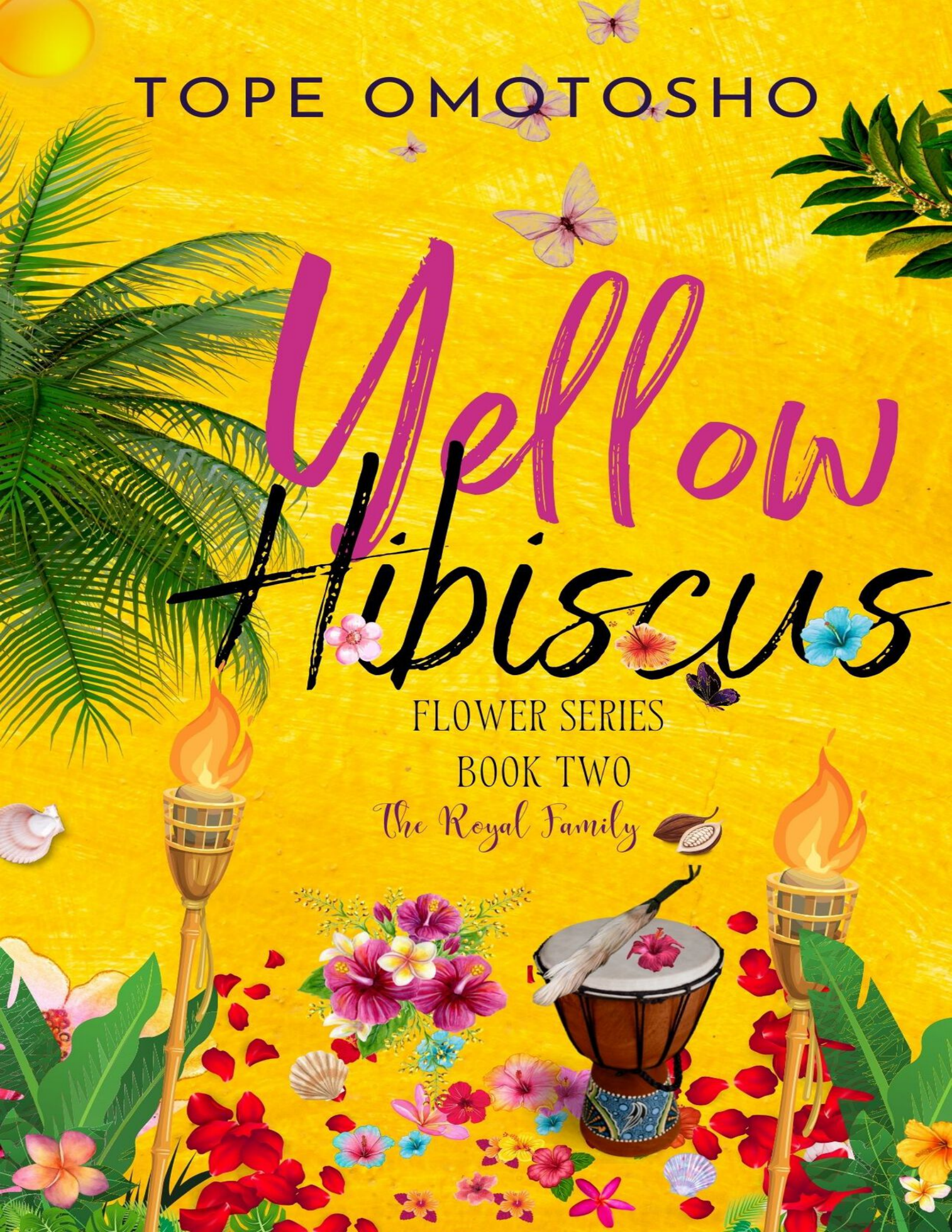
TOPE OMOTOSHO

Yellow Hibiscus

FLOWER SERIES

BOOK TWO

The Royal Family



Yellow Hibiscus



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Yellow Hibiscus

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TOPE OMOTOSHO

LEVERAGE
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Yellow Hibiscus

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To the Author of the best love stories

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Acknowledgments

To the Christian pantser's source of inspiration—the Holy Spirit. I am very grateful.

To Dapo: To my Sweet Caramel, thank you for being my Prince Charming and for all your support over the years. Particularly for this book. You had to keep encouraging me to keep writing even when I couldn't keep going at some point. I couldn't have gotten this far in this writing journey without your love and support. I love you.

To Mayowa and Morayo: Your love and joy keep me going. Your shouts of laughter and pulling me to spend time with you keep me in check. You remind me of how much God has blessed me and who I am, despite being a writer. I love you both, M & M.

To my readers: I can’t appreciate you enough for your support. Your love. You motivate me to keep going when I’m so discouraged and feel like throwing in the towel. Your testimonies and lessons make the late nights worth it. You are amazing! Thank you, thank you. God bless!

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Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross.
– S.D Gordon

Joy is the serious business of Heaven.
- C.S. Lewis

“True, that he’s no Prince Charming but there’s something in him that I simply didn’t see.”
- Beauty and the Beast

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Because of you, I know the path of life, as I taste the fullness of joy in your presence. At your right side, I experience divine pleasures forevermore!

Psalms 16:11 TPT

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PRAISE REPORTS FOR TOPE OMOTOSHO BOOKS

Brown Roses

Amazing book. The characters are somehow stuck in my head. That's how great it was. Amazing story and relatable characters.

-Ebos

My Nigerian KK has struck again. Tope, you've delivered another thought-provoking novel. I was like, abi is this a true-life story ni 'cause every emotion was really captured such that I could connect with it.

I totally RECOMMEND this book. Learn about guilt, grief, forgiveness, love and lots more through the relatable experiences of humans like us.

-Tolulope

Surely a satisfying read. Relatable characters, real conversations, different lessons about overcoming insecurities and learning to love yourself the way God loves you and so much more.

-Temitope Abatan

***

Where Are The Heels?

I wanted to save several quotes. The author wrote so many things that were spot on. The romances were beautiful…in a realistic iron sharpening iron way. As it was, I loved getting lost in a Tope book.

- Heather Wood, bestselling author of Until We All Find Home

Tope's books are always like a breath of fresh air. Clean and very enjoyable to read. WATH (just like other books by the author) will take you through a flurry of emotions. Are you lost on the topic of purpose? There's something for you here. In fact, there's for everyone. Lessons aside, it's so entertaining to read and relatable as always. It's a fantastic work.

-Tolulope

***

With These Shoes I Thee Wed (Book 1)

Temitope spins a story that is brutally raw and true to life. Quirky, fun, humourous, deeply spiritual, some cringe-worthy moments and unforgettable characters that suck you right into their world as they hold you by the jugular. Read into the late night you must because their creator holds nothing back. She peels the layers away from our everyday masks of propriety and touches on the core of the human frailty. You can see yourself in the quintessential lawyer who, despite her prowess in the courtroom, is a woman who battles the deepest insecurity a woman can have. You will identify with the illustrious fashion designer who, despite her success on the runway, is unlucky in love. And there's the woman who fights off attraction to a man who's off-limits. What do these women have in common? They're all navigating the single life in a world where none of the men are what they seem at first.

Temitope always weaves stories that draw out spiritual and life lessons. There's always something to learn, but what I love about her stories is her ability to shatter every know table known to culture. Nothing is ever how you expect it to be. There are twists and turns and whilst you're on the roller coaster ride of this drama, you're never, ever left the same. The stories, the characters, they linger still in your mind and in your memory. This is just part one and I am itching for the sequel.

- Sola Macaulay, Author of the Hand You Hold

This is a masterpiece. I really enjoyed following Toke's story. It was so relatable, and engaging that I couldn't drop it till I finished reading. This is awesome-tastic. Great job Tope! We want more.

- Reader

I enjoyed reading this book. I loved Adetoke's journey. Indeed, God leaves no one behind. It is really an interesting read.

- Excellentvicky

***

Now You Know Where It Pinches! (Book 2)

A great follow-up to book one, Tope Omotosho writes an intensely emotional tale which will leave you turning the pages.

- Osar Adeyemi, bestselling author of After the Storm.

Tope Omotosho delivers another page turning piece! Now You Know Where It Pinches is a beautiful tale that will warm your heart and rekindle a daring trust in God even in the face of daunting uncertainties.

- Emike Osumah, bestselling author of Ripples.

***

Love Me Again

Tope is a fearless writer who goes boldly where others do not dare to tread. In her fiction, she reveals profound spiritual truths, showing that God is at work even in the darkest times of our lives. Love Me Again deals with painful subject matters, and I actually gasped when I read some of the shocking twists in this story. But it all comes together beautifully. We need books that reflect the sticky and messy situations of life, and how, according to Romans 8:28, God works all things for the good of those who love Him.

Love Me Again does this with flair.

– Milla Holt, bestselling author of the Color-Blind Love series

I moved through the pages of Love Me Again so quickly. I fell in love with the characters as I followed them through the myriad of emotions that Tope put them through. I laughed. I cried. I rolled my eyes. The story was so real, and I was thoroughly entertained. But as interesting as the story was, the best thing about Love Me Again is the doctrine. Tope wove important tenets of the Christian faith intricately into the fabrics of that

story. I was taught by the Holy Spirit as much as I was entertained. So take it from me when I say Love Me Again is a must-read, and not only because it is thoroughly entertaining but chiefly because Tope Omotosho writes God's heart.

– B*isola Badejo, bestselling author of Life-Row*

This was my first Nigerian Christian Fiction book. I had no idea what to expect and how it would be different. It met all my standards and expectations and more. I was constantly warmed by the beauty and depth here. This had everything I love.

Solid, solid book.

– *Heather Wood, bestselling author of Until We all Find Home*

Love Me Again is a gripping tale in every sense of the word. How the author explores sensitive themes without sugar-coating pain and hardships of life is beautiful. The way she weaves God's light, love and purpose through such intense, heart-wrenching pain leaves the reader totally intrigued, entertained yet face-to-face with the tangible goodness of God.

– *Emike Osumah, bestselling author of Love's Winding Path*

***

Once Upon a First Love

I totally enjoyed reading Once Upon a First Love. I like the use of language. Even though the language is English but the 'Nigerianness' came through wherever there was a need to douse it with that flavour. Only a Nigerian person would say, "This one you came to our church today, Timilehin will not let me rest." Reading sentences like that made the book relatable.

- Temmyyinks I admit that I have never read a book like this in my entire life - mind you, I'm an avid reader. Despite my extremely busy schedule, I "marathon" read the book because I couldn't put it down until I read the very last page! The book is well written and has "no word fillers" I could relate with the storyline and most importantly it felt like my love life with God was "x-rayed", a diagnosis made and treatment commenced.

– Aijay

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NOTE FROM AUTHOR

I remember visiting Ondo when I was about eight or nine. I don't recall the exact year, but I know it was to celebrate the life of my great-grandmother Olori Esther Osebusola Aderele who was wife to my great-grandfather Rufus Adesokeji Aderele—Oba Tewogboye (II) the 41st Osemawe of Ondo Kingdom (1942-1974).

I fell in love with the state. I think it was the first time I had a taste of Asun—an original Ondo delicacy. I witnessed my grandmother princess Moradeke Florence Oshodi (née Aderele) dancing to the tunes of the live band singing her praises while she was dressed in beautiful Aso-Oke with traditional beads resting in her bosom. I recall the first time I heard my grandmother speak Ondo language when I was way younger and I was like 'is she really speaking Yoruba?' It just opened my eyes to the fact that there are a whole lot of tribes and languages and cultures, even within the Yoruba ethnic group.

I was young but I was enthralled by everything. And I knew Ondo was definitely a place I would love to visit again. And I did; at least two more times and each of those times were as beautiful as the first time. I decided to base one of my main characters in Ondo and tried to explore some of the beautiful cultures and places in Ondo. I must state that I had to embellish a few things to blend with the story I was writing, but don't worry you will

still get the feels :). For example, Ondo Kingdom is a city in the big state of Ondo with other kingdoms and parts. It's a relatively big place to explore. I know I found it a bit hard to research Ondo and understand the culture. While I tried my best, I'm not entirely sure I got to give you a full grasp of it. Seeing is believing. ;)

It is truly a sunshine state and I hope you enjoy reading and enjoying the place as I did through the pages of Yellow Hibiscus following Isi's journey of following God and finding love. Nelly and Adeniran's stories were hard to write and I kept pressing for more out of them in the beginning because I felt I only knew the surface of their characters. I'm happy with the end results, and I hope you will be too.



My Great-grandfather, Oba Tewogboye II The Osemawe of Ondo; Queen Elizabeth II & her husband, the Duke of England.

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CHAPTER ONE

ADENIRAN– AGE 7

Ants were swarming everywhere. He couldn’t stop them from crawling across the pages. *Breathe in. Breathe out… Breathe in. Breathe out.* “B-barkness can-not bark-…” He shook his head and pushed a lump of saliva down his throat. Even in his ears that didn’t sound right.

Why was it so hard? Why couldn’t they just use flash cards like before?

He raised his eyes, daring to look up at her kind eyes, which held no judgement or mockery. But he was going to let her down. He couldn’t do it. He was as dumb as everyone thought he was. “I’m sorry, Mummy.” He hung his head. “I can't do it. I don’t want to read anymore.” He couldn't keep the letters straight no matter how hard he tried. And why couldn't the letters just stay put?

“Don’t apologise. Instead, try again. ‘Darkness cannot drive out darkness…’” His mother's voice trailed off. Her eyes steady on him. Waiting. She expected him to repeat after her. She had said the words with no hesitation. No pause. No stumbling. Even if there was a comma Adeniran wouldn’t notice because it was so smooth. He wished he had the ability to do it the same way.

All the same, Adeniran opened his mouth.

As usual, the words didn't stick in his mouth fast enough when they moved across the page—like his tongue was trying to wrap around the sounds as his eyes tried to pass the information quickly to his brain. And

then nothing. It was all muddled up. After a few minutes, he tried hard to focus and managed to get them to stay still long enough for him to say them. “Darkness c-cannot drive o-out darkness. Only," he paused. Blinked. "Only l-light c-can do t-that. H-hate…” In frustration, he chewed down on his lower lip as hot tears pricked his eyes.

“*Cannot*. Hate *can-not*,” his mother said through clenched teeth. “Start again, Adeniran.”

Adeniran fought back the tears. His father had always said that crying was for weak babies, but Adeniran wasn’t a baby. Neither was he a weakling. He didn’t want his father to be right about him. In that same vigour to prove his father wrong, he tried again.

“Hate cannot drive out hate; o-only l-” his lips pursed. He couldn’t get the next word out. It resembled a snake wriggling out of the page. He shook his head to regain focus.

“L-ove. Only love can do that. Try again. You can do it. That quote was from Martin Luther King and he was a very courageous man. You’re strong and courageous too, Niran. You can do it.”

He did. Just because the words ‘you can do it’ from his mother, propelled him to give his best. He pushed out the words even though the letters were all over the place—running across the pages like ants and suddenly jumping out the page at him like fishes lunging in the air. Teasing him like could never catch them no matter how hard he tried.

Why did he have to read at all?

Hot air blew into the room from outside, slapping Adeniran on the face and he kept a finger on the dog-marked page and wiped the sweat beads from his brow. He didn’t know if he was sweating from how hard it was to read two paragraphs for the last thirty minutes or if it was from the stifling heat outside.

Or maybe it was a little of both.

All he knew was he would prefer being outside playing football with Mosadi than being here in his mother’s bedroom reading about men of strong courage and, in a few minutes, learning about the history of the Aremeyin fortune. He needed out. Needed to distract his mother or plead with her to let him continue his punishment some other time because that's what reading was to him. His mother would hate for him to think she was punishing him when she was only trying to help him.

The sneers of his classmates taunted him even from the dark recesses of his mind. The insults from his teachers were accompanied by the whip of their canes against his back as they called him all sorts of names for not reading correctly or copying accurately from the board.

“This heat from outside is too much. Adeniran, could you close the windows and turn on the AC for me please.”

He jumped out of his seat, relieved to be free of his thoughts, and obeyed. He could see the twelve acres of their family land with over two thousand cocoa trees from his vantage point near the window. Farm hands were working on the farm, removing every ripe cocoa pod in preparation for processing and, later, exportation.

Adeniran was used to the bustle around the house at this time of the year: Cocoa harvest season. During the latter part of the year, there was always a lot of work to be done to get the Cocoa bagged and distributed to as many places as possible.

He noticed the compound gate being pulled open from the corner of his eye and averted his gaze to the black Rolls-Royce driving into the compound.

Something warm danced in his chest as his father alighted from the car and headed to the house with an entourage following behind him in quick steps. As far as he knew, that warmth wasn’t the tingling sensation of happiness or affection. It was more of the prickling heat of hatred that had festered in his heart for as far back as he could remember.

The family house had been built here almost fifty years ago when his grandfather had bought the land next to it. A former bungalow that had been bulldozed over and in its stead, a high-class mansion had been constructed by Julius Berger, a German company situated in Nigeria. It contained eight bedrooms, which was more than enough for each of his grandfather’s three wives. It had two living rooms, a swimming pool house, a games room, a cinema room that they alternated using, an indoor gym, and a glass garage house that housed all five of his father's luxury cars.

Years later, it was home to his father and his four wives—used as a getaway from the Palace.

Even though Adeniran was only seven years old, he could tell the way he lived was nothing like Mosadi’s—even though his best friend’s only living relative was his grandmother. Even at that, Mosadi got the older woman’s love and attention in its entirety. There was no condition to her love. While

Adeniran lacked his father's warmth, he got his mother’s undivided attention.

Adeniran turned from the window and went back to sit on his mother’s bed.

“Do you think daddy likes being a king?” he asked as she adjusted her back against a pillow propped behind her. She sighed in relief as her hand fell on her baby bump. Adeniran was fascinated by it. Her bump resembled a basketball. Possibly slightly bigger.

“Why are you asking?”

“I don’t know. He looks sad sometimes. And I hate it that we only get to see him once in a while.” And he couldn't shake the look of disappointment that crossed his father's tired face each time it met with Adeniran.

“Hmmm….I think you’re too young to understand what it means to hate. So also, you don’t know what love is all about.”

Adeniran might not know what hate was like but he despised having the winning title as the family’s laughing stock. A good example for parents to teach their kids what not to be like. A point of praise to God that their children hadn’t ended up like him. He turned and glared at the book containing newspaper clippings and old photographs. Papa Ondo had achieved a lot in his lifetime and had a good name preceding him. And he hadn’t even been well educated. Maybe back then he wasn't pressured to have a degree. It seemed things were way easier back then.

“What was Papa Ondo like? Did you get to meet him?” He walked back to the bed and put aside the folder containing his great-grandfather's little history and glanced up at his mother. He was tired of reading. He didn’t need a book to get ahead in life. According to what he'd read, his great-grandfather had a basic education but had amassed a fortune through his astute business skills over the years.

"No. I’m not sure I know as much about him as what you would read in the family book. What exactly do you want to know?" Mum asked, her face tight with pain. Her eyes flickered to the abandoned book and she fixed a stern stare on him. He pulled the book back close to him.

“Was he like me?” He didn’t want to say the word.

His mother cast sad eyes at him. “I don’t know, baby.”

Adeniran wished she knew. Maybe it wouldn’t make him feel bad.

“Adeniran, look at me.”

He raised his eyes to his mother’s. “It’s true that you’re not like everyone else. But that only makes you unique. God made you wonderfully and beautifully, and we learn differently than others. That doesn’t make you dumb, and neither does it make them better than you. It only means we have to try different things that work well for you. Do you understand?”

Tears pooled in his eyes and he threw his gaze down at the bed.

“Do you understand, Niran?”

“Yes,” he mumbled.

She rubbed her palm over his head. “I only want what’s best for you, Adeniran. I know you can do so much more than you’re permitting yourself. But you have to try. You have to focus and push yourself. Okay?”

“Okay.”

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CHAPTER TWO

ADENIRAN

Present Day

Palette Explosion: Grand Opening

A hand nudged his arm and he turned to look at Camille. He'd been dreaming of her. *Again.* He wasn't in his mother's bedroom, and he wasn't a child anymore. He despised such dreams. Dreams that transported him over two decades back to his childhood. Meaningless dreams that only served to make him relive his pains and wallow in regret. Somehow, the darkness always found a way to drag him back in.

What did he have to do to get rid of them? Even so, those memories… dreams, though painful, were among the sweetest to him.

"Hey. Are you okay?" Camille asked, her gaze on him, brows curved up in concern.

He worked his jaw. How long had he dozed off? "I'm good." He jutted his chin toward the window. "We're here?"

"Yes. You know you have the option to decline." She placed a hand on his arm. "You don't need to attend this thing if you don't feel up to it. We have to catch an early flight tomorrow."

Gone were the days he would have been uncomfortable at her concern. These days he appreciated the warm gesture. Camille was always looking out for him. Always by his side. Even now she could sense he was not in the best of moods.

“I know.” As much as he didn’t want to, he knew he had to show his face. “I committed to being here and since Sade can’t be here, I’ll attend for the both of us.”

“Okay, then. Let’s party.”

Adeniran stepped out of the car with Camille standing tall by his side and the reporters at the event wasted no time in focusing their cameras on them both and shouting a barrage of questions and blinding lights.

“Prince! Prince, over here!” a male reporter yelled somewhere in the small crowd.

Adeniran kept his gaze straight ahead, keeping at bay the irritation at the title. No matter how many years he'd spend building himself as a striker in the Chargers of Florentia (C.O.F), the media, along with everyone else, still thought to refer to him by his royal status.

“Prince, who is the woman next to you? Is it true, Prince, that you are getting another season with C.O.F? Are you a major investor in this restaurant? Are you moving back home?” Another male voice shot the questions at him at an alarming speed.

Adeniran didn’t even bother with a smile and let his bodyguards clear the path to the restaurant.

“You’re back on your feet. We thought the doctor said you wouldn’t be able to walk again. Does that mean you’re returning to Italy or are you still facing retirement?”

“Madam, please what’s your name?” Another tossed out.

“Is the woman your wife?” A lady’s voice called out.

Adeniran clenched his hand. He hated reporters. They were a heartless bunch who lived off people’s low momenta and caused more harm than good. But he disliked them less than he despised overly chirpy people who acted like energiser bunnies. Those were the worst. At least the former had a reason (even as warped as it was), the latter had no basis for it.

“No comment,” he said loud enough for those around him to hear and allowed the bodyguards assigned to him to do their jobs.

Pain radiated from his kneecap, and his eyes were watering. Forcing a smile, he nodded as people greeted him. Several thoughts raced through his mind as the pain escalated. He couldn't afford to be too detached at this point. Not tonight. Not when the next football season was just around the corner and he was eager to prove his worth to the football club and his teammates. Minutes later, the pain had subsided and he could breathe easily again.

He needed to get through the evening while keeping his cool. Give a few fake smiles and then leave the premises. Even if he was a silent business partner, his partner Erinma Roberts was well-deserving of his support. While Erinma had done an excellent job with the restaurant, Adeniran didn't want to be in a room full of people who were laughing at whatever jokes or trends they were discussing and how perfect their lives were. He was painfully aware that everyone else seemed to be having a good time except him.

And it shouldn’t bother him.

But it did.

Joy, happiness and happily-ever-after fantasies were not only erratic but they were also a waste of time and mental space. It was bad enough to hope for a happy ending only for it to be wrecked by unforeseen incidents. Because hope meant placing your expectations on things that would most likely never come true. It entailed hanging on by a thin thread or sitting on your hands waiting, and Adeniran was never going to do either.

It was the reason why he avoided people with cheerful personalities and women who wore flowers in their hair. He stayed away from people who quoted meaningless phrases like, *‘it gets darkest at the end of dawn’* or *‘Your circumstances are not the key to joy’*. The worst were: *If you want to be happy, be’*, and *'Happiness from the inside is the cure to gloomy days and loveless nights’*.

One couldn’t *be* happy or joyful just like that. It was all a lie. And as much as he was a Christian and had the quotes of Joy tattooed on his mind, he didn't think it possible—not in the kind of world that they lived in.

He motioned for a waiter and took a glass of the pink mocktail drink that was being passed around. He was about to take a sip when a couple walked into his line of sight. Adeniran's body stiffened as a flood of familiar but unwelcome emotions ravaged his mind, spirit, and body.

"Adeniran, when do you plan on settling down?" Wunmi, his elder sister, had inquired some months ago.

"Not any time soon. Maybe never," had been his stern response.

Regrettably, he had developed a desire for something other than his ardent love of professional football in recent months. And each time, he felt as if he were suffocating from his desire for more. He didn't want anything else. He didn't *want* to want anything else other than to get back on the field and establish his reputation as one of the world's greatest footballers.

Still…seeing that chef woman on his friend Nelly's arm roused something in him. Awakened a hunger for more in his life.

He hadn't given a woman much thought in quite some time. For a long time, he had been preoccupied with his career. His long-term ambition was to make a name among Nigeria's all-time football legends. His short-term ambitions were to do whatever he could to achieve his long-term goals. Because somewhere out there, a child aspired to be like him. In the meantime, women were a source of distraction. With them, there was way too much drama. And they demanded far too much attention. Emotions. *Care.*

None of which he was willing to give.

Adeniran had watched his elder siblings devote themselves to love, build a home and expand their family over the years. Throughout those years, he pushed aside any jealous feelings that threatened to make him guilty about his lifestyle choices. He refused to be swayed. Like an Iroko tree, he stood tall and was determined not to lose focus, sinking his roots deep in all things soccer-related. He practised hard and gave his all on the field.

Dulling his ears to Funsho and Wunmi’s advice to settle down and start a family—didn't he want more in his life than raving fans, money and attention?

In truth? Adeniran wasn't totally opposed to the idea of 'more'. It wasn’t that having a wife and kids could ruin his dreams. He just didn’t see himself ready for that level of responsibility. Even if he was a little over thirty.

Slowly, his eyes scrolled down the length of the chef's slender frame. He was captivated the first time he laid eyes on her lovely face, but he had messed up. In a busy city like Lagos, even he knew things could be hard with the craziness that came with living as a Lagosian. Adeniran also knew he'd made the mistake of lecturing her on how to cross the street. As if she were a child and not the grown woman that she clearly was. He took in her

appearance. Gone was the wide-eyed look and replaced with smooth confidence. Or maybe it was there and he hadn't noticed.

Even if his intentions were pure, he had passed the message in the wrong way—agitated and frustrated after a family meeting.

That was one of his toughest times after getting the news that still sought to rip his life apart. Clearly, in this life, he couldn't catch a break.

He wouldn’t be surprised if that one-time encounter had landed him in her black book.

"It hurts to see you do that, y'know," Camille said behind him.

She stood next to him, her gaze taking in Adeniran's open view.

"What if I settled for another man? Would that make you happy?" The naked hurt in her tone sent him on a guilt trip.

Adeniran swung his gaze from the woman of his thoughts to his date, raising an eyebrow. "Why would you think that?" The guilt grew like tentacles working their way to a part of him he thought he'd locked up, knowing full well that he had forgotten the woman who stood by his side.

"If I showed interest in another man, would you even care?" She repeated, rubbing the soft bud of the peach rose softly along her throat.

He frowned. "Camile, where is this coming from? We aren’t even dating."

A douse of rage flashed in her eyes. “I’m sick and tired of this on-and-off thing between us. You keep introducing me as a friend.” She took a step closer. So close he could smell the fruity smell of the mocktail that hung on her breath. The same one in the glass sweating in his palm that he was yet to taste. “You know I want to be more than that to you, He Ran,” she said, calling him by his football nickname. “I want to bear your last name, have your babies.”

Babies? Adeniran shook his head and took a step back. As if being near her could somehow make her pregnant. “Camille, you need to calm down a bit.” Yes, they’d talked about a future, but Adeniran had never consented to it. He blanched at the prospect of elevating their relationship status, the more they discussed it. He liked her, but he was content for her to remain in the friend zone. “Besides, I don’t think this is the appropriate place to discuss us."

“Oh, I beg to differ. What better place to discuss it than in this extremely romantic restaurant?” She brought the peach rose to her nose to demonstrate her point. Inhaled deeply. “It smells so good. The whole place smells like a

slice of heaven. Have you been to the flower shop yet? I need to get a bunch of roses. Of course, you're paying."

He fought the smile creeping up his lips. Camille was spontaneous. Impulsive. One moment she was having a discussion, the next moment she was changing the topic to something else leaving the next person flustered and trying to keep up. Adeniran always kept up. "Sure."

She beamed. "So are we going to have a chance at being more than friends?" Her tone was tinged with longing and Adeniran felt like he was being pushed into a tight corner. He didn't want to ruin her heart or ruin their friendship. He could even say that years of rejecting her had made her more determined.

"Can't we discuss it later? Please." That was the best he could come up with.

"I don't want to," she said stubbornly.

His lips curved to the left as he gave her one of the smiles he'd heard had tripped many women's heartstrings. "C'mon, Cami. Let's have this conversation in private."

"*Ti vergogni di stare con me?* Are you ashamed to be with me? Is that it?"

He squinted at her and took her hand in his. Were they really doing this? Her English was fluent, but she only spoke Italian when she was getting upset. And in this case, he felt she was doing so to remind him of how loyal she'd been by going as far as to learn another language just because he'd transferred from WestHouse United in the U.K. and relocated to Italy. The last thing he needed was for her to be upset. "Never. I could never be ashamed of you. You know that."

She frowned. "Then why are you ogling another woman in my presence, Adeniran? Because it's impolite."

"I'm not ogling a woman. You know me."

Camille scoffed. "Oh, I know you so well." She rolled her eyes. "I'm going to get a drink."

He breathed a sigh of relief when she sauntered off to the bar, hoisting herself on one of the stools and smiling at the bartender. The dude smiled back, clearly checking her out with the way his eyes lingered on her face briefly before cascading down. And that didn't bother him. Camille was a big girl. She always knew how to put people in their place when they overstepped.

But with him, it had been a different story.

Just one mistaken kiss and he’d been in trouble with Camille Brown.

She was a rising model, and also the only daughter of the head coach at WestHouse United. When he first met her, he thought her to be extremely beautiful: she had a lovely figure, a beautiful face, creamy caramel-coloured skin (the seed of her interracial parents) and as icing on the cake—she loved the sport as much as he did. He’d been attracted to her. Everyone on the team knew, however, that the coach’s daughter was off-limits. But that hadn’t stopped Camille from showing her interest in him—occasionally making an appearance at their practice, waving at him when he happened to glance her way, and finally asking him for his phone number on a victory night of 0 - 3.

A week later she’d called to ask him out.

Adeniran had found the whole thing amusing but indulged her all the same. When Coach caught wind of it, he’d invited Adeniran to his home for dinner. Adeniran had wanted to decline the offer, but Coach had roped him into a nice home-cooked meal with his Ghanaian wife, Lumusi. Adeniran hadn't had one of those in far too long. One taste of Lumusi Brown's Ghanian jollof-rice had him craving home and the firewood-flavoured jollof-rice—which was arguably the best kind of jollof rice there was.

After Coach had warned him that his daughter was off limits (knowing firsthand the frivolous lifestyle that came with the business). Adeniran had stated clearly that he wanted nothing more than friendship from his daughter and after a full-minute stare-down, Coach had believed. In months to come, both of Camille's parents had welcomed him into their home and their lives and Adeniran saw them as the parents he hadn't known he needed.

He stepped back from the thoughts and settled his gaze back on Camille and the bartender who was no longer tossing flirtatious glances her way. And even if he were, Adeniran still felt nothing.

Camille had become a loyal friend over the years, standing by him even when he told her flatly that he wasn't looking for a relationship. Disappointed, she agreed to his terms, and he'd grown to value her friendship more than anything else over the years. She was his female best friend in more ways than one. Or maybe his only best friend. It had been a long time since he had spoken to Mosadi, his boyhood closest friend. They kept in touch now and then but had grown apart over the years.

Not that he had that many friends to selectively choose one that stood out. He didn’t keep too many of those by his side. Growing up, he had relegated himself to being a loner.

He realised he was being unfair to her. She didn’t deserve to be strung along. He needed to cut her loose. Set her free so she could meet a man who would love her the way she wanted to be loved. He would let her cool off before bringing the conversation up again. He needed to clear the air and reiterate his stance on them being strictly friends.

With a sigh, he lifted his drink to his lips. The sweetness that would have coexisted with the coolness of the drink had evaporated. His eyes found Isimeme again.

She looked tastefully dressed in her silk-like skirt with a funny pattern, pale pink blouse and wine stilettos. Nelly stood by her side, clearly marking his territory with the lingering stares at his date and how he stuck by her side like a bee on honey—which was amusing to Adeniran. After all, his friend went through women like the player that he was. But he’d never seen him so hung up on a woman. Not like this.

Adeniran felt compelled to right his wrongs as soon as possible.

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CHAPTER THREE

ISIMEME

A famous chef once said, *'if you cook, you are going to get hurt'*, but Isi also believed in another statement, *'to love, meant the risk of getting hurt'*. Because did a person's heart get to choose who to love? It was not about being a pessimist by believing your heart would be crushed or the love of your life would forsake you for another woman—or worse, die—but about the likelihood of never getting it back when you gave it away. To Isi, that had to be much worse than the forearm scars, the splash of hot oil on the face, and a few knife wounds gotten from her passion for cooking.

And for that, she was in serious [1]*gobe*.

What was there not to like? Even in her mind's eyes, she could conjure up his profile. When it came to his lean, muscular body, decadent chocolate eyes, thick dark hair, and the way he looked at her, smouldering and intense —considering she was nearly drooling whenever she saw him these days— she had entered 'one-chance' territory. Which was ironic because, after her father died, she'd spent the other half of her life caring for her aunt and uncle, leaving no time for boys or even considering the possibility of entertaining a love interest. They would never have permitted her to converse with, let alone date, the opposite sex.

In their interesting way of looking at things—getting pregnant was just inches away from liking a boy.

She turned her body slightly and her gaze landed on Nelson Banjo, elegantly dressed in a clear-cut pale-pink blazer and matching pants. A white button-up shirt tucked in and he had this whole Caribbean look working for him. Isi smiled to herself. Only Nelly could pull off such sweet colours without breaking a sweat—his gait confident and his smile contagious. His looks were one-hundred-percent caramelised onions yummy.

And the best part was he liked her. Like, really, *really* liked her. Erinma and Odavwaro, Erinma's EA, had filled her ears with stories about Nelly’s knack for casual relationships. But even they could tell something was different about him now. She knew deep down that things were bothering him that he covered up with his silly banter. The eyes, however, could not conceal what was hidden in the depths of a person's soul.

While she had known him for a few months one thing Nelly had failed to do was hide his feelings for her. He didn't cower behind kind gestures or joke about it or do anything crazy. He was extremely vocal about it; mentioning it in little ways and in every way. Expressing it openly without an iota of care over her background and that she was nowhere the kind of girl he would usually go for.

Isi's eyes skimmed over his profile without being too obvious. Her insides were suddenly giddy. *Yes, he is undeniably attractive.* He had always been clean-shaven but recently, he was letting his beard grow out, and Isi liked the look on him. She was getting to know what she wanted in a man these days, having been kept away from the crazy world of dating and courtship. Perhaps she was a beard kinda girl. She didn’t know for sure. She knew one thing, though—she had a serious crush on Nelly.

Isi bit her lip and her cheeks warmed at her self-confession.

Although she couldn't exactly put her feelings for Nelly into words, she knew her feelings for him were growing and their meeting one another had to mean something.

What if…

No.

With a shake of her head, she dismissed those errant thoughts. Not wanting to put ideas in her head. Ideas she wanted to be true but wasn't sure if it was God's will or hers.

She blew out a breath and tucked a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. Even if her heart was way ahead of her, now wasn't the time to lose her

head. This was her chance to live out her dreams now that she had the freedom she had never had before while caring for her aunt and then her uncle before they died. Her survival back then was dependent on her faith, fellowship with her church family, and voracious reading habits.

There was a time, Isi had treasured Disney fairytales, swoon-worthy love stories and classic hallmark movies—the whole shebang. It exposed her to an entirely different world in which Isi wanted to live in: the good versus the bad with the predictable outcome of the good guy winning in the end. And yet, no matter how far-fetched they were to her than reality, Isi had enjoyed devouring them like a child starved of food for days. One thing was consistent across the stories though—every prince needed a princess.

An enchanting love story.

All love stories usually started the same way: the boy meets a girl, the girl crushes on the boy, the boy expresses his love for the girl and then they eventually get married after all the obstacles they have to surmount. Isi had read quite a few of those romance-swoony books, but since she had given God the task of writing her love story, she wasn't too expectant of a fairy tale kind of love.

Don't doubt My power to work great plans for your life, Isi.

A slow breath brushed past her lips. These moments of hearing God speak… tickled her in ways that gave her goose-pimples all over her body. The way God spoke to her privately amid a company of people, gently wading through her thoughts to impress His loving Words on her heart. It made a girl feel special.

I believe it, God, she whispered back from her spirit. She had no doubts that God was willing to make her story an unforgettable one. Most especially since the Bible had taught her to be expectant, she was willing to do exactly that.

In fact, it was part of the allures of a fairy tale story; it made a person believe in the unthinkable—like believing in an unseen God who was Love Himself.

As a believer in falling in love (not the headlong fall because you were walking blindly and not watching your footsteps, but falling in the sense of surrendering her will and choice to God and accepting His choice of a partner for her) she believed in growing to love a person—because love grew stronger with time.

And because of that—

"Hello again," a male voice from behind her said softly, invading her thoughts.

Isi spun around to face Prince Adeniran Aremeyin. She blinked. “Good evening, er - Prince Adeniran.” He looked sharp in a black tuxedo and bow tie tonight, as he always did. His crisp white shirt fit perfectly across his broad chest. Isi had to force herself to swallow. This prince, no matter how handsome he was, lacked all of the distinguishing characteristics of a charming prince.

Was she supposed to curtsy? God knew she wasn't interested in doing so. Still, she would if it was necessary.

The corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn’t smile. Isi had the impression he found her amusing and not in a way she found personally funny. “Evening, Madam Chef. And it’s just Adeniran, please. No title." He cocked his head to the side. "It’s good to see you here again. Hale and hearty.”

Huh? And then it came running back to her. He was talking about the day they ran into each other. The day his car almost ran her over and he scolded her for not knowing how to cross a road. She gave him a small smile. “It’s definitely by God’s grace that I’m alive today.”

His lips curled up in a tight smile. “Of course.”

Isi looked over her shoulder, wondering when Nelly would return to her side and relieve her of Prince Adeniran's intense scrutiny.

“Do you still eat at sleazy restaurants for lunch?”

Her eyebrows arched. “Pardon?”

“The day we met, you were on your way to a restaurant whose structure was riddled with safety hazards bouncing all over it. Do you still eat at such run-down establishments? It fascinates me that a trained chef like yourself would go somewhere like that.”

“Somewhere like where, exactly? Where people sell food and try to make an honest living by doing what they know they can?" *Or what they think they know?* Isi cringed inwardly as she remembered the heavy curry taste of her meal that day.

“So you’re saying that the food there was fantastic?”

She tried her hardest not to stare him down—even if he was inches taller than her. “I never said anything like that. I’m only saying we shouldn’t look down on people or jump to conclusions.”

He looked amused. “Okay. That’s reasonable.” He dipped his head in a small bow. “Well, it was nice seeing you again, Chef.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. Unfortunately, she was unable to return the sentiment. When it was glaring she was not going to respond to him, he smiled and strolled away.

Isi’s eyes trailed after him as she observed him greeting people in the same stiff manner as he made his way to his reserved table. It was her third meeting with Prince Adeniran and she still wasn’t sure if she liked him or not. She was more in favour of the latter. She knew it was wrong to jump to conclusions—for goodness’ sake she had just chastised him for it. But would it be wrong to make those conclusions if he was a tease and a grouch on the three occasions she’d met him? Yes, he was wealthy, annoyingly handsome, and physically fit, but that wasn’t all a prince should be all about.

She exhaled. It might be unrealistic, but deep down, she was still a die-hard fan of a swoon-worthy love story that made her heart flutter. She recounted several fairytale stories from her childhood, including Belle from Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, Tiana from The Princess and the Frog, and Ariel from The Little Mermaid were among her favourites. Some were Princesses who were born into royalty with a lot to live up to.

However, Belle was her best character. She wasn’t born a princess but was swept into it by her vulnerability and kindness. Or maybe it was because Isi loved bright colours that she took a liking to Bella’s character in the romantic fantasy.

Every lesson learnt in Beauty and the Beast tugged at her heartstrings—not judging a book by its cover, seeing beyond a person's facial beauty and deep into the heart and soul to what they were truly made of. But what reaffirmed those lessons was the fact that God gazed at them in that way, seeing into their deepest thoughts and hearts. Because identity stretched beyond the physical and into the spiritual.

She chuckled to herself, shaking her head at how far her thoughts took her.

Isi you need to lighten up a little.

She was at a breathtaking restaurant opening with people she considered close friends and yet she couldn’t stop her thoughts from wandering—not that any of her thoughts were bad. She just couldn't help but associate even the littlest of things with how great God was.

Isi ran her hand down the smooth asymmetrical patterns of her handkerchief hem skirt. Her gaze darted around the elegant décor of Palette Explosion in lovely themes of light brown, a dash of green, black and yellow. There was also a photo ops section with flowers and furniture set at a corner, towards the bar. The entire place was more than she had envisioned. *Thank You, God.* There was no jealous feeling snaking its way to her heart—because she was so proud of Erinma and how far she'd come. God had given her friend Beauty for Ashes…and Isi knew there was more to come. Her vision had come true. God had made it happen and Isi allowed herself to bask in the victories of the positive visions she'd had. They weren't like the others.

Isi forced a smile at the couple who glanced at her as they passed by.

Not right now. She wouldn't allow herself to plunge into the darkness. Not today. Because today was a good day and her friend needed her smiles and positive energy. She always had her alone time to take a trip to the past.

"Hey, gorgeous." Isi turned to look at Nelly with two glasses in his hands. He extended a glass of mocktail to her when he reached her side. "You good?"

A tingle ran down her arm as she felt glad to be the object of Nelly's attention. "Yeah." It had been an interesting couple of months since she packed her little belongings and moved to Lagos. She'd been in Lagos for over eight months, met Nelly some months ago at Erinma's company sitting lounge, and he'd quickly become a close friend—one of the few she'd ever had.

And I had almost not given him my phone number.

She stared down at the glass, wondering how she was going to take a sip without smearing her Fairy Dust Pink lipstick—courtesy of Proud Belle—on the glass.

"What's on your mind?"

He laughed when she told him.

"No one is watching you. Except me. You can go ahead and paint the glass red if you so wish."

Isi shoved his arm playfully. "I don't wish to do that."

"Just don't get dehydrated in an attempt to please people. It's not your style."

"I'm not trying to please anyone." She looked down at her glass and wrinkled her nose. "I just don't want it to look disgusting."

“Then lick the rim of your glass.” Isi raised a brow at him, her curiosity also piqued at how he knew this sort of information. Nelly chuckled. “Don’t look at me like that. It’s a trick one of my sisters uses. She’s a heavy user of makeup and she always has one event to attend. And trust me, I’ve seen more absurd methods.”

“Hmm.” She looked down at the strawberry-coloured drink with small cubes of ice. There were a lot of things she didn’t know about Nelson Banjo. A lot of things she found that she wanted to know.

“Were you jealous?” He teased her.

“I’m not answering that question.” She raised the glass to her lips and drank. Not interested in following his interesting albeit weird instructions.

Nelly’s eyes twinkled with mischief. These interactions with Nelly were so much better compared to the grumpy footballer prince.



“Hey, guys,” Odavwaro, breezed over to them. Her dress was a stunning blue with a trumpet bottom in a brownish-blue Ankara material.

"Hi, Odavwaro. You look good," Nelly commented.

Odavwaro bent her knees and put one foot in front of the other in a slight curtsy. "Thank you very much. You're far too kind. I'm hoping I run into a nice-looking guy this evening." She looked around the room and back at them. “Seen anyone that you could introduce me to?”

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm. What? My mum claims that church is not the only marketplace."

Nelly turned his gaze to Isi. “I definitely believe that.”

Isi lifted her glass to her lips to hide her smile and took careful sips.

Odavwaro continued, “No matter how much I disagree with her, she's right. So I'm left with always having to play dress up whenever I have to step out of the house."

“Don’t we hate it when they are always right?” Nelly said.

Odavwaro snorted and mumbled, “tell me about it.”

“Have you seen Erinma though? I can’t seem to find her," Isi said. Already the room was getting packed with guests; bloggers and influencers, celebrities and all other persons who showed up to have a taste of fine-dining, exotic flowers and mingle.

“She stepped out briefly. I’m sure she will be back soon.”

Isi frowned. It was strange for the host to be missing their event. “I’ll call her," she decided.

Odavwaro expelled a deep breath. "Well, I’ll shine my eyes and be on the lookout. Now if you will excuse me, I need to head back to the flower shop to keep the flow going. Bye guys!” She wriggled her fingers at them and glided away.

“I like her.”

“She’s a very likeable person,” Nelly agreed. "Just like you."

"Hmmm." Isi reached into her purse for her phone and dialled Erinma's number. She frowned. It was unreachable.

Where did she go?

“Hope you're having fun, though?" Nelly’s question burst into her thoughts.

She gave a slight nod. “I am.” She looked around the room. “But I’m also wondering where Erinma went.” Maybe she went to invite Andrew to attend the grand opening? Isi sincerely hoped so. Isi had liked Andrew, a single dad and businessman, since the first time they met—his attraction to her friend was glaringly obvious. Erinma had been unhappy ever since she broke up with him months ago, mentioning her insecurities and fears of another failed relationship because of newly revealed secrets about Andrew's baby mama. While Isi didn’t dismiss her friend’s concerns, she'd also felt she’d been too quick to distance herself from him and his daughter, Bella.

It was several minutes later that Erinma made a reappearance. And Isi couldn’t help but grin at the man by her side. Andrew Madu. Their open stares at each other revealed that they had put their differences aside. They were undeniably in love with each other. Isi almost let out a sigh but kept it trapped within her. She felt like a love-struck preteen with heart emojis in her eyes, eagerly waiting for that kind of love. A love pure and true that fought to grow stronger over time no matter the obstacles.

Excitement bubbled within her and she knew it was going to be worth the wait.

"Why are you grinning like you won the lottery?" Nelly’s voice dismissed her musings.

She lifted her shoulders, retaining her smile but vamping it up a bit. "I always smile like I won the lottery.”

Nelly raised a brow. “Is that so? Well, tonight’s smile appears to be extra special.” He threw a glance behind him, brows furrowed as he returned his gaze to her. “Or is there some guy you’re smiling at?”

“Yeah right.” She shoved his arm playfully. “I’ve barely noticed if there are good-looking men here.”

He blinked. “I hope I don’t fall into that category.”

Laughing, she shook her head.

“Hmmm. Well, I know for a fact some have been staring your way.”

Is he jealous? The thought warmed her somewhat. “Really? That escaped my notice. In any case, I did win the lottery. And no. I'm not going to tell you what it is."

Nelly pretended to be offended by placing his hand over his heart. "Is this how you treat a good friend?"

She rolled her eyes, ignoring him.

But he was right; she felt as if she’d won the lottery. Because this time she spent with her friends was equal to the dizzying excitement of winning (if she did win), and this seemed to be her best life yet, with things finally looking up for her. Regardless of the blows, she’d taken in the past. Eyes had not seen, ears had not heard, what God had in store for her.

And as for her love life…

She raised her eyes to Nelly. Who knew, maybe he was right there with her, knowing Nelly was interested in her beyond the safety cushions of friendship, but something held her back. Isi wasn’t ready to vacate that plush side. Not without a yes from God.

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1. a Nigerian slang word meaning trouble.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ADENIRAN

"Hello, Prince Adeniran."

