see was sparkling orderliness.

“This doesn’t look humble at all. It’s very gorgeous and large, yet warm and cozy. You were right, I love the interior!”

“Thank you. I suppose large is relative, especially when you put it side by side with your parent’s mansion.”

“Pleeeassee. That house is expansive! Too big for anyone. Did I tell you I used to get lost as a child?”

That had her turning back, eyes widened in awe and delight, at the thought of little Tade trying to find his way through numerous hallways and turns. “No!”

“Yes, too! I think it wasn’t until I clocked ten that I stopped losing my way. I used to be very terrible with directions, you see. Truth is, I still kinda am.”

Now Uju was giggling aloud. “Fascinating! Somehow, I can’t wrap my head around you being any younger than twenty-one.”

“Just don’t say that next to my mum. She has albums and albums of embarrassing baby photos she’s always ecstatic to whip out.”

Uju’s eyes twinkled with mischief as they finally arrived at the dining table. “Now, that is what I call a marvelous idea! Thanks for sharing so generously. I’d be sure to mention how I can’t help wondering what you were like as a child, next time I find myself in her vicinity.”

“Damn! I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“You? Is that a possible feat for you to achieve? You couldn’t even pretend not to have caught a lady ogling you.”

His brows shot up. “Oh, so you finally confess you were feeling the boy, eh?”

It was Uju’s turn to wish she’d kept her mouth shut. When she wouldn’t say anything in response, he chuckled and changed the subject.

“I brought dessert and wine. I figured, if you are going to be hosting, the least I can do is be a thoughtful guest.”

She was smiling as she accepted his gifts. “This cake looks homemade.” It was a cute four-inch cake with a simple butter glaze design, and an inscription that read, ‘*Your Sweet Icing.*’ Once more, her cheeks caught fire. *Cheesy much?*

“That’s probably because I stayed up all night making it.”

Her head jerked up to him. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not. I really made the cake myself. I love baking, so I figured, why not?”

Uju’s lips settled into a pout as tears stung her eyes. “You love baking? I’m a sweet tooth!”

“You see? Meant to be! You and I, Njay, we are well-suited for each other. You just can’t deny it. Don’t worry, I’m going to be baking you more pastries than you can ever eat, so stick around, will ya?”

“No. You are bad for me because I’m actually trying to stick to a healthy diet. Pastries aren’t healthy.” Her argument was weak, she was aware, but at least it would be on record that she tried.

“Okay, only on cheat days, then. Deal?”

Butterflies swarmed Uju’s belly as she placed the cake on the table. How could she refuse his sweet plea? The simple answer was she couldn’t. So, hooking her pinky finger around his, she pressed their thumbs together and muttered, “Deal.” She was rewarded with that brain-scrambling smile, and as though she hadn’t already received enough sugar for the night, he finally released his right hand from the prison of his back. Uju gasped as the most beautiful bouquet of white tulips appeared in front of her. “Tulips!”

“You like them?”

“Are you kidding me? They are my favorite flowers!” She paused to expand her lungs with their scent. “How did you know?”

Tade shrugged, the smile on his face, that of a man who knew he’d outdone himself yet again. “You just struck me as the kind of woman who would appreciate something other than the regular roses.”

“Oh, I love roses too. But tulips are unquestionably my favorite of all time!

My goodness! And they're white as well! Oh, Tade! This is truly beautiful! Come, help me fit them in a vase!"

He promptly obeyed, and soon, she had two vases filled with tulips in her home because the bouquet had been too large to fit into one.

"I... I didn't prepare anything for you," she said, turning away from the window where she'd chosen to place the second vase. He was right by her side, looking down at her in that manner that perpetually made her feel as though she were the only person in the world, the only one he could see.

"That's okay," he replied softly. "Just being here with you, in your space, is more than enough gift. You are more than enough gift, Njay. Thank you for trusting me with your home. I don't take this for granted at all. I'm truly glad to be here."

Uju took it then, her first step towards the edge of the cliff. The very one that could only lead to one place—her falling irrevocably in love with him. And because that moment was too precious, too perfect, with the soft light from the dining room bathing them, and the soft music she'd begun playing just a little earlier, filling the air, she couldn't not do anything. She couldn't not reach out and cup his chin with her palm. She couldn't not stroke a tender caress across his cheeks, and she couldn't not rise to her tiptoes, wrap her arms around his neck and draw him in for a tight embrace.

"Thank you, Tade. Thank you for everything."

His arms went around her in an instant. "I should be the one thanking you. You wouldn't understand now, but someday, soon."

She nodded and simply stayed that way. He must have sensed she had no intention of letting go shortly, for he drew closer, shifting them so he could bear more of her weight. That way, she no longer had to strain herself, standing on her tiptoes.

"You good?" he asked after a moment. When she bobbed her head, he countered, "You're shaking, Njay."

Only because this feels so wonderful and I want to stay here forever. It felt perfect. They fit like puzzled pieces designed for each other, and the intensity with which she wanted to keep holding on to him frightened her so much, she couldn't not shake. Was she really prepared for this? To have her world flipped on its axis? Could she survive this if she gave in and let herself free fall? She'd started and ended many relationships in the past, yes. But at worst, she'd only moved on with a sense of regret over things she could have done better. Uju didn't know what it was like to have her heart broken, and perhaps it was for the

best. Perhaps it was only right that she never got to find out, because when she considered the way this man was making her feel; the power he wielded over her after such a short while, she didn't think it was a risk she could take.

"Njay? Are you sure you're all right?" he asked again when she wouldn't respond.

She was smiling as she finally pulled away. "Of course. You just... smell so good, better than the flowers."

The curve of his lips mirrored hers as he searched her eyes. "Thank you. I was going to say the same about you." He must have decided to let whatever he'd seen go, for he simply took her hand, changing the subject once more. "So, what's the itinerary for the evening?"

Uju released a breath she hadn't even realized she was holding. They were back to safe, familiar territory. These were waters she could easily wade. So, for the second time that evening, she led him to the dining table. "Well, I was thinking dinner first, then movies later so the food can digest as we watch. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Any allergies? I just realized I should have asked earlier."

"None, I eat everything and anything."

Uju slowed down, then threw her head over her shoulders to look at him meaningfully. "*You eat everything?*"

It only took him a second to get it. The furrowed lines on his forehead disappeared, his eyes widening with disbelief as he did. "Ah, my goodness! Obianuju! You need hypo! Of course, I didn't mean *that*! Not that I'm saying I don't, but—"

Uju burst into laughter, unable to help herself. He'd instantly turned the proverbial red, looking shy and adorable as hell. Her ribs were hurting when they finally made it to the dining table. Deep down, she was glad her mission had been successful. The thick awkwardness that had stained the air had now fully dissipated, and things were back to normal between them.

"I hope you don't mind onugbu soup and pondo yam," she said as she served their meal. She'd kept both soup and swallow warm in thermal flasks earlier, so she didn't have to worry about heating them up.

"*Ei!* Do you know it's just dawning on me that I'm in a proper Igbo woman's house? My dear, anything you give me, I'll chop and even lick the plates!" He was rolling his sleeves as he said those words—right after tucking out his shirt.

As Uju watched, he transformed from the posh, multi-millionaire, Tade

Maxwell, to simply Obatade. Good, she liked men who could eat. In no time, they were both settled and ready to dig in.

“Oya, oya, bless the food, ma. This aroma is confusing my senses. In fact, my stomach has started singing.”

Uju struggled and failed to keep a straight face as she shared a short prayer. By the time they said amen, she was in stitches.

Her heart warmed as they ate. Everything about the moment felt so precious. It made her think of the family she’d always wanted deep down, and, slowly, the fears that had formed a grip around her heart began to ebb away. Perhaps letting herself fall in love with this man wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Sixteen

I personally don't believe in the concept of 'the one'. Notwithstanding, there's no denying that some people are darn well-suited for each other.

Tade couldn't remember the last time he'd had a meal that tasted sooo good! In fact, it had been so delicious, he'd asked for second and third servings, before finally heeding his stomach's protest and towing the path of self-control. Of course, Njay had readily fed him again and again, watching delightedly as he cleaned the plates each time. He'd sung praises of her cooking skills, and her head had swelled—proper give and take. It was official, her onugbu soup had become his favorite native dish of all time!

As they sat arm in arm on the soft fur rug in her living room, watching the closing credits of the movie, *Fifty First Dates*, Tade was grateful she'd placed dinner first. In the two hours since then, the food had digested, and he finally felt light and comfortable again.

"Well, that was certainly a good watch!" Uju chimed as the credits finished rolling.

"I told you, you'd enjoy it. I really can't believe you hadn't seen *Fifty First Dates*. It's like the ultimate rom-com! Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore did so well, directors had to bring them together again for *Blended*."

"Now, that one I've seen—several times, in fact. I truly enjoy it. Besides..." She leaned back, turning her head so she could hold his gaze. "It can't be you *yabbing* me about movies I've not watched when you didn't even know there's one called *Thirteen Going on Thirty* until tonight. I mean, that was the ultimate coming-of-age film for girls back in the days!"

"You see?" Tade countered, turning his palms to the ceiling. "You said girls. If it was a movie marketed towards female teenagers and women in their early thirties, then it's understandable that I haven't seen it, yes? But what's your excuse for today being the first time you'd be watching *Fifty First Dates*? I

mean, don't say it anywhere else o, they'd laugh at you!"

He knew the moment she decided to give up on him. It was when, after staring for a long minute and saying nothing, she suddenly scoffed, jumped to her feet, then groaned.

"Ugh! You're so annoying! Big head!"

Tade's tummy leapt. "A Nigerian woman calling me a big head? Mama, I've made it o! I'm now in the finals!"

That threw her exasperation out the window. She was still laughing when she returned with the cake and wine, ticks later. He had stood up to sit on the love seat by then, and she naturally joined him.

"So, do we see another movie?" she asked as she cut the cake. He too busied with uncorking the wine, they'd decided to keep it for dessert. "It's only seven-thirty p.m. It's still quite early." She handed him his plate of pastry.

"We could," he said, accepting it with gratitude. "Or we could just sit and gist."

"Ehen? What do you want to gist about?" Cake in her hand as well, she retreated to the opposite corner of the chair.

"Anything, everything. I enjoy talking to you. Oh, I know! Tell me about your family. We've spoken about your business, and your friends, but not them. And it's totally fine if you don't want to share."

"Nah, it's okay." She tucked her legs underneath her, swallowing one spoon of cake. "Where do I begin? First off, I'm from Enugu, born and bred. I come from a family of seven." When Tade whistled, she nodded. "Yes, I know. It's a pretty large family. There is my mum, my dad, and their five children. I'm the second born."

"Really? You struck me as an *Ada*." It was a name popularly given to the first daughters of Igbo families; it literally meant first daughter.

She cocked her chin. "*Tsk*. That is one honor I'm very glad I don't have to bear. My sister, Adamara'mma, is the firstborn. We all simply call her Ama. She's thirty-four, and has a beautiful daughter, Ardella. Ardella is seven and has all her uncles and aunties wrapped around her finger. She's super adorable, and the reason my mother keeps asking me for more grandbabies."

"Well, she could just ask Ama to give her more, except your sister is no longer interested in having kids?"

"Oh, I'm sure Ama would love to have more children. It's just, raising one child as a single mother, even with all the support from family and friends, is enough work on its own. Especially as she also has a thriving career."

Tade could sense there was a story there, but he didn't prod. It was the year two thousand and twenty-three, there was nothing new about single mothers. He was more in awe of the sheer strength it must have taken Ama to have decided to raise her child on her own. As though Njay could hear his internal dialogue, she sought to clear his confusion.

"Ama was married once. Eight years ago, she had this beautiful wedding with the man of her dreams. Only, things changed afterwards. He wanted her to quit her job and when she refused, he got aggressive. She thought he was simply frustrated as his business wasn't doing well at the time, and that it would pass. She'd also already taken in with Ella, so she was willing to work things out. That is, until he—"

"Don't tell me he hit her." Tade found himself holding his breath, hoping to God it wasn't true. When his hopes became a muddy pothole jumped into, he found himself feeling rage towards a man he barely knew. There was nothing he despised more than weak men who tried to cover their inadequacies by making their women feel small, worse still when they sunk into the abyss of violence and dared to raise their hands against said women.

"He did," Uju answered softly. "Only once, but once was more than enough. My sister left him that day, to his astonishing dismay, and never returned. She appeared in front of my parent's home, and she didn't even have to say anything before they took her in. My dad is the chief judge of Enugu state, by the way, and my mom is a professor."

Tade was beyond impressed. "Wow! A family of scholars."

"Yes. Alas, I was never really interested in towing that path, so I stopped after my masters'." He smiled at the disclaimer, and she kept going. "Anyway, my dad got him arrested and helped my sister file for a divorce. His family came running, and after days of pleading and failed emotional blackmail, we let him go. The bride price and dowry got returned, and that was the end of that matter. The divorce was finalized a few months later. My sister won full custody, of course, and Ella's father can only see her under close supervision."

Tade could finally breathe. He was so proud of how her family had handled the matter. It further gave him an insight into how this woman, who was winning his heart by the second, had turned out so well. "Your family is amazing! You know that, right?"

She lifted her shoulder in a casual shrug, but she couldn't hide the proud gleam in her eyes. "Well, we always try to be there for one another. Ama has been living with my parents ever since—not that she can't afford to live on her

own. Like I said earlier, she has a thriving career as a bank director, but she's always been closer to our parents, and she loves that they're happy to help with raising Ella. She's making plans to leave the country soon though, so there's that."

Tade bobbed his head. "I understand. And I'm so sorry she ever had to experience that at all. I can't imagine how tough it must have been for her." He wanted to say more, but at the risk of coming off as though he was posturing, he simply left it at that.

"Ah, it's all right. She has since healed from it all, and is in a much better place now. As for Ella, she has more than enough exemplary male figures in her life, and her father surprisingly does right by her, so she's turning out well, too."

When Tade nodded again, this time saying nothing, she simply continued. She told him about her other siblings. There was Kelechukwu after her, and Ifunnaya after him, then there was Odinaka, the baby of the house.

Kelechukwu, twenty-nine, was a neurological surgeon in the U.S. Ifunnaya had taken her mother's path and was a professor of arts and literature at the almighty Julliard, at the tender age of twenty-seven. Uju described her as the family's protégé who'd graduated from university at seventeen, and bagged her first master's degree at nineteen. Her second had come at twenty-two just as she was rounding up her first PhD. She'd become a professor at twenty-six.

"She has several essays that have gained attention worldwide, has spoken at countless Ted talks, and will publish her first novel next year. None of us can wait! We're just so proud of her, you know? She's so young and has achieved sooo much! I'm excited to see how much farther she'd go."

Tade could hear it in Uju's every word, she truly adored her little sister and celebrated Ifunnaya's wins as her very own. "And your brother, Odinaka?" he asked, immensely enjoying, and grateful for the peek she was giving him into her family.

"Oh, he's into sports. Years ago, that would always give my father a headache, but seeing how well athletes are doing these days..."

"I grab, project Mbappe." When she smiled, Tade added, "What sports is that?"

"Basketball. He's been in the U.K for a while now, and is starting to make waves. He's only twenty, so we're very hopeful for him. He just needs one big signing, and poof! He'd be worldwide."

The wheels in Tade's mind turned. Surely, he had one or two connects in the Basketball industry that would help her brother get in front of the right

audience?

“So, there you have it!” Uju announced, letting out a fulfilled sigh. “That’s my family for you.”

Tade had no choice than to stan. Dropping his glass of wine, he broke into a round of applause. “Wow! Your parents really said, ‘*high achievers only*’, huh? Come correct or not at all!”

Uju flipped her hair. “I suppose. I never really thought about it that way. I’m just glad we’re all doing well.”

“I mean, it’s something truly commendable. Such a big family and not one black sheep.”

“Hahaha! Well, I reckon it’s more about the fact that we all grew up. My elder sister and my immediate younger brother were quite the rascals back in the day. But they hit twenty-one and suddenly got their life together. It was really fascinating to watch. Had my mother giving testimonies in church and all.”

Tade could just imagine the scene. “And you?”

“Oh, I’ve always been quite the divergent. Never really gave any trouble, but hardly complied, either. My mother said for the longest time, she couldn’t figure me out. I just liked doing things in my own way, at my own time. It was the reason they didn’t oppose me when I binned my engineering degree for events planning, even though they couldn’t wrap their heads around why.”

“What? You studied engineering?” Now, that was a shocker.

“And graduated with honors, too!” she tolled. “Mechanical engineering in Unilag, mastered Mechatronics at Stanford, then came back to pursue my passion. Where did you think my love for automobiles came from?”

Tade folded his arms across his chest and just stared at her, processing his breakup with words. They soon reconciled. “You are full of surprises! I never could have imagined! Why mechanics in the first place, though?”

“I was simply fascinated by the idea of machines. Wanted to learn how they operated, so I went to school to study them.”

“And afterwards?”

“Well, whilst studying, I realized once I’d satisfied my curiosity, I got bored really quickly. I started putting together activities for my friendship groups around the same time, and found out I actually enjoyed planning events more, so I made the switch.” She raised her hand. “Now, don’t get me wrong, studying mechanics was fun, too. In fact, my professors had high hopes for me, believing I’d make it big in the industry.” She lifted both shoulders to her ears and shook her head. “But it just wasn’t me, you know? I just didn’t see myself doing that

for the rest of my life, so I came back here and started something else.”

“Wow!” Tade exclaimed for the umpteenth time that evening. “Just like that? I’m curious. How did your parents react?”

“My father asked if I needed capital to start my business. My mother heaved a deep sigh and wished me the very best. That was about it.”

“Sounds like they’d truly grown accustomed to you always having your way.”

“Well, they got one professor, one surgeon, a bank director, and a basketballer. I’m sure they must feel very contented and accomplished.”

“Not to mention, you’re one of the top three events planners in the hottest city in West Africa. I’m certain they’re very proud of you.”

“Oh, they are. Tremendously so.”

Tade released a deep breath, soaking it all in. “You know, I’ve never been more grateful for the family I come from, as well as my successes so far, than today.

She looked at him funny. “And why is that?”

“I mean, imagine I was just a regular doctor or a lawyer? Imagine finally getting to meet your family. How could I possibly measure up?” He watched her as she giggled, content to keep doing so for the rest of his life. “I’m being serious.”

“I know what you mean. I find your family quite intimidating as well, so yeah. But you have nothing to worry about. My folks are really chill people. As long as they have something doing and we truly love them, my parents have no issues concerning our choices of partners. Oh, well, they must be Christians. That’s their only condition.”

Tade had no words to describe how elated he was at the turn this conversation had taken. He wondered if she realized the implication of what she was saying, if she knew just how much progress they’d made in a single night.

“What?” she asked when she caught him staring.

He rested his head against the sofa, his heart full. “Look at us, talking about meeting your parents and being partnered up on our second date—third—if we’re counting the first encounter.”

Her cheeks took on a twinge of pink and she frantically tried to look anywhere else but at him. “Oh? I thought we were speaking hypothetically o. Not that I was saying you’re going to get to meet my parents or anything, or that we’re going to be partnered up. I was just saying...” She rolled her open palms over each other. “Generally speaking, all my parents want is to see their children

happy,” she ended with a shrug, arms now outspread.

“Yes, yes, of course. I totally understand you, Miss Uju. We’re just in a deeply hypothetical scenario right now. Nothing real at all. It’s all simulations.” He began to punch invisible buttons in the air. “I mean, can’t you see me shutting down the systems? Nothing real at all, my dear. Nopity, nope!”

She threw a pillow at him then and he swerved, shielding his face with his elbow as he easily dodged it.

“My goodness! You are really aggravating, shey you know?”

“I’ve heard it’s part of my charms,” he teased further, sticking out his tongue.

There was another pillow throw, and he wasn’t quick enough to dodge it this time, so he simply retaliated. And thus, the evening continued: pillow fights, more banter, until it was time for him to go home.

They said reluctant goodbyes for the third time since they’d met, and with a promise to see again in two days, he kissed her cheeks, got into his car, pulled out of her garage, and into the streets. He’d just gotten on the highway when he received a text.

I actually think my parents would love you, you know? Big head.

The grin on his face remained permanent, all the way home.

Seventeen

We all have scars, Chico. Some, bigger than others'...

The following week was filled with wholesome dates and activities planned out between Uju and Tade. They went pottery-making, visited a perfumery and baptized their nostrils in scents, went bowling at Dufus and Gees, spent the entire day at Primemark game center, wall-climbing, arrow-shooting, bouncing—and falling—in a pit of balls... Of course, they also went jet-skiing, as well as paint-and-sipping. They even attended the Black Tie Christmas orchestra, and Uju had felt like royalty all night long, thanks to Tade's doting.

Most of these, they'd enjoyed alone, just the two of them. Others, Tade's friends joined in. Like the day at Primemark, Bolanle and Ben were there as well. At Dufus and Gees, most of the squad were present too. Then, there was that afternoon they'd spent paint balling. Goodness! It had been so much fun! Couples had been split into opposing teams, and that had made the game bloodier, with no side wanting to lose to the other. As God would have it, Uju and Bolanle's team had claimed victory, much to Tade and Ben's chagrin. Naturally, the women had not been able to shut up about it at all.

Sometimes, Uju caught herself feeling guilty for engaging in such endless leisure activities, and she began to wonder if she'd closed for the year too early, whether it wouldn't be best to call her staff back to work. Alas, every time those thoughts crossed her mind, her conscience would go, *'You'd be a terrible boss if you ended their well-deserved long holiday!'*. Because Uju never wanted to be seen as a wicked Igbo woman by her staff, even though she wore the tag with pride whenever men pinned it on her, she'd quickly banish those concerns and go back to enjoying herself. After all, her schedule hadn't afforded her the luxury of time to go on a vacation that year, so why couldn't she take a month-long holiday? Why did she have to keep wrestling with guilt for not actively

working when she wasn't owing anybody? She deserved this. She deserved these heart-overflowing moments filled with bursts of happiness. She deserved spending sweet time with the handsomest man in the world, basking in the way he was never able to tear his gaze off her, even when surrounded by a multitude. She was beyond worthy of all the wonderful sensations that had made their home in her, as she drew closer to falling headfirst and irreversibly in love with said handsome man, upon getting to know him better.

And that was why as another Sunday came around, she was sitting by his side in his blue Jaguar F-type, hand-in-hand, as they found their way to the beach house where Ben and Bolanle were having their all-white, fifth wedding anniversary party. As one could expect, they'd both dressed the part.

Tade was wearing a khaki senator-styled two-piece. The shirt was free, with a faux collar spilling into a four-inch-deep chest part. The trousers allowed much room for movement and air as well, and even though the look wasn't form-fitting, Uju had still wanted to gobble him all up when he appeared at her front door earlier that evening. On his feet were a pair of black palm slippers Uju found really suitable for both the occasion and location.

She herself had gone for a two-piece as well. The high-waisted pants were long and wide, and the blouse was a cute, fitted crop top with tiny straps for sleeves. The neckline was her most favorite part of the outfit; it was a dangling cowl cut that somehow left everything to imagination. On her feet were a pair of low-heeled sandals. Her jewelry choices for the night were simple as always—bangles, a golden choker with a large sapphire pendant, and identical earrings. She'd completed the look with a turquoise beaded clutch, and was confident she'd killed it.

She still remembered how Tade had whistled when he first saw her in the fit, his dawn orbs twinkling with approval. *"Ouuuhh! You're going to set the party on fire, mama! And I especially love what you did with your hair!"*

Uju had blushed as she smoothed her hand over said hair, muttering, *"Thank you."* She'd styled the braids into a half ponytail, while the rest of the braids flowed down her back. It felt just right for the mood, as well as her outfit.

Bolanle had given her an invite over lunch on Thursday, and Uju had accepted it wholeheartedly, promising to be there.

"Tade's family will be there as well. You know that, right? They're like my in-laws," Bolanle had said, evidently feeling the need to add the caveat.

Uju had thought long and hard before bobbing her head. *"Yes."*

"Well, I suppose you could choose to come independently, but I doubt Tade

would be able to act as though he doesn't know you for the entirety of the night. It's been a while since I've seen him get this way about anyone else. Scratch that. I've never seen him get this way about anyone else, not even when he was with that devil's spawn, Tonya, and he really loved her."

Uju's instincts had instantly raised their hackles, and she would have pressed for more information if Bolanle hadn't quickly realized she'd misspoken; apologized, saying it wasn't her place to share, and refused to speak any further on it. Uju's heart had sunk in disappointment, but she'd understood and earnestly appreciated Bolanle's decision to respect her friend's privacy. That didn't mean Uju had stopped thinking about it, though.

In fact, since then, she'd wrestled with broaching the subject with Tade. Given, it was partly because an opportunity had not presented itself to do so. Besides that, she wasn't quite sure how she was supposed to start the conversation. What would she be asking as? His talking stage partner? His friend? Things were still undefined between them, and, in all honesty, Uju didn't have a problem with that. She wasn't in a rush.

A frustrated steam of air blasted through her lips. She didn't even know why she couldn't stop being bothered about it. From what Bolanle had said, it was clear that whoever this Tonya was, she was history and there was a lot of bad blood. Tade had told Uju he hadn't dated anyone in three years. Jests and jabs from his friends concerning their budding romance had affirmed as much. So, again, why was she still bothered about this woman? Uju simply couldn't put a finger to it.

Indeed, it didn't help that at several points during the week, a particular number would call Tade, and his countenance would instantly alter as he ended the call. And when messages came in from said number, he'd immediately delete them, refusing to even glance through. Uju was well aware she couldn't fault him for wanting to protect his peace of mind if this Tonya was terrible news. That didn't mean she wanted to be caught in the middle of a situation that had nothing to do with her. After all, if this Tonya character was truly the person trying to reach Tade, it spoke to reason that, though he believed himself done with her, she wasn't, with him.

Blame her love for Kdramas, but Uju was wary of exes who refused to move on. She'd also heard one too many stories of men suddenly realizing they'd never recovered from said exes, only to end up finding their way back to them. It was not the kind of situation she relished being in at all. Still, as frightened as she was by the magnitude of the feelings brewing inside of her, she also knew it

was neither fair to herself nor Tade to keep entertaining such unhealthy thoughts. They could only be recipes for disaster. Thus, she did what she'd done that Thursday before telling Bolanle, "*It's all right. If Tade believes it's time to let his folks know about us, then sure... I'll be happy to come as his date.*"; she swept those concerns out of her mind.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Tade's voice filled the car, bringing her back to him, to what really mattered.

"We both know asking price starts at..."

"Two million dollars. Yes, yes," he completed, rolling his eyes. "You still won't send me that account number."

"Which should indicate my thoughts aren't for sale."

"What if I fervently begged you to share them?"

Uju's response was a quiet, genuine smile as she changed the subject. "Are you sure you're ready for your folks to know about us?"

He turned to her then, locking gazes for a brief intense moment before he returned his attention to the road. "I was about to ask you the same. There's still enough time to change your mind. We could just step into the party separately, and act like we don't know each other all night long."

Everything in Uju wrestled against that idea. "And what's the fun in that? I've been looking forward to seeing your mother's reaction. We've already come this far, haven't we? I say let's do it! Fighting!" She pulled up their entwined hands, letting her renewed excitement shine through as she struck the air with the combined fist she'd made.

He smiled at her then, and just like that, all was right with the world once more.

They'd just begun to drive down the tarred street road—courtesy of the Maxwells—that led directly to the beach house when a call came in for Tade. As his phone was plugged into the car, Uju could see the number displayed across the screen. It wasn't the familiar one that had been bugging all week, so she relaxed.

"Probably someone from the party calling about something," he explained, accepting the call. "Hello?" he greeted first.

There was a brief silence before a woman's voice blared through the speakers. It sounded anxious, desperate. "Hello? Hello, Tade! It's me, Tonya. Tade, please! Please don't end the..." She didn't get to finish her sentence before Tade did just that, his features shifting from the dazzling grin Uju adored so much into a disturbing scowl.

Uju waited, breath bated, as she seriously contemplated if now could be described as the perfect time to broach the topic. After all, she had heard the woman speak, had she not? She'd heard the name. It wouldn't come off as she was asking out of thin air or making mountains out of molehills. She could also play it cool. Go the light and easy way, maybe even joke a little, "*The baby mama is finally calling, huh?*" Uju winced, shutting her eyes as those words crossed her mind. *Anything but that, please.*

Well, what if she just went straight to the point rather than beat around the cattle pen? Explain everything from the start? How it was making her feel, and how she was almost going mad from curiosity?

She must have spent a good time wandering the maze of her mind because next thing she knew, they were pulling to a stop. She looked up to see they'd arrived at the beach house. The gigantic blue rustic-style duplex, surrounded by exotic cars, was plenty indication of that. Not to mention Adekunle Gold's *Party No Dey Stop* blaring loudly from the speakers within the building. She figured she should say something then, anything to break the ice that had formed since that call, churning what had once been comfortable silence into a thick, tensed, awkward spell.

"I—"

"I'm sorry."

Uju swallowed the rest of her words, eyes flaring with wonder, as she turned to Tade. He had pulled both hands off the steering wheel and was reaching for hers, gaze boring into her soul.

"What?" she asked, not sure she'd heard correctly. A whisper was all she could manage.

"I'm sorry," he said again in a voice she'd never heard him use. It was low, solemn, so solemn, and filled with the remorse she could clearly see in his eyes. It made her heart ache. "I know you've been noticing the calls and messages all week, and I know you've been curious. I should have been more forthcoming..." He forced an invisible lump down his throat, as he broke eye contact for a moment.

Uju's stomach twisted into knots. This couldn't be her fears coming true, could it? Certainly not, Tade wouldn't do that to her. Most importantly, he didn't look like someone who was guilty, just troubled. She bade herself calm, aware that what he truly needed from her in that moment was patience, as he gathered himself together.

It took another few seconds of regulated breathing before he spoke again. "I

want to talk to you about it, you know. I just... My mind has been a mess. I've been struggling. I'm still struggling—and failing—to put words together. But I promise you..." He held her gaze captive once more. "I promise you, Njay. I will tell you everything. Just give me tonight. By the end of the night, I'd have been able to get my head together. Then, I'd tell you all you need to know. Would that be okay?"

What could Uju say other than yes? She broke free from his hold then, reaching to cup his face ever so tenderly. Just like she'd grown accustomed to doing over the past week, she stroked a soft caress across his chin. "Mhm-mhm," she bobbed her head. "That would be totally fine. There's no rush, Tade. I don't know what's going on, I have no inkling what must have happened, but I can see it's quite serious. And a sore spot for you. I happen to know enough about respecting people's traumas, not to go around poking thoughtlessly. So, please, don't feel pressured, okay? As long as *you* assure me there is nothing to worry about, then there isn't." She meant those words with all her heart.

"Oh no, not at all. Tonya is... She's history. Forgotten and buried," Tade was quick to affirm. "And I honestly thought I'd fully healed from this, but it's the first time since... Since everything went to hell, that she'd get so close, you know?" He shook his head as though shaking off a bad dream. "I don't know why she's doing this, or how she even got my number, it's just... Having to rehash everything after I've kept it all buried for years now, is doing a huge one on me. But I'm getting myself together, I promise you that. And this, it doesn't affect anything between us, okay? It doesn't change a single thing. She's nothing. Plain and simple. I've got you, Njay. I do. Can you believe that?"

It was a broken plea, one that made him sound so fragile, so vulnerable, she wanted to kiss all his worries away. Uju did just that. A light, lingering smooch on his nose. Then she was quickly withdrawing. That earned her a chuckle, and when her heart leapt at the sound, she knew she'd already tripped over the edge of *that* cliff. She was falling now, hopeless, helpless.

"A kiss on the nose? Really, Uju?"

"What? It's a very cute nose," she flirted, unable to wipe the smitten grin off her face. "It was also a very nice kiss. If I do say so, myself."

"Well, I can't argue with that, you didn't lie. I only wish you'd chosen another part of my face as its recipient." When she giggled, he brought her knuckles to his lips. "So, should I take that as a yes? You trust me?"