Adeniran turned slightly to face the person behind the voice. A beautiful woman in her mid-thirties or early forties. The woman who had interviewed him a while back. "Good evening, Ma'am."

"Ma'am?" Her eyes twinkled as she chuckled. "Let's skip the formalities, shall we? As you know, my name is Ari Mato. But I prefer you call me Ari," she explained.

He pursed his lips. "Ari. Duly noted."

"I'm grateful for the last interview with you. You took off before we could chat."

"I apologise. I had other meetings lined up for the day."

"It's fine. I'm told you will be leaving for Italy soon. I hope to have another interview with you soon. Maybe when you return?"

The Ari Mato show was one of Africa's most popular talk shows. He rarely watched the show but based on Sade's ramblings (she watched the show often), the woman was good at what she did. He'd appeared on the show before. Several months ago. Adeniran was unbothered by her questions, yet he still felt uneasy during interviews and talking in front of a crowd. Despite his tight-lipped responses and stiff demeanour, the talk-show host drew out emotions from both her audience and guests. If a

comparison or standard was required, she was the Nigerian Oprah of their time.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“That said, would you be open to a video interview to encourage youths in a foundation? We are planning an empowerment program in which we will bring in a number of successful Nigerians to speak to the children in the orphanage and a few juvenile correctional homes for boys.”

"I may be willing to consider it if some questions I have are answered."

She grinned, exposing even white dentition. “Great. Please forward all of your inquiries, and be expecting a call from my team as well to finalise things.” Adeniran thought their conversation was over until she cast a not-so-subtle glance behind him and swept her gaze back to his face. “And how about that lovely lady over there at the bar? Is she ‘the one’?" She inquired, her index fingers forming air quotes. "I believe her name is Camille Brown.”

Adeniran frowned. Sade hadn’t mentioned the woman as being a Gossip. “No. We are close friends.”

She nodded once. Accepting his response. “Well enough. I hope to have you on the show again one of these days. And the next time around I would appreciate it if I didn’t have to keep trying to reach your manager. He was rude at some point in the past. Would it be too much trouble to ask for your card?”

“I apologise on his behalf.” Adeniran took out his sister’s business card and handed it to Ari. His sister doubled as his go-to person whenever he was in town. “That’s my sister’s card. You contact her, and she gets in touch with me.”

Ari accepted the card and in turn handed it over to the man behind her. “Your sister Sade. It would be great to have her on the show as well. I’ll be in touch.”

As Ari and her companion walked away, he returned his gaze to Camille. He frowned as she tossed her head back and downed another drink. How many had she consumed? Adeniran silently berated himself as she motioned to the bartender for a refill. He should have been keeping count. He took a step forward toward her.

“Adeniran.”

What is it again?

He halted in his steps and turned as his business partner approached him, accompanied by a tall, dark man. He turned to give his full attention to Erinma, giving Camille one last look as the bartender refilled her glass.

“Hi, Niran.” He accepted Erinma’s side-hug and nodded to the tall, nice-looking guy by her side. “This is my boyfriend, Andrew Madu. Andrew, this is Prince Adeniran Aremeyin.”

Adeniran hitched a brow but extended his hand anyway. The man's handshake was firm and confident. Last that Adeniran heard from online gossip waggers in passing and from Sade, Erinma had broken up with her long-time fiancé barely four months ago, and already she was off the market. Apparently, even their long-term relationship—which Adeniran had expected would lead to a full-blown society wedding—hadn’t survived whatever had prompted their breakup. And considering the way Erinma smiled up at her new man, the guy wasted no time grabbing what he wanted. “Nice to meet you, Andrew.”

“Same here. It’s really a pleasure meeting you. I’m a fan.”

Erinma turned to Andrew. “And he’s one of our partners here in Palette Explosion.”

Andrew looked down at his girlfriend with a shocked expression and then back at Adeniran. “Wow. Congratulations on the grand opening.”

It was grand. Soft music and light conversation over a gourmet meal lingered in the air. There was a pleasant feeling that hung over them. Even if Adeniran hadn't been so involved in the setup and his sister had been preoccupied with her own thing and their joint partnership in luxurious apartments, Erinma had managed to bring her vision to fruition exactly as she had proposed.

“Thank you. Erinma has a way of convincing people to join her team.”

“Yeah, she’s quite persuasive.” He wrapped his hand around Erinma’s waist and drew her close to him, close but respectful. Another yearning struck Adeniran’s chest and he struggled to keep it at bay. “You did great in the match. Those dribbles you gave the opposing team were spot on.” Andrew's quick shift in topic made the ache in his chest lessen a bit, allowing him to breathe easily on familiar ground.

Adeniran gave a single nod. “Thanks.” It was always reassuring to hear how well he was doing.

“Andrew owns BAM Cabs,” Erinma proffered the information with a smile on her face. “I don’t know if you know it.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it. The word is that you’re giving Uber and Bolt a run for their money.”

Andrew grinned. “I certainly hope so. Means we’re doing something right.”

“Keep it up. Healthy competition is needed in this country. Too much power in too few hands harms the masses.”

“Definitely.”

When Erinma excused herself to attend to guests who needed her attention, they talked briefly about football. Adeniran should have been doing rounds, but that was the job of his younger sister Sade. Even though he was a large shareholder he preferred to be a taciturn partner, leaving his sister to handle the partnership's side. That had worked better for them.

“How’s your leg?”

Adeniran’s body stiffened at the question. Almost a year ago he’d suffered from a knee injury that almost hurt his career. Thankfully, he recovered in time to join the team for the Championship League. But once in a while, it ached him.

“It’s fine,” he gritted out harsher than he intended. “Sorry. I’m a bit on edge.” *And itchy to get out of here.*

“It’s okay. Thank God it wasn’t worse.”

Adeniran shoved one hand in his pocket.

“Are you looking at retiring soon?”

The question caught him off-guard but he schooled his features to hold back the fear that came with the possibility of no longer playing professionally. “Not yet,” he said with much less force.

Football was an energy-consuming sport but there was a global retirement age pegged at thirty-five. And Adeniran was three years short of that. In his field, the ‘R-word’ was many a footballer’s nightmare. It marked the end of an era and the start of something new. Only sometimes that ‘new’ was unknown and frightening if unplanned. But that wasn’t Adeniran’s case. He didn’t plan to retire until he was at least thirty-seven and until then he would put everything he had into making everyone see he wasn’t dispensable. That was his only plan. Forget his uncle and what had been hinted at the last family meeting.

“I still have some game in me.”

Andrew nodded in agreement. “I don't doubt it. There are still the likes of Gianluigi Buffon, Diego Lopez, Rabiu Ali and the likes.” Adeniran

stiffened at the mention of Rabiu Ali, a Nigerian footballer, who a few people nicknamed ‘young Pele’ after the Brazilian legend Pelé—a former professional footballer who played as a forward in Brazil. Pelé was dubbed ‘the greatest’ by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA). Rabiu Ali was older and still in the game, something Adeniran also hoped to achieve. “You guys keep putting the country forward and giving us something to look up to other than the hell our corrupt leaders and some of us citizens are doing.” Andrew nodded. “Keep it up, man.”

His eyes moved till he found her back to him. She was laughing softly as Nelly leaned in and said something to her.

“I will,” Adeniran mumbled.

No. Retirement, marriage, and kids—were not on his short-term or long-term goals list. He just needed to get back in the game and all those silly whimsical thoughts would be rid of.

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CHAPTER FIVE

ISIMEME

Isi held back a laugh from something Nelly had said when a beautiful woman walked up to them. The laughter slowly died in Isi's throat.

“Hey,” the woman said to Nelly as she got close to him. She placed a hand on his arm, leaned even closer and brushed her lips against his cheek. She pulled back and offered a sweet smile that bared her perfect dentition. “How are you? You look good as always.”

Nelly smiled at her politely, also taking a step back to put some distance between them. “Thanks. The same goes for you. And I’m doing good. You?”

She shrugged. “Same old, same old but I’m okay.” Her gaze turned to Isi. “Isi, right? Nelly introduced us at Proud Belle’s launch party.”

Isi nodded. “Yes. You remembered right. And you're Tito Jacobs.” There was no way she could forget the name and face—who she was. Not after the shocking realisation of who she was to Erinma's boyfriend and his daughter.

"I’m good with names and faces. Though it can get tiring with my line of work.” Tito took a glass of white wine from a passing server. “Hope Nelly hasn’t been boring you with his dry sense of humour.” She took a sip and Isi narrowed her eyes at the glass when she lowered it. There was no lipstick stain.

How did she do that?

Isi blinked twice and shook her head. “No. On the contrary, he’s been really fun to hang out with.”

"Is that so?" Tito raised an eyebrow. “Hmmm, our Nelly is improving. Okay *nau*. I guess that's good to know." She pointed a black fingernail at Nelly. "Mind if I borrow Nelly for a few minutes?” She turned her gaze to Nelly. “I need to introduce you to someone and maybe we can discuss a way forward for the Topaz Project you’re working on.”

The Topaz project? Isi knew Nelly had mentioned the project a few times in their conversations over the last few weeks; something about having issues with the client and what they needed for their brand. If Tito could help in some way, Isi was all for him finding a way forward for the client.

“You okay with me leaving your side for a little while?” Nelly asked.

Isi gave him a look that she hoped portrayed what she thought of him sticking by her side instead of following Tito right away. “I’m not a baby. I can take care of myself.” She nudged his shoulder. “Go ahead.”

He pressed his lips together as if unsure and then he nodded. “Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

Isi wanted to say something cute and flirty about missing his company but thought against it. “I’ll be here," was what she eventually settled for.

Alone, Isi walked back to her table for two. She plopped down on her seat and took out her phone. A week ago, an idea for making a cookbook for simple and nutritious meals had jumped at her out of nowhere and she had started taking down notes on what she would like to put in it—if she decided to go through with it. She’d learnt this: to achieve the goals she had to be intentional about it.

Her Dad's older brother, Uncle Idahor had taught her the hard way how help didn’t come in pretty wrapped boxes but that a person needed to persevere to make some advancement in life. Hone what little skills they had. Her job at Urban Mojo left little time for herself on most days. All she wanted to do when she got back was take a long bath and sleep. But taking a bath was a luxury while she was crashing at her cousin Nosa’s crowded apartment in the far place of Iyana-Ipaja.

Isi exhaled gently and looked behind her.

From across the room, Nelly was in deep conversation with Tito Jacobs and another gentleman. It was a surprise she was the mother of Andrew’s daughter. From Isi’s findings on the internet, she was twenty-seven. Making her a teenager when she had her daughter, Bella. Isi couldn’t help but

wonder what had transpired in her life to make a mother walk out on her daughter and her father. But not only was it none of Isi's business, it was not her place to judge. It was interesting how they were all acquainted with one another: Nelly, Tito, Adeniran and Sade—the Aremeyin siblings.

Isi was yet to know the full story.

From what Nelly has told her, they had all gone to the same private school in Lagos. Only Tito had been expelled. Even though she moved to another school, she kept in touch with previous friends and they'd stayed in touch over the years. Even if they weren't in the same social class standing, they kept up their relationship with one another.

Tito Jacobs was a queen of social media, trending with her hilarious videos and catchy captions. Not only was she smart, but she was also strikingly beautiful. Her father was the founder of J. Jacobs Consulting Firm. Tito's father catered to well-known corporations, so money was not an issue.

She picked a toothpick, swiped a [1]*puff-puff* from a plate and popped it into her mouth. Isi was obviously surrounded by the socialites of Lagos. And she couldn't help but feel a little self-conscious.

A server came to her then, requesting her order and she ordered her meal from the mouth-watering extensive menu. She smiled up at him when he said her food would be with her in a few minutes. Reaching for a tumbler, she poured some water from the pitcher. Looking left and right, she ran the tip of her tongue over one side of her glass and took a sip. When she brought it away from her lips she glanced down and so no sign of her lipstick.

It actually worked?

She looked up, grinning but holding back a laugh. Erinma was mingling with friends and patrons around the room. Now more than ever she felt the harsh reality that she was alone and was reminded that this wasn't the kind of setting she was used to. She was a humble girl from a humble background.

Plus, her cousin loved to remind her of that every chance she got. Isi's grin faltered a tiny bit.

Do you really think a rich guy would want to marry you? Don't forget where you came from. You're poor like the rest of us…

Though her cousin's words were true in some ways, Isi wasn't going to let her words define her. No matter that seeing Tito with Nelly made her

want to believe her.

Isi bit her bottom lip and made every effort not to look down at Tito's glistening legs or the fact that her dress ended mid-thighs. The sight of them together made her stomach tighten. She looked away and tucked into the chicken and potato kebab that the server had brought to her. She savoured the buttery texture of the potato while trying to keep her mind from pacing back to Nelly and Tito.

Why am I even bothered?

It wasn’t even like they were an item.

Despite her self-talk to avoid tossing glances at them, somehow her eyes found their way back to them. Tito’s hand resting on his shoulder. She took her gaze away from them and her eyes clashed with a pair of brown eyes attached to the very handsome man seated at a table for two.

She waved a little and he bowed his head a little in greeting. Uncomfortable, she was the first to look away.

Her brows pinched together. Was Prince Adeniran actively staring at her? She squeezed her eyes shut. Had he witnessed her glass-licking technique? She opened her eyes and looked back to find his gaze now directed down at his phone. Erinma had mentioned he was an investor. Isi thought he would have a seat in a VIP corner. What was he doing sitting at the back?



She caught a whiff of his cologne even before he whispered into her ear. "How's the food?"

"Mmm...Delicious."

“What’s up?” Nelly asked, taking his seat next to her.

“Nothing much. Thinking is all.”

“About?"

He grabbed a fork in front of him and helped himself to her food. He made a sound as he chewed.

Isi smiled.

"Good?"

He nodded. Swallowed. "I'm yet to taste your cooking. If it's better than this—which I'm guessing it would be—you're going to be my personal chef."

"I doubt you'll be able to afford me."

"I'll pay, whatever the cost is."

Her stomach flipped as he teased back with a wink. She averted her gaze from him before leaning in close and doing something goofy like pulling his cheeks. Because that's how she felt when she was with Nelly—it made her want to unearth her inner child.

God, it will be nice if I could just know who this man of mine is.

That one, Beloved.

Isi frowned. Confused. *What?* She had not expected an immediate answer.

Turn to your left.

Isi blinked but did as she was told, pulling herself away from Nelly's side. Her eyes scanned that corner of the room, without knowing what she was looking for. The living room was teeming with people who had come to grace Erinma's invitation. She lifted her glass to her lips but faltered when her gaze collided with a familiar pair of eyes.

That one. That's him.

Prince Adeniran looked smug, as though he was privy to her conversation with God. He gave a single nod yet again and raised his glass at her. She offered a small smile and turned away. She reached for her glass and took a sip of her drink.

Him who? What?! Isi clutched her stomach.

She was hallucinating. She had to be!

That's the man I have for you. But he doesn't know it yet.

Some sips of her drink flew out of her mouth while others passed the wrong route. *What?!*

"Hey, are you good?" Nelly said next to her, placing a palm on her back. His touch sent a sweet tingle down her spine.

She nodded. Coughed. Eyes teary. "I miss-swallowed," she croaked out. She lifted her gaze to meet Nelly's concerned chocolate brown ones. Her mind was still jumbled from what God had just told her, so she managed a small smile. "I'm good. Thanks, Nelly."

"You sure? Do you want me to get you some water?"

She shook her head. “No. I’m just going to use the restroom. I’ll be back.” She squeezed his arm, reassuring him that she was okay and stood. When she got into the restroom, she entered a free stall, closed the door and sat on the closed toilet seat.

What had God said? That Prince Adeniran was the man for her but he didn’t know it yet.

Bile rose in Isi's throat. There had to be a mistake somewhere. Did Adeniran's presence irritate her so much that her thoughts flew to him, imagining the impossible? *Why are you telling me this, God? And what do You mean he doesn't know it yet? Why am I in the know and he isn’t?* When an answer wasn’t forthcoming she shook her head and got out her compact mirror to check if her makeup was still on and bits of water hadn’t marred it. Even if that was the case she knew not what to do to remedy it. She didn’t have any makeup on her.

She swallowed hard and stared at herself in the compact mirror from her purse. Odavwaro had cajoled her into putting on some makeup and Isi had. The beautiful rose-gold eye shadow looked good on her. It made her look princessy and not like the poor girl who had grown up without a father and had to face a few of life’s struggles to survive. The lipstick made her look flirty and bold. As much as she loved it, she didn’t see herself allotting an amount of time to get her makeup done before leaving the house. She was, and probably would always be, a plain girl of simple taste. She grew up wearing vaseline on her lips till she could afford to get chapstick. And even when buying makeup wouldn't break the bank, she still didn’t want that stress of layering her face.

Even her clothing options were somewhat stress-free.

Being that her wardrobe choices consisted of very few trousers and mostly skirts.

She stood and stepped out of the stall. Her love for skirts was like that not because a man of God had promised brimstone and fire if she wore them. But because of her convictions and dislike for them as her go-to wear every day. She liked the comfortable, laid-back and decent flirty skirts. Asides from that, she loved the different fabrics and their varying lengths. It added a touch of playfulness to her overall look. Add cute shoes and she felt somewhat sexy in her skin.

Isi spared another glance at her appearance in the mirror over the sink.

Even if Nelly's reaction at seeing her had been worth the forty-five-minute effort put into getting ready. The way his eyes roved over her still gave her goosebumps and that flutter in her stomach. Nelly was a good guy. Given that he wasn't perfect and had his flaws. But God could work on him. He had every opportunity to be the man God could make him become.

But how, God? I don't know that Prince guy. How can he be the one? What about Nelly? I know him.

My plans for you are good, to give you the desired end.

Isi squeezed her eyes shut. She shook her head. Maybe she was forming thoughts in her head. Maybe she just needed to think things through. She had always done what God expected of her. But this—this where her heart already belonged to someone else and God wanted her to expel all of those feelings and hand her heart to someone else? Just like that? Isi felt light-headed and her very heart felt like it was about to burst. Maybe she hadn't heard Him correctly. Perhaps it was the high feeling of the night and all the excitement that was making her think this way. Or God was playing games on her and it was punishment for not being nicer to him.

I'm sorry God if I'm not shining as bright as I should and leading others to You. I'll do better. I promise.

Taking a deep breath, she composed herself and walked back out the door.

All her life she had followed His rules. Done what He wanted. This was definitely not how God would repay her years of faithful obedience. Not when she'd been with an uncle who was hard to relate with. God wouldn't give her a husband who would treat her with her disdain or look down upon her. She knew God gave good gifts to His children, and since she was His child, He wouldn't give her otherwise.

If you, imperfect as you are, know how to lovingly take care of your children and give them what's best, how much more ready is your heavenly Father to give wonderful gifts to those who ask him? And so she clung to the latter of the Scripture, believing it would be for her just as God's Word had said.

"Hey. You good?" Nelly asked, placing his hand on the small of her back when she returned to their table.

She prompted her lips to smile a bit. "Not really. But don't worry, I'll be fine."

As he frowned, the lines between his brows pinched together. “Are you sure? Do you want to leave?”

“No. I’ll be fine.” She smiled even wider, moved by his concern. “I have a lot on my mind right now, and I don’t want to leave. It’s a great night, and I still want to have Chef Jordan’s dessert. Erinma mentioned it was going to be amazing.”

“Alrighty, then.”

Isi took a small sip from the glass of ice water Nelly offered her. There was so much of Nelly that she already knew. So much of him, she was already familiar with: his sandalwood scent, the crinkle at the corner of his eyes as he smiled, the stern expression on his handsome face when he tried, and yet failed, to be serious. And then there was his playful nature, which made it easy for her to relax her guard down when she was around him—even when she had a strong hunch that he carried his share of burdens he was yet to divulge to her. How could God want her to be with that kind of man? It had to be a mistake. *It* is *a mistake.* He was easy on the eyes but nothing about his character attracted her.

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1. traditional African snack made of fried dough

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CHAPTER SIX

ISIMEME

“You guys! Hope you’re having good fun.” Isi turned at Erinma’s voice only to find Erinma standing behind them with Prince Adeniran beside her.

“Where did you go?”

Erinma winked at her. “I’ll gist you later.”

Nelly shook his head. “You women and your girl talk.”

Erinma shrugged. “There’s never a dull moment, Nelly. You should join us one day.”

"Soon," Isi added to her friend's taunts. For as long as she could, Isi tried to delay shifting her gaze to the man standing next to Erinma.

“I’ll pass, please. Hey, Adeniran.” Nelly held up his hand to Prince Adeniran. They slapped hands and pressed their knuckles together. “How far, man?”

[1]*“I dey.”*

“Niran, you remember Isimeme? My childhood friend,” Erinma said.

Prince Adeniran’s gaze flicked to hers. Not a smile in sight. “Of course, the chef. She’s not a face a person can easily forget. Her food made quite an impression.”

Her mood was already upside down and his words just further dampened it. How could he talk about her food making ‘quite an impression’ with no expression on his face?

Every time Isi spent in the kitchen, she wanted those eating to taste all the love and passion she poured into her food. How much of herself she gave into preparing a meal that brought smiles to people's faces and joy in their hearts—in summary; how it made them feel. She prayed that her food would be a blessing to those who ate it. Hearing him speak, he clearly hadn't gotten an impression from her food. Not the one she wanted.

Isi forced herself to smile. "Mmm. Thank you very much. I guess it's good to see you again, Prince Adeniran." She blinked at her small slip. *Oops!* He had told her to drop the title. Would he assume she was trying to take a dig at him on purpose?

Instead, his profile remained stoic. "Please, drop the title. It's Adeniran. And we've actually met before." The side of his mouth quirked up. "I bumped into her while she was attempting to kill herself."

Erinma's jaw dropped.

"What?" Nelly said, his gaze immediately swinging to her.

Isi was already shaking her head. "No. No. It wasn't like that. A bike rider came out of nowhere and I had to step back. Unfortunately, it was his car coming my way." *This guy is really a piece of work. Is this his poor attempt at making jokes?*

"When did this happen?"

"Actually," she began, giving Adeniran the same stern look she gave Nosa's kids when they were misbehaving, and shifting her attention to Nelly's worried expression, "it was on the same day I met you at Proud Belle. I was crossing the street to have lunch at that restaurant not far from the building. After that, I doubled back carefully to the company so I wouldn't miss Erinma and in you came and the rest is old gist."

"Oh gosh, Isi," Erinma said. "Lagos can be like that. You should be more careful."

"Same advice I gave her," Adeniran said.

She blinked. "And I explained that day it was a mistake and it would never happen again." *What is his deal? Or did your ego block your ears?* Isi wanted to add but clamped her mouth shut. She hardly knew the man. She would put her tongue in check, thank you very much. But she already disliked him.

Erinma chuckled. "We all know Lagos can be crazy."

Adeniran opened his mouth to respond but a tall, slim biracial lady strutted to his side, wrapping her arms around his neck and putting her lips

on his.

Isi tore her gaze away from their PDA.

[2]"*Ciao amore*."

"Hey, Camille. What's going on?" He took a step back, his hand on the woman's narrow waist.

Camille giggled. "I missed you, handsome!"

"Ah." Adeniran winced. "You've had too much to drink. That's it. I'm taking you home."

Camille pouted. "No, [3]*bello*. The party is just getting started. I haven't even had dessert. You know my favourite part of any dinner is the dessert." She tapped the tip of his nose with her glossy fingernail and gave another drunken giggle.

Nelly gave a low chuckle beside her.

"We're skipping dessert tonight. It won't kill you." Prince Adeniran's eyes were on Isi's briefly before meeting with the others. "You will have to excuse us. I believe we'll continue this conversation some other time. That way we can get to know each other better."

"Of course." Erinma stepped forward and kissed his cheek. "Thank you so much for coming. Again, I look forward to a wonderful partnership."

"Likewise." With his free hand, he slapped Nelly's palm in a manly handshake. "We'll see later, man."

"Sure thing, baba."

Adeniran gazed at Isi again. "Welcome to Lagos."

Isi permitted a tiny smile. "Hmmm… thanks."

His eye gave her a brief once-over before leaving with the woman pressed against his side.

"Well, that was interesting," Nelly said.

"Is that his girlfriend?"

"His best friend. He doesn't do relationships."

Oh boy.…

How could a girl stay best friends with someone like that? He was fine, but his personality was lacking. Who would have guessed? Perhaps it was his personality that turned them away because Isi was convinced that this man could not be God's choice for her.

Not now. Not ever.

1. A slang used in Nigeria meaning, I'm good
2. Hello Sweetheart in Italian
3. Handsome in Italian

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Chapter Seven

Adeniran

"Geez! You're such a grouch, Niran." Her eyes half-lidded, she moaned and slumped on the king-size bed. "I was having *sooo* much fun!"

“Not by getting drunk. That’s a recipe for a humiliating night and an embarrassing morning.”

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand “Whatever. You know I don’t consume alcohol. This was just a once-in-a-long-time occurrence." She raised a finger. "But that’s not the point. The point is, Adeniran, why won’t you go out with me? Am I not attractive enough for you? Not good enough? Is there a standard I’m failing to meet?”

“You’re all of those things and more, Cami.”

She scrunched her face into a frown. She looked adorable. “Meaning I’m not attractive. Not good enough? *Substandard?*”

He removed her murderous heels and placed them carefully on the floor. She would kill him if he messed up her shoes. “No. It means you are attractive, good enough and more than you give yourself credit for.”

She clucked her tongue. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“Then let’s be together.” She pouted. “Since nothing is stopping us.”

There were a lot of things stopping him. But now was not the right time to have that conversation.

He draped the duvet over her fully-clothed body, tucking the edges under her chin. “Let’s discuss this when you’re sober.”

She groaned again, but this time she didn’t beg or protest. She closed her eyes and hugged her pillow close like it was a cuddlesome. “I wasn’t so drunk that I forgot what we discussed. I know what we talked about and I still know what I want.”

He closed the door of his room behind him. Loosening his necktie, he strode to the bed and tossed it there. An hour later, he had done some press-ups, taken a warm shower and flopped on the bed, his head resting on the soft pillow.

His thoughts effortlessly transported him to a beautiful sunshiney woman who didn't freak out about his wealth or societal status or try to impress him by pretending to be someone she wasn't. She was refreshingly honest unlike what he was used to from other women. He couldn’t believe Nelly had met her on the same day. He wondered if things would have turned out differently if he had escorted her to the food joint as he’d wanted to. If, maybe, they would have become chummy friends like she obviously was with Nelly, rather than ice-cold like she was with him.

Then again, he probably deserved her fury and disinterest when it came to him.

He pressed his fingertips to his forehead and laughed at himself. Her eyes were fiery when she glared at him but somehow she'd managed to tamper down her anger and respond calmly. Exactly how she had reacted to him that day in Victoria Island when his entourage of cars had nearly killed her.

The laughter died and his stomach roiled when he recollected more events from that day.

On that same day, there had been a family meeting after his father’s lavish birthday party and they were told the current [1]Osemawe of Ondo had fallen ill, and there were speculations that his successor would be chosen from three ruling families. And the Atewogbase family was one of them.

Adeniran didn’t think he had anything to be concerned about. He was a long way from the throne. His brother and half-brothers were way ahead of him in line to be the next Osemawe. But that wasn't what set him on edge. It was his father’s callous words that upset him that morning, prodding him to vent some of that anger and frustration on Isi that fateful day.

We don’t have anything to worry about. The Ifa doesn’t make mistakes. Just as well as the kingmakers. They know who to choose.

His father’s words could have come off as casual but Adeniran knew they had been meant for him. The pain of that brought to remembrance his dream from earlier on. And once again he resumed from where he’d stopped…



ADENIRAN - AGE 7

He had a ten-minute break, so he went to grab two packs of [2]*chin-chin* and a juice box from the pantry downstairs. As he ate, his eyes stayed fixated on it and he gasped when he saw her belly move slightly beneath her nightgown, his eyes widened in their sockets. Did he just see a foot?

He blinked rapidly.

"Adeniran?"

“Huh?” For a second he had forgotten his initial question. Then he remembered.

"Oh. How did Papa Ondo become a king, making daddy a king too?"

"It's a long story."

He frowned. He changed his mind. He didn't want to hear it.

“I hate Ondo. I hate this whole place.” *I hate this family.* The only people he wished he could claim as his family were his mother, brother and sister. And the baby in his mother's stomach. His father could disappear for all he cared.

His mother smiled a bit then winced slightly. "You can’t hate your history, Adeniran. It was a long time ago. Before your elder sister was born. As you know, your great-grandfather was the Osemawe of Ondo. He ruled for seventeen years before he died.” Her face relaxed a little as the pain subsided. “Before then, Ondo Kingdom has been in existence for over five hundred years. There are numerous theories as to how it started, but I prefer Princess Pupupu’s version more. There’s something encouraging about a woman in charge and held in high respect. Some say Ondo was brought into existence by Princess Pupupu. She was one of the twins of *Alafin Oluaso*.

The sad thing was twins were considered taboo at the time. An abomination."

Adeniran's eyes grew wide. He had heard a lot of abomination stories in Ondo and their consequences—Mosadi being the bearer of such gory details. "Did they do something bad to them?" He couldn't imagine anything bad happening to the baby in his mother's stomach. He hadn't seen him or her but had already formed some sort of attachment to the baby. Maybe because of the amount of time he spent in his mother's room.

"They did. But that was a long time ago. *The people didn't know any better. The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.* Matthew 4:16. Light came and changed all that."

"The light …"

"Is Jesus. My sweet Jesus. Jesus is my joy." Those phrases were a constant on his mother's lips. She always said it with a smile on her face even when she was sad. And Adeniran had seen those sad moments a lot and he wished for times when she was joyful. He ascribed most of her unhappiness to his father.

"So what then happened?" Adeniran questioned.

"The twins were referred to as *Ese Omo*. But only one twin survived."

His mother finished the story and Adeniran found it more interesting than reading a load of history in a book.

"As I said, there are different versions of how Ondo came about. It might even sound a tad bit mystical to some, but it's our history."

"I don't like history." He didn't like reading much. He didn't like learning. Period.

"It's always good to remember where you came from. You almost know who you are. [3]*Omooba* Adeniran—son of not only a king here on earth but the King of kings in the highest heavens. And as a Christian that's one of the most important things you must be aware of; knowing who and whose you are. Don't forget it."

Adeniran thought about his father. "And are you expected to live in a polygamous home as a Christian?" That was the word that had slipped out of Mosadi's mouth one day when they were talking about how large his family was compared to Mosadi who was an orphan and lived with his grandmother. Mosadi had referred to Adeniran's family as being polygamous and, according to him, they were living in sin.

His mother sighed. “It’s been a part of our culture for many years, my darling. Some things cannot be easily changed. Some mindsets are hard to let go of due to different reasons. And in such cases, there's a need for change. As Christians, we have to showcase the culture of where we come from. The Kingdom-culture. And to do that we must be willing to take up positions of authority for the benefit of the greater good. We are not just here to exist and go about our business; we are here to go into the world and spread God's light.”

Adeniran remained silent at that. His gaze flickered to the flower painting on the wall of a Yellow Hibiscus. It was his mum’s favourite flower. He was tempted to ask her what kind of light she was shining in a house like this and married to his father. Instead, he knew what kind of answer she would give would hardly satisfy his curiosity.

“Your great-grandfather was a good man.”

Adeniran knew bits of his great-grandfather, James Mobolaji Aremeyin. However, how his father spoke about him gave Adeniran the impression that he was a good man. A cocoa farmer and philanthropist. He believed in God and abhorred anything that contradicted the Bible. But he was also a man who had tried his hardest to live out a holy life: he went to church frequently and destroyed any [4]*charms* his wives did against each other.

“So what happened? I heard Ore’s mum saying what they are doing to Daddy is wicked after everything he has done for them.” Ore was his half-sister. The daughter of his father's second wife. Her elder brother, Olajide, was the chief ringleader in making Adeniran feel like a fool. The whole extra wives thing upset him knowing how much his mother had to endure in the house. Adeniran had heard the snide remarks and bitter-placed words uttered behind his mother's back. "Is it that Daddy wasn't supposed to be king?"

There were rumours that their father might be dethroned for reasons of negligence of duties. That he was more focused on his success than on the success of the Ondo kingdom.

“I don't know, Niran. Life is filled with all sorts of wicked people. That’s why you have to stay close to God. He’s the only one that can protect you. Always be on His side.”

“But what’s the point of being king and so powerful if you can’t even fight off bad people?”

“You can’t win all the battles. There are some you leave for God to fight.”

Adeniran shook his head; it was all absurd. “I don’t think I can ever become a king.”

Another wince. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I’m stupid.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Did Olajide say that to you?”

He shrugged.

“Do you know the Bible refers to God’s children as royal priesthoods?”

Bible again? He didn’t want to hear what the Bible had to say about him. Not when he didn’t feel that way. “Yes. You’ve said it before.” His mother loved quoting random verses, and he couldn’t understand half of what she said. He realised now that he could have asked if he was curious. “What does it mean?”

“It means you have been born into a new family. You’re no longer an ordinary person but a prince. A joint heir with Jesus and that means you can share in all the wonderful things that Jesus enjoys.”

“What does Jesus enjoy?”

“Victory, closeness with God, the way you talk and act changes because you know you share in His glory and riches. This is your spiritual right as a child of God. And it also means you have a mission God expects you to accomplish. A special task He has set aside for you alone and it involves shining God’s light to others.”

He frowned. “Here in Ondo.”

She nodded. “Here or anywhere. Everyone who tells you otherwise is a liar.”

Adeniran welcomed the words with a sliver of hope surging through him.

“And if you don’t believe it here,” she pressed her palm against his beating heart, “and here,” then on his head, “then you will never live out God’s good purposes for you. Are you God’s child, Adeniran?”

“I think so.”

She shook her head. “I won’t accept that answer. You don’t doubt it. You have to believe it from your heart and shout it out of your mouth. So are you?”

“I am God’s child,” he said with a bit more confidence.

She leaned back and smiled a little. “Good. I don’t want to hear otherwise. If I hear you say anything insulting about yourself again, I will

spank you."

She smiled, and Adeniran smiled back. His mother was firm while also gentle with him. The combination didn't make him run away from her as he did with his dad.

"You are going to be great someday, Adeniran. I can sense it. You know what they said about you at your naming ceremony?" When he shook his head she continued, "the pastor who named you said you are a child of great destiny. That's why I'm doing everything I can to help you succeed."

Suddenly, she groaned loudly and closed her eyes. This one was longer than the last because she gripped the bedsheet hard, pulling the sheet out from where it was tucked and crumpling it in the process. Her forehead glistened with sweat beads.

"Should I call Daddy?" His panic reached his ears.

"No," she gritted out. A moment later she gasped and opened her eyes, panting. "See… " she forced a smile. "I'm fine."

No, you're not fine. Stop lying to me. But Adeniran didn't utter those words. He'd been taught never to be rude to his elders. "Is there something wrong with the baby?" He asked instead.

"No. Your brother or sister is just eager to come out to play with you."

"Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"I would really love another girl. But I want what God wants to give me." She cocked her head to one side against the pillow. "What do you want, Adeniran?"

"I want what you want," he said quietly.

She smiled. "Then let's believe in God together." She extended her hand and took his in hers. "I love you, my son, and all my children. Very, very much. You're going to do so well, Adeniran. I believe in you. I do."



The flashback fizzled and he was back in his hotel room. He pinched his nose and got up from the bed. He wanted to believe his mother was proud of him. She'd held on to God till the end. Her faith in God had been her

propeller but for Adeniran he chose to hang on loosely–wary to put God to test when his life lacked the joy a couple of believers seemed to possess.

Having come across various levels of Christians in his life, he felt relieved that he wasn't the only one who failed to see the joy of being a believer. He didn't have to have a constant smile on his face or make himself happy when there was nothing to be happy about.

For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

The Word came to him, time and time again even after his knee surgery. That, and *I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me.*

All his life, he had felt the need to prove himself. To show he was more than his failures and that he could achieve more than the short expectations they had of him. And if he was lucky, the current Osemawe would recover and live a long full life.

Either way, the sooner he got back to the C.O.F, the better for him.

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1. the paramount Yoruba king of Ondo Kingdom a city in Ondo State, southwestern Nigeria.
2. a fried snack in West Africa.
3. Prince, princess, offspring of a king, descendant of royalty
4. A charm is a magical spell or an object that brings luck.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

ISIMEME

"That was such a fun night!"

"Mmm. It was a fantastic evening!" Odavwaro corrected, removed her shoes, and sat down on the couch. "Everything went so smoothly. Did you notice how quickly the food was consumed? *Oh là là!* Geez… And the chef's mint ice cream and crêpe were out of this world." Odavwaro blew a chef's kiss.

Isi reclined back in the armchair and ran circles over her tummy. "I can attest to that."

"You girls, God is so good."

"Yes," Isi murmured her agreement.

"Praise God. Thank You Jesus for a wonderful night," Odavwaro said and Erinma and Isi waved their hands up in the air. "However, I believe Erinma on a certain hunk's arm was also the highlight of the evening."

Meanwhile, the highlight of my evening was learning that I was going to marry a grouch. No. She *thought* she heard she was going to marry a grouch.

"[1]*Abeg*, please give us the gist. This evening, you and Mr. Madu appeared to be very relaxed and in love."

"Thank God I'm not the only one who noticed," Isi teased. "You were practically convincing all the single ladies that we needed to find a man and cling to him."

Erinma grinned like a love-sick girl, despite the scars that attempted to restrain her expressions. "Choose either the short or long version."

“Long!” Isi and Odavwaro both said in unison. Right now, Isi needed the distraction. "Who wants half a chicken when you can have the whole thing with the laps and wings?" Odavwaro asked.

Erinma clicked her tongue while shaking her head in amusement. “Seriously, you girls are way too interested in my love life.”

"Please excuse me. When you sat here months ago, crying about how you thought Andrew would never be interested in you because his baby mama is none other than Tito Jacobs, and you felt you weren't good enough for him, you opened up your love life to us."

Isi raised her shoe in the air. "Speak up, sister!"

Erinma was all grins, shaking her head at the both of them.

“And,” Odavwaro said, pointing at Erinma, “you were miserable for months. As your executive assistant, I say this with affection, but it was not pretty watching you look moody and depressed every day. There were a few fashion choices you made that were just [2]*bleh*.”

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"It wasn't bad like that. It just wasn't you. You weren't putting in much effort and I don't blame you."

“Hmmm… I’ll think about *not* raising your pay.”

Odavwaro grinned, baring her teeth. “Girl, you know you love me. Plus, I'm only pulling your legs. You were killing it the entire time. My mother would be very proud of you. She would say, 'just because he said no to you, doesn't mean you have to say no to the rest of the world.'" She pointed to herself. "Mind you, I don't agree with all of her inspirational/relationvation quotes."

Erinma laughed.

"What?"

"Relationship and motivational quotes," Odavwaro explained. "My mother dishes them out like a bunch of sacrilegious sayings. Only God knows where she gets some of them from."

Isi smiled at both of them. Couldn’t life be this easy and less worrisome and dramatic between women?

“Well, I’m glad Prince Adeniran could make the opening since he’ll be leaving the country soon. Except for video calls, I don’t know when I’ll see him again.”

That bit of information made Isi's heart dance a little and the uneasiness from earlier seeped out of her. "Is he not coming back?"

"He will, but not for a long time. He doesn't frequent Nigeria. He usually comes once or twice every two years."

Maybe I misheard, Isi finally surmised. God wouldn't want her to spend months, if not years, pining for someone who was in and out of the country every few years. She smiled to herself as she tucked her chin to her chest. If God wanted things to change it would take some miracle.

"Don't change the subject, Erinma," Odavwaro pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at Erinma. "You're still owing us gist."

Erinma rolled her eyes, grinning.

Isi remembered the whispered words from earlier that evening. *That one. That's him.* And then she shook her head to clear her mind and listened intently as Erinma told them an abridged version of her driving her car (a big deal because she never liked driving at night due to a major fire accident that occurred a few years ago), praying to run into the man she was falling for, and giving him a brown rose, which meant she was as interested in him as he was in her.

To put it another way, it was completely romantic and well worth the risk.

Stories like Erinma's inspired Isi to be patient when it came to love and the special guy she would, eventually, spend the rest of her life with.

"Let's watch a movie till we fall asleep," Odavwaro suggested.

"I'll make the popcorn. I was too nervous to eat much at the restaurant." Erinma stood up from her seat. "At the very least, I won't burn it."

All too soon, they were shrouded in comfortable silence by a film about a woman who falls in love with a wealthy man who pretends to be middle-class like her. Isi found herself unable to escape her thoughts.

Isi wrapped her arms tightly around her waist.

The ache in her chest persisted. She was happy Erinma had reconciled with her man. Still, Isi couldn't help but feel a little lonely without a man. She had been without a man all through her thirty-plus years on earth. Not that she was having a bad case of desperation to want to be in a relationship, but she longed to have someone by her side. Longed to fall in love someday, get married and have kids of her own.

Just like her parents' sweet love story and how much they had been into each other before he died. Her mother had been lucky at love a second time,

entering her tenth year of marriage with a good man.

God, I don't want Adeniran. I don't care that he's a prince. I like *Nelly. Please, make that happen instead. He's* my *choice.*

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1. Please
2. Not good

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THREE MONTHS LATER

While we are mourning the death of the Osemawe of Ondo (Oritowade III) after a long bout of illness, we just learned that Prince Adeniran Luke Aremeyin was involved in an accident on the field. The extent of his injuries is unknown at this time, but sources say it could spell the end of his career as one of Nigeria's top football champions. Our prayers and thoughts are with him.

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The Ari Mato's Show
Guest: Prince Adeniran Aremeyin
(Transcript)

Ari Mato: Hello everyone and welcome to the Ari Mato show. Today, I have two special guests and I'd be interviewing one of them right before our next segment with Dr. Ahmari Mvogo.

(The audience breaks into a round of applause)

Ari Mato: I'm thrilled to be welcoming him again on the show. He's not only hot, hunky, and athletic but he's also a Prince, and he's here in the studio for a fifteen-minute interview. Welcome with me none other than football star, Adeniran Aremeyin!!!!

(Adeniran enters with a slight limp, waves, and receives a standing ovation from the audience.)

Ari Mato: Adeniran, it's great to see you.

Adeniran: It's great to see you as well. Thank you for having me.

(More screams from the audience. And a few marriage proposals from female fans.)

Ari Mato: Your fans are eager to see you, and I must say that I'm jealous. I wish I could make these people scream like this for me every time I walk onto this stage.

(Audience yells even louder)

Ari Mato: (to the audience) It's all right! You don't have to give me the accolades. If you don't clap, I'll just carry Adeniran away and we'll have a private conversation for a happier audience.

(There are chuckles in the studio followed by echoes of We love you and No)

Adeniran: I think they have apologised.

Ari Mato: It appears so. So, Adeniran…How's life? I remember running into your younger sister, Princess Sade, at a mall and she was dressed so sportily. I looked at myself and I was like 'Nah, I'm just wearing workout clothes, but I'm still nowhere as fit as she is. (laughter from the audience and a photo of Adeniran and Sade in football jerseys is displayed on the screens in the studio) When I got home I stepped on the scale and realised that all those green and orange smoothies and vegetables I'd been consuming were for nothing.

Adeniran: (laughs) I know the feeling, but don't take it personally. She eats healthy—even eats more than me on most days. But what baffles my siblings and me is that every time she eats, I keep wondering where all that food is going. Nonetheless, she does a good job of staying fit.

Ari Mato: And how about you? How are you doing since everything that's happened?

Adeniran: I'm alive. I'm eager to move forward.

Ari Mato: The entire world watched what happened on the field. My heart stopped when I saw you fall. And I was screaming at the TV for you to get back up and finish the game. But minutes later you were carried out on a stretcher. And like me, I believe the whole country felt that pain. Not just about the match but with deep concern for you.

Adeniran: (exhales) I can categorically state that it was a complete nightmare for me. I was

dribbling the ball with an opponent and trying to pass the ball to another of my teammates on the pitch in one minute, and the next I was tumbling down on the grass with a sharp pain shooting up my leg. I heard a snap. I didn’t want to think that it came from me, but then my leg felt like it was on fire. When I looked down I remember whispering silently to God that this wasn't happening to me. I’ve heard a lot of players who’ve been through such incidents and sympathised with them. But never would I have imagined that happening to me.

Ari Mato: Hmm...

Adeniran: I closed my eyes and hoped that wasn't me laying on the ground and that wasn’t my leg stretched out oddly in front of me.

Ari Mato: I can’t even imagine how you felt.

Adeniran: I was knocked out briefly because of the pain meds, but when I came through, I was given the diagnosis. The femur in my left leg was broken, and I needed surgery to get me back on my feet. I’ve had some physio in the last couple of months and I’m hopeful I will be able to rejoin my team in time for the next season.

Ari Mato: You’ll be in my thoughts and prayers, and I hope you bounce back stronger than ever.

Adeniran: I appreciate that.

Ari Mato: Thank you for coming.

Adeniran: Again, thank you for having me.

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CHAPTER NINE

ADENIRAN

"You did great," Camille said to him as he climbed into the car after making a quick exit from the studio building. "The people loved you, and they seemed to be very sympathetic."

He took the cold bottle of water she offered him. A small smile grazed his lips. "Yeah. Thanks." He unbuttoned his jacket and peered out the window, his gaze drawn to the orange hues of the setting sun. He took a long sip of water, gulping down the cool liquid down his throat as it flushed out the uneasiness from a few minutes before.

The interview had been both Bryan, his manager, and Sade's idea of giving back to his fans, as he spoke for fifteen minutes with one of Nigeria's hottest Talk Show hosts about one of the worst moments of his life. Adeniran had insisted on recovering alone, away from the prying eyes of the media. But Bryan, on the other hand, had not given up.

I know you're in tip-top shape, but the rest of the world needs to know you're fine. The C.O.F. should be well aware that you intend to return for the pre-season, he had explained.

Which was why Adeniran was seated at the back of his tinted Range Rover. Assuring everyone that he was fine, that he had ridden the tide and that he would emerge stronger. Even if he put on a happy face and pretended to be normal, the truth was that things were not going well for

him. Especially since there had been talk going around of him being benched.

“We have to be at the restaurant by seven and that’s still an hour and a half away,” Camille interrupted his thoughts, staring out the window. "You weren't wrong about the traffic."

He didn't have to fake a smile this time. Camille's appeal with Nigeria had dwindled a bit since her last visit. She'd come eager to explore and take a break from the modelling world. But now she was filling in as his assistant because his baby sister couldn't make it.

"Hey, thanks for doing this. I don't think I've said it."

She didn’t turn away from the window. "You don't have to thank me. I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else."

He pressed his lips together; concerned, annoyed… doubtful. Since what happened the last time they were in Nigeria, things were still a little tense between them. They had ignored the drunken embarrassing moment and resumed their friendship as if nothing had happened. As if she hadn't confessed to wanting more and he hadn't friend-zoned her as he had done for years. He could tell she was disappointed because of his rejection, but she was putting on a brave face. Making him hate himself even more for not putting more effort into feeling more for her.

Camille was everything a guy like him could ever wish for in a woman. She was into what he loved. It should be simple for him to switch their relationship to something more lasting and loving. So why couldn’t he? It wasn’t hard to love her.

He peeked at her in her midi flowery gown, her long brown and gold frizzy natural hair neatly tucked into a bun. She was gorgeous. A good woman for him. Only someone as stupid as him would even hesitate for a fraction of a minute about dating her—or putting a ring on her finger.

Still, his reality concerning everything love and relationship not only confused him; it frightened the crap out of him.

"Right, I need your phone. I have to post pictures of the interview."

He nodded and dug out his phone from his breast pocket. “I’m just going to rest my head a bit.”

Camille turned and her eyes flitted over his face with unmasked concern, before she eventually answered, “Okay.” Her gaze settled on his phone, to post a few pictures on his Instagram feed as his manager and sister had advised.

Adeniran shut his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. While everyone else held fast to hope for his future, Adeniran clung to it for the second time in his life, wanting to believe that this time around it wouldn’t let him down as it did all those years ago. That he would be blessed with a miracle. Again. It had been a blessing that his knee had healed from the ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) injury. And he wanted to believe without a moment's hesitation that God was looking out for him. Happiness, however, was still a long way off.

The cacophony of inner voices in his head threatened to overwhelm him. What had become of his life? What was going to happen to his fifteen-year career down the line? He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter. Willing the memories away.

He had drifted in and out of consciousness all day at the hospital. One long memory played in his head over and over again, sweat dripping from his brow despite the coolness of the room as he lay on the bed in excruciating pain.

What would his mother think of him now?

Just as the car started, he gave in to the thoughts of the past to play out…



Adeniran - Age 7+

It all happened too quickly.

At least that’s what seven-year-old Adeniran thought.

Although it wasn’t his first time seeing a baby born in the house. It was the first time his biological mother had given him a younger sibling. Not just any sibling—but one who survived the nine months.

One minute he was in a head-on foot tackle with his elder brother Funsho, dribbling the brown dusty soccer ball while his best friend Mosadi watched on the sidelines in their spacious compound (which was the only good thing about their abrupt move) and the next thing their elder sister ran up to them— breathless—to announce their mother had given birth to a baby. A girl. God had given them a girl. A baby sister.

Their soccer game was forgotten, and all Adeniran could think about was his new sister. A younger sibling who would grow up and one day he would be able to boss her around—much as his older siblings did to him. Run a few errands and retrieve their books from their shared bedroom. Do the dishes and pack their plates. Adeniran followed their sister past the tall guava tree and blooming hibiscus tree on the way back to the house. Her long braided hair which she'd held up in a chignon, now swung behind her. As they approached the front doors, his baby sister's cry grazed his ears.

I have a baby sister! Joy swelled in his chest. Greetings like *a yan tomo nen o* for the parents of the new baby were being said as guests were starting to show up unannounced with gifts.

The wives in the house huddled by their mother's side, singing to the welcome of the baby into the world.

Were lo bawa se, e e e
Were lo bawa se
Were lo bawa se e e e
Were lo bawa se
Ohun ti a ro pe ko see se
Were lo bawa se

Easily He did it for us
Easily He did it for us
Easily He did it for us
Easily He did it for us
What we thought was hopeless
Easily He did it for us

As they moved he caught a small glimpse of his mother's strained face. He knew the pregnancy had been hard on her and he was glad that it was over.

"She wasn't like this when she was pregnant with you," Funsho told him. *"I guess things are different."*

"Why? Why are things different now?"

"I don't know." Adeniran looked at his brother who offered a small, tight smile. His look said there was something more to the story he wasn't telling. "Don't worry. Mummy will be fine."

Are you sure? *Adeniran had wanted to ask. Instead, he left things as they were.*

The younger wives took turns in holding the baby. Only one of his father’s wives was absent from the celebration.

Later that week, the entire house was in a frenzy, but in a good way. There was music, dancing and food, as well as loud peals of laughter from guests. However, Adeniran soon discovered that not everyone was happy with his mother’s decision to have her fourth child.

Instead, the love he normally saw in his stepmother Oseye's eyes morphed into a jealousy so intense that he could taste the bitter aftertaste in his mouth. His gaze lowered to the green and yellow fabric she held close to her flat stomach, murmuring words that Adeniran believed were not loving. He frowned. His mother also had the exact same piece of wrapper. But then, his mother might have given it to her. He had never understood his mother’s relationship with the strange woman. Then her murmurings stopped, her face broke into a smile and she called him over.

Adeniran took careful steps towards her. “Yes?”

“Wait here.” She turned and went into her room and returned minutes later with a nylon. She tossed the nylon at him with a wink. “Take.”

Adeniran eyed it warily. “What is it?”

“What do you think? I got sweets for you.”

Oseye had always gotten things for him. But those were clothes and toys. Nothing edible. “Why?”

She stared at him amused. “Because I’m happy for your mother. And it will be a nice treat for you.” She winked again and went back into her room.

He turned and marched to the house.

“Adeniran! Come here,” Jide’s mother called out from the entrance of her apartment.

He stopped and glanced her way.

“Are you growing deaf?” She pulled on her ear. “Didn’t you hear me? I said you should come here!”

He didn’t want to go. But if his father heard he’d disrespected one of his stepmothers he would get the whipping of his life.

“Here,” she said to him when he was close. “Take this sweet.” She opened her palm to reveal the minty sweet. It wasn’t one of his favourites. Not like the ones Oseye had gotten him.

Still, he took it from her.

She jutted her chin at him. “Put it in your mouth.”

He raised his gaze to meet Jide’s mother’s icy ones. “I don’t want to lick it yet.” His mother had told him severally that he wasn’t supposed to accept food from strangers or eat anything without her knowing about it.

“Why? You can see all the children licking sweets. Is it not a happy day?”

“I’m not supposed to lick sweets in the evening.”

“Read, you cannot read. To write, is *wahala*. Yet you can open your dirty mouth to say nonsense!”

“Ebunoluwa, why are you bothering the poor boy?” Big Mummy approached them. “If he doesn’t want your sweet, don’t force him.”

“Big Mummy, who called you into this?” Jide's mother said this without the venom she'd just directed at him.

Big Mummy smiled. “I called myself. Look at the boy; he looks like a lost sheep afraid for his life because of a big bad wolf.”

“So I’m the big bad wolf, *abi*?” Jide’s mum sneered.

“If the shoe fits.” Big Mummy said as she wrapped her arm around his shoulder. “Let’s go and greet your mummy. Okay?”

He nodded.

Big Mummy had her good and not-so-good sides. It depended on her mood. But even when she wasn’t in the best of moods she was always good to him. Today was different though. She was obviously in a good mood.

Everything had been somewhat peaceful before that day, that was just before all hell broke loose in the Aremeyin household.



The memory vanished when he blinked, but the mental anguish lingered. He cast a glance out the window. It was drizzling when they arrived at Marigold Royale Hotel and Suites. All Adeniran wanted to do was go up to the room and sleep. Pretend this wasn't his life and he wasn't on the verge of losing his job and career.

But first, he had to speak with Camille.

“Do you want to have dinner?” He inquired as they got out of the car.

“Sure,” she replied with a shrug.

After Camille mentioned her desire for a Ghanaian dish—rice balls with peanut butter soup—they were soon led to one of the hotel's many restaurants that catered to those with a craving for African food, Urban Mojo. He remembered having lunch with Erinma and her friends there. The food was delicious. He also remembered the quirky chef who worked in the restaurant's kitchen. When he remembered their conversation from months ago, the corner of his mouth tipped up in a smile. Thoughts of her came to him now and then and each time he found himself smiling at her overly cheerful demeanour, that, and how he managed to leave her tongue-tied every time. He wondered if she would still be in such a happy state if she were in his shoes, if she lived the kind of life he had.

Adeniran had looked her up on social media and discovered she was most active on Facebook but was gradually finding her footing on Instagram as *Isi's Food Journal*. He could tell most of the shots were taken from home with the poor lighting, and once in a while a cool-looking kitchen—Nelly's maybe? Somehow the thought gave him a strange feeling—other than that the photos were passable. She posted barely manageable photos of delectable dishes that he believed would look more appealing if she invested more in a better camera.

Why am I thinking about that woman?

He pushed thoughts of her out of his mind and ignored the fact that she was probably working in the kitchen right now.

The server brought their food to their table and they ate in silence. Taking him back to the reason he had asked to eat with her, going back to when he returned to Italy months ago.

"I know you're not in love with my daughter," Mrs. Brown had told Adeniran when he'd gone visiting his coach when he returned he stopped at the U.K before moving on to Italy.

He'd coughed his water back into his glass. It was a good thing his coach was not present to witness that conversation and leave him with a few broken bones.

"I see the way she looks at you. And I also see the way you look at her." Her gaze narrowed. *"It's not the same thing. One looks at the other with love, while the other can't even be bothered."*

Adeniran knew the category he fell into. What he didn't know was what he was expected to say in response to that. That he was sorry?

Camille's mother went on, *"I'd prefer if you didn't lead her on. She doesn't deserve a man that doesn't love her. If the two of you are friends, as you always claim you are, then do her a favour and push her away. My daughter is very persistent, and if she doesn't get what she wants it doesn't enter her brain to back down. Instead, she makes every effort to obtain it."*

"So what do you advise that I do, Ma?"

"Cut things off. Since she won't take it easy then she should take it the hard way."

Adeniran had been flummoxed. He definitely hadn't seen that coming.

He looked at her silently, *"I'll do as you said."*

"Good. Please, eat. Your food is getting cold."

Adeniran felt no obligation to finish his meal after that as his appetite had died. What if she had put some kind of poison or love potion in it? He stared at Camille now and roused up the courage to do what he had to do after they were through with their meal.

"Camille, can we talk?" He asked after she'd ordered dessert. Adeniran had opted for a glass of water.

She looked up from her phone. "What about?"

Instead, he chickened out. "Never mind. You should get some rest."

She dropped her phone on the table and folded her arms over her chest. "No. We can talk. What's up?"

He shook his head. "It can wait."

"No, Adeniran. What is it?"

He scratched the back of his head.

"I know my mother spoke to you. I sensed it from the way you kept shifting on your feet when I got back. She told you to stop giving me false hopes, right?"

"Er- not exactly in those words…"

She narrowed her eyes. "I know my mother, Niran. I was wondering how long it would take you to talk about it."

"I'm sorry—"

"So what were you going to say? Tell me to get out of here and you are not romantically interested in me—"

"Cami—"

"—Because I know that already."

He sighed. This wasn't going according to what he had in mind at all.

"Just say what you want and let's be done with this."

“Let’s give this a shot," he blurted. "Let’s be a couple.” What better way to spend the rest of his life with someone if not with his best friend? He had lost in so many areas. He didn’t want to lose her too. In the last few months, he’d given a lot of thought to his life—what he wanted the end of his life to look like. He hated the emptiness in the room which only lessened when Camille came to visit. Though there were one or two of his teammates, and a few other footballers that he knew, who were okay with the idea of having kids without the daunting commitment of being permanently attached to their mothers. Adeniran didn’t subscribe to that. If he ever planned to have kids, he wanted to do it the right way. His mother would want him to do right by a woman.

While he didn’t plan to stay in Nigeria for long, he thought it best to start thinking about his life without football—no matter how bitter it was. He was grateful to Camille for her friendship and love. Even if he was yet to get his heart to feel the same way she did. If love was a choice, then it wouldn’t be too hard to do.

Surprise flickered across her face. Her jaw went slack. “Really?”

“Why are you surprised? I assumed you wanted this.” Doubt crept into his head. *Has she changed her mind?* Was there someone else? They hadn’t spoken in a while when they returned, with her being pulled into various modelling jobs and him focusing on football. A lot could have happened in a matter of weeks or days. Asides from that, she wouldn’t be on the market for long in her line of work.

She waved her hands in the air, like what he’d said was inconceivable. “Well, I don’t know. Maybe because you’ve said it so many times that we should only be friends. Maybe it’s because you avoided me all through our stay at your place. We’ve been walking on eggshells around each other and now you tell me you want more?” She shrugged. "What changed?"

“Football has always been number two for me, my faith in God being number one. I’m not going to keep up hopes that I will return to C.O.F. Now that this has happened, I want to reset my priorities.”

“And I now become your second priority, then? Replacing football?”

“Yes. That’s if you agree to give us a try.”

She mouthed, ‘wow’.

He shook his head. “Think about it. I don’t want to rush you.”

Camille shook her head. “Do you seriously think I’m going to need more time to think things through?" She grinned. "I’m all in, Niran.”

He smiled a little. “Good to know.”

She beamed at him.

And it suddenly occurred to him then that he cared about her happiness. He cared about Camille and knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for her, which, he believed, was the first step toward making any relationship work.

“Let’s go on a date tomorrow.”

“I’d love that,” she said softly.

Later that night, alone in bed, Adeniran went to the search engine and looked for the highlights of that night, which he studied fervently. He was watching the video for the third time (aside from seeing it again with Ari Mato). Camille had tried to keep it from him that day at the hospital, but he needed to figure out what had gone wrong. The crowd's chants of *Olé* echoed in the stands as he made a move he thought would score them the game's final goal, but it had ended up twisting his leg as he aimed to kick the ball, landing flat on his back.

After the fourth time, Adeniran stopped playing it back. He wasn’t to blame. If everything had gone as planned, he would not be sitting in a hotel in Nigeria, but rather with his team. Training. Laughing at their corny jokes and making plans to spend time with them and their families over the holidays. He could only wait and hope for the best at this point.

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CHAPTER TEN

ADENIRAN

He was obsessed with his phone. For the seventh time that afternoon, he pulled his phone from his pocket and checked to see if there were any missed calls from his agent, Bryan. He leaned his head against the wall. *God, I need to get back to my team. Make this happen.* Regardless of what he told Camille, a part of him still hoped. He'd barely gotten any sleep last night, and the prospect of not making the team kept him awake, watching sports headlines and goal highlights.

Adeniran looked up just as the door to his left opened and Camille stepped out dressed simply in blue jeans and a crop top. Gucci sunglasses perched atop her head. Her wild honey-brown curls were tucked into a reasonably neat bun. This was not the woman who walked down the runway wearing clothes and jewellery worth thousands of pounds.

"I think you should change your shoes," Adeniran eyed her heels as he stuffed his phone into his jeans pocket. He wasn't intimidated by her height or anything. He loved that she was taller than him. But for walking around in Lagos, they weren't…practical.

"Too much?"

"A bit."

"I'll be right back." She hurried back to her room and returned minutes later with black Converse. Two inches chopped off her tall frame. "Better?"

"Much."

She gave him a wink and tucked her arm into the crook of his arm. “So what do you have planned for us today?”

“I was thinking about taking you around to some of the few places I like here and maybe we can catch a movie.”

“Sounds fun.”

He tapped the elevator button. “I know you didn’t get to sightsee the last time—not like there’s much for you to see here.” She slapped his arm. “But I’ll do my best.” That he did business in Lagos didn’t mean it was his favourite place to be. He preferred the quiet life.

“And that’s good enough for me.”

Adeniran already had the day planned. Still new at the whole idea of having a girlfriend, he was willing to put in his best. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been to the Cinema. Camille believed he needed to de-stress from thinking about his team and all things football related. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell her that football was all he’d ever known, all he’d built his life around, and what had shaped him into the man he was today. But he decided to just go with the flow—after all, you don't argue with your girlfriend on your first date.

With a face cap to keep the blazing sun off his face, he tried to focus on Camille. He'd decided to take her around Lagos today because he hadn't had the chance to do so the last time. Fairly confident that his time in Nigeria was coming to an end, after seeing a Nollywood dramedy he took her sightseeing to the museum, an art gallery, and a few other places he thought were appropriate for her standards. Now that he decided to take things with her more seriously, he didn’t think Camille’s life goals would ever include living in Nigeria, no matter how crazy she was about him.

Which was why he needed to get out of here.

He yanked his phone from his jeans pocket when it vibrated against his thigh and sighed inwardly; it was a text from a telemarketer and blocked the number immediately. He was going insane waiting for Bryan’s call. He’d even sent an email to his coach, but only got a one-sentence reply: *We’ll get back to you soon, so rest up and hang in there.*

That was all he’d been doing over the last couple of months. Hanging in there. Waiting, *hoping*, for some kind of miracle. His fate was practically in the hands of other people. It wasn’t particularly something he liked or wanted. Why couldn't everyone see that he was fully recovered? He’d even had Camille send videos of his time at the gym.

But what if I can’t get back on the team? It was harrowing to even think of what his life would be without playing the game and this would be his new normal. Adeniran looked up to see a group of five women, one of whom had a baby strapped to her back, each holding a pestle and mixing *amala* in a mortar with fixed concentration.

It had been too painful for him to stay at home in Florence, even though his floor-to-ceiling windows provided a panoramic view of the gorgeous city. Being absent from the field, not seeing his teammates, or having the ball at his feet further dampened his mood. Instead, he’d been warned to stay off the field until he was fully recovered. Both physically and mentally. Feeling useless and almost going out of his mind with boredom, he’d let Camille talk him into another trip to Nigeria—saying it was the perfect time for him to show her around since they hadn’t been able to do so during her previous visit.

Adeniran had hesitantly said yes to the distraction, but now, he was starting to regret it. Maybe his presence would be able to sway them more than being thousands of miles away. He tossed his head back on the headrest and groaned again.

“Hey.” Camille nudged his arm, disrupting his thoughts. "What is she doing?" She pointed at the robust woman turning something with a huge iron strainer over a medium-sized black pan. Flames of fire from the dry firewood hit the pan from below.

“She’s frying *Akara*. Bean cakes.”

“Oooh, I’ve never had any. You know Mum totally hates beans. Can we?” She asked, pointing outside the window for the car to find a spot to pull over while they were still stuck in traffic.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. It doesn’t look sanitary to buy from her.”

Camille didn't share his sentiments. “Don’t be such a killjoy!”

“I’m only looking out for your welfare.”

“I can do that all by myself, thank you very much. Okon. Can you please find somewhere to park? I want to buy some bean cakes.”

“Okay, ma,” Okon replied, turning on the indicator light and signalling left.

“Are you sure there won’t be any issues with the police?” Adeniran knew some rules had been put into place to curb cars stopping for any roadside purchases or buying from any hawkers.

“No problem, sir. I will clear away from the road so other cars can pass. How much Akara do you want to buy, Ma?”

Adeniran dug out some money from his front pocket and handed it to Okon. “Get that amount in two separate bags. The other bag is for you. Eat it in your free time.”

Okon bowed his head. “Thank you very much, sir. I’m grateful.”

Adeniran ignored him and shifted his gaze to the rear-view window. His team of bodyguards had also found a place to park a few metres from them. Okon stepped out of the car and crossed the street after checking for oncoming vehicles from either side of the road.

“Those children knocking on the window. What do they want?”

Again, he dug into his shirt pocket for some change. “They are begging for money.” He lowered the window and gave it to them. Their faces lit up with wide smiles, uttering words of ‘thank yous’ and ‘God bless yous’. He waved away their thanks and wound the window back up.

“Awww, that’s so sad. And their parents can’t provide for them?” When Adeniran shook his head, she muttered, “bummer.” Her eyes followed the children as they trudged off to another vehicle, performing the same hand-to-mouth mannerisms they’d done beside their car. Unfortunately, the occupants were not as interested in helping as they had.

“Is that what they do every day? Beg on the streets? Don’t they go to school?” Camille asked, her voice filled with anguish.

“Everyone has a story, Cami. Some are worse than others.”

“At least your younger sister is giving back in her way. Didn’t you say she owns a women's shelter in your hometown?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” *At least she has that as her project.* Right now, Adeniran didn’t feel he had much going for him. *Yeah, and self-pity is not a good look on you, man.*

The driver was back in the car not too long after and the trip resumed.

“Yum, this is good. It has a pepper kick to it." She shoved the black nylon bag his way. "Want some?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I can take anything right now.”

“You’re worried about the team.”

“Yeah.” After waiting for so long, there was a possibility that troubled him. “What if they decide not to take me back?”

“Then they will be fools not to,” Camille said. “My dad still thinks you’re brilliant.”

At the mention of his former coach, he smiled a bit. Coach Brown had always been supportive. Even during the recovery months, he'd sent Adeniran emails encouraging him to keep his head up. He was more of a father figure to him than his biological father was.

His phone rang when they got back to the hotel. At the sight of Bryan's name on his screen, he excused himself from the table.

"Hey, Bryan. How are things with your family—Maria and Justin? How's Celeste?" He asked after Bryan's wife.

"She's great. She and the kids send their love."

Adeniran stuck his hand in his pocket and then yanked it out almost immediately. He was nervous. "Tell them I said hi. I can't wait to taste your wife's spaghetti and meatballs again. Tell her I'll stop by sometime for a meal."

Bryan chuckled. "She'll be glad to hear that."

"I know." Celeste was fond of trying out new dishes and everything she cooked was a hit. When Bryan didn't offer to talk further, Adeniran went on. "Do you guys need anything here? I know I promised Maria I would bring back a colourful Ankara fabric for her. You can tell her that I haven't forgotten."

The silence lingered.

"Ade, I spoke with your coach, Ivano, and Roman." Adeniran's body tensed. Roman Cattaneo was C.O.F'S manager. He was also a very difficult person to work with. Whatever Bryan had to say was going to be bad news. Bryan wouldn't hesitate this much if it was anything good. Adeniran braced himself.

"I'm sorry, Adeniran. But they are deciding to drop you," his agent said.

His breath got knocked out of him. The world had to be against him. It was the most reasonable explanation for what was happening to him. *God, are You doing this to me? Kicking me when I'm down?*

"Are you there?"

"Yeah." He turned to face the wall, eyes closed, needing a minute.

"Why?"

"This isn't the first injury you've sustained on the field. You bounced back from that ACL injury, and that was a miracle. I don't think you should push this one. It's best if you take some time off and think of something else you can do."

Adeniran was already shaking his head. “No. Bryan, you know I’m good. You know I can make another comeback. I can do this!" He said through gritted teeth. "I’m all better now. You’ve seen the videos.” He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to take in a breath. “I just need the chance to prove myself.”

“You know I love your never-give-up attitude my man, but this time I don’t think it’s going to cut it.”

“What if I walk? What if I sign up with another team?” If his current team didn’t want him, surely others would—everyone knew how invaluable he was to a game. The thought had occurred to him but he didn’t think that would have been a necessary step to take.

“There’s news circulating. They are stipulating this injury happened because you came back too early from the last one. If this is the reason, I doubt other teams would be eager to take you in. I think this is a good time as any to bow out respectfully and with your fans in awe of you. Don’t be that guy that had everything working out for him till everything spiralled down and you become lost in the shadows. Retire. Build a family. Do something else that would make you happy.”

Happy? The word felt foul to him. “I’ll figure something out.”

Bryan sighed. “Don’t think of doing anything crazy.”

“I won’t. Will let you know what I decide. But what about you? What are you going to do?” *Now that he wasn’t actively working.* Bryan had been by his side for over twelve years. He had two kids in the university and one still in primary school. He needed the money.

“Don’t worry about me, mate. Celeste thinks I have my head only in the game, but she’ll be proud to know I’ve made quite a few investments over the years. Besides, I might as well take a step back and reevaluate what I want to do. I’ve been thinking about retirement for a while and Celeste has been talking about us going on a trip. I might do that.”

Adeniran nodded. “Let me know if you guys need anything.”

“I’ll do that. Send my love to Camille.”

He stood in stunned silence for a moment after the call disconnected, numb. What did his life mean now? If there had been a more pressing time he needed God to speak to him, it was now. *The second thing I love most in my life is being taken away and You stand watch and do nothing while my life is crumbling? What are Your reasons?* he inquired silently.

Adeniran wanted to scream the latter out and yell at God. But getting emotional and losing his cool that way would only be to his detriment. He turned to head back to Camille, but just as he turned his jaw collided with a certain forehead. The tray in their hand with vanilla mini cupcakes decorated with colourful butterflies and sprinkles had narrowly missed the front of his shirt. He bit back a curse word.

“I’m so sorry,” said a familiar voice.

He glanced down at the face before him. *You’ve got to be kidding me.* He almost burst out laughing. Almost. His lips quirked in a sly smile, needing to let off some steam after his recent rejection. “We really need to stop meeting in this manner.”

Isi forced a smile, clearly disappointed to see him. “Believe me. It wasn’t on purpose.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Indulge me, do you have some kind of problem watching where you’re going? Like you have a body balance problem? Maybe you need glasses or something?” *Why am I picking on her?* he asked himself. He told himself it was because of his mood at the recent news. And maybe because he just needed to get a rise out of her. See if she could keep up with her silly all-too-easy smile and mannerism.

Her lips parted in surprise. “That’s a very impolite thing to say.”

“It’s just a question.”

“No, it’s not. I bumped into you. I apologised. You don’t have to be so insulting and tactless.”

His brow furrowed. “Tactless?”

"Yes. You're exactly like the beast."

His frown deepened. "Excuse me?" He wasn’t in the mood for any silly games or conversation.

"The Beast from *Beauty and the Beast.* You're exactly like him. You hardly ever smile. You’re a grouch. And now, it appears you’re full of yourself."

He blinked thrice. "Are you really comparing me to a fantasy fictional character? Are you delusional?" What kind of dream world did she live in? And was that what she spent her time doing—watching children’s movies?

"No. I'm comparing your bad personality with that of a fictional character. I don't know you so well, but so far you are impossible to be around. Because it's your personality right now, it doesn't mean it's who you

are, or who you have to be. You’re grumpy, broody, rude, rich, and unfortunately, attractive.” Her eyes widened and she pressed her lips together, like the last bit of his attractiveness shouldn’t have slipped past her pale pink lips.

She took a deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is that just because you’re a prince and a famous footballer doesn’t give you the right to treat people anyhow. Who would you be if everything was taken away from you?” He bristled at her words. “I may be lower in social class than you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t deserve to be respected for who I am. I know who I am, and I won’t let you push me over."

Adeniran couldn't think of anything to say in response to her softly spoken rebuke.

Taking another breath, she took a step back. "Sorry, again, for running into you like that. I assure you that my balance is perfect. It's just that we keep meeting in unusual circumstances. I need to get back to the kitchen. Enjoy your stay at Marigold Royale." She turned on her heels and flew down the corridor, taking a sharp right and then she was gone. He was left staring at the grand hallway’s beige walls. Did all that happen? Without a doubt he was entirely to blame this time. He should have kept his mouth shut and just talked to her civilly. Within five minutes, he’d stoked her dislike for him.

He was still perplexed when he walked over to meet Camille, who was sitting in the hotel’s plush waiting area. A large cosy section with a massive gold chandelier lowered at an angle from the ceiling, casting an amber light in the vicinity and giving the entire room a warm and welcoming glow. A few feet away, there was an open bar with customers already seated and being served. The bartender was a cute female dressed in a blue waistcoat and a white shirt. She smiled politely at the elderly man she was attending to, and the man responded by reaching out to touch her arm in a less-than-friendly gesture. The lady avoided his touch with a tight smile.

Old geezer, Adeniran thought in disgust. He hoped Isi wasn’t getting that kind of treatment.

What was it about her that made him both irritated and drawn to her? She was perceptive, but she was just another pretty face. He’d forget about her soon enough. She was intriguing, but not enough to make him lose his head over it.

Camille lowered her phone when he approached her. “Are you okay?” Her brows drew together. “Was it Bryan? What did he say?”

He took the seat next to her, jolting his thoughts away from his temporary distraction. “I’m being pulled off the team.” Briefly, he relayed the information to her, keeping Isi’s words and chastising tone in the back of his mind.

Her shoulders sank. “I’m sorry, Niran. what are you going to do now?”

“Maybe I can fly back to Italy and convince them that I can do it.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” He narrowed his gaze at her and she shook her head. “I’m not trying to be a pessimist. I just want you to have an open mind. Maybe Bryan is right. Maybe this is time for you to bow out.”

“I’m going to speak with your dad. See what he has to say about the whole thing.”

“Right. I’m sure Dad will love to help out in any way.”

Adeniran rubbed his eyes, thinking of the best time he could put a call through to his former coach.

"Hey…Why don't we get something to eat and later we can lounge at the pool?" Camille asked.

"Sure. Whatever."

She pouted. "Cheer up, He-Ran."

He forced a smile. “All right. Let’s do that. I’m kind of hungry anyway.”

“Great!”

The server placed his food in front of him and his lips twitched. A stack of blueberry pancakes with a drizzle of melted chocolate sliding down the sides and blueberries scattered on the top. But it was the blue and yellow butterfly perched delicately on the side of the plate that tickled him. Had Isi plated their meals?

Camille peered at his plate. "Wow. That looks lovely. Oh! And we have little notes next to our meals." She grabbed the folded note next to her plate and opened it. “Enjoy our meals packed with a burst of fun and sunshine.” She flipped the note over to check if there was anything at the back. “It’s cute, right?”

Adeniran still wasn’t sure of what to make of it. Not sure he wanted his meals to look ‘cute’. He eyed the colourful butterfly on his plate like it was an icky bug planning to come alive. Still, he lifted his fork after he said grace and dug into the meal. The rich flavours burst on his palette and he kept digging into it till he’d wiped his plate clean albeit the insect.

“Delicious,” Camille commented when she was done.

“Hmm,” was all Adeniran offered, staring at the wafer and honey-flavoured butterfly with rich chocolate-dotted eyes. He didn’t know how Isi figured out the order was for them or if she made it a habit to serve all the patrons with colourful-looking meals with a side note. Somehow that thought didn’t even make him feel any better.

After their meal, while Camille lounged by the pool—half-dozing, he received a call from his big sister.

“Hey, there. *Bawo ni*?”

“I’m okay.” He stood from the chaise lounge, putting some distance between him and Camille. “How are you and the family?”

“All well. We give God thanks. So… what have you been up to and when do you plan on paying us a visit?”

“I didn’t plan on stopping by.”

“*Ahn-ahn*. Why? Are we fighting? And see how you’re saying it with so much confidence.”

“Wunmi, I really didn’t plan on being in Nigeria for this long. I’m only relaxing a bit before I return.” He looked back at Camille. “And besides, I don’t think Dad wants to see me.”

“He’s your father. Of course, he’ll want to see you.”

He scoffed. His eldest sister may have faith that their father will turn a new leaf, but Adeniran had given up hope years ago. There was no way the man would act any differently than he had in the past. Especially since Adeniran's career had come to an end.

“Come to Ondo,” Wunmi insisted. “We haven’t seen you in months. Your niece and nephew miss you.”

“I didn’t plan to come to Ondo. I plan on heading back.” *To where?* The thought struck him. Not to his team. Not to his old life. But he was less interested in returning to a place that served as a constant reminder of when his problems began.

“Would you really leave like that without seeing us?” She sighed. “Come on, Niran. It’s just for a little while. At least let’s use your nephew and nieces as an excuse. You don’t spend enough time with them as is.”

He turned to look at Camille. She was awake now. Taking a selfie.

“I won’t be coming alone. Camille’s with me and I can’t shoo her off.”

“Are you two finally dating?”

His sisters were aware of his long-standing friendship with Camille and had even hinted at something more between them. Adeniran had consistently denied all such allegations up until a month ago.

When he didn't respond she kept on, "bring her with you. I'll tell Sade and she'll make sure the rooms are ready for both of you. Or are you staying in the same room?"

"No. I'm not that kind of guy, Big Sis."

"I just wanted to be sure. You've been over there for such a long time and maybe you are now *westernised*."

"Nothing's changed."

"Alright then. Good to hear that. See you when you're back."

When he ended the call he headed over to Camille. "What do you say about visiting my hometown?"

"Really?"

"I know you would like it."

Her eyes twinkled. "Okay. Let's do that."

"I'll make the arrangements." His phone buzzed in his pocket. Sade was most likely calling to confirm his arrival in Ondo. When he took his phone from his pocket, he frowned at the caller ID. It had nothing to do with his sister.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

ISIMEME

Isi walked into the children's church thirty minutes early. She greeted the other volunteers who served in other departments in the hallway before strolling to the Starlight Pre-Teen department in His Glory Center (popularly known as HGC). The walls of the fellowship hall were painted purple, orange and white. There were four rectangular tables with six chairs on each table. Each table was a different colour scheme: blue, red, green and yellow. Overall, the room was designed to be welcoming and a safe space for each child who came for service. There were already a few dozen kids seated at their tables, including Isabella Madu, who waved cheerily at Isi when she sighted her.

And in that instant, her heart ached for her cousin's children, Eniye and Obaseki, who weren't churched. Isi had tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade her cousin into letting her kids attend church even though she didn't want to. Those kids were missing out on making quality friendships, as well as a whole lot of godly content, and Isi was still praying to God to touch her Nosa's heart so she could see the value and joys of fellowship in God's presence with other believers.

Isi returned the wave with a big smile of her own and walked over to Tolu, the other female volunteer in the room.

After a quick exchange of greetings, they worked together to set up the crafts, and Bible study materials needed for the service, while Tolu gave her

a run-down of yesterday’s fun moments and meeting discussions.

As volunteers, they should have done all of their preparations for Sunday service the day before, but none of them had come into church yesterday due to the retreat. Isi still felt bad about missing out on the retreat. Her work schedule at Urban Mojo was extremely demanding. Unlike the small-scale Lebanese restaurant where she had previously worked in Benin City. Those were the days when she had fewer plates to wash and a schedule that allowed her to double back to her uncle. When she returned home these days, she was far too tired.

More so because she'd run into Adeniran all because of the tense and irritable conversation she'd had with him the day before.

Isi had scoffed and gave a discreet eye-roll as one of the waiting staff hurried into the kitchen with a rush of excitement, ready to burst after meeting the worldwide renowned famous footballer in person with his stunning interracial girlfriend. After he'd called out their order, Isi was hesitant to cook their meals because she was on brunch duty. Isi had no idea what possessed her to slip one of the butterfly wafers she’d made for a five-year-old’s birthday party onto their plates, along with a thank-you note card.

When the server went out with their orders, she chided herself for being too forward. What if Adeniran returned his food and her boss got wind of her folly? She would be fired, that’s what would happen. *Isi, why did you do that?* Maybe Nelly’s adventurous and laid-back personality was rubbing off on her, but she couldn't celebrate the victory of trying to impress him with her food because she kept looking over her shoulder every time the kitchen doors flew open and a server returned with a set of dishes only to hand it over to the dishwasher. She exhaled a sigh of relief when the server informed her that they had left the restaurant. Thank goodness Chef Dodzi was too busy at the back office to notice her twitching like a leaf, or she'd be out of a job.

Why does he bring out the worst in me? And then she'd called him a beast…

As Tolu handed her a stack of bright-yellow A5 papers, Isi snapped out of her reverie, pushing those thoughts away. "These hymn papers are being used today," she explained. "It came up during the retreat. Sister Eliana suggested that we begin teaching the children hymns at a young age. Some of them have used hymn books in school, while others are brand new to this. So we'll begin with Amazing Grace today."

"Awww, I love that idea, and I also love that hymn." Isi gathered the papers. Hymns had been an important part of her life in the youth church where she had grown up, and the suggestion to get the kids started with it early was a fantastic idea.

Isi moved to share the hymns as more kids filed into the room; some dragging their feet across the carpeted floor while others looked eager to participate in whatever was planned for them. It was a pleasure for Isi to be among them.

Sister Tolu kicked off the service with a short prayer, followed by the hymn and spontaneous worship in which some of the children rendered a song or two in the mix. Isi closed her eyes and raised her face to the heavens, feeling more connected to God in that moment of worship—resting in God and serving others. Even as she assisted in the children's church, she kept her mind on God and all the good things He'd done for her. There was something uplifting about being among children that reminded her that she, too, was a child of God.

Eliana, one of HGC's Children's church coordinators, stopped by her side with a carton of snacks just as Sister Tolu began the day's video.

"Good morning!" She chirped. "We missed you at the mini-retreat."

"I know. Sister Tolu told me all about it. I really wanted to be there. When is the next retreat?"

Eliana creased her brow. "I don't know. Maybe in six months."

She sighed. "Hopefully I'll be there."

"Meanwhile, I hope you're not finding the children's church too cumbersome." Isi took in the scene before her; the kids were seated, raptly watching an animated video of Jonah and the Whale. It was yet another topic discussed at the retreat—using a variety of teaching methods to keep the kids guessing for more. Isi admired the amount of thought and planning that went into the children's ministry. She smiled and returned her gaze to Eliana. "Not at all. I love children."

Eliana scrounged her nose. "That will only make the work a little easier. It doesn't make it any less difficult."

"True."

"Jeremiah don't put your fingers in your mouth," Eliana instructed the boy seated close to them, her tone firm but gentle. "You're a big boy, right?"

The little boy yanked his hand from his mouth and fixed Eliana with a handsome smile as he nodded.

“Good. Now keep watching.” Eliana turned to Isi. “I’ll see you after the service.”

When the video was over, Isi took over from Tolu and quizzed the children on what they’d watched, answered a few of their questions and asked them to share their learning points. That went on for thirty minutes till the service ended and parents trooped in one after the other to pick up their own.

Eliana returned and plopped on an empty chair next to Isi.

“What did you think of the hymn idea?”

“I think it’s a great one.”

Eliana beamed. “Good. I’m hoping we can keep this up and have some choristers come to teach us some hymns we don’t know.” She shrugged. “Either way, YouTube is a teacher too, *abi*.”

Isi laughed. “Yes, it is.”

“Speaking of the choir, the praise and worship session on Wednesday was phenomenal,” Eliana said.

Isi’s head bobbed in agreement, recalling goose pimples up her arm. “The Pastor’s message was equally compelling. I’m glad we can have those Bible study sessions without any fluff.” Tears streamed down her cheeks as she was overtaken by God’s love for her. She could recount every angry word and insulting remark her uncle had made. Isi had chosen to look for the good in everything. To reach deep into her soul and tap into the joy that God had placed there.

A joy that knew no bounds because of the One who had placed it in her life as a constant. Because those times taught her one of her most important lessons: joy was a result of God's presence and goodness in her life, not of her circumstances.

“Mmm. I agree. I think now more than ever we need to hear those things that spur growth and not make us comfortable at our current level.”

Isi admired Eliana even if they were probably agemates. Though they had only been working together for a few weeks, the woman possessed grit and a sweet spirit. She could be gentle when she needed, but could also be firm. And her love for God shone through when she spoke.

“I know. I love those times. It’s funny, but now I look forward to those moments even more because I know I don’t get to have many chances to

hear the Word on Sundays. Unless I purchase the recording."

"I've bought a few. I just haven't had the time to listen to them."

"And you won't have to deal with any hassles from me because we're in the same boat. How do you like Lagos?"

"It's been good so far." Eliana raised a brow. "I mean, it's not Benin but I'm adjusting to the chaos of it."

"That's more like it."

Isi had been battling the unexpected traffic and long hours on the road. Lagos had a mind of its own, brimming with activity and a whole lot of drama, adventure, and craziness. She'd seen on serious levels how educated men and women stooped to fist fights and hurled dagger-like insults at each other in the middle of the road, causing terrible traffic jams for other commuters rushing off to work while other stand-bys gawked at the scene as the police, road officials or even passersby tried to resolve the issue.

Her quiet life in Benin City consisted of going to work, church and returning home. Even when friends invited her to see a movie at Kada Plaza, she declined. Her Uncle's health came first. She visited her mother now and then and they caught up on life. There wasn't much for them to talk about and memories of dad and her elder sister, Isoken, were too much to bear. Furthermore, Isi didn't think it was appropriate to talk about her first husband while she was in her new husband's house. The little friends were either married with kids or off chasing their dreams.

When she thought of marriage, she thought of Adeniran, and she couldn't help but wonder if God had made a mistake for the first time in history, in her life. She was fond of Nelly. She was aware of his weaknesses and she ignored them because no man was perfect. He had a previous life with a slew of women. But that was all it was—the past.

Her feelings for Nelly didn't blow hot or cold like all those teenage angst novels or the real life of a teenager. She wasn't confused about her feelings. He was her buddy and, asides from Erinma and Odavwaro, her go-to person. In fact, the two women teased her about them being together. There was no waiting to look around to not 'put all her eggs in one basket'. She'd even mentioned him to her mother when they spoke a week ago.

Isi, you're doing it again. You're thinking way too much about this.

Blowing out a silent breath, Isi disengaged from that thought, shifting her thoughts to safer ground till when she could sift through her emotions on her own. "There was one time when the bus I was on had slowed to a stop

and a man dressed in dirty jeans and a t-shirt with a black durag stood in front of the bus fearlessly like he didn't care if anything happened to him."

Eliana nodded. "That happens a lot."

"The man walked up to the driver, and was demanding the usual daily ticket fees the *danfo* bus drivers were meant to pay before they could make a living." Isi had craned her neck to get a view of what was transpiring between the two parties but soon the man outside was hailing the bus driver and his eyes were already on the lookout for his next victim. Because left to her, the men (street-urchins) popularly known as *Agberos* whose life existence—according to Isi—was to enforce their 'territory' and authority and sustain their lack of a proper job.

Even though her initial honeymoon phase with the city had worn off, Isi knew this was where God needed her to be at this point in her life. Or maybe even start a family. Her mind toggled between the thought of surrendering to what God told her months ago and maintaining her relationship with Nelly.

A beautiful thrill swept down her spine at the thought of Nelly. They'd grown closer over the last few months. He had called yesterday to say he would be in HGC on Sunday and asked if they could hang out afterwards.

God, please don't make this hard for me.

There was a sweet burning sensation within her chest as she walked back to the adult's church. As she noticed him standing next to his Red Toyota, a smile spread across her face. She'd taken special care in her appearance, choosing a black pleated skirt with a casual top tucked in and a denim jacket with embellished rhinestones on the collar, finishing the look with a pair of white converse with black stripes.

"Hi, Pretty Lady."

"Hi." Isi waved at him. Nelly greeted her with a side hug. "Where's everybody?"

Nelly took out his phone. "She said to call her when you were done." Next thing, Erinma's voice came on the line via speakerphone.

"I thought we were hanging out after church?" Isi's eyes bounced to Nelly's smirk and back on the phone.

"Yes! I'm so sorry. I had to make a quick dash to the restaurant.

"Hope it's not something too serious."

"No. Just a little issue with one of the suppliers and the manager is tied up with the bridal party arriving at two. So I just need to settle it. I'll make

it up to you, I promise. And since Nelly is around and he said he would be your ride. ”

“It’s fine. Hope the matter is resolved quickly. I’ll call you later.”

“Thank you,” Erinma said on the other end of the line, relief laced her words. “Nelly promised to wait for you. He said he’ll treat you to lunch.”

“And I would love to take you out for lunch,” Nelly affirmed.

“Bye.” The call ended and Isi handed Nelly his phone.

“See something interesting down there?”

Isi glanced up at him, gaze narrowing but trying hard to hide her smile. “Because I’m getting the vibe that this is a gang-up.”

“Trust me, it’s not.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

ADENIRAN

ONDO

Ondo’s calm air welcomed him, as did the ease with which the cars travelled down the road. The topography of the state was not only amusing but also distinct. The city was surrounded by large hills, valleys and highlands, and it was known for having clean air. The exquisite traditional food cuisines of [1] *pupuru*, pounded yam and *egusi* [2], black soup, [3]*asun* in *alata swe swe* (fried peppered stew), and others made his mouth water. He hadn’t had the spicy barbecued goat meat in a long time—slow-roasted and cut into bite-sized pieces with aromatic flavours from sautéed onions, bell peppers and chilli. Ondo style. Getting some with roasted plantain on the side was high on his priority list.

Adeniran suppressed his growing hunger and focused on the scenery in front of him. Trying to reconnect with his hometown. A place he'd willingly left behind after his mother died.

He'd once thought the place was dull and uninteresting. Maybe the years away had instigated the nostalgia he was experiencing now. As the expression goes, "there's no place like home." There was a cluster of old houses with rusted metal roofs and cable dishes attached. The town's lack of development in some areas did not imply that the people who lived there were backward. Adeniran recalled his surprise at returning for his father's

birthday after a few years away to see things had changed, but not sufficiently to 'wow' him.

There was still a lot of work to be done in other parts of the country, including the so-called megacity of Lagos. And Ondo had a lot of potentials to be great as well.

Without a doubt, God was keeping a close eye on the state when it was created. Ondo alone had enough natural resources to make it stand out and be more of a powerhouse than Lagos. Lagos was not only the richest state in Nigeria, but it was also the most developed due to its large population, active seaport activities, and other factors. It was over-hyped, according to Adeniran, and he was relieved to be out of the madness of that city life.

Adeniran had always believed that healthy competition was necessary to allow governors to develop their states to the best of their abilities. Instead, there was a lot of laziness and monopoly, which slowed down governance. While others did the hard work, everyone sat and waited for the Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) of each state to be pooled and the national pool of money to be shared. For a multi-ethnic and bi-religious country, there was far too much ethnic discrimination and religious bias. He exhaled deeply; just thinking about the country gave him a headache. Instead, he chose to concentrate on his condition. Just as everyone eventually did when the country's problems became overwhelming.

Camille's head was balanced on his shoulder, and he rested his hand on the back of the chair. He was still trying to figure out this boyfriend thing. It was ironic that he was let go from his job just as he was deciding to get serious with Camille and start a family.

Not that he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to care for Camille. He had made wise investment decisions over the years. In addition to that, his family owned a good amount of shares in Cacao Love Bars (CLB), one of the largest chocolate-producing factories in the world, and profit was shared amongst them. So not only was he making a decent amount from his job as a footballer, and his joint business deals, but he also earned a sizable sum from CLB.

She stirred.

“Are you awake now, sleepy-head?”

“Ugh,” she grumbled, wriggling her nose. “I despise flying.”

“I know.”

She moved her neck from side to side, stretching her hands and loosening any kinks. “This place is gorgeous,” Camille said. She let down the window and the warm, fresh air from outside rushed into the car.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t believe you don’t like coming back home.”

Adeniran clenched his teeth. It wasn’t home for him. It had stopped being that a long time ago.

The funeral of the last Oba had been done, and they were now observing the obligatory ninety-day mourning period. This was before the next Osemawe ascended the throne. The next in line being someone from one of the five ruling families. And everything about his last meeting with his family was about to come true. Adeniran had desperately been waiting for Bryan's call, deciding to hope against all odds that the kingmakers would pick anyone but him.

And even that had failed him.

You should be here in Ondo. Getting ready to be king. Your football career is over. Ko fi gbogbo nkan wọnyẹn silẹ. Ati gba akọle ijọba rẹ. [4]

He gritted his teeth as a muscle in his jaw twitched at his uncle’s call. His uncle's words fanned the flames of annoyance in his chest. His career of over twelve years had been rendered a child's play; of no importance. But his uncle was wrong. Football was his life. His heartbeat. Not to reign as some traditional king and put on some funny-looking crown.

How could he just give it away—and for some flimsy traditional title, he didn't even want or deserve? *Who would you be if everything was taken away from you?* The chef’s question had stayed, leaving him still uncertain of the future.

Bryan’s call would have put an end to these shenanigans. Only now, he wasn’t sure what to do next. Which was why he’d taken Wunmi up on their offer. But as the car inched closer and closer to his father’s house, he was beginning to believe he’d made a huge mistake coming.

Last he knew, the family home he’d grown up in had long been abandoned. Adeniran knew the memories there were probably too much for his father to bear.

Camille’s eyes widened. “This is your father’s house? It’s incredible.”

That it is.

As the car drove down the driveway into the large compound past the guarded gated entrance, the path to his father's house was lined with tall

palm trees. With its sleek curves and floor-to-ceiling windows, his father's grand duplex looked like it was plucked from the pages of a luxurious architectural design magazine. Palm trees grew on the back and sides of the house to give it a more natural forest feel and to make it feel more connected to nature. There was also a large patch of green grass in front of the house with manicured shrubs, and a sea of flowers in all shapes, sizes, and colours just before the brick walls that led to the main entrance of the house. The entire estate was situated on a two-acre plot of land with a breathtaking view of the hills.

Adeniran didn't have many memories here. Not good ones anyway. The best memories of his childhood were tucked away in the house that he had thought was home. Probably that was one of the reasons he didn't have much of an attachment to the place. It was only a building with fine architectural structures.