Uju searched his eyes for a moment longer. There was nothing but sincerity in them. "It's a yes," she nodded. "I believe you, Tade. I trust you." She watched

as he dissolved with relief, as his chest fell, heard that deep sound of imprisoned air finally being set free, and she knew in that moment: whatever this was between them meant as much to him as it did to her. Her fears cowered some, retreating into the shadows.

“Good, good!” he said. “Now that we have that sorted, we have a party to get to. I fear if we don’t appear soon, Bolanle would have our phone batteries dying from calls.”

Uju couldn’t agree more. Her cheeks were still crinkled as he helped her out of the car minutes later. Then, holding her hand, he led the way to the entrance. The bouncers at the door immediately recognized Tade, hailing him as they stepped aside.

As soon as they were in the house, Uju could tell the party was happening by the poolside. There were a few people hanging around in the living area, and many others seemed to be moving towards the backyard. “Looks like they’re having so much fun!” There was no mistaking that. From the booming music to the shouting, not to mention the vibrating ground, it was evident the bash was in full swing.

“Trust B.B to always throw a mean party,” Tade shouted into her ear as they advanced. It was the only way she could hear him over all the noise. And Uju knew this, but his breath, so close, so hot on her neck, rendered her powerless against the delicious shiver that licked her spine. “When it comes to parties? Those two? Them no dey ever carry last!”

Uju’s response was a warm chuckle as they eventually stepped over the threshold into the pool area. Aromas of grilled fish, *asun*, and suya drifted to her, tickling her nostrils. Her mouth instantly watered. She was definitely going to be cheating on her diet tonight.

“Merry Christmas!” someone greeted just then.

She turned to find an ice cream and popcorn seller who’d set up just after the back door, smiling at her. He was dressed in white as well—save for the striped apron and the Christmas cap that covered his head. Add that to the false beards he wore, Uju couldn’t help wondering where she’d seen his face before.

“Merry Christmas!” she greeted in response, unable to look away from the delectable ice cream array. Figuring one evening of indulging wouldn’t hurt her fitness goals, she decided to begin her night with the sweet desert. “One vanilla and one cappuccino, please!” she called, soon as she received a confirmation from Tade to place an order for him, too.

“I hope you’re enjoying your holidays, ma?” the ice cream seller asked with a

knowing smile, when he handed them their cones.

Uju thought it strange, the way he was looking at her as though he was privy to some information she didn't know. Still, she managed to infuse her voice with warmth as she replied, "I am, thank you!" After all, it was Christmas. The entire season was popularly regarded as one of holidays. This ice cream vendor couldn't possibly be referring to the break she was taking off work, could he? No. That would mean he knew her on a personal level. And that, would definitely mean some *Scream-level* kind of insanity—*Scream*, the movie franchise.

"What?" Tade asked her as they turned around, continuing their journey into the crowd.

"Oh, it's nothing," she answered, shaking the troubling thoughts out of her head. "He just seems really familiar, is all. Also, I don't know if I'm imagining things, but random people keep greeting me '*Merry Christmas!*' wherever I go, these days. Sometimes, it's someone dressed in a Father Christmas costume. Other times, it's simply street vendors. And for some reason, they all seem to look alike!"

She was expecting Tade to respond with concern, something to affirm she wasn't being paranoid. He teased her instead, nudging her shoulders softly. "What? Do you think you're in a Hallmark movie or something? Where Santa disguised as a regular old jack-of-all-trades keeps following the main leads around, making sure his magic continues to bring them together?"

Uju burst into laughter at the ridiculousness of it all. As she sobered, she realized she actually appreciated him making light of the issue. It made her feel calm, rather than more anxious. "I mean, it doesn't seem so farfetched, does it? How else are we to explain us meeting the way we did? Not to mention the fact that I still can't find any flights home, when people keep booking theirs every other day? It's like once I get on any airline's flight page like this..." She snapped her fingers. "They purposely lock me out!"

Tade's eyes widened in faux awe as he skipped forward so they could stand chest to chest. "Woah! Magic! I can't believe this! Looks like someone up there really wants us to be together, huh?"

Uju couldn't help shaking her head at him. "Obatade Asher Maxwell! When will you ever be serious?" In her heart, though, she was deliriously pleased to see him back to being his usual self, dark shadows dispelled.

"Never!" he quipped, returning to his place by her side. "So, better get used to it. You're getting a sneak peek into what the rest of your life will look like."

Uju would have given that a nice retort if Bolanle didn't suddenly materialize in front of them.

"Ha! At long last! They grace us with their almighty, royal presence!" Bolanle dipped in a flamboyant bow for effect. "Nawa!" she continued as she stretched to full height once more. "I was about to call you guys o. What's up now? Did you get lost in each other's eyes again, and forgot what day it is?"

Tade and Uju shared a look at Bolanle's accusation, and their smiles deepened. It was true, they did have a habit of forgetting the world around them, only seeing each other.

"Can you imagine? They're doing it again!" The other woman huffed in faux exasperation as she threw her hands to her waist. "You two are insufferable! Making me, a seasoned married woman, wish I was falling in love all over again for the first time!" She shook her head. "Foul! I say what? Foul o!"

Uju was near doubling over with laughter as she stepped forward for an embrace. "Oya, sorry, sorry! We're here now, aren't we? And that's what really matters, no? It's wonderful to see you too, baby girl." She sighed as their hug deepened. Then they were breaking apart. "Happy Anniversary! We brought you a present, but it's in the car. You'll get it later." She took a step back, taking Bolanle in. "Wow! You look stunning! And you are glowing as always! Whuuutt?! Cut soap for me now, abeg!"

It was the gospel. Bolanle was dressed in an armless pastel green dress that flowed outwards from under her bust, dropping all the way down to her ankles. The color complemented her gleaming ebony skin so well, it looked like it had been made just for her. She was also rocking a lush, twenty-four-inch-looking wavy wig, and her feet were graced with silver slippers. She'd accessorized her outfit with silvery jewelries as well, and although the ensemble came across as simple, everything about it exuded sophistication.

"Thank yoooo! I've been trying out some products from our latest skin care collection and I just love them! I can't wait to share them with our customers. And yes, they're pregnancy safe as well." When Bolanle ended those words with her hands over her still very flat belly, Uju gasped. "*Shhh!* We haven't told anyone yet!"

Promptly covering her mouth, Uju drew Bolanle in for another embrace. "I can't believe this!" she whisper-yelled. "I'm so, so happy for you!"

"Thank you, thank you!" Bolanle beamed. "We just found out, ourselves. We'll be sharing the news with the rest of the family later tonight."

"Of course, of course!" Uju gushed, stepping aside so an awe-stricken Tade

could also envelop Bolanle in his arms. He'd told Uju the story behind his friendship with Benjamin. When she added that knowledge to the deep affection she'd witnessed being displayed amongst the three of them, it was an established fact that he considered Ben and Bolanle as much his siblings as his twin-sisters.

"I can't believe this!" She heard him exclaim. "I'm finally going to be an uncle, eh? I'd say it's about time!"

Ben joined them then, teasing as he slapped Tade playfully on the back, "Do fast and born your own! Stop looking for other people's children to spoil *upandan!*"

They spent the next few minutes laughing, hugging, and fawning some more. Uju's heart wouldn't stop soaring with gratitude for the intrinsically wholesome moment she considered a privileged to have been granted access to. As far as she was concerned, she was going to be floating on clouds for the rest of the night. Bolanle was a year older than her, and had held off on having kids for the first few years of marriage, as she'd wanted to focus on stabilizing her skin care brand. Uju was thrilled her new friend would get to welcome her bundle of joy on her own terms and in her own time. She wished for as many women who desired the same, to find the courage to tow that path, society's opinions be damned. Most importantly, she hoped with all her heart that they found partners on the same page.

"Well, well, well! Who do we have here?"

Uju froze, instantly recognizing that immaculate articulation, as well as the one-of-a-kind voice. Aware that the jig was finally up, she turned to see Mrs. Maxwell standing right in front of them, her identical daughters flanking her sides.

"I thought I was seeing wonders, but it appears I wasn't. Indeed, that is Uju, my one and only J.J, next to my son, my one and only son, Tade; holding hands and looking all cozy, as though they've known each other for ages! Does anyone care to explain this?"

Eighteen

Home isn't just a place; it's the people and things that make you feel like you never have to be anywhere else, for they'd always keep you safe, warm, and sane...

As though it had been fore-planned, Benjamin and Bolanle stepped aside, creating a clear pathway from Uju and Tade to Mrs. Maxwell and the twins. That gave the women room to draw closer, their strides purposeful. The hopeful glint in Mrs. Maxwell's eyes, the rising smile on her lips, and her arms poised, ready to draw them in for an embrace, was all Uju needed to know she was safe.

Tade was grinning as he put his arm around her. "Mom, Zi, Zen, meet Uju, the woman who now holds custody of my heart. I really hope she decides to keep it for good." He was looking down at her as he said those words. And Uju, heart racing, stomach churning, skin brazenly blazing, wondered how she could ever hope to stop herself from loving this man. She'd sooner fit a camel through the eye of a needle. "Of course," he continued, breaking eye contact. "She's also my date for the night, and hopefully, a while still to come." He turned to her once more. "If she'll keep having me."

Yes! Of course, I will! But Uju spoke none of those words. She couldn't even bring her lips to move if she tried, couldn't trust herself to be coherent. She had thought she was ready for this moment, but her nerves were suddenly getting the better of her.

"Ei! I can't believe this!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed. Her joy was a lit fire torch, impossible to hide. "My goodness! Tade, do you realize who this is? She is J.J o! The J.J I've been hassling you about meeting, all this while!"

Tade shrugged, his smile smug. "We figured that out the first night we met. It was attraction at first sight, and we've been riding together ever since." He arched his brow at Uju, as though asking for confirmation. She nodded. Of course, it was attraction at first sight for her as well. It had since grown into

something more, something deeper.

His mother's soft shoulder-tap pulled them back to reality. "And you couldn't tell me? You heard me going on and on about how I wished you'd ended up with J.J, rather than the new lady you've just begun seeing, and you didn't say anything!"

Tade was chuckling as he pressed a kiss to his mother's temple. "Now, how could we have succeeded in surprising you, if I'd just dropped the news like that?"

She threw him an offensive side eye before stealing Uju from his side. Warm, affectionate, motherly arms wrapped around Uju the next minute. "*Omo mi!* Ah! I should definitely give a testimony in church next Sunday! I have no words for how happy this makes me! My goodness! Welcome home, J.J! I'm convinced you're finally where you belong. Don't let anybody steal you from us o!"

Uju could only smile and nod as the embrace lingered. Then Mrs. Carolyn was pulling away.

"Who would have thought? After all your *shakara!* 'I'll see for myself, I'll see for myself.' Now that you've seen for yourself, you can attest I was trying to make you a good deal, abi?"

Uju's smile graduated into a chuckle. What was one to say at a time like this?

"So, tell me, how do you find my son?"

When Mrs. Carolyn winked at her, she couldn't help but blush. She suddenly felt like the countless brides she'd watched being put on the spot as the wedding coordinator tried to confirm, "*This man said he came to marry you. Will you marry him?*" It was as though she'd embodied them when she heard herself respond, "He's trying, he's not bad," just as those brides would often shyly say, "*Yes, I'll marry him.*"

"Ah, *lobatan!* You hear that, Tade? They said you're trying o, which means you have to do more! J.J is one in a million and a million in one! Please! I must not lose my daughter-in-law now that she has finally come home to me. *Inugo?*"

The entire scene was truly hilarious to Uju. This was a man she'd only known for a week, by the way. She had no doubt that years down the line, she'd look back at this moment and laugh her lungs out.

If Tade shared the same thoughts, he didn't show it. His response was swift, as he gave a mock salute. "Yes, ma! I'm on it, ma!"

"Ehen! Good boy! Anyway, I trust you!"

"So, you're the one our brother has been hiding?" Zen spoke then, stepping forward.

Uju's smile widened as she held the younger woman's gaze. Indeed, she'd tried to keep things as professional as possible with the Maxwells. That didn't mean she didn't have a relationship with the twins—she did. As such, she knew Zen was easily misunderstood. It didn't matter to her though, the younger twin was secretly Uju's favorite. They had this funny, yet wholesome relationship where they never agreed, but deep down, were both aware of the profound respect they had for each other. With Zaiah, it was more of a casual, mutually admirable relationship.

"I guess I am," Uju answered. "Good thing cat's out of the bag now, eh?"

Zen cocked her head to one side, painted Uju from head to toe with the strokes of her gaze, then nodded. "Not bad. He could have done much worse."

The elated tilt of her lips, as well as the unmistakable glint of approval in her eyes, betrayed the truth behind her words. So, as her mother chided, "Zen!" and everyone else either gasped or shook their heads, Uju only shook with laughter.

"Gee, thanks!" she retorted, matching Zen's energy. "Such high praise! I'm sure I'll go to bed with joy in my heart tonight, knowing our *Most Venerable Lady* slightly approves of me." She flourished that delivery with a curtsy for theatrical effect, and everyone cackled.

"Sis, it'd appear you've met your match o," Zi said, finally joining the conversation. She took Uju's hands then. "Pay her no mind. I, for one, am thrilled it's you, J.J." Her eyes narrowed as she looked from Uju to her brother. "Come to think of it, I see it now! You two are truly well-suited for each other. But I'm really curious, how did this happen?"

"I want to know too!" Zen and their mother chorused and soon, Uju was being pulled away by all three women.

She looked up to Tade for help, but he simply blew her kisses, wishing her well, as he took off with his friends. *So much for love!* She was all on her own.

For the next half an hour or thereabout, Uju entertained the twins and Mrs. Carolyn with the tale of that fateful evening she and Tade's love story began. Because that was exactly what it was—a love story in the making. They listened with rapt attention, just like her girls had, and Uju felt something fundamentally shift in the atmosphere, signifying that the relationship she shared with these women had changed and might never be the same. The fears she'd been keeping at bay rose once more. Was this really the right decision? Mixing business with pleasure? Mrs. Carolyn was one of her biggest customers. What if things between her and Tade went south? What would that mean for her brand?

Breathe, Uju, breathe. Nothing is guaranteed. Don't deny yourself of today's

joy because you're worried about tomorrow's unlikely doom. Live in this moment, go with the flow. And if it ever ends, you'll pick up the pieces and rise again. You're strong enough, you've got this.

Uju didn't know where that voice had come from, or to whom it belonged. All she knew was that it'd said exactly what she needed to hear, so she did just as counselled. She heaved a deep breath and relaxed into all the wonderful feelings that were wrapped up in that moment; the joy, the warmth, the sense of belonging, and most importantly, the palpable affection she could feel emanating in tidal waves from all three women who surrounded her. Just like with Tade, it felt like being home.

Speaking of the devil, even though he'd abandoned her earlier, he'd kept coming around with excuses such as bringing them drinks, suya, pepper-soup, and asking if they were comfortable. His mother had eventually grown tired of his antics and asked when he'd signed up to be the night's waiter. At those words, he'd turned around with a cheeky smile and simply kept to occasionally checking in from a distance, whilst he tried and desperately failed to pay attention to whatever it was his companions were telling him. Of course, Uju knew all of this because she had barely been able to keep her eyes off him, herself.

"Ei, God! You two are really gone for each other, are you not?" That was Zen. "You're absolutely smitten! Look at how you keep making doe eyes at each other. Ughh! It's so cute, I'm going to fall ill!"

Uju shook out of her reverie at those words. She had to peel her eyes off Tade so she could return her attention to her audience. "What?"

"Zen thinks you're in L.O.V.E.," Zi supplied. "I agree."

"Me too!" their mother thirdered. "And it's so pleasing to my soul! What's that you children say these days? It's pleasing to me and my homegirls!"

"Purr!!!" Zen chimed. "And that's on..."

"Periodt!" Zi finished, drawing an invisible slash under her chin.

Uju chuckled. She didn't even try to argue, even though it wasn't entirely true. How could she hope to win against these women when they joined forces like this? As though Tade had sensed her need for reinforcements, he appeared by her side.

"I can see you girls are having so much fun, and as much as it gladdens my heart, I'm afraid I have to break up the party. Can't let y'all hoard my date all night long now, can I?"

"Hmm! It's okay, it's okay! You can have her!" Mrs. Carolyn said, rising to

her feet. “Me sef, I have a date. And so do your sisters, abi?”

“Yes, oh!” the girls said, standing as well.

Mrs. Carolyn held her son’s gaze meaningfully. “Your father will be arriving in a bit. Bring her over to greet him when he does, all right?”

Tade nodded, and soon, it was just the two of them again.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked, taking the seat in front of her.

Uju pondered that question for a moment, wondering if she’d be able to find the perfect words. She couldn’t, so she simply settled for, “Like a lot has happened. Feels like a rush. A really heady rush. It’s all...”

“I understand. I feel the same way as well. Can’t exactly put it into words, but I do know my heart is full, settled.” There was silence as he leaned closer. “I’m really glad you’re here with me tonight, Njay. I’m gladder you seem to love my family, and I’m so happy you’re comfortable around them. Now, I know they can be a lot—”

“I grew up in a family of seven, and manage brides for a living, Tade. Trust me, your folks are the sweetest.”

His bespoke, dazzling grin transformed his entire face in a flash. “I won’t tell them you said that, so their heads won’t swell. But yes, it means a lot to me that you approve of them.”

She leaned back in question. “Not that they approve of me?”

“Well, I’m undeniably grateful they love you too. However, what matters the most to me is that you love them.”

Uju’s mouth dropped. She really couldn’t believe this guy. How could anyone be so amazing? Many other men would be more worried about his woman being accepted by his family, but obviously not him. In one sentence, he had basically affirmed and reassured that her happiness and opinion mattered as much as his family’s—perhaps even more so.

“I do,” Uju responded. “I love them.” It was the simple truth. What was there not to love?

“Good. I’m sure I’ll love your folks as well—whenever I do get to meet them. I mean, I’m already in awe.” Without giving her a chance to respond, he rose to his feet. “Now that we have that sorted and settled... Miss Uju, I’d like to see if you can beat me in a dance, please.”

There it was again, that wicked glint of mischief, that daring smirk. Uju found herself pursing her lips and shaking her head as she tried not to smile. This man and always challenging her. Well, this was one challenge he was certain to lose. “Game on!”

“Hanhan! See this woman, o! It’s like you’re very confident. So, you feel you can dance?”

She was jumping to her feet the next minute, hand in his. “Argh! Don’t try me o! I dey dance fire! Dance is my favorite form of exercise. And all those salsa classes simply can’t go to waste.”

“Salsa?” He seemed genuinely impressed. “I just keep learning new, interesting things about you, Miss Uju. What else is there that I’m yet to know?”

She swept a flirtatious gaze over him, ending her appraisal with a wink. “Stick around, big boy, and you’re sure to find out.”

“Ouuuhh, I intend to!”

They had just found their spot on the dancefloor when Uju suddenly felt Tade turn to stone beside her. Instantly worried, she spun to see what could have gone wrong. She didn’t even have to second guess. The moment she laid eyes on the strange woman who was now standing in front of them, Uju knew exactly who she was.

As though confirming her thoughts, she heard Tade’s broken whisper.

“Tonya, what are you doing here?”

Nineteen

"And if I showed you my scars, if I couldn't be strong, would you still love me the same? Tell me honestly..."

“What are you doing here?” Uju heard Tade ask again, louder this time.

The atmosphere was suddenly thick with tension, and if the music was still playing, she was no longer aware. She looked from Tade to Tonya, wondering what someone in her position was expected to do in such a situation. Walk away? Stay? One thing was certain though, it wasn't her place to get involved. Still undecided, she pinned her attention on the other woman.

Tonya was petite, much smaller than Uju at what seemed to be no more than five-foot-four inches tall. She was a dark-skinned beauty with adorable brown eyes, the kind of nose many ladies paid fortunes to get, and pert lips that were perfect for her pear-shaped face. It was evident that she'd taken extra care to look stunning tonight, just as it was obvious she'd also deliberately toned down her makeup to look solemn, remorseful.

Uju waited for it to rear its ugly head, the green-eyed monster called jealousy, and sure enough, there it was. Just not in a *'You've come to steal my man'* kind of way, but more in a *'So, you're the woman he once loved deeply'* kind of way. She knew it didn't make any sense. In fact, she'd never felt jealous over any man before. The only reason she recognized the emotion for what it was, was because once upon a time—perhaps still a little bit—she used to be territorial over her friends. But she supposed that was just love and all its accompanying baggage, was it not? It rarely ever made sense. Shaking her head, she forced herself out of her mind and back to the scene at hand, just in time to hear Tonya speak.

“Tade, I'm so sorry for showing up here. I just needed to talk to you,” she began, her voice clear, as she took a step towards him. When he immediately jumped back as though he'd been burnt, she reeled to a stop, the shock on her

face, telling.

Uju was by his side in an instance, her body moving before she could tell it to. Just what had this woman done to have hurt him so badly? Forget jealousy, she was upset. Given, she didn't know Tonya. And yes, she was still out of loop on the whole back story. Nonetheless, those facts did nothing to douse the embers of rage that had fanned alive inside of her. It was apparent, even to a blind man, that whatever it was Tonya had done, it had really traumatized Tade. And Uju just couldn't stand for that.

"Don't!" Tade warned. His voice was resolute, as hard as the lines that were now etched across his face. "Don't come any closer, Tonya. You signed an agreement, remember? You are not to establish contact in any form or way, and you've been flouting that agreement all week."

"I know! I know, Tade. And I'm so sorry! I truly didn't mean to. I..." Tonya's voice was breaking now, her demeanor, transformed before Uju's eyes. The well-put together, demure-looking persona Uju had glimpsed earlier seemed to have dissolved. All that was left in its place was an extremely anxious-looking woman.

"Please, leave."

"But Tade, you need to hear me out! I promise you, I swear! I'm not here to bring trouble back into your life. I just want to apologize to you in person. For everything."

He almost didn't let her finish. "You're about three years too late, and your apology was never needed. Again, leave."

When Tonya would have said something more, Bolanle, Benjamin, Mrs. Carolyn, as well as her daughters, suddenly appeared, flanking Tade's side and even stepping into his front. Uju noticed then, that the party had gone still. The music had indeed stopped playing, and everyone was hush, their attention on the unfolding scene. Feeling the desperate need to, she reached for Tade's hand, squeezed as she held it in hers as if saying, *"I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you."*

"Well, well, well! Who do we have here? What? Ran out of gold and came back to dig some more?" That was Zen, claws and fangs bared.

"I just came to apologize," Tonya repeated, her voice growing stronger now.

"You heard the man. He doesn't need your apology. Now, get out! Before I have those gentlemen at the door, show you the way." That was Mrs. Carolyn. With such a stern edge to her tone, Uju knew she never wanted to get on the woman's bad side.

“How did you even get to be here, anyway?” Bolanle demanded. “This party is by invitation only, and I can’t believe anyone here would make you their plus one.”

Tonya barely spared her a glance. “When there’s a will, there’s always a way. I needed to talk to Tade, so I found one.” She looked straight at him. “If you could just give me a moment, Oba. Please?”

“I think not!” Zi countered, taking a step forward.

This caused Tonya to retreat, but she didn’t back down. “How about we let Tade speak for himself, huh? I already made the trip down. I refuse to believe he’d just turn me away, not when he loved me for so many years. Oba, please, I know you’re a better man than that. I need to speak with you. I swear it, I didn’t come to cause any trouble. I just want... Please hear me out. After today, you’ll never see me again, I promise.”

“Tonya, he already asked you to leave.” It was Ben who spoke this time, and like everyone else in the past few minutes, Uju was shocked to see the happy-go-lucky guy sound so... dangerous. They were all like mother hens protecting their chick, and Uju found comfort in the knowing that whatever had happened three years ago, Tade hadn’t gone through it alone. These fierce guardians had been by his side.

“It’s all right, Ben.” Tade said, finally speaking again. “I mean, I’m a grown man, for chrissakes. Seeing all of you here, fighting on my behalf against *her*...” He shook his head as his avengers fell back. “Not a good look at all.” He turned to Tonya then, holding her gaze. “You know what? You want to talk? Fine. I’ll listen. It’s been three years, has it not? Let’s hear what you really have to say for yourself, and why you’ve chosen now to say it.”

Every avenger looked like they’d protest, but all Tade had to do was raise a single hand, and they were all swallowing their words. He turned to Uju, a fervent plea in his eyes. “I have to do this, Njay, but I haven’t forgotten my promise to you. I’ll explain everything later. You can take that to the bank. Please, don’t go, okay? I’ll be back before you know it.”

Uju held his gaze, she couldn’t not. “Are you sure?”

Another man would have taken that to mean she was questioning his sincerity, but when he flashed her a reassuring smile, she knew it could never be him. Her Tade wouldn’t misunderstand intentions so clear; he was aware she was only asking out of concern for him.

“I’m sure,” he responded, cradling her cheeks. “I’m very sure. I just... I just realized this is something I need to do, something integral to my healing journey.

I'll be fine, and I'll be back before you know it."

That was all she needed to hear. There was not one word she didn't believe. So, nodding, she covered his hands with hers and shifted both to her lips for a kiss. Who could've imagined she'd ever openly show affection like this? It didn't matter though, all that mattered in that moment was him. She saw his gaze flicker with an emotion so raw, so powerful. He was pulling her into his embrace before she could place it, pressing a kiss to her forehead. The moment was as fleeting as it was special. Soon, he was leading Tonya out of the backyard.

As they disappeared behind the doors, Mrs. Carolyn cleared her throat to address the guests. "The show is over, people." Fingers flickered in the air. "As you were."

Just like that, the party continued as though it'd never stopped. The music was blaring once more, couples were swinging their bodies, and loud chatters filled the air.

"I am so sorry you had to witness that," Mrs. Carolyn said, coming to stand by Uju's side.

"It is I who should be apologizing," Bolanle insisted, her face filled with concern and remorse. "This is my party and apparently, I should have vetted who I handed invites to a little more. I can't believe anyone would let her in here." Her sigh weighed a ton. "I'm so disappointed. In fact, you know what? Time to go fish out who the Judas is and ensure they never get invited to anything we do, ever again! Once again, I'm so sorry about this, mummy, Uju."

Uju was quick to respond. "There's nothing to apologize *to me* about. It isn't your fault at all." She chorused that last part with Mrs. Carolyn, and they shared a smile.

The older woman carried on, cradling Bolanle's face. "Really, dear, don't worry too much about it. This isn't on you. Everyone here knows how you love Tade like your own brother, so deeply, so protectively. Now, go put those feet up and rest! You shouldn't be stressing so much, this crucial period." When Bolanle's eyes widened in surprise, mirroring Uju's, Mrs. Carolyn's lips deepened their curve. "What? Shocked that I know already? I perhaps did before you. Mothers always know, my love. There's this..." She gesticulated in the air. "Glow! That your hands keep finding your belly confirmed it for me. Congratulations, my love!" she ended in a whisper, no doubt believing that no one else knew, and obviously not wanting to be the one to break Bolanle's good news in her stead.

Uju heard it, nonetheless, and so did the twins.

Bolanle's mouth was still hanging in awe when Benjamin pulled her away moments later. Of course, Zi and Zen followed suit, wanting to hear more about the newest member of the family.

"I ruined her surprise, didn't I?" Mrs. Carolyn asked as soon as it was just her and Uju.

"Well, *I* already knew," Uju replied. "She shared the news with Tade and I earlier this evening. And she was going to announce it to the family later tonight, so I guess she wouldn't mind?"

"Ah, I see! Tomorrow morning at breakfast might be better suited though, seeing as most of us would be too tired to congregate by the time this party's over."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes! We're all spending the night—well, family, that is. You did bring an overnight bag, did you not?"

Uju nodded. Tade had asked that she packed one, explaining that they'd most likely be staying for the night. She just hadn't known a family breakfast was in the mix.

"Good, good. Now, there's someone I want you to meet before the night runs out."

That someone turned out to be Tade's father, who was just as amiable as his wife, even though a great deal more reserved. And then, before Uju knew it, she was meeting over a hundred other people as well. Thousands of '*Yes ma*' and '*Yes sir*' later, and grateful that asides for Mr. Maxwell, Tade's mom had simply introduced her as a family friend, Uju made her escape. She found her way to a restroom, then to the upstairs balcony, which was now both quiet and deserted, as most people had begun to leave. Sighing in relief over finally getting a moment alone to herself, she took a sofa and gazed up at the stars.

Of course, she knew Mrs. Carolyn had kept her by her side to stop her from worrying. Alas, now that she was alone, the latch broke free. Thoughts of Tade surged. It'd been almost two hours since he walked away with Tonya, and they were still talking. Uju was aware they'd found their way back inside as it got chilly. They were now in the mini library and had left the door slightly ajar—no doubt an attempt on Tade's part to quell her fears. However, she found she was no longer afraid he'd suddenly rekindle his love with his ex. She only feared Tonya's reappearance would end up having ripple effects on their budding relationship; ripple effects that could cause irrevocable damage.

For one, it appeared Tade was still greatly disturbed by the past events. Could

they simply brush over something that evidently still wielded that much power over him? And what would happen if he suddenly realized he wasn't truly ready to risk his heart again? That he still needed time to heal? What would that mean for her? For them?

Oh, Uju, I hope you haven't made the biggest mistake of your life. How do you want to be thirty-two and struggling to heal from your very first heartbreak? You're too old for that, you know? You should have been building odeshi like your mates since secondary school, but no, you refused to fall in love!

Despite herself, Uju laughed at those thoughts. If there was anything she'd learned from seeing her friends go through the cycle of falling in love, getting hurt, falling in love again, and getting hurt all over again, it was the fact that one could never fortify oneself against heartbreak. You just learned to live through it each time, heal, then gather enough courage to try again. That was one thing she had never understood. Why would anyone willingly subject themselves to the possibility of such pain repeatedly, knowing how badly it'd hurt before? But now, she got it. The reason was the irresistible power of love. It was too whole, too perfect, too life-changing, to not want to risk everything for, over and over again. And thus, Uju unlocked another fear. Now that she'd gotten a taste, would she become an addict, always chasing after the next glimpse of romance, desperate to experience that high again?

A shudder wracked through her at the thought. *God abeg!* She took her right hand on a three-sixty journey around her head, then extended said hand from her face with a snap of her fingers. *It'll not be my portion in Jesus' name!*

"Amen! But just so we're clear, what would not be your portion?"

Uju jumped at Mrs. Carolyn's sudden presence. Her eyes widened as her thoughts went to her *internal* monologue. *Oh, dear!* Had she actually said those aloud?

Twenty

Validation is an easy concept, really. It's simply saying, "You're not crazy for feeling the way you do, here're some comforting words to hold on to."

“E rr... do you know I can't even remember what I'd been thinking about?” Uju responded as Mrs. Carolyn drew closer. She just had to believe the older woman had heard nothing except those last words. It was easier to feign ignorance that way.

Mrs. Carolyn had a knowing smile on her face as she took the sofa right next to Uju's. “It happens all the time. Fleeting thoughts, they're called. They'll come back.” She paused before saying, “I was wondering where you went.”

Now this, Uju could answer honestly. “I figured it would be nice to have some time alone.”

“Ah, good ol' solitude. It is necessary. Especially on a night like this. I'm sure it's all been quite overwhelming. I'm also sure you're at this very moment, thinking to yourself, ‘*Yet here you are.*’”

Uju giggled softly as keenly intelligent eyes twinkled back at her.

“She doesn't deny it! But not to worry, this nosy woman will be gone in a heartbeat. I only sought you out because I reckoned you could use some reassurance and respite from the thoughts that must be eating away at you.”

Perhaps it was how swiftly Mrs. Carolyn's voice had turned solemn, Uju found herself leaning towards her, ears prepped to listen gingerly.