Two maids in matching dark brown dress uniforms came down the stairs straight towards them. Bright smiles plastered on their faces as they welcomed them with curtsies, took their luggage and ushered them into the house. As soon as they walked through the doors he heard Camille's sharp intake of breath. It was always a lot to take in the first time. But even so, Adeniran couldn't deny the plush beauty of the decor and wide space. The sprawling stairs with side mirrors, the eclectic African paintings and bronze artefacts, the sculptors and then the live plants that dotted the room—not in an overwhelming way—but as mild as possible with enough opportunity to breathe and appreciate their beauty.

"This place is amazing," Camille murmured. She turned to look at him. "I can take selfies, right? It wouldn't be a violation of anything?" She asked, already taking out her iPhone.

"I don't think so."

Camille shifted her gaze from him and returned to her phone. "Great!!"

A woman came down the hall and his whole body stiffened at the sight of her.

"Welcome home, Adeniran," Oseye said to him with a broad smile.

He eyed her subtly. *What could she be possibly happy about?* "Thank you." He focused his attention on the lines on her wrinkled face. She'd changed since he last saw her at his father's birthday party. Her light brown hair was styled in a sleek bob, and she wore just a hint of makeup. Her drab

clothes had been replaced with colourful attires that made her fair skin pop a little more.

Camille strolled over. “Good afternoon, Mum.”

“Hello—”

“She’s not my mother,” Adeniran cut Oseye off.

Camille blinked quickly as her lips parted. “Oh, I’m so sorry. *Ma*.” He placed a palm on her back after she shot him a look. “I’m grateful for your hospitality in allowing me to stay in your lovely home.”

Oseye smiled slightly. “It’s a pleasure, my dear.”

“Cami, why don’t you let the maids show you to your room? You must be exhausted.” He pressed his lips against her brow. His first physical display of affection both in open and in private between them. He was hoping she would take the cue and leave. He didn’t want her anywhere near the older woman.

Camille raised her delicate brow at him with a wry smile and faced Oseye with a smile. “Thank you again.”

Oseye only nodded once, her smile still in place. “I’m sure you’re tired from your journey. You should go ahead and get some rest. I hope you will find the room suitable for you.”

“I’m confident I will. The house is incredible, and the furnishings are exquisite.”

With pride, Oseye looked around the room. “Yes. Thank you very much. I’m sure Adeniran will show you around when you have settled in.”

“I would love that. Have a good night, Ma.” To Adeniran she said, “I’ll see you later.” He was sure she would. He could see the questions in her eyes.

"What about Big Mummy Banjo and Mummy Ore? Aren’t they around?" He inquired after Camile had gone up the stairs.

Oseye averted her gaze. "They are not around."

His brows furrowed as he frowned. "Why? Did anything happen to them?"

"Your father sent them to the United States a few months ago.”

"For no apparent reason?" It made absolutely no sense at all. Then again, his father was unpredictable. His gaze narrowed. “And how come you’re here? Why didn’t you go with them?”

Oseye met his gaze with a small smile. "You must also be tired from your trip. Is there anything, in particular, you will like to eat now that you're

back? I can prepare a feast for you as a welcome home party."

"I'm fine."

"Oh." She nodded, accepting his rejection. As if she had anticipated it. "How about your lady friend?"

"If I need anything I'll ask the cook. Thank you." He only said the latter only because his mother had taught him not to be disrespectful to his elders, even if their actions clearly warranted a whole great deal of annoyance.

"Okay. As you wish."

Adeniran turned to leave.

“It’s good to see you. And how’s your leg?”

Adeniran looked at her suspiciously. "It's all right."

"Your mother would be very proud of you and your accomplishments."

Hot rage coursed through his veins. He moved forward, his tall frame towering over her. "Please, please, please refrain from mentioning my mother around me during my stay here, no matter how brief. You stabbed her in the back because she was too nice to you."

Oseye's eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm sorry for what I did."

Adeniran glared at her. "Sorry? I can't believe you. You should have known how sorry you would have been before you killed her." His lips curled up in disgust as a bittern tang hit his mouth. “You’ve successfully driven everyone away from here, and you now have our father all to yourself. Bravo.”

Her eyes widened in shock. She shook her head. “No. No.”

Her reaction enraged him even more. She’d been playing the innocent card for far too long, and if the only reason he was back in Ondo was for this—he would seize the opportunity with both hands. "Your evil ways will eventually catch up with you. I can assure you of that. I will reveal your secret even if I die trying.” He jutted his jaw. “So go ahead, cook up your concoctions. Bring out your ineffective witchcraft. This battle will end with one of us dying."

A small smile crossed her lips. “I guess it’s about time.”

1. a traditional fermented, smoked-dried cassava food, commonly consumed in South western, Nigeria and other West Africa countries.
2. a thick West African soup made with ground melon seeds, typically also containing leaf vegetables and meat or fish.
3. A Yoruba dish made from roasted goat meat sautéed in spicy peppers and other vegetables.
4. Leave all those other things behind. And get your royal title.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ISIMEME

LAGOS

"Did you enjoy the service?" Isi asked. For weeks now, she'd been hoping she could make some headway with Nelly's casual attitude toward God. She didn't stop to consider her reasons—she only knew she would do it for anyone else, even if it didn't involve any emotional attachment.

"It was nice," Nelly replied. "The Pastor was really good."

"Glad to hear it." As much as she didn't want to put pressure on him to take his spiritual life seriously, she couldn't do so. But, as a friend in his life, she felt compelled to show him what it meant to have a friend in God. After some soul searching, she realised that one of her goals in reconnecting with Erinma was to be an encouragement when she was unsure about opening her flower shop and restaurant—and perhaps a voice of reason when it came to reuniting with Andrew. But with Nelly, things were still a bit murky and uncharted.

A female staff member called out a customer's order of frappuccino and grilled chicken waffles. The scent of bold aromatic coffee danced in the air with unhindered abandon and all Isi wanted to do was mentally capture the elegant décor of the place and its mouth-watering pastries.

What if God brought them together for Isi to help Nelly find his way? *And then maybe, just maybe, we would be together,* the thought came to her.

More than once she'd heard of Christian couples who had started as casual friends, with one leading the other to Christ and found themselves falling for each other, only to discover God had bigger plans for them both

She exhaled gently.

Baby steps, Isi. Let the Holy Spirit work in him. You don't have the power to change him. Neither did she know what God had in store for either of them.

"Okay," she finally said, "and you will be coming back for more?"

He steepled his fingers and shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "I don't see why not. I'm intrigued about what they taught on being new, and shedding the weight of the past."

She nodded. "I also heard they have upcoming discipleship programs for…" her voice trailed off. She was about to say for those who gave their lives to Christ. Thank goodness she'd reeled in her words. Saying the words 'those who wanted deeper in Christ' might have been a bit too forward.

"For what?" Nelly raised a brow just as a server brought their ordered meals. The server smiled afterwards and left the table. "You were saying something about a discipleship program."

Isi kept her eyes on the prize—the delicious spread of exquisite croissants, milkshakes, crispy chicken sandwiches, and coffee. "Nevermind. It's not important for now. Just keep coming."

Nelly gave her a levelled gaze then looked away.

"I love this!" She took a long sip of her chocolate vanilla milkshake with a healthy dose of whipped cream. It elicited the same sweet sensation in her tummy. The same feeling she got, spending time with Nelly. It seemed that was something she couldn't seem to get enough of. "You're right. Their pastries are really good."

When Nelly had suggested the place for lunch, Isi had imagined a coffee shop where they served only caffeinated items and would have to force herself to drink a cup and probably snack on a meat pie or chicken pie. Instead, the place had her blown. The extravagance of their menus was enough to make it a Willy-Wonka of pastries and desserts; in addition to their sandwiches.

"Did you think I was lying? I can't believe I haven't brought you to Coffee and Cream yet."

"I think your job as a tour guide ended months ago."

He spread his hands apart. "Where did your sense of adventure fly to?"

“It flew to the mindset I-need-to-make-more-money-to-rent-my-own-apartment.”

“Wow. I’ve never heard of the place. Is it in Lagos?”

Isi laughed and helped herself to the second half of his croissant, dipped it in her shake and placed it back on his plate. Then she stuck her tongue out at him. She knew he despised milkshakes. According to him, milk was for babies. Not grown men.

“*Haba!*” He exclaimed. “That’s unfair.”

“Seriously though, there are a lot of places in Lagos and I doubt we can see them all.”

"It doesn't matter. We don't have to see them all. I believe it's the company you're with that matters." He linked his fingers together. "And I'm not sure where you got the impression that I'm not a Christian."

She cocked her brow.

"You've been inviting me to church because you think I'm some sort of pagan."

Isi was quick to shake her head, a lie at the tip of her tongue. Then she pursed her lips. "I'm sorry."

Nelly leaned back and folded his arms across his lean chest. "Explain."

"Um…

"I respect God. I just…" He blew out a breath and scratched the back of his head. "Maybe I haven't fully been able to connect like the rest of you do. I see the way people talk about having some special relationship with God and the Holy Spirit and it kind of feels like something distant and out of reach for me."

Something about the way he spoke showed his sincerity. His openness was something he hadn't been doing despite their closeness. "Connecting with God isn't out of reach for anyone. As long as you're saved, all you need to do is put in the same effort as you would in building a relationship with those that matter to you."

The expression on his face grew serious as he contemplated her words. Seconds later, he said, "okay. I'll give it a try." He smiled a little. "Thanks for rendering a listening ear."

"Anytime, Nelly. You know I'm here for you always."

"I know. You really are an amazing woman. The total package any guy would want to spend a lifetime with."

Their eyes held for what seemed like minutes before she gave a shy smile and broke away from the intensity of his gaze. She took a bite of her chicken sandwich, all the while her tummy tingled.

"Are you sure you don't want a taste of my coffee? Trust me it's not all black and bitter."

She shrugged, took a hold of his cup and took a sip, eyes widening at the taste of whipped cream and sprinkles.

Nelly's eyes gleamed, lips curving to the side, his expression saying an 'I told you so'. She helped herself to another generous sip.

Although Isi had to admit she was no caffeine lover, she needed the sugar high to ride the tides of her heightened emotions.

"Your job at the restaurant…" Nelly said, "are you enjoying it? Is it all you dreamt it would be?"

"It's going well. I'm learning new things from my colleagues."

Her pastry-chef colleague, who also had brilliant skills when it came to pastries, would most likely love it as well. She could still imagine the taste of the Banoffee Pie he made just last week for a customer. The sweet smell of vanilla, bananas and caramel teased her in the kitchen while she'd been stuck with her potato purée.

So far, her colleagues were warm and easy to relate with. And while Isi knew most of them checked the Christianity box in their talk and application papers, Isi sometimes felt like an outsider. While they went as a group after working hours to 'club their stress away' Isi had declined at least twice before hoping they finally got the message that she wasn't into nightclubs or late-night parties.

"So," he said.

"So," she repeated, a bit prolonged on the 'o', dragging it out. Had she missed something he said while meandering through her thoughts?

"Tell me about your family. You rarely talk about them."

"Maybe because it's too difficult to talk about?"

"I know. That's why I'm asking. To be honest, you've been giving me breadcrumbs for a while now. I don't want crumbs anymore, Isi. I want the whole loaf. While I know I can't readily have that, I'll settle, for now, with getting to know you better and being more open with me. Do you think you can do that?"

Her hand paused over her glass before wrapping her fingers around it and raising it to her lips."What do you want to know?" She asked, then took a

sip.

“I don’t know.” He leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest. “Anything you want to let me know. Anything you’re willing to share.”

Anything she was willing to share? There was a lot she could share but did she want to share them now? With him? Right now in the cosy cafe and she didn’t trust herself to not let a tear or two leak out.

“Tell me more about your family,” he said as he bit into his shake-dipped croissant with a grimace.

“It’s not something I really like talking about.”

“But you’re going to share it with me anyway?”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Don’t act like you’re immune to this area of conversation.”

“How so?”

“You’re not exactly an open book. I don’t know much about your family aside from what you said about your dad losing his company, and you dropping out of school to support your family with menial jobs.”

“I promise to tell you whatever you want to know.”

“Okay.”

He tapped the table. “I’m going to get something. Are you cool or do you want something else?”

She shook her head, full of her milkshake and pastries. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Nelly stood and she watched him as he walked over to the long counter and was attended to a minute later by a pretty girl with a cute smile. The claws of jealousy gripped her and she reminded herself there was nothing to be jealous about. He acted very casually with the lady and when he busied himself with his phone. Erinma’s experience had somehow taught her to be on the lookout for red flags.

He brought back a bottle of juice. Pineapple flavoured. “Where were we?”

She folded her arms on the round table and leaned forward. “You were about to tell me your deepest secrets.”

“If I told you, it might scare you off.”

Isi smiled a bit and gazed down at her arms.

“I told you one of my down moments. It doesn't compare to you not talking jack about your family back in Benin.” He wiped his hands. “I want to know more about you, Isi. Warts and all.”

“Warts and all?”

“Yeah. But it’s not like you have any warts.” He smirked, lifting his mug to his lips.

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Girl, who’s laughing with you?”

She stuck a tongue out at him for the second time.

His face turned serious. “Are you ticklish?”

“What?”

“Are. You. Ticklish?”

“No. I don’t know.”

He lifted a brow. “You don’t know if you’re ticklish?”

Isi looked away from his inquisitive stare. “What’s wrong with not knowing whether I’m ticklish or not?”

"Absolutely nothing. It only makes me want to learn more about you."

“Hmmm.”

“For real though, talk to me. Tell me about your family,” he asked. “How did your parents meet?”

“According to my mum, they met at the university. They were crazy about each other.” Isi gave an easy laugh. “They got married when they were in their twenties. He was two years her senior and in a different department. He was this go-getter so he walked up to her one day and asked her on a date. My mum almost freaked out.” Isi sighed. “She said she always saw herself as this wallflower but Dad—who was so good-looking and tall and intelligent—never saw her that way. She was stunning back then. Still is.”

“What happened to him?”

A chill ran down her spine, and she bit the edge of her lower lip. “Do you remember that explosion that happened in Lagos a while ago?” Nelly gave a nod. He placed his fork on the plate and listened intently to her. "He was among those who died that day." "I guess that he also jumped into the water or was pushed." She inhaled deeply. "It was him and my older sister."

“Isi... I’m truly sorry.”

She could recall that day vividly. Not like she had been there when it happened but her imagination was quick to conjure up the horrifying images of what could have played out. Her father had left for Lagos with her sister to secure an apprentice job at a fashion school. They needed to be

in Lagos by early Monday morning, so they decided to leave Benin on Sunday to ensure they arrived on time.

“My father didn’t want to be out late and hated travelling at night because of how scary the roads got at night with bandits in operation. I remember my mother getting the call late that night about him and Isoken’s disappearance. Mum had been frantic with worry, calling every one of their friends in Lagos asking if he’d stopped by at their place.”

Isi had been too young but she had known something was terribly wrong —most especially after the weird dream she had two weeks before their departure to Lagos and telling her father and sister not to go. Her childish pleas had been met with warm smiles and a promise that he would return after three days and Isoken would stay behind if she got the job.

Nelly’s brows knitted together. “But he taught you how to swim? How come he couldn’t swim his way out?”

“I don’t know. I wish I had the answers.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

Isi waved his apology away. “No, it’s fine. I asked myself the same question. Almost driving myself crazy with them until the day I decided to let God take the pains and unanswered questions.” She licked her lips. “I would rather not talk about this anymore, please.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Totally fine.” He ran a hand over his head. “I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

She forced a smile and lowered her gaze back to her plate.

A few minutes later she snuck a look at Nelly as he ate. Nodding his head when he spooned some yoghurt he'd ordered into his mouth.

What’s stopping you, Isi? she thought. Absent-mindedly, she put a spoonful of yoghurt into her mouth.

"There's something on the corner of your mouth." He pointed to the left side of his mouth.

She raised her hand to her face. "Where?"

Nelly skipped going for a serviette and wiped off the white stain of yoghurt from the right side of her mouth. He brought his thumb to his mouth and swiped it off.

"Thanks," she breathed out.

She averted her gaze back to her plate. In reality, what was she waiting for? Nelly was a good guy and was strong and steady. He was there when she needed him and likewise. She cared so much about him that, if need be,

she was willing to place his needs above hers and she felt completely at ease with him. God hadn't said anything negative about him, so why was she holding back?

It was not because of Prince Grumpy. When Erinma told her about his injury she felt concerned for him. She'd also watched the YouTube recording of his interview with Ari Mato. Even with all his stoic facial expressions, there was no hiding the pain…the anguish in his eyes as he talked about what happened. Isi had never been a football fan but she watched the replays of the incident. When he lay on the grass, eyes squeezed shut in pain she could feel his pain. Her shock turned to concern, then to worry, then to sadness at the chances of this further denting his personality and him becoming even more of a grumpy person.

She ran her tongue over her lips. Not sure if she wanted to bring him up. "Have you heard from your friend? Prince Adeniran?"

Nelly looked up from his plate. He pursed his lips. "Yeah."

"How is he?"

He shook his head slowly. "He's not himself."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't been himself ever since the injury. I mean, he usually keeps to himself but this time it's really bad. He's had a tough time since his childhood and I think after his mother's death this is a huge blow to him."

Isi tried to remember if she'd read anything about his family background when she looked him up several months ago but came up with nothing. "How did his mother die?"

Nelly shook his head again. "Nobody knows. She was fine one day, and the next day she wasn't lucid. She died shortly after that."

Her brows drew together. "I'm sorry, that doesn't make sense. Was it a medical issue?"

"I don't know. Adeniran has never spoken about his mother's death but from the little I gathered he was close to his mother. He wasn't even a teenager when she died. After that Adeniran didn't pursue a lot of things. He didn't go to university. He concentrated on football and audiobooks, and that was it."He sighed and rubbed his brows. "That's why if he doesn't get back on the team it's going to be a huge blow to him."

"Because of the injury?"

Nelly nodded.

There were still so many questions she wanted to ask from his half-baked answers. A lot of missing pieces that her brain needed to understand the whole picture of who Adeniran Aremeyin was, and why he was the way he was.

“He was hoping to hit retirement in five years at 37 even if the usual age is 34. Those plans may crash and burn with everything that happened.”

“But he hasn’t retired yet. He still has a chance to go back.” She didn’t believe in giving up even if she had had to fight tooth and nail for what she wanted. A tenacity that got her through her childhood years.

He rubbed his forehead. “It’s not certain.”

“Why? Don’t you believe God can do a miracle? Why are we so quick to dismiss God’s divine intervention in our lives and give up?”

“Isi, it’s not like I don’t believe God could heal Adeniran if He wanted to.” He paused. “It’s just. This is not his first injury. His ACL was partially torn in the first one and he got better and went back.”

“Then God healed him.”

“This time is different. It would be too risky for him.”

That shut her up.

Isi's eyes descended to the table. *God, please help Adeniran through this situation. Let him hold on to you. Please fill him with Your peace and let Your will be done in his life to bring about your good purposes for him.*

Warmth swelled in her chest after her silent plea to God. That she didn’t like him didn’t mean she couldn’t pray for him. Compassion moved her to talk to God about him if for nothing but their childhood similarities.



Isi didn’t get back until late that evening, since she was off duty at the restaurant for the day. Disappointment swirled in her chest each time she saw Eniye and Obaseki home either sleeping, lounging watching Television or fighting over playing video games on Nosa’s phone.

But Isi was usually too tired to argue with her when she got back late from work on Saturday nights. On Sunday mornings there was no point

talking Nosa into getting her kids ready for church so Isi could take them with her.

"*Your church is too far,"* Nosa had said.

"*Okay. I can look for a church around the area that would be good for them,"* Isi replied.

Nosa shrugged nonchalantly. *"I don't want them mixing with local children."*

"Nosa, you have to take them to church. You can't just let them stay home," Isi said. *"They need to mix with other children in church and learn morals and learn about God. They might never consider the church as important if you don't let them have that experience right now."*

"I don't have to do anything. And they are my children. I decide what I want them to do. When they grow up and leave my house, they can do whatever they want to do."

"Nosa—"

"Drop this topic, Isimeme." Her tone held a finality and a clear warning that Isi would get more than she bargained for if she kept at it. And so Isi held her tongue. She knew when she was losing the battle and needed to recoup for a later time.

Isi only mentioned it once in a while but prayed about it constantly.

It had been at least two weeks since she brought it up again. Her mind and body were always too tired for Nosa's heated comebacks when she got home. For several weeks now all her Saturdays were busy at the restaurant. Because of how prestigious Royale Marigold was, it catered to a host of events: conferences and seminars, cocktails, private wedding parties, and lunch meetings. And it helped that Chef Dodzie had an impressive clientele that specifically requested exotic African dishes.

Still, there was no party like a Lagos party when money wasn't taken into consideration. Isi recalled the wedding five Saturdays ago in the hotel's grand ballroom which seated four hundred guests. The guests were dressed in sophisticated clothes of different styles in matching material patterns and eye-blinding jewellery that twinkled under the room's lights. Some of those weddings were featured on Sweet & Swoon Weddings, a popular blog that featured swoony love stories of how the couples met, pre-wedding shots and wedding photos.

That said, as much as she loved her job and the buzz that came with it, she enjoyed her personal time. Those moments where she could reflect and

understand where her life was going, and if she was still on track. This evening though, she settled for family time with Nosa and her kids.

She sat with crossed legs on the living room floor and tried to help Nosa's daughter, Eniye, with her homework. It was light years since Isi had done any maths problems involving fractions, decimals, areas, and perimeters.

"Aunty Isi can you make the egg and bread pancake for me to take to school next week? All my friends were begging me to give them. They said it was very sweet."

Isi glanced away from her Insta-feed after pausing a video. "Er…"

"Pleassseeeeeee."

"I'm not sure I'll have the time, but let me see what I can do."

"Better don't promise the girl what you can't do *o*," Nosa said from where she stood, folding laundry. "Don't let the girl think you're a liar."

Isi gritted her teeth. "As I said, I'll try."

"Thanks, Aunty Isi!" Eniye said. Isi smiled at her. Eniye was Nosa's first child and looked exactly like her mother—in attitude, character and impeccable behaviour, but other than that they drew the line. The boy, Obaseki, was more of an introvert. Most times he kept to himself.

"You didn't give me the gist of the party you attended that day. I noticed you didn't come home that night. Has that Nelly boy finally popped your cherry?"

Isi's eyes bulged and she averted her gaze to the children in the room.

Nosa laughed. "Why do your eyes want to fall out of their sockets? These kids are not ignorant of these things."

Still… "It doesn't matter." But they were not her kids and Isi couldn't air her opinions without Nosa thinking she was attacking her parenting skills. "I don't think we should mention things like this in front of them. They need to know the ramifications of these things. Why it's wrong and why they should wait till God blesses their union."

Nosa scoffed. "[1]*Oyinbo* grammar. Do you now want to give me parenting advice?" She said with a smirk.

Isi pressed her lips together. These days her big cousin felt she was attacking her in many ways—the way she conducted her business, her choice of words, and how she talked badly about people behind their backs. And then there was her dressing; her low-cut body-fitting blouses, mini skirts and dresses that showed off her thighs. Then there was the short jean

knicker she was currently putting on. She wore it in the house but there were times she walked out of the house with cat-callings in her wake. Isi didn’t feel she should go out dressed like that but her husband didn’t seem to mind and Isi was in no place to give her opinion. Nosa was beautiful and didn't need to—

Wait…was she being judgy? The thought dawned on her.

Dear God, forgive me if I'm being judgemental.

“Well, I will do what I believe is best for my children. When you have yours you can hide them in the house and feed them crumbs of what real life looks like.” Her eyes narrowed. “But trust me, when they come out they will only want to spread their wings and fly and be everything they were warned not to be.”

Isi blinked. Not sure if her cousin was still talking about her kids…or Isi.

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1. foreign/well spoken

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ADENIRAN

ONDO

He swiped the sweat from his brow and chugged down a bottle of water in one go. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth and tossed the bottle into his sports bag, lifted it, slung it over his shoulder, and tried not to add a limp to his gait as he strode across the field to where the car was parked. Two men stood straight in anticipation of his arrival, while another followed behind him. It was suffocating. Irritating, to say the least. He'd of course had a security team on several occasions while playing for the Chargers of Florentina. Even with safety measures from the police in place, things could get rough and crazy after a football game if devoted fans of the losing team were in a foul mood and looking to express their displeasure with a fight break out with opposing teams. Adeniran had been stuck in one of those brawls and made it out with two stitches to his left brow.

Only, he hadn't anticipated this.

When he came back home to Ondo, he wasn't expecting to come to such outlandish treatment. Especially not with the knowledge that the team of guards had been assigned to protect his life not because he was a semi-famous footballer but because of what his life meant to those who needed him to live up to his responsibilities. A responsibility he didn't want as the chosen Osemawe to Ondo Kingdom.

They were in the twenty-first century for goodness' sake! What were they even thinking? Gone were the days when civilization wasn't as developed and the people needed some king to dictate what they could or couldn't do. Judge menial matters and other trivial issues. That was why they had the local council, governments and the president. What did seating over a few thousand people have to do with making the population any good?

In truth: he had no idea.

Neither did he want to know.

It was common knowledge that he wasn't the brightest. He'd managed to push through secondary school with a few credits and passes. He hadn't bothered with college and put his all into becoming a star footballer.

With irritation, he tossed the bag to one of the new guards assigned to him and climbed into the backseat of the sleek black SUV. The boot closed with a gentle *thud* and the attendant got into the front passenger's seat and the driver took off. This wasn't how he planned on enjoying his holiday; sandwiched between two other cars with a security detail that had direct orders from his uncle to be his permanent escort wherever he went.

Bodyguards.

Male attendants.

A chauffeur.

He hated everything about it. And he was yet to give his approval. If he did, which he wasn't, were they going to throw a parade? He also didn't want to believe their negative vibes had led to his sudden downfall. He knew about village people from one's hometown ruining a person's chance at happiness. Then again, Adeniran didn't believe in all that.

Camille, on the other hand, thought it was a step up for him. An elevation of some sort. Like it was some way he could have power and be someone of greater importance.

Adeniran hissed silently. Elevation [1]*oniranu*. What did she even know about it? It was all nonsense to him. Wasn't that what he'd been trying to do over the years? Build a legacy that superseded the throes of his childhood. The painful consequence of his father's actions had followed him and his siblings all through the years.

Of course, he understood what it felt like to be popular. While playing for an Italian football club, he knew the life of being a celebrity and being adored by fans in different parts of town. But in Nigeria, all he wanted when he returned home was to be himself. Enjoy the quiet life he had in

Ondo before returning to Italy for the next season. But his uncle had tainted that.

He pulled out his phone from his back pocket and checked the notifications. There were a few messages from his younger sister, Sade. He had a few from his older brother and ignored them both. He knew what Funsho would say and he didn't want to hear it. Any second he could delay what everyone thought was inevitable was good for the time being. Because he had every intention to fight back. This was his life and no one could dictate what he could or couldn't do.

Ondo was his father's hometown. Although it wasn't as lush as the megacity, Lagos, it had its perks. Back in the day, there were several things he and his old friends did on occasion to have fun even when he had a curfew attached to his movements. Most of the time they went to the river or played football with a self-made dingy goalpost. Despite everything that happened, Adeniran wouldn't trade those start-up days for anything. They were his motivation to push forward and make something of his life.

And becoming a professional footballer had been his best bet. There were a lot of legends in the professional football world, but Adeniran had one in mind when he hung the player's poster up on his wall.

Edson Arantes do Nascimento.

As a kid, Pelé had been his hero. Adeniran had watched his games with fervour. His eyes followed Pelé on the screen—every dribble, every penalty kick, every goal scored. How he seemed to calculate every move his opponents posed to make and finagle his way out of it. It made the game sweeter with his unexpected and well-played moves.

Adeniran made it a duty to put in his best and be the best.

He endured gruelling training sessions from different professional coaches. Even though he had never been a morning person, he'd developed the habit of getting out of bed each morning and making it to the field with his squad where they paired up and did passing drills. It was while being on the team in Ondo he learned to never let his teammates down. As a team, they depended on each other to bring a win. Just the same if they lost, they all lost.

When he was fourteen he played as a forward for the Comet Football club in Ondo just before he got drafted into the Liverpool Football Club. He left after ten years at a transfer window to join the C.O.F in Italy.

It had been too great of an opportunity to miss. A new job meant longer training sessions, new teammates and trying to fit in. What Adeniran loved the most was the idea of starting afresh. It also meant a new culture and working to learn a new language. All of which he'd been willing to do.

He angled his thoughts away from his memories and back to the leathery smell of the SUV. The more he thought about how far he'd come, the more decisive he was to fight for what he wanted. No one was going to push him over.

Mosadi: Hey, man.
Heard you're back in town.
We should hang out.

Adeniran focused on the message. Mosadi and he had been good for a short time during his childhood, but life intervened and they drifted apart. They only recently started talking after meeting at their primary school reunion in Ondo a few years ago.

Adeniran: Sounds good.
Time and place?

Mosadi: Bites and Slurps.
2 p.m tomorrow.

Adeniran: See you then.

He placed his phone aside and leaned his head back on the headrest.
You'll make us proud one day, Adeniran. I can feel it.



Adeniran got dressed and made his way out of his bedroom to the dining area. Taking the stairs one at a time. Camille was still in her bedroom, getting her beauty sleep.

"Hey, big bro," Sade said, slicing an orange in two.

“Hey.” He looked around. “Are you aware Big Mummy and Mummy Ore are no longer staying here?”

She cut the peel off. “Yes.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“It’s not newsworthy. And I didn’t think you would be interested in such news.”

“Are you telling me you don’t find it strange that they would just move out and relocate?”

Sade shook her head. “No. Everyone in this family has been doing whatever they want. You relocated, and the rest of the family followed. Big deal.” She bit into an orange slice. “You think they like that you’re the only one in the family enjoying the comfort of living abroad?” She scoffed. “Why are you even bothered? I thought you would be happy?”

“I am.” Everything just seemed off.

“Meanwhile, Uncle Owolabi is talking with dad in the small parlour. Hush-hush conversations. Brother Funsho flew in from Abuja last night. He’s in there with them.”

His brows rose. “And Sister Wunmi?”

“Sister Wunmi is yet to arrive.” She dropped the knife on the plate and licked the edge of her finger.

“You have no idea what they are talking about?”

“No. Why am I even answering you? I’m not your Personal Assistant. Call and find out where they are yourself. ”

Adeniran pulled out one of the brass chairs at the dining table and sat down. “Don’t be like that.”

“Be like what?” She cocked her head to the side. “Telling you to snoop around yourself to get your own information and stop using me?”

“I pay your salary.”

She scoffed. “You pay what? You can’t threaten me with that. We are partners.”

He grabbed a slice of orange and popped it into his mouth. “It’s not a threat. And I have more stake in the business than you so don’t be too quick to smile.”

Sade pointed the knife at him and he eyed it wearily. “Since you have more to lose then I will run your business to the ground.”

“I told you I’ll get another jersey for you.”

She shook her head and lifted an orange to her mouth. “Nuh-uh. I want that one. Either you give me or we keep this going.”

“Aren’t you too old to play this game?”

“Aren’t you old enough to tell a woman you aren’t interested in her instead of stringing her along?” Sade shook her head. “I hate it when men do that.”

“Stay out of my business, Sade,” he growled out.

Sade leaned forward. “Why don’t you just tell her you don’t want more?”

“Like I said, it’s none of your business. But if you are so desperate to know, we’re now dating.”

She blinked. “Since when?”

“Since none-of-your-business.”

She gave an eye roll and shrugged. “Whatever. It’s not like your business is very interesting anyway. *Sha* don’t let dad find out.”

Adeniran didn’t care what his father thought of him.

“I don’t get…Why are you being salty?”

“Why are *you* so grumpy?”

“Because—”

“Are you two arguing again?” Wunmi asked as she entered the dining room. She dropped her bag on the dining table, her eyes darting between them. “I swear you guys bicker like cats and dogs. You would think since you decided to be business partners you would be more mature and drop the babyish things.”

“I am more mature,” Sade defended herself, “I just have to stoop a little to Adeniran’s level so he can understand certain things when it comes to relationships and relating with humans.”

“You don’t deserve a response to that.”

Wunmi shook her head in amusement. “I can’t believe you two are business partners and haven’t killed each other yet.”

He couldn’t believe it either.

Sade was the last born and was into kickboxing as a sport to relax. A sport neither of them thought was suitable for a woman. But all of them knew exactly why she’d chosen it. She was also a humanitarian; fighting as an activist for both mother and child alike.

“I don’t have time for this. Have you spoken to Funsho?”

He shifted his gaze to Wunmi. “Is he around?”

“Yes. He arrived before I did. He should be discussing your situation right now with Daddy and Uncle Owolabi.”

Panic seized him but he squelched it. His brain stood on alert as he planned on how best to excuse himself without disrespecting anybody. He already knew there was a chance no one would agree with his choices. But he could live with their disapproval. He couldn’t live with doing something he didn’t want.

Uncle Owolabi walked out of the small parlour with Funsho in tow. Judging by Funsho’s hardened expression, the meeting hadn’t been good for him and Adeniran felt a prick in his chest. How would his brother possibly be feeling since he wasn’t the chosen heir? Elated? Relieved, while Adeniran’s whole life and career were close to being lit up in smoke?

They all ganged up against him to control his future. He wasn’t having any of that.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Adeniran gritted out, grappling for some level of composure to keep his cool.

His uncle gave a single nod. “ Adeniran. [2]*Bawo*?”

“Not quite fine, sir.”

Uncle Owolabi’s greying eyebrows rose to meet his receding hairline. A trait that thankfully, only fell upon him and his sons. “Ah-ah. What happened?” He inquired in thick Ondo dialect. It was distinct from the usual Yoruba dialect. “Are you feeling sick? There seems to be something going about in the air. What do they call it?” He snapped his fingers. “I can’t remember the name now.”

Adeniran glanced at his brother who shook his head grimly. Meaning he should keep his words and opinions to himself. This wasn't the time to air his thoughts or express himself. There was no way he could do that. “I’m not interested in being the next Osemawe.”

“[3]*Ehn?* Why?”

“Because I already have a life. And it isn’t here trying to take up some form of Obaship.”

“I see.”

“Adeniran.”

Adeniran turned to face his big sister’s warning tone.

“You are aware that there are other people who are vying for this position. Some people will even kill for it.”

“Then they should leave me out of their bloody pursuit of it. I don’t want to be a part of this.”

Uncle Owolabi shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Do you realise any of your half-brothers would jump at this? Look, Adeniran, I suppose you believe this is all nonsense to you.”

“Uncle–” Uncle Owolabi interrupted Funsho's speech with a raised hand.

“The Oba has passed and the [4]Ifa has chosen you among many candidates, Adeniran. So many people have wished for this kind of opportunity to come to them, but it lands on your lap without you seeking it and you want to toss it away?” He narrowed his gaze at him. “You should think long and hard about this before you throw it away. Don’t let your shortsightedness hinder the good of this family.”

What the… “*Ifa*? I don’t believe in anything superstitious.”

“Be careful with your word choice.”

Adeniran took a deep breath. “Why can’t Brother Funsho do it? Why do I have to give up everything I have to do this?”

“Are you hard of hearing? The oracle selected you. This is our heritage and we should preserve it.”

“They don’t even know me.”

“And they will. I suggest you think very well about it. Let Funsho speak some sense into your head. I will return by the end of the week and I hope to get a more favourable disposition from you.”

“Uncle, aren’t you staying for breakfast?” Wunmi asked.

Uncle Owolabi shook his head. “I have to get somewhere. A friend’s daughter is having her child’s naming ceremony today. I promised to be in attendance. I will take a rain check for breakfast. Thank you, Wunmi.”

“Okay. I’ll see you off, Uncle.”

“I’ll follow you,” Sade said.

“Adeniran?”

“Sir?”

“Remember what I said. You are doing this not only for yourself but for the family.” And with those last words, he walked out of the dining area with Wunmi behind him, inquiring about their cousins.

“You should do it,” Funsho simply said when they were alone.

“You say it so casually, but you have no idea what you’re asking of me, and you feel I should jump at it. Just like that? Why can’t you do it? You’re

here in Nigeria. You have your life here. Why should I have to give up everything I've worked for to become an Oba."

"Adeniran, I'm not saying it because I'm the firstborn. And besides, they chose you for some reason. This is for us to restore dad's honour after all these years. To put the family into the limelight again."

Adeniran scoffed. "Nobody cares about that."

"That's where you are wrong. We all care. Tell me…how long do you think you will play over there? You will retire soon. This is perfect timing for you to shift to something else."

"You are not Dad. Stop trying to take over my life."

"Then do this because of Mum. What do you think she would say to this? Tell you to back off and remain abroad doing your own thing? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you. For us. Don't mess it up because you refuse to open your eyes."

"My answer is still no."

"Adeniran…"

"No! I said no! They should find someone else. That's my final answer so leave me alone."

He stormed out to the backyard and looked up at the hibiscus tree. The tree was bare of the usual pink petals that bloomed and made the branches come alive, brightening the whole backyard with its vibrant colour and beauty. The door closed behind him and he shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

"Mum always loved this flower," Wunmi said beside him. "I still don't know why. It's practically the most common flower in the country with no scent and she thought it was the most beautiful and exotic thing that ever existed."

His jaw tightened. Talking about their mother was a struggle for all of them. But mostly for him. His mother had been the only one who had faith in him. "She was partial to the yellow variation." *The Hula Girl.* Adeniran had done his research on it, intending to visit the Hawaiian Islands one day.

"I guess dad did his best to recreate it in any way he could."

"I'm surprised the witch hasn't cut it down," he said, referring to his stepmother.

"I'm sure she's tried. But dad wouldn't let her. In some ways, it reminds him of Mummy. He still comes out here in the evenings, sits by the tree,

and talks to Mummy as if she were sitting next to him. They were inseparable."

"Yet he let one of his other wives kill her."

Wunmi shook her head, her gaze swivelling to his. "We don't know that for sure, Niran. It's all conjecture."

Adeniran also shook his head. "I'm sure she did it. I told you what I saw. She had Mum's wrapper with her." It still haunted him now and then.

"There has to be some sort of explanation—" his sister started.

"Are you taking her side now?" Adeniran gritted out.

"No. Of course not."

"I confronted her when I arrived. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"You shouldn't have done that. What if Dad finds out?"

"I don't give a damn. It's the only thing keeping me going."

She exhaled a sigh. "The only thing I'm looking for right now is closure. And since I can't get that, I have to shift my focus elsewhere. I can't keep living this way." After a few minutes of silence took up space between them, she continued, "My husband has done everything he can to help me. Be supportive. Helping with the kids. But we both know this is affecting him and the kids. Postpartum depression nearly destroyed me." She raised her eyes to the chirping of birds. "At least I'm glad I got over it."

Adeniran was aware of his sister's bouts with the baby blues. Adeniran was out of the country when his nephew Toba was born, but Sade had kept him abreast on family matters. He had also been absent when his brother's wife gave birth to twin daughters. He'd been busy with training yet again. Football. His other life. A life that separated him from his realities in Ondo. A reality that now threatened to destroy him and all he'd worked for in the last couple of years.

He swallowed and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"*Ahn-ahn.*" She swatted his shoulder. "Don't be sorry. I understand. We all understood. You have made us proud over the years."

"You are family," was all he said. His sister could excuse his absence but Adeniran couldn't bring himself to do the same. They weren't a close-knit family but in the past, while his mother had been lucid, she'd been the one to bind the family together. Always thinking up fun games and activities they could all partake in.

Her eyes softened at that with understanding. "I know that. We all understand why, Adeniran."

“Still, I can’t help but feel I could have done way more than sending the kids clothes and goodies.” He had missed a lot.

“Well, if this will make you feel better, the twins love that they had their cool uncle sending them things from abroad.” She smiled and nudged his arm. “Cheer up, Niran. This is life. Things happen. And you haven’t done anything wrong by wanting to live the life you want.”

He scoffed.

“About this Oba thing.” Adeniran’s body stiffened but he clamped his mouth shut and listened. “You should consider it. This is a responsibility that has been placed upon you and whether you like it or not, it will be for the betterment of the family.”

“You’re not my mother,” he gritted out.

“Oh, I know that. You made that very clear all through the years.” She paused. “And I would never want to take that role. I know Mummy did a lot for you. Something I’m not sure I could have ever done.”

An apology hung loosely on his tongue but he didn’t let it get past his lips.

“Besides,” he said, “don’t we have enough money as a family? What does this have to benefit everyone?” Last he checked the company, Cacao Love Bars, was doing extremely well for itself. Funsho and Wunmi, as well as other first and second-borns of the other wives, managed the shares from the company.

“Honour,” Wunmi replied.

“Sometimes, no matter how hard you try…. Honour still doesn’t come your way.” *Even from those who matter most to you.*

“I know you have ambitions for your life but you should think about doing this for us. For Mum.”

Adeniran almost scoffed.

“Just think about it. Please.”

“I’ve heard.” But he’d already made up his mind. Using their mother as a trump card had always been efficient in the past to get him to do what they needed him to do. Not this time. This time he was half certain his mother would never have wanted this for him.

1. rubbish/nonsense
2. Yoruba for 'How are you doing?'
3. Really?
4. Oracle - regarded by Yoruba as the deity of wisdom and intellectual development

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ADENIRAN

"You don't look so good." Mosadi lifted his soda bottle to his lips. "What's wrong?" He tipped his head back and took a sip.

"Everything," Adeniran responded. He grabbed his bottle and followed his friend's lead. The need to get out of the house pushed him to leave two hours before he met with Mosadi. The tension in the house was stifling. Many things felt out of place in his father's house, and there were questions that he needed answers to in addition to recent changes that he found hard to grapple with. He wished he didn't have to leave with the guards trailing behind, but at the very least he could drive himself. Although his father had not yet requested to speak with him, Adeniran suspected that his father knew he had no intention of adhering to whatsoever the *Ifa* believed. Either that or Funsho should have informed their father following their heated argument.

"I'm listening. Unless it's something you don't want to talk about."

Allowing a few minutes of silence between them, he told Mosadi everything that was going on at home with his stepmothers and their children's disappearance. He also mentioned his relationship with Camille, which had him thinking deeply. He was fine with her; as their relationship progressed, they spent more time together, with Adeniran doing his best to make it work. But he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

"[1]*Dis guy sef,*" Mosadi laughed and shook his head, completely puzzled. "You're dating a gorgeous model, so what don't you like about your relationship with Camille?"

"I should have known that's the first thing you would want to tackle."

"I start with small matters first."

"Which is a quack ideology, by the way."

"Leaves more time to discuss the weightier issues."

Adeniran grunted and drank some more.

"So? Why don't you want to smash-slash-date her? The girl is fine."

Adeniran shook his head to discard any thought of 'smashing' his best friend, now girlfriend. He pointed his bottle in Mosadi's direction. "You see that kind of talk breeds greed and acquisition of wives as if they were some kind of trophy."

Mosadi burst out laughing. "Only you make romantic gestures sound like a business deal."

"Life is a business deal."

Mosadi bobbed his head. "Hmmm… deep."

"The way you talk at times." Adeniran shook his head. "You'll probably walk down that altar more than once. If you try again, God will rain down fire on you as you enter the church premises if you even attempt a second go."

"Unless my grandmother doesn't gag me before I even leave the house."

Adeniran's lips twitched with a smile. "It's been a while. How is she doing?

"She's doing well. You should go see her while you're still around. *Make she no come vex for una.*"[2]

"I'm already expecting it."

Adeniran had spent some of his childhood days with Mosadi and his grandmother. Since she worked with the government, she had a lot of free time on her hands back in the day. The meagre government salary hadn't been enough and money from her husband's pension funds wasn't forthcoming so she'd augmented by opening a small shop in front of her house where she sold some amazing *moin-moin*[3] and bean cakes.

Adeniran dropped the bottle on the table. "I'll come to visit soon." He missed the old woman and her troublesome ways. Besides, who knew—she could offer some words of wisdom in his sorry-ass predicament.

"Why don't you just tell her the truth?" Mosadi interrupted his train of thought. "Alternatively, you could simply hand her over to me. I'll make sure to look after her if she doesn’t mind getting married to a soldier.”

Adeniran glared at him.

Mosadi laughed. "I'm just messing with you, bro."

"Even if I agreed for you, is it your Soldier-boy salary you want to use to pay the bride price?"

"You never know when the millions will start rolling in."

Adeniran scoffed.

When Mosadi joined the Nigerian Army all those years ago Adeniran had cheered him on. It was something his friend had always wanted to do since they shared dreams of what their lives would be like in the next twenty years—Adeniran, a footballer, and Mosadi a Major General. But, with reports of the terrorist group Boko-Haram invading many villages in Northern Nigeria and troops being deployed to the Sambisa Forest, Adeniran was half-afraid that his friend’s body would return home to his ailing grandmother who had seen enough sorrow in her lifetime.

"I can't be king. I saw how my dad did it. I can't put myself through that."

"Things are different now."

"Not much different."

A female server arrived at their table carrying a tray. Mosadi smiled up at her, the signature smile that drew the women to him.

"This is from Aunty Lola," she said, dropping a side dish of meatballs and barbecue sauce. She stood up straight and put her hands in front of her, her tray facing her legs. "We haven't seen you in a while. I hope you're doing well."

Mosadi’s brow furrowed. All smiles were gone. "Nike, darling, did you miss me?"

"Isn't that why I'm asking?"

Mosadi chuckled and Adeniran took that time to explore one of the meatballs.

"Not bad," Adeniran said as he popped another into his mouth, this time dipped in the reddish-brown sauce.

The lady turned her attention to him. A happy expression on her face. "Of course, it's not. Please tell your friends about us, it will be much appreciated.” She turned to leave and then twisted to them again. “Oh, and please come back again."

“See you later, Nike.”

The lady moved to another table.

"What did you do to that one?" He threw the question at his friend as soon as she left.

Mosadi shook his head. "Sometimes I worry about what you think of me." Mosadi leaned forward and took two of the meatballs with his fork and shoved them into his mouth.

"As if..."

“Who is she?”

His friend waved his hand. “She’s the owner’s niece.”

“She seems to like you.”

He waved the statement away. “She’s a kid. Not even my type.”

"I hope you passed that piece of info to her."

"Okay. Why don't you want to be Oba?"

Adeniran grabbed another meatball. “Because I don’t want it. It’s not part of my life goals. It makes no sense to me. Take your pick.”

"I suggest you take the position."

"Just like that?"

"I’m not sure there's much to think about here. You're already on the brink of retirement. This is simply a good way to transition to the next phase of your life. I see this as an easy win."

"Are you sure your eyesight is in good working order?"

Mosadi traced his finger across the scar that ran from his upper eyelid to his cheek. "The eye is fine. Although it twitches from time to time. C’mon man. Okay. Let's look at it this way: after you retire, what happens? You’ve already lived your best life—"

"So I should rot away what’s left by wearing a crown and having my life monitored as though I were a lab rat?" He shook his head. "When I eventually retire I would rather take up a training position. There are a lot of kids who require assistance in honing their skills."

"So you would rather be a sharpener than a King?"

Adeniran grabbed a napkin and wiped his hands.

"Remember what Mama used to say to us?”

“Sometimes you just need to turn your head to get a better view of things,” Adeniran said, not missing a beat.

Mosadi finished with a few punchlines. The reason why Adeniran usually considered talking to him even with his irritable lifestyle. “Turn your head,

bro. And as for your other members of the family, be glad they're out of your hair. Their presence may have been more detrimental than you would have known.”

Adeniran tossed the napkin on the table and dropped his gaze to the table. His heart spoke a prayer to God.

Lord, please show me Your will. Search through my desires and make me yearn for what You want.



A couple of hours later, Adeniran walked into his father’s house. For years he’d danced around the idea of having his own house. He had lands. Had properties he’d placed on rent both in Lagos and Ondo, but he hadn’t bought a house for himself because he only stayed for a few weeks and flew back to join his team. Now, he had to think properly about it. He couldn’t stand coming to his father’s place. Especially with his decision still fresh on his mind. He had to get him and Camille out of here.