“I can't pretend to know what exactly you're thinking, but I imagine at this moment, you're pondering whether or not you can be confident about Tade's feelings for you. Especially after seeing how shaken up he was by that lady's presence.” When Uju said nothing, she simply continued. “Now, I'm not here to share what happened three years ago, it's not my place. I'd leave that for Tade to do, and I have no doubt he will. I only came to let you know that I raised a decisive son who has never, not once, attempted to trifle with a woman's

feelings. Right from when he was no older than seventeen, I have watched Tade treat all the women he's gotten romantically involved with, with nothing other than respect and genuine affection. This explains why he's only had four girlfriends to date, yourself included."

"No, I'm... I'm not his girlfriend... We're not..."

"I know, I know. You're in what you children call '*the talking stage*' these days. I understand the need to take your time, but seeing you two together, it won't be long until I have grandbabies running around the house. You do want children, yes?"

Uju laughed at the concern in her voice, it was all she could do to stop herself from turning completely red at the reference to grandbabies. "Yes, yes, I do."

Mrs. Carolyn's smile stunned, and Uju's chest caught, remembering Tade. *Wow, the apple had fallen right under the tree.*

"Good, good! Now, back to the matter at hand. I can tell you this much, Tade dated his first girlfriend for four years. The relationship ended because they couldn't survive the distance, as he was already mostly living in the U.S at the time. Following the breakup, he stayed single for two whole years before dating again. Bisi was his first love, you see. He wanted to be convinced he was truly over her; he had no interest in hurting another innocent lady, trying to move on too quickly. Thus, he waited and healed." She paused, as though to let those words sink.

"Aurelle came next. She was pretty, a sweetheart, American, and we all loved her. We believed she was the one. Alas, the relationship lasted three years. In their words, they'd discovered they were too different, wanted contrasting things out of life, so a breakup had just made sense. They remain good friends though, Tade even attended her wedding. She has three adorable boys now." Mrs. Carolyn's lips tilted at those words, and Uju could tell she was recalling a fond memory. "This time around, it took only one year for Tade to try again. He was twenty-seven when he met Tonya at one of our mid-year galas, but they didn't officially start dating until he was twenty-eight."

"They were together for three years," Uju surmised.

"Indeed, and he was planning to propose for the second time when everything went to hell."

"He proposed twice?" Uju wasn't sure she'd heard right.

"Well, once," Mrs. Carolyn corrected as she sat up. "He never actually got to, the second time. Thank God for that! To think we all bought her initial excuse of not being ready until we found out the true reason."

“Then everything got called off.” Curiosity was killing Uju. She really wanted to know, but she’d wait.

Mrs. Carolyn’s sigh held notes of sadness. “I wish it had been that simple, but as I said, Tade would surely explain it all to you. The only reason I’m telling you this story is...”

“You want me to understand that Tade doesn’t start a new relationship unless he’s convinced he’s fully healed from the last one.”

“Voila! No matter how long it takes! You needed to have seen how much I begged and bargained for him to meet new people, start trying again, these past three years.” She lifted her right shoulder to her ear. “He simply wouldn’t budge! And that my son, for how easygoing he is, my goodness! I have never met anyone so unyielding! He does only what he wants, in his own time. If he listens to you, it’s only because he chooses to.”

This was something Uju wasn’t surprised to hear. She’d known Tade couldn’t have attained such lofty heights of success by just following orders and suggestions. She’d also caught glimpses of his hardheadedness here and there, but not in a way that made her hackles rise. Rather, she considered it to be a healthy dose of self-mindedness that she appreciated in any man. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing remotely compelling, nor attractive about a man who could be blown in any direction. As long as he was often willing to give ears to reason—a propensity which Tade was proving to have—she was good. After all, she was a woman who liked to live life by her own rules as well.

“I can tell,” she responded.

“Of course, he’s different with the woman he loves. He could give you the world if you wanted it.”

Uju was chuckling as she said, “Oh, I don’t doubt that one bit.”

Mrs. Carolyn’s hands came to rest on her chest, her eyes watering. “Have I mentioned how ecstatic I am, seeing you two finally together? I just knew you’d both make quite the pair, and it’s wonderful to see my vision come true! In any case, the gist of this entire conversation is Tade wouldn’t have started this with you if he wasn’t absolutely convinced he was ready to try again. So, do not let the fears win, my love.” She was reaching out now, taking Uju’s hand in hers. “My son will return to you, and you will both live fulfilling lives. Seeing as you found your way to each other without my involvement, it just tells me all the more that this has been ordained. So, fret not. You’ve made an excellent choice, you won’t be disappointed. This, I can assure you of.”

As Uju stared into Mrs. Carolyn’s sunset orbs, imprinting this moment in her

memories, she instantly knew the kind of mother she was going to be. It was the kind who'd confidently boast about her children's morals and integrity, knowing she'd done a great job, raising them. Add that to the impeccable parental traits she must have inherited from her parents, Uju was set.

"Thank you, ma," she finally said, soaking it all in. "Thank you so, so much. I believe every word you've spoken, and I shall take them to heart. I promise." It meant the world to her that Mrs. Carolyn had thought it necessary to come reassure her in this manner. More than ever before, it was clear that the Maxwell matriarch really wanted Uju to become a part of their family.

"Excellent!" the older woman chimed, patting Uju's hands. "You do that. Now, if you'll excuse me..." She rose to her feet. "It's almost midnight and this young lady," she pointed to herself, "Needs her beauty sleep. And so do you. Apparently, Tade brought in your overnight bags earlier. The twins have taken yours to their room—no, I won't be allowing you and Tade share a room. I'm not *that* bougie. Not to say I actually think you two are being saints, but at least in my house, there will be some decorum."

"I'll be happy to spend the night with the girls, ma," Uju heard herself say. It was all she could manage whilst her cheeks flamed. She couldn't believe Tade's mum had insinuated that she and her son had had plans for, or had actually been getting down to, anything naughty.

Mrs. Carolyn was evidently pleased to hear that. "It's settled then! I suggest you go wash up and change into something more comfortable. The party is already over. You could do with some rest while you wait for him."

Uju bobbed her head. She couldn't argue with that. She was actually exhausted and was itching to get out of her clothes and makeup. So, why wait any longer?

In thirty minutes, she'd bathed, performed her night skin care routine, changed into her pajamas and was having a good time catching up with the twins. That was when her phone pinged with a message.

Are you still up?

Flash would have felt threatened by the speed with which she responded.

Yes, just finished getting ready for bed. You?

Same. I came earlier, but I heard you were bathing.

Apparently, mom has us sleeping in different rooms.

The world faded as Uju crawled into the wall, getting lost in their own little simulation.

She said no fornication in her house. Well, she didn't exactly say those words, but she implied as much.

Lmao! If only she knew it's not happening anywhere else, either.

Ikr? Anyway, how are you? How did it go?

Uju's heart stopped its every function as she awaited his response.

I'm good. It went well... Turned out to be exactly what I needed, closure.

Uju wasn't sure what to make of that, so stomach guarding, heart still in recess, she asked.

So, we're good?

It was the swiftest reply she'd received that evening.

Of course! Of course! That was never in question, Njay. Ever. We are good, good. I promise you.

The force of the wave of relief that instantly washed over her was so mighty, it threatened to drown her. But she found her way to shore, strength and hope renewed. She would have replied, but he was typing again.

I'll explain everything to you tomorrow. I know I promised tonight, but I'm sure you must be exhausted, and it's a conversation I'd like for us to have when we've both had a good night's sleep and emotions aren't running so high. But believe me when I tell you, we are good. We are superb! In fact, I'd have come right over to show you just how good we are, but it appears my mother is keeping watch in the hallways.

Uju's eyes widened as she giggled, unable to believe it.

What? No way!

It was all she could type as she tried—and failed—to ignore the riot that had erupted in her tummy at the implication of his words. “*I’d have come right over to show you just how good we are...*” Uju swallowed a squeal, swinging her legs as she became one with her pillow. *Chei! Imagination wan wound me!*

***You’re shocked too, aren’t you? Na so we see am o.
Does she actually realize everyone here is an adult?
Apparently, her bougie isn’t bougie enough to allow
iniquity abound under her roof.***

This time around, Uju laughed out loud.

*Funny how she said those exact words to me.
Well, I guess we have no choice but to see tomorrow, then.*

A sad sticker accompanied that text, and it wasn’t difficult for Uju to visualize the look on his face. It made her giggle even harder.

*We’re already past midnight, so I suppose I’ll see you later
today. Dawn is only a few hours away.
Ughhh! I can’t wait!*

Uju’s heart was beating irregularly now, thrumming softly as her knees weakened.

*Me too.
Send me a picture of your face? If I can’t see the real deal,
at least, let me use the virtual one to hold body.*

Uju wasted no time switching on her camera. It took about five minutes to get the perfect selfie. The moment she hit send, the chat box filled with praises.

***Hanhan! See fine girl! Comot for here, jhor! You too fine!
Only you carry the beauty of hundred people! Chai!
Asanwa! Asampete! Ego oyibo! Ochak’amaka! Chop all
my money jare, na you get am!***

Uju didn't know when her laughter overflowed, spilling from her lips in a sonorous euphoric melody.

Where did you learn all these ones from?
Nne, forget that thing! My babe is Igbo. The least I can do is know how to hype her in her language now!

My babe. Uju's heart leapt, somersaulted, then began to gallop to where she didn't know. She was grinning from ear to ear as she typed her response.

Ehen? You've given me assignment o. So, it's to go and start learning oriki now, abi?

Oriki was a Yoruba praise poem usually orated in awe of loved ones. Uju had always found them intriguing and honestly wouldn't mind learning for Tade. Yes, she was a finished woman, and Obama was the first black president of the United states, potato, potahto.

Only if you want to, babe. Trust me, it's not even necessary. Let me do all the stressing. You just sit back, relax, and enjoy. I gatchu.
Hanhan! It's not easy! Nwoye'm Odogwu! The lion, the conqueror, the champion! Intentional man!
That's me!

They must have chatted for about an hour more before her eyes started to drift close. When she told him how heavy they'd gotten, he rushed their goodnights.

Oya, oya, go to bed. We have the rest of our lives, okay? Sweet dreams, Njay. As always, dream of me.
You too, babe.

Uju dropped her phone at those words, feeling proud that she'd finally gathered the courage to return his use of endearment. She was still reeling from the rush of the conversation they'd had when she turned to see the twins staring at her.

"What?" she asked, unable to wipe the smile from her voice. "Why are you

looking at me like that?”

“We sef go love o!!!” they both chorused in response, and Uju was turning her back to them again, eager to hide her flaming cheeks. They continued to tease her, and she continued to laugh, but eventually, she succumbed to the wiles of sleep.

The last thing on her mind as she slipped into the land of dreams was how grateful she was over the fact that, together, she and Tade had successfully maneuvered what could have otherwise been a complicated situation, leading to more problems. So many things could have gone wrong that night. He could have failed to reassure her, she could have refused to trust him, she could have let her fears won and gone home, and he could have decided not to reach out to her when he got the chance. However, they’d done the exact opposite, making the right decisions every time. He’d communicated, and she’d listened, giving him the benefit of doubt. Even when he’d been talking with Tonya, he’d sent her a couple of messages, letting her know she was on his mind.

Just checking in. I hope you’re comfortable.

It’s taking longer than I thought, but we’d soon be done.

It’s getting really late, I hope you’re getting some rest.

All of these showed that whilst they were yet sprouting seedlings, they had so much substance to them, and it was a good enough foundation on which to build something stronger. If they continued this way, growing better, then perhaps her first love would end up being her last love, after all. And Uju would love that, she would love that very much.

Twenty-One

One common misconception about love is that it fixes everything; this is untrue. Love can only assist. At the end of the day, you are responsible for your own healing...

For a while after Tade sent Uju to sleep, he laid awake, face turned towards the ceiling, thoughts roaming the wilderness. All that tethered him to his immediate surroundings were the soft snores from Bolanle's brothers.

On one hand, he was really glad he and Uju seemed to have overcome what could have been their first big issue. Although there were still matters to resolve, he found comfort knowing that they were, at least, out of the woods. On the other hand, he couldn't stop thinking about the conversation he'd had with Tonya and how it'd made him feel. He still remembered how enraged he'd been as he walked her out to the car park, barely maintaining a grip on the rein he'd tied over his emotions. Playing the scene all over now, he felt none of that rage, only peace. His breathing steadied as he went back to the very start.

"All right, now you have my attention, Tonya. Talk. Why are you really here?" Tade demanded as soon as they found a quiet spot. "Came to see if you could sink your claws into me and suck me dry again? If that's the case, then I'm sorry. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. It won't happen a second time."

Tonya looked so distressed as she held his gaze, hers sorrowful, but he wasn't about to buy into her lies again. "You have every right to be angry at me," she began.

"Damn right, I do."

"Yes, and if you chose to be angry for the rest of your life, I wouldn't be able to fault you for it."

"Well, I'm really glad you know that."

She nodded. "But I meant what I said, Tade. I only came to offer my

sincerest, deepest apology. I am so sorry,” her voice broke into a strangled sound he could not recognize. “So sorry!”

Tade paid attention then, truly looking at her. At surface glance, she seemed just like the Tonya he’d always known with signs of aging here and there. However, on a deeper appraisal, he could tell she was different. For one, she seemed to have lost some weight, she was smaller than he remembered. For two, there were clefts around her eye sockets, not so noticeable, and he supposed her makeup was doing a great job of concealing most of them, but they were there. As for her eyes, they weren’t as vibrant as he remembered. They seemed dull... as though someone had once extinguished the light out of them, and she was only now finding her dawn once more. Just like that, Tade felt the rage he’d held on to for so long, vanish. However, that didn’t mean he stopped being upset, and he definitely couldn’t be bothered to entertain thoughts of concern over her, no matter how powerfully they tried to rise to his consciousness. For all he knew, this was just another wicked ploy.

“I am so sorry for everything I did to you, Tade,” she said again, drawing him out of his thoughts. “I wish I could claim I was overtaken by the Devil, and that I didn’t know what I was doing, but that would be a lie. I knew, and I did it, anyway. I was just consumed with so much greed, then anger, and I made things worse than they already were. You didn’t deserve any of what I did to you. You were so kind, Tade.” She wasn’t looking at him now. Her head was bowed in remorse as her body shook from the weight of her obvious guilt. “You were so kind, so sweet, so perfect, and all I ever did was hurt you.”

“Well, I’ve hardly ever been perfect,” Tade heard himself say. “I’m human, just like you, flawed.”

“You know what I mean,” she countered. And because he did, he held his peace. “You were a good man, Tade. ARE a good man, and I ruined it all. I am so, so sorry.”

Tade hadn’t realized how much he’d been wanting to hear those words until that moment. He thought he’d outgrown the need to hear her apologize, to hear her acknowledge truthfully for once, that she’d been wrong without trying to manipulate, shirk accountability, or somehow blame him for her cruel actions. He’d gone to therapy, he’d talked through it all, felt all his feelings, processed them, and he’d truly believed he’d healed over time. Alas, the past one week had proven that healing was often theoretical until we came in contact with the people who hurt us, once again. One could only tell how deeply those scars lingered, upon stumbling across the very person who had the power to rip apart

old wounds, as they were the ones who'd put them there in the first place.

This led him to an epiphany. That was why he'd been avoiding Tonya all of the week before, refusing to pick her calls or read her messages. It was why his heart had been at unease ever since his sisters mentioned she'd been asking about him again. He'd been afraid, afraid that contact with her was going to make him hurt all over again, and especially terrified that it would ruin the good thing he was trying to build with Uju. But now that he was standing face to face with her, Tade realized there had been nothing to be afraid of. He might have still been angry, and might have been unknowingly waiting for an apology, but Tonya truly no longer held any power to topple his world. As that knowledge settled, coupled with the satisfaction he'd gotten from hearing those words of admittance, the ton of weight that had been hanging on his shoulders all week, lifted. In its stead, a blanket of peace settled around his heart.

When he spoke again, his voice was still firm, but softer. "Why now? After all this time? Why did it take you three years?" What she said next almost knocked off the solid earth beneath his feet.

"I was in rehab."

"What?"

"It is as you heard. I was in rehab. For drugs."

Tade's composure shattered. His voice was filled with shock and concern as he drew closer to her. "I'm not understanding. I thought... I thought it was just him, Bayo. I thought you'd managed to stay off those poisons."

"I had. Until everything went to hell. After your parents involved legal authorities and I had my wings cut off, the reality of what I'd done dawned on me." She hugged herself as a sudden bout of chills wracked through her, and, in a fleeting thought, Tade wished he'd brought a jacket along. He said nothing, though, letting her continue.

"It was too much for me to bear. I didn't want to face it. I didn't want to deal with the consequences of my actions, and Bayo..." She drew in a deep breath, shaking her head. "He was there with the drugs, whispering deceitful good-for-nothings in my ear every day. He said the drugs would take the pain away, that I wouldn't have to feel anymore. I tried to fight against it, you know? The temptation? I really did. But I was in such a bad mental space..."

"You eventually gave in," Tade completed, knowing all too well how the story often went.

She bobbed her head, still not holding his gaze, and that was when it all came together. She had gotten addicted and had been sent into rehab. That would

explain the changes he'd seen in her. She seemed to have been clean for some time, seemed levelheaded as well. He couldn't notice any glaring sign of withdrawal, but he could tell her body still remembered. More than concern, what settled in Tade's heart for her now was empathy. He knew he shouldn't feel that way. In fact, he ought to be joyous she had gotten what she deserved, but he couldn't help it. Despite all that happened, despite the path she'd chosen, there was no denying that Tonya's was a brilliant, resourceful mind. If only she'd made the right decisions, her life would be so different now. It would be significantly better off. Seeing her like this, hearing her story, it felt like such a waste. Tade genuinely hoped she'd be able to successfully pick up the pieces and make something better out of her future.

"Let's go in," he finally offered. "You are cold. We could use the mini library downstairs. No one would disturb us there."

She quietly followed as he led the way and soon, they were seated in said room, with the door left slightly ajar lest anyone got ideas. He offered her one of the throw blankets he'd grabbed from the sofa, and she accepted it with thanks, wrapping it around her body.

"Care for anything? Tea? Coffee?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm good. Thank you."

Tade nodded. "All right." There was a brief spell of silence before he spoke again. "So, rehab?"

She told him everything then. How Bayo had introduced her to drugs, how they'd quickly ran through what had been left of the money she'd siphoned from Tade, how miserable life had gotten as an addict with no means to fund her addiction, and how she'd almost turned to stealing, desperate.

"I stood in that public bathroom with that lady's purse in my hands, and it was as though I'd finally come to my senses. I couldn't wrap my head around what I was doing there, in tattered clothing, looking haggard as hell, and starving, but only thinking of how to get my next shot. It wasn't me, and it certainly wasn't the life I wanted to live. So, I took myself back to my uncle and aunt. Begged them to help me one last time. They did, bless their hearts. They sent me to rehab so I could get better." Her eyes kept staring into space as she spoke, and Tade knew she was reliving all the nightmares.

"The first time, I only lasted three weeks. The second time, thirteen. The third time, I was determined to get clean for good, to get my life together. So, I cut off all ties with Bayo, and asked to be sent to a center abroad where he'd never be able to contact me. It worked. I'm seven months clean now, got out a few weeks

ago. Came back to Nigeria and learned that you were in town. I figured if I was really serious about righting my wrongs, then I certainly had to make a stop. I had to tender that overdue apology and let you know just how much I regret everything.”

She was finally looking at him now, and Tade couldn't resist searching her eyes for any hint of deceit, any sign that this was just another elaborate scam she was trying to pull on him. Fortunately, there was nothing. It was either she'd gotten even better at lying, or she was actually being honest this time.

“It must have been hard,” he whispered.

“It was,” she nodded with a sad smile. “But no worse than what I'd put you through. I truly, deeply am sorry, Tade. I don't expect you to ever forgive me, but I just wanted you to know that I am. If it's any consolation, the boys got cracked down on whilst I was in rehab. They got raided by E.F.C.C and are all doing jail time now, including Bayo. I would have been in the same trouble if you hadn't let me go all those years ago. I'm aware there's nothing I could ever do to truly make up for all that happened, especially considering how kind you were to me, but I can do this at the very least, use my words to let you know how regretful and thankful I am. And like I said, you don't even have to accept my apology or forgive me. Just giving me this space to speak with you is more than I could have ever asked for.”

Tade stared at her, long, hard, then he received another epiphany. Him refusing to forgive her was another clog in his healing process. Like his therapist had emphasized, people often mistook forgiveness for a favor they did the person who'd hurt them, a favor said person would never be deserving of, so why bother? But in truth, forgiveness was for the one who'd been hurt. Refusal to forgive was a prison, a dungeon people unwittingly held themselves locked in, for to continue to stay angry at the person who had hurt you, you had to consistently remind yourself of the reason for your anger in the first place. In so doing, without even realizing it, you inadvertently chain yourself to the past; unable, repudiating the chance to truly move on, whilst everything else around you followed the passage of time. Yet, whenever we chose to not forgive, we turned around and wondered why we wouldn't stop hurting for good? How could we when we'd kept rehashing our own nightmares?

No more, Tade vowed to himself. He hadn't understood when Ms. Comfort had said those words to him back then, but now he did. He would no longer be a prisoner of his past. He would finally give himself the permission to truly move on. And just like that, he let it all go.

"I forgive you, Tonya." He was never going to let her wield so much power over his life again. "For real, I do. I forgive you."

She stunned him as she broke into tears, raw and drenched with relief. He fetched her a wad of tissues, which she accepted with gratitude, and waited until she'd calmed down before speaking again. "So, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," she sniffled. "Still figuring it out, really. Maybe take some courses, start applying for jobs... thirty-one isn't too old to start all over again, is it?"

Tade shook his head. "No, not at all."

She bobbed hers. "Great! Then that's what I'll do."

"Is there..." He paused, pondering whether he really wanted to ask that question. Throwing caution to the wind, he went for it. "Is there something I can do to help?" He was sitting on a stool, legs folded inward so that his feet would rest on the stool's bar. "Anything at all?" he asked again, spreading the hands that had been interlocked between his thighs.

Tonya rolled her eyes in response. "You are Tade Maxwell. Of course, there are a million things you can do to help. However, I won't be accepting any of them. This is something I have to figure out of my own. I really appreciate the offer, though. Thank you. And thank you for forgiving me as well. I know it could not have been easy."

Tade shrugged at those words. "What can I say? It's Christmas! A season of love and cheer! I suppose forgiveness comes with the package. There's also the fact that I've often been accused of being Santa."

"That, no one can argue with. And you seem to have found Mrs. Clause."

Tade instantly lit up at the mention of Njay. "Oh, yes! I'm very convinced of the fact. I'm just trying to make sure I convince her as well."

"You will. You convinced me, I just couldn't say yes because..."

"Because of Bayo."

"No, Tade." Her voice was firm, as though she needed him to believe her. "It was because of what was left of my conscience. I couldn't let such an elaborate lie become bigger than it already was. I couldn't betray you more than I already had."

Tade nodded. That he could live with. "Was there... was there ever a time when... when..."

"When I loved you?"

Tade didn't know why he wanted to know, but he simply nodded again.

"I was fond of you, and there were moments when I thought I could love

you.”

“But you didn’t.” He waited for the pang to hit, that searing pain, but it never came. That was when he affirmed he was truly free. Free and completely healed. He might have loved her once, and she might have taken that love for granted, but it no longer mattered. Tonya shook her head and when she would have apologized, he stopped her, hands raised. “Don’t. You don’t have to be sorry. I was just curious, is all. Thank you for being honest with me.”

“It’s the least I could do,” she whispered. “But you are a very loveable man, Tade. I’m sure your Mrs. Clause would agree.”

Tade blushed at the thought of Njay admitting she found him loveable. “I certainly hope she would, someday, soon.”

“She makes you happy.”

“She makes me euphoric!”

Tonya’s smile was wistful, but genuine. “I’m happy for you, Tade. Truly. I can tell you really care about her. She’s one lucky girl.”

“I happen to think I’m the lucky one.”

“Still the lover boy, I see.”

He beamed proudly at that. “Forever and always.”

“Good, good. I’ll rest easy knowing I never made you lose your heart.”

“You never could have.” It wasn’t said in a malicious way, just matter-of-factly. Tade was always going to try at love again, always.

“Too bad we never know what we had until we lose it. Sometimes I wish the girl I was could have realized, but I was stuck on puppy love.”

Suddenly feeling wary about the turn the conversation had taken, Tade rose to his feet. “Don’t sweat it. We all make mistakes. It just wasn’t meant to be. I wish you the very best moving forward, Tonya.”

She must have taken that for the dismissal it was, for she also stood. “Thank you very much. I wish you the same as well. I must get going now. I know I’ve overstayed my welcome. You have a woman to get back to, and well, I think I’ve tested your mother’s patience enough.”

Tade was smiling as he saw her off. He waited until her uber arrived, and after another round of appreciation, apologies, and farewells, he watched her drive away, out of the beach house, and out of his life for good.

Tade’s phone vibrated, drawing him out of his reverie. As he checked the mail that had just entered, he couldn’t ignore the fact that it was almost dawn. Aware that he had another long day ahead, he halted his daydreaming and welcomed sleep.

The conversation with Tonya had been good, it had helped him close that chapter of his life. Now, he could proceed to the next; the chapter where he charmed Njay into becoming his wife—right after clearing up this entire Tonya situation with her.

There was a smile on his lips as his breathing deepened. He couldn't wait to see her again.

Twenty-Two

Vulnerable communication is not just talking, it's saying, "You are important enough to me, that I want you to see me, to understand me. I also trust that you will." Now, that? It's powerful...

The next morning was rowdy with warmth and cheer at the beach house.

By the time they all woke up, there was no trace of the party that had happened the night before, and breakfast was ready. They all gathered around a large dining table by the poolside, bantering and laughing through their meal of bread, sausage, eggs, and tea, with more than enough fruits to go around. Tade remained glued to Uju's side, flirting and flattering, making her feel at home. And when Bolanle broke her good news, everyone had the heart to act surprised, even though most of the people around the table had already found out by that morning. Bolanle didn't seem to mind, though. She was gloriously basking in expecting mom ecstasy as she went around hugging everyone, alongside Benjamin, who couldn't wipe the joyous grin off his face.

All in all, Uju had a wholesome time. Benjamin's mum and Bolanle's family had also welcomed her with open arms, and by the time she was leaving, she was certain she would love to do this again.

The drive back to her house was relaxing and just as sweet. She held hands with Tade all the way, singing along to old classic love songs at the top of their voices. They stopped at the gate to share some cake with Alfred, whom Tade had taken an instant liking to—good thing the feeling was mutual—and with a knowing wink from their favorite security guy, completed the ride home.

"Wanna come in?" Uju asked as they stopped at her door. Tade had walked her up the stairs as always and now, she had her back turned to the wooden frame, right hand over its handle, awaiting his response. She watched as that smile she had come to know as well as the lines on her palm, brightened up his face.

"I thought you'd never ask."

She was giggling as they got into the house, and whilst she left him to lock up after her, she went into the kitchen to make arrangements for snacks and drinks.

A few minutes later, she was back to the living room, a tray of cookies and juice in hand.

“Hungry?” she asked, joining him on the loveseat. It had become their favorite sofa.

“We just had breakfast, you know,” he smiled, accepting the tray, still.

“That one is what you’re calling breakfast? Bread and tea? See this man, o. It’s like you’ve spent too long in that your obodo oyibo. Here, we eat proper food for breakfast in order to hold our stomachs until evening. That one we had at the beach house was just appetizer. I’m sure everyone would get home and start looking for correct food.”

“Ehen? *Youdonminit!* Tell me more!”

There was something about the way he said those words, eyes widened in faux interest, lips twitching with playful mockery, that made Uju want to throw him away. “*Kai!*” She shook her head. “You’re not serious at all. You do not have one serious bone in your body like this! Go away, jhor!”

He was smiling as he responded, “Are you sure you want me to leave? I thought we had something important to discuss. Abi you don’t want me to keep my promise?”

Even though his tone remained teasing as he said those words, the atmosphere in the room quickly switched from relaxed to tense. Of course, Uju couldn’t wait for him to keep his promise. Even though things between them had gone back to normal and the morning had been wonderful so far, that didn’t mean the impending conversation wasn’t hanging over them like a doom cloud in the air. Nonetheless, she was no longer in a hurry. She was willing to wait until the right moment. If Tade decided it was now though, she had no objections.

Setting her plate aside, she took her most comfortable position: legs folded under her bum as though she were getting ready to enter a three-day meditation retreat. “I guess it’s time to address the elephant in the room,” came her solemn whisper.

Tade nodded, mirroring her actions. His voice was a caress when he spoke. “Where do you want me to start from? The very beginning?” He gazed into her eyes in that way of his that often told her he was as present in the moment as he could ever be, and that she mattered more than words could ever tell, earnest for an answer.

“Wherever is most comfortable for you to start from,” she replied just as softly. “But before you do...” She raised her right hand. “I wanted to let you know that you don’t actually have to do this. You don’t have to tell me anything. I...” She released a stream of breath. “I gave it some thought all morning whilst getting ready for the day and I realized that as curious as I am, whatever happened in your past doesn’t really... It shouldn’t change anything between us. Most importantly, I shouldn’t be having such expectations or making any demands from you, especially when all of this is still so new.” Her eyes watered with the force of emotions so raw, as she smiled. “I guess the point I’m trying to make is, I can tell how sensitive this is for you, and as I said in the car last night, I don’t want you to ever feel pressured to address it before you’re ready. So, it’s fine, completely fine, if we don’t talk about it today or anytime soon, for that matter. You’re in a much better place now, you’ve reassured me that everything is sorted, and truly, that’s all that matters.”

Tade stayed silent as she finished, his eyes never losing hers. When seconds turned to minutes, Uju found herself growing uneasy.

“What?” she asked, shifting in her seat.

He shook his head. “Nothing much. I was just wondering how in the heavens I got so lucky to have met someone as amazingly thoughtful and kind as you, my Njay.”

Uju’s head swelled, the butterflies in her tummy threw a carnival. How did he always know the right words to say at the right moment? It was... it was ethereal, as simple as that. She couldn’t ever hope to wrap her head around it. And just like that, she was bushing hard, her cheeks crinkling until they hurt.

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about!” he exclaimed, tapping her nose. “Show me your thirty-two oh-ohhhh, *feyin e!*”

Uju couldn’t help herself. The laughter that had begun to bubble inside of her reached peak boiling point and overflowed. That he’d sung that line from a popular song by the famous artist, Lagbaja, in said artist’s voice, endeared him all the more to her.

“Good! This is how I always want to see you: joyous! You have such a stunning smile, Njay. And the sound of your laughter, my goodness! I could listen to it all day long! I mean, do you know how many times I’ve been tempted to just hit the record button, then plug my air pods, and play it on repeat? Please...” He took her hand in his. “I never wanna see you cry—except it’s tears of joy—okay?”

What could she have done other than nod in response?

“Awesome! Now, back to what you were saying. You aren’t rushing me, babe. At all. I do want to talk about this. I’m finally ready to. Truth is, I actually haven’t spoken a word of it since it happened—well, except to my therapist. When you’ve kept something to yourself for so long, it’s difficult to eventually share, you know? But it’s all right now, I promise you. Last night... Last night was something that needed to happen for me to get here, and I’m grateful it did. You’d understand why I said so in a bit.” His smile tugged at her heart as he tickled her cheeks. “So, once more, where do you want me to start, my Njay? The very beginning?”

She squeezed the hand that still held hers, chest filled with warmth. “Wherever is most comfortable for you, my...” She almost said my love, but certainly, they weren’t doing that four-lettered word yet. It was way too soon. So, she simply swallowed her words, letting the rest of her sentence trail off.

If he’d caught on, he gave no indication as he started to talk. He led with how he’d met Tonya at a Gala. She’d been a friend’s plus one, and he’d instantly taken a liking to her. “She was bright, bubbly, fun to be around, and she didn’t seem to be intimidated by my family name, either. And I know how that sounds, but when you grow up seeing people’s countenances change, as well as the manner in which they begin to treat you differently once they know who you are...”