“Welcome home, Prince,” the head of his father’s house staff greeted him.

“Thank you, Talabi,” Adeniran replied. “Where’s Camille?”

“She’s in her room.”

“Did you get the order for her food?”

“Yes. And she ate before she retired to her room.”

Adeniran thought of something. "Talabi, do you have any idea why other members of this family relocated?"

Talabi's eyes shifted. "I don't know, Prince Adeniran."

"None at all?"

He raised his eyes to Adeniran. "I'm just a staff here, sir. All I know is that it was a quick move."

“Very well. I won’t be having dinner tonight. I need to rest. I’ll see you in the morning.” He needed to get to his room and He was moving to the stairwell when Talabi spoke up again.

“I have a message from your father.”

Adeniran’s body became rigid. “What is it?”

The house staff bowed. “Prince Adeniran, your father would like to speak with you. He told me to inform you as soon as you returned.”

The day was just about to get worse. “Where is he?”

“He’s in the verandah, sir.”

“Thank you, Talabi.” Adeniran changed directions and headed to the verandah. His steps measured as he walked past the two living rooms and down the corridor to the verandah. The hiss of the sprinkler as it watered the small patch of grass. He saw his father seated on a chair, his eyes fixed on the hibiscus tree. Letting out a breath, he pushed the door open and stepped out.

“[4]*Le o bai*,” Adeniran said, prostrating.

His father turned his head slightly, eyed him warily and looked back to the garden. “How are you, Adeniran?”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Get up. I heard you’re delaying in making a decision. I thought you were smarter now.”

Adeniran clenched his teeth. His father had always been the one to get to the point. Dilly-dallying was never his strongest suit. “I’m not still the dumb young boy you thought I was if that’s what you mean.”

His father’s eye twitched, a telltale sign Adeniran remembered as his effort to curtail his anger. “Good to know you are maturing with age. Sit down.”

Adeniran didn’t want to sit down. He didn’t want to be near the man. But even if he was his father, he still held the thin honour of having been King many years back. So Adeniran lowered himself to a chair and stared ahead.

“I don’t know why you were chosen to be the next Osemawe, but you are just one among three choices. You don’t have to do it. Olajide was also chosen and if you don’t want it...he will rise to the occasion. I know how important your football career is to you.” He waved his hand dismissively. “ So you can go back and do that.”

His father brought his hand to his head.

“You and your so-called friend should leave my house as well.”

“You talk like you don’t know what happened to me on the field.”

He dropped his hand. “I didn’t forget, I chose not to talk about it. You chose to live your life the way you wanted. I let you do as you wanted and focused on my matters. At least we thank God that you’re alive.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“What else should I say?”

“I have decided to do it.”

Adeniran felt his father’s hot glare on him.

“What?”

“I will be Oba.”

“This is not a game, Adeniran. We both know you are not capable of being king. You may have been destined to be king, but you are not king material. This time I believe the *Ifa* made a mistake.”

Adeniran thought his father’s words no longer affected him. He was wrong. A part of his heart felt seared at his father’s blatant disapproval of him.

“You knew? You have always known they said I would be king someday?”

“Of course, I knew. I was the Oba. And I am your father. They could not report what the oracles had to say about you. But you are not my favourite son. I wanted Funsho to be king. He’s smart, responsible, and married to a responsible woman. You, on the other hand, have no ambitions to get married. You may be successful, but everything about you is a hot mess.”

“Thank God you don’t have a say in this.”

His father looked away from him. “I regret the way things ended on my part. But we have a chance to rise again, for the family name to gain its honour and respect, and I will not have you ruin this opportunity by being stubborn and foolish.”

Adeniran balled his palms into a fist in his lap, his jaw clenched hard.

“Your mother wasted time on you.”

“Don’t talk about my mother,” he gritted out. “She was too good. Too good for you.”

“And yet she was my wife. She coddled you. She spent too much time trying to help you out of that sickness you had.”

“Dyslexia is not a sickness. It runs in the family.”

A scoff followed his father’s low chuckle. “Well, you didn’t get it from me. Maybe it was from your mother’s side of the family. That’s why she wanted to help you. It all makes sense now.”

Adeniran shot to his feet. “Don’t disrespect my mother!”

“And don’t you dare raise your tone at me again. [5]*Joko*!”

His breathing was ragged as he lowered himself back in his seat. After a few minutes of silence, he said, “I’m sorry, sir.” His mother hadn’t taught

him to disrespect his father.

“The western world has spoiled you. This is yet another reason why you should not be king. Inform the kingmakers that you will not be accepting the throne and will return to Italy or wherever it is you wish. You and that freeloader that you call your girlfriend. She would never make a proper queen.”

"I don't think you have the right to pass judgement on someone you don't know." He could put up with his father's insults, but he wouldn't let him disrespect Camille. She was better compared to his father's wife, who lived in his home. "As for Osemawe, I'm not going to do that." I already informed you that I would accept the position."

“You want to risk more people knowing about your life? Your limitations? It could disqualify you. Why not just bow out respectfully like a man?”

He didn’t want to take that risk, but he had to do what he had to. “I will take the risk.”

“You never stop disappointing me, Adeniran, and it seems it is in your nature to keep doing so. The only thing that will bow to you is the grass when you step on them.” He waved his hand, dismissing him. “Go.”

Adeniran rose to his feet and rolled his shoulders. He wanted to say something. He felt the need to defend his reasons. But there was no point. His father would never have any faith in him or his capabilities no matter how hard he tried to prove him wrong. The realisation of that left him defeated but not as depressed as he used to be in the past. He had half a mind to get rid of everything, take Camille and get away from it all, and see what the next chapter of his life would bring. It certainly wouldn’t have to be this demoralising.

How are you so sure? The question floated in his head. But Adeniran believed that anything else had to be better than this.

“How did you find your meeting with your father?” Oseye said to him. She stood by the stairs, waiting for Adeniran to approach her.

“I’m sure you’re aware that he wants me to step down.”

“Yes,” she confirmed quietly. “But it doesn’t mean I agree.”

His brows knitted together. “Would your agreement mean anything to him? And why do you care about this?”

“I am not your enemy, Adeniran.”

“You’re also not a friend.”

She sighed softly, her lips quivering in a small smile. “Your mother would be so upset to see us relating in this way.” He opened his mouth to speak but she raised her hand. “I know you don’t want me to bring up your mother, but you need to grow up. Stop living your life trying to please your father. If this is what God desires for you, then go ahead and do it. I know we still have our differences, but I felt compelled to speak my mind. Even if it’s not presently appreciated. Good night, Adeniran.”

“You know my father would despise you for saying these things to me.”

She gave a sad smile. “I’ve despised myself for so long. What he does won’t bear much infliction beyond what I’ve done to myself over the years.”

Adeniran frowned. *What was that supposed to mean?* He turned to ask her but she was already walking towards the veranda to meet his father. He would have to ask her some other time. But her words danced in his head.

He got out his phone and placed a call to Uncle Owolabi.

“What is the matter?” Uncle Owolabi said after they exchanged pleasantries.

“I have made a decision.” He paused. “I would like to be the next Osemawe of Ondo.” As he spoke his decision out loud, he felt relief and a heavy weight of responsibility rested upon him.

Uncle Owolabi was quiet for a brief moment. “Have you spoken with your father?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. We will discuss more tomorrow.”

“Alright, sir. Good night.”

“You have made the right choice. This is your fate.”

Adeniran nodded. This was his destiny. God’s plans for him…but a huge wave of panic washed over him. His throat felt tight as fear crawled up his chest and he found it hard to breathe. He was going against his father’s wishes. He was going after what God wanted for his life. But he still couldn’t help but think he was in over his head. A Scripture floated in his head. Not knowing the full verse, he did a keyword search on his Bible app and found it. Ephesians chapter three verse twenty in the NLT version. His eyes ran over the letters:

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.

That soothed him to a certain degree. With God involved, Adeniran wasn’t doing it alone. If this had been God’s plan for his life all the while then he would face it head-on with his fears and then try to take whatever blows came in strides as came with the contract of surrendering to God’s will.

Taking a deep breath, he jogged up the stairs and decided to let Camille sleep in. He would talk to her in the morning.

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1. Gosh, I don't know what's wrong with you
2. She shouldn't get angry with you
3. Bean pudding
4. Good evening, Father in Ondo dialect
5. Sit down!

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NELLY

LAGOS

Brian Mcknight's 'Back At One' ended with him killing his engine. This was the last place he wanted to be. He wouldn't be ringing the man's doorbell right now if he hadn't promised his mother he'd stop by. He heard someone shuffle towards the door. The front door then swung open, presenting him to his father.

"Good evening, Dad."

In response, his father mumbled something and returned to the living room, leaving the door open for Nelly to enter. With a sigh, Nelly removed his shoes and socks and entered the living room. The room's stale air assaulted him. He looked at the cigarette tray on the centre table, which held a dozen half-smoked cigarettes. As if each time he lit the health hazard, he was torn between finishing it or quitting halfway. There were family photos on the wall, they were all smiles, oblivious to their father's private and business affairs, which he kept a secret.

"How is work?" His father inquired.

Thus began their staccato dance.

"Work is fine," Nelly answered.

“Are you hearing from your mother?”

“Yes.” Nelly sat in an unflattering saddle brown armchair that his mother claimed to adore. He would have gotten the thing completely upholstered

and revamped if his mother hadn't already warned him against it.

"How is your sister adjusting?"

Nelly remembered his mother telling him how frequently they talked, so he assumed his father already knew the answer. Regardless, "well enough."

His father took his rectangular glasses off the table and put them on. "Are you getting leaner?"

"No."

"Have you had dinner? I made one concoction of rice like that. You are welcome to some if you wish."

Nelly's stomach grumbled, but he fought off the urge to dash to the kitchen to check what was in the pot. His father wasn't a great cook, but he was good at throwing things together and they usually turned out well most of the time. He remembered his father making yam porridge with spinach leaves, smoked fish, and stockfish years before. It was delicious. "I'll pass."

His father released a heavy sigh. "You know, you didn't have to come check on me. I'm perfectly fine."

"I know." He could see that. It had been surprising to find the place in such good condition. As far back as Nelly could remember, his father had rarely been present, let alone had the entire apartment to himself. Perhaps his father was a neat freak like him, most likely that it was one of the things he'd inherited from his father. "Mum told me to stop by. Maybe you need me to do something while I'm here. Fix a light bulb, or do some house chores. Anything."

"So you wouldn't be here if your mother hadn't requested you?" His father sighed again and shook his head, not waiting for Nelly's affirmative response. "The toilet light has gone out. The one in the pantry is out as well. I tried to fix it earlier, but I didn't have the correct bulb." He then listed off the bulbs he required as well as some food items. “There’s money in my wallet…”

“I’ll take care of it, sir.”

His father muttered something under his breath that Nelly didn’t catch.

Nelly jumped to his feet. "I'll be right back. Is there anything else you need? Do you have a list of toiletries or household things you need me to pick up?"

His father stood and walked over to the dining table. He flipped open a notebook and tore out a sheet. "I wrote this yesterday. Everything I need is in there, including the light bulbs."

He stuffed the list into his front pocket without looking at it. He was back at his father’s door forty minutes later. He had done everything his father had asked of him, and he was ready to stop acting like the dutiful son and leave. Just as he was about to take his leave, his father stopped him at the door.

"Thank you for settling Tolani's school fees."

Nelly nodded. "You're welcome."

His father sighed. "Nelson... you're my son. My firstborn child. Why does talking with you always have to be this way? Why don't we make peace? Reach an agreement? I can't turn back the hands of time, but we can move forward from this."

"I’m not sure I know how to move forward, Dad."

"You can't keep holding grudges forever. I believe I trained you better than this."

That hit a nerve. "I'm paying Tolani's school fees and sending pocket money to them because you trained me better. I still show up from time to time because you trained me better. But I can't sit and listen to you give me advice. We're way past that, and there are just some things you can never get back."

His father looked stricken. "Nelly..."

"Good night, sir. Have a restful night." Nelly walked out and shut the door behind him.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ISIMEME

Her relationship with God had been the bane of her daily existence. When she remembered Easter and the fact that Jesus, her Lord and Saviour, was alive, it was the sunshine in the sky, the rainbow at the end of the pouring rain, a child's hysterical screeching laughter, and the broad smile on her face. If nothing else in her life was going well, she knew that because she had a relationship with God, everything would be fine in the end.

Over the last week, she'd taken out time to pray; both for Nelly and Prince Adeniran. The latter weighed more on her mind after her last conversation about him with Nelly. Ascribing the reason for his melancholy personality to what he'd possibly lived through, very much aware she'd almost followed that easy road when her world had flipped upside down.

I can't thank You enough, God. Thank You for Your grace, which I was willing to accept and make use of.

The children's church was empty, and Isi was alone in the room, busy packing up the toys and stacking the chairs so the cleaning crew could focus on cleaning the room for next Sunday. Tolu had excused herself to attend a friend's naming ceremony right after the service.

"Hey, Isi." Isi raised her head, a lime-green plastic chair in her hands. "There was something I wanted to give you." She held up a book in the air.

"Oh. What is it?" Isi completed stacking the chairs and approached Eliana.

“I was looking through hymns for the next service when I stumbled upon one that I just knew I had to share with you.”

Her mind was racing with questions. “Okay.”

Eliana opened the book to the page she’d used her fingers as a bookmark. “I don’t know if you know this hymnal, but it’s one of my favourite hymns: O Jesus I Have Promised.”

“I know the hymn. It’s also among my favourite hymns.” The question was why it was being shown to her. Was God trying to tell her something? Isi did a quick scan of the page. “Is there something, in particular, you want me to take note of?”

“Yes. The third verse.” She pushed the hymn book into Isi’s hands and took a step back. “I have a meeting with Pastor John. You can leave the book on the shelf when you’re done.”

“All right. Thank you.”

Alone in the room, Isi settled in one of the banquet chairs reserved for the adults and read the words slowly.

O let me hear thee speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
Thou guardian of my soul

She gasped. The lyrics of the hymn smacked her in the chest with harrowing guilt. Too many times she wanted to do things her way. Too many times she did things her way and it ended up blowing up in her face and had her running back to God in humility; begging for forgiveness.

Lord, what have I done wrong?

Don’t be like Jonah.

Her brows drew together. The kids had learnt about Jonah that morning. Isi had personally taken the lesson and gone over the summary of the teachings with them. “*Jonah learnt obedience to God even when things were uncomfortable for him to do,*” Isi had said to them. “*God knew what was best for Jonah and He knows what’s best for us.*” And now God was bringing her own words back to her attention.

God, I've followed everything You've asked me to do. I have followed your will for my life every step of the way. What else would you have me do?

A part of her desperately hoped He would have let go of all things related to Adeniran.

Do you believe My plans for your life are better than what you will choose for yourself?

The only thing that came to mind was the last thing He'd said that she still struggled to accept was the Adeniran thing. And the idea of marriage to him still appalled her. Moreover, she didn't want the kind of life he had to offer. She breathed out heavily and snapped the book shut.

She was running from God.

Like erosion that ate away at a rock, little by little, she was losing track of God's plan for her life.

Nonetheless, help me, God. Let me remember that I am Yours. That I belong to You. No matter what anyone says, it doesn't shake my identity in You. But, God, Please, I don't want it to be Adeniran. Please don't let it be him. I'm begging You.



Adeniran

ONDO

He gritted his teeth and pressed his palms to the floor, putting most of his upper body weight on his hands, hoping that his workout would take his mind off his conversation with his father and the enticing Black Forest Gateau. Wunmi had sent over a cake. *For no reason*, she'd said, but

Adeniran wasn't having it. He was curious if Uncle Owolabi had informed her and Funsho of the news.

"It's just a belated welcome home gift," she further explained.

Adeniran was sceptical. His sister also knew how much he despised taking sweets.

Sade, on the other hand, had pounced on it while watching some of her shows on TV and had taken half of it to share at the women's shelter when she stopped by. Adeniran didn't even attempt to touch it. His sweet tooth was a weakness that he rarely indulged in, regardless of the occasion.

Even at that, that he was on a small break didn't mean he had to go crazy and eat whatever he wanted. He needed to maintain his build so he didn't have much work to do when they started a new season.

Now and again, his thoughts drifted to his conversation with Mosadi. Now that he had a way forward on the Kingship matter. He didn't know how things worked, but he knew there would be a few meetings in the coming days before the big announcement came. But the more he looked at it. The more he felt this was what his mother would have wanted him to do.

A movement at the door caught his attention and he turned his head.

"Can I interrupt your little workout session for a bit?" Sade said.

"Sure. What's up?" After the last set, he sat up, stretching his legs before him.

She ambled into the room and held up a stack of papers. "I want to give you a breakdown of what's been happening at SLH."

"Go ahead." He dabbed his eyebrow with a towel.

Sade and he had started Sweet Like Home Luxury Apartments about five years ago in response to demand and the number of people who came into the country for short visits and wanted the luxury of staying in a contemporary and relaxing apartment while catching up with friends or conducting business. While the initiative had been all Sade's, Adeniran was happy to collaborate with her on something other than their inherited stocks in Cacao Love Bars. The family's disagreement over the shares was not worth the money if a good night's sleep was at stake.

His sister took a settled position on the floor and crossed her legs into a pretzel form. "Things are really doing well. The way this is going we could open another branch in Abuja. But let's focus on the needs first."

She regaled him for the next half hour about their profits and what she thought they needed to do to improve. They weren't the only ones who

rented out high-end apartments. One aspect of the Nigerian market that irritated Adeniran was how everyone seemed to follow the next person in business. As a result, there was the issue of market saturation. But he wasn't bothered by it, ensuring that SLH was cutting-edge and included a few amenities that would appeal to the desired clientele: the wealthy with a narrow taste for exquisite services and business executives.

As if it were some sort of copycat strategy to make their own money before the market's demand dwindled.

"I think we should look into private dining." There have been a few requests for it, and I believe it is a good idea. In addition, I'm thinking about having fresh flowers to greet the guests. "What are your thoughts?"

“I think that’s okay. Let’s not pump money into what’s not necessary.”

“Agreed.”

A sound at the door made them pause their conversation and turn their heads in that direction. Camille waved at both of them.

“Hi, Sade.”

Sade gave an easy smile. “Hi, Camille.”

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?”

Sade raised the papers. “We’re just discussing business. Very boring stuff.”

“Do you mind if I talk with your brother a little?”

“I don’t mind. I’ll leave you two.” Sade got up and walked out of his room.

"Hey, you.”

Adeniran glanced up at Camille. "Hey." He stood and wiped the sweat on his forehead.

She ambled over to his sweaty body and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I need to get some lady things. Take me to the nearest supermarket."

“Why didn’t you just say that to Sade? She could take you.”

A frown crossed her features. “Are you so busy that you can’t take me out?”

“You said you need lady things. You really want me to follow you.”

“Your sister didn’t invite me here. You did. Plus, you aren’t buying it. You are taking me to the supermarket to get it and not buying it.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he hadn’t necessarily invited her but she had worked her way into tagging along with him. Talking about how

she had always wanted to visit Africa and get to know him back to his roots.

"Give me some minutes to change and we'll head out."

"I'll be in my room. Come by when you're ready."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ISIMEME

LAGOS

It was Music Friday, and Isi looked over her shoulder and laughed as Ife, the Sous-chef, sang a high-pitched rendition of Aretha Franklin's *A Natural Woman* (one of Isi's mother's favourite songs), and the men in the kitchen stomped their feet in protest—claiming it was a 'feminist song'. It was a good thing the kitchen was far away from the dining area, or their customers might have questioned their sanity and work ethic.

Isi bobbed her head to the old-school R&B jam and swung her hips to the soulful tune as she finished her peppered shrimp sauce.

The song was blaring through the stereo, which was only allowed to be turned on at the start of a weekend, on busy days like today, or when Chef Dozdie was feeling particularly cheerful. Today turned out to be all of the above, which was ideal for Isi. There were a million and one thoughts racing through her mind. And she needed to get as far away from it as possible. Having said that, she concentrated on her reality within the kitchen walls of Urban Mojo.

She had always wondered what Paul meant when he said, *'to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews… To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.'* She understood it to mean something when she was at work, surrounded by a group of people who weren't Christians but who

knowingly or unknowingly expected her to share the Gospel or be an example of light to them. This was why she tried to relate with her colleagues, interact with them and be interested in what they liked, as long as it didn’t interfere with her relationship with God and she didn’t lose herself along the way.

Because that was what was most important to her—not losing the joy of her salvation.

As the sweet vanilla scent of Crème Brûlée drifted over her, she shuddered. The heavenly sweet scent of coconut and torched sugar brought back memories of fun, bliss, and happy moments.

Desserts weren't her thing but she was more than willing to learn when the pastry chef was in the kitchen cooking up a variety of amazing sweet treats. Sometimes as part of the kitchen staff, they were lucky enough to take some yummy desserts back home.

As much as Isi had a sweet tooth even if desserts were not exactly her speciality. She was more of a main course girl. If you gave her protein, herbs and spices, and vegetables, she would prepare a well-cooked and well-seasoned meal. However, if she was given flour, sugar, and the like, her brain would be mushy like undercooked scrambled eggs as she struggled to come up with a recipe.

But she was learning.

And it was also one of the main reasons Isi found herself watching the reality cooking show 'Chopped' on occasion on YouTube. The show, while entertaining, made a chef think fast on their feet. And the creativity of some of the chefs was top-notch despite the icky ingredients they were sometimes given—cricket, goat brains, chicken legs, etc. Though in Africa the latter was taken as a sweet delicacy for children; especially for babies who were teething—it was a good scratching tool for their itchy gums.

"Grilled meat with mashed potatoes and sweet shrimp sauce ready!" Isi called out over her shoulder.

She wiped the side of the plate with a clean napkin, and before she could blink, a server swooped in and grabbed the plated food, loaded it on a tray, and was already moving towards the door, heading to the diner who'd ordered it. This was a typical day of a busy period at the restaurant with a crowded overflow. Fridays through Sundays were their busiest days. Isi had only worked at Urban Mojo for a couple of weeks but she’d gelled with the demands of the job.

Thank God for their sturdy shoes and their breathable chef uniforms, which made standing on her feet and enduring the heat of the kitchen easier. It had been a dream come true for Isi when her childhood friend, Erinma, assisted her with the job at Marigold Royale. Isi had always had high hopes and expectations about landing a job when she followed God's call to leave Benin and move, but after several weeks of wandering along the streets of Lagos with no decent job in sight, her hope had faltered a tiny bit. But God had been her steady anchor and she had persevered.

Still, she never imagined herself working in one of the country's top hotels. It was true what the Bible said in Ephesians 3:20, *Never doubt God's mighty power to work in you and accomplish all this. He will achieve infinitely more than your greatest request, your most unbelievable dream, and exceed your wildest imagination! He will outdo them all, for his miraculous power constantly energizes you.* The only regret was that Erinma was no longer with Lanre Nejo, who happened to be the son of the owner of the five-star hotel.

Isi had barely taken a breath when another order came in for the same meal. Chef Dodzie entered at that moment with his arms folded. "Let's keep the ball rolling. No time to take a breather. We all know that the weekends are our busiest." His beady eyes latched on Isi briefly before moving around the room. "A hungry man is always impatient. Get to it, chefs."

She looked up at the time. There were two hours until closing time. Comfortable shoes or yes, her feet were in desperate need of a massage after working thirteen hours a shift. The kinks in her neck and stress in her shoulders could have been worse, but Isi enjoyed everything about it, except for the awkward moments with Chef Dodzie.

There was just something off about the man. Even if he was a good chef.

Ever since she'd started working at the restaurant she'd learnt a few tricks in the kitchen and a few new things concerning cooking some Ghanaian meals. She loved the experience, but there was a nagging feeling that hadn't quite left her.

"Are you heading home after work?" Gbenga asked. He was a Pastry Chef and his mouth-watering pastries always had her craving them instead of having a proper meal during a short break at work.

"Yes. You guys are going out?"

"We are hitting the club after this," Gbenga said. "Want to come?"

Before Isi could respond, Ify answered for her. “Have you forgotten? Isi doesn’t do clubs or all-night parties that don't involve Gospel Jamz, hands lifted in praise to God and sizzling hot prayers to leave the devil fearful and telling him to back off.” Fortunately, her tone was not sarcastic.

Isi gave Gbenga a friendly smile.“I’m just going to head home from here. I still have a long way to go.” Hopefully, being this late at night, traffic would be a lot lighter.

“So you won’t come?” Gbenga’s voice carried disappointment.

“Leave Isi alone. She’s a church girl,” this came from Debbie, the Line Cook.

“No. Sorry. Seriously though, you guys don’t think you should go home? It’s been a really long day and there’s that dinner party that we’re prepping for tomorrow.”

“Babe, we understand our body. A little dancing and drinks won’t make us any less ready to work tomorrow.”

“We’ll see tomorrow then,” Gbenga turned around and focused on the Tiramisu he was making.

At the close of work, she hoisted her bag up her shoulder and made her way out of the restaurant.

Her phone vibrated in her bag and she took it out. Her heartbeat skyrocketed at his name and she smiled at the text. She tapped it open with her thumb.

Nelly: Hey Pretty Lady.
On your way home?

Isi: Hey, back.
Just leaving.
Walking towards the Hotel exit.
Super tired.

Nelly: Great. I’ll be there in a bit.

Isi’s brows shot up. She frowned at her phone and looked up. The usual day-slash evening crowd was gone, and the car park was almost sparsely empty except for those who were parked for the night. Planning to hit Marigold’s VIP club or had booked a room. She gazed back down at her phone and typed out a reply.

Isi: There where?

Nelly: Look up, Beautiful. ☺☺

Isi looked up just as a gleaming red car drove into the compound and it had her pulse quickening. She knew beyond a doubt that it was Nelly who drove in. She dropped her hands to her side and laughed as he drove over to her side. The window next to her rolled down and he smiled up at her.

“Hello there. I couldn’t help but stop. A beautiful lady like you shouldn’t be heading home alone.”

“Oh really? I don’t get into strangers’ cars,” she said, playing along at whatever game he was dealing.

“You can trust me. I’m one of the good ones.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Trust me.”

She twisted her lips. “I can only trust a man that has his whole heart submitted to God. And Jesus said He shouldn’t be called good. In His words. ‘No one is good except for God.”

He opened his mouth, but then shut it again then said, “I’ve no comeback for that.”

Isi laughed. “So what do I get as a reward?” She made a show of batting her eyelashes. "Since I clearly won."

His eyes gleamed with unshared laughter. “Get in. I’ll take you home.”

She opened the door and got in. His spicy male scent cologne greeted her.

“How was work?”

Isi shrugged, buckling her seatbelt. “It was so-so.” She told herself to take a calming breath. Breathe. “How was your day? Were you able to finish the project?” He’d told her he was having a hard time with a particular client who was always finicky about work done for him.

“No headway yet. I feel like we’re only going back and forth and dancing around the work. It’s kind of irritating.”

She knew how restless he got when handling a project for so long. “I’m sorry. I pray you get inspiration soon enough.”

“Amen to that. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He reached for her hand and squeezed lightly. “Seeing you makes the day better.”

God, is this real? Is what I feel for this guy real? It felt genuine to Isi. When she caught his gaze trained on her, she felt butterflies flutter in her stomach and her mouth went dry.

And this happened the majority of the time.

She guessed the real question was: how long would it last? Because everything she felt for Nelly was totally genuine. With him, conversations were smooth sailing. And she hadn't felt this comfortable with a guy in a long time. The last guy she was this way with had deserted her when she told him they couldn't be more.

Now, Isi was starting to question if God could really lead a person to their spouse or if love was only possible with one person in a lifetime. If the romantic notion of a soulmate was true or not.

God, please You need to let me know if this is the real deal because my feelings for Nelly are escalating.

A gnawing feeling tugged at her (heart) and she shifted in her seat. Uncertain of what it meant. She gave Nelly a sidelong glance. They spoke almost every day and when they didn't, they kept up with text messages. There were days she was down, reminiscing about her time in her hometown in Benin and she needed a pick-me-up. As if Nelly was specially intuned with her, he connected at those moments and she felt herself getting better. He was no doubt a great guy. Handsome even. But it was his ability to always make her laugh and how easy it was to talk to him that got to her.

"Everything okay?" He asked, maintaining eye contact with the road in front of him.

"Yeah. Just happy to have you in my life." Which was true. She just had to deal with the pesky emotions that made her desire more from her friendship with Nelly.

He met her gaze briefly. "I ditto that."

She smiled and faced forward, glancing at the beautiful night sky hinting at oncoming rain. There was still so much she didn't know about him. He behaved like he was an open book but deep down he was a private person. There were things about his life he didn't want to talk about and Isi found herself tiptoeing around certain topics. All she knew was he had a younger brother and sister and he loved his mum. Isi smiled to herself. He had the tell-tale signs of a *Mama's boy* but not overly so that he lost all sense of independence. She knew someday they would talk about it, but for now, she cared about his well-being.

"You really need to stop this, Nelly." She explained further at his confused look. "I hate the thought of you going home alone. It isn't safe and it freaks me out."

“You’re afraid someone would rob me?”

“Don’t even say it.”

He gave a low chuckle. “I’ll be fine. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“Positive confession is good, but you also need to be careful. Driving back to your place late at night isn’t safe. I’ll be home thinking about your safety and waiting anxiously for you to text me that you’re home.”

“I love that you’re worried about me, but I’ll be fine.”

“I know, but—”

“Don’t worry your pretty head about that. You should get some rest. You look exhausted. You sure they aren’t overworking you? What’s your boss’ name again? Chef Donut?”

She troubled her bottom lip, a bit peeved at his abrupt change of topic. “Chef Dodzie. And I’m okay. I just have to get used to it.”

He flexed his arm on the steering. “I don’t know. That guy gives me bad vibes.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a way he looks at you..it might be nothing. Just be careful, sweetheart.”

A thrill skittered down her spine. He slipped in a few endearments in passing conversations but each time it came out of his mouth it still made her cheeks heat up. And it only reaffirmed what she already knew: she had romantic feelings for Nelson Banjo.

The sooner she accepted the truth, the sooner she could figure out what to do with how she felt.

“I will.”

She struggled to keep her eyes open but drifted off. The next thing was a warm hand touching her arm and she woke up with a start.

“Hey, sleeping beauty. We’re here.”

Isi blinked at the broken gate that led to her cousin’s compound which had four-storey buildings with eight apartments in each but felt like a hundred people were staying in the spacious compound. She turned back to Nelly. “Sorry, I fell asleep.”

“No need to apologise. You were tired.”

She gave a tired smile. “Text me when you get home?”

“Will do.”

She nodded, grabbed her bag from the foot of the car and got out. He always wanted to watch her as she walked in so she gave one last wave and

walked into the semi-dark compound. Seconds later she heard his car do a u-turn and drive out of the street.

“God, please let him get home safe,” she whispered up to heaven.

Isi let herself in with the extra key her cousin had given her with much hassle on returning home at odd hours—asking why she couldn’t just sleep over at her boyfriend’s house. The back and forth was getting tiring and Isi was starting to believe she couldn’t make Nosa believe she was just friends with Nelly and there was no ‘smashing’ in her terms, going on.

Rolling her shoulders she trudged past the couch and into the cramped kitchen. After the long hours, she was not going to bed without a hot shower. She reeked of fried onions and paprika.

The smell of fermenting banana peels hit her nostrils and her gaze darted to the brimming bin pile sitting on the kitchen sink. She shuffled over to it, tied the nylon and dumped it into another nylon and set it on the floor to be thrown by the ‘*kole-kole*’—bin cart pushers when they did their early morning rounds of throwing away bins for what Isi thought was a somewhat reasonable fee. There were always petty jobs available in Lagos if one was willing to look for what services he or she was willing to offer.

Her cousin’s two-bedroom apartment desperately needed a splash of colour and extensive work in several parts of the house. The purplish linoleum flooring in the kitchen begged for an upheaval. One side of the wooden cupboards was broken from its hinges while the sink was rusted around the edges and in full view was a bucket placed beneath it and the sounds of water droplets mixed with the small scratching of cockroaches running around in the shadows.

Mess or not, she was thankful for having a roof over her head.

Isi lit the brownish pot used to heat bath water and stood nearby, keeping an eye on it to make sure it didn't overboil. She leaned against the fridge, her gaze fixed on the rain falling, sleek drops sliding down the window. With a soft sigh, she turned off the gas a few moments later, just shy of boiling point and began preparing for her bath. She couldn't use a full bucket because there were only two buckets of water and an empty bucket on the bathroom's cement floor. She'd have to scoop a little bit of water into the small bucket and settle for a light shower.



Isi shivered slightly from the cold. She drew the wrapper closer to her jaw as she folded her legs on the small space set aside for her to sleep on the narrow bed. She was fighting sleep because she needed to know if Nelly had arrived home safely.

So she did what she usually did at the end of the day before her nightly inner dialogue with God in her head: she reflected on the rest of her day. Every day, her feelings for Nelly grew stronger.

She clenched her eyes shut. How long did she have to put up with this?

Do you want to share some of your bad luck with him?

Isi blinked her eyes open and all she saw was darkness from which those dreadful voices and emotionally draining self-talk came. The same darkness that had ruled her life before God's light came in. She guessed the real question was whether she was holding back because God hadn't said anything or for personal reasons.

A long time ago, Isi believed that the only purpose of her life was to bring bad luck to everyone she cared about. Things seemed to go wrong when she stayed in their lives. From amazingly good to deplorable, where the source couldn't be traced back to anything. Except for her.

And Isi had bought into all those lies.

Yellow, yellow. Witchy, witchy.

You killed your daddy, killy-killy.

You're bad luck. Unlucky-lucky.

Fly away. Witchy-witchy.

She squeezed her eyes shut again. Willing for sleep to come. *Think happy thoughts, Isi. Always happy thoughts.* She'd come this far. She could ride over the waves of the sickening sadness again and come out strong. At her phone's vibration, she popped her eyes open and grabbed her phone. There was an incoming text from Nelly.

Something in her chest fluttered.

Nelly: Hey. You asleep yet?

Isi: Not yet. Was waiting to hear from you.

Nelly: Thanks. Feel so loved right now 😍
Isi:
Nelly: Lol. Just got home. Sleeping anytime soon?
Isi: Soon enough.
Nelly: Sleep well, dear.
Isi: Thank God for that. Have a good night's rest. :)

Nelly is typing...

Nelly: I'll try my best. *wink*
Isi: Do that.

Tucking the phone under her pillow, she released a deep sigh and went back to her musings. Isi had been through a few trials in her thirty-plus years of life and had learned the importance of guarding her heart via painful experiences. One of the few ways she didthat as a child was by reading her favourite stories. She hid her face in a book's lively pages and read it late at night into the early hours of the morning after finishing her housework. Hardly catching a wink of sleep. Those books revived her tired heart, filling her mind with ideas and possibilities she couldn't fathom as she vanished into that world of sunshine and happiness—no matter how imaginary or out of reach it was.

The books contributed to her willful state of forgetfulness while also inspiring her to hope and dream. And it made her look out for more in her life than what it currently was.

Even though years passed and she focused more on her relationship with God, finishing Culinary school and maintaining a level head, those sentiments were rekindled when she made the journey to Lagos with her mother all those years ago and saw the kind of home Erinma had lived in; it left her spellbound. The Igbos (one of Nigeria's many tribes) were famous for their extravagant pillars in their magnanimous homes. Erinma's home reflected her family's wealth and beauty in the same way. She was transported back to her childhood fairy tale stories for a brief moment and it had secretly reawakened something in Isi's heart.

If fairytales were realistic, Isi's story would never be the same as Cinderella's. It would have been comparable to Beauty and the Beast—except, there was no arrogant prince who hoped for her to fall hopelessly in

love with him. There was also no selfish guard asking for her hand in marriage.

Isi smiled to herself in the cover of the darkness. Maybe one day that would happen. If God allowed it.

Ignoring the fact that she'd long since given up on fairytales, she adored Disney princesses and their lovely, magical princess gowns. She believed in modern-day princes and princesses with royal titles because they were connected to God. Everything was a matter of perspective and understanding who one was in Christ. Isi discovered something related to royalty.

This was why Isi believed she didn't have to look down on herself.

She exhaled and shifted to get back, careful not to poke one of the kids with her elbow, she rested her palms on her stomach.

Even though her uncle's house had been a nightmare. The harsh realities of life begged to differ when she finished the book, satisfied with the ending but hungry for more information about life beyond the character's happily-ever-after: was their love story true? Did they have children? How many in total? Were they content? Was their love as strong as it had been from the start? What did they do for fun? What were they doing right now?

Because Isi only wanted to keep seeing how happy they were and how much they loved each other in their perfect world. Even so, love was no fairytale. Neither was life. And there was no such thing as a perfect world in reality. In Heaven, yes (depending on who believed), but here on Earth, life had to be lived even in the face of adversity. And it was the trials she'd faced that helped shape her faith and caused her to rely more on God.

That helped her put things into perspective.

She closed her eyes and finally drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter Nineteen

Nelly

He rolled over on his bed for the tenth time in thirty minutes, his hand on the back of his head, his eyes open to...nothing. His sleepless nights had started when he was twelve. The yells, loud noises, and silent sobs persisted no matter how hard he pressed his palms to his ears or how loudly he played Tina Turner's upbeat music on his Walkman to drown out the noise.

But that had stopped a long time ago.

Now, Insomnia was a nightmare on days when he had a lot of work to deliver to his clients. Because all he did was stare into the darkness in the hopes of falling asleep, but it didn't help when he kept seeing colours and patterns swirl in his mind. It was one of the worst aspects of the night approaching, and it was one of the reasons he didn't want to come home after work hours.

Nelly rolled onto his side and took his phone from the nightstand. The light from the screen triggered something within him and he opened to Isi's last message.

The emoji hug that he wished was a real warm hug, with his fingers sliding over her arms.

You're so pathetic…

He had a crush on a woman who was probably too good for him.

Or just perfect for him.

Not many women could keep him spellbound, but Isi had done so since the moment she outrightly refused to give him her phone number that day at Proud Belle.

And it wasn't like she was the first or only woman to refuse him. There was only a ray of light around her that drew him closer to her. Her kindness and carefree manner were equally captivating. He only wished he could soak up some of her sweetness. She smiled in and out of reason. Unlike Nelly. He didn’t feel the need to keep up the façade when everyone had left and he didn’t have to make people smile around him.

He got out of bed and trudged barefoot to his kitchen. There were three bedrooms in the apartment: one guest room, a home office, and the master bedroom. All ensuite. He liked to keep his space pristine and rarely brought his flings home.

But Isimeme was not a fling. There was just something about her that brightened his day. She was the light in his dark place. The laughter to his secret gloominess. The balm that licked away at deep wounds he’d refused to revisit since his childhood.He liked her. A lot. Something about her made him feel calm and assured. Her presence didn’t leave him recapturing all of the negative aspects of his life, but rather looking forward to a brighter future. And he wanted to be the same for her. He wanted to be there for her. As he knew she would for him.

Though he could tell something was holding her back.

He brought down a tumbler from the cupboard and poured himself a glass of water.

Does she not *like me?*

He tightened his grip on the tumbler.

Nelly knew he wanted more with Isi. More than he had ever wanted with any other woman. But at the same time, he was afraid of himself. Afraid of the darkness that lingered somewhere in him. And by all means, he wanted to fight it off. He didn’t drink. Had never lit a cigarette in his life and he tried his best to live right—excluding the occasional need to quell his urges as a man. But he was nothing like his father.

His phone buzzed close to his hand and he looked down at the caller ID.

He tapped the green button and put it on speaker mode.

“Good afternoon, Mummy.” It was supposed to be afternoon over there if his memory served him correctly.

“[1]*Ọkọ mi.*” Her voice rang clear in his kitchen. “How are you?”

He turned to lean his back against the kitchen island. “I’m good. How’s Tolani?”

“She’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“And how’s work? Hope you’re hearing from your sister.”

“Work is sort of stressful right now. Yeah, Bimbo is fine. We spoke the other day.” He scratched the back of his head. “Did you get the money I sent?"

“Yes. That’s part of the reason I’m calling. I appreciate it. Your sister has been singing your praises here.

Silence danced between them.

“When last did you speak with your father?” She asked.

“Weeks.” He didn’t bother mincing words. Their last meeting had had Nelly on edge for several days.

“And you say it like it’s a good thing.”

“Mummy, please. I can’t do this right now. I’ve had a long day.”

“I’m sorry. I guessed you wouldn’t be asleep yet.” His mother was aware of his insomnia. “No matter what has happened, he is still your father.”

“Which is not my fault. Why do I have to pay for something I didn’t choose nor want in my life.” He could feel the tension falling on him and he rolled his shoulders. He didn’t want to get into this with his mother now. He still needed to get some sleep so he could have fresh eyes and ideas for the project he was working on.

She sighed. “Don’t be annoyed. He made a mistake.”

Eyes squeezed shut, he pressed his fingers against his eyelids. “I’m not annoyed. Not anymore. I'm currently working on a project and I don’t want anything to mess up my mind right now.” And any subject relating to his father was most likely going to do that.

"So talking about your father has now become that much of a problem? Are you sure it's not because you haven't spoken to him that your mind isn't at rest?"

“Okay. I’ll see him again soon, just been a little busy.”

“That’s fine then.”

“Is Tolani settled in school now?”

“Yes. You know your sister, she has even started making friends.”

“As expected.” Like him, Tolani was a social butterfly. “Is she there with you?”

His mother snorted. “That one? She went with her new friends to have lunch. I was invited but I want to use the opportunity to relax a bit. It’s not every time I can cross my feet and sleep during the day.”

Nelly was relieved that their mum was able to accompany Tolani to her university and watch her settle down. Their mum needed that break. *Deserved* it even. When everything seemed to be falling apart, she’d been the one who had kept the family together when everyone had to suffer because of their dad’s mistakes and how deep his father’s lies were.

His father had been a good man to the public and had been the same way at home. They weren’t rich or anything but they had lived a comfortable life. Only he was weak and made poor financial choices. His do-good nature was what had landed the family in a sinking ship of debt from money collectors. What they hadn’t been aware of was his father was digging a deep hole into his business finances just so he could cater to people. The final blow was when he made investment choices in wishy-washy ventures that crashed.

Helping people was good but Nelly only believed in helping people who were close to him and not every tom, dick and harry who called themselves men but claimed poverty and couldn’t cater to their family.

Nelly had worked his tail off to make sure his parents and siblings had food on the table, and he had pushed back on the money lenders, trying to reach some kind of agreement with them so they didn't make good on their constant threats to ruin his family and take everything they owned.

It was the reason Nelly only gave to charities that catered to women who got blindsided by the men they claimed to love, as well as the damages those men left in their wake.

Not only had Nelly's father's actions harmed the entire family, but it had also made Nelly wary of dishonest people, preventing him from falling into the same traps as his father. He dated casually but never allowed himself to become emotionally attached. As a result, he had difficulty trusting people, and only one woman managed to win his heart over the years.

Again, Isi reappeared in his mind, and he didn't resist.

Every time she smiled, he wanted to run his fingers across her lovely fair skin and claim the corner of her lips. He would cling to her and never let go. Her candour was refreshing, even startling.When he ran into Isi at Erinma's office that day, he found her intriguing. He knew he'd regret not being able to meet with her again as he was leaving without her phone

number. As a result, he'd returned to help her gain access to meet with Erinma. Then, and even now, her story piqued his interest. He didn't want to press her on her life in Benin, aside from the untimely deaths of her father and sister, and he didn't want to push her. But he could tell she was upset about something, and whatever it was, it was probably too painful for her to express.

Maybe that was why she still wasn’t completely committed to him.

Or what if she didn’t want to be with me?

Dread gripped him, but he squelched the notion. That kind of thinking would do him no good. It was best to think positively. Deep down, he knew that there was a part of her that liked him more than just as a friend. He also knew she didn't make light of her spiritual life. She was a devout churchgoer, and he admired her for it. Although Nelly went to church primarily for special occasions such as weddings, baby dedications, Christmas, and Easter, he realised he could always do more. It would be a bonus if Isi was the reason he took God more seriously. Maybe he'd get a sense of what she felt about her relationship with God. He would go to any length to have her next to him, not just as a friend, but as his wife.

And one way to start would be to be open with her.

He connected his phone to his sound system and played a playlist of his favourite songs, relaxing to Robbie Williams' 'She's The One.' Only the song brought back memories of Isi, and he imagined her there, listening as well.



She looked girly in a light blue pencil skirt and a white chiffon top with slits on the sides. Her brown hair was braided into short braids that ended at her shoulders. Her tanned arms were getting more sun, and Nelly wanted to take off his jacket and cover her up. He had grown possessive of her, and not even the sun was allowed to taint her.

But he kept his arms to himself, knowing that he couldn’t when she wasn’t even within his reach. Figuratively.

He held back a smile as her fingers tore a piece of roasted plantain with fried sweet peppers and grilled fish. The cute way she rolled her eyes back as she ate.

“This is really good, Nelly,” she said, licking her thumb and index finger and he struggled to keep his gaze focused on anywhere but on what she was doing. “Are you sure you don’t want some?” Eyes teasing, she dangled a piece of fish in front of him.

He shook his head. “Nah. I’m good. I’m having fun over here just watching you.”

“Well, you’re missing out.”

“Not from my view over here.”

She shot him a look, smiling.

He adjusted the knotted tie around his neck, pulling at it a little to let in some air. *Why is it so hot in here?* He glanced at Isi and she wasn’t even breaking out any sweat. How long did he have to remain friends with her before making his intentions known? She wasn't a girl who rushed into things without clearly thinking them through.

“You said I’m not an open book. Well, I’m about to give you a chapter or two into my life.”

“Okay.” She propped her hand against her head. “Let’s hear it.”

He blew out a breath. “I was studying Medicine when I dropped out of school to take care of my family’s financial crisis. I quit school eventually and after the dust settled I went back to study Graphic Design at a polytechnic university and took some advanced courses on the side.”

She waved her oily hand in the air, hence putting his aligned thoughts to a screeching halt. “Wait, wait, wait. You were studying Medicine. As in, you were going to be a medical doctor?”

He cringed. “Yeah.”

She wiped her hands with a serviette, abandoning what was left of her meal. “I think you would have made a very nice children’s doctor. I can imagine you handing out sweets and putting a smile on your patients’ faces. But please, continue. Sorry to interrupt. I won’t do it again.”

“Yeah, well, being a doctor was not my idea. It was what my father wanted for me. He wanted to be surrounded by doctors, lawyers, and engineers—professional careers that meant he could have more bragging rights in front of his friends. Eventually, he got what he wanted. But not with me.” Nelly hoped he didn’t sound as pathetic as he felt.

“What year were you in when you dropped out of medicine?” Isi asked.

He grabbed a bottle of water off the table and took a swig. “Entering into my third year.”

Isi blinked. “Oh wow. That must have been hard. Shouldering that much responsibility without any notice.” She gave a small smile laced with empathy. “I guess we’re not so different from each other.”

He guessed she was recalling the years she had cared for her aunt and uncle, forfeiting living her own life. “My father was constantly breathing down my neck because he wanted me to be a better man. Talking about how he felt I was his only son and I could make a good life for myself.” His father had taken him out to National Stadium in the evening just before dinner time, sat him down and spoke to him, man to man, about what it meant for a man to own up to his responsibilities at a given time and be able to be there for his family when they needed him. Several years later, all his father’s secrets blew out in the open. “When his finances went down the drain and I had to come back home to salvage what I could, I started doing small design jobs. Little by little, word started getting out about my work.”

“And your big break was when Erinma gave you a chance?”

His reply lulled as a group of guys walked in. They were loud and their boisterous laughter made a few people stare their way. Their baggy trousers hung way below their waists and their shirts could barely cover up their underwear. His life could have turned out that way. He could have lost all hope of ever being someone when his father’s world imploded on all of them. But that hadn’t happened. Instead, he was doing well for himself. Better than he would have ever dreamed. And he knew God had most likely been looking after him. Nelly turned to find Isi staring at him. Her brows were drawn together with a curious look on her face.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat and nodded. “That’s where I rediscovered myself. Creative designing became my passion. I loved that it constantly gave me something to look forward to, something new and different.”

“Do you hold a grudge against your dad because he almost made you do something you didn’t want to do ?”

“Sort of.” Nelly pinched the bridge of his nose. “I think he knew how to give advice but not how to act them out personally.”

Her nose scrunched as she frowned in confusion. “In what way?”

Nelly shook his head. Not sure if he wanted to be this open with her.

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m glad you were able to do what you love. I’m sure if you look back, you’ll see the disruption as God’s divine interruption into whatever your father had planned for you.”

He groaned inwardly. “That’s not all. My father had another family. He fathered other children outside my mother. And it’s not like he married that woman. He just had an extramarital affair that resulted in three more children. My mum took it really bad.” He could hear her silent sobs right there in the restaurant. “When I got back from school there was a woman and three kids, the eldest was about thirteen. I walked into the house and saw my mum sitting on the floor. Her eyes were red and everything seemed to fall into place. Those children outside were my half-siblings. We weren’t the only ones my father hurt. And I suddenly had a whole lot of responsibilities. There was no money to continue in private school and it made it easier to drop out. My mother didn’t want them to stay in the house, but she wanted them to be cared for. When I started making some money, I sent some to them.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

“I didn’t do it willingly.”

He’d been irritated at his mother’s benevolent nature.

“But you still did it. And I’m sure you wouldn’t want them to suffer in any way.”

“I guess.”

“And how are they doing now, your half-sisters?”

“They are fine. They are good girls. Two are in the university studying Nursing and Law. The third is still in secondary school.” Their mother was not as gentle as her daughters, and it made him wonder how his father could make the mistake of hooking up with such a woman. He’d met the woman one too many times and dealing with her less-than-flowery words and comments about how inconsiderate his mother was, always got on his nerves. What infuriated him further was how cowardly his father was. He couldn’t put the woman in her place.

“Hey.” Isi reached out and grabbed his hand, and in a way, tugged him gently away from his harmful thoughts. “You’re a good man, Nelson Banjo. I feel fortunate to have you in my life.”

He covered her hand with his. “I think it’s the other way around—I’m the lucky one.”

She grinned. “You know what cheers me up when I’m down?”

“A tub of ice cream? Something sweet?”

She shook her head. “I’m going to give you the summary of a lovely book I read by one of my favourite authors.”

“That so?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She nodded. “And it had a whole lot of food and cooking in it.”

Nelly crossed his arms, already feeling better—because that was what she did. Knowingly or unknowingly, she always made him feel better with her smile, laughter and just because she was her.

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1. My beloved, a Yoruba term usually used by mothers for a child

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CHAPTER TWENTY

ADENIRAN

ONDO

Camille paced back and forth in his room, saying, "I think your father is completely selfish."

"How so?"

She came to a halt and stared at him. “Hello!” Her hands were flailing around her. “Why are you acting as if you are unaware of what’s happened in the last few days?"

Adeniran was very much aware. But he’d endured far worse insults from his father since he was a child, so whatever Camille was witnessing was just a small taste. Following their conversation, he had left his father’s house and had lodged him and Camille at a hotel in Ondo. Funsho and Wunmi had shown their shock and annoyance at their father. Adeniran appreciated their reactions, but he knew it wouldn’t change their father’s mind. He did what he wanted however he wanted.

“I can’t believe your father threw you out of his house because you want to be King.”

It was a wonder why she chose to be friends with him. He was anything but accommodating. But she was like a dog with a bone, constantly nagging him about his life and family, wanting to know more than he was willing to share. And now she was fully aware of the bad blood between him and certain members of his father's side of the family. His mother had been an

only child so there were no cousins or aunts or uncles to run to. Both their maternal grandparents had passed. It was a long tragic line of disappointments and closed doors.

“Look…being King,” she paused. “I know you are doing it not for yourself but for your family, but it makes no sense for you to do it. You have no political power or authority in the law so what’s the point?”

“You won’t understand.”

Anger flashed in her eyes and he winced.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I know you hate it when I say that.”

“Explain things to me and make me understand.”

“It’s not really something I like to talk about.”

“Then try.”

He sighed. “First of all, this is my heritage we’re talking about here. And even if I don’t wield any political power, it’s for the sake of honour. And then there’s the influence. It may not mean much now, but the king made the law back then. The same king adjudicated between the people and ensured peace within the kingdom as well as peace with other kingdoms.”

“Are you sure going against your father is wise?”

“It may not be wise, but it’s not his choice to make. I’ve prayed about this Camille. I know this is what God wants me to do. As much as I don’t want to,

He saw her bristle at that. “How are you so sure this is God’s plan for you?”

“Because I know this isn’t something I would willingly choose for myself.”

Adeniran had been thinking long and deeply about it. Stayed persistent in seeking God’s will on the matter now that he had time on his hands and didn’t have anywhere he was rushing back to.

Who would you be if everything was taken away from you?

He felt the answer was out of reach.

"Just because your agent broke the bad news to you doesn't mean your life is over." She walked over to him and placed her palm against his cheek. "There's so much out there for you. You are capable of coaching. I'm sure there are opportunities out there for you if you look for them."

"I'm surprised you're saying all of this. You were immediately on board when I mentioned it to you."

She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately.”

“Okay. Do you want to share?”

“Do you plan on getting married someday?”

He frowned. “Yes. I plan to.”

“And whoever you marry will be Queen?”

“Yes.”

She walked away from him and sat on the edge of the bed. "I used to think it would be a good idea for you to do this, but I'm not so sure anymore. And I'm not sure I want to be here."

“Cami—”

“I’m a Model, Adeniran. I’m not queen material. And to be completely honest, I don’t think I want to stay here in Nigeria. My life isn’t here.”

“What are you saying?”

She looked at him with tears in her eyes.“I love you so much, but I don’t think I can stay here.”

He moved closer to her, but then grabbed an armchair and sat in it.

“I didn’t know we were going to be here for so long. I had hoped Bryan would call and say you were in the clear and you would leave once you had recovered. And I guess I wanted the chance to know you more.” She gave a low chuckle and pushed out an exasperated sigh. "I've wanted this for a long time, but it's just bad timing for both of us, and it appears that it will always be."

He took her hand in his. “At the very least, we gave it a shot.”

She smacked him on the arm. “How come you didn't ask me out sooner?”

“I’m sorry.”

Her shoulders dropped.

Adeniran leaned in for a hug, rubbing her back.

“The last time we were here, we ended up leaving because you were in a hurry to run from your family. But I followed you back for a reason. One, to make sure you were okay, and two because I wanted to see where you’re from. Explore the place with you and get to know how you were as a child and all the crazy things you did. But you’re making it difficult for me.”

He drew back and arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Camille. How exactly am I making it difficult?”

“Getting to know more about you.” She slid her fingers into her back pocket and slanted her head upwards at him. “I’m concerned about you,

Niran. I know this place holds some deep memories you aren't exactly fond of."

Adeniran clenched his teeth. She had no idea.

She crossed her arms. "What is it you're not telling me?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Why are you repeating what I said?" He tried teasing in an attempt to lighten the mood.

She rolled her eyes but he could tell she was still peeved at him.

"Cami, tell me what you want me to do."

He heard her sigh. "At least can you take me somewhere nice? I'm tired of being cooked up here in this hotel."

"I'm meeting up with an old friend. Would you like to come?"

Her face lit up. "I would love to."

"We'd leave in twenty minutes."

"I'll be ready." She stood and strode to the door. "And Niran?" He turned to look at her. "Thanks for being my friend." She left the room and closed the door softly behind her.



"I thought you would love to play a few rounds."

"One-on-one?"

Mosadi walked up to them.

"Mosadi, this is Camille."

He stretched a hand and Camille shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Camille."

"Same here. It's a pleasure to meet Adeniran's friends." She sat down and crossed her legs at the knee. She twirled her finger at both of them. "So when did your little bromance start?"

Mosadi nodded. "Back from primary school days before he moved to Lagos for secondary school."

"Interesting." She gestured at Adeniran with a thumb. "Think you can give me some details on this guy here? He's very tight-lipped when it

comes to talking about himself."

Mosadi chuckled. "Is that so? I'm sure there are a few things I can say."

"Awesome." She lifted her bottled water to her mouth.

"So why do you like my boy?"

Adeniran coughed. What sort of question was that? But his friend was unaware of his and Camille's conversation. His gaze swung to Camille's.

Camille didn't seem bothered by it. "Isn't it obvious? Because he's everything I want in a man."

"Really! And you don't think you can do better?"

A slight frown swept across her face. "What do you mean?"

Adeniran glared at Mosadi.

"I know you're close to this guy—possibly in ways I'll never be—but Adeniran is still as buttoned-up as ever." Mosadi stared down at his phone. "Sorry, I have to take this."

"Are you upset?" He asked her once they were alone.

"Somewhat, but I'll get over it." She laughed. "It's understandable that he's concerned about his friend. Besides," she said, raising a shoulder, "he's just telling me what I already know. It's sad, really. I know you, but I don't quite know you."

It seemed more like Mosadi was looking out for Camille. Before Adeniran could respond to her his phone rang. He excused himself to attend to the call.

"Hey, man."

"[1]*How far?"* Nelly asked."I was thinking we should call in the troops. Hang out somewhere before you fly off again. What do you say?"

"Who else will be there?" He looked over his shoulder; Mosadi was still on his call. "And can I come with some people?"

"Sade, Tito, me and Isi. Full troop." Adeniran perked up when he heard Isi's name, but he also noticed how Nelly had fixed her in conjunction with him. A burning sensation hit his chest. He had no idea what it was for or why it was there. Nelly went on. "Although Tito may bring a plus one. Nobody knows what she'll do next these days."

"I'll be bringing Camille as well so add her to whatever you're planning. I'll ask if Sade and another friend would like to come."

"[2]*No wahala*. I thought you said you two were just friends. Are you guys now a thing?"

"We're close." They were, however, more at some point. Adeniran was unsure how he felt about it and whether he was ready to tell his friends.

“We’ll talk more when we see. I’ll forward the details soon so you can plan yourself.”

“That’s fine.” Adeniran was tempted to ask in turn how things were going with him and the chef, but he tossed the thought aside. He didn’t want to get more entangled in her affairs. From the restaurant opening, it was clear she hadn’t taken a liking to him.

He rejoined Camille.

“A friend is planning something in Lagos. I’m sure you would love to hang out at the beach.”

“Thank God. Yes! Please, let’s do that.”

He smiled.

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1. What's up?
2. No problem

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ISIMEME

"The only thing I want to do right now is sleep." Isi flopped down on the couch and rested her head on the throw pillow. She was off that Monday and had gone to visit Erinma at Proud Belle and she'd driven them back to her house when she'd closed for the day. These days Odavwaro was given more responsibilities with the company, allowing Erinma to direct more attention to her restaurant.

"Are they overworking you at your job?" Erinma asked, checking on her houseplants. Something she'd called Coleus—leaves in a beautiful shade of green and deep purple. Another reminder of a glorious God, His beauty and His love for man.

While Isi couldn't keep track of the name of each of her friend's plants, she loved the widespread use of them in the house and how they made the place warm and cosy. There were different sizes of life plants that dotted her friend's home. Not to mention the spectacular view of her garden through the sliding doors. Isi loved sitting in front of it, gazing at the flowers, breathing in the amazing fragrance of fresh flowers and reminding herself that God's beauty and goodness were evident in nature.

"No. It's mostly the commute to and from work. On days when we are catering for a wedding or corporate event, I may have to leave Nosa's place as early as 5:30 a.m. I have to be super careful of the bus I take at that time

so I don’t get robbed.” Her forehead creased as she frowned. “Does it sound like I’m complaining?”

Isi didn’t want to come across as ungrateful. Not in front of the person who had helped her get the job in the first place even if she and her now ex-boyfriend weren’t really on speaking terms.

“No, you don’t sound ungrateful. You sound like a woman who’s working hard to make a living while wishing things were a little easier along the way. Everyone wishes for it.”

Isi nodded, pondering on it a little. “Is it too stressful to manage both Proud Belle and The Flower Shop?”

“Sometimes. But I knew this way before I ventured into it.” Erinma took off her gardening gloves and laid them on the table next to her plants. “This is just how things are to be. At least right now.”

“At the expense of wearing yourself out?” Isi replied.

“Believe me when I say that’s the last thing I want to do to myself. I’m learning to relax when I can.”

Erinma took a seat and slumped her shoulders.

“I’m hoping not to let my father down,” Erinma explained. “The company means so much to him. Given how Proud Belle started and how much work he put into it, I completely understand. And since my elder sister Somto has no interest in it, I feel obligated to carry the family’s mantle.”

“Have you discussed it with your dad?’

Erinma pressed her lips together. “Not fully. I’m still praying about it. Hoping for the best solution.” She breathed out. Back straight. “I’ll be fine though.”

Isi gave a nod. “I’ll keep you in my prayers.” Isi began right there and then. *God, please help Erinma. Give her a clear path through this and tell her how best she can serve You in whatever position you place her in.* A calm peace settled in her heart and she knew her prayer was heard by God and was being attended to.

A minute later, Erinma clapped her hands together.

“Why don’t you move in with me?”

Isi blinked. “What?”

Did Nelly talk to her?

No. Isi didn’t think he would. He promised her he wouldn’t. Isi had specifically told Nelly not to bring up the idea with Erinma. Her friend had

to do it on her own. Isi already felt like all she did was get and keep on getting—it could make any relationship monotonous and boring.

"Seriously, I think you should come to stay here with me."

"Why? Isn't it going to be more travel time to get to work?" By Isi's calculations, Ipaja was much closer to Ikeja.

Erinma shrugged as if it were a no-brainer. "You'll be going against traffic if you leave from here and the time difference wouldn't be much. Plus, I have the space. And it would also help you with getting to work on time without having to rush out the door so early in the morning. What do you think? Say yes. It will be so much fun staying together."

Isi shook her head. "No. I don't want to impose. You've done a lot for me already."

"Impose like how? I haven't done anything. It doesn't even compare to everything I did for…" her voice trailed off and Isi could guess what her friend's thoughts were on.

"Have you spoken to Destiny since then?"

Erinma shook her head. "Not since she sent me a text saying that she started attending church services. I didn't check back on her." She bit her lip. "Is that wrong? I mean, am I supposed to follow her up as per being a good Christian?"

"I don't think you should make it a part of your responsibility."

"We were best friends. I can't—" she pursed her lips. "She shouldn't be expecting that things would automatically go back to the way they were before I discovered that she was having an illicit affair with my ex-boyfriend."

"Isi, you are not imposing. Say yes. Move in with me."

"I'll think about it."

Erinma shook her head. "That's not good enough. But I'll let it slide because I know you want to be completely sure. So no *P-lob*."

"No P-lob?"

"Oh." She laughed. "I mean no problem. Bella's been saying it a lot these days and I guess it stuck."

"Seems like Bella is rubbing into you more than you know."

"She's precious. Andrew did a fantastic job with her."

Isi had to agree. The girl was smart, funny and courteous. "Do you guys still attend pottery classes?"

Erinma wrinkled her nose. “No. She politely offered to drop out after a few classes. I guess I have to find something else to make us bond.” She sighed. “Bella means so much to Andrew and I don’t want to give her any reason to think I want to steal her dad away. I so badly want this to work out.”

“God brought you two together for a reason, sis. Don’t overthink this.”

“You sound like Somto.”

“Good to know your big sister and I are saying the same thing. So don’t stress about this.”

“How are things with you and Nelly?” Erinma looked down at her smartwatch. “Yikes! Andrew will be here soon and I need to shower. Let’s talk more in my bedroom.”

Erinma grabbed her phone and turned towards her room.

“Things are so-so,” Isi said, following Erinma down the passageway to her bright bedroom, light pouring in from the windows with the curtain tucked aside made a rectangular shape on the hardwood tiles.

“What do you mean ‘so-so’?”

Isi sat on her bed and tucked her hands between her laps. “I like him a lot.” She sighed and placed her head in her hands. “I have this massive crush on him and I really want him to ask me out and I want to say yes.”

“So who’s freaking out now?”

“I’m trying not to.”

Isi raised her head. Erinma stood before a full-standing mirror with a black short sleeve tie front midi dress pressed against her body. She shook her head and replaced it with a pale pink satin jumpsuit. Erinma had a date with Andrew and Isi had offered to babysit Bella at Erinma’s place—Erinma had a whole bunch of games and movies planned for Bella and Isi was there to execute the fun and games in addition to making mouth-watering dishes.

“Nelly is so laid back and easy to be with.”

“There’s a ‘but’ somewhere.” Erinma turned to her. “Pink or black?”

Isi narrowed her eyes at the two options. “Pink. I think it’s more flattering.”

Erinma puckered her lips and blew her a kiss. “Thanks. Please, continue gushing over Nelly. I’m all ears.” She dashed back to her wardrobe and selected a beige jacket.

“I feel like I’m still in the university.”

Erinma giggled. “Aren’t we girls always like that when we like a guy?”

“I guess so.”

“So what’s the problem? Hasn’t he asked you out yet?”

“No. I told him I wasn’t ready.”

“And are you ready now?”

“I’m ready.” Her reply sounded weak and uncertain in her ears. Isi bit her lip. How could she begin to explain that she had a nagging feeling that Nelly was most likely not God’s choice for her even when her feelings for him were escalating by the day?

“Then I think it’s okay for you to tell him. Or are you waiting for him to bring it up again?”

Isi shook her head.

“So what are you waiting for?”

Isi had asked herself the same thing. And since God hadn’t said anything else on the Adeniran matter, there was nothing to lose.

Twenty minutes later, Erinma was dressed and ready for her date. She looked chic, confident and it never showed in her outward appearance that she had fought a series of mental battles to get to where she was right now.

“How do I look?”

Isi grinned. “Like a princess waiting for her prince.”

Erinma’s lips pressed together as though she was about to cry. “You want to know something funny and crazy?”

“Tell me.”

“You know I used to look at my scars as a limitation. But I don’t see them that way anymore and each day I’m learning that everything I went through—the sufferings, the pains, the heartbreak—were not proposed by God but have found purpose in God. I can be joyful. And deep down, the way we found each other, I know Andrew being in my life is God’s way of telling me that He loves me and He’s got my back.” Erinma made a face. “Does that sound weird?”

Isi shook her head. It made perfect sense. “Not at all.”

“I don’t know what the future will bring for us as a couple, but God is with us. He’s in our relationship and I think that’s the most satisfying thing about us being together.”

Isi nodded silently. A cold breeze ran down her back. *You’re talking to me, God, aren’t You?*

The doorbell rang. Erinma grabbed a shawl along with her purse and they both made their way to the living room. Isi walked ahead to open the door and let Erinma's guests in.

"Aunty Isi!" Bella ran towards her and Isi wrapped her arms around the small girl.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

Isi looked up at the couple and smiled to herself as Andrew wolf-whistled at Erinma, drew her close and whispered something that had her friend grinning broadly.

"Hey, Isi," Andrew greeted when he pulled back but kept her firmly to his side.

"Fantastic! I'm going to make you a delicious lemon cake and we'll eat homemade pizza. How does that sound?"

Bella clapped her hands excitedly. "Sounds great, Aunty Isi."

Isi straightened and looked at the couple. "You guys should get going."

"Thank you, Isi," Andrew said and dropped his gaze to Bella. "Remember what we talked about. Be nice."

"I will. Don't forget to bring back something for me," Bella said.

Andrew nodded and returned his gaze to Isi. "Please, feel free to call if Bella causes you any trouble."

Isi waved them away. "Nah! It's going to be fine. Have fun!"

"We will."

Isi steered Bella to the living room and turned on the TV. "What do you want to watch? Aunty Erinma got new episodes of your favourite cartoon for you. Should we start with that, or you want us to make our pizza first?"

Bella tapped a finger on her chin in thought. "Can we make the pizza first?" She dropped her hand. "I want to watch and eat at the same time."

Girl after my own heart. "That's perfect!"

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Isimeme

Over the weekends before Isi got a job, she made pancakes, eggs and sausages for Nosa's kids. While it was something she looked forward to as one of the ways to pay Nosa back for letting her stay in her house, she loved seeing the joy on their faces when she came up with kid-friendly pancakes. Occasionally, Isi splurged a bit on a few supplies: bananas, vanilla extract, coconut milk, Cacao Love Bars (for a rich chocolatey feel) and edible sprinkles for a dash of colour.

Isi wiped her hands on the napkin when she was done doing the dishes and spread it across the counter. "I have something to tell you."

Nosa shoved another fork full of eggs inside her bread and folded it. "Okay. What happened? Hope you're not pregnant?"

"What? No."

She muttered something and brought her food to her mouth and took a huge bite.

"I'm moving out." Isi had prayed and thought hard about it. It seemed like a reasonable option to move in with Erinma. It not only made it easier to get to work on time but it also allowed her to bond a little with her friend.

Nosa chewed slowly and then swallowed. "To where?" She took another bite, a piece of egg falling from the side of the plate.

"It's somewhere on the Island."

Her cousin nodded like she had expected this to happen. “A man’s house?”

Isi clenched her teeth. Why was her cousin behaving this way? Why was she always thinking the worst of her? “A friend of mine. Erinma. Remember I told you about her a while ago.”

Nosa twisted her face in a frown. “Oh!” she suddenly said. “Okay, I remember her. The CEO,” she said sardonically. “I thought you would say you’re moving in with your boyfriend.”

“How many times do you want me to say it—he’s not my boyfriend.”

Nosa bobbed her head. “He’s not your boyfriend but you two hang out late into the night. Your poor mother would be heartbroken to hear that her only living daughter is parading Lagos with a hotshot graphic designer.” She gazed at Isi. “*Abi*, that’s what you said he does? He designs things?” She looked back at the small bread and egg left in her hand. “He must have had fun putting his designs on you.”

Isi wasn’t too much of a novice to not know what her cousin implied.

“I haven’t had sex with him.”

Nosa grunted and shoved the rest of the food in her mouth. “You hah hey liar.”

Even with her cousin’s mouth full, she could deduce her words: You’re a liar.

“Anyway, I thought to let you know. I will leave in two weeks.”

Isi left the kitchen for the children’s bedroom. Right now it was glaring that they both needed a little space. The kids were in the room playing a card game and she was going through her Instagram feed when Nosa burst into her room unceremoniously.

“Kids, get out of here.”

“But Mummy we’re playing—”

“I said get out!” The kids scrambled to their feet and hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

Nosa peeled open a wrapper of chewing gum and popped it into her mouth. “You’re a very ungrateful person.”

Isi was confused. “Why would you say that?”

“After all we did for you, you decide to repay me like this?”

Isi stood. “Nosa, how have I in any way done wrong to you?”

“We took you in and gave you our food to eat. Now that you are making small change and you’re hanging with the big boys you want to shove our

kindness in our faces and tell us to go to hell?”

Was that what this was about? “I would never do that.”

“You want to leave when you know there’s a lot of expenses here. I need all the money I can get. You see how the house is. Obaseki isn’t bringing in enough money and I’m struggling to keep the shop afloat.”

Isi placed a palm on her forehead. “Wait, let me get this straight. You assumed I would keep giving my paycheck to you all the time because I’m living here?” Isi tried to keep her voice down so they were the only ones privy to their conversation. “I only gave you the last two because you said you needed to sort out the kids’ school fees and your younger sister needed money to sort her salon bills. You expect me to give you my hard-earned salary all the time while I stay here?”

“Is that too much to ask? After all, you’ve been staying here free of charge and eating my food. Do you think things here are free? Nothing goes for nothing, Isimeme.”

Isi was stunned. “I’m not hearing this correctly.”

“You think you’re better than us now, right? We’re now too poor for you, right? You can’t handle the discomfort in my humble abode now that you’ve had a taste of good living, fancy parties and rich men, right?” Nosa swept a hand over the crammed kid’s room Isi had shared with Nosa’s small children for months. “We’re too poor to roll with you.”

“I would never think that way, Nosa. You know it has nothing to do with money or fame.”

“[1]*Obhaohoghe*.”

“For goodness’ sake, I stayed with your father till he passed. I looked after him while you and your sisters were so caught up in your jobs. According to you all, I was the closest and since I lived with him I should continue caring for him.” Isi had practically spent a part of her life as a servant to her uncle. Cleaning and cooking for him. Bore the brunt of his anger when his sickness made him close to an invalid. She’d been there for it all.

“I hear you. Hard work never killed anybody, aunty caretaker. Answer me this. My father spent his money on you as well. He took care of you. He gave you part of the money you used to send yourself to learn how to cook. Is it bad to collect what my father spent on you? Now you’re trying to make me feel guilty.”

Isi’s shoulders slumped. “I’m not trying to guilt-trip you.” Isi pressed her lips together. “I’m doing this so I don’t end up breaking down.”

“Mmm-hmm. So you said. You want to move so it's closer to your place of work and you’ll be going against traffic.”

Isi was momentarily confused. “Is there anything wrong with that?” She felt like they were in a wrestling ring and this was the beginning of the next round of the fight.

“Is there anything wrong with that?” Her cousin mimicked. “You wouldn’t have said that when you were begging for a place to stay in Lagos.”

“I try my best to get to work early. I have to leave early and endure the long traffic to make it back here. It hasn’t been easy for me.”

“It’s Lagos life! It hasn’t been easy on anyone. Things aren’t easy for non-elites. We have to fend for ourselves. I should have let you go and live in that riverine community on top of the water. In Makoko, you would have seen how hard people really struggle to survive. You don’t know how easy I’ve made things for you,” Nosa said angrily. “But I guess this life is not good enough for you again. My sisters warned me not to let you in but I didn’t listen to them. They said you would bring bad luck and that’s exactly what you’ve done! Everything in my life has been going from bad to worse since you came here while you are living the good life. ”

There was a knock on the door.

“What?!” Nosa responded.

“I’m coming in,” Okey walked in. Isi bowed her head a little in greeting Nosa’s slightly older husband. “Nosa, which one is all this shouting you’re doing? Get out of the room and leave her alone.”

“I have to speak my mind, Okey,” Nosa said, crossing her arms. “If she’s going down the wrong path she has to hear me out. If her father were alive he would appreciate that someone spoke sense into her head.”

Isi bristled at the mention of her late father.

“It’s not everything in your head you need to voice out, Nosa. And if you must, do you need to shout?”

“It’s fine, sir. Let her say what she has to say,” Isi said to Nosa’s husband.

Nosa eyed her. “How gracious of you.”

Isi didn’t want to fight and was tired of correcting her. Now she knew Nosa did it intentionally. Her cousin’s words were intended to inflict pain and they were so close to drawing blood.

But Isi wasn’t going to give in.

“Ever since you came to live here you’ve been acting like the whole world is at your feet. You come and go as you please. Just be using your powers to get men and sneak your way into rich people’s pockets.”

“I know how much you need the money. So I’ll give you part of my next two salaries. After that, I will think of what else I can do to help.”

“Thank you o! Aunty-caretaker,” Nosa called after her as she left the apartment. She took the stairs two at a time and brisk-walked far from the building, escaping her cousin’s taunting words. Her tears blurred the boys running on a part of the compound playing football.

She wiped the tears with the back of her wrist and tapped his number across her phone’s screen. A drop or two fell on her screen and thumb. *Useless tears.*

It took a few rings before he answered the call. “Sweetie. How’s your day going?”

“N-not so fine. “ She sniffed and wished she’d grabbed some tissue on her way out.

“What’s wrong?”

She could feel his tension and concern in those two words.

“I just had a fight with Nosa.”

“What happened?”

“I told her I was moving out and she got upset. She thinks I have this evil plan to use rich people to get ahead of her in life.” Isi bit on her lower lip, and saying it aloud enraged her even more.

A car horn blared in Nelly’s background. “She obviously has no idea how much of a beautiful person you are: inside and out. She doesn’t know you at all. If I were you, I wouldn’t dwell on it. But knowing you, this will offset your balance.”

“Yeah. It already is. You’re driving. I can talk to you later.”

“No. I just parked. Talk to me, Isi. Wanna tell me what exactly she said to you?”

Isi sat on a large rock, her skirt tucked between her legs. A wave of emotion overtook her and she resisted the flood of tears that threatened to fall. “No. I don’t want to repeat it.”

“Babe, don’t let her words get to you.”

She smiled a little. “I’ll try.”

“Tomorrow is your first Saturday off. Let me pick you up and we’ll go somewhere nice. Are you okay with that?”

“You don’t have to.”

“Isi, you should know me by now. I don’t do anything I don’t have to do. I do what I need to do, and I know you deserve a little break, especially after working so hard this week.”

“Then I’ll meet you at your office.”

“No. I’ll come and get you—”

Isi sighed. “Nelly…”

“See you tomorrow, Isi. I’ll be there by noon. Cool?”

She grinned. “Cool.”

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1. 'Liar' in Edo

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Isimeme

"What do you want to do today?" Nelly asked her, reversing the car out of the compound as two boys ran behind it, one holding a football. It was a lovely day for being outdoors.

"I don't know," Isi replied. "This is my first free Saturday after a long time. What do you want to do?"

"I'm game with whatever you want to do."

She twisted her lips, fighting a smile. "That's not helpful."

He smiled. "I know. Still feeling bad about yesterday?"

Isi looked down at her hands. "A little. But I'm a bit better." She smiled at him. Isi had spent most of the day having inner talks with God and meditating on His Word when all she wanted to do was lash out at Nosa for the myriad of unkind words that she spewed out of her mouth. "I'm glad we are going out." Things in the house were still on edge and Isi was glad she'd taken Nelly up on his offer to take a breather.

"It's okay. Nelly is here now." He grabbed her hand and gave her a gentle squeeze.

"How about we go to your place? I owe you a cooked meal, right?"

He tossed a curious glance her way and switched it back to the road. "Seriously? You really want to cook on your free day? Aren't you tired of being in the kitchen?"

"No. I love it. Can you ever get tired of web designs?"

“Not right now. I like what I do but I can’t stay in a place for long. I like my freedom to move about whenever I want.”

“Which is why you don’t stay seated in your office.”

“Girl, keep talking like that and I’m going to put a ring on that finger.”

She laughed. “Turn off the AC.” Not saying a word but with a shake of his head, he did as she wanted. They had spent just a few months together but already Nelly was getting accustomed to her ways. Isi stuck her hand out the window as they drove down the street. She loved this weather. Not sunny. And it wasn’t raining. The weather was cool and relaxing. Good enough for a romantic stroll, or enjoy the feel of the gentle breeze on her hands—as she was currently doing.

“We’ll soon get to the express road.”

“Okay.” She wriggled her fingers.

“You realise people are staring at you.”

“I don’t care. Let them stare.”

“You’re such a weird girl,” Nelly said good-naturedly.

As soon as they reached the expressway, Isi drew her hand back in, and Nelly popped up the window, reactivating the air conditioning. On their way to his house, they stopped at the market. She knew exactly what she wanted to make for him, but she was missing a few ingredients. Nelly wanted to take her to a supermarket, but Isi preferred the smell of farm produce and the camaraderie of the market-goers. Price haggling with marketers. Perhaps she was truly strange as Nelly had said.

Nelly’s apartment was charming. Like him, it was well-organised. Sleek and masculine.

He took the nylon bags from the boot, not letting her carry any of the shopping bags. Isi couldn’t help but wonder if this treatment was a lure that guys did to make a girl go out with them or if this royal treatment continued even when the guy had the girl’s heart firmly within his grasp and there was no going back.

“You have a neat place.”

“And by neat you mean?”

“Very tidy. Nothing seems to be out of place.”

He chuckled and nudged his head to a passageway. “Kitchen is this way.”

She followed him into a black and beige-themed kitchen. Isi ran her hand over the black countertop. The idea of having her own place, her own kitchen where she could run things was one of her secret cravings.

“Is this kitchen Isi-workable?” Nelly questioned.

“It definitely is.”

He began putting things away and leaving a few things she would need on the work table.

“Do you cook often?” She questioned.

“Not necessarily. I cook when I can.”

“Do you like spicy food?”

“I’m a Yoruba guy. I can take the heat.” He winked at her. He gestured his thumb behind him. “I’m going to change and I’ll come help.”

“You don’t have to help. Just your presence would do.”

His grin broadened. “Then I’ll make that available in a jiffy.”

Isi got out her phone and went to her playlist while Nelly exited his kitchen. She tapped on *Oceans* by Hillsong Worship. The soothing music filled the kitchen as Isi immediately went straight to work. She rinsed the fish, spiced and sought out a frying pan in the cupboards. Closing the door with her hip, she washed the pan, and soon she was dipping the fish in hot oil. The rich fragrance of herbs quickly permeated the air, joining the sound waves bursting from her phone. They collaborated to create a fragphonic (her vocabulary addition to the English vocab) mix that created a serene and sweet-smelling atmosphere all around her.

It made her think and reminded her of the hymn, Trust and Obey. She smiled to herself, closing her eyes and recalling the first verse of the solemn hymn.

When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there’s no other way
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Trusting and living a lifestyle of obedience to God was completely reliant on Him and His ways. Like the hymn and the song implied, for her to be happy and live a satisfying life that God was pleased with; she had to put her hope and confidence in God.

When he returned, she already had the chicken sizzling for a sweet and sour stir-fry sauce. She tossed a slice of carrot into her mouth, not bothering

to look up at him. The chopping board before her was splayed with the orange, green, yellow and red of the varying vegetables she planned to toss into the pan.

“It smells amazing in here,” Nelly said, releasing a deep breath.

“Thank you.”

“Guess you found everything you needed.”

Isi looked up at him. Gone were his dark-wash jeans and long-sleeved shirt in exchange for black joggers and a black cotton shirt. Her gaze slid down his profile and took in that the first two of his four buttons were undone. His forearms were exposed, revealing lean muscles and a vein trail down his arm.

She forced her eyes away from the captivating scenery in front of her and focused back on the vegetables which didn’t hold that much appeal. Not for the time being.

“How’s it going? Hope I didn’t take too long.” She felt the heat of his gaze on her face but did not raise her head. “It feels like I was gone for too long with everything you’ve done.”

“Er–no. I work fast.” She popped another carrot in her mouth before pulling out a bowl from the drawer and emptying the contents of the black nylon into it.

The yellow and red chilli peppers came next.

She brought it up to her nose, closed her eyes and took a deep sniff of it. The scent always made her smile to herself. The flavours were rich, complex and refreshing. Bursting with a sweet flavour that added a whole new dimension to a simple dish.

Chef Dodzie wasn’t keen on this kind of pepper (and a few spices Isi liked to employ in her dishes), since it was a hot variety of chilli and he didn’t need his patrons loving their glass of water more than their meals.

“I was wrong,” Nelly commented.

Isi fluttered her eyes open, momentarily confused. “What?”

“You can never get tired of cooking. Your face lights up when you are smelling pepper. *Ordinary* pepper.”

“Trust me. It’s not ordinary pepper.”

She laughed and blew a wisp of hair away from her face. It fell back into place, and she blew at it again. If she made the mistake of one touch of her finger on her eye and she knew would hate herself.

“Let me get that for you.”

“Alright.” She kept one eye closed and watched him walk over to her side with the other. She shifted her one-eyed gaze downward after catching a glimpse of his collarbone. He brushed a strand of her hair away from her face, and she shuddered as his finger grazed her cheek. Isi opened her other eye and looked up at him.

“Better?” He asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She turned around and resumed chopping the chilli and habanero peppers. Instructing her heart to take a chill.

“Isi?”

“Yeah?”

“Look at me,” he said in a low voice.

She took a deep swallow and raised her eyes to him.

His eyes roved over her face for what felt like an eternity but were most likely half a minute. Then he said in a voice that was borderline husky, “I know you like me.” She swallowed, trying to maintain eye contact. “I see it in your eyes. Feel your shivers when I touch you.”

Isi didn’t want to mislead him. Not when she was still struggling and *failing* to figure out what was developing between them. “I’m sorry, Nelly. I __”

“I feel the same way. I’m attracted to you, Isimeme.”

Her breath hitched.

“I know you still want to be friends. But I would be lying if I said I didn’t want more.”

His gaze shifted to her lips before returning to make eye contact. Her hands felt clammy. Her heart was thumping against her rib cage. She recognized that move...that expression that suggested something was about to happen; she'd seen it too many times in movies. Read it in books. Imagined it in her head as she inwardly swooned as she read Christian contemporary romance novels. Her first instinct was to take a step back, which she did. Was he planning on kissing her? Did she wish for him to kiss her? The answer to that question terrified her more than the prospect of the event itself.

She ran the tip of her tongue over her lower lip. “I-I’ve never been kissed,” she said hastily. And she almost wanted to snatch the words back and make them disappear into nothingness—just like the WhatsApp delete message feature within sixty-nine minutes. But it was too late. All had been

said and done. “And it’s not something I want to do till I get married,” she further explained.

His eyes widened with disbelief. Shock. Disgust? The last part was her mind trying to deduce his thoughts from his profile. “Wait, Isi.” He held up his hand. “You have never been kissed? Ever?”

Isi looked away from his bewildered expression, and shook her head, feeling shy. When she’d made the vow to keep herself for her husband at age fifteen—while she’d stood firm at her decision—it had seemed like a silly venture to the class of people she called her friends. And as she grew older, she realised how difficult it was to keep her emotions in check. Hormones and heart palpitations were a given when a girl harboured a crush on the opposite sex. But what made it easier was giving God that control of the whole thing—her emotions and every single one of her crushes, trusting Him with her heart—knowing that at the right time, she would have the guy meant for her.

Why isn’t he saying anything? Did he think she was archaic in her way of thinking…*living*?

“Isi…that’s amazing,” he finally said.

“What?”

“I mean, you really are something, Isi. This just makes me want you more. But I would never make you do something you don’t want to do.”

“Have you ever been tempted to want more?”

She laughed lightly. “You mean have I ever wanted to kiss someone?”

He nodded.

“Nelly, what do you take me for? A piece of wood?”

“I’m just asking.”

“I have. I just don’t follow the feelings no matter how hard it gets. I give myself some Joseph sense and flee.”

He chuckled. “Ah. I get it.” It didn't quite look that way. He still looked dazed. “No offence, but I know you’re not in your twenties.” Nelly blew out a breath. “My sisters definitely need to take pointers from you.”

Isi laughed again.

“I'm not sure why you haven't decided whether we should be more, but I'm willing to wait as long as you want. I only ask one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That you let me know if at any time you feel I won’t be the man you want. So I don’t keep my hopes up.”

“I will.” *I promise*. Not only for him but for herself.

He smiled a little then moved away, increasing the distance between them as he took a seat on a high stool at the far end of the countertop, propping his hands on the cool marble surface.

He drummed the counter. “Okay. Two things. Tito and I are planning this thing with some of our schoolmates and I was wondering if you would like to come. One of my clients is having an in-house get-together for his fortieth in a few weeks. Would you like to come?”

It had been a while since she'd been to the beach. “Sure. What day are you considering for the beach hangout?”

“Tomorrow?” He said sheepishly.

“Tomorrow? And you’re just telling me? I have to be at work at five. I’m not even sure I have something to wear.” When Nelly beamed at her, she had no idea she’d said the latter aloud until he said:

“I’ll take you shopping after we eat.”

She felt herself blanch at the thought. The idea of Nelly taking her shopping was as unappealing as Sautéing shrimp—she hated the splash of hot oil that stung her skin when the water hit the oil. “No way.” It just felt too personal. Private. *Couple-ey* And Isi couldn’t help but swoon a little at it asides from the intrusion it brought. How long had she dreamt of doing this? It was finally happening but along with it came the doubts.

“Okay. Whatever you say.”

“And when is the get-together?”

He grinned when she looked his way and her heart stuttered in her chest. “I checked. It falls on one of your free days. Second Tuesday of the month.”

Isi wiped her hand on a napkin before reaching for a skillet to check on the chicken. It was browning nicely. “Don’t bank on it. I might have to work that day. My boss may change his mind.” She set the water to boil in a pot and got out a frying pan to prepare her sauce with. From the corner of her eye, she saw him frown. “What?”

“I can’t help but wonder.” He paused. “Are you certain your boss is not some kind of overbearing slave driver?”

Her hand paused over the pan for three seconds then resumed the motion of flipping each piece of chicken to let the other side cook. “It’s just the demands of the job.” She tossed a bright smile at him. “I’m fine and I’ll be fine.” Right now, her dealings with her boss were the least of her worries. The heated exchange with her cousin took front stage, centre.

She felt Nelly come near her and the next thing, he took her other hand forcing her to abandon what she was doing to make eye contact. “I know you say you’re fine even when you’re not.” His thumb caressed the back of her hand. “If anything is going on with you, I want you to tell me, okay?”

She grinned at him. “Thanks.”

“So what are we eating the chicken with?”

He let go of her hand, grabbed the stool by the counter and sat down. She missed the warmth his touch gave her. “I’m going to make Tangerine sauce and white rice.”

“Yum.” He smacked his lips and she laughed.

She placed the chicken pieces on a plate when they were done. She threw him a glance over her shoulder. “How are things with the project you’re working on?”

“It’s where it is. I believe I’m making headway.”

“That’s great. Thank God. I’ll keep praying for you.”

“Thanks, dear. I need all the prayers I can get.” He stood and walked casually to the refrigerator.

“Oh yeah, I got something for you. Let me go get it.”

She frowned as she watched him walk out of the kitchen, wondering what he was up to. He returned to the room a minute later with a pink gift bag and handed it to her.

“What is it?”

“You’ll see.”

She grabbed the bag and peeped inside. Gasped. Isi glanced at him. “You bought me a bag?”

“Do you like it?”

What was there not to do like? It was a grey denim crossbody bag and judging from the detailing and designer label from a popular brand, it was obvious it was a legit designer bag and not a rip-off. Her conscience, however, felt the sharp bite of guilt niggling. “It’s beautiful.” He grinned. “But Nelly…” she shook her head, holding the bag out to him. “Thank you, but I can’t accept this.”

His smile faltered. “Why not?”

When he made no move to take it she dropped the gift bag on the worktable and checked on the food. The water was already bubbling and Isi worked fast to wash and add the rice to the hot water. She spoke as she

worked. “Because I don’t want you to be misconstrued. I don’t want you to think we—”

“—We are a couple. We just had a conversation about it some minutes ago, so it’s understood.”

She eyed him suspiciously when he dropped the subject so easily. They worked comfortably together, he made the plates ready while she dished the food. The way they moved around each other made it look like they were a couple. Except they weren’t. And she couldn't help but think she might be sending off the wrong vibes. Right in a way but wrong in another way.

She shook her head at her thoughts. Things were ceasing to make sense these days. Meanwhile, Erinma's words from the other day had consumed a part of her thoughts. Could God actually be leading her into a relationship, a *future*, with a man who was as melancholic and temperamental as him?

Nelly brought over two mugs from the scanty plate rack and poured orange juice into them.

“Thanks.”

Once he settled down, Isi had the honour of giving thanks for their food and immediately dug in afterwards. She hadn’t realised how hungry she was until she took the first bite. She loved how the sweetness and tanginess of the tangerine balanced perfectly with the seasoning of the chicken.

Nelly sliced some meat off his chicken, closed his eyes and moaned. “This is so good,” he said with food tucked into one side of his mouth.

“Glad you like it.”

“You should make some of these chicken wings for the hangout. Oh! And Tito is a vegetarian.” He shuddered as he said the word.

She laughed. “That’s fine. I’ll cook up something nice for her.”

He winked at her. “Thanks. And hope you’re feeling better now.”

So far spending the day with a friend had been exactly what she needed. “Yes, I am. You were right about hanging out.”

“What every guy loves to hear.”

“What?”

“That I was right.” He winked at her again, and she rolled her eyes, her eyes twinkling.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ADENIRAN

It was summery weather and very relaxed for a Sunday morning. There had been rain clouds in the early morning, but they had cleared to reveal a clear sky, crisp air and a not-too-hot day. Perfect for a day at the beach. Adeniran observed the crowd level through his sunglasses. He guessed Nelly had chosen a Sunday because of the troops of people that usually flocked to the beach on the weekends. Mostly on Saturdays. It didn't matter that it was a private beach.

As far back as he could remember, there was always one party or the other. Which was a good thing because he didn't want people to recognise him and ruin his little fun. He also trusted the bodyguards attached to him would do justice to keep anyone not in their inner circle away from him.

Disappointment wasn't even close to describing how he felt about that reminder, because this was how he'd spend the rest of his life. He planned to spend his free time with friends at the very least.

"Thanks for this," Camille said, stretching her hands out in front of her. "You came here a lot?"

"Often. We came here to unwind."

"Cool." She fixed her gaze back on the water.

"Am I forgiven now?"

"Hmmm. Not yet."

He chuckled. "What do I have to do?"

She turned and threw her arms around his neck. She stood on tiptoes and whispered, “I’ll let you know in due time.” She took a step back. “In the meantime, I’m just going to enjoy this balmy weather.” She winked at him before walking over to her beach bag on the sand. Camille drew out a blue beach towel and trudged her way through the sand to the hut house they had rented for the duration of their stay at the beach.

Adeniran returned his gaze to the scenery before him. Nelly was hauling some of the games planned for the day and the chef walked alongside him, holding picnic baskets in both hands. There was no mistaking the glow on her face as it came from within rather than from the mild sun shining down on them.

Mosadi walked over to him. “Any word from Sade?”

He wrenched his gaze away from her and turned to his best friend’s worried expression. “Not yet. I’ll call her now.” Mosadi nodded and stalked off to his car and his usual rigid posture. If Adeniran didn’t know better, he would suspect his best friend had a thing for his baby sister. But Sade already had a boyfriend.

The idea and repercussions of it made him visibly cringe. Adeniran pulled out his phone from his pocket. He walked over to Camille to get a better look at his phone. He slid his shades up to his forehead and speed-dialled his sister’s number.

Sade had planned to attend the hangout, but due to a minor crisis at the habitation home she oversaw, she had to cancel. He needed to make certain that everything was fine with her. At the very least, he could show more concern for his family while he was present.

“Yeah?” He could tell she was stressed because of the strain in her voice.

“Hey,” he said when she answered the phone. “Is everything okay?”

“Not at all. One of the husbands came by and caused a commotion. He wanted his kids. Can you believe he slapped the poor woman?”

“Has he gone?”

“Yes. I called the police on my way over to the house.” She breathed out. “I was so tempted to punch him in the ears so he will need a hearing aid sometime in his immediate future.”

“Don’t do anything crazy. That’s why the authorities have been put in place. To do their jobs.”

She huffed. “How many of them do their jobs? If they did, things like this would not even be happening. Imagine the guts the husband had to make an

appearance here and act all high and mighty. In fact, he’s not a man, he's a barbarian.”

“Take it easy. Your anger won’t solve the problem.” He knew his baby sister to take things a bit overboard when her anger got out of control. “Have the police left?”

Camille lowered her shades and raised her gaze to him. ‘*What’s wrong?’* She mouthed.

He shook his head. *Later.*

“Yes. After taking a statement from the woman.” She let out a frustrated sigh. “God, I’m done with all these crappy situations.”

He looked down and something in the sand caught his eye. He stooped down and swept away the layers of white sand and unearthed the seashell.

“You’re making a difference for those women. That’s what matters. Take it easy, Sade.”

“Yeah. I will. Thanks for calling. Have fun.”

“Will do my best.”

He ended the call.

“Is your sister okay?”

“Yeah. Just some things that were happening at the shelter. It’s been resolved so no need to worry.”