“I understand,” Uju assured him. “Some prince of *Zamunda* vibes, eh?”

Tade paused, looked like he might have said something, then simply shook his head, evidently amused. “I ain’t no prince, all right. But yeah, that was one thing that stuck out to me about Tonya. She didn’t seem fazed at all. To her, I was just another regular guy.”

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As Tade took the trip down the memory lane, he realized the encounter was still as fresh as day one in his mind. The cute pink dress Tonya had been wearing, the way she’d smiled up at him with those big brown eyes. He’d known in that moment that he would love to get to know her better. Of course, now that he really thought of it, his reaction to her hadn’t been anything visceral like what he’d felt when he first laid eyes on Uju. With Uju, he’d known instantly that he was going to make her his wife. With Tonya, it’d been more of a *‘let’s see where this leads us,’* kinda thing.

“We exchanged numbers that evening, and I reached out to her the next day,”

he continued. "I soon had to leave town, so we didn't see each other for about four months after that, but we stayed in contact every other day. Eventually, there was this tech summit at South Africa and since getting her U.S visa had been taking forever, we decided to meet there. It was wonderful. We spent the entire weekend together, and I finally asked her to be my girlfriend. She said yes, so we started dating. Things were really smooth for the first couple of months. I really thought I'd gotten to my last bus stop. Alas, we celebrated our six months dating anniversary, and that was when it began."

He half-expected Uju to ask him what had begun, but she didn't. She just kept listening, no doubt, not wanting to interrupt. Tade was grateful for that. It gave him encouragement to continue. "I still remember the first time." His gaze found space as he got lost in the past. "She called me crying, saying that her niece was having a really bad health crisis, that they'd run out of funds and needed all the money they could get. I was very curious because I knew she was an only child, an orphan who had been raised by her uncle and aunt, and up until then, she'd mentioned nothing about a sick niece to me. Nonetheless, she seemed truly distraught, and I cared about her, so I was eager to help in any way I could. She explained that the child, whom she claimed was only twelve at the time, needed immediate health care, but the doctors were asking for money. The bill they were trying to raise was about two point five million naira. I asked her to send the details, then I wired the requested amount to the last digit. I left nothing out."

Tade had almost lost his mind from worrying. He'd been in the middle of an important project in Australia and had been unable to leave, but he'd wanted to. Every fiber of his being had been desperate to be there with Tonya and her family, there for them.

"She must have been very grateful," Uju finally spoke, bringing him back to her.

He nodded as he held her gaze once more, thankful that she hadn't let go of his hand. "Oh, she was. And in a few days, when she told me that the worst was over and her niece, Rachel, was back home, I was so relieved. Leukemia, Tonya had said. Apparently, Rachel's condition was getting worse, and they needed to do a bone marrow transplant as soon as possible. However, not only were they struggling to raise the money for the surgery, finding a donor was also proving impossible. You needed to have seen me doing research, calling everyone I knew, pulling strings, trying to ensure that Rachel got the best medical care possible. I'd make a million recommendations, send Tonya the contacts of so

many world-renowned doctors, and she just never got in touch with any of them. I thought that strange, you know?" He raised his chin in question, his eyes narrowing with the suspicion he'd felt then.

Uju bobbed her head, urging him on as she shifted forward, closing the distance between them.

Twenty-three

The reason betrayal is one of the most devastating forms of heartbreak is that it often comes from the people we trusted with all our hearts...

The gesture was such a sweet, reassuring one for Tade that he felt his veins renew with strength to proceed, and so he did. “Whenever I asked why, she always seemed to have one perfect excuse or the other. Honestly, I can’t even remember what any of them were anymore. All I know is they revolved around how her uncle was on it, and they were getting the best medical care possible. Eventually, she told me to stop spending so much time trying to get them doctors and just focus more on my work. In her words, the financial aid I was sending was beyond good enough, and I didn’t have to expend any more resources. I should have suspected there was something fishy then, but I didn’t. I guess, I just never thought, never imagined she’d be lying about anything.”

“We only see what we want to see,” Uju whispered.

“Precisely! And all I’d wanted to see was that Tonya was the brightest thing in my life at the time. A beautiful, pure soul.” Tade shook his head. He had been so blind. “This went on for three years, babe. Almost three years! Every few months, there would be yet another crisis. Like clockwork, I’d send more money. At some point, she said they’d found a donor, and it was time for the surgery. Babe, I contributed thousands of dollars! I can’t even call the exact amount because you’d be livid. Till date, even my family doesn’t know just how much that lady siphoned from me.” He heaved a deep sigh. “But honestly, if it had been only me, I wouldn’t have been so hurt. I later got to find out that she’d been doing the same with my family and friends. Going to them, asking for help behind my back, telling them she felt bad about coming to me, felt embarrassed, and didn’t want to disturb me any longer. Of course, she also pleaded that they never told me.”

A loud gasp escaped Uju's lips, and her hands flew to her mouth to stop the rest. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to."

The sight of her was so adorable, it gave Tade a reprieve from the crushing weight of his memories. "It's all right," he chuckled. "Really, it's fine."

She managed a small smile as she dropped her hand. Her voice was solemn when she asked, "Her niece wasn't really sick, was she?"

"Oh, she is. But it's diabetes, autoimmune. Rachel got diagnosed when she was only four and indeed, the entire ordeal had been taking a toll on their family. However, they'd been managing it well on their own. Tonya's uncle wasn't poor—still isn't. They are comfortable, enough to handle the medical costs themselves. Even more so back then." He rubbed his fingers together. "It was the fact that there was any illness at all that made it entirely believable, she you get? You know how they say the perfect lies often have atoms of truth? Yup. Tonya would send pictures of Rachel in the hospital and all, whenever a crisis occurred for any reason, and she would claim it was leukemia. Of course, as her family lives in Abuja, it was too easy to get away with the lies. There was no chance to fact-check, and whenever I visited Nigeria, she ensured I seldom got to see them. The few times I did, not for long."

She'd played the game so well, Tade hadn't suspected a thing. "So, in my head, I'd be speaking to Rachel, asking about her health; speaking to her parents, doing the same, and they'd be telling me, '*Oh, she's doing much better, she's getting treatment*', and I would think, '*Yeah, everything checks out*'. Whenever the conversation started to get detailed, like me wanting to know about the surgery and all, Tonya was always smart to swiftly change the entire conversation. She left no room for suspicion. None at all."

"Was she even giving her family any of that money?" Uju's voice was filled with awe.

"Not at all. Well, just a few gifts here and there... Some monetary contributions too, but nothing that truly reflected the amounts she was receiving from me."

Uju began to shake her head, then suddenly her brows were furrowing. "Wait, wait. There's something I can't understand. What was she doing with all that money? I assume you were giving her other gifts as well?"

"Of course! She didn't want for anything. Asides from her *job*..." He wiggled two fingers on both hands, making air quotes. "As an HR personnel at one of the big firms in Lagos, she also claimed to be selling gold on the side. I would send her monthly allowances to boost her salary; make huge investments in her

business; clear her shopping carts; send her on all-expense-paid vacations multiple times a year, just so she could see the world and destress.” Tade shook his head. He had done even more for her, and he’d never taken them into account, because as far as he had been concerned, it was the least he could have done to make her life as comfortable as possible. That was often his goal whenever he dated, to make his partner’s life worry-free and joyous. “Suffice to say, she was getting more than enough from me for her upkeep without ever having to ask. Even if she hadn’t been working or running a business, she wouldn’t have lacked anything. So, there was never any need to lie—except, it turned out there actually was.”

“Drugs. Was it drugs? I really don’t mean this the way it sounds, but there was something a little off about her last night.”

Tade drew in a ragged breath. “It was drugs, but she wasn’t the one taking them—not at the time, anyway. Drugs and a lot of outrageously awful financial decisions. Turns out she was with another guy named Bayo. They’d been together since she was in Uni, and I’d been their target from the start. Basically, he was a bum who pimped her off for money. It was an entire operation. They’d set their sights on a rich guy, sink their claws into him and payday would begin.”

Uju hugged herself as shivers wracked through her and Tade’s arms ached to replace hers, but he kept them by his side.

“*Chineke!* Ehen? Inside this same Lagos? I thought things like this only happened in movies o! *Omo!* I’m so sorry! I’m so, so sorry.” Her eyes grew soft as she reached for him. “You honestly didn’t deserve any of that. My goodness! I still can’t wrap my head around it all. How did you ever find out?”

Her evident concern, as well as the empathy in her gaze, made Tade’s heart sigh in relief. Her words were like cute teddy band aids on the cuts he’d had to endure all those years ago. “Ah, wait now. I haven’t even gotten to the interesting part. Bayo was actually a part of an entire syndicate, and Tonya was basically funding them. Drugs, women, yahoo-yahoo, night lifestyle, name it! Also, he would often convince her to invest the funds she was siphoning from her victims in one scam business venture or the other. Turns out she never truly had a job, and whenever I wasn’t with her—which was almost always—she was with him. And yes, you guessed right, including the vacations.”

Uju’s mouth was ajar as she shook her head once more, slowly this time. “And the gold business?”

“At least, that one was true. It was a front for money laundering, though, and it soon collapsed.” There was a moment of silence before Tade went on. “I

remember proposing for the first time, our second year of being together. I was inching closer to thirty, figured it was the right time to settle down, and she'd be thrilled to be my wife. *Tsk, tsk, tsk*. How wrong I was. She turned me down, flat! Said she wasn't ready yet, that she needed more time." Tade would never forget the chill that had seeped into his bones as he stood at the top of the Eiffel tower that *unfateful* night, wondering what had just happened. She'd all but ran away, leaving him there, and he'd had to make his way back to their hotel alone, more ashamed and confused than he'd ever felt in his life.

"But I loved her, so I was willing to wait until she felt ready. Six months later, I playfully brought up the conversation of marriage again and she froze up on me, maintaining that it was still too soon and there was no rush. She said we had all the time in the world and saw no reason we shouldn't take it. I should have walked away then, but I stayed." Despite the number of years that had passed since then, Tade still couldn't wrap his head around how he'd trusted Tonya wholeheartedly. He'd truly believed she'd been scared of marriage and had needed to ease into the idea of it. "L.M.A.O!" he laughed aloud at himself. "*Wo, ife ya werey gan o!* Love is crazy! It was just making me do stupid things!"

When Uju chuckled, he was grateful she'd appreciated his attempt at comic relief.

"Anyway, the third year came around and I was planning to propose again. That was when I received a message from an acquaintance who happened to be a mutual with someone in Tonya's close circle... the whole syndicate whatever." The words in that text were still imprinted on his mind.

Tade, I hear you're planning to propose for the second time. You should know, Tonya isn't who you think she is. We need to talk. I'm in London for the next few days. I hear you are, as well. Let me know when you're free to meet.

At first, Tade hadn't been interested in taking the message seriously. However, the person who had sent it was Wunmi. They'd known each other since high school and even though they weren't close, they had kept a relationship cordial enough for Tade to be aware of the fact that she wasn't the kind to go around, stirring trouble where there was none. If Wunmi said something was amiss, then it probably was. Hence, Tade had replied to her message, and they'd fixed a rendezvous. They'd met in a pub on a Sunday evening, and Wunmi had come with heavy receipts. Screenshots from Tonya's

Instagram account, the one he'd never known she had because she'd told him she didn't do social media. Pictures of Tonya and Bayo at bars and lounges in Abuja, and a voice recording from someone who worked at the hospital where Rachel often received treatment for her diabetes. Tade could still relive the exact emotions that had overtaken him in that moment: disbelief, rage, confusion, and hurt sooo deep, he hadn't thought he could ever heal from it.

"I didn't want to believe it, I didn't. But the pieces of evidence were too damning and somehow, things began to click into place. Offhand comments, sketchy actions I'd never read meaning to, unexplained MIA days. Suddenly, it all made sense, especially the real reason she'd rejected my proposal. Nonetheless, I still wanted to give her the benefit of doubt. So, I delayed the proposal plans, hired a private investigator, and continued to act as though everything was normal—well, almost. I cut down on the funds I'd been giving her, began to ask more questions about her niece's health. Before my very eyes, she unraveled. The lies became too much to keep up with. She grew anxious over the fact that I was no longer sending her money, then she had the effrontery..." This part made Tade laugh out loud. He shook his head as he shifted, dropping one leg from the sofa. "She actually had the effrontery to insinuate that *I* was cheating. In her words, it was the only explanation as to why I'd suddenly changed."

Uju could only stare, eyes bulging.

"Yeah, it's exactly as you heard. Thankfully, my P.I was already done with the work I'd hired him to do. There's little you can't find out when you have money in this country, you know?"

"Before!"

"We got everything. Medical reports, their other victims' data, travel documents, drug abuse history, everything! We also found out where she was staying with her Bayo. I flew down to Nigeria, gave her a nice little surprise, caught her in the act, and she still tried to deny it. Claimed Bayo was her friend, that they'd just been hanging out, and when I confronted her with all the evidence I'd gathered..."

"She finally accepted?"

"For where? She tried everything she could: blackmail, guilt tripping, manipulation... Everything was everyone else's fault, except hers. It was even my fault for living in the U.S and not being physically there for her. After all, *a girl had needs*. It was also my fault for not having helped her move to the U.S ages ago, as though that wasn't part of the reason I was asking her to be my wife,

so she could get her green card.”

“Did she know that? That you are a citizen? She could have easily said yes and ended up divorcing you, you know.”

Tade nodded. “I asked her why she didn’t take it all the way yesterday. She said it was because her conscience wouldn’t let her.”

“Ah, I see. Funny how it works. Said conscience apparently wasn’t in the room when she was defrauding you, using her niece’s illness.”

“Right? In any case, all her pleadings fell on deaf ears. I maintained that it was over between us. When two months had passed and I wouldn’t give in, she made good on her threats. She went around telling anyone who cared to listen that I’d impregnated her and refused to marry her because my family wouldn’t accept an orphan. Rather, I’d forced her to get an abortion.”

This time around, Uju didn’t even bother to hide her gasp. “What? No, no, no! Tell me it’s a lie!”

Tade scoffed. “I wish I could. Chaos broke free. My family was thrown into a mess. Everyone began to run helter-skelter, trying to bury the gossip. Blogs were asking for ridiculous amounts to pull down their posts. I called Tonya, begged her to take back her words, but she wouldn’t. She said I had to give her settlement money. Even her addict boyfriend had the guts to join in on the threats. All this while, I hadn’t told my folks what really happened, but I’d exhausted my patience. I was anxious to end the entire drama once and for all. So, I finally came clean. My mother was furious. My dad, I’d never seen him so livid. My sisters? They wanted to tear her apart. We involved our lawyers then, slammed her with over a hundred charges ranging from fraud to defamation. That was when she knew we were really being serious. We also charged her boyfriend for being an accomplice and accessory to crime.”

“I’m sure she didn’t see that coming.”

“Nah, she was counting on me being too ashamed to let anyone know what had happened, too ashamed to let anyone know I’d been fooled. She underestimated the bond I have with my family, even more so, the sense of security I have in my person. I could never let the actions of others define me like that.”

“Serves her right! Please, tell me you didn’t actually drop the charges. Tell me she served good time in jail.”

Tade smiled at the anger in Uju’s voice. “My folks would have wanted nothing better. But her folks stepped in and pleaded. They traveled all the way down to Lagos. Her uncle prostrated for my dad and her aunt wouldn’t stop

rolling on the floor, crying and begging. However, it was Rachel's call that broke my defense. I still remember her little voice saying, *'I know my aunt did something really bad! And she needs to face the consequences of her actions, but please, don't punish her too severely. She's been good to me, and she's all that's left of her family.'*" Tade abruptly stopped as his voice cracked. When he felt his eyes grow wet, he swallowed a groan. He couldn't believe he was about to cry!

Uju pulled closer to him then, rubbing his knees affectionately. "You couldn't say no to her, could you?"

Tade shook his head. "My folks couldn't understand it, but I dropped the charges and let it all go—only on one condition."

"That she would say the truth?"

"That she would say the truth," he repeated. "And she did. She told everyone how she'd falsely accused me and how I'd actually ended the relationship because she'd cheated and lied. I had evidence to prove her guilt as well, so my image was restored, and the rest, as they say, is history. I cut her off completely, changed my lines, denied every point of access she could have ever had to me, and I never heard from her again until last week."

"Wow!" Uju exclaimed as he finished. "I can't believe this. It feels so... surreal! Like you just told me something straight out of a book. I mean, I didn't even hear one word about it on social media or the news, and thank God for that! I can't imagine how crazy it would have been if things had blown up. It would have been soo messy! Just so messy!"

"I know right? I'm just grateful my parents were able to keep things under control because I wasn't even in the country at the time, I'd gone back. And I don't really pay attention to sensationalism, so if it had been left to me alone? Things would have gone to hell before I realized what was happening."

Uju lifted his hand to her lips then and rained kisses across his knuckles. "You went through so much! I can't even comprehend how you must have felt, how difficult it must have been for you." She held his gaze intently as she asked, "How are you even able to trust anyone after that?"

Tade also heard the question she didn't ask. *"How are you able to trust ME?"* He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "For one, I'm very self-aware and attuned to my emotions. I knew what had happened had the capacity to impact me greatly, to mar me beyond repair, and I didn't want that. I couldn't stand her winning so infinitely. I also didn't want to become someone filled with paranoia, always waiting to be stabbed in the back, never knowing who to trust. That would have just been a very sad way to end up living. So, I did what I had to do. I dragged

my ass to therapy, and I got the help I needed.”

He dragged in a deep breath as he sat up. “It took a while—thirteen months to be exact—but I soon stopped feeling so angry at everything and everyone. I eventually stopped feeling the need to isolate. I pulled myself out of the work hole I’d buried my head in, started socializing more, returned to indulging in my hobbies, and slowly learned to smile again.” Uju’s lips curved at that, and his couldn’t help doing the same. “It wasn’t easy, but yeah... at the start of this year, I finally began to feel like I’d gotten myself back. Nonetheless, I knew that didn’t mean I had to jump into another relationship right away. I still wanted to give myself the chance to just be, and really ascertain that I’d fully healed. Coming back to Nigeria this December, I figured, perhaps it was time to try again. Three years was more than long enough, and my heart felt ready to love once more.” His voice softened to a whisper as he pulled her closer. “That was when I met you.”

Twenty-Four

Never lose your heart, never lose your ability to love like you've never been hurt before. That's how you win...

Uju's heart fluttered as Tade leaned into her, nudging her left shoulder with his right. The way he'd said those words, and how he was now looking at her, made her want to confess feelings she wasn't even entirely certain of yet. Thankfully, she managed to hold on to a modicum of self-control. "And have you?" she asked instead. "Fully healed?"

His response was swift. "I thought I had until last week when Tonya started to reach out again and I got triggered. However, after last night, yes! I'm entirely certain that my healing is now complete. Like I said when you and I chatted, the conversation with her was what I hadn't realized was missing."

Uju's curiosity got the best of her. "Yeah, what's up with that sef? What was she really there for?"

Tade told her everything then: how Tonya had indeed come to apologize and had seemed sincerely remorseful; how she'd shared her drug addiction and recovery journey with him; and how she was trying to get her life back together now. However, what thrilled Uju the most was the fact that Bayo and his criminal cohorts had ended up behind bars. It served them right, and yeah, the pun was intended.

"At first, I thought she was simply playing another con, but she seemed genuine. And as I watched her, what anger left in me just... dissipated. I didn't want to be mad anymore. I didn't want to continue to hold on to that hurt in the name of not forgiving her. It wasn't doing me any good. Rather, it was giving her too much power, so I just... I let it all go. I wholly forgave her."

As Tade finished recounting the events from the night before, Uju could only stare in marvel and admiration. Her head was still reeling from the shocking story she'd heard, but of all the insane things that had gone down, what stood out

to her the most was how Tade had handled it like a class-act. Not only had he been such a great boyfriend to Tonya, even after finding out the height of her deceit and betrayal, he'd confronted her calmly, walked away with his shoulders high, hadn't gone around trying to ruin her name and had been willing to bury everything. If the gods hadn't been so hellbent on destroying Tonya and made her completely mad, she would have gotten off easily. Yet, after all the chaos she'd caused, the words of an ill child were all it'd taken for Tade to pardon her crimes.

As though those weren't amazing enough, this thoroughly wonderful man had also chosen to go to therapy and work through the trauma so he would never have to bleed on someone else. Next time she saw Mrs. Carolyn, Uju had to give the woman due accolades for raising such a fine man. She wasn't sure there were five of him in the world. Add her brothers and her father, that only left one other man out there who was so... perfect: emotionally mature, self-confident, and sufficiently secure in his masculinity, that he wasn't afraid to do what was needed for the best of his wellbeing. If she hadn't already been falling hopelessly in love with him, this would have been the tipping point for her. As it was, the speed of her descent accelerated, its depth increasing by the second. How could she ever go back to life before she knew him?

"So, that's it! The boring story of how they broke my heart, bah-ah-ah!" His fake cry jostled her out of her thoughts' maze, and she simply stared, befuddled for a moment, before bursting into laughter. "Ah, finally! She's doing something. I thought I'd lost you there for a minute."

"Ah, no, no. I was just... taking everything in. It's quite a lot to process."

"I know, right? I mean, who hasn't been heartbroken before? Why do I have to make such a fuss out of it? I'm sure heartbreak is always a lot for everyone. You must have stories of your own."

"Well, that's the thing, I don't."

"What?" He looked like he couldn't believe it.

"Yep. I've never been heartbroken before."

"How's that possible? I distinctly remember you telling me about some of your dating escapades."

"I have dated, numerous times, but I've never been heartbroken."

"I don't understand. When a relationship ends, are you not supposed to feel like your heart is being torn apart, shredded into pieces?"

Uju bobbed her head. "I suppose I would—if I'd been in love with said person in the first place. However, I've..." Her sigh weighed a ton. "I've

actually never been in love.”

It was Tade’s turn to cover his mouth. “It’s a lie! You’re whining me right now, are you not? Pulling my legs?”

Uju schooled her features into serious etches, needing him to see her sincerity. “I’m not. I’m being for real. I know how crazy it sounds, but until recently, I didn’t even know what falling in love felt like.”

He drew back then, studying her face as both his legs came back to the sofa. “You’re actually not kidding me.”

“I mean every word.”

“Wow. Not even puppy love? You know, having crushes in secondary school, and not being able to sleep at night because you can’t stop thinking about how they talked to that other person?”

Uju chuckled as she narrowed her eyes. “That’s pretty detailed, almost sounds like a personal experience, but nope, not even that. And I know I’ve probably morphed into a green bald alien, with eyes that take up half my face and nose too flat to possibly be what I use for breathing, but yup, it is what it is.”

“Wow!” Tade exclaimed again. “And you’re in your thirties. How is this even possible?” He stopped abruptly, holding his hand up. “Wait! You said until recently, and by that...” He shifted closer, his gaze taking on that mischievous, dangerous glint. “I’m assuming you meant recently like two weeks ago recently, and that would mean... me!” His eyes widened with incredulity. “Wow! Miss Obianuju Victoria Chimezie, am I your first love?”

Uju should have easily refuted that statement. She should have laughed, or said something funny, or simply brushed him off. Alas, all she could do was remain a captive of his scrutiny, her heart thudding against her chest so loudly, she was convinced he had to hear it too. How could he not, when the stampede was drowning her ears?

Say something, Uju. Speak! He might be your first love, but this isn’t how you want him to find out, is it?

What happened the next moment made her tumble, falling even deeper for him. He must have sensed her dilemma, and his only thought must have been to rescue her, because he was suddenly laughing and bumping shoulders.

“See this babe, o! I was just joking with you, hanhan! See as you just went serious on me. Stop staring at me with evil eyes, jhor! Do you know how many people are happy that I was their first love? It’s a privilege o, forget!”

Uju’s chest expanded as air rushed in. “Ye, ye,” she retorted in Korean. “*Jeonha!*” She was giggling as she dipped in a traditional Korean bow, hands

going over her head. “All hail your royal lovingness! Would you like an award for that, my crown prince? Most first loveable?”

“Chai! See finish is really not good! But yes, I would certainly love an award,” he quipped, stretching so that his spine would grow longer, and his shoulders, farther apart. He looked every bit of a prince as he continued. “You can also make one for yourself. Best in...” He leaned in so close she could feel his breath. “Never been in love before.”

That did it. Next minute, Uju was chasing him around the living room, throwing pillows he mostly dodged, as their symphonized laughter filled the air. They kept that up for about fifteen minutes, then they were collapsing into each other’s arms on the floor, spent.

“Ah, my goodness! That was such a fun way to have ended such a heavy conversation,” Tade sighed.

“I absolutely agree.” Silence hung in the air for a long moment as Uju only spoke again when her breathing stabilized. Her gaze was solemn as she held his. “All jokes apart, I’m truly sorry you had to go through that, Tee. You didn’t deserve any of it, none at all! And I’m so proud of the way you handled it all, the breakup, the legal case, but most especially your healing process. I must also commend you for choosing to hear her out last night. I imagine it must have taken a lot of courage.” She cradled his cheeks. “Well done! You did so great! If no one has ever told you that, I’m telling you today, and you best believe it, okay? I’m freaking proud of you!”

She watched as his eyes fluttered close, as he drew in a deep breath, and released it in a way that said he was truly at peace now. “Thank you,” he muttered, opening said eyes. “You have no inkling how much those words mean to me. And believe it or not, you’re the first person who has ever validated the course of actions I have taken since it all came crumbling down. Sometimes, I’ve even wondered if I’d been too... lenient, too soft. But hearing you say that now...”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I still wish she’d suffered a little more for everything she did. But then again, thinking about it, getting involved with that man called Bayo in the first place is enough punishment. He’s her karma. I’m just... I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m glad she’s in a better place now and I hope she continues to keep him out of her life for good. So yes...” She stroked his chin. “You did good.”

Her stomach flipped when he flashed her that signature grin, revealing the set of stellar dentition. “You see why I lo... like you? You’re so sweet! You barely

know her and yet, look how thoughtful and empathetic you're being towards her. You're really amazing, you know?" He touched his forehead to hers then, wrapping his arms more securely around her, and Uju had to beg for heart to be still, beg for her lips to behave themselves and stay put. She had scarcely recovered from almost hearing him say those four-letter words, and now having to be in this position?

Daughter of Zion, hold fast! You must not lose the fight!

"I'll tell you a secret," he said as he pulled away, drawing her to his chest instead.

Uju didn't know whether to celebrate or mourn the loss of that air-snatching moment. "What is it?" she asked, her voice, a breathless whisper.

"Deep down—scratch that—even on the very surface level, I'm kind of glad you've never been in love before. This way, I have a real chance of stealing your heart and making sure you never have to experience what heartbreak feels like, for the rest of your life."

Uju's world spun on its axis, a myriad of emotions rose like tides within her. "Is that a promise?"

Tade lifted her chin with a finger so he could dig mushy wells in her eyes. "No babe, it's a vow. I'm going to make you love me, Njay. It's only fair. I can't possibly be alone in this, so get ready to be stormed off your feet."

Uju's mind scrambled. Inside of her, that girly, soppy part of her being that had lain dormant for so long, and had finally started running haywire since Tade stepped into her life, squealed. Was that a confession? It had to be, right? It couldn't not be. *Dear Lord, this delicious man would not be the end of me! My heart, please, mechie onu before you betray me! Keep quiet!*

As it turned out, her heart didn't have to comply, for his phone suddenly rang then, drowning every other noise. Heaving a sigh of relief at the narrow escape, Uju attempted to pull away so he could take his call, but he held on more tightly, keeping her in his arms.

"Hello?" He started. "Yes, Dad... I'm fine, sir... Yes, we're together... She's fine too... Abuja...? When...? This afternoon...? For TWO nights...? Oh wow...! No, yeah, sure, sure, I can make it... It's no problem, sir... Ah, I'm sure she'll understand... It's no problem at all... All right, sir. I'll make sure she hears... Yes, see you soon." He ended the call.

This time around, when she pulled away, he let her.

"Your father?"

He bobbed his head. "Something's come up at work. He wants me to

accompany him on a quick business trip to Abuja. All this one is *ojoro o*,” he grumbled. “Because if I wasn’t in Nigeria, he would have gone alone.”

Uju couldn’t help giggling at how adorable he looked. “But you’re in Nigeria, so the point is moot. I’m sure he’d just love to have his son and heir by his side. Besides, it’d give both of you much needed bonding time.”

Tade was pouting as he reasoned with her. “I’m going to be away for three days, Njay. We’ll be coming back on Wednesday evening.”

“That’s all right. I’m not going anywhere. Actually, that’s not true...” When he cocked his head in question, she explained. “I have to go into the office tomorrow. New clients. Their wedding is for June, and I still have some space in my calendar, so I figured, why not? Besides, I’m starting to miss work already.”

“*Tsk, tsk*, workaholic.”

“See who’s talking! Anyway, the koko is, I’m not just going to be lying around, missing you and counting the hours until you’d be back. I’d be pretty occupied, myself. In fact, I’d been wondering what you’d do with yourself once I got busy, so this works out. I should be done with the first round of consultations latest by Wednesday, just in time for your return. We can meet up on Thursday.”

“You’re going to miss me?” There was that mischievous twinkle again.

Uju rolled her eyes. “I was speaking about the things I wouldn’t be doing in your absence, remember?”

“Ye, ye,” he retorted in Korean, undoubtedly teasing her. “Whatever you say. Me, I’ll miss you sha, but that’s okay. Absence will make our hearts grow fonder, and when I return, we can have a really wholesome date.”

“What are you planning?”

“A whole day in my house? Come to think of it, you’ve actually never been. All the times you pick me up, I just meet you at the lobby doors, and then we drive off. I’d love to have you all to myself, in my space, for a whole day. What do you think?” He winked at her. “Are you up for the challenge?”

Uju didn’t even have to give it a second thought. “When have I ever shied away from one?”

“That’s what I’m talking about! It’s settled then. I go to Abuja, you close some deals and make some *mullaaaa*! And when I come back, we meet at my place for a wonderful day indoors. What do you say?”

“Sounds like a plan?”

“Awesome!” He rose to his feet then, pulling her along with him.

“When’s your flight?”

He looked down at his Patek wristwatch. "In another ninety minutes or so."

"That means you have to leave now, if you want to finish packing up in time to make it."

He threw her his forefinger. "That's right." Then he was pulling her into his embrace again, arms tightly wrapped around her. "Oh, I'm going to miss you so much, Njay! So much! I wish I didn't have to go."

"And what would you be doing while I get to work?" she asked, hugging him just as tightly, inhaling deeply so that his musky, sexy scent would become a part of her. *He always smells so good!*

He leaned his chin atop her head. "Sitting prettily in the corner and watching you in action?"

"SMH. You're not serious at all."

"Oh, but I am. Good thing I'll be around for quite a while this time around. I'll still come watch you work, one of these days. Don't worry, I'll be as quiet and negligible as a statue."

"Please, you couldn't even if you tried. Your mere presence commands attention. I mean, have you seen you?"

"Is that a compliment I sense somewhere?"

She simply smiled as she leaned further into his embrace. Uju didn't know how long they remained standing there, both clearly unwilling to let go of each other. Alas, Tade's phone buzzed once more, and that marked the end of the soul-filling moment.

She saw him off to his car, kissed his cheeks goodbye, while he kissed her forehead. Then she was waving as he drove out of her compound. She remained by the gate, watching until his Jaguar disappeared down the street. As it did, she turned around to go back in, counting the hours until she would see him again.

Twenty-five

How do you know it's love? For one, when you find yourself wanting to spend every waking moment with them...

The days went by like a breeze with the rest of Monday being the slowest, and that was only because Uju had little to do. Tuesday and Wednesday picked up the pace as she stepped into work mode. Some of her staff were happy to join her even when she'd insisted it wasn't necessary. She ended up being grateful for the helping hands, though. By the time Wednesday evening arrived, she'd effectively secured one more client for the approaching year. Her new bride was a big Instagram celebrity and business mogul, and her fiancé was an oil magnate. So, that meant the budget was heavy—just the way Uju liked it. They'd drawn up sketches for what they wanted their big days to look like, and Uju had fixed their next appointment for the second week in January, when the proper work would start.

As she was driving home that night, she received a call from Tade, letting her know he had arrived safely in Lagos. He suggested coming down to her house, and though Uju was dying to jump into his arms, she maintained it wasn't necessary since they were going to be spending the entire next day together, highlighting his need for rest. He reluctantly agreed, and they remained on the phone, taking each other through dinner and their night routines, just like every other evening since he traveled. She fell asleep around eleven p.m., and by seven a.m. the next morning, she was awake and ready to begin her day.

The sun had just begun to migrate to the west when she arrived at Tade's apartment building, four hours later. It'd taken her that long because she'd had to go through her devotion, make jollof rice, do her makeup, and pick up the box of donuts she'd ordered from her favorite bakery. She easily spotted him leaning casually against the railings that guarded the enormous steps leading all the way to the lobby. His head was bowed, eyes intently on his phone, and ears covered

with his air pod max. He was wearing the most casual fit she'd ever seen him in: gray sweatpants, black crocs, and a dark grey hoodie that looked like it'd fit right into her wardrobe. Like always, he looked yummy!

She honked as she drove to a stop, and that was more than enough to get his attention. His head jerked up as he pulled his headset to his neck. His eyes lit up in recognition the moment they fell on her car, and the next minute, he was climbing down the rest of the stairs towards her. Uju could barely contain her excitement. She all but jumped out and into his arms. However, aware that they were many passersby, and not sure how he'd react to such an excessive display of affection, she kept her arms to herself. Instead, she got busy with unloading the goodies she'd brought along. He was soon by her side, taking most of them off her hands.

"Wow, heavy!" He said, grinning at her. "And something smells really delicious! This woman, what did you bring o?"

"I guess you'll see when we get upstairs," she winked. "There is a bottle of wine though, that much I can tell you."

He was still smiling as he handed her car key over to the valet, and began to lead the way to his suite.

"How are we going to get the key?"

"Oh, he'll bring it up once he's done parking the car in the garage."

Uju nodded, then they were stepping into a private elevator Tade had had to operate with his thumbprint. A few minutes later, the doors opened into his penthouse, reminding her of her favorite teenage show, *iCarly*.

"Wow!" she gushed as they stepped out. "The elevator leads right into your home! Now, that's something I've never seen before."

"I aim to please and thrill, milady. Don't worry, I'll include your fingerprint to the biometric system later. That way, you'd also have access."

He said those words so flippantly, so naturally, as though they were a given, and he hadn't just basically told her his home was hers. Even she had not yet taken that step with him, and he'd become a regular visitor in her house.

Uju took a deep, steadying breath as she tried—and failed—to ignore the tingly sensation that had overtaken her body. "Is that how you always welcome your women? Add their fingerprints to make them feel at home?"

He was shaking his head as he dropped everything she'd brought on the kitchen island. "How did you know? Although the only women I've ever brought here are Uju, Victoria, there was also J.J, and, of course, Njay! Once you add your fingerprint, my collection will be complete. You can call me

Obathanos,” he declared with theatrical flair, lifting his right fist. “The collector of women’s fingerprints, conqueror of Uju’s heart!”

Uju couldn’t help grinning as she took in his home. It was a really beautiful place. The living area was an unending rectangle with tall ceilings and walls. At one end of the hall was the kitchen that had every utensil and furniture necessary. Right before it was the dining area with an exotic glass and mahogany dining set. As for the living room, it’d been designed like a swimming pool, with a very short staircase leading down to it. Mint-colored sectional sofas formed a U, facing the large TV that looked to be no less than a hundred inches long. On the other side of the parlor were a snooker and pinball table. Uju nodded her head in approval. The entire interior was tastefully done. Unlike most bachelors’ homes she had grown accustomed to, Tade’s was filled with warmth, vibrant hues, as well as a profound aura of homeliness. She loved it very much.

“I could give you a full tour if you’d like.”

She startled. First from feeling his voice super close to her ears, then from the arms he’d wrapped around her from behind. Needing to hold him just as close, she turned to put hers around his neck. He snuggled her in, and all the time they’d spent apart, all the longingness and love sickness, simply faded away.

“God, I missed you!” he breathed into her neck. “You have no idea how much I’ve been dying to do this since I saw you come out of your car. I was this close to snatching you into my arms and never letting go, right there in the middle of the road for everyone to see.”

Uju’s heart soared. Her belly fluttered as she responded, “I missed you too, so much! I wanted to jump on you. It took everything in me not to, wasn’t sure how you’d take it.”

“What? That’s funny! *I* wasn’t sure how *you* would take it, thus I had to restrain myself.” He withdrew so he could hold her gaze. “I wouldn’t have minded, baby, not at all. So please, next time...” He was hugging her again. “Jump on me all you want, okay? What am I spending all my mornings in the gym carrying weights for? Jump away, my dear! Your man can handle it.”

Uju’s elation spilled from her lips in tittering bubbles as she held on more tightly. “Duly noted, sir! Gosh! I can’t believe we were only apart for two days.”

“I know, right? Felt like forever! I couldn’t wait to get back home to you. Uju, what have you done to mee-eee?”

Easily recognizing the line from Johnny Drille’s song, she sang in response, “I no know oo-oo, oh yeah!”

His boisterous laughter tickled her ears. “Johnny really did something with

that song, didn't he? Especially the part where he said, '*It must be you. I need you for my family.*' I resonate with it *gan!* I guess now, the question is, do you believe me, Njay?" His voice went husky in her ears, making her tremble. "Do you believe that I need you?"

Even as Uju's knees weakened, her retort was swift, teasing. "I've been told not to trust Yoruba men. It appears one thing they know how to do excellently is lie!"

"Ouch! What if I told you I'm different?"

"That's what they all say."

"Well, I actually am. I'm about... fifteen percent American by race? And hundred percent American by citizenship."

When Uju gave him the "*Really?*" look, he chuckled as he cradled her head back to him and refused to let go. They remained like that for an eternal moment, the only sound between them, the harmonized symphony of their breaths. Uju hadn't realized how much she'd missed this, needed this, until then. So, she remained still, letting herself relish every second, imprinting each into her memories. Alas, nothing lasted forever—especially good things—and Tade was soon breaking their embrace, taking her hand in his instead.

"Come, I'll show you around."

The penthouse ended up being bigger than she'd imagined. There were two bedrooms with terraces and bathrooms ensuite, one room filled with several kinds of games, a mini gym, and a cozy cinema. Of course, there was also the main terrace that offered the most exquisite view. It overlooked the Lagos Lagoon, with Banana Island in sight as well. Then again, there was little one wouldn't see from the vantage point of twenty-two stories up in the sky.

"Your home is gorgeous!" she fawned as they ended the tour. "And wonderfully furnished as well. Everything about the interior is giving!"

"Why, thank you, milady! I'm glad you approve." He drew her into his arms once more. "Now that you know your way around, shall we begin our day?"

"Of course. What do you have planned for me?"

His eyes twinkled. "Oh, a lot! You'll see!"

Twenty-Six

Sometimes, when two people love each other, things happen, electrifying things. Okay, scratch that, a lot of times!

It turned out Tade didn't lie.

He and Uju spent the entire day playing games, gisting, bantering, and playing more games. From car racing to virtual reality, adventure and battle tournaments, his mini arcade had them all. The competitive spirit within Uju had fully awakened, and she was grateful for all the Sunday evenings she'd spent with the girls at Dufus and Gees, kicking one another's butts. With Tade, she won some, lost some and by the time they were done, they were both too tired to keep count. However, when they got to the snooker table, she had to admit that he was by far her boss. He took the opportunity to teach her and, of course, that meant a lot of body contact. Every time he came behind her, framing her sides as he guided her on how to properly hold the cue stick and shoot to score, Uju drew closer to the edge of control. Her body was in flames by the time she finally declared exhaustion, claiming she'd love to get some rest. Easily agreeing, Tade led her to the kitchen counter.

They'd emptied the box of donuts for lunch and now sat in silence, filling their stomachs with cold juice.

"Wow. I can't believe it's four p.m. already," he said when his alarm started to ring.

"I know, right? Time does fly by when you're having fun."

"For sure! What have I been telling you all this while? Never a dull moment with me, baby!" There was that naughty wink that always had a way of driving Uju crazy as he reached for his phone.

"Got an appointment?"

"You could say so." He rose to his feet. "You see, I've got a dinner date with the most beautiful woman in the entire multiverse, and it's time to start making

sure we actually have something to eat.”

“Oh, we could just eat the jollof...” she started to say, but Tade silenced her with a finger to her lips. It was sexy as hell!

“That jollof is for only me, ma. I’ll keep it in the fridge and will be eating small, small, until it finishes. So, *comot ya eye!*”

Uju was smiling as she too rose. “All right then. What are we having for dinner? What can I do?”

“Madam, sit down and relax, please.” Hands on her shoulder, he pushed her gently onto the counter stool. “Let Chef Tade get to work. Richard is learning work where I am o. Don’t worry, by the time I’m done, you’ll only ever want to eat my food.”

“Na so! Don’t forget that adage about pride and falls, sha.”

“I’m a Maxwell, baby girl.” There was that wink again. “We talk and do!”

“Osheeeyyy!”

He was grinning as he got to work, and all Uju could do was stare as she watched him in action.

First, he rolled up his sleeves, then he threw on his apron in slow motion. Before she knew it, knives were flying in the air, the pan was sizzling, vegetables were sauteing, and the entire house was covered in a gazillion scintillating aromas. Uju remained in the same spot, heaving dreamy sighs as she preserved the moment with her phone’s camera. It was like her favorite Kdrama scenes come alive. He moved with fluid certainty, proving this wasn’t his first rodeo. Uju had never seen a sexier man, and her girls wouldn’t stop screaming in the group chat as she shared pictures and videos.

Chiderah: *Isah lie! Ehn? Chimoo! Me too I want my own chaebol heir o!*

Jessica: *I can’t believe our babe is living the dream! Who needs Kang Tae Moo when you can have Tade Maxwell?*

Yemi: *Ore mi, ore mi! It’s like this Christmas is for you o! Na you get am! Hanhan, I go love!*

Sarah: *See the way he’s flipping that steak! That man sure knows his way around the kitchen. Makes me wonder what else he knows his way around. This babe! Stop dulling us now!*

Hauwa: *Don’t mind her o, Uju’nwa. Evil communication corrupts good manners. We’re talking about food, see where*

that one has carried her mind to.

Sarah: *Hanhan, the eating you do in the bedroom and the one you do on the dining table, are they not both foods? The correlation is there now!*

Osas: *All that one no concern me, abeg! My own be say, Uju, bia, how are we going to taste out of that thing your man is cooking?*

Uju: *Don't worry, I'll send pictures when it's ready. You people can join me in the spirit realm*

Chidera: *Tufiakwa! Na only you go dey chop food for spirit realm o!*

That threw everyone into stitches, and as they began to respond with hilarious stickers, Uju decided that was enough chitchat for the evening. It was time to go back to admiring her fine man who could do it all. She looked up to see he was already turning off the stoves.

“Is the food ready?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Great!” She finally rose to her feet again. “I’ll help you set the table.”

“No, ma,” he interjected, coming around the counter to hold her by her shoulders once more. He spun her gently, so she’d have her back turned to him. “You’ll go into the guest room and wait until I say it’s okay to come out, eh?”

“Command or request?”

She could hear the smile in his voice. “Please ma, will you please go into the guest room please, and wait for me, please? I’ll let you know when it’s time to come out, please?”

Now, how could she refuse when he asked so sweetly? That was how Uju found herself sitting on the bed in the very lavish guest room, and chatting with her girls once more.

Jessica: *Me thinks he’s putting together a romantic dinner. Candlelight, roses, and all!*

Hauwa: *Yes oh, I think so too. It’s evening already, abi? He’s probably going to use scented candles.*

Jessica: *You’re in the spirit, my sister! Ehen, Uju, shebi you mentioned there was a large, beautiful main terrace? I bet that’s where he’s setting things up!*

Uju: *Abi, should I go and peek?*

All five of them who were online heavily opposed those words, and Uju swiftly banished the thought from her mind.

Jessica: *What's the fun in that? Don't ruin the surprise, jhor!*

Sarah: *I agree. Stay in one place! Let someone's son succeed in romancing you properly. Hanhan!*

Osas: *Tell her o!*

Uju: *Hian! Issokay! I've heard o! I'll stay put until he comes to get me.*

Osas: *Ehen! Now you're talking! Do like a normal human being for once.*

Uju: *As per I'm abnormal, abi?*

Jessica: *Before, nkor? You no know?*

Yemi: *Sorry jare, I was putting Deja to sleep. That boy will not stop disturbing his mother. What did I miss?*

Chidera: *Tade is making Uju wait in the guest room whilst he sets up dinner.*

Yemi: *Oouhh! I'm sensing a very romantic something. Sha take it easy o, babies don't sleep at night. They're little demons that don't want you to have any joy, and will drain your life force with their cries and incessant demands.*

Sarah: *Hanhan, mama, wetin reach that one now?*

Hauwa: *Sis, is there something you want to talk about? Is that PPD I'm sensing?*

Yemi: *Oh, no, no, no jare. Lol! At all, jhor. I was just being dramatic, but thank you.*

Jessica: *Are you sure? I can recommend my therapist o. You know we've always got you.*

Yemi: *I know that, love. Thank you. And yes, I'm serious, it's really nothing.*

Uju's heart squeezed at how ready they all were to rally around Yemi at the first sign of trouble. She would always love that about her sisters.

Uju: *I'm glad it's nothing concerning, baby girl. And thank you for the advice, but don't worry, there won't be any baby*

making tonight.

Osas: *You say that now. Wait until the wine starts kicking in. That thing goes straight to your lady parts. You know that, right?*

Uju would have responded, but at that moment, two knocks sounded on the door.

“Njay, you good?”

“Yes, yes. Are you done?”

“Yes, is it safe to come in?”

She was jumping to her feet the next instant. ‘*Got to go, dinner is set!*’, she quickly typed and sent to the group. Then she was yanking the door open.

“Hi!” she chimed.

His eyes gleamed as he waved at her. “Hello! So, I have just one more favor to ask of you.”

“Don’t tell me you want me to wear a blindfold?”

His smile deepened as he revealed the black band. “Great minds do think alike. But not to worry, I promise, it will only be for a few minutes.”

It was just as he’d said. And by the time Uju heard the sliding of doors, then felt the burst of the evening breeze against her skin, not to mention the atmospheric sounds of cars driving and winds howling, one part of her girls’ guesses was confirmed—they were definitely on the terrace.

“Now, here we go!” he whispered behind her. Then the band was coming off, revealing the most romantic dinner setting she’d ever laid eyes upon.

If she’d thought he’d killed it during the yacht date, this was even better! It looked like a scene right out of Pinterest. Table for two, scented candles and rose petals on the floor, as well as on the small round table he’d thrown a red satin cover cloth over. Of course, the table itself had been set to perfection; glass of wine, napkins, and just by its side, was a food cart evidently filled with their meals.

“What do you think? I outdid myself, eh?”

This was one of those situations when Uju couldn’t even jest. She was beyond impressed. “You over outdid yourself! This is truly amazing, Tee. You should have told me, I’d have worn something more appropriate.” She looked down at the pair of khaki shorts and top she’d thrown on for comfortability, and he simply bumped shoulders.

“C’mon! That’s part of the fun! We’re creating our own traditions. Casual

clothing for fancy dining. I mean, I'm still in my sweats. It's going to be fun, I promise."

It turned out exactly that way. Dinner was like everything else she'd ever experienced with him—the best. They teased, flirted, fought with their feet, held hands, and got lost in each other's gazes a million different times. Tade had prepared a full three-course cuisine. They'd started off with some sort of lobster soup, and thereafter, had come the lamb chops and creamy pasta with vegetables. They'd ended with cheesecake for dessert, and everything had tasted so good, Uju couldn't stop singing his praises.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"Oh, had a roommate in college that was actually working as a chef at a French hotel. Now, don't get me wrong, I don't enjoy cooking. Nonetheless, I've always found the process fascinating, so I love to pick up a few things here and there. I find it comes in handy when you're trying to get a woman who's never been in love before, to fall for you."

At his signature wink, Uju's belly fluttered. "This is what you call just picking up a few things? If you now decide to enjoy it, nkor? And the cheesecake? I remember you saying you actually love baking. Did you make it yourself?"

"Yes. Spent all morning on it and kept it in the fridge to cool just before you arrived. Soft work. I only managed to get it right on the fourth attempt." He drew a finger across his brow and wiped. "No sweat."

She giggled, the sound a genuine reverberation from the depths of her soul. She was truly touched by the lengths he'd gone to, to make the entire day special for her. "Soft work indeed." There was a pause as she returned her napkin to the table. "These all tasted great, Tee. For real. Thank you for putting it altogether, you're really sweet! That said, I'd pay good money to eat your meals, bonus if I can watch you cook. Perhaps you're in the wrong career path after all."

"Nah, I've made too much money from Tech to believe there could possibly be anything else for me."

"Flex! God when?"

He only responded with a lazy grin as he began to pack up. She joined him, receiving no objections this time around. Within the next hour, amid more lighthearted conversation, banter and singing, they finished clearing up the terrace. Soon, all the dishes were fitted into the dishwater, and it was time to relax.

"Now that we have that out of the way," Tade began, taking her hands as he

led the way to the living room. “I vividly remember someone promising me a dance we never got to have.”

“Oh, you mean the one your *lovely* ex interrupted?”

“Ouch! I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

Uju scrunched her nose and eyes together as she nodded.

“Yeah, I thought so. Notwithstanding, I’m an innocent man and an innocent man has nothing to hide, so indeed, that very one. How about we finally have the show-down now, Miss Uju?”

“You know me, I’m always game. It’d be good to sweat off all that food, in fact.”

“Always speaking my language. I love it!”

He stepped away then to turn on the vinyl player, and as soon as the disk started rolling, Uju knew this was more about dancing together than against each other. An old classic, *Just The Two Of Us*, by Glover Washington ft Bill Withers came on, and he was taking her hands in his once more.

“What do you say, milady?” His brows arched. “Are you ready to rumble?”

And rumble they did. First to more old classics and finally, to modern blues. As soon as *Lover* by Taylor Swift came on, Uju knew her loss in the war she’d been fighting against the maddening urge to kiss him was inevitable. Their chests rose to meet again every time they drew apart. His arms surrounded her waist, and hers, his shoulders, as they sang the lyrics to each other.

“Can I go where you go...?”

“Can we always be this close? Forever and ever and oh!”

“Take me out, take me home...”

“You’re home, baby,” Tade mouthed, making her chuckle.

“You’re my, my, my, my...” she continued.

“Lover...” he breathed, eyes never leaving hers.

They kept going, never stopping their singing, not even when he spun her around, dipped her in a bow, and certainly not when he brought her back up so that once more, they were staring into each other’s souls, chest to chest, struggling to catch their breaths. Then, the song was coming to an end. And suddenly, they were no longer singing. Uju suspected that like her, Tade simply couldn’t have formed the words even if he tried. The sexual tension that had been burning between them all day—scratch that—ever since that night at X bar lounge, had boiled to a fever pitch and there was no ignoring or denying it any longer.

So, as those last words, “*Darling you’re my, my, my, my... Lover,*” rang from

the speakers, they let Taylor Swift have them, too focused on each other, wondering who would be the one to make the first move.

It was Tade who did, and in the most beautiful way Uju could have ever imagined.

“Can I..?” he swallowed hard. “May I kiss you, Uju? I’m afraid if I don’t, I’d actually go mad from imagining, from... wanting.” His voice was so strangled, she could tell that just like her, he’d been struggling to grasp on to control, that he’d been thirsting for this for so long!

It must have been the thoughts about thirsting, for her throat suddenly felt parched. Unwittingly, she wetted her lips, swallowing as well. His low groan went straight to her veins, replacing blood with liquid fire, and all she could do was nod, as the words helplessly slipped, “Yes, yes you can. In fact, I think I’d love that very much.”

That was all Tade needed. The next minute, his lips were coming down on hers in the most mind-blowing kiss Uju had ever experienced.

Twenty-Seven

Everybody deserves that once-in-a-lifetime kinda love, the type that sets your soul on fire...

The moment their lips touched, Uju knew there was no going back for her. If she'd thought Tade made her feel alive before, now she was wonder woman, floating through clouds.

He started slowly, tenderly, as though he was afraid she would change her mind, and as she felt herself opening more to him, moving her hands from around his shoulders to the base of his neck so she could cradle him closer, the pace quickened. His lips were as soft and plump as she'd imagined, they were also delicious! Uju could taste the wine they'd had with dinner, and it made her want to drink more deeply, heady with desire. She was no novice in the mouth tango department; she'd had sundry kisses in the past, but it was a certainty in that moment, a knowing deep in her soul that none of them would ever come close to this. This was different. Every single thing was different. The way the hairs on her body stood alert with pleasure as he tried to make her a part of him, how fireworks wouldn't stop exploding in her mind, and how despite the faint awareness of music playing in the background, he was all she could feel, all she could think about, he consumed her every sense, making her hope this moment would never end.

Dear Heavens! Is this what it feels like to be kissed by someone you actually have real feelings for? Is this what I'd been missing out on all my life?

Her train of thoughts got derailed as he caressed her more earnestly, his lips demanding. Uju had never been one to accept defeat, so she matched him, fervor for fervor, suckling when he nibbled, biting when he grazed, angling her head to grant herself better access. Before she knew it, they were moving, taking steps backwards until she could feel the hard wall behind her. Lost in passion, her man still knew to protect her head and back with his hands, to rest her so gently against the mass of concrete, so she wouldn't suffer any bruising, as her legs

went around his waist. Loving him all the more for that, Uju's hands moved to the neck of his hoodie, pulling him closer still. Then he was seeking entrance, prodding her lips apart with his tongue. Uju wasted no time opening up to him completely, taking the advantage herself, to explore every treasure he kept hidden.

"Damn, you taste so good," he moaned into her mouth and her thighs were tightening of their own volition, squeezing hard to keep her most intimate desires from running wilder.

Osas hadn't lied, the wine definitely went straight down south. Uju could feel it kicking in so bad, and even though she knew she wasn't ready to go *there* tonight, she still couldn't bring herself to stop—at least not yet, not when there was still so much about this man's mouth she wanted to unravel. After having held back for exactly two weeks, she was starving and wouldn't be sated so soon. Good thing he seemed to be as ravenous as she was. Gone was the slow, soft Tade she'd glimpsed when the kiss had begun. Now, he was in full ravage mode. Nonetheless, his hands wouldn't stop cradling her so tenderly, as though he feared she might break, otherwise. Amid the haze, Uju realized those arms weren't straying either. He wasn't trying to cup feels by moving down to her bum or breasts; he was being mindful to maintain boundaries, only sticking to what he'd been given consent for.

She could only imagine how difficult that had to be. For him to have remained aware enough to exercise such restraint in this kind of situation, simply reverberated louder than ever before, how important this man truly considered her to mean to him. So naturally, she fell faster still, covering more depth. Then she was losing her thoughts, unable to think anything else, only feel. The kiss grew deeper, hotter, faster. Before Uju knew it, she had to be the one restraining herself from pulling up his hoodie and copping a feel of those muscles that wouldn't stop rippling underneath her fingers, against her chest.

"I want to touch you," she heard herself moan. The words hadn't even formed in her head before escaping her lips, so there was no way she could have stopped them.

He said nothing, only broke the kiss, and as Uju feared she'd ruined the moment, he started to strip before her very eyes. Two seconds later, the hoodie was gone, yanked off to reveal the most perfect set of abs she'd ever seen.

"Oh, wow!" she gasped, helpless to do anything but ogle. "Damn, you're fookiine!" she muttered again. At this point, it was clear she was losing her mind, just after losing control. What more was she going to lose that night?

“I could say the same about you, you know?” he croaked, his voice so freaking husky, it went down the same path as the wine. Then he was taking her face in his large palms again and kissing her senseless.

What was air? It ceased to matter. What was breathing? All Uju needed to stay alive were his miracle-working kisses. Her nipples strained against her sports bra, her thighs hurt from squeezing too tightly, and she still couldn’t let go. Her hands ravenously explored his body, learning every hill and tower, every peak and valley. She’d called it right that night they first met: he was a gorgeous specimen of a man! She didn’t know how it happened, but soon they were on the sofa, and her hands were already reaching for his buckle when she finally, at long last, came to her senses.

Abruptly, she stopped, breaking the kiss as she drew in loud air.

Ah! Thank you, Jesus! My goodness! What has come over me? Uju, were you about to jump this man? Chai! And your mother raised you better than this o!

He gave no protest as she pulled away, didn’t try to draw her back towards him and take her lips once more. Instead, he promptly sat back and placed one comforting hand on her knees. “You good?”

She nodded. “Yes!” She was still struggling to catch her breath, so that answer came out in another gasp. “I... I’m sorry. I... Wow! I... I don’t even know what to say.”

His chuckle was comforting as he dropped his face into his palms. “I know what you mean. Trust me, I know exactly what you mean. I don’t have words, myself. That was...”

“It was unlike everything I’ve ever experienced before,” Uju supplied.

“Exactly! I don’t think I could have put it better. It’s a good thing you stopped us, you know? I was this close to completely losing control.”

Uju swooned at those words. They made her feel even hotter. She fanned her face as she sat upright, returning her feet to the ground. “Well, I wish I could say the same for myself. I clearly forgot to hold on to mine.”

He looked up at her then, eyes still darkened with desire. “You don’t hear me complaining, babe. You can put your hands on me all day, any day, and I’d only ever feel like the luckiest man alive. You can’t even start to imagine how good it felt, having you touch me like that.”

Dear Heavens, can’t a girl win this fight? How am I supposed to keep it together when he keeps saying things like that? When he keeps looking at me like that? She knew the answers as well as she knew her own name—she couldn’t. That left her with only one right thing to do. She jumped to her feet, wanting to

put as much distance between them as possible, even though it hurt.

"I... I have to go. It's getting late."

As though he understood what she was trying to do, he remained on the sofa, giving her the time she needed to pull herself together. "You mean, it's gotten really late? It's almost midnight, babe."

"Ehn?" Uju frantically searched for a wall clock then, needing to confirm for herself. She couldn't even remember where she'd dropped her phone. She found one easily enough. It was huge, golden, it looked like it'd cost at least a few thousand dollars, and yup, it declared Tade an honest man. It was indeed almost midnight, only five minutes to, to be exact. "Where did all the time go? I remember it was still nine thirty p.m. when we finished with the dishes."

"Well, there was all that dancing..." he answered, finally rising to his feet. "And all that kissing..."

Uju couldn't bring herself to move as he drew closer. She was running low on willpower once more.

"Spend the night, Njay. Please?" He stared at her through his lashes as though she were all that mattered to him in the world. "Stay with me. I promise, nothing you don't want to happen is going to happen. In fact, let me rephrase that. Nothing is going to happen at all. Whether or not you want it. I'm going to sprinkle my body with holy water and lock myself up in my room. See no evil..." He made the cross sign. "Touch no evil."

Despite herself, Uju chuckled. Gosh! He made it so hard and so easy at the same time! Hard to refuse him anything, too easy to love him. Besides, it was barely a fair fight when he was using that soft, whispery voice he had to know had a straight connection to her heart.

"And what could possibly happen?" she retorted. "Who even told you I want to have anything to do with you before? Me, I'm a daughter of Zion o."

"You see? It's settled! Daughter of Zion," he gestured at her. Then at himself, "Son of God. We've got this, baby! We'll be fine. You can stay in the guest room, I will stay in my room, and all would be right in the world."

She couldn't not listen to his attempt at winning her over. Truth was, her heart was wavering with every word, and it vaguely occurred to her then, that this was the first time he would be leading a conversation that was sexually connotative. That was another thing she really liked about him. He had never tried to act smart, making sexual jokes or offensive innuendos in hopes of getting away with them. Even now, he was being so sweet and respectful about it all.

As if to corroborate her point, he added, “In fact, if it would make you feel better, you can barricade your door. I’ll do the same.”

Unable to believe him, she clamped her teeth together and sucked in air through them. “*Mstee!* Can you be serious for once? Barricade for what? Who’s going to come and jump you?”

“Ah! We can’t say, o! Fine man like me. The koko is we shouldn’t let the devil use us.”

“Then I can just go home instead of going through all that trouble. That way, we both get to sleep in peace.”

“Hanhan, it’s like you use to quickly vex o. Oya, wait, wait. It’s late, we’ve both been drinking so we can’t drive. It just makes sense for you to spend the night. I’ll drive you home first thing tomorrow morning, if that’s what you want.” He raised three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Or I could just take Uber.”

“You could, but with all the kidnapping news and considering the season we’re in, I don’t feel comfortable sending you off in a strange man’s car, this time of the night.” When she did nothing but stare at him, he pursed his lips into a pout, enlarged his eyes and began to blink like a lost puppy. “Please now, stay? I promise, I don’t have any evil intention. I just... I want to keep having you here. I love having you here.”

And just like that, what little was left of her resolve dissolved. “I didn’t even pack an overnight bag.” It was her last attempt at standing her ground. It was also a very weak one, and she knew he knew.

“That’s totally fine. I have many, many sleep wears that would look great on you. You can just throw one of them on.”

“And how about my night skin care routine? How will I take off my makeup? Toiletries for having my bath?”

He started to lead her to the guestroom then, wordlessly—but not before pausing to wear his hoodie once more. Uju breathed a sigh of relief. It had been getting increasingly difficult to keep her gaze averted from those abs she could still feel against her palms. In no time, they were standing in the bathroom, in front of the vanity, and he was opening the cabinets.

Uju’s hands flew to her mouth as she saw her complete skin care set staring back at her. “How?”

He rose one finger. “That’s not all.” He opened the drawer as well, and sure enough, there was also a full make up set, all products Uju used, smiling at her. And yes, they were all brand new.

Uju interlocked her fingers under her jaw. She couldn't wrap her head around just how amazing this was. "How?" she asked again. "How did this happen?"

Without replying, Tade took her left wrist and led her back into the room. They came to a stop in front of the closet, and when he opened it, Uju wasn't as surprised to find at least a dozen fits in there. After all, if he could pull off skin care and makeup? Clothes were a given. Still, she was sufficiently awed. Dresses, jeans, tops, jumpsuits... they were all her regular choices of clothing, in colors she loved, and yep, they were her size as well! Size ten!

Her hands went to frame the sides of her head, mimicking an explosion. "Now, you have to tell me! How did you manage to get this done? I mean! Clothes I can even understand. But skin care? Makeup?"

The grin on his face was that of a man who was extremely pleased with himself. "Well, I might, or might have not put my sisters up to playing F.B.I during the beach house party. I had them take pictures of all your skin care products and makeup as well, and they handled the rest. The clothes, though, I picked those out myself."

Uju couldn't stop shaking her head. "I can't believe you! How long have you been planning this?"

"Now, why would I reveal trade secrets? So, how did I do?"

"A hundred percent!" she pealed, rising to drop a quick kiss on his lips before she could stop herself. She was beyond thrilled. "I can't... No one has ever done anything like this for me before, Tade! Wait... Are you even real? There has to be a catch somewhere, isn't there? Some flaw I don't know about?" She narrowed her eyes. "It can't be physical—well, as far as I've been able to see. So maybe... IDK, IDK, some covert narcissism hidden somewhere? Now that I think about it, this feels a lot like love bombing."