“Okay.” Camille yawned. “I’m just going to take a little nap, okay?”

“Alright.” He rose to his feet, twirling the seashell between his fingers. The plethora of colours: turquoise green, beige, white and peach. In some ways, it reminded him of her. He expelled a breath and looked up. Nelly was making conversation with Tito. Perching his glasses back on, he ambled over to them and shoved his find in his pocket.

He restrained himself from looking for the one person he was curious about.

“And here’s our star footballer! Nigeria’s finest! Give me a hug, Sugar.”

Adeniran rolled his eyes but went along with Tito’s crazy behaviour. “How are you?” He took two, no three steps back after removing himself from her personal space.

“I’m good,” she replied. “When are you going to make room for us to spend alone time together.”

“I thought you already had a boyfriend.”

He accepted the apple juice Nelly extended to him and uncapped it.

"I just have a friend that is a boy." She winked. “We’re just keeping things casual. A little fun here or there. Nothing serious.”

Adeniran eyed her. "What are you, twelve?" Even he knew the propensity of a relationship and didn’t engage in meaningless hookups. No matter how hard one resisted, feelings still found a way to wriggle in.

She shrugged. “Monogamy is obsolete and unrealistic, isn’t it?” She trailed two of her black and white false sunflower nails down his shirt. “What’s wrong with having a little fun?”

Nelly shook his head while smiling to himself. No one had been absolved from Tito’s teasing ways.

“Get your claws off me.”

She erupted in laughter. A flurry of air blew her kimono open, exposing her tiny shorts and bikini top. Adeniran looked away and rubbed his eyes. Tito was getting out of hand.

“Don’t be so stiff, Adeniran.” She squeezed his biceps and let go when he took a step back from her. “You need to enjoy life a little.”

“Our definition of enjoyment is very different.”

“Whatever. So we are now going to be bowing to greet you very soon. How do you feel about the upcoming changes in your life? From footballer to His Royal Majesty?” Tito asked.

“I’m just going to take it a day at a time,” Adeniran said.

She narrowed her eyes. “All that public poke-nosing… you’re going to be cool with it? What if they talk about your learning disability, or that you didn’t go to uni? ”

“I’ll deal with it.”

“I’ve got your back though.” She winked at him. “I know how to distract a crowd. I’m this close,” she brought her fingers together till they were an inch apart, “to hitting a million followers.”

“Impressive,” Nelly said. “I can imagine the mad deals you’d be getting.”

“You can’t even imagine.” Tito eyed the drinks cooler. “Nelly, did you bring anything stronger than fruit juice or energy drinks?”

Adeniran tuned out of Nelly’s reply and the ensuing conversation. His eyes scanned the scenic view. It wasn’t hard to find her with the pink hibiscus flower stuck in her hair. Her arms crossed and her back to them as she dipped her feet in the water.

Adeniran worked his way through the small group of uni students setting camp on the beach till he got to her while she had no idea he was

approaching.

“Hello again,” he said.

Isi turned to him and a small smile decorated her pretty oval face with high cheekbones. The only sign of makeup was the clear lip gloss smeared on her lips. Her mocha brown eyes failed to catch a bit of that smile. “Hi. It's sort of nice to see you again, Prince Adeniran.”

“Do you really mean that?” He couldn’t help himself from posing the question.

“No.”

Adeniran blinked and looked down at her, taken aback by her sincerity or lack of it. Had she just said no? Was she serious? His eyes searched her face for any signs of humour, but there were none. “Do you really mean that?”

“Sorry. I know we didn’t make the best of first impressions. I guess I’m a bit weary of us meeting each other and the bad vibes bouncing off your body.”

Off his body? *Who is this woman?* Every time she opened her mouth to speak, there was always something that surprised him.

He found that he was interested in getting to know her. As an individual. Not a woman. His eyebrows bunched together. Was he making sense to himself? All he wanted to do was understand what made her function.

The wind blew strands of hair across her face, and she didn’t bother shifting it.

Adeniran stuffed his hands into his pockets before doing something completely stupid like sweeping the hair away from her face and tucking it behind her ear. She belonged to someone else, and the smiles and light touches she gave Nelly indicated that she felt the same way about him.

“It’s fine. I suppose I deserved that.”

She chuckled. “No. I’m not insulting you or anything. I’m just being honest.”

“Do you always tell the truth even if it hurts those around you?”

“I try not to say it harshly. I do it with love.”

“Interesting.”

“Why? You expected me to tell you I missed seeing you and I’ve been very eager to see you again?”

He chuckled. “No. Please, on no count should you try to be anything other than who you are. I actually appreciate the honesty.”

She clicked her tongue and looked back at the ocean.

Adeniran grinned at himself. She was definitely something. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the gang and noticed Nelly stealing glances at them. He raised his fist, and Nelly focused fully on whatever he was doing. A sign that they were brothers and he would never make a move on his girl. He faced forward and made sure to keep his distance. He stood at least four feet away from her and dug his feet firmly into the sand. A safety measure to prevent him from leaning toward her.

He wriggled his fingers in his pocket and made contact with the seashell he'd picked earlier. Bringing it out he rubbed it between his fingers.

"Is that a seashell?"

"Yeah. I found it on the shore." He glanced at her and saw her transfixed on it.

"Here." He held out the seashell to her.

"It's so pretty." She gazed up at him. "Thank you."

His gaze drifted to her mouth. But it did not end there. He mentally crammed every single feature of her face as if he needed to remember it.

He swallowed and cleared his throat. "Are you one of those people that collect them as a hobby?"

She grinned and nodded slowly.

"This was once a home to a small animal." She closed her eyes, as though trying to recall something vital. "Mollusks!" She looked at him when she opened her eyes. Her eyes reflected a mixture of joy and sadness. He was curious as to what had triggered that peculiar reaction in her. "The shells protect their vulnerable bodies from predators that hunt them. They absorb salts and chemicals and in turn, secrete something that hardens their outer bodies as a result. When it dies, it leaves behind this empty shell."

"That sounds sad."

"No, it's not. It's just like a memento of their existence." She raised her eyes to him. "My father taught Marine biology at the university."

"He must be an intelligent man."

"He was." She enclosed the seashell in her palm and returned her attention to the approaching wave. Cold water crashed against his knees, and he heard her sharp intake of breath as he instinctively grabbed her shoulders to keep her from being pushed or pulled away by the force of the water.

Adeniran couldn't claim to have audibly heard from God. But at that moment, within a twinkle of an eye, he felt a knowing hit him right in the

chest:

This is your wife…

When he made contact with her, a crazy jolt of electricity travelled up his arm, and he quickly set her aside before it could reach his brain and zap him of his thinking abilities.

The water fizzed away, eroding sand and drawing him closer to her like an invisible magnet—as though he was destined to be by her side.

Where is this coming from? This was unlike his emotions.

His mind struggled to come up with something meaningful to say to quell those feelings.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

Another moment of silence passed between them.

She looked back. "Well, I'm going to help Nelly with the food. Again, thanks for the seashell." She turned and made her way to Nelly. Nelly's face lit up when she reached him and he gave her a side hug.

And he suddenly understood why he felt the way he did—he didn't have someone close by his side. Not a close friend, but someone who loved and cared for him.

His eyes drifted back to Camille. Maybe he'd been too stubborn to take notice of what he had all the while, but Camille was not meant to be his to have.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Isimeme

"You good?" Nelly asked her when she got to his side.

She forced a smile. "Not exactly."

"What's wrong?" He looked behind her and then leaned in. "Did Adeniran say something to upset you?"

"No." In fact, the conversation had been like a long-awaited icebreaker she hadn't known she'd wanted. When he spoke to her, not with sarcasm or bite, she felt the sincerity of his words. And when he wrapped his arms around her, like he was afraid the torrent of the water could make her lose her footing, she gasped. She could still feel the burn of his touch on her arm. The sweet sensation as his fingers held on to her arm as the rush of cold water attacked her knees. She placed her hand on her arm and shivered. When Nelly touched her she felt safe and cared for, but when Adeniran touched her she half thought she would cringe at it. Instead, she'd also felt safe, but she'd also felt like it was the right place to be.

"Isi?"

She gazed up at Nelly's worried expression. "Mmm?"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Not exactly." He opened his mouth to speak but she continued, "I'm going to sit down a little."

He frowned.

“Or do you need me to do anything for you?” She could set aside her mangled thoughts for a few minutes. Hours, even, if she had to. She could go through her emotions late at night after work.

He shook his head. “Go ahead and sit down.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll come by later.”

She smiled. “All right. Thanks. If you need me, I’ll be over there.” She pointed at a nice spot on the beach, not too far off from him.

“Okay.”

“Don’t be stingy with the chicken wings.”

He smiled, but it didn’t have the usual Nelly spark. “I won’t.”

She lingered a little. “Do you think Tito will like the Sweet potato salad and Falafel I made?”

“I’m sure she will. It looked delicious.”

She arched her brow. “And are you going to give it a try?”

He looked pained. “I don’t think so.”

“What about the Tofu chocolate cake?” Isi had searched it out and followed the recipe online.

“I’ll try.”

“I’ll take that.” She turned and walked off, taking her raffia bag with her. She trudged off to a side, not too far off as she’d told Nelly. A good enough spot that no horse and its rider pummelled into her. She plopped down on the sand and gazed at the ocean. She studied the water, how it stretched farther down with no end in sight. And if she watched the sun go down, it seemed like it was sinking into the water, only to come back up at the break of dawn.

O Lord, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom, you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. The Lord does whatever pleases him throughout all heaven and earth, and on the seas and in their depths.

With a sky breath, she retraced her steps back to her dilemma.

God what is happening to me? Why am I stuck in this mess?

Is it Nelly or Adeniran?

The question seemed silly.

It was getting pretty obvious she was fighting a losing battle. God wanted her to be with Adeniran, but her heart skipped for another man. A long time ago, she’d questioned the possibility of love being more of feelings and

involving the will; the ability to make a choice between simply going with the flow and doing what she wanted (or thought she wanted) or deciding not to.

And she knew what trope in a book this was.

She was stuck in a silly love triangle.

Isi laughed at herself. How many times had she read books that spoke about a woman finding it hard to choose between two guys with who she wanted to spend the rest of her life? It had to be simple.

But here she was—completely torn between this achingly hard choice to make. To choose her will or God's will. To surrender completely to God or withhold a part of herself from Him.

There was a song by Jenn Johnson, a singer in an American Worship Band, she'd heard a few months back thanks to Eliana—'In Over My Head'. The song held a deep meaning of following God no matter where it led, no matter how bad the situation got or if it involved her losing everything she'd planned or ever wanted (as opposed to God's will), she would willingly let God do whatever He wanted with her life.

A single tear streamed down her cheek as she realised she had to end whatever she was doing with Nelly Banjo. The first reason was that she was tired of seeing him and not wanting more. The second reason was shame and guilt. The tightness in her chest from spending that much time with Nelly. In some ways, she felt she was cheating on Adeniran. He wasn't completely hers yet, but she was his until God said otherwise. God had said so and she had no other choice than to believe it. She needed to untangle her thoughts before confronting the gloomy reality of not having Nelly as a constant in her life.

Was this supposed to be how heartbreak felt? Like her insides were in turmoil, her heart was being torn in half and one half was ripped out?

A small tide hit the shore, sending two teenagers to scream excitedly. That was another joy of life; to be given the freedom to live a life enjoying what God had made and given to all life for their pleasure.

She had never once doubted the voice of God. Never had any cause to do so. Until now. She'd heard of people mistakenly hearing God on a subject matter, only to end up burnt in the end and casting blame at God for their misfortune.

Was that going to be the same case for her?

Marriage was important. She wanted a marriage as sweet and loving as what her parents had, and she wasn't planning on missing out by making a clumsy mistake like thinking a man was 'the one' for her. It had to be her choice.

Isi turned and gazed at Nelly, then at Adeniran. They were both so different that it made it so hard to consider acting on her own will. She looked away. Could she confidently trust her choice?

This isn't your choice to make, Isi. I lead the path with the light of My presence for those who follow me. And right from the foundations of the world, I have ordained this for you.

But God, there has to be a mistake. Is this really You? This man isn't necessarily a good guy, Isi protested inwardly. *I want someone sweet, caring, kind and who treats me with respect. Someone who values my relationship with You and all that it represents. Adeniran could never do that.*

How are you so sure, beloved? For I know the thoughts I think towards you are good and not evil. To give you an expected end. I know the heart of man, and I know My desires for you.

A cool breeze blew in her direction, blanketing her like a warm comforting touch.

Take a look back in your life at all My works. Have I ever failed you?

Isi swallowed hard. *No.*

Then I won't start now.

She shut her eyes. *I'm sorry, Lord. Please let me be a lamp that keeps on burning and shining brightly for You.*

And at that same moment, it hit her—she needed to be out there in the water. Needed to clear her head. She hadn't planned to swim, but just in case, she'd worn her swimsuit beneath her wrap dress. Taking her towel out of her bag, she yanked at the strap of the dress and shrugged out of it and walked purposefully to the water. She didn't care if the water was cold. She just needed to be in it. The water hit her legs and she walked further in, propelling herself forward till the water touched her midsection, and then, slowly, she lowered herself into it.

I don't want to run anymore. This is me giving myself to You. Wash me, Lord. Make me a worthy vessel for Your use.

She was running from God before. She'd been living in delayed obedience, but not anymore.

Taking in a deep breath, Isi lowered herself even further until it was in over her head.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ADENIRAN

Time flew by and no matter how he tried not to look, his gaze always found her. It followed her when she walked away from their group with a troubled expression. He'd kept his eyes fixed on her when she marched purposefully to the water and lowered herself until she was out of sight. Adeniran had swung his gaze at Nelly and discovered him watching her as well, also wearing the same worried look Adeniran felt. He forced himself to look away when he saw she could handle herself in the water.

There were so many things about her that he wanted to know. He couldn't get rid of the surprising feeling of being close to her earlier. And unless he was mistaken, every chance encounter with her wasn't coincidental and pointed to something more. He laughed at himself as he shook his head. *Who am I kidding? She isn't even fond of me.*

But she spoke with you amicably, the thought struck him quickly.

Adeniran shook his head, wondering where those insane thoughts were coming from.

He strolled over to where the guys stood, feasting on the food.

"Are you two now dating?" He fired the question at Nelly, hoping there was no bite in his tone. He didn't even think it through.

Nelly sighed. "I'm working on it.

"Why?" Mosadi asked, voicing out Adeniran's bafflement.

“I want to do things right. She’s special and she deserves special treatment.”

“She’s not fragile, is she?” Mosadi asked.

Nelly snorted. “Hardly. She’s tough, more reason why I like her.”

Same here. Adeniran almost choked on his drink at his thoughts. What was that? Either he was getting a heatwave or he was seriously checking his friend’s girl out.

Mosadi looked back at Isi. “I’m intrigued. Are you buying your time or she already has a boyfriend.”

“She has never had a boyfriend.”

“*Ehn*?” Adeniran looked back at the woman. Thinking about how her beautiful curves could be made out of the jersey summer dress she had on. “You’re lying.” Which man wouldn’t move in on that?

“I swear it’s true. Me *sef* I was dazed. She’s one of those serious Christian girls who like to take every part of their life seriously. God first, everything else follows.”

“Then she’s one of the good ones.”

“I have a plan though,” Nelly said cheekily.

‘Pray-tell,” Adeniran said dryly.

“Hope it’s not something dumb,” Mosadi said.

“*Abeg*, free me.” Nelly nudged Adeniran’s arm. “What about you? Are you and Camille now an item?”

Mosadi sent a teasing look his way. “Adeniran is too blind to see what he has next to him.” He nudged his head at where Camille and Tito sat. He knew without having to look because he knew Isi was on the opposite side, seconds after coming out of the water, sitting on a blanket with a towel wrapped around her shoulder as she was typing away on her phone. Her gaze shifted momentarily to the water as she typed like it was her muse.

“It’s complicated.” Adeniran said. He didn’t want to go into the long story of how they’d started dating and how things had ended as quickly as they began.

“I don’t believe in complicated relationships. Now *that*,” he jutted his chin at Tito who was doing a video of herself and Camille, “is complicated. I don’t know what’s up with Tito. She’s been acting really out of it these days.”

“So I’ve heard.” Gossip tabloids were talking about her relationship with Real-Estate Mogul Omar. As usual, none of the news was good although

Tito was still one of the leading social media influencers in the country.

He ambled over to Camille.

“Hey,” he said. Sand particles dotted her hair. The smooth planes of her face were set in a hard line. “Are you okay?”

“I wanted to tell you…my agent called. I’ve gotten a new job in London,” She said.

He blinked at the shock of her announcement. And then he settled for, “congrats.” From the side of his eye, he watched as Nelly pulled Isi and they were walking off. “When do you leave?”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “This week. You didn’t even ask what company it is.”

“I’m sorry. What company?”

She shook her head. “It’s for clothing apparel. Mark and Penny.”

Adeniran knew the luxury clothing brand. “That’s great, Cami.” He put his arms around her, pulling her into a side hug. “You’ve been wanting them to sign you up for ages.”

“Yeah. I’m stumped about it.” She raised her head to gaze at him. “You’re really happy I’m leaving?”

“I’m not happy, but I know it’s for the best. You’ll miss my coronation ceremony.”

She pouted. “Yeah. It will be streamed online, right? I’ll watch it. I promise.”

He squeezed her fingers. “It’s fine. I’ll miss you, y’know. Like I’ll seriously miss you.”

She searched his eyes, as though hoping to confirm his sincerity. And he knew she would find it there. After a while, her face lifted in a smile. “I’ll miss you too.”

They watched the waves together. There were more people in the water now. Even more, people stood at the edge, waiting for the water to come to them.

“I see the way you look at her. Isi.”

There was no point in denying it. “It’s nothing.”

She gave him a look that said, *seriously?*

“She’s not with your friend, Nelly, is she?”

He shook his head. “Not that I know of. But they are both interested in each other.”

“Oh.”

Adeniran tried to discard the jealous fire aflame in his chest. It was crazy of him to feel this way. This was his friend's girl. A girl his friend was riveted by.

"They aren't engaged. There's still hope."

He didn't hope. He didn't like her—she was the complete opposite of what he liked.

"I need to check on Sade again," he said. He patted the back pockets of his jeans for his phone then remembered he'd asked Camille to keep it safe in her bag at some point. "Phone's not here. I'll be back."

Doing a U-turn, he headed back to the beach hut. He slowed his steps when he heard voices.

"...and thanks for bringing me here. I had a good time," Isi said.

"That was my intention. I'm worried about you. You've been a bit downcast these days."

"You know what happened with Nosa. And then there are a lot of other things on my mind I need to work on."

"I hate that you're always looking so stressed from work. And now your cousin is harassing you at home." A pause. "I know you're always taking care of others, but Isi, you need someone to take care of you."

She gave a soft laugh. "You've been doing that since the first day we met."

"I want to do more."

Adeniran's jaw tightened. He looked around if perhaps the others could see him standing there. He shouldn't be eavesdropping. And yet, he couldn't stop himself.

Isi laughed. And to Adeniran it sounded nervous. "Seriously, Nelly. I've been taking care of myself all the while. You don't have to do that."

"I want to. I want to spoil you—shopping trips, carry your bags for you, feed you. Let me do this for you, Isi. Please."

"Do what?"

He paused.

"Isi, will you be my girl?"

An invisible force slammed against Adeniran's chest and he found it hard to take his next breath. He turned his head a bit and he caught a glimpse of Isi through the small openings of the crooked walls of the beach hut.

"Are you for real?" She placed a palm over her mouth, blinking.

“Do you really think I’m going to waste any time making you my girl? I didn’t like watching other men ogling you today. And I don’t want to pressure you, but I feel the urge to ask you out now. I’ve waited for months to do this.”

“You waited for months?” She repeated, weakly.

He stepped closer to her. “I was trying to be patient.”

She bit her lip. “I understand.” She sighed. “I’m sorry, Nelly. I- I can’t go out with you.”

“Why?”

Nelly’s phone rang out and he ignored it. Seconds later that it stopped, it started ringing again. He yanked the phone out of his pocket and silenced it.

“Nelly, I–” Isi began.

Seconds later his phone rang again. At first, he was going to ignore it, but then he glanced down at his phone’s screen. “I’ll be right back,” he excused himself. He walked out of the hut, putting some distance between them, phone attached to his ear. His voice was low but laced with tension as he tried to speak calmly and professionally to whoever was on the other end of the line.

Isi placed a palm on her forehead, whispering ‘*no, no, no. What have I done? Is he going to…’* She pressed her lips together in a slight grimace. She exhaled deeply and dropped her hands and Adeniran saw the tears gathered in her eyes. Then seconds later, she folded her arms against her chest. Eyes downcast. Gnawing her lip so hard he expected it to bleed. Isi turned her back to him and he couldn’t see her face anymore. The droop of her shoulders and shaking of her head.

His eyes squinted at her. ‘*What is she thinking?’* Adeniran thought to himself.

What am I doing staring at them?

When Nelly returned, she was more composed.

Adeniran turned sharply and stalked off to the screams and shouts of other beachgoers. The beach was now getting a bit more crowded as evening came.

Camille was the first one to sight him and rose to her feet, casually, trying not to draw attention to him. She came to him.

“Hey,” she said, nudging his arm. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“It’s not really anything.”

“What’s wrong?” She repeated.

Nelly walked towards them. Adeniran’s gaze slid to Nelly’s hand on the small of Isi’s back. “Guys, I have to head out. There’s a project I’m working on and one of the guys wants to meet.” His eyes shifted to Isi. “Baby, I’m sorry I can’t drop you off.”

She waved his apology away with a small grin. “It’s okay. I’ll take a bus to work.”

“Let me drop you off,” Adeniran said. He felt the heat of Camille’s gaze on him but Adeniran’s gaze remained on Isi. “Since Nelly is going straight to work.”

“Thanks, man,” Nelly said to him.

“I can take a bus. No worries. Besides, I need to leave. I have to get to Erinma’s place to take a shower before heading to work. I'm moving to her place soon,” she added, as if by reason of explanation.

He looked at his watch. “What time do you resume?”

“Five.”

“You don’t have that much time. I’ll take you to another place where you can shower and change.”

Suddenly, he noticed he was walking alone to his car. He stopped and turned to look back at her. Isi shook her head hard and he was half afraid she would get a headache. She didn’t even say anything. There was no need for her to say anything.

“I know you don’t trust me, Madam Chef, but I promise you I don’t plan to do anything crazy. My sister and I run a luxurious apartment not too far from here. You can do what you want, and we’ll make it in time for your job.”

She blinked, still having that sceptical look, but then she nodded. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she said as she caught up to him and they resumed their walk to his car.

“It’s no bother, Isimeme. At least give me a chance to make a good fourth impression on you.” He didn't know why, but this mattered to him.

She bit down on her bottom lip and Adeniran thought she looked cute. “Okay,” she finally said.

Adeniran was no gentleman, but just this once he would try to be one. He walked over to the passenger’s side and pulled the car door open for her to step in. “After you.” He almost added 'mi lady' but he knew that was pushing it too far.

“Thank you.” She climbed into the car and he slammed it after her.

He was doing this because he wanted to get into her good books. He made it in record time to her workplace with just two minutes left till when she would be seen as late.

"Thank you," she replied. The car smelled like oranges and lemons. Uplifting scents that perfectly matched Isi's cheerful personality. It was also a gentle reminder that she wasn’t his type and he shouldn't think of her as anything other than his friend's woman.

“You’re welcome.”

She opened her mouth, then clamped it shut.

“Is there anything else you want?”

Her gaze settled on him, and then she shook her head. “No. Enjoy the rest of your day.” She got down and slammed the door before he could put in a word or retract what he said. She walked a few steps when someone called her attention and she turned in that direction.

“Chef,” a tall, dark-looking man said as he approached her in lazy steps. Adeniran glanced at the rear-view mirror and stiffened at the smug look on his face as he looked down at Isi. Isi took a step back, and a tiny look of disgust flitted across her face.

Adeniran stayed seated in the car, not immediately driving away. He lowered the back window close to them so he could hear what he had to say.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Isimeme

Isi smiled at her boss. “Good evening, sir.”

His eyes flickered to Adeniran’s car then back at her. “Wow. You must be a girl in high demand. One guy comes to pick you up after work hours, and another drops you off at work. It’s no surprise your skin is glowing these days,” the man said.

Isi's eyes widened. The audacity of the man! “That’s a bit presumptuous, sir.” For once, Isi wished she was the violent type for a change. But what good would that do her?

His lips curled into a coy smile. “Presumptuous is me thinking you were a good girl. Meanwhile,” his eyes roamed down her body and he licked his lips, “you’re one of those who act all nice and sweet but you’re a vixen beneath the sheets.”

She fixed her gaze on him. "I'm not sure what you mean, but I'm certain I'm not what you're thinking."

He moved closer to her, and she shifted her weight away from him. Her body stiffened as he whispered something in her ear. His nasal voice made her want to itch her body all over—like an itchy rash. She knew he couldn’t do anything to her here in the open, but still, his nearness to her was extremely cringey.

“Don’t be selfish with that gorgeous bod of yours. I will reward you well.”

A door slammed and they broke apart. Isi's hands were trembling. She prayed that whomever it was wouldn't insinuate anything. When she turned to see Adeniran striding towards her, shock and relief washed over her.

"Is there a problem here?"

Chef Dodzie's face took up a warm smile, erasing the creepy-shark one that was there a few seconds ago. "No problem. I was just discussing with my employee here about the special dish for tonight." His gaze lingered on her casually but Isi still felt the sick vibe all around him. "We plan on having grilled vegetables with a side of beef." He raised his eyes back to Prince Adeniran, "please, feel free to stop by for dinner. The clock is ticking, Chef Isi." He turned away and strode with confidence to the restaurant.

She felt the rush of bile into her mouth.

"What did he say to you?" Adeniran demanded.

Isi blinked up at him. "I thought you had left."

"I stuck around when I saw the man approach you. What did he say to you, Isi?"

"Nothing important. Thanks again for the ride. Bye." She attempted a small wave but it was just three of her fingers raised in the air before she turned sharply and headed to the entrance of the restaurant after her boss. Her palms were sweaty and her fingers clung to the strap of her backpack.

This wasn't the first time someone at work was claiming a romantic interest in her.

But something about this time felt different.

Her hands shook as she buttoned up her jacket.

Let me know when I can book a session.

His grave-like voice and his insinuation made her want to throw up.

God, please take control as I go about my work today. You saw what happened. Please, don't let it happen again. And if it does, give me a way of escape. Touch his heart and make him realise his wrongs. Help him be better for You and help me shine Your light more brightly in Jesus name, Amen.

Isi inhaled a steady breath after the prayer, feeling a bit calmer. She went out to the kitchen and straight to her station to start preparations for the evening crowd. She kept her gaze down on her worktable.

"I believe we are all set for this evening and you enjoyed your hours of rest."

“Yes, Chef!”

“Today we’ll be working on a different special. I want to make sweet potatoes and bean curry served with saffron rice and fried dumplings. For our dessert, we’ll make corn pie. Chef Isi.”

Isi looked up at him. “Yes, Chef?”

“You’ll be assisting me with the special today. No mistakes. No slip-ups. I won’t be receiving any apologies.”

“Yes, Chef.”

He clapped twice. “Let’s get to work!”

Seconds later Chef Dodzi was beside her and they were peeling the potatoes. Each time his black sleeve grazed her arm it took everything in her not to flinch and move away. He wasn’t making any moves or trying to toast her, so she had to remain professional and calm.

“Have you ever made sweet potato and bean curry before, chef?”

“No, Chef.”

“Then make sure you pay close attention to how I make it. No slips this evening.” Then his voice dipped into a low voice. “Or are you already mooning over our last discussion?”

Isi narrowly missed the sharp edge of the peeler cutting through her black gloves. Her gaze snapped up to him but he had his attention all on his half-peeled potato.

He gave a small chuckle.

Isi looked up to find Ife’s eyes on them. Her gaze darted between them and she raised questioning brows. Isi’s lips quivered as she smiled and shook her head.

“You’d be wise to keep our conversation between us. We wouldn’t want a bunch of senseless rumours going around that will make you lose your job.”

“Yes, Chef.”

They worked together in anything but companionable silence. She watched carefully as he added spices, tomato sauce, carrots, and sweet potatoes into the saucepan while she put the rice to boil. The dinner rush gradually slowed down and Chef Dodzie called her into his office.

“Do you know why I hired you?”

She shook her head.

"You are astute. Ambitious. However, you are lacking in some areas, and your cooking is adequate but not exceptional. I hired you because you have

the potential to be more than just an average chef with a little more experience."

His softly harsh words struck her hard.

“You can choose to come back and get involved with me. Or you could choose to leave and never come back. The choice is yours. You can leave.”

Her decision had already been made hours ago. “I would like to tender my resignation with immediate effect.”

He raised his brows. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not sure what impression you have of me, but I’m not that kind of girl. I’m hoping you know what you’re doing, and maybe you’ve developed a habit of doing this to other women, but it’s completely wrong. Don’t forget that there’s someone bigger than you who’s watching. And I don’t mean those in power in Marigold Royale, but way beyond that.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

NELLY

Colours swirled in front of him as he tried to decide on a colour scheme for a website design for a female boutique. But only one stood out and reminded him of the one woman who was within his reach but still far away.

Orange.

He remembered Isi's laugh and smile. About how everything about her reminded him of beautiful days with the sun setting. But when he thought about her now, all that came to mind was her glum expression when he'd formally asked her out. The negative response was the last thing he expected.

Throughout his meeting with his clients, he had barely kept his full attention on the discussions at hand. Several times during the meeting, he had to ask one or two people to repeat themselves. Fortunately, he wasn't the only one there. He had invited his Director of Design and another team member who worked closely with him to join him via video conference. They'd scheduled an early morning group meeting to come up with something to suit their client's eclectic tastes.

Had he misread her all along? Nelly shook his head. He had never been unable to read a woman’s body language—the smiles at his jokes, the glances she tossed his way when she thought he wasn’t aware of her looking at him, the way she smiled shyly and looked away when she caught

him staring at her, the way she teased him and was keenly interested in every aspect of his life. Those signs did not appear by chance.

Then why did she say no?

The thought followed him until he finished his meeting at a late hour and still drove down to her cousin's residence in Ipaja.

"I'm outside," he said to her once she answered the phone, trying to keep the anxiety out of his voice. There was no way he could sleep at night if things between them remained unresolved. Or, more accurately, her response had left him completely confused.

"At this time?" Her voice was clear. It didn't sound like she was already asleep in bed.

"I wasn't happy with how we ended things."

She exhaled quietly. "All right, I'm coming out."

"Thanks." He dropped the phone in the cup holder when it had ended. Leaning forward, he gripped the steering wheel and rested his head against it. He jerked his head up at the pull of the gate and saw Isi, clad in a midi jeans skirt and a long-sleeved grey top, make her way to him. He unlocked the car as she opened the passenger door and sat beside him. She slammed the door shut.

"How did your meeting go?"

"Distracting."

She cocked her brow. "Distracting?"

"I couldn't stop thinking about you."

A small wave of guilt flashed across her profile. "I'm sorry. Was it really that bad?"

"I'll live."

"Why did you come? You know that I hate it when you drive home late. Plus, you should be at home resting, preparing for your meeting in the morning."

"I didn't think this could be put off. I didn't get an answer back at the beach."

"You should have gone straight home. We could have talked about this later."

An uneasy feeling encircled his throat. "I'm here now. We can have that conversation now."

Isi crossed her arms and said in a small voice, "okay."

"I asked you to be my girlfriend."

“Nelly, I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

“Why?” Whatever she had to say had to be big. Her lips pressed together and he braced himself for it. Did she have a medical condition? Had she received some form of bad news from her mother or was her cousin messing with her again? And then, in a gentler tone, he said, “talk to me, Isi. What's wrong?”

“We can’t be together because we’re not supposed to be together.”

His eyes narrowed. “Says who?”

She sighed. “Do you want me to tell it to you straight?”

“That has always been one of your strongest qualities, so don’t stop now.”

“I don’t think God wants us to be together. He has someone else in mind for both of us.”

He chuckled. “Is this some kind of joke?”

She bit her lip, then shook her head.

“Of all the crazy things I’ve heard in my life—this has to be the craziest. How can you say God doesn’t want us to be together? Since when does God have any say on who we want to be with? For goodness’ sake, there’s no such thing.”

“There is,” she said quietly.

Now he was getting irritated. “I know you love God. I love God, too. But don’t over-spiritualise things, Isi. Did a pastor say this to you? I know you don’t fall for sick gimmicks.”

“No man told me anything.”

“So what’s all this about? Are you saying,” he almost didn’t want to say it aloud because of how ludicrous it sounded—but he said it anyway, “that God *told* you not to be with me?” Yes. It sounded fantastically silly in his ears. “Please, don’t tell me that’s what you’re saying.”

She looked him in the eye. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

He threw his head back and laughed. A loud, cackle, belly laugh. It was almost midnight, and he was seated in his car laughing hard.

“I’m sorry. But this is crazy.”

“It’s not so crazy.”

“Then show me.”

She turned to look at him. “What?”

“Show me where it’s written in the Bible that God will tell a man who he is to marry. I believe you won’t form an opinion yourself. There has to be

proof of this ideology.” Hurt flashed across her face and he hated himself for it. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. But she was hurting him. Her rejection stung. “I’m sorry. But I need you to show me where it says that in the Bible and this isn’t some kind of man-made doctrine.”

She yanked her phone out of her skirt pocket and the dull light from her phone illuminated her face. A while later, she handed the phone to him. “Here.”

Nelly looked at her and he knew somehow he had messed up. Not stopping to consider that realisation, he took her phone and she withdrew her hand fast when his finger grazed hers, not wanting to make any contact or lingering touch.

“It’s the highlighted part.”

“Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.” He frowned.

“Do you believe my coming to Lagos was coincidental?”

He shook his head.

“And do you believe our meeting was by chance?”

He lowered the phone to his lap. “No. I could never believe that. The way we met was more than that.” He felt it deep in his bones and had never been more sure of anything in his life. Also as sure as the fact that Isi was his to have and do life with. Be a family. She was his and no one else's.

“And do you believe God is in control of everything that happens in our lives?”

He blinked. All he could think about was those three questions Jesus kept tossing at Peter, ‘Loveth Me more than this?’.

“If I have surrendered everything that I am, if I followed His lead to come to Lagos and I met you on that same day that God said I should go there—then, I think I can trust God wouldn’t lead me astray.”

He looked back down at the highlighted portion. The words burned into him like fire. Hotter than Isi’s heart-breaking words to him that tore his heart in two.

“Don’t do this to us,” he whispered into the silence.

Tears fell down her cheeks. “I’m not doing this to us.”

“I don’t get it?” Nelly regarded her. “Why would God give you something that is completely against what you want?”

“God’s will is always better than ours because He knows what’s best. All the time. His thoughts aren’t our thoughts and His ways are not what we

would ever imagine for ourselves."

"What if you're wrong?" He looked at her. "I've heard a lot of people who thought they heard God say something but they regret it now. They know better. What if what you think you heard, isn't what it seems?"

"I've heard it. I've been convicted on this too many times that being with you, having this lovesick feeling for you is totally wrong."

How could it be wrong to sincerely love someone?

That left one question. He pushed past the lump lodged in his throat. "Did God reveal who the person is?"

"Yes."

"Do I want to know?"

She studied him briefly. "I don't think you should."



He did everything in a daze after that—drove to work, ate, and slept. He did it all in a daze, like a zombie. Because it had to be a mistake. That was the only way he could justify the ridiculous things that came out of Isi's mouth.

I don't think you should.

Nelly slapped his palm against the table's surface. The sound reverberated within his office walls. He'd called her three times that morning and she refused to take his calls. His head fell back against his headrest. There was no way it could be Adeniran. But somehow he had a feeling she had her eyes set on his friend. He had noticed how they spoke at the beach. The way Adeniran's eyes seemed to look for her. How could she even think Adeniran could be the man for her? Someone she barely knew.

They don't even like each other.

He shut his eyes, imagining the two of them back at the beach. Were they talking about it there and then? Making a fool of him? Making plans to be together? His nostrils flared as heat flowed through his body.

No way was he believing it.

And yet at the same time, the conflict of emotions warred within him. Tearing down everything he knew about the both of them. He opened his

eyes and his gaze flew to the wall clock. It was almost time for their group meeting. Losing concentration yesterday was a one-time thing. He couldn't afford to do that again that morning. He could think all about his personal woes later on.

He stood and grabbed the minutes of their impromptu meeting with Topaz Group. Nelly had always assumed working with Erinma was more difficult because of her demand for excellence. *But at least she knew what she wanted.* The Topaz head, Mrs. Wilson didn't seem to know what she wanted. She wanted perfection, and that itself was threatening to make him drop her as a client. But he needed this to be right.

The team was already waiting for him in the conference room when he stormed in. "I want to hear what you have in mind. Fresh ideas. Go." He pulled back a seat at the head of the table and sat down. For the next forty minutes, he listened to his team bounce ideas. Nelly only half-listened. Usually, at these meetings, he tried to take notes of bits and pieces of ideas and combined them into something workable. He stared down at the pencil in his hand and the blank sheet staring back at him. He was off his game. Again. All of them were unaware of the anguish he was going through. And all because of a woman.

'Why are women so conniving and vindictive?' he thought to himself.

Nelly wished he had an answer to that. This only brought back memories of his father's errors. His weakness.

"Is this the best you could come up with?" He barked out at them, silencing them mid-conversation. All eyes were on him. "I want a clear-cut way forward! Not the baby ideas you're coming up with. I pay you guys enough money to come up with something more eye-catching. I need a lot of those options. If you guys can't come up with something before the end of the day, it's going to be a long night here in the office."

Thomas, his Director of Design, looked at him. Looking every bit unsure if he should voice out whatever was in his head.

Nelly crossed his arms. "Speak, Thomas."

"I think we have seriously been giving our best to this project. If Mrs. Wilson is not happy with anything, I don't think it has anything to do with us."

Nelly couldn't argue with that. They had been dancing in circles for months. Still, that wasn't what he wanted to hear. He wanted solutions, not excuses. He nodded. "When a creative person starts to believe his or her

past work is better than any future ideas they can come up with, they are already on the way to failure. Becoming obsolete and dispensable."

Thomas blinked and looked away. "Sorry, sir. We'll try harder."

"Give me concepts and patterns. Everything we've come up with for this project has been rejected. So we need to wear our thinking caps and brainstorm something that will sweep them off their feet." His gaze strolled over everyone in the room. "They are threatening to meet with our competitors if we don't give them a reason to stay in Arrow Point. Let's give them a solid reason."

The mood of the room seemed downcast. If at first, he saw fire ablaze in their eyes when he walked in, it was dim now. Now all he saw was fear and a glimmer of determination—it wasn't what he wanted. He decided to go easy on them a little. "The truth is, I'm also getting tired of these people. It's almost like they have high demands and don't even know what they want," he said. "But as a team, we don't give up when our clients challenge us for our best. There's a whole lot of best in this room. We just have to dig deeper to bring it out." There were nods around the room. The fire was coming back up. "Let's give this another shot. I believe in you guys. We can do this."

When the meeting was over he walked out of the office. Several minutes of driving and he came to a stop at Proud Belle. He strolled into the building and straight to Titi, the receptionist. He wished he didn't have to go through her. Unfortunately, he'd been trying Erinma's number and she wasn't answering. He braced for whatever Titi would dish his way. "Hi, Titi. Is Erinma in?"

Titi looked up from her computer. Her eyes narrowed at him. She was still raving from his last stunt of taking Isi up to Erinma's office without a go-ahead from her. "She's in, but I don't think you have an appointment." And then she grinned and he could have sworn there was some evil lurking in that cheeky smile of hers.

"I'm aware of that." Nelly gave his best teeth-blaring smile. "But I'm hoping you could let her know I'm here."

"She's in a meeting. She's been in and out of meetings over the last three hours."

"Then call her EA."

"And why would I want to help you?" Her look became smug, further irritating him.

“Because it’s your job.” He didn’t even bat an eyelid. His smile didn’t waver either.

“Is this how you want to play it, Nelly? I’m a gatekeeper here—”

“Please, let’s not do this.” He leaned forward. “I wouldn’t want to discuss your impropriety with your boss.”

Titi’s mouth fell open. Then she snapped it shut, glaring at him. “Fine. I’ll call her EA to give you a pass.”

He was playing the bad guy today. Probably making enemies. And he didn’t care. The elevator doors opened to Erinma’s floor. As usual, Odavwaro was seated at her desk looking cool and tastefully dressed in her usual eye-catching outfits that made a statement that she was obviously aware of her body size and was equally comfortable with it. Today, she looked snug in a long-sleeved turtleneck in a shade of green and a black midi leather skirt. But in exchange for her block heels, she was in open-toed sandals. Her bright pink toenails gave a show for all to see.

“Hey, Nelly,” she said brightly. “How’s everything?”

He gave a single nod. Not in a smiling mood. “Fine. And you?”

She lifted a shoulder in a shrug, still smiling. “I’m peachy. Erinma is currently with someone, but they should be done soon.”

There were no waiting seats outside Erinma’s office. So he pulled out his phone and checked through his notifications if there was anything important.

“Are you okay?”

He glanced up to find her eyes observing his face. “Not exactly.”

“Oh. Is it a problem with work?”

He pocketed his phone. “No. It’s personal. But thanks for asking.” He shut the door to that subject line. He didn’t need to discuss his broken heart with Odavwaro. There was just one person he wanted to help him figure out the craziness of everything.

“Well, I hope you’re able to sort it out soon. Because this isn’t the Nelly I know.”

The corner of his lips tilted a bit. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for asking.”

She pressed her lips together. “Okay.”

The door to Erinma’s office opened and she walked out with an elderly man in an impressive-looking grey suit.

“Thank you for coming by,” Erinma was saying. “I’ll be in touch.” With the man in the elevator, she spun around to face him. “Hi, Nelly. I wasn’t

expecting to see you today. Is everything okay? How’s it going with the Topaz Project?” She asked him.

“It’s stressful as usual.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Actually, I need to speak with you about something urgent.”

Concern took up her face. “Let’s talk in my office.” She strode past him into her spacious office. She took a seat in the sitting area in her office and gestured for him to take a seat as well. “What’s the problem?”

“You look awful.” Erinma stated. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Isi said she can’t be friends with me anymore.”

Erinma blinked. “That’s strange. Why would she say that? Did something happen between you two?”

He shook his head. “Not on my part.”

“Are you sure? Isi wouldn't do that without a reason. Did you guys have a fight?”

“No. I just need you to talk to her. I think she’s got a wrong idea about me.”

She raised her brow. “In what way?”

Nelly didn’t want to go into the specifics. “I think it’s better if you both talk in person. I can’t make sense of it myself.”

Erinma frowned. “Okay. I’ll talk to her.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

“Is that why you rushed over to my office?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Sorry for the impromptu meeting.”

She tilted her head. “It’s okay. I know you sincerely care about Isi. Leave it to me. I’ll get to the bottom of this, okay?”

Minutes later, he was out of her office and driving back to work. There was only one thing left to do—he had to make her change her mind. Had to make her realise what they had was the real deal. The best. He loved her and things couldn’t just end between them. Not now, not ever.

Riding on that optimism, he tried her number again and this time she answered. “Isi, I’ve been calling you non-stop. Can we talk? Please, I–” he sighed, “I just need to understand what’s happening between us.”

“Nelly, please, don’t make this hard for me.”

He scoffed. “Are you being serious?”

“We need some time apart. A little break. I’m not trying to push you away,” a brief pause, “it’s just hard for me right now, and I know it’s the

same for you.”

He panicked. “What about the party we’re to attend together?” He was grasping for what little pieces he could still hold on to. Already, he knew she was slipping away from his reach.

“I don’t think I’m in the mood for any party right now. I’m sorry to have to cancel. Being with you is a bit hard right now.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “How long do you need?”

“I’ll call you when I’m ready. I need to go. Bye.”

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Nelly

'Isn't She Lovely,' by Stevie Wonder, was playing softly in the background, and he wished he could turn it off. He couldn't, however, turn off a live band that was playing. Apart from being a guest, one of the guitarists was one of his clients and the birthday boy. The fact that she wasn't here with him hurt even more than her turning him down. Because she'd not only turned down his proposal of a relationship, but it seemed like she'd also discarded their friendship.

He clenched his teeth. Did the last couple of months not mean anything to her? He took a glass of wine from a passing server and consumed half of it in one go. He'd thought they were making progress and could have sworn that she was interested in him like he was in her.

"Hey, man," Adeniran said.

Nelly stiffened and nodded at him.

"What's up? You look moody."

"How do you know Caleb?"

Adeniran raised a brow. But Nelly ignored it. That wasn't the answer to his question but Nelly didn't care about hurting anyone's feelings right now and Adeniran was the last person he wanted to talk to at this moment. "We met in the UK and ran into each other a few times. He told me his people were planning this and invited me. Any problem?"

"None."

“What’s going on in your head?”

“I see the way you look at her.” Nelly stared straight ahead. “There’s no way you can tell me that you’re not into her.”

“Who are we talking about?” His friend sounded cautious.

“Isimeme.”

Adeniran sighed. “I won’t deny it. But I respect that she’s with you and I won’t get in the way of that.”

“She’s not with me,” Nelly said with a bitter laugh.

“What happened?”

The music from the live band finally eased off, announcing a twenty-minute break. He drank some more of his wine. “She doesn’t feel the same way.” It pained him to say the words out loud. “It hurts like hell.”

“That’s not possible. I see the way she looks at you.”

Nelly turned to face his friend. “Well, in this case, those looks were deceiving.”

“I don’t think you’re right.”

Nelly locked his gaze on him. “Are you claiming to know her more than me?”

Adeniran narrowed his eyes. “I never implied that. All I’m saying is you’re most likely jumping to conclusions. Look, I don’t know what’s going on with you but since you guys are close it should be easy to sort out whatever differences you have.”

Nelly looked away from him and sighed. Letting some of his anger simmer down. “We spoke.” He forced himself to retell her exact words to him. “And so she wants nothing to do with me.”

“Hello, boys,” Tito said to them. Her pixie hairstyle made her look younger. Nelly took his time looking at her. Her body glistened with whatever oil she had rubbed on it. Her lips were coated in a deep shade of red and her low-cut dress was even more alluring. He’d always thought Tito was too much for him to handle. That her *wahala* and drama were too much, but this evening he knew he wasn’t thinking straight to even be considering hooking up with her.

“Tito, how many have you had to drink?”

She gave a mock frown. “Why? Do you think I’ll be too drunk to make out with you?” She winked.

And just like that Nelly’s earlier illicit thoughts evaporated. What was he thinking? He knew who he was in this mix. He wasn’t a rich boy and he

wasn’t loaded with high connections to bring much to the table. There was no way Tito Jacobs would look his way. She didn’t flirt with him the way she did with world cup winner Adeniran Aremeyin who was now on his way to becoming the next ruling monarch of Ondo Kingdom.

Adeniran took the glass from her grasp and she pouted.

“No more drinks for you.”

She batted her eyelashes. “Adeniran stop giving me zaddy vibes, you know I like it.”

Adeniran hailed a server and dropped Tito's half-empty glass on the tray just as she reached for another. This time Nelly grabbed her wrist and tugged her to his side, away from the tall glass of champagne.

“Wow,” she giggled. “Nelly, when did you decide to grow muscles?”

Nelly released his hold on her.

“What happened to your Real Estate boyfriend?”

“He’s not in town at the moment. And you? Where’s that pretty, simple girl you always had hanging around you?”

“We’re no longer a thing.”

Nelly caught Adeniran looking thoughtful when Caleb walked up to them.