"Ouch!" Tade exclaimed as he staggered backwards, hands cradling an invisible arrow to his heart. "That one really hurt, you know? You do your best for the woman you're crazy about, and she thinks you're just love bombing her. Well, I guess you have to get used to being love bombed for the rest of your life, because no, babe, this isn't a drill. It's for real. And as for flaws..." He closed the distance between them once more. "I've got plenty. For one, I snore—badly. Two, I'm terrible with directions. I honestly cannot even tell my right from my left most times. Thank God for G.P.S! If not? Wheew! There's also the fact that I tend to get very absorbed in work. And the worst part? Whenever things aren't going my way? I get irritable and start acting like an ass to everyone in my immediate vicinity. I'm trying to work on that, by the way."

He paused to catch his breath. “Trust me, not perfect at all. Really, I could go on and on, but my sisters would be in the best position to tell you all about my shortcomings. In fact, they would be most obliged. I guess all I’m just trying to say is,” his voice lowered, turning to marshmallow. “I’m not a perfect man, Njay. I’m immensely flawed, so don’t go putting me on a pedestal, please? I’m really just a man trying to do right by the woman who’s rocked his world from the moment she stepped into it.”

If Uju was plugged to a heart monitor, the entire room would have been thrown into chaos then. *Gosh, this man!* Even when he was claiming to be imperfect, he still did it so flawlessly!

“So, you picked out all these clothes, and you didn’t think to pick some night wears?” she asked, changing conversations as she returned her attention to the open closet.

“I have enough, remember? Hoodies, sweatshirts and pants, boxers, shorts, you can have your pick of *them*.”

She turned to him once more, eyes slitted with suspicion. “Why do I have a feeling you planned all of these, just to see me in your clothes?”

His own eyes flared with mischief. “Wow, obvious much?” He raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, you don’t catch me.”

She hid a smile as she sat on the bed. “You know who you remind me of sometimes?”

“Pray tell.”

“Damon Salvatore.”

He stopped in his tracks. “For real? An insane vampire?”

“Yup. Don’t forget he was also mischievous, and that’s one thing you happen to excel at, being naughty.”

“Ouuhhh!” His brows twitched. “Now, maybe that’s the secret I’m hiding. Maybe I’m a... vampire!” He mimicked an explosion with his hands, adding extra drama to that word. “And that’s why I really want you to spend the night, so I can drink your blood.”

Uju’s response was swift as she snapped her fingers at him. “I bind and cast you in the mighty name of Jesus!”

There was a fraction of silence before they both burst out laughing.

“Chai! You’ve made me as unserious as you are.”

“Well, you know what they say, baby. Stellar communication promotes good manners.”

“No one says that.”

“Well, I do. And I just remembered there’s something else I have for you. Gimme a moment. I’d be right back.”

He was gone before Uju could respond, and once she found herself alone, she couldn’t help screaming into her hands. Tade was freaking amazing! Every time she thought it couldn’t possibly get better, it did exactly that. Aware she just couldn’t process this alone, she picked her phone and began to type. Most of the girls would be asleep, but she could imagine what their reactions would be when they finally caught up on the gist. They would lose their minds for sure, just like she had. With that thought, she hit send.

Babes, you won’t believe what just happened!

Twenty-Eight

My favorite kinds of relationships are the mutual efforts kinds. You spoil me, I spoil you...

Tade was whistling as he made his way back to Njay's room, the box of gifts he'd gotten her in hand. He still remembered how he'd stood in front of that boutique in the shopping mall at Abuja, contemplating whether or not purchasing the items would be seen as doing too much. He'd eventually decided he'd rather be the man who did too much, than the man who simply didn't do enough. That line of thought had ended up being all the ginger he'd needed to take that step towards doing more things to make his woman happy. He was still reeling from the glorious wonder that was the earth-shattering kiss they'd shared, as well as her evident joy at the extent to which he'd gone to make her overnight stay as comfortable as possible. The thought that the gifts he was about to present to her would definitely be the perfect way to end what had been an utterly beautiful day, made him giddier. He couldn't wait to see the look on that face he now knew by memory, when he finally revealed the souvenir he'd brought along from Abuja.

He was probably the kind of man many would call a simp with the way he was moving, but Tade would gladly be the king of simps for Njay. He loved her. It was as pure and simple as that. There was no use denying it now. This was the fastest it'd ever happened to him, falling so hopelessly, irrevocably in love with someone, but there was nothing to be done about it. It simply couldn't be helped. Every passing moment he spent with her, and even the ones apart, made him see why he couldn't ever go back to doing life without her. As far as Tade was concerned, it wasn't a possibility he ever wanted to contend. If, heavens forbid, anything ever went wrong, Tade knew this was one heartbreak he would never recover from. Hence, it was in his best interest that he did everything in his power to ensure this wondrous sapling they'd begun to nurture, blossomed into the sturdiest, healthiest tree, and bore beautiful fruits. That was the only way

forward, till their hairs turned gray or nothing at all.

Sometimes, he still found himself being shocked by how he'd come to love someone so deeply in such little time. He, who had always been a lover boy, for this was certainly a new record for him. Everything with Njay was different. Ever since meeting her, it suddenly made sense why it had never worked out with anyone else. Njay was the only one for him, this much was clear to see now. He'd never been one to believe in soulmates, or the concept of '*the one*', but Njay certainly changed that. She thought he was flawless? *Pfft!* Little did she know she was, in fact, the perfect one. There wasn't a single thing about her Tade didn't adore. From her laughter to her gorgeous eyes, her voice, her wit, and quick comebacks that kept him on his toes... He was smitten with the way her nose scrunched up whenever she called out his bullshit, the way her eyes softened whenever he said something sweet. He absolutely couldn't get over how stunning she looked every time she blushed, and that was why he tried to make her do so as often as possible.

Of course, there was also her heart. Tade was endeared by the way she spoke about her friends, her workers, her family, and even his. He would never get over the manner in which she'd easily extended grace and understanding to Tonya, a woman she barely knew, despite having just heard the most damning things about her. Njay was kind to her very soul. There was not one mean bone in her body at all. She was also sweet and generous, never failing to gift him something every time they met. The best part? She wasn't only generous with material things. She was just as quick to share her emotions as well: empathy, sympathy, joy. Most importantly, she brought him so much peace! His heart often went to rest whenever she was near. She just had that way about her, of putting him at ease.

Did he even need to mention how secure she was in herself? See how they'd resolved that issue with Tonya so effectively. She'd been able to trust him, to wait patiently, and she'd listened with all her heart, believing his every word when he'd said it was all in the past now. Tade was still stuck on that. He'd been scared, insanely worried that the entire incident would ruin things between them. Fortunately, it had only brought them closer. Of course, there was also the fact that she was a boss lady. It was one thing Tade found ridiculously sexy. He hadn't just been flattering when he'd told her he truly admired what she'd built with Blossom Events. His woman was a hot cake, and he was freaking proud of all her achievements. Yes, he was well aware they had nothing to do with him, and that was totally fine. He fully intended to make significant contributions to

her continued success, moving forward.

What else did he love about Njay? However, the more accurate question would be, what was there not to love? Was it the way she readily bantered with him? How she could switch from lighthearted conversations to sober discussions in a heartbeat? How she had so much range, she effortlessly intellectually stimulated his mind on diverse topics of interests? His mother hadn't been overstating when she'd said Njay was a million in one, and one in a million at the same time. She indeed was one of a kind, and if Tade had ever needed proof of God's love for him, this was it. Only pure love could have been the incentive behind such a blessing—that was precisely what Njay was to him, the biggest blessing of his life.

Bro, do you know how you sound right now? The voice in his mind asked. Crazy, head over heels, in love? Yup, that's about right. Because that's exactly how I feel, he answered. Stanley's *Mumu*, *Mumu* song started to ring in his head just as he arrived at her door. Laughing at himself, he raised his hand to knock.

"Come in," came her swift response.

"Are you decent?"

When he heard her playful hiss, he opened the door and stepped in. "I brought you your pyjamas for the night," he announced, handing her the sweatpants and polo he'd picked from his closet. "And this as well." He placed the box of gifts on the bed, then stepped back so she would do the honors.

"What's that?" she asked, looking from the box to him.

"Well, why don't you open and see for yourself?"

Eyeing him suspiciously, Njay drew closer to the box and began to work on the ribbon. The ticking clock grew louder and soon enough, it was being drowned out by what would be her hundredth gasp of the evening.

"It's a lie!" she gushed as her eyes fell on the golden Saint Lauren clutch and the matching pair of shoes he'd gotten her. "Oh my God, Tade! Oh, my goodness! I don't even know what to say!" She lifted the items then, her glee evident as she checked them out. "Are these? I mean, they clearly are! But still... How?! Oh, Tade!"

"Souvenirs from my trip to Abuja. I figured it would be rude, coming back with nothing."

"Guy! This is more than something! Are you kidding me? Arghhh! I've been wanting this particular pair of shoes for ages! And this bag! It's just... it's stunning!"

Now, Tade was sufficiently pleased with himself. Leaning against the wall, he

crossed his arms over his chest, and threw his left ankle over the right. *Mission successfully accomplished!*

“You really are unbelievable! You know that, right?” Her eyes were twinged with tears as she looked up at him, happy, grateful tears, and it made Tade want to kiss her again.

His entire body grew taut as vivid memories from earlier that evening flashed through his mind. Indeed, the night was permanently etched in his soul, never to be forgotten. “Don’t tell me you want to cry,” he said, forcing those thoughts out of his head before he’d lose control again. “C’mon, baby.”

“Well, these are happy tears,” she defended, blinking hard as she rubbed at her eyes.

Tade pushed away from the wall then, ready to take her in his arms. However, she abruptly turned, raising one finger in command.

“You think you’re the only one that knows how to pull sweet surprises, eh? You just stay here, I’m coming back!”

Curiosity almost made him follow her out of the room, but he did as he was told instead, stayed behind like an obedient puppy. She came back seconds later with a small fancy bag.

“Here!”

It was his turn to look at her suspiciously. “What’s that?”

“See for yourself,” she threw his words back at him.

Smiling at how charming she was, he accepted the package, then sat on her bed to unravel it. There was a single fist-sized jewelry box, colored black with gold rims. It looked so sleek, and Tade couldn’t wait to see what was in it.

“Wait, don’t tell me this is what I think it is? I mean, I know I’m irresistible, but baby, I was going to propose eventually. You didn’t have to take the lead.”

Uju slammed her forehead against her palm in a frustrated sigh. “What am I ever going to do with you? Open something, jhor! It’s not only propose, it’s dispose. Irresistible, *kwa!* I don’t know who’s deceiving you.”

“Ouch! You’re strict sha, shey you know?” He was already doing as he’d been asked, though.

This time around, he was the one to cover his mouth in awe as the box popped open. Right in it were three pieces of golden goodies. One was a neck chain with a pendant shaped like a car key. The second was a bracelet with the same pendant, and the third was a pair of identical cuff links. They all looked so good, he knew the custom order had to have cost a fortune. His eyes stung with emotions, his throat closed up, putting him at a loss for words. “Babe! These are

fire!” was all he could manage.

“I told you, you aren’t the only person who’s good at giving surprises! So, do you like them?”

“Like? I loooveeee them! I love them so much! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

She came willingly when he pulled her in for a lingering embrace that ended in a sweet, tender kiss.

“Thank you too,” she whispered when they pulled away, their foreheads touching. “For everything, really. You’ve just... You’ve taken my whole world from a hundred to one thousand.”

“Only because you continue put mine at level uncountable million!”

She giggled then, and he fell in love with the melody all over again.

“All right, all right, it’s time for me to keep my promises. I’ll leave you to freshen up and get some rest now. There are toiletries, your body wash, towels, sanitary products, a toothbrush, all you could ever need really, in that bathroom. However, if I happen to have forgotten anything, give me a holler and I’ll...” He twirled his forefinger in the air. “Abracadabra it.”

She was still laughing when he closed the door behind him a moment later, and his heart... it was a resonance of that descant.

ooooo

Morning came quickly for Tade. But that was only because he’d stayed up until three a.m., chatting with Njay over the phone, and by six a.m., his body alarm had abruptly woken him up, pushing him out of bed. One would think that being in the same house, they’d have preferred to talk in persons, but no. He’d stayed in his room, she’d stayed in hers, and they’d chatted all night long. Ahh, the silly things love made one do.

Sensing that she was still asleep when he stepped out of his room, he simply went about his routine. Some weightlifting at the gym, a full set of press ups, one liter of water down his throat, a warm shower, then it was time to make breakfast. He’d just gone halfway when she stepped out, looking all cute in his polo, eyes still laden with sleep. Something in Tade kicked excitedly at the thought that she hadn’t bothered to dress up and look pretty. That she’d come out in her *‘I-woke-up-like-this’* state spoke volumes of how comfortable she already felt with him. His soul was deeply pleased.

She was rubbing said eyes as she walked up to him. “Something smells nice.

Good morning.”

“Good morning to you too, sleepyhead,” he greeted in response, pressing a kiss to her forehead as he hugged her. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, and Tade knew he could get used to this. “How did you sleep?”

A sweet smile stole across her lips as she stretched. “Like a baby!”

“Music to my ears! So, we have pancakes and omelet, and of course, tea. They can all be yours in a bit. You just have to choose—bath first or bath after?”

“Bath first.”

“I thought as much.”

“I won’t be long.”

He nodded, sending her off with another kiss to the lips. Then, he got busy with finishing up and setting the breakfast table. She returned looking all bright and fresh half an hour later, and they sat down to eat.

Breakfast was pleasant as always, even though they were more quiet than usual. Still, Tade didn’t mind one bit. He treasured the fact that they could also sit in companionable silence and feel completely at ease with each other. It only meant, though, that there was no opening for him to announce the good news that had finally come through that morning. It was going to end up being the biggest surprise he’d put together for her so far, and he’d been working on it for days now.

Perhaps, after breakfast, I can tell her then.

“What do you want to tell me?”

Tade’s eyes widened. Had he said that aloud?

As if she had read the question in them, she offered, “You’ve been opening your mouth and closing it. You also look restless, like there’s some gist you can’t wait to drop.”

That made him smile. “I’ve become an open book, huh?”

Her shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. “I’m just great at observing people, comes with the job description. So, are you going to let the cat out of the bag or... hold that thought,” she said as her phone rang. “My mom,” she mouthed to him. Then, she was standing up to go to the terrace.

When Tade looked down at her plate to see that she was already done eating, he cleared the dishes. His eyes continued to dart to her as he loaded them into the dishwasher, but he couldn’t hear a word she was saying; the morning wind was doing a good job of drowning them all out. It was about another half an hour later when she returned to join him in the living room.

“Trust everyone is doing good?” he asked.

Uju nodded. “She just wanted to check in on me. We’re both sad I really won’t be able to make it home for Christmas. I mean, it’s the twenty-second already, and I still haven’t been able to book any flights.” She settled into his open arms, and he promptly wrapped them securely around her. “Thank you for breakfast, by the way.”

“You’re welcome. And speaking of flights, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh? Have you finally been able to book one for me? I swear, it’s so frustrating! I’ve tried everything I can, used different browsers, even asked my friends to. At least, now, I’m even finding flights, but my bookings keep getting rejected. Hian! I never see this kain thing before o.”

Tade’s lips creased deeply in a secret grin. “Well, I think I might have been able to solve that problem.”

She was jumping out of his arms the next second. “For real? Oh, thank you so much!” She dissolved in relief. “Which airline? Ibam air? Air Ease? Please tell me it’s not Dannax?”

Tade trembled with laughter. “This your beggar, it’s like it has choice o!” Those words were a reference to a particular slang from a popular Nigerian TV show, *Jenifa*. “So, if it’s Dannax, you won’t go?”

Her shoulders dropped. “Hmm, I’ll *kuku* go. Half bread is better than none. So, is it?”

As Tade searched her eyes, he realized this surprise would be best delivered in another way. So, he simply said, “You’ll find out tomorrow. I’ll drive you to the airport and give you your boarding pass then.”

“Hian. Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “What are you planning?”

He drew her back into his arms. “You’ll see. All you just need to know is that you won’t be missing out on Christmas with your family this year. You trust me, don’t you?”

Her response was automatic, as though she hadn’t needed to think about it. “Yes!”

Tade’s heart soared. “Good! Then, just relax. All you have to do is pack. Tomorrow, you’ll be in Enugu.”

“How about you?” she asked softly from his chest.

“Me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to come along? We can get back in time to spend New

Year's with your family—that is, if you don't mind being away from them for Christmas?"

Tade's breath stilled as the implication of those words dawned. This time, he was the one pulling away, needing to see the answer for himself. "Do you know what you're asking, Uju?" He searched her gaze.

"I do, do you?"

"You want to take me home, to see your parents?"

"Is it moving too fast for you? I mean, it's not like it has to be anything serious. It's just, all those aunties are bound to disturb me for a husband again and I figure it would be... nice to have someone by my side who can shut them up. You can think of it as doing a friend a favor."

That made Tade chuckle, relieving the tension that had held him in a chokehold. "A friend? I see. *Ahem*," he cleared his throat. "Well, since you're asking so nicely, I've been spending Christmas with my family for the past thirty-three years of my life. I'm sure they'll be fine without me this year."

Her smile hypnotized. "So, you're saying you'll come along?"

"Yes, Miss Uju." He rubbed his forehead against hers. "I'll follow you all the way to Enugu, and to the ends of the earth, if that's what you need me to do. You only ever have to ask."

Her response was a lingering kiss to his cheeks, then she was snuggling into his arms again, making it her home.

As for Tade? Well, he was floating on clouds and was certain he would continue to do so for the rest of the weekend. He was going to meet her parents! Life couldn't get better than that.

Twenty-Nine

Never trust a Yoruba man who takes you to his parents. They do that every other day. However, if an Igbo girl takes you to her parents? Congratulations, Chief!

Tade ended up spending Friday night at Uju's. He'd maintained that since they'd be travelling together, it only made sense to sleep over at her place, so they could depart from there the next morning. He'd transformed into an irresistible kitten as he argued his case, and Uju hadn't been able to deny that to a large extent, he made a solid point. So, he'd packed up his bag for the weeklong trip and followed her home. Like the night before, they shared separate rooms. And the next morning, Uju treated them to a breakfast of yam and egg sauce. Then, they were on their way to the airport. Their flight was for twelve p.m. and as far as Uju was concerned, arriving at the airport two hours before takeoff for local trips was the only right thing to do.

"You still haven't told your folks we're coming?" Tade asked as they drew closer to the second Murtala Muhammed local airport terminal.

"Nope! We're going to surprise them, remember? I can't wait to see the looks on their faces! They'd be so happy! For years now, it's just been them, Ama, and Ella at Christmas."

"How about your other siblings? They don't come home for the end-of-year?"

Uju shook her head. "The nature of Kelly's job wouldn't let him. As a surgeon, he could be called in at any time. He rarely goes on vacations, sef. Ify tries every two years, but this year, she's too busy working on her latest project. As for Odinaka, the season lasts through winter, so no chance. He tries to make it home for Easter or summer whenever he can, though."

"You're all so busy. I imagine your parents must miss you all very much."

"They do. That's why they're always thrilled whenever any of us makes it home. Their ultimate dream is to have all their children under one roof once

again, someday.”

“Must be a bittersweet feeling. On one hand, you’re happy all your kids are thriving in their respective careers. On the other, you can’t help wishing it didn’t have to take them so far away from home.” Tade took her hand in his. “Good thing they won’t have to miss you this Christmas.”

“And it’s all thanks to you,” Uju replied sweetly. “You still wouldn’t tell me what airline we’re flying with, would you?”

He groaned, and her smile deepened. She hadn’t let it go since yesterday afternoon. Every other hour, she’d just ask out of the blue. He’d tired of indulging her ages ago.

“Patience, woman, we’re almost there.”

Aware that he was right, she was content to go back to enjoying the ride in silence. Benjamin had sent one of his chauffeurs to drop them off, and she was grateful for the exotic comfort of it all. The airport finally came into view, and she sat up, preparing to alight, only... they didn’t slow down as they neared. They didn’t stop either, they just kept driving down the airport road, all the way towards the international terminal.

“You do know Enugu is a Nigerian state, right?”

Tade was half lying on the seat now, long legs strewn out, and left elbow covering his eyes. *Such an unbothered stance*, Uju thought to herself. What exactly was this man planning? Or could it be what her girls had guessed last night? She shook her head. Surely not.

“Youdonminit?” he drawled out. “I thought it was a Ghanaian state o!”

“Stop, jhor!” she swiped playfully at him. “We just passed MM2, and our car isn’t stopping.”

“That’s because we aren’t going to MM2.”

“Let me get this straight. The airline you booked operates out of the international airport? Does that happen?”

“We aren’t going to the international airport either,” he answered simply. “Don’t worry, babe, I’ll get you to Enugu in one piece. You said you were going to trust me, didn’t you?”

Aware that he’d gotten her there, Uju clamped her mouth shut and resumed looking through the window. She couldn’t keep her eyes off the road as they inched closer to the international airport. However, when they were supposed to make the turn that would lead them to the airport’s tollgate, they kept driving forward. Perplexed, she shifted in her seat. Could it really be as her girls had guessed?

“What? Worried I’m trying to kidnap you?”

Uju got startled as Tade breathed in her ears. She didn’t even bother deigning that a response. Rather, she strictly kept her eyes on the road. After what seemed like ages, they finally pulled into a large parking space in front of a couple of identical buildings.

“Are you ready to board your flight, Miss Uju?” Tade asked as they drove to a stop.

She stared at him, believing more deeply with every passing moment that her suspicions were, in fact, well-founded. Without waiting for her response, he got down from the car, then came around to help her out. Of course, she took his hand. Soon, their chauffeur was wheeling their luggage, as well as the presents they’d gotten her folks, into one of the buildings. They followed suit. They were hand-in-hand as they stepped in through the doors, and just like any other flight terminal, there were stalls with check-in agents. Only, this was perhaps the emptiest Uju had ever been in. From the looks of it, Tade and she seemed to be the only ones there for travel. The second he got recognized, he was being welcomed.

It all went by like a breeze. This minute Tade was presenting his I.D and nudging her to do the same. The next, they were being led through a hallway, into a hangar where an airplane that looked too small to be commercial awaited them. Another brief round of screening by the F.A.A.N (Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria) onboarding agents, and the path to their ride out of Lagos, became clear.

“Tada!” Tade tolled as they came to a stop in front of the airplane. “The one airline you couldn’t have guessed, Maxwell Airline!”

Uju could only sigh in disbelief as she turned to him. She didn’t even have the energy to be shocked anymore. After all, it was just as her friends had surmised. However, to actually confirm it for herself? The fact that it’d actually turned out to be true? She was mind blown.

“Of course, your family owns a private jet.”

“Yes, we do. And ever since you told me about your dilemma, I’d been pulling strings, trying to ensure that the jet would be available for use this weekend, so you’d be able to make it home in time to spend the holidays with your family.”

“At this point...” Uju was shaking her head. “I truly don’t know what to say anymore. This... this is too much, babe!”

Tade wasn’t having it. “Uh-uh! There’s no such thing as too much for my

queen, okay? Now, come along. We don't have to keep standing here when we can chill in there until it's time for takeoff."

Uju was still struggling to process it all as he helped her onto the plane. Sure, she'd flown first class multiple times with top airlines around the world. However, from the moment she stepped into that jet, she knew there was simply no comparison. The interior was like a scene out of a movie, tastefully furnished in the signature Maxwell style—classy, expensive, and luxurious—in colors of beige and gold. This jet was an eight-seater. It also had a lounge area that came with a bar, and of course, restrooms that looked so comfortable, one could easily forget themselves in there. The seats were made of pure Italian leather, the rugs felt so velvety underneath her shoes, and... and she simply had no more thoughts.

It was why, when Tade asked her, "What do you think?", all she could do was nod in response.

The rest of the journey went like that for her. She barely uttered a word, too spellbound to form any. As one could expect by now, Tade remained the sweetest through it all. He ensured she was served everything she needed by the hostess, kept checking in on her to ascertain she was okay, and would make a joke now and then to get her smiling. It wasn't until the city of Enugu came into view below the clouds that Uju finally felt the shock waves dissipate. Even at that, she couldn't wrap her head around it all. She'd just flown in a private jet to her hometown, relishing the most luxurious experience ever, when only three weeks ago, she'd been anxious over the possibility of spending yet another Christmas away from family! *Yeah, there definitely has to be some bigger hands at play here. This has magic written all over it. Suspicious magic.* In fact, she was going to find a writer to turn the entire adventure into a hallmark script. She had no doubt it would do crazy numbers, because what?!

Uju had grown up with a silver spoon. She'd be the first person to acknowledge that her family had always been upper-class, and though, there were many others who had wealth far beyond their reach, she'd always enjoyed the finer things of life. As such, she'd never really been easily bamboozled by ostentatious displays of riches. But this man? Her Tade? Nah, he was a class-act through and through! The only thing she could be was thoroughly impressed.

"Are you developing cold feet on me, now that we're almost there? I can always go back with the jet, you know?"

She chuckled as he made yet another attempt to draw her out of her thoughts. This time around, he succeeded. "Abi, you're the one developing cold feet?" she

threw back at him. They were sitting opposite each other in chairs that treated her body like an intensive spa session.

“Ah-ha! She finally speaks! I was starting to worry I’d have to figure out how to get us to your home once we touch down.”

“Pleeeassee! I can find the way even with my eyes blindfolded. Don’t worry, love. We’re in my city now. Just sit back and relax while I run things.”

“Oshey! Big mummy of Enugu!”

She was still laughing when they disembarked minutes later.

As they stepped out of the airport, they found a car waiting for them with a professionally dressed chauffeur holding a placard containing both their names. When Uju expressed her surprise, Tade explained it was courtesy of Benjamin. Notwithstanding, she couldn’t help watching the driver curiously as he loaded their luggage into the trunk. He kept triggering her brain’s facial recognition software.

“Babe,” she whispered to Tade as they got into the car. “You’d laugh at me if you heard what I’m about to say.”

“You always make me laugh, Njay, wouldn’t be anything new.”

Side-eyeing him, she continued. “This chauffeur, doesn’t he look familiar to you? Like the ice cream man at Bolanle’s party? I can also swear he’s the same person I’ve been seeing all around; the Father Christmas, the street vendors... I know this sounds crazy, but what if I’m truly being followed?”

To his credit, Tade didn’t laugh. Instead, his face grew serious as he studied the driver through the center mirror. He must have decided there was no cause for alarm, for he eventually smiled. “Or maybe he’s just a hustler. Besides, he’s a tall, dark man. Almost everyone in Nigeria looks like that. But if it’d help you rest easier, I’ll confirm with Benjamin.”

She nodded, urging him to. A few minutes later, he put his arm around her.

“Benjamin just confirmed. The guy is legit. Nothing to worry about, my love.”

Uju nodded again, thankful. There was still something niggling at her heart, but if Tade and Benjamin said everything checked out, she wouldn’t let it bother her. Settling into her man’s arms, she turned to take in the sight outside the window. Driving past familiar landmarks felt so surreal. She was actually home! That word rolled over in her heart as she stretched her arm through the open window, letting the breeze blow against her. *Home*. She’d really made it, and it was all thanks to this man by her side. This man whom she was... Uju froze as the realization dawned.

It had happened. Finally. The fall was complete, and now she was entirely, irreversibly, in love with Tade. *Oh wow.* She waited for the pang of panic to hit, for fear to take over her heart and render her useless. Sure enough, it didn't disappoint.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

I just discovered I'm completely in love with you, that there's no going back now, and I don't know how that makes me feel. Are we going to make it, Tade? I don't even know what we are right now. Friends? More than just friends? What if we don't make it? Am I going to survive this? Did I make a huge mistake letting myself fall for you? I thought I'd be able to handle the hurt, the heartbreak if it inevitably comes, but I'm not so sure anymore. I don't think I'll ever be able to let go of you, Tade. Or maybe I should, before you let me go.

"Njay?"

She shook her head, shoving those thoughts far, far away. Now wasn't the time to let the fears win. They'd come such a long way. She wouldn't run, couldn't run. She'd stay, give it all she got. It was the least she owed them both. As for what they were, they'd figure it out soon enough, after the holidays. So, releasing a deep breath, she finally answered, "I was just thinking you'd definitely make my parents happy. You look like the perfect picture of a responsible African son: low cut, no overgrown beards..." She bobbed her head eagerly. "They'll definitely approve."

His laughter filled her with light. "And if they don't?"

"It doesn't matter. They have no choice now, you see? I've decided on you, Obatade Maxwell."

His eyes softened, filling up with what could only be described as the very emotion that now plagued her. "It's about time you got on the regimen, Miss Victoria. *You* see, I decided on you quite a long time ago."

Her heart held. "How long?"

"You'll get to find out soon," he replied, winking at her.

Keeping that reassurance close to her heart and choosing faith over fear, Uju relaxed into his arms once more. In no time, the two-story duplex that was her home finally came into view.

The first person to be aware of her arrival was the gateman, Sunday. When he would have sounded the alarm, she lifted a finger to her lips. Grinning excitedly, he quietly let them in. Uju was pleased to find that everyone seemed to be indoors that Saturday afternoon. Thus, they easily maintained stealth until they reached the door. Three knocks, a call from inside, and their domestic worker,

Chinenye, was soon opening the huge wooden frames.

“Eiiiiiii!!! Sister Uju!” she screamed, jumping on Uju.

Uju and Tade exchanged a look as she eagerly returned the young lady’s embrace. *So much for stealth.*

“Aunty! Uncle! Come and see o! Sister Uju has come home oooo!!!”

The riot broke loose then. Before Uju could snap her fingers, her mother, father, sister, and niece were rushing to the door. Different exclamations rang in the air.

“It’s a lie! Uju kwa?”

“This girl is a wayo girl o! She told me she was not coming this Christmas!”

“My daughter is home, ke? Let me see o!”

“Aunty Uju, is that really you?”

Uju didn’t know when the tears began to drop from her eyes. All she knew was at first, she was hugging her family members one after the other. Then, she was hugging them all at once, her joy explosive. This was everything she’d hoped for, and more! It was just as she remembered, yet even better. It was home!

Thirty

When love is meant to be, things just have a way of falling into place. Wouldn't you agree...?

Tade couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he watched Uju reunite with her family. If she hadn't already told him all about them, if he hadn't grown accustomed to the fondness in her voice when she spoke of them, the sight before him would have been enough to reveal what kind of people they were. Even her father, an honorable chief judge, was shedding tears and hopping in an embrace that seemed to last forever. Tade captured the moment with his eyes, storing the picture safely in his memories, as he patiently waited for them to notice him. It happened sooner than later. The hugging and crying ended, and suddenly, everyone was looking at him, the curiosity in their gazes, unabashed.

Uju took the cue then, clearing her throat. "Mummy, Daddy, Sister, meet Tade. My... my friend. He's going to be spending Christmas with us. I hope that's fine."

Stepping forward, Tade touched his right forefinger to the ground as he lifted his left leg. He was aware his assessment had already begun and was eager to rank the highest score possible. "Good afternoon, ma. Good afternoon, sir." He stretched to full height. "I... My name is Tade... Obatade Asher Maxwell. I... I'm Uju's friend, as she said. I hope you don't mind my just dropping in like this. She insisted on surprising you all."

Her mother, a tall dark-skinned beauty who didn't look a day over forty, was the first to respond. "Tade Maxwell. Could it be the Maxwell I'm thinking? Maxwell Holdings?"

Tade stood at attention. "Yes, ma!"

"Ehen? What's the relationship?"

"I'm their son, ma. I mean, my father is the current chairman of Maxwell Holdings, ma." Tade wiped the back of his hand across his brow as beads of

sweat broke out of his forehead. *Goodness!* Why was he suddenly so nervous? It wasn't the first time he would meet a girl's parents. Then again, he should have known nothing about Uju would ever be the same as others. Someone snorted, and he suspected Uju's elder sister, but he said nothing. He simply kept his gaze on the woman in front of him.

"Are you going to keep adding '*ma*' to everything you say for the length of your stay?" she asked, her eyes taking on that teasing glint that was now all too familiar. Uju might be the spitting image of her dad in complexion and smile, but she had her mom's eyes and height.

"No, ma! Erm, I mean, no... ma?"

This time around, when Ama broke into a full-blown laughter, Uju joined in. Tade had never been more grateful for his dark skin than in that moment—at least, they wouldn't see the fire burning up his cheeks. Thankfully though, Professor Chimezie seemed to have been pleased with his response because she was now smiling at him.

"You must be tired from carrying all that luggage, and it's rude to keep guests waiting at the door. Come in. I'll make you guys a nice, sizzling lunch. I'm guessing you barely had any breakfast, seeing as you're both here so early. By the way, you are very welcome to Enugu, Tade. And, of course, to our home as well!"

Tade breathed a little easier as he followed them into the house. Professor Chimezie's voice had held nothing but warmth and sincerity. If she said he was welcome, then he was. He allowed himself to heave a small sigh of relief at that thought. The first hurdle had been crossed! Now, he had to, at the very least, get Honorable Justice Chimezie to stop eyeing him like he was a pound of fresh bush meat. The older man had still not said anything to him, but he wouldn't take his eyes off Tade, either. As though he'd heard Tade's inner dilemma, he chose that moment to break his silence.

"When Uju kept telling us she wasn't finding any flights, we didn't realize it was because she was trying to surprise us with a man."

"Daddy!" Tade heard Uju whisper, but her father simply ignored her, not minding the fact that she was hooked to his arm.

"*Ahem,*" Tade began, clearing his throat. "It's not like that, sir. We really couldn't find any flights, but I managed to secure one for us just in time." Of course, he wouldn't mention they'd flown down in his family's private jet. That would seem like a brag, and it was the last thing he wanted to come across as.

"Hmm, Ibam Air? Or Air Ease?"

“Maxwell Airlines, Daddy,” Uju replied, snorting.

“Maxwell Airlines? Which one is that one again? Has your family ventured into transportation as well?”

Tade drew in a deep breath. This woman would not be the death of him! The look she was giving him declared this was payback for keeping the truth of their travel arrangements from her. “No, sir. My... ah... my family has an airplane for private trips. I was able to secure a flight for us today as no one else had use for it.”

“You mean like a private jet?” Ama gasped, and there it was, the cat out of the bag.

Tade nodded, turning to the woman who looked so much like Uju, they could pass for twins. The only difference was she was shorter, taking her father’s petite stature. “Yes, I suppose you could put it that way.”

“Hm,” Justice Chimezie grumbled. “It’s either a private jet or it’s not. Which one is *‘You could put it that way’*?”

Tade’s eyes fluttered close as he bit the inside of his cheeks. “Yes, sir. Pardon me, sir. It was, indeed, a private jet.”

“Good,” the older man responded approvingly. “Only the best for my daughters.”

Tade released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. It was no welcome, but it left him feeling the same way as Professor’s offer of a hot meal. Soon, they were settling down in the expansive living room. Uju’s home was beautiful, large, and the interior spoke to the taste of her parents: minimal, yet classy and affluent.

“Chinenye, you know what to do now?” Pa Chimezie was asking as he took his seat. Tade suspected it was one that secretly had his name on it. “Make sure Uju’s room is cleaned, and prepare the guest room for this young man here.”

Tade was rising to his feet in the next instant. “Ah, sir, that won’t be necessary. I have already booked a room at a hotel. I wouldn’t want to impose on your hospitality at all.”

“Mine, can you hear this young man?” Pa Chimezie called out to his wife.

“What did he say?” the professor responded, coming out of where Tade believed was the kitchen.

“He said he’s booked a hotel o, so we shouldn’t bother getting the guest room ready.”

When the professor burst into laughter, and Ama joined in, Tade had to turn to Uju for help. Alas, there was none to be found there. She was also laughing at

him. *Great, just great!* He'd obviously put his foot in his mouth, and he didn't even know what the defining moment had been.

"Cancel it, dear," the professor said suggestively. Tade knew it was more of a command. "*Bia*, what do you even want people to say?" she asked as she rested one hand on her hip, spoon dangling from the other. "That Professor's daughter finally brought home a man, and they pursued him to a hotel? Biko o, we have more than enough rooms, and I'd be pleased to have you stay here with us. Unless our home is too humble for you."

"Argh! Not at all, ma! Your home is gorgeous! Truly beautiful!" Tade recognized a trap when he saw one, and he wasn't about to walk right into it. "I'll be honored to spend the duration of my visit here."

"What she said," her husband affirmed. "You are our guest, and we love to treat our guests with the utmost hospitality! So, relax, eh? You have nothing to worry about. As far as it is our daughter, Uju, who brought you home, calm your mind."

Tade didn't know how someone could sound so reassuring and daunting at the same time. He heard what the honorable justice was communicating, loud and clear, all right. He'd crossed over the threshold, but he was not fully in yet. There was still grilling to be done. Muttering his heartfelt appreciation, he returned to his seat. He'd just settled in when Ama appeared by his side. She held her peace as she served him a tray of orange juice, cookies, and groundnuts—all of which Pa Chimezie referred to as *oji*. It was apparently an Igbo term for light refreshments given to a visitor, and Tade accepted them with thanks. Then she was taking the sofa right next to him.

"You know they're just pulling your legs, right?" Ama peered up at him. "They like to act tough, see if you'll be able to keep up, but deep inside, they're total softies."

"You don't mean it? They could have had me fooled."

She was giggling as she stretched out her hands. "Hi! My name is Adamara'mma, but everyone calls me Ama."

"I know," he responded, gingerly accepting her handshake. "I've heard so much about you."

"That's strange. I have heard nothing about you." She threw her sister a meaningful glance before turning back to him. "So, what's the tea? Boyfriend? Fiancé? Although, I see no ring. How long has she been keeping you a secret from us?"

To say that Tade was pleasantly surprised by Ama's person, would be putting

it mildly. For some reason, his mind had envisioned a reserved, prim, and proper lady when Uju had told him about her elder sister. The woman before him was anything but. She was bubbly, full of life, and looked like she spent most of her time laughing. Tade was instantly taken with her. She seemed like a really fun person.

“Err... I’m not quite sure how to answer that question. Really, it’s as Uju said. We’re just friends.” Of course, he had plans to change that soon—real soon—but for now, he’d go along with her.

Ama narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you realize you’re the first man my sister has ever brought home? And you’re telling me you’re just a friend?”

A brilliant idea came to Tade’s mind then. “Well, the truth is,” he started, leaning towards her in a conspiratorial whisper. “She said the aunties were going to have a field day, bugging her about a husband, and she didn’t want that to happen. So, she begged and pleaded and wept for me to come along, help her save face. What can I say? As the wonderful friend and perfect gentleman that I am...” He heaved a helpless shrug. “I couldn’t just leave her hanging. I had to drop everything and fly down, because that’s what friends do when the other is in need. No?”

Ama studied him for a long moment, then she was bursting in mirth and clapping her hands. “Ah! I like you! I like you very much! Uju! Nice one! I approve of him!” She gave her sister a thumbs up. “*Odi’nma!*”

Wheeww! Looks like I just jumped over hurdle three!

“I’ll tell you what?” Ama continued as she sobered. “Relax and breathe. Again, my parents are the sweetest people ever! Just be your normal self, and they’d love you, eh?” She slapped his shoulder softly as she stood up. “I have to go help mumcee in the kitchen, but you and I, we have a lot of catching up to do. Welcome to Enugu, Mr. Tade. You’ll love it here, I promise!” And just like that, she was gone, leaving Tade alone once more.

The next Chimezie to accost him was little Ella. She was the spitting image of her grandmother.

“Hiiii” he greeted warmly, unable to stop smiling at how delightful she was.

“Hello!” she chimed in her cute baby voice. “My name is Ardella, but grandma likes to call me Ifeyinwa.”

“And what would you like me to call you?”

“Ella! That’s what all my friends call me.”

“Hello, Ella!” He reached out for a handshake, which she grasped with her tiny hands. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too! Aunt Uju says you’re her friend.”

“Yes, that is right.”

“Will you be my friend too?”

Tade looked up at Uju then, and she simply nodded, urging him on. “Yes, of course, I’ll be your friend, Ella.”

“Yaaayy! Aunt Uju, Uncle Tee says he’ll be my friend!”

When he cocked his brow in question at Uju, she mouthed in response, “Uncle Tade is such a mouthful, don’t you think?”

He couldn’t even argue with that, so he just nodded, returning his attention to the seven-year-old who was watching him curiously.

The rest of the afternoon went by pleasantly. Little Ella continued to keep him company, Uju eventually came to sit by his side, the chief judge asked questions about his work, as well as the political situation in the U.S. And as Tade answered, all the tension that had held him imprisoned, faded away. By the time lunch was ready, the entire household seemed to have warmed up to him, and by night’s fall, he was feeling like a puzzle piece, clicked perfectly into place.

∞∞∞∞

Days in the Chimezies’ household passed by in a blur.

Sunday came swiftly, and they all piled into Pa Chimezie’s SUV, singing along to gospel music, all the way to church. As they arrived, Uju and Tade sat next to each other, sneaking glances, and secretly holding hands from time to time, through the service. Of course, Tade’s presence did not go unnoticed, and that Sunday evening, they had quite the number of aunties—as well as uncles—visiting. Pa and Ma Chimezie seemed intent on keeping Tade’s family background a secret, and he quickly caught on as they introduced him as just Tade. When the guests would ask what family he was from, the professor or honorable justice would simply smile and say, “*A reputable family in Lagos. His parents are business owners.*”

The first time Tade heard those words, he almost spilled his drink. Then again, he supposed that was some way to put it. Yes, the aunties and uncles had quite the number of questions for him as well. Of course, Tade answered as many as he could, as gracefully as he could. When evening set and Uju’s mum began to shoo them away, he found himself falling for her in gratitude. Dinner that evening was even livelier than the one before, with plenty of banter and

laughter to go around. By the time Christmas morning came, he was truly beginning to feel at home.

The day started amusingly. Despite having hired catering services for the Christmas cooking, Pa Chimezie insisted on Tade doing the honors of slaughtering one of the goats. Suffice to say, his enemies were put to shame. As cheers and applause for his performance filled the house, they settled into a morning of devotion, carol singing, and storytelling. By afternoon, guests started to arrive, and Tade found himself joining the family to play hosts. The curiosity about his identity continued, and they simply *controlled V* what had happened the day before. Naturally, Tade didn't miss the knowing smiles and winks they kept throwing Uju's way, nor how she wouldn't stop blushing. It thrilled him to no ends, especially as he knew the next time he returned, things would be much different. He'd be coming with his family, and his intentions would be made fully clear. But for now, it felt wonderful to have a taste of what life as an in-law to the Chimezies would be like.

The evening was filled with more merriments as they gathered by the poolside. Igbo high-life music blared from the speakers, delectable aromas of assorted pepper soup, *Nkwobi and isi ewu*, both traditional goat meat dishes, crammed the air. As one could expect from an Igbo party, there were more than enough bottles of beer and malt to go around, and as everyone had their fill, blasts from knockouts threatened to deafen their ears. It was a proper Igbo Christmas, as Uju had explained to Tade, and he looked forward to experiencing many more. The day ended too quickly, and before they knew it, it was Tuesday.

As dawn announced its arrival, Tade joined the ladies in the kitchen despite protests from the professor. He ended up being grateful for his insistence because it turned into a really bonding moment for them. Ama and Ella had already been completely won over to his side. His breakfast endeavor sealed the deal with the professor as well. He could tell that she had now grown entirely fond of him. She laughed easily at his jokes, shook her head in resignation when he was being unbelievable, and commended him when he did something right. What could he say? Ama had been right. All he'd needed to do was be himself, and he was being accepted wholeheartedly.

As night fell, Tade decided it was time to fully win the honorable chief judge over, too. Only, just as he was about to set out to find the patriarch, he got found, instead.

Thirty-One

One thing you can always be certain of is the fact that love is clear. It doesn't hide, and it definitely doesn't confuse...

“**T**here you are!” the older man chimed as he joined Tade on the patio, his gait as agile as always. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Tade was already on his feet, bowing his head. “Interesting you’d say that, sir. I was just about to come ask if you were down for a game of chess.”

Pa Chimezie waved him off as he took one of the lounge chairs. “Chess can wait. Tonight, I want us to have a discussion that is long overdue. Would you not agree?”

Immediately understanding what that meant, Tade bobbed his head, taking his seat as well. He’d known this day was going to come sooner than later, and to a large extent, he was prepared for it. At the very least, he was no longer the nervous wreck he’d been, that afternoon they’d first arrived. Thank the heavens for that.

“How old are you, son?” the honorable chief judge asked, turning on the proverbial grill as they sat face to face.

“I’m thirty-four, sir.”

“That’s old enough to be married with kids by now.”

“Yes, sir. You’re absolutely right.”

Pa Chimezie cocked his head to one side, observing Tade keenly. “Is that why you’re here? To ask for my daughter’s hand in marriage?”

Tade broke into cold sweats. *So much for having prepared for this.* He hadn’t expected to be put on the spot like that. What was he supposed to say? No, and yes? He decided to go with the truth. After all, it was something that never failed. Clearing his throat, he nodded again. “Well, that’s definitely in the works, sir. However, in all honesty, I’d hoped to do so a little later. You see, Uju and I,

we just got together. Left to me, I'd be ready in my suit, waiting for her at the altar this evening, even."

"But you believe she needs more time."

"I definitely think a little more time would do us both some good, yes. Personally, I already know what I want from this, and I'm certain I'm never going to change my mind. Notwithstanding, I think it would be great for us to spend more time getting to know each other without the pressure of marriage."

There was a long moment of silence when Tade feared he'd ruined everything before Justice Chimezie suddenly declared, "You're indeed a very honest man." It was more of a statement of fact than a question.

"I try to be, sir," Tade answered, nonetheless. "My father raised me to believe a man is no man, without integrity and honor. He also emphasized that the fastest way for one to lose both is by being careless with his words."

Justice Chimezie clearly approved. "A good man, your father. Though I have my reservations about the phenomenon of *honest* billionaires, he's not the one on the hot seat right now. You are." He arched his brows. "Another man would have told me everything he thinks I'd be happy to hear—how much he loves my daughter, how he can't wait to get married, and how happy he intends to make her. But you held my eyes and told me you'd still love to take your time even though marriage is an endgame for you, not minding how it would make you look. In my books, that's more than good enough. I understand now why you're the first man Uju has ever brought home, why she looks at you with stars in her eyes. I've never seen her that way, you know? Not even as a teenager."

Tade wasn't exactly sure how to respond to that, so he simply kept quiet.

"I can tell you care for her as well, deeply."

Now, that, he had a ready answer to. "I'm hopelessly in love with her."

The older man's lips tilted at their corners. "Ha! Young love! It was so for Dorcas and I, you know?"

Of course, by now, Tade knew Dorcas was the professor. He'd seen plenty of plaques and awards around the house bearing her name and pictures.

"It wasn't a common thing in our time, marrying for love, but we got lucky."

Tade watched as this hard man's features instantly softened, as his eyes grew all mushy, no doubt taking a trip down the memory lane. And he instantly knew that a few decades from now, that would be him whenever he spoke of Uju, still as helplessly in love with her then, as he was in that moment. Most probably, even more so.

"We've always prayed with all our hearts that our children would experience

the same. But then Ama had to go through that.” Pa Chimezie cleared his throat as his voice broke, shaking his head. “In any case, since you’re not here to ask for her hand yet, I shall let you off easy this time. You make her happy, and you’ll continue to do.” It wasn’t a request.

“With all my heart,” Tade vowed, nonetheless. “Even when it isn’t within my power, I’d still find ways to make it happen.”

The honorable chief judge watched him again. “Something tells me you aren’t just saying mere words like that other unfortunate fellow. The same thing tells me I can rely on your promises, so I’ll trust you. But know this, if there ever comes a day when your heart doesn’t race at the thought of my daughter, don’t hurt her please, just return her safely home to me. She’ll always find love here.”

Those words, the power of emotions behind them, were so touching, so poignant, that Tade felt one tear slip down his eyes. He was swiping it off immediately, sniffing so he could push back the rest of the waterworks. This was it. This was exactly the kind of father he wanted to be for his daughters.

He leaned forward in his seat. “Will you permit me to steal those words, sir? I’d love to say them to the man who’d come ask for your granddaughter’s hands in marriage, sometime in the not-so-distant future.”

It only took Pa Chimezie a moment to grasp the implication of those words. Then, he was cackling hard and slapping his thighs. “Ah! That was smooth! That was really, really smooth! And yes! Feel free to use them when the time comes—as long as you give me credit. If not, I’ll sue you for copyright o.”

Tade broke into laughter as well, relief flooding him. The final hurdle had been crossed! He’d successfully won over the last present member of the Chimezie family. He’d deal with the rest when he eventually got to meet them, as well.

“Rest assured, sir. The only time we’ll be dragging each other to court is to sign the marriage certificate.”

“Hahaha! I like you, boy! I really like you! Now, about that chess game...”

It was the start of a beautiful evening.

∞∞∞∞

Uju was sitting by the pool when Tade found her much later that night. She didn’t have to look up to know who it was. The footsteps, that musky scent, and the way the hairs on the back of her nape stood with attention were all the confirmation she needed.

“Two million dollars for your thoughts?” he asked as he joined her.

“Price has gone up o,” she smiled up at him. Her breath caught upon glimpsing how handsome he was under the moonlight, but she still managed to say, “Christmas price is five million dollars.” Would she ever get over the irresistible effect he had on her?

“Hanhan, Madam Cash! Have mercy on us now. The economy is hard o.”

“Tah! Spend this money, Oga Billionaire! We both know it’s chicken change for you.”

“Chicken change, ke? *Aduru owo yen?* I really like the way you believe in me, o. God will believe in you too.”

Her cheeks crinkled as she kicked her feet in the water. There was a spell of silence before she spoke again. “I see you had a wonderful evening with my father.”

“He’s a very interesting man. He has stories for days. I enjoy drinking from his well of wisdom.”

“You see, I told you you’d like them, and that they’d like you.”

“I do, very much! It’s clear to see now, why you’re the way you are. Love lives here.”

“I could say the same for you.”

He nudged her shoulders softly. “Guess we both lucked out, eh? I mean, if we really look at the chances of ending up in such wholesome homes, the odds have been in our favor.”

Uju bobbed her head. “I agree, and I’m truly grateful for that. I intend to continue the tradition with my own family someday.”

“Yes to that!” Tade’s enthusiasm peaked. “I’m all in!”

It was the kind of response Uju would have effortlessly given a witty retort to, teasing him. Alas, she was so preoccupied with thoughts of them both, and especially her fears, that she couldn’t even find the zeal to banter. Of course, her amazing man easily picked that up.

“What’s wrong, Njay? Talk to me,” he pleaded, voice suddenly somber.

“Hm? Why? Why do you ask?” She reckoned if she succeeded in placing the focus on him, maybe she wouldn’t have to reveal the things that had been haunting her.

“Well, for one, you’ve been kinda spacing out these last few days. Two, I just basically insinuated we’re going to be building a family together, and you didn’t give me your usual, ‘*Who’s deceiving this one?*’ response.”

“I don’t talk like that.”

“Sure, you do. But that’s beside the point.” He shifted closer to her, making their sleeveless arms rub against each other. “Talk to me, baby. What’s wrong? Is anybody stressing you? Just give me a name and I’ll make them pay.”

The words were flowing out of her mouth before she could stop them, “Oshey! Arnold Schwarzenegger!”

His smile was automatic. “Now, there is the Uju I know! So, are going to talk about this or what?”

A small sigh escaped her lips as she turned to him, resting her chin on her shoulder. *So much for hoping he’d let it go.* Searching his gaze, she debated: should she tell him about her worries? Would that be the right call? Ever since her epiphany on Saturday, she hadn’t been in a good head space. Despite adoring how seamlessly Tade had fit into her family, and despite the joy that bubbled in her heart seeing how fully he’d been accepted and was genuinely loved, she couldn’t get herself to stop feeling afraid. She’d scarcely gotten any good sleep in the past two days, even talking to Sarah and the girls hadn’t helped much. She wished she wasn’t so frightened, wished she had more courage, but the idea of being broken by love wouldn’t stop haunting her. Of course, she wanted to share this with Tade. She’d tried many times, only to end up clamping her mouth shut as no words would form. She was also aware he had been sensing something was amiss, and that didn’t make things easier. Nonetheless, she was grateful for his patience so far.

As for the persisting dilemma, how could she possibly share her fears without confessing her feelings? And why was she so afraid to admit she’d fallen in love with him? Since when had she become a coward? She was Uju! Obianuju of Blossom Events! Badass, CEO extraordinaire, who was never afraid to speak her mind. Besides, wasn’t this what all those relationship pages on Instagram always talked about? Communicating, having the tough conversations, rather than letting doubts and anxieties fester on until they created such wide chasms that could no longer be bridged?

That’s right. I’m letting my fears become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I can’t let them win. Tonight, I’ll find the courage to choose love intentionally, deliberately. I might not have been able to have decided when I started falling for this man—or when I fell completely, for that matter—but I can make my choice now. I can keep choosing him, I can commit to doing everything in my power to make this work, no matter how tough it gets, as long as he does the same. And something deep inside told Uju her wondrous man wouldn’t ever meet her halfway. Nah, he was the kind to go all the way, never stopping until what was being offered was

nothing short of his best.

I deserve this love. I'd be doing myself a great disservice if I held back from experiencing genuine happiness, all because I'm unsure of what tomorrow would bring. Like Sarah had said, there were no certainties in love, only reassurances and faith. Faith that things would keep getting better, and that even if they didn't, we'd be fine—eventually. Beyond that, amid the terrors, Uju was convinced she didn't want to stop before truly giving them a chance. She wasn't ready to let go. She wanted this, no matter how long or short it lasted. And if it ended up breaking her, well, so be it. She'd pick up the pieces, count the experience as one well had, and endeavor to move on. Finding conviction in that knowledge, she released a deep breath.

"I love you, Tade," she blurted. *Go big or go home.* "I've fallen hopelessly, deliriously in love with you. I know how crazy it sounds, but it's the truth. I realized it when we were driving home from the airport and... I guess I just froze up. I've never been in love before, you know that. This is all so new for me, and it's so fast! I can't even believe it's only been two weeks, feels like I've known you forever! Yeah, I know how cliché that sounds, and I never thought it would happen to me, but it did. And..." She rose to her feet. He followed suit. Ignoring him, she continued to ramble as she paced.

"And now that I know what love is, now that I've experienced it in its fullness, I finally understand what it is to be afraid; to be terrified of growing so accustomed to the presence of another person in your life, your very being merges with theirs, truly becoming one in every sense of the word, only to end up losing them." Her voice broke as she stopped abruptly, spinning to face him. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Tade? I'm saying that I love you! I don't even know how that is possible, but I do! Yes, I'm aware it's only been two weeks, and that's exactly the problem! I'm so worried, I'm... frightened this is all a fever dream that'd vanish when I suddenly wake up one day, leaving me with nothing but haunting memories. Memories and a gaping hole in this place, right here..." She thumped her heart with her fist twice. "This place where you seem to have settled and made your home, Tade. I'm not even in control anymore. It no longer belongs to me. Are you understanding? My heart is wholly yours! But what happens, Tade? What happens if we ever get to the day when you don't want it anymore?"

Uju was near panting as she finished her speech, unable to believe she'd just said those words, hopeless to remember most of them. All she knew was she'd confessed her feelings, and had told him she was afraid of being hurt, and... Uju

frowned as she faltered backwards. And he was smiling. The big head actually had a wide, silly grin on his face.

“Did you even hear anything I said at all?”

“Of course.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“I’m sorry, am I supposed to be crying when the woman who captured my heart, the very first moment I saw her walk into that lounge, just confessed she’s in love with me as well?”

“As well?” Uju asked, wondering if those words really meant what she thought they did.

Tade closed the distance between them. “Yes, Uju,” came his tender response as he cradled her face. “As well. Or wait, did you think you were alone in this? That only you were experiencing that free, fast fall, whilst I was just chilling? *Pfft!*” he scoffed. “You said what? You realized it when we were on our way here from the airport? My darling, you have some catching up to do o. I’ve been completely, insanely in love with you for quite a while now. In fact, I’m a finished man for you, a proper finished man.”

The tides of emotions that had been stirring up a storm inside of Uju broke free. They were too much for her to comprehend, to bear. All she knew was everything suddenly felt good! The stars were shining brightly, the moon wouldn’t stop showing off, her world was filled with multicolor, and her lips... they seemed to be permanently etched in a beam.

“You love me?” Her voice was filled with the wonder she felt.

“Ah! Finally, she gets it! Yes, Uju, I love you! I love you so much, I fear I’ve been rendered incapable of doing anything else. You’re in my every thought, my dreams, every waking moment is filled with you, Uju, you! No one else, nothing else. You need to see my to-do list every day...” He pressed his forehead against hers. “Make Uju happy, make Uju laugh, make Uju blush...” his voice was a whisper now. “In that utterly adorable way that drives me crazy! My goodness! Argh... There it is!” he exclaimed as her cheeks burned. “There it is! Can’t you see, my love? Can’t you see how irrevocably undone I am for you?”

Uju blinked in awe as she felt wetness on said cheeks. She hadn’t even realized when she started to cry. He loved her! He’d actually said those words! Wow! This moment was one she would never forget for as long as she lived. It was more than anything she could have ever asked for; it was perfect! All she could do was bob her head as the evidence of her boundless joy bubbled freely from her lips. She could see it now, so clearly, just how much she meant to him.

She couldn't believe the haze of fear had almost blinded her.

"And you're not alone, my love," Tade continued, kissing away her tears. "You're not alone at all! I feel it too, that dread, and *I* know what heartbreak tastes like. I've survived several. Yet, I also know I'd never be able to survive you, Uju. I know it like I know my own name, it just won't happen. So, no. I'm not ready to lose you, either. I'm not ready to give you up. You never have to worry about me deciding I no longer want your heart. What? Am I mad? Definitely not! Not when I had to work so hard to get it. I want it, *pa*! And I always will, so forget anything about a return policy, *kolewerk*! I've commandeered ownership for life!"

He kissed both eyes as she chuckled, and Uju's heart hurt in a good way. "My sweet baby, don't let no fear win, okay? Remember when I said I'll make sure you never have to experience heartbreak? I wasn't just trying to be smooth, I meant every word! And even more so now, with every fiber of my being. I've got you. I've got you, Njay. I'm never gonna let you crash. I will always catch you. You have to believe that."

Uju was blowing hot tears now, unable to control herself. "I've got you too! I'll always catch you too!"

His arms encircled her, holding on as if for dear life, as he whispered sweet nothings in her ear. He waited until she'd gotten herself together before teasing, "Oya, stop crying o. I only just succeeded in winning your father over. Before he would come and kick me out now, thinking I'm already showing my true colors."

Uju chortled, harder than she had in days. She could just imagine it, her petite father, literally kicking this giant out of his home. There was nothing Justice Chimezie couldn't do if it meant protecting his children. The good thing was, he'd never have to protect her from this wonderful man.

"Oh, Tade!" she sighed, tightening her embrace. "You're very crazy, but I love it! And I love you." Now that she'd finally said those words, she couldn't stop. She felt free! So free, especially from the fears. They were all gone now, completely dispelled.

"Well, I guess it's a lucky thing I just happen to love you too. Then again, if we really look at it, I'm the blessed one."

"You and I, Tade, we are both blessed." She rose on her tiptoes then, covering his mouth in a kiss that went all the way to her soul, making it whole.

Thirty Two

Unfortunately, even the best stories, often come to an end.

A time was had in Enugu. After the entire confession drama that Tuesday evening, the rest of the week was filled with sightseeing. They visited notable tourist attractions such as the museum, Awhum cave and waterfalls, Ugwueme and Udi Hills, Ani Ozala lakes, to mention a few. Some of these, Tade and Uju toured alone, and others, her family tagged along for the ride. Ella had been most excited about the trip to the amusement park. There, they'd had loads of fun!

Uju's spirits had soared with gratitude as she watched Tade completely become a part of her family. Her parents had openly accepted him with whole hearts—her father especially, after trashing him at golf (At least, that was one thing Tade actually wasn't good at. Uju had almost begun to believe the man truly had no flaws). As for her mother, although the professor was evidently taken by how much of a gentleman Tade was, it was no secret that to her, his most impressive quality was how he'd ventured out of his family's safety net and made a name for himself, regardless.

How about Ama? She was the first to have welcomed Tade to the family, and now considered him her bestie. She also hadn't hesitated to tell Uju how elated she was on Uju's behalf, over having found—in her words—such a magnificent man. Uju had cried when they had that conversation, and had shared how much she truly believed that when Ama was ready to try at love again, her sister too would find someone even more amazing than Tade. They'd both thrown themselves into each other's embrace then, letting the waterworks flow.

Finally, there was Ella. Uju's niece absolutely adored Tade, and had latched on to him for most of their stay. It was just as well that Tade was equally smitten with her. He never failed to entertain her, happily doted on her, and fulfilled her every request. Of course, it was Uju's secret that she was a sucker for their cute

little friendship. Tade was so good with Ella, and it wasn't just her, but all the other kids in their umunna as well. Uju couldn't deny that watching how easily he rolled with them, how attentive he was to them, and how effortlessly he made them laugh, tickled her ovaries. No, she wasn't trying to move ahead of herself, but it still didn't hurt to acknowledge that whenever she looked to the future now, the thought of him being the father to her kids filled her with a strong sense of comfort and security. She truly believed he would make a great one. All in all, it was a perfect week with her folks.

By the time another Saturday rolled around, more tears were shed as they said goodbyes. Tade and Uju arrived in Lagos around four o'clock that evening. They crashed as soon as they got to Uju's place, exhausted from the week's activities. Sunday morning came too quickly, and Tade had to leave to go attend worship with his family, as it was the last service of the year. Uju too was glad to be back in her church, fellowshiping with friendly faces once again. She'd actually missed them the week before. As soon as the service was over and well wishes had been shared, she got into her car and began the journey home.

The afternoon passed by in a blur: lunch, a quick video call with the girls, and a much needed nap. When she woke up by five p.m., it was just in time to start her preparations for the Maxwell's annual new year's eve bash. Tade had said he'd be coming to pick her up by seven and she didn't want to keep him waiting. Thus, after taking her bath and freshening up, she got to work.

One hundred and five minutes of artistic efforts later, she was standing in front of her full-length mirror, looking more fabulous than ever. For the bash, she wanted to channel chic, joyous, and fun, so she'd decided on a short, flared peach dress that she'd gotten from one of the hottest Nigerian designers at the moment, *Shopmarikan*. It was a pretty girlish dress that spread out from her mid-waist into a full flare that stopped right above her knees. The bodice itself was form-fitting, and the sleeves were a pair of two-inch-wide straps with vertical bow ties where they joined her bodice. Her hands skimmed over the square neckline as she turned around to take in the U-cut that revealed just the right amount of back skin. It was perfect! Even her girlfriends had unanimously agreed it was the dress for the night, when she'd told them her vision and shown them her options.

As for her braids, she'd styled them into a side-part, mid-bun, with a few curled strands set free to add more razzle to the entire dazzle. She'd done something a little more glam than usual with her makeup tonight: pigmented golden eyes with smokey cut creases, and glossy, ombre lips. Her jewelries were

all golden as well: a matching necklace, earrings and matching bracelet set. The entire look was embellished with the YSL clutch Tade had gotten her. Naturally, that meant she was also wearing the shoes it'd come with. It was a six-inch sandal with the YSL logo for heels, and everything came together like it had been made just for this fit.

She bobbed her head in satisfaction as she finished a three-sixty spin. *Omo! I look so darn good! Even if I say so myself.* She was beyond excited. The ensemble had turned out exactly as she'd envisioned. Her phone rang in that moment, pulling her out of her reverie. Guessing it was her best friend calling, she picked it up to find she was right.

"What's up?" her voice was cheery as she answered.

"I'm good o. Just wanted to check in on you. How far? How preparations? Are you ready? Or have you already left?"

"Ready," Uju replied, piling her necessities for the night into her purse. There were debit cards, her national identity card, her car key, some cash, a small sachet of wet wipes and three sticks of tampons—just in case. She had no use for the tampons that evening, but loved carrying some on her at all times, as there could always be another sister in need. "But still at home. Tade should arrive at any moment now. It's almost seven, and he's never late." As though on cue, she heard the doorbell ring. Uju smiled. "Told ya."

"He's here already?"

"Just rang the bell," she answered, heading downstairs.

"Hanhan, this your man no dey carry last o."

"Before, nkor? Anyhoo, I'm going to snap pictures and send to y'all later. As for now, I have to go."

"All right, all right. Have fun o, but don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Uju snickered. "Again, you know that's not restrictive at all, right? I think I'd rather focus on *not* doing exactly what you would." She was ending the call before Sarah got the chance to retort. "Bye, my love. Talk to you later, *mwah!*" Aware that her best friend would definitely get her lick back, Uju was still smiling when she opened the door seconds after.

"Hmm, someone looks happy?"

"And you look extra dashing tonight, Mr. Maxwell."

"Extra?" Tade asked, closing the door behind him. "Is someone admitting I *always* look dashing?"

Uju lifted her shoulders as she welcomed his embrace. "Maybe, maybe not."

His only response was to lean in for a kiss Uju gladly melted into. Her toes

curled, her body tingled all over, and she wished they could stay that way forever.

“You look... breathtaking.” Tade fawned as they pulled apart. His eyes roamed over her. “I love everything. The hair, the make-up, the dress... I’m so proud you’re my woman. You’re going to have every neck straining just to get a second look at you tonight, you know?”

Uju brimmed with pleasure. “And does that bother you?”

“Hell nah! it makes me feel darn good! Didn’t you notice something?”

“What?”

“My head,” he gestured at said body part. “It’s already getting bigger.”

Uju broke into a chuckle, shaking her own head as she walked towards the living room. “Sha don’t let it burst. Me, I can’t pack grey matter o.”

“Eeewww! This woman, what is wrong with you? We were having a romantic moment now! Ugh! The imagery!”

He seemed truly repulsed, and Uju only laughed harder as she returned with the gift she’d gotten his folks. “It’s a good thing you never thought of studying medicine, you know? You’re the type to end up fainting every time you get into the theatre.”

Tade didn’t bother contesting that. “Know thyself and you’ve already unlocked one secret to true success,” he simply replied, taking the wrapped box from her. “So, are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Soon, they were in his Chevrolet, well on their way to Banana Island.

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The party was in full buzz when they arrived. Everyone who was someone in Lagos seemed to be present. Tade and Uju had to maneuver their way through extended family members, business colleagues, celebrities, and friends, before running into the latest expecting mom.

“Heeyyy! Look who’s back in town!” Bolanle pealed as they hugged. “I heard you had a wonderful time in Enugu!”

“We did!” Uju confirmed when they pulled apart. “Lord knows I’d still need like three days to recover from all of that jumping around. But yeah, we had a really great time. I’m super glad I was able to spend the holidays with my family, after all.”

Bolanle’s eyes twinkled as she wiggled her brow. “Ouuuhh! Dating a

billionaire definitely has its perks, does it not?”

Uju’s first thought was to say they weren’t actually dating, because even though they’d confessed their feelings to each other, they were still quite undefined. Tade seemed to be taking his sweet time asking her to be his girlfriend, and yes, she was waiting for him to. After all, she’d been the first to confess. She definitely wouldn’t be the first to ask the ‘*What are we now?*’ question. Alas, aware that she had no interest in poking *that* hornet’s nest at the risk of ruining such a lovely evening, she settled for a casual response.

“It sure does. That’s why I’m motivated to work even harder. I can’t wait to get my money up and start flying private jets up and down. I’m telling you, sis, that life is sweet!”

Bolanle’s head fell back in laughter. Next minute, she was throwing an arm around Uju’s shoulders. “You see! That’s one of the reasons I really love you! Another woman would have been thinking about how to relax and enjoy her man’s money, but the only thing on your mind is how to multiply yours.”

“Ah! I’m still going to enjoy his money o,” Uju whispered conspiratorially. “It’d just be nice to have mine as well, so that my shakara will be legit.”

They were both still laughing when they arrived at Mrs. Carolyn’s side. She was more delighted to see Uju than ever before, and as soon as pleasantries were exchanged, Uju found herself facing the four prominent women in Tade’s life, having to tell them all about the Enugu trip. She’d have solicited Tade’s support or, at the very least, asked him to rescue her. Alas, when she looked up for help, her man was nowhere to be found. Believing he must have been pulled away by the many other guests who were trying to gain his attention, Uju accepted her fate. Over the next hour, she transformed into an avid storyteller, recounting most of the Enugu experience (of course, she kept that night at the pool to herself). Her audience was smiling with satisfaction when she finished.

“Now that it’s confirmed that both families approve, I hope you two can hurry and fix a wedding date already!” Indeed, that was Tade’s mum.

“Ah, mummy! They’ve only known each other for three weeks o. At least, let them date for a few months first now,” Zen rose to the rescue.

“Three weeks, a few months, what’s the difference? My dear, see eh, when it comes to matters of the heart, it’s not an issue of how far o, but how well. Besides, when you know, you know. The moment I laid my eyes on your father...” Her eyes took on a dreamy look as she sighed sweetly, hands on her heart. “I knew instantly that I was going to marry him, that there was no one else for me. Three months later, we were hitched!”

“Hmm! Was it really because of love or because there was already a little boy growing in your tummy?”

At Zen’s question, everyone broke into laughter, but what made the moment even funnier for Uju, was seeing the always self-possessed Mrs. Carolyn flush hard as she struggled to find words.

“Well, what led to the baby boy growing in my womb? Was it not love?”

“Eeeww, I certainly do not want to imagine *that* at all,” Zaiah responded, scrunching up her nose.

Ignoring her daughters, Mrs. Carolyn turned to Uju. “My darling, pay them no heed, please! What’s important is that I indeed married for love, and that same love has kept us growing strong these past thirty-five years. In fact, at the time we had our civil wedding, I didn’t even know I was already with child. True!”

“We know, mum. You’ve told us the story a thousand times over.” Zendaya turned to Uju as well. “She found out when she was already four months gone. That was how long it took for her to really start showing. There had only been a few other pregnancy symptoms, and she’d simply attributed the most obvious one to stress from wedding preparations.”

“That, and the fact that she’d been so busy, she hadn’t even been counting how long she’d gone without,” Zaiah supplied.

“By the time she knew for sure, she was already Mrs. Maxwell,” Bolanle completed.

Uju was truly intrigued by the entire tale. “Wow. That’s... How did you feel?” She couldn’t imagine finding out about being pregnant only months later. *God abeg! This is why abstinence is key.*

“Happy,” Mrs. Carolyn answered, her joy evident. “We’d hoped to wait a while, but when God says yes, who can say no?”

“Hm! That’s a funny way to put it when you were, *ahem*, sinning,” Zendaya countered. When her mother flashed daggers at her, they all broke into laughter again.

Uju had to admit that this girls’ talk felt like an initiation ceremony, like she was being officially welcomed as a member of the family. Before that night with Tade in Enugu, this knowledge might have made her freak out, but now, it only warmed her heart.

As though to confirm her thoughts, Bolanle whispered in her ears, “Welcome to the family. I got this speech too—right before Ben asked me to be his wife.”

Uju’s heart jumped at those words. *What???* Was Tade actually going to ask

her to be his wife? Was that why he'd disappeared earlier? Surely not. That would be insane! It didn't even happen that fast in the movies—or the books for that matter. *But what if he does? What will you say?* The voice in her head asked. The fact that Uju couldn't respond right away told her all she needed to know. She was truly gone. Just then, Zen tapped her hand softly, gaining her attention.

"I've got some party packs to bring down from the terrace. Mind going with me?"

Thinking nothing of it, Uju simply nodded. "Sure, why not?"

They were on their way the next minute. She tried keeping an eye out for Tade as they climbed up the stairs, but he was nowhere to be found. Worried that something might really be wrong, she sent him a quick text.

Heeyyy! You good? I haven't seen you in a minute.

His reply was swift.

Sure! I'm so sorry for going M.I.A. I figured you were in good hands, though. Been busy getting some important stuff done, but you'll see me soon. I'll tell you all about it, then.

All right, take care. Missing you.

I miss you more, baby.

Satisfied that all seemed to be well, she put her phone to sleep and tucked it away. When Zen's gaze wouldn't take its weight off her, Uju angled her head at the younger woman. "Are you going to say what's on your mind? Or would you just keep staring?"

"You really love him, don't you?"

Uju blinked as she hurriedly looked away. "Why? Did I do something?"

"You didn't have to. Not intentionally, anyway. Your body responds of its own accord. The moment his reply came in, you needed to have seen the way all of you just..." She exploded her fingers. "Lit up!"

Uju's cheeks burned.

"Ha! See? You're doing it again! My goodness! You are in love! Just as he is!" She clapped her hands excitedly. "This is perfect! I'm so jealous!"

Uju was smiling now. Obviously, there was no point in trying to hide it any longer. "Don't be. You've got Richard," she teased instead.

"Oh, don't even get me started! Can you imagine what my brother did? He

set me up! On a blind date! With Richard!”

Uju was snorting now. Tade had told her all about it. He’d asked Zen to meet him up at a fancy diner, only it had been Richard waiting. Of course, his sister had been livid. Livid, but not mad. “So, how did it go?” she asked. She already had her guess, but still wanted to know for sure.

“It went... well,” Zen responded. “I suppose.” It was her turn to avert her gaze.

Uju smiled sweetly as she watched her become flustered. “Hmm, I see. So, will there be another date?”

Zen lifted her shoulder in a casual shrug, still refusing to look Uju’s way. “Maybe, maybe not. But tonight isn’t about me. It’s all about you.”

Uju would have asked what that meant, but the sudden gust of wind she felt on her skin announced their arrival on the terrace. The next minute, they were stepping through the open doors and the sight that awaited her had her stopping in her tracks, shocked to the bones.

Before her very eyes was the perfect proposal setting. Balloons, white tulip petals strewn across the floor, and more flower arrangements than she could count. Of course, there were also a thousand candle lights, but the star of the show had to be the four-men band that started playing the chorus of *Lover* by Taylor Swift upon her arrival—the very song she and Tade had first kissed to. As one would expect, to top it all, was Tade standing right in the middle, a bouquet of pink tulips in one hand, and a jewelry box in another.

Uju feared hyperventilating as the implication of what was happening dawned on her. He really couldn’t be asking her to be his wife only after two weeks, could he? That would be insane! It didn’t matter how many times she thought of it, nor the myriad of angles from which she considered it, it was insane! Yes, she was crazy about the man, and yes, she definitely saw herself spending the rest of her life with him. Nonetheless, there was no rush. They still had all the time in the world.

Slowly, she got her legs to start moving. One after the other, until she was standing only two feet away from him. It was in that moment that her eyes truly saw the letters that had been written with neon lights across the flower arch.

May I Be Your BF?

Mirth bubbled inside of Uju, rising to the top and spilling from her lips in a hearty melody. She couldn’t believe it! Relief flooded her as she doubled over.

She just couldn't stop laughing. First, at herself for getting so far ahead, then at Tade for making such a big deal out of a girlfriend proposal. Suddenly, tears were falling down her eyes, hot tears because now that she thought of it, it was truly, truly sweet! There she'd been, worrying that they hadn't yet defined their relationship, when the whole time, he'd putting something so breathtakingly special together.

He was by her side the next instant, flowers and jewelry box forgotten so he could draw her into his arms. "Baby? Did I do something wrong? Oh, I'm so sorry. So sorry! I didn't mean to upset you. I thought... I thought you'd find it really sweet."

This man! Will he ever get it wrong? No. No, I don't think so. He is love embodied, and he lives that truth with everything in him. By his side, I never have to worry. I only have to relax and bask through a lifetime of being shown just how amazing love can be when it's right.

Uju was shaking her head as she found her voice. "I'm not upset, Tade. Far from it. I'm just sooo happy! Gosh!" She took his face in her hands. "This... I could never have seen this coming. It's more than I expected. It is sweet! *You* are sweet!" She was holding his gaze now, hoping he'd see every inch of the love that overwhelmed hers. "You are the sweetest, Tade! The most perfect man in the whole wide world, and the one true confirmation that I must have done something right in my past life to be deserving of someone as amazing as you."

"*Shhh!*" he whispered, hugging her close. "I'm the one who's supposed to be giving the speech, remember?"

"Oh! Oh! Sure, sure!" She wiped her tears as she pulled away, a permanent grin taking over her lips.

Clearing his throat, Tade picked up the bouquet and the jewelry box once more. Then, gaze solemn with the depth of his emotions, he began. "Obianuju Victoria Chimezie, I once promised that one day, you'd find out exactly when I decided I was going to spend the rest of my life with you. It must have been when I saw you walk into the lounge that fateful evening. However, I didn't realize how much I meant that thought until you sat in front of me and I took your hands in mine. I came to back to Nigeria in search of love, but I never imagined I'd find the greatest of all, so soon. I know it's only been a short while, but every day with you has felt like home. Like all this while, I'd been wandering, lost and alone, and now I finally have a place to rest."

His voice broke, and he drew in a deep breath. "I love you, Uju. In every interpretation of that word that exists, I. Love. You. With all of my heart, and

every single thing I am, to the deepest parts of my soul, I love you. You are etched into my existence, never to be erased. In centuries to come, when they tell my story, it would not be complete without you. You make me happy, you bring me peace, and I'm certain, entirely convicted, that there's no one else for me. However, before I bamboozle you into wanting to spend the rest of your life with my unserious ass..." That part made her chuckle amid endless tears, and he continued, smiling now. "I figured, let's take this step by step. So, this is me taking the first step towards forever with you, my Njay." He drew closer. "May I be your boyfriend? But only if you'd be my girlfriend in return, of course."

What else could Uju do other than throw her arms around him and yell, "Yes!" a thousand times over? She was still crying as she accepted the bouquet from him; as he wore the diamond necklace he'd gotten her, around her neck; and as he drew her in for a soul-melting kiss. Cheers and wild applause filled the air, but he was all Uju could see.

"I love you, Uju," he whispered again against her lips. "Forever."

"And I love you, Tade! I know I always will." It was as true as the fact that the solar system revolved around the sun, and Uju wouldn't have it any other way.

Because that's what happens when love visits. It sweeps you off your feet, turns your entire world upside down, puts a million glittering stars in your skies, gives you a new home, and renders you hopeless to do anything but accept it with all your heart, hoping it would stay forever.

For the longest while, Uju had believed love had deemed her unworthy. Now she knew the truth, love had never deserted her. It had simply been bidding its time, waiting to arrive at the most auspicious moment when every line would fall into rightful place.

What could she say? The wait had been most definitely worth it. She would cherish this gift with all her heart for as long as she drew breath, and even beyond.

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Amid the celebration, unbeknownst to the lovers, as well as their family and friends, one of the band men merrily sneaked away. He jumped over the terrace wall, floating easily until his feet landed on solid ground. As he walked towards the gate, he began to transform into all the personalities he'd taken on for this mission. First, a twelve-year-old girl, then a suya man, a sugar cane seller, an ice

cream vendor, a chauffeur, a saxophonist, and finally, Father Christmas. He was grinning as he got to his sleigh, which was actually a regular Volkswagen to the ordinary human eyes.

“Hanhan! Your own Christmas never finish?” The security personnel asked as he climbed on. “Anyway, happy new year o!”

Giggling at those words, the uncanny man brought out a glowing green notebook and began to twinkle his fingers in the air. As he did, red ink marked across the book.

Uju and Tade, mission accomplished!

He sighed in satisfaction as he read those words over. This match had been particularly fun to work on, as he’d been spot on about the pairing. They were perfect for each other, and he was beyond pleased with the results! Now, Uju could book any flight she wanted to anywhere in the world without difficulties. Closing said book, he waited until the skies filled with fireworks, announcing the start of a new year. It was only then that he turned to the security personnel.

“Merry Christmas! And a splendid, happy new year to you too!” he tolled. “Ho! Ho! Ho!”

With those last words, he whipped the reins of his sleigh and soon, his chariot was flying, carrying him up to the skies, until the next Christmas when he would visit yet another unsuspecting stranger with the ultimate gift: the gift of love.

Epilogue

Tell me, what better end could there be, other than 'Happily Ever After'?

“**H**ow are you feeling?” Tade’s breath held as he contemplated the answer to those words. “Nervous as hell.” It was the only response he could give. It was also the entire truth. “Did you feel this way, too? On your day?”

His best man, Ben, chuckled as he helped Tade smoothen his collar. “Why do you think I kept emptying all those bottles of water?”

Tade smiled as the memory floated back. “I remember. You were running to the toilet every ten minutes.”

“I was jittery as hell, man! You know, everyone focuses on the bride on the wedding day—which is an amazing thing, by the way. It’s just, no one really talks about how crazy it can be for the groom as well. Trust me, bro, whatever you’re feeling right now? It’s absolutely normal.”

“What he said,” Chuks replied, coming to give Tade an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “During my time? Chei! E be like say person pour cold water for my body. I was just gentle. People were thinking it was composure, they didn’t know it was nerves.”

“But it all makes sense the moment you lay your eyes on your her, you know?” Adrian, his white colleague, and very good friend chipped in from where he sat by the window.

It was the evening of Tade and Uju’s final conjugal ceremony, their white wedding. And their entire party was lodged in one of the best hotels in Marrakech, where Uju had insisted on having the event. Of course, Tade had had no objections.

From the moment he’d asked her to be his wife six months ago—right in the middle of New York Times Square—which had been only six months after he asked her to be his girlfriend, he’d known the ceremonies were going to go

exactly as Uju wanted them to. For one, she was the expert at these things. For two, he'd learned from both his fathers, and his married friends, that the weddings belonged to the bride. His job description as the groom was simply to be a joyous participant, provide all the necessary funds, and show up in all the ways that were required of him. Even if he'd not been so wisely counseled, Tade would have still ended up doing all of those. As far as he was concerned, the only thing that mattered was Uju's happiness. His number one priority through life was ensuring that as long as it was within his power, whatever that happiness looked like, he made it happen.

Hence, when she'd insisted on having seven ceremonies, he'd exuberantly nodded yes. First had come the 'knocking door' ceremony for which he'd traveled to Enugu, alongside his family, to declare his intentions. They had been heartily received, and the rest of the wedding events had officially kicked off. The next had been an intimate introduction party, still in Enugu, followed by a regal civil wedding in Lagos. Then had come the elaborate traditional marriage, in Enugu as well, that had completely shut down the internet. As they recovered from that, the bridal shower versus bachelor night had followed. It had been wholesome, filled with cheer, bromance, and everything good. Two days ago, was the rehearsal dinner and finally, they'd made it to the D-day—exactly one year since he first saw her walk into that lounge.

Tade was proud to say he'd enjoyed every single event so far, as they'd all been beautifully planned and flawlessly executed. They'd also given him the chance to meet Uju's amazing friends, as well as the rest of her wholesome siblings; all of whom he'd easily established warm camaraderie with. Of course, for all those other events, he'd been nervous as well. However, the anxiety that had been plaguing him all day long today, was a more vicious breed. He could barely stand or even sit still. It didn't help that he'd gotten scarce sleep the night before, no thanks to the fact that he hadn't been able to stop imagining how this evening would go, over and over again.

He released a deep breath as he looked around his hotel suite. All of his guys were present, having traveled down to Mexico from their various places of abode to honor this day. When Uju had declared that she wanted an intimate white wedding ceremony, Tade had been in full agreement. Their traditional wedding had been a festival, what with all the dignitaries his parents had had to satisfy with an invitation, and that was just people from his own side alone. Uju's side had held down their own as well, with the impeccable caliber of guests they'd had in attendance. Left to the bride and groom, all their ceremonies

would have been small and intimate, but it'd soon become clear that if they wanted peace to reign, they had to compromise and acquiesce to some of their family's demands. As they'd led by example, their parents had contentedly settled for an intimate, private white wedding affair.

Tade held each of his friends' gaze as they smiled reassuringly at him. It was just the way it should be. Everyone who needed to be there was present, and soon, the night would be made perfect as he exchanged solemn vows with the woman who owned his heart.

"Adrian is completely right!" Wale chirped, drawing Tade out of his reverie. "When I was about to marry my wife, I was just shaking. But the moment I saw her walking down that aisle? Wheew!" he whistled. "Everything faded away. Na so I calm one time!"

Everyone broke into laughter at those words. It was common knowledge that Wale was now the remaining bachelor amongst them.

"Who *dash* monkey banana?" Chuks asked, and they laughed harder.

By the time they sobered, Tade had to admit he felt so much better. The comic relief turned out to be just what he'd needed, and he could guess that was exactly why Wale had done it.

"I'm really happy to have you guys here," he declared. "Thank you all for making the trip."

Tade wasn't the least bit surprised when all of them began to respond at once, saying anything but, "You're welcome."

"Abegi!"

"You dey whine me? Where would I be, if not here?"

"Put the thanks in your pocket, jhor!"

"Send funds, Oga!"

"Please! What are friends for?"

He was still shaking his head when a knock sounded on the door, and it opened to reveal his father.

"It's almost time," his old man announced.

And just like that, every appearance of jokes disappeared. In coordination, they all got busy with last-minute checks. Then satisfied that everything was as it should be, they stepped out of the suite. As Tade and his groomsmen had taken plenty of pictures and videos earlier, what came next was the first reveal.

"I was thinking we could do it in the courtyard," the photographer suggested as they made their way down the stairs. He was a renowned Arab professional whom Uju admired and had worked with for years. "It's beautiful, it's spacious,

it would come out really well in the pictures.”

“All right! Let’s go for it!” Tade eagerly agreed. Hassan had proven to be a wizard with his lenses, so Tade had naturally come to trust his judgement one hundred percent. Their wedding set up had been done on the grassy field behind the hotel, just by the edge of a scenic cliff, overlooking the sea. This meant none of the other guests would have to see the bride until it was time to.

“Perfect! I’ll have someone get the ladies.”

Tade nodded, and as one of the photographer’s aides made their way back into the lobby, the wait began.

As he anticipated the arrival of his bride, he couldn’t help looking back on the journey so far, that fateful evening he’d first laid eyes on her, and everything that had happened afterwards. Their first date, the first time he’d introduced her to his family, how she’d stood by him and trusted him when his past had come calling, his first encounter with her family, their unforgettable confession of love, that night he’d asked her to be his girlfriend, and the other night he’d asked her to be his wife.

It had been a summer evening at New York, and every billboard in sight had rolled a montage of their moments together as he got on his knees. Uju had been struck speechless, only able to bob her head repeatedly, as he slipped the eighteen-karat rose gold ruby ring onto her finger. Then she’d been jumping into his arms, kissing him senseless as their audience of a million New Yorkers and tourists cheered on.

The memories unrolled in seconds, like they’d all been made yesterday and an eternity ago. He couldn’t believe how far they’d come in just a year. So much had happened over the past months. Things hadn’t always been rosy. They’d had the occasional misunderstanding here and there, fallen out a few times, but through love, empathy, and earnest communication, they’d worked it all out.

One of the things that had posed a persisting dilemma was their living situation. He had a thriving career in the U.S and she had a booming business in Nigeria. Neither of them had been keen on living without the other in a long distance marriage. At the same time, they’d both been reluctant to ask any sacrifice of the other person. Eventually, they’d decided on the craziest thing; they would live six months in the U.S and six months in Nigeria. At each interval, the affected party would have to run their affairs from halfway across the world. Tade still didn’t know how feasible that arrangement would be. Good thing they wouldn’t have to find out, because what Uju wasn’t aware of was that he had made arrangements to transition into a leadership position at Maxwell

Holdings. A job was just a job he could do from anywhere in the world, but Uju had real ties here, a business that relied on her to run at its best capacity. It was no sacrifice for him, only a gift he couldn't wait to give to her.

His heart filled with joy, imagining the look on her face when he finally broke the news. Of course, knowing Uju, she would accuse him of being ridiculous and demand that he didn't make such a drastic decision on her behalf. Then, he would tease her and say she was getting ahead of herself, believing she'd even crossed his mind for a second whilst he'd been in the decision-making room. She would throw pillows at him, he would dodge, then they'd end up in each other's arms, after which they would kiss and make sweet love.

Yes, that was something Tade looked forward to doing the most these days. He had been happy to wait with Uju until after their civil wedding, and now, he just couldn't get enough. Sex with her was everything he'd hoped it would be, and so much more. It got better every single time.

"She's coming! She's coming! Turn around! Turn around!"

Tade got startled out of his thoughts as those words filled his ears. Hurriedly, he did just that, spun, so he would have his back to her. Then, hands clasped in front of him, heart threatening to jump out of his chest, he counted the seconds.

Music started to play—or maybe it was just his imagination. All he knew was that one minute, he was staring at an orchid tree, and the next, he was feeling a soft, familiar tap on his shoulder. His eyes fluttered shut of their own volition as he turned around, ever so slowly. When he heard that intimate giggle that was now a tune in his soul, he released an affectionate sigh.

"Are you going to keep your eyes closed forever?" her teasing voice tickled his ears.

Tade willed said eyes open then, and the moment they fell on her, he forgot what it was to breathe. Emotions rose, clogging his throat, filling his eyes, and before he knew it, the tears were dropping. "You look..." No word came to mind. None could have possibly sufficed in capturing the true essence of just how... "Ethereal," he whispered, grasping the perfect one. "You look so ethereal."

Her dam also broke free, spilling over her magnificent face. In the distance, Tade could hear the camera clicks in the air, but in that moment, nobody else existed, only her.

She smiled through her tears. "You don't look bad yourself, Mr. Handsome."

"Well, I am wearing the suit you chose." It was Victorian styled, and he was pleasantly pleased with it. It perfectly complemented her gown; an exquisite

white ensemble that outrageously flattered her gorgeous body.

The dress made him think of mermaids, and it fell all the way past her toes, pooling around her feet. Behind her, flamboyant sleeves merged into a huge butterfly, and the neck's draping rose to meet one of those sleeves. Like all their other ceremonies, she'd chosen to style her natural hair, this time with diamond pieces. When one combined the entire look with her flawless nude makeup, as well as her stunning soul, she was indisputably the most dazzling bride ever.

"It would appear I chose right," she whispered, her eyes never leaving his. "Both the man and the suit."

"And I chose better," he murmured, drawing her close. "The best woman in the whole wide world." He would continue to choose her, a million lifetimes over.

It was with this conviction in his heart that he received her hand from her father's at the end of the aisle, over an hour later. The same conviction with which he said the vows he'd painstakingly written to ensure they did justice in capturing the essence of the love they shared. And the same conviction with which he kissed her at the priest's behest, so tenderly, so patiently, knowing that he had the rest of his life to do it over and over again.

Then it was official, husband and wife, in every way possible, for all eternity.

Author's Note

Dearest Hopeful Romantic,

I truly hoped you enjoyed reading the story of Uju and Tade, as much as I relished writing it. This has been such a molting journey for me, and I thought to take you along on how it all came about, hence this author's note.

I was singing through chores one fateful evening in October 2023, when a bulb lit up in my head. I'd just written a beautiful thread for my online community of over 150k members, on the theme, ['When Love Visits Again.'](#) The thread had received much love across both platforms on which they'd been shared: Instagram and Twitter, and I couldn't help thinking, "*What if I made this into a novel?*". With Christmas' bells already tolling, the idea expanded, "*What if I made this into a Christmas novel?*" Before I knew it, the plot formed in my head. A wedding planner who's never been in love, a Diasporan tech bro who's returning home for Christmas, and who just happens to be a lover boy—all the markings of the Christmas movies and novels we could never get enough of. I started writing that very evening.

It was going to be something short, fun, silly. Just a cheesy romance to get people swooning on Christmas day, but the story quickly grew out of my hands, turning into something more! With every word, my characters showed me they could go farther, creating a beautiful world that would end up becoming a most beloved home for readers such as yourself. Who am I, not to listen to the demands of my characters? After all, I'm but a vessel through which they share their stories with the universe. So, I obeyed, and thus, this wholesome fairytale was birthed.

I really had so much fun working with Uju and Tade. They are a delight! Two people with opposing personalities: Uju, far more reserved, and Tade, more forthcoming. Yet, the moment they start to get to know each other better, you can see Uju unfurling, opening up, and letting this amazing new experience

transform her life for the better. As for Tade, we watch him take a very important step in his healing, to seal away a traumatic past that had struck at his heart three years before the story begins, in order to fully water this new love he's found.

Writing this book, I wanted to give my readers a healthy, full, swoon-worthy romance. I wanted you to laugh, heave dreamy sighs, hug your pillows, and pause your reading so many times just to take it all in. As a relationship counsellor, I also wanted to depict the kind of wholesome dynamics that should be found in healthy relationships: communication, trust, mutual respect, acts of services, reciprocity, generosity, kindness, and validation; just to mention a few. I also wanted to show Uju and Tade as humans who are not perfect, but who take their self-development seriously, rather than waiting for someone to come rescue them, or worse still, bleeding on others; and are all the better for it. More specially, I wished to portray truly hearty family and friendship dynamics filled with love, warmth, open affection, and support, as naturally as possible. Above all, I wanted to give lovers of African literature a good love story devoid of trauma and heartache. What can I say? I'm a woman of the people. I heard all the requests, and I took them personally!

Dearest reader, I truly hope you enjoyed stepping into Uju and Tade's world, and that you were able to experience all I'd endeavored to render, in their fullest measures. There will be more wholesome love stories coming your way, I promise. As I launch my career as an African author, a Nigerian author, I vow you'd only ever get to read of love, thriving, healing, and beautiful relationships: romantic and otherwise, from me. So, stick around, will ya?

Until our next book, leave a review, please? I'm dying to know your thoughts about Uju and Tade!

Thank you so much for making it to this point. I verily appreciate you.

Comfort Omovre

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My sister, Faith, the first writer I ever knew. You've been such a tremendous source of strength and inspiration over the years. Thank you for showing me what was possible from such a young age, and encouraging me to hone my skills so sharply.

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Finally, thank you, dearest reader, from the depths of my heart. Buying an author's first book is like dipping your hand into a dark box of colors; you never

know which one you'd get. However, you trusted me and ended up becoming my very first readers! Thank you so, so much for your trust! My heart will always remember you. I pray that you always find the love and support you need, as well.

Above all, I give all the glory to God Almighty, for it is he who has made everything possible. Thank you, Father, for always showing your gracious, loving hands at work in my life. All that I am and will ever be, praise your name. Now and forevermore, Amen.

About The Author



Comfort Omovre is a counselor, coach, creator, and storyteller. She is the founder of *Phoenix Blvck Enterprise*, an online brand dedicated to helping young adults achieve positive wellbeing, through nurturing healthier relationships, as well as investing in their emotional and mental development. Via her social media platforms, she has been able to reach millions of individuals, encouraging them to embrace self-love and growth, especially as they commit to building safer and deeper connections. Some of her works have been featured on these notable platforms: *Bored Panda*, *Elle Magazine*, *Selar*, *Black Love Social*, *She Leads Africa*, e.t.c.

In her leisure time, Comfort enjoys engaging in hobbies such as cooking, watching Korean and Chinese dramas, going sightseeing, and getting much needed beauty sleep. She hopes to one day travel the world. However, her life's goal is to establish self-sufficient orphanage homes and schools, as well as shelters for abuse victims across her home country, Nigeria—perhaps someday, even the world at large. Until those dreams come true, she's quite content with

taking little steps all the way from her home in Calgary, Alberta, where she lives with her blissfully married husband.

Connect With The Author

Stay up to date on every exciting news, community events, and book announcements!

Follow Comfort on Instagram: @phoenix_blvckJoin The Hopeful Romantics Newsletter: <https://phoenixblvck.myflodesk.com/thrnewsletters>