“Awww, poor baby.” She pulled his cheeks and he jerked away from her. She rolled her eyes. “You guys know I’m not drunk right? Stop acting like my big brothers.”

“And stop acting like a spoiled brat. If you stopped to think about the consequences of your actions once in a while we won’t have to be babying you. Do you think either of us wants to keep looking after you? Grow up, Tito!”

Tito glared at him. “Just because we’ve been friends for long doesn’t mean you get to talk to me as you like. If being my friend is such a problem to you then why don’t you just stop.”

Adeniran took her hand, tossing a warning look at Nelly. “We are friends. At the same time, we’re concerned about you. Tito… “ he lowered his voice, “don’t you want to see a therapist or something? There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Oh, so you think I’m mad as well?” She yanked her arm away from him. “I’m going to walk away and act like this silly conversation didn’t happen.” She took a deep breath and smiled. “See you boys later.” She turned on her heels and sauntered off across the room.

Nelly shook his head. "I wouldn't have brought her here if I had known I'd have to babysit."

“Don’t worry; I’ll keep an eye on her.” Adeniran's gaze shifted to him. “You need to relax.”

The vein above his left eye twitched. He stared at Adeniran for a beat before nodding. He hadn’t been so irritated in a long time.

“Glad you guys could make it.” Caleb took long strides to them, bottled water in hand.

“Is she with you?” Caleb said, his eyes on Tito.

“Yeah,” Nelly replied. “She’s my date. Nothing is going on though.”

“Which one of you wants something to happen?”

Nelly’s face blanched. “None of us. What makes you ask that?”

Caleb shrugged. “Because I don’t believe a man and a woman can be friends and not one of them catches any feeling for the other.”

Adeniran scoffed. “You’re still hung up on Bisola.”

“At least I made my move and I have no regrets, unlike some people.”

“What are you implying?”

Caleb faced him. “Nothing.” His gaze flickered to Tito again. “She’s a wild one isn’t she?”

Nelly scoffed.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Caleb lifted his bottled water to his mouth and downed the whole bottle. “What’s her story?”

“Don’t bother. She’s a real piece of work.”

Adeniran looked at Nelly, a tightness in his expression. “Maybe you should go for a walk. Shake off this crazy mood of yours.”

It sounded like a good idea to him. “I’ll see you guys later.”

As Nelly walked away he heard Caleb asking about Camille.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

ISIMEME

"Is that the last of it?" Erinma blew out a breath, hands on her hips.

"Yeah. That's the last of it."

"Good," she huffed out. "Because I don't think I could have carried any more boxes. I would have told you to leave the rest in the living room till Andrew comes." Erinma winked. “He’s good at heavy lifting.”

Isi chuckled. “No doubt about that.”

“You came to Lagos with all of this?” Erinma gestured at what was Isi’s entire life’s items sitting on Erinma’s hardwood floors.

Isi gazed down at the large boxes of books and a few things her mother had sent over in a large Ghana-must-go bag. Those were in addition to the two bags containing Isi's clothes and personal belongings. Nosa’s elder sister was clearing their father’s house to make it ready to rent. Not wanting to inconvenience her mother, Isi had asked her to send a few of her things with her so she could receive them in Lagos. Nosa had thrown a fit when her sister had sent it over, claiming Isi wanted to ‘eat-up’ all the space with her things. “No. My mum sent some of the things over.”

“Oh, okay. How is she?”

“She’s good. We spoke yesterday. She sends her love and thanks.”

Erinma wrinkled her nose. “Are we still doing this?” She waved the appreciation away. “I already told you it’s not a problem. Just make sure

you pay your rent as much as possible." She rubbed her tummy. "Feed me silly with all those your culinary dishes."

Isi nodded and threw a salute. "I'll try my best."

Her friend's face turned serious. "Seriously, though, no pressure. I don't want you to think I'm trying to exploit you by asking you to do that. Only cook when you're hungry and you can make me some if it's not a bother."

Isi nodded again. "Understood." Erinma didn't know all that Isi had gone through at Nosa's place and her cousin's harsh words. When Isi had informed her mother she was moving out of Nosa's apartment to Erinma's her mother had sounded relieved.

"Thank God," her mother said. "I've been praying you would find another place. I know how caustic Nosa's tongue can be."

"It's fine. She helped me when I first arrived. I feel like I owe her a little. I still plan on sending money once in a while for the children's upkeep. She and her husband aren't really doing well."

Her mother clucked her tongue. "Isimeme…you're too kind-hearted. Just like your father."

Isi smiled a little at that tall comparison. Her father would approve of her decision, even if he would also tell her not to sell herself short for anybody. It was something she had come so close to doing each time she thought about Nelly.

"Hey, Isi," Erinma said, pulling Isi out of her reverie.

"Yeah?"

Erinma twisted her fingers and Isi frowned. "Are you ready to talk about Nelly?"

When Erinma mentioned Nelly stopping by her office, she had known this conversation would come up soon. And it had to be when Isi had taken a day off work to move since the next couple of weeks were going to be busy. "Sure."

"What happened between you two?" Erinma sat on the bed and Isi did the same.

"What did he tell you?"

"That you told him you can't be friends with him anymore. Why did you say that?"

Isi stared down at the raised calluses on her index fingers. How much could she share? "Because Nelly isn't the guy for me."

“Oh.” Erinma sat up, blinked. “How do you know? Did God tell you something?”

Isi nodded.

“Oh,” Erinma said again. “Did you explain it to him?”

“I did. He wasn’t happy about it. And I don’t think he really understood what I was saying.”

“It’s understandable. What guy wants to hear that the woman he’s crazy about is going to be with another man? But don’t feel bad about it. Aside from Lanre cheating on me, when I called things off between us, I already had an idea that we weren’t the same people we once were before the fire. We were different. I changed and on our list of priorities, we had very different things .” Erinma turned and said softly, “if you honestly feel this is what God would want you to do, then do it.”

“Thanks. I half-expected you would talk me into giving Nelly a chance. Since he’s a good friend of yours.”

Erinma patted her chest with a look of disdain. “No. I would never do that. You’re both my friends, and I want what’s best for the two of you. In this case, God knows what’s best and I have no say in this.”

Erinma checked the time on her watch. "I have to rush off to the flower shop. And we’re having live music at the restaurant today. Will you be okay by yourself or do you want to come? It will be fun."

"No, thanks. I need to get some rest." Isi wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to settle in. She wasn't ready to tell Erinma she'd quit her job. Not yet.

“Okay. I’ll bring back something from the restaurant so you don’t have to cook. If you intend on cooking, just call me.”

“That’s fine.”

Erinma looked around Isi's bedroom. “Alright. I’ll leave you to it.”

"I'm grateful for this opportunity. Really."

Erinma rolled her eyes. "Are we still doing this?"

"I just want you to know that I don't take your friendship for granted." After all, her friend was a millionaire boss-lady who ran a multi-national beauty company and recently opened a restaurant and flower shop. Isi didn’t want her to think she was taking advantage of their childhood friendship—Erinma had already been beaten by one of such friendships.

“Trust me, you’re not doing that. In fact, you’re doing me a favour. I just can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner. It’s really good to have you here.”

Isi smiled. Nodded.

Once Erinma left the room, and minutes later left the house, Isi took out her clothes from her hand luggage and laid them on the bed. Next, she pulled open the white wardrobe in the centre of the room. There were at least twenty black hangers on the railing, and she took them out. She spent the next hour organising her clothes and deciding what to wear for the new week—while she went job hunting, and putting away the rest of her things. The room was stunning. She'd never had a more beautiful space to herself.

She bit her lip. Her cousin was still annoyed that she'd left. More jealous than annoyed. Nosa's words worked their way to her memory.

We're now too poor for you, right?

Just be using your powers to get men and sneak your way into rich people's pockets.

Isi didn't want to rehash those thoughts. Now that she was out of her cousin's hair, she had more things on her mind.

Surely, God had not made a mistake. For a long time, she'd believed He probably meant something else and Isi had mistaken His words to mean Prince Adeniran was the man for her. Her future husband. But it was true. She'd felt more at ease since acknowledging His will for her. The discomfort in her spirit had subsided considerably.

Every woman should be overjoyed at the prospect of spending the rest of her life with such a man who was wealthy, good-looking, handsome, and supposedly a fellow brother in Christ, despite his persona implying otherwise.

But Isi knew she wasn't every woman.

Plus there was little she knew of him. She laughed quietly at herself. How was she supposed to get to know someone who probably had no idea about who she was to him? Or was it the fact that he already didn't like her?

That's not entirely true…

He had made an effort to talk to her, and he even dropped her off at work. *After witnessing her boss making a pass at her.* Isi shook her head—what would he think of her now? And why did she care what he thought?

Exhaling a breath, she pulled out her phone from her bag and couldn't help herself. She was more of a Facebook girl but a year ago she'd opened an Instagram account just to have it there. Just in case she needed to post some photos of her food. But with a poor phone camera, she hadn't thought

it would do justice to the way the end product turned out. To date, she had zero posts, five followers and two people she was following.

She tapped on *following* and tapped Erinma's name. She smiled at Erinma's new DP. A picture of her in a cute red dress, putting her scars on full display. Isi loved it and was proud of her friend. She scrolled down to her feed and her heart stuttered at the sight of the man of her thoughts: Prince Adeniran Aremeyin. Erinma had tagged him on her post at the restaurant and Isi followed that tag which led to his page with the blue checkmark on it.

He had over forty million followers.

Isimeme pushed the pillow against the headrest and leaned her back against it. For the next few minutes, she observed his photos. She could tell some of them weren't posted by him. He didn't look like the kind of guy to sit around posting selfies of himself. He, however, seemed like the kind of guy that enjoyed seeing a person wilt in his presence. Isi snapped her eyes shut and clutched her phone to her chest. *You're judging again, Isi. You need to stop it. Everyone has a backstory for their behaviour.* Taking a deep, soothing breath, she opened her eyes and resumed perusing his Instagram page. There were a ton of them in his football jersey and a few taken from black-tie events. There was one of him with sweat trickling down his forehead and a small smile on his face. And another of him in a black suit with Camille on his arm. Both smiling.

What does he need me or when he has her? I have nothing to bring to the table.

I have prepared you for a time like this, Isi. You have followed Me through the years. Don't stop now, for I am Faithful in what I have called you to do. And you can depend on Me to complete the work I have started with you. Trust Me.

Perfectly understood, God.

Again, she focused on his photo. Taking her eyes away from all the distractions—because, yes, Camille was a distraction. And Isi swiftly killed the temptation to scurry over to Camille's page to learn more about her.

Truth be told, Adeniran was more handsome when he smiled. The faint signs of laugh lines were there.

So what happened to him?

She googled Prince Adeniran Aremeyin and the Ondo Royal Family. Then she tapped on the article that appealed to her. Her eyes bulged.

They had shares in Cacao Love Bars?
Isi clicked on the link that landed her on the page of an old article.

THE NEWS TIME

A Brief History of
Cacao Love Bars,
the Obaship,
and the Start of The Aremeyin Wealth

Written by Adewuyi Olalolu

Once upon a time, Nigeria relied on the many minerals and agriculture it had to build itself up through foreign exchange earnings. However, the discovery of petroleum in 1956 altered the country's trajectory. Exporting cash crops gradually fell out of favour, and everyone in power became greedy for a piece of that oil money. Some saw crude oil as a blessing, while others saw it as a curse for Nigeria.

Most kings in history and to this day have many wives, procreate, and may or may not have a significant economic impact. True, obas were not expected to be business-minded; however, this was not the case with a certain Osemawe's business acumen; instead of the Oba focusing solely on the kingdom, his family, and ruling, he also concerned himself with farming.

Cocoa production was a huge contributor to Nigeria’s wealth, contributing 41% of Cocoa in the whole of West Africa and was among the most important export crops in the country during the 1950s and 1960s—making it the most foreign exchange earner. But as all eyes focused on oil exploration, gradually cocoa production experienced a decline. A lot of farmers complained of this downward turn of events over the years.

And Oba Adegoke Charles Aremeyin (II) happened to be one of them.

Oba Aremeyin began ruling in 1942, given his role as the Osemawe of Ondo Kingdom he led the people into a godly way of life; this is irrespective of what the rural deities expected of an Oba. As a husband of five and father to fourteen children. A believer in education, having been educated himself, he sent his eldest daughter to England to study.

He was also among the Kings to formally meet with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth (II) on her visit to Nigeria during the colonial era of Britain ruling over Nigeria. Oba Aremeyin didn't leap into the idea of wealth that could be made from the sale of petroleum to foreign bodies. Instead, he focused on his cocoa farm there in Ondo and made sure it not only catered to his immediate family but also that of his community: employing many and also exporting to other countries.

He stood firm on his farm despite the rocky years. Gradually, the farm became a wasteland after his death—cocoa production was low and the quality even lower. His grandson, Ezra Aremeyin couldn't stand to see his family's land sold to developers. While the farm was on the verge of being sold by his father, partnered with a foreign company in Switzerland with the hopes of supplying Cocoa to them. Although the business progressed, due to certain inconsistencies the partnership was dissolved after eighteen months. Ezra Aremeyin didn't lose faith, instead, he resulted in starting his Chocolate Factory here in Nigeria. Still, that didn't work. As a final resort, 28-year-old Ezra Aremeyin bought stocks in a start-up Chocolate Company in London. Cacao Love Bars was

launched in London in 1975 and to date has raked in over 100 billion pounds in annual revenue. At the same time, he was chosen as Osemawe of the Ondo Kingdom of the ruling family: Atewogbase (III). With his accession to the throne came multiple difficulties, including the death of his wife, Amelia Aremeyin, and the resulting chaos in the palace, followed by his dethronement.

Dethronement? That seemed huge. Isi wondered what happened to his mother.

With a sigh, she tossed her phone on her bed and hugged her pillow close.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ADENIRAN

"Good to see the place is busy." Adeniran observed there were a few empty tables in the restaurant beneath the leather beret he wore, his face partially hidden from others.

"Yes. God has been good to us," Erinma replied.

"How's the flower shop doing?"

Her eyes sparkled at the mention of the flower shop. Adeniran knew she paid special attention to the shop.

Taking a closer look at her he noticed she seemed tired. He couldn't really tell if there were bags under her eyes, but her eyes and body posture hinted at fatigue. "How have you been balancing your role at PB and managing the restaurant?" He couldn't imagine it being easy. Running a restaurant was not a small feat. And in addition to that a flower shop.

"It's been hectic but then I'm trying my best. You remember Odavwaro?" He nodded. "She's my EA and is doing more of the work and I oversee the most important things. The arrangement is fine for now but I don't want it to come to a point where they assume I'm no longer invested in the company. The woes of being a serial entrepreneur." She shook her head.

"I'm sure things will pan out properly with time."

"I'm trusting God." She tilted her head. "And I hear congratulations are in order. You're going to be the next Osemawe. That means you're finally moving back to the country."

“I am.” Even though not everyone was happy about it. His father was still not speaking to him.

“Wow.” She wriggled her eyebrows. “How does it feel, being the next Osemawe?”

“Surreal.” He was still trying to wrap his head around it and settle into the reality that awaited him.

“It means a lot of things are about to change for you. I’ll be praying for you. Trusting God that this new phase you’re entering would bring glory to God and cause His light to shine.”

“Thank you, Erinma. I’ll appreciate that.”

She clapped her hands together. “Now that you’re here, what would you like to eat?”

“Er, nothing, for the time being, thank you.”

“Okay. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Your friend, Isi, does she enjoy working at Urban Mojo?”

Erinma’s forehead creased. “I guess so. Why?”

When deciding who to share his observations with, Adeniran chose Erinma. He told himself that he didn't know how things were between Nelly and Isi after their last conversation. Adeniran felt compelled to make amends for his snide remarks over the last few months. It was the least he could do. He felt compelled to find out what was going on with her and the arrogant chef guy, as well as how long the man had been harassing her. Just thinking about his sleazy hands touching her set him on edge.

He convinced himself that it had nothing to do with his developing feelings for her, or what he thought he heard at the beach.

“I saw a little of what transpired between her and her boss after I dropped her off,” he said, after recapping that a group of them had gone to the beach. “Isi didn’t feel comfortable with him and she looked afraid.”

“Wait…You think he’s harassing her at work?”

He remembered the man leaning into Isi and her body language indicating that she didn't want any of his attention. "I'm sure of it." Her hands were trembling when Adeniran approached her, and whatever he said scared her.

"Then why has Isi remained silent all this time?" At the very least, she could have informed Nelly." She shook her head, a worried expression on her face. "He'd go insane if he heard this."

“Maybe it was subtle for a while, and it wasn’t anything too serious to be worried about.” But Adeniran had a gut feeling that Saturday was different. As if it were a springboard for more of those unwanted advancements and she was at risk of further harassment, and he would pounce on her if she was left alone.

Adeniran clenched his teeth. His mind, now playing tricks on him.

It also didn’t help that Sade had filled him with gory stories about some of the ladies at the women's shelter.

“I’ll look into it. Thanks for letting me know. Maybe that’s why she chose to stay home today.”

“She’s moved in with you?”

Erinma looked at him with interest. “Yeah. Today, actually.”

He gave a nod. “She brought it up at the beach. The troop had a hangout. I know you are aware”

“Hmmm. Okay.” Her curiosity didn’t seem to wane and Adeniran knew it was only going to get worse.

“Can I check out the flower shop? If it’s possible, I'd like to place an order right now.”

“Of course.” She rose to her feet. “If you’d follow me.”

Adeniran spotted the white roses when he walked through the entrance of the flower shop and an idea popped into his head. He knew the next couple of days were going to be busy for him and doing this now, even if he was probably being way too presumptuous, was the best thing he could do at the moment.

“Can those be delivered to a certain address?”

Erinma beamed at him and collected a note card and pen from a lady behind the counter. “Sure.” She handed him a pen and paper. “Just write down the address and what you want to be written on the card.”



Isi walked in and he let his gaze follow her every step. He drank in her appearance—her head adorned with a colourful headwrap tied at the front, a

fitted white cotton shirt tucked into a yellow wavy midi skirt. A gold belt was cinched around her middle, revealing her tiny waist.

Adeniran didn’t fail to notice a good-looking man watching her while she spoke to the manager, to which Isi was oblivious. He rose to his feet. There was no way another guy was raining on his parade. As he made his way towards her he felt all kinds of nervous with his heart rate racing.

“You came.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. He always seemed to do more with them when she was around him but knowing he couldn't, they always ended up in the same place.

She raised a brow.

“Erinma mentioned you were resting at home. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for the other day. I don’t think I’ve gotten a chance to say thank you again for dropping me off.”

“You’ve thanked me once already. That should suffice.”

She pursed her lips and looked away.

“Would you like to join me?”

She tossed a wary glance his way. “Why would you want to have dinner with someone you don’t like?”

“Who said I don’t like you?”

She lifted an eyebrow.

“As I told you before, I’m trying to make amends. Please, join me.”

She cast another doubtful look at him and then nudged her chin for him to lead and she followed him to his corner table.

“You look lovely,” he spoke softly when they had settled down at his table. It pained him that the doubtful expression hadn’t left her face.

“Thank you.”

“Has that man been bothering you for long?” He didn’t want to beat around the bush. There were questions he needed answers to and this was the top on his list.

Her brows drew together. “What man?”

“Your boss.”

She blinked. “Oh. No, he hasn’t. That was the first time he would vocally make his interest known.”

“Did he bother you again after I left?” He sounded angry. For what exactly, she was keen on knowing.

“He wanted to continue the conversation we were having at the parking lot.”

“And what exactly did he say to you?”

Why is he so interested all of a sudden? “That he wants to sleep with me.”

A muscle twitched in Adeniran’s jaw. “Please tell me you reported him.”

“I didn’t. But I’m more interested in knowing why you suddenly care what happens to me.”

“Of course, I care. Anybody would care about this. We’re not talking about something as little as crossing the road—although that is equally important—but being sexually harassed.” His voice was low as he said it yet she still flinched visibly at the words. “I’m not an egomaniac and I certainly don’t approve of a man trying to take advantage of a woman because he feels somewhere in his silly sense of superiority that it’s his right to do. It’s trash. I just want you to get the respect you deserve. And it has nothing to do with you being a woman, but a human being.”

Whatever she’d thought he would say it was obvious she hadn’t expected that. Along with the level of concern, he wondered about the impact of how his words made her feel. She folded her arm over her chest like she was putting up a protective shield against him. “I’m fine. Can we please stop talking about it?”

He observed her and he was sensitive enough to tell her discomfort over the whole thing. And then he sighed. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. Workplace sexual harassment is a crime and you should report him if he keeps coming on to you like that.”

Isi cocked a brow at him and smiled. An attempt to make the mood lighter. “Are you worried for me now? I can handle myself, Oba Adeniran.”

He scowled at her. *What is it with her eyebrows this evening?*

“What about Camille?”

“She’s fine. She left for London. For a job.”

Isi nodded and averted her gaze from him. And it seemed like she was looking for a way to escape from him.

“But she's not coming back,” he thought to add.

Her eyes flew back to him. “Why? You two broke up?”

“Fortunately, yes.”

“Fortunately?”

How could he explain to her that he had made a mistake in asking Camille to be his girlfriend in the first place? “I made a mistake asking her out. We both realise we are not what we really need for each other.” He

leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. Everything in him wanted to cross that invisible wall she'd put up and hold her hand. But he didn't think she was a PDA kind of girl. And even if she was, she would most likely give him an earful when things were barely casual between them. He steepled his fingers together. "I jumped into a relationship with her thinking since she'd always been by my side, she was meant to be there forever."

"And what made you change your mind?" She settled back in her seat, crossing her arms. He could tell he had her undivided attention.

"You."

Her eyes bulged. "Me?"

"You."

Isi turned her gaze downwards, biting hard on her lower lip. His gaze followed her every move and it stayed fixed on her glossy lips for a moment and he felt heady. Warmth bloomed in his chest, spreading down to his toes before he shifted his eyes back to capture her face in full. The smoothness of her skin, her beautifully sculpted high cheekbones, the crookedness of her thin eyebrows and long eyelashes, the silver pineapples that dangled from her earlobes. He stared at her, transfixed. When she still held her lower lip captive after some minutes he couldn't keep silent.

"If you bite too hard you might draw blood."

She fluttered an eyelid, then released her firm grip on her lip. "Why? Why am I responsible for that?"

"Because no matter how hard I try to fight it, I can't help but be drawn to you." He heard her sharp intake of breath but pressed on. "I know I've been hotheaded in the couple of months that we've known each other, and I will be lying if I said I didn't mean any of the words that I said to you."

"You said so many things. Which are you referring to?"

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

She shrugged. "I'm not even sure what exactly we're talking about or where this conversation is heading to."

A young waiter appeared at their table and asked if they were ready to order. Adeniran glanced at Isi. "Would you like to order something?"

She smiled up at the young man. "Yes, please."

The waiter handed them both the menu.

Adeniran was a bit thankful for the temporary distraction, just so he could pull his thoughts together. He perused the menu barely taking in the expanse of dishes laid out before him. All he could think of was how he was

going to keep the conversation going with the many things he had to say and the apologies he had to make.

God, please help me. I know I've made mistakes in the past. Now I ask You to order my steps and direct my speech. Let the words that come out of my mouth be wholesome and peaceful and sincere.

"What's the chef's special?" He heard Isi ask the waiter.

The young man rambled a whole list of dishes he'd memorised right from starters straight down to the main and the desert. Somewhere in between Adeniran had heard something about cheese, orange lamb chops, baked cabbage and potatoes and strawberry sorbet.

"Sounds delicious. I'll have that please."

"Excellent choice, ma'am." The waiter retrieved the menu from Isi and turned his attention to Adeniran.

"I'll have the same."

The waiter bowed and finally left them alone.

"What exactly do you want from me, Adeniran?" She shot the question straight at him, jumping right back to where they'd left off.

He stared straight into her eyes and said what he felt he had to say. "Marry me, Isi."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ISIMEME

“Marry me, Isi.”

The three small words came out of his mouth, but they were anything but small. They reverberated in her head, compounding, and her heart thudded against her chest like an uncontrollable yo-yo. He hadn't asked 'will you be my girlfriend?' Or 'would you date me?' or 'do you like me enough to consider being with me?'. She blinked rapidly. He wanted her to marry him just like that? “D-did you just propose to me?”

“Yes,” he said calmly. Not breaking eye contact. It was at this time she wished his face would break into a goofy smile. But then that wasn’t his style.

“Why?” That seemed to be the only thing she could push out of her mouth.

“Because you are a good woman. You are selfless." He paused, as though his next words would be packed with more meaning, more reasons why she should say 'I do to a man she barely even knew. "And you will make a great queen.”

Unfortunately, his latter explanation didn't quell her nerves. He didn't love her. His concern was for his position.

This is ridiculous! "We barely know each other, Adeniran." She was stalling. Even if God had already given her a go-ahead several months before, her heart didn’t feel quite ready to surrender totally to him.

"And we will have the rest of our lives to do that," he said.

God, is this how it should be?

You've guarded your heart with all vigilance all these years, now I encourage you to release it. This is who I have for you, my daughter.

But do I have to make it so easy for him? Fall into his arms like I'm a lovestruck girl?

Do unto others as you would want them to do to you.

Isi frowned slightly at that and retorted, "You don't even like me."

"On the contrary, I do. But I know there's a lot about me you dislike. Maybe hate."

She sighed and shook her head. She couldn't deal with another round of emotional turmoil right now. "Hate is such a strong word, Adeniran. I don't hate you. I only seem to have different perspectives on some things than you do. We don't even agree on some issues, so how could anything work between us?"

His lips curved in a boyish grin, and Isi felt her heart pound wildly against her chest. "Have you ever heard the expression 'opposites attract?'"

She squirmed in her seat, clearing her throat. "Of course I have. I'm surprised you know anything about it."

Adeniran laughed quietly. "Come on, I'm not that bad, Isi."

She arched her brow.

"Seriously. I may not know much but I'm willing to try and do my research." They hadn't discussed marriage again, and she assumed he was giving her more time to think about his proposal.

Their server arrived with their meals, which smelled divine. They both thanked the server and gave their plates concentrated looks. Isi reached into her purse for her phone. She couldn't help but photograph the visual presentation of her meal with the lovely edible pansies. She glanced at Adeniran, who was staring at her strangely.

"What?" She tucked her phone back in her purse.

"Nothing. It's nice to see you find joy in the tiniest of things."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. "I guess I learnt to be content with the little things around me."

"So you're a romantic. And it's not a question. I already figured it out when you compared me with the beast in *Beauty and the Beast.*"

She laughed a little and stunned him with another of her smiles. Was she now flirting with him? How the tides had changed! "I think I am. I guess

you could say that." And then she nodded with more certainty. "Yes. Yes, I am. But then you weren't asking."

They ate their meal without saying anything. There was light music playing in the background, and now and then, loud laughter could be heard from the bar. The orange lamb chops were tender and delicious. The meat easily ripped away from the bone. Jordan's cooking had one beautiful aspect she admired: he always packed in a lot of flavours, sometimes colours, and it all came together beautifully. She lifted her head from her plate once or twice to meet Adeniran's intense gaze. Other times, she stole a glance at him, relieved to see that he was also tucking into his meal, and she forced herself not to laugh when she heard the occasional grunt of appreciation for good food.

"I apologise for referring you to that cartoon character."

"There's no need for an apology; I suppose you were right to think that way; I, on the other hand, should apologise to you for a lot of things."

“All is forgiven. There are worse things that have happened to me.”

She saw the curiosity in his eyes but then he cleared his throat. On what I said earlier…” His voice trailed off.

Her heart squeezed tight in her chest. She waited for him to elaborate.

“About getting married.”

"What I'll do is, I'll think about it.”

He nodded like that was fair.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He nodded again. “Sure.”

“What happened to your mother?" She saw his whole body go rigid at the question. Obviously, this was unbidden territory for him.

His lips pressed into a thin line. "What has that got to do with this?"

"Nelly told me a bit of what happened..." she trailed off when his face took on a pained expression. "It was a long time ago."

“If it’s okay, I would rather not have that discussion right now.”

That was fair. “Okay.”

“Can I ask you for something?”

She shifted in her seat. “If it’s something I can do. Yes.”

“Will you go out with me? On a date?” He asked. And for the first time, she saw how nervous he was.

She smiled. “Okay.”

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Isimeme

When Erinma found out that she was going on a date with Adeniran she squealed and offered for her to go through her wardrobe to pick whatever she wanted. “It’s going to be so much fun!”

“But I already have clothes!” Isi laughed as Erinma literally dragged her to her room.

“I know you have clothes. There’s nothing wrong with having a lot of options to choose from. Do you have any preferences?” Erinma looked her over. “I know you love your skirts but what about trying on a dress for a change?”

“Er—I guess it depends on the dress.”

Her friend went to work and started taking clothes, shoes and purses out. Just the same way she was pulling out clothes on the day Isi had been over at her house and she was getting ready for her date with Andrew. But now it was Isi’s turn to try on outfits and stand in front of the mirror. After several minutes and nearly ten outfit changes (complete with matching accessories, bags and shoes), Erinma was finished and told her to try them all.

Isi blanched. “*All* of them?”

“Yes.”

For the next couple of minutes, Isi tried on seven of the outfits and had her heart set on the seventh outfit. And it wasn’t any of the beautiful dresses Erinma had laid out. It was a beautiful dark grey-coloured tulle skirt which

she paired with a light grey top tucked into the skirt with a clutch bag and two-toned cream pumps. A gold necklace of a simple design with a heart pendant. As much as Erinma's style was classy and her wardrobe screamed of lovely colours and dresses any girl would be proud to have, Isi was content with her choice. Everything about the entire outfit was simple and beautiful. Just the way she liked it.

Isi took a deep breath and nodded. "This is it."

"*Ohhh*, I love it!" Erinma gushed.

Would Adeniran like her in this? Did he prefer his women to be dressed in body-hugging clothes, ripped jeans, and the likes? Isi recalled Camille's outfits as modern, simple yet chic, but equally expensive. Isi brushed aside the thought. She didn't see the need in pretending to be someone she wasn't just to make a certain impression. If changes were required, she would make them as they went. For now, she would take comfortability over conformity.

What if things didn't work out and he wasn't interested in her? What if he discovered she was nothing like his ex-girlfriend—classy, rich and exposed to different cultures and wanted more? She shook her head. She was *not* going down that lane. *God, I'm trusting in You. Please keep giving me a sign that this is Your will for me. If any way it isn't then let it scatter. Give me a way out!*

"Wigs?"

Isi startled. "What?"

"Wigs?" Erinma said again, pointing in the direction of the collection.

Isi looked in the direction of the different colours and lengths and textures and she shook her head. "No thanks. I would rather go with styling my natural hair."

"That's fine." Erinma nodded. "Are you nervous?"

"A little."

"You'll be fine. When is he picking you up?" Erinma peered at Isi's hair, her nose scrunched up and her mouth tugged to the side in concentration. Probably thinking of what she could do with it.

"Four." She didn't have to go to work that day since she had to go to work on Sunday.

At their last meeting, they exchanged numbers and agreed there and then on a date. Just before his coronation—something she was keen to talk to him about. If they became a couple and he became the next king in Ondo

town and they eventually got married it would come with a complete upturn of her life. It all felt so crazy. They had spoken in between the waiting period till when they were going out on their date. So far her interactions with him had been…interestingly eye-opening. During the week she had gotten a bouquet of white roses. And the card that accompanied it said, *I'm sorry for the past. Cheers to a fresh start and, hopefully, a little more sunshine in my life.*

It made her smile.

"Seriously though; you and Adeniran?" Her friend shook her head. "I never saw that coming."

"Me too." Isi was now seated at Erinma's dressing table, where she was attempting to style Isi's hair into a sleek look she'd seen on Pinterest.

"But how though? I mean, I started suspecting something was up when he was asking questions about you and your boss. It was good for him to show concern, but I sort of felt like there was more to it. And then there were the roses! At that point, I knew something was up."

"Which is why, when we got home, you grilled me with a million and one questions." Erinma was prepared to make a few phone calls to ensure that if Chef Dodzie harassed her any further, he received a stern warning or was thrown out of the restaurant. In truth, Isi had considered all of this before quitting her job. It would have made things considerably more challenging at work if she had told Erinma. It also made Isi uncomfortable about relying on someone else to fight her battle. Isi, on the other hand, was moved by Erinma's willingness to speak with her ex just to make sure Isi was okay. Because Erinma was sweet like that. "It's better that I left the job."

"I don't know why you didn't speak up sooner, but I'm sure you had your reasons." Erinma held Isi's shoulders gently, and locked eyes with her in the mirror. "When you get another job and anyone else harasses you, do not remain silent."

"Understood." Besides, it wasn't the first time she'd been harassed.

"Have you heard from Nelly? Does he know about you and Adeniran?"

"No, and no." Nelly hadn't contacted her. Which was probably for the best. Although it made her sad. She'd stopped herself so many times when she wanted to text him and see how he was doing although she'd been the one who requested that he give her some space.

“I haven’t seen him in a while. Maybe he’s been very busy.” It was a feeble excuse. They both knew that Nelly would keep in touch despite his hectic schedule. It was a Nelly thing to text with an emoji and share a few laughs in between, no matter how busy his day was.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

After the whole dressing scene was over, Isi padded barefoot to her bedroom and laid her clothes carefully on the bed.

Her feelings for Nelly were beginning to fade, but they remained. Tucked away in her heart as the last vestiges of a crush or...first love? She wasn't certain. What she did know was that this was a step in the right direction. Looking up, she saw that she had two hours to get ready for her first date.



“You’re beautiful,” he said as his gaze swept over her, her stomach fluttering when he smiled at her.

“Thank you. Erinma would be glad to know all her fussing was not in vain.”

“Please remind me to thank her. But then I believe you’ve always been beautiful.”

She felt as if she had been swept into a fairytale. Adeniran had arrived at the exact time he said he would and looked gorgeous and suave in his white shirt, black jeans and white sneakers. He ushered her into his car, made sure she was buckled up and took his seat beside her.

“No driver today?”

“Nope. Today I’ll be the chauffeur. Regrettably, the guards will be tailing us.” He cast her a sidelong glance as he backed out of Erinma’s compound. “After the coronation, things will get busier for me, and I want to enjoy this pleasure. Taking you out, in particular.”

Okay… “Why, in particular, in taking me out?”

He took his gaze away from the road for a moment to smile at her. "Because I find you intriguing and can't seem to take my mind off you."

No words came out of her mouth at that. This side of Adeniran was mind-blowing and extremely interesting to see and get to know. It was as if she

was seeing a completely different person than she had previously perceived him. Then again, she had never really known him in the first place.

“I meant what I said about a fresh start.”

Isi let out a slow, calming breath. Nelly was goofy and easygoing, whereas Adeniran was more mature and confident. Both, however, were very direct about what they expected from her. It was time to change the subject before she became enamoured with his smooth lines. She needed to concentrate. "How do you feel about your life not being as private or as private as you would like?"

“I can’t say I’m looking forward to that part, but I’m certain this is the right path to take.”

“Wow. From a pro footballer to the next monarch of Ondo kingdom. That’s a huge jump. It sounds like an adventure.”

“I don’t see anything thrilling in it.”

“Well…Life with God is always an adventure. He brought me to Lagos and I’ve enjoyed it so far.”

“Left to me, I’m kind of exasperated with Lagos. And I’m hoping I can give you a more special date if you decide to come over to Ondo. For now, I hope you will be pleased with this.”

She tossed a tentative glance at him along with a small smile.

After twenty minutes of driving, they arrived at a part of Lagos she was acquainted with. She’d been there before with him. It was one of his apartment complexes.

She threw a quizzical look at him. “What are we doing here?”

“I rented out one of my apartments. I want to cook for you. And I’m hoping we can catch a movie I strongly believe will pique your interest.” He parked in the same spot in the open area as the last time and Isi believed it was specially reserved for him as the owner. The signpost ‘parked at owner’s risk’ was a stone's throw away from them, where two black jeeps parked and two tall bulky men in black with matching black shades alighted from one of the cars. They were his bodyguards.

But then his words finally hit her. She was going to be alone with him on their first date? He jumped out of the car and walked briskly to her side. Pulling the door open for her. She looked up at him when he held out his hand, a lump enclosed in her throat. Then she looked away. She was hesitant to get out of the car.

God, surely I did not come here for this? She'd been alone with Nelly only one time and that was because she felt comfortable with him—and even that had been a great risk on her part. Being alone with a guy she barely knew was not only asking for trouble, but it was also jumping right in front of the den of lions instead of being thrown in.

Her thoughts had held her hostage that she didn't notice when he withdrew his hand and placed his arm on the door.

"There will be other people in the apartment. We wouldn't be alone." She glanced back at him as she contemplated that piece of information. "If you're not comfortable with this I could always plan something else."

"You have a plan B in mind?"

He slipped his hands in his pockets, looking sheepish. "Not exactly. I'll think of something."

Isi felt like he'd probably put a lot of effort into their date. And His peace hadn't left her. So… "Sure," she smiled and this time placed her hand in his. He placed his hand on the small of her back and she felt a sharp tingle shoot up her spine as he led them into another entrance, unlike the other time.

"I have a special apartment that has access to its kitchen. It's mostly reserved for special clientele with allergies who prefer cooking their food to sharing a kitchen with others. I also made sure to add a few other perks. Somehow I imagined I would want to stay here when I'm in town. Unfortunately, it's one of our most booked suites and I always seem to be at a disadvantage." He knocked the breath out of her with another of his gorgeous smiles. "Well, until now." He pulled open a door for her to walk through and the subtle smell of patchouli hit her nostrils. A small company of staff members greeted them as they took the elevator to the suite.

"Why didn't you just build your own house?"

"I didn't plan on returning to build a family here."

"Until now?"

"Until now," he affirmed.

Finally, he opened a door that led to a stunning room with floor-to-ceiling windows with a lake view as well as a breathtaking view of the city's buildings. She could see why his clients kept booking the suite if this was the only selling point. It was also impressive when she looked around the room. The sophisticated dining area spotlighted fresh yellow and purple roses on the polished dining table, along with a large flat-screen TV and

refined living room furniture. Then the next star of the show was the kitchen with red accents and ultra-sleek appliances, including a yellow stove with stainless steel knobs. Overall, the atmosphere was welcoming. Isi could see why this room was frequently booked. A man and a woman dressed in business casual attire appeared from another room with welcoming smiles, and Adeniran explained that they were members of his retinue.

"Please take a seat, and I'll begin preparing dinner."

"What are you making?"

"Florentine shrimp pasta." He suddenly looked nervous. "I'll admit that I'm not much of a cook, but I managed to pick up a thing or two while in Italy."

"Did you cook a lot over there?" She dropped her purse on a yellow three-seater. "I've heard Italians are great with pizza, and pasta dishes, among others. Did you eat a lot of their food or did you just crave Nigerian cuisines?"

"There's no place like home. Sometimes after a match, I craved some good pounded yam and egusi soup with assorted meat. At first, I hired a Nigerian cook, but things didn't work out so I had to let her go. Then I settled for an elderly lady who could cook both Italian and Spanish food. As for me…I tried cooking. Especially on days that my cook was off. I was in a different country, and even if I didn't go out much I still wanted to try my hands on a few simple dishes: pasta, meatballs, salad, sandwiches, and hot chocolate; that's about where my Italian cooking skills stop."

She laughed. "Did your cook teach you a few things?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

"So…I have to ask. Is this your first date?"

She raised her eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"Nelly mentioned you haven't really been on many dates…and a few other things. All voluntarily from him."

"Riiigghhtttt." She was curious to know what other things Nelly had mentioned. And she found it interesting that they seemed like they had been learning bits of each other from Nelly—voluntarily or not. "Officially? Yes."

Adeniran nodded, the first serious expression on his face since he picked her up. "Means I've got my work cut out for me."

Isi laughed. “It’s not that serious. I trust whatever you do will be fine.” Instead of taking a seat as he said, she followed him to the kitchen and watched as he rolled up his sleeves to reveal his slightly hairy fair arms and got to work, bringing out a red pot and pan from one of the kitchen compartments.

“What made you decide to be a chef?”

“I enjoyed Home Economics in secondary school. My teacher was more obsessed with food than with anything else. It piqued my curiosity as we prepared pastries and cooked a variety of foods. Then I became more interested in cooking at home, and although I had limited freedom, I never gave up on my dreams. I watched cooking videos, researched recipes online, purchased used cookbooks, blended my spices and ideas, and tested them on church members. They eventually started placing orders for me to cook for them, but I couldn’t keep up.”

“Why?” Adeniran inquired, his gloved hands dicing onions and garlic. “If they had paid you well enough, you could have hired another hand.”

“I was doing it in my Uncle’s kitchen and my Aunt didn’t like the intrusion. So I stopped.” It hadn’t been that simple. There had been insults and a few physical assaults, but Isi had suspected her Aunt’s reaction was more than met the eye. No wife wanted to know their husband was interested in another woman and that woman was under your roof and in your care.

“Finally, an opening at a Lebanese restaurant in Benin rekindled my ambitions and everything I hoped to achieve. I started work there as an apprentice chef.”

“Did you enjoy it?” He put the pasta to boil.

“Yes. I was introduced to a whole lot of spices and flavours. There’s much more to the salt, curry, thyme and stock tubes that were in my aunt’s kitchen.” Isi watched as he added olive oil to the hot pan and tossed in a clove of garlic. “How was your stay abroad? Did you enjoy Italy?”

“I did. It’s a very beautiful country. I didn’t explore so much. It’s one of the things I regret not doing.”

When the clove of garlic was brown he placed the shrimp in the pan to sauté.

“If you had the opportunity to do things differently, would you do it?”

He said nothing for several seconds, his brows drawn together. And then, “I would love to, but I’m not sure I would know how to go about it.”

Soon the sweet blend of flavours from his meal filled the air and her tummy growled. Cooking took no more than thirty minutes, he told her about his early days in football during the short time they ate. She noticed that he left out information relating to his family. And she wasn't going to push it, although it made her all the more curious about them and what they were like. Nelly had given her bits and pieces that were missing a lot of blanks.

Isi was aware that he got along with his sister, but that was all. But for the time being, she was more concerned with the way the light in his eyes dimmed after his impassioned talk about the sport he loved.

"You miss playing?"

He nodded. "Every day."

She fought the urge to reach out and take his hand in hers. It was far too early in whatever it was they were doing for that purpose. His touch was already doing strange things to her body.

"I've never been a football fan; never fully understood the game. But I can imagine how it would feel to be forced to give up cooking. I mean, I won't be working in a fancy restaurant, but I'll still have the pleasure of cooking for my husband and children. When I eventually have them." She smiled at him. "I guess what I'm saying is if this is what God wants for you, then I'm sure one way or the other He would give you the grace to find joy in it."

He smiled, but his eyes were not as bright. "I'll try to keep that in mind."

Grinning, she said, "Dinner was delicious. My compliments to the chef."

He bowed. "Thank you."

She started stacking the dishes and cutleries to clear.

"You don't have to do that." He took the plates from her hands and walked back to the kitchen as she stared after him.

"I don't mind doing the dishes."

"I figured, but tonight I want you fully relaxed. I'll handle the dishes when I return."

She shook her head. "It wouldn't take up to twenty minutes." She walked into the kitchen, grabbed a soapy sponge, and began cleaning. "It's only fair that I clean after being fed," she explained over her shoulder.

"You're stubborn," he said quietly close to her ear, and she nearly dropped the plate she was holding. She hadn't heard him coming up behind her.

“So I’ve been told on rare occasions.” He stood with her while she washed and rinsed and he dried the dishes with a dish napkin. They were done sooner since they worked together.

As they moved to the living room, she wondered what was next.

“Now on to a movie,” he said as if he could read her mind.

The evening was becoming increasingly interesting. “What did you have in mind?”

He reached for a remote from the tempered glass-centred table, and the light in the room dimmed as the TV turned on. “It’s a surprise.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “Is it a cartoon?”

“Yes. It’s titled Frostlight. Have you seen it before?”

She gave a small shake of her head, trying to recall anything with that name. Then she remembered something. “No, I haven’t but my cousin’s daughter has a pencil case with the same name.”

“Great. I haven’t either, but it comes highly recommended.”

“From who?”

“My niece and nephew.”

“Ah… alright then.” He'd considered her preferences in his planning, and it touched her that he cared enough to think about her. That was a point in his favour in her eyes. She tried not to think about whether Nelly would have done the same or more if she had gone on a date with him.

“Got any space for popcorn?” He asked. “Or if you want something else that can be arranged.”

She patted her tummy jokingly and said, “a little. Popcorn is fine.”

“I’ll be back.”

She ran her fingers down her skirt. Watching a movie was different. Was he going to put his arm behind the chair and gradually let it fall around her shoulders? Would she have to lean in close? *Ugh!* She cupped her palms over her eyes. Then she realised she had some makeup on and yanked her hand from her face. *What’s the matter with me?* She chuckled at herself. The evening had been great so far, and she was worrying for nothing.

If they sat next to each other, nothing would happen.

As it turned out, her fear was completely useless. Moments later, they were watching the movie in silence, with a bowl of popcorn in between them. She adored everything about it. Each scene's music, as well as the entire soundtrack. In every way, it was spellbinding.

“Thanks for a wonderful evening.”

“Thanks for the pleasure of your company,” he replied.

Isi glanced at him, the movie’s end credits playing in the background. He returned her stare and she felt compelled to cover her face once more. Her eyes traced his sideburns and the way his moustache curved around his mouth, emphasising his full lips. Then her eyes dipped to his mouth and a small shiver of pleasure ran down the length of her spine. She darted her gaze across the room, her eyes bulging.

[1]*Body no bi firewood!*

She chuckled nervously and jumped to her feet. “It’s kind of hard to believe this is happening right now.”

He cocked his head to the side. If he knew what had gone in her head seconds ago, he didn’t reveal it. “What makes this so hard for you to believe? I thought you loved fairy tales.”

She cringed inwardly. Reality was much more difficult. "This isn't a fairytale."

"How is it not?” He replied with a calm she wished she could claim. “If God writes our love story, why can't He write it in a way that's both absurd and out-of-this-world? Why can't this be *our* fairytale story, Isi?"

She blinked rapidly. *Our love story? God, is this the same person?*

“Have you given a thought to what I said about us getting married?”

“I have.”

He frowned. “Are you still in love with Nelly?”

The question almost knocked her back into a chair.

“Don’t worry. You don’t need to answer that.”

“No. I am not in love with Nelly, but it doesn’t mean I don’t have residual feelings for him.”

He regarded silently. “Because he was your first love?” The way he said it. One would think he was jealous of the possibility of it. That he was torn at the mere fact she cared for Nelly and had once thought of him being more than a friend.

"I guess you could say he was."

"Then it's okay to admit your hesitancy to be with me."

Isi looked away from him. Why was he asking her these questions?

“You really love him.”

Her eyes flew back at him. His tone was anything but accusatory, maybe a little sad. Still, she felt the need to defend herself. “Are you getting

pleasure from this? I know you get extremely cranky and emotionally withdrawn from time to time but I didn't peg you as a sadist.”

Adeniran’s brows drew together. "You think I'm emotionally withdrawn?"

She folded her arms across her chest. “I think you’re sometimes insensitive.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. I guess I should take you home.”

He stood up but she stayed put where she stood.

Isi lowered her gaze to the pointy toe-box of her shoes. “I ended things with him because I didn’t feel comfortable entering into a relationship with him. I felt that being friends with him would allow my feelings to fester, so I asked him for some space.”

“I understand if you need more time to think things through. Sort through your feelings. And if you choose to say no, I’ll be okay with that too. Though…” When he paused mid-sentence, she looked up at him. “I will still like to pursue you if you’re willing,” he finished when they locked eyes.

That made her stomach flip. Not batting an eyelash, she stood, fixated on looking at him. But he looked away first. Leaving her the chance to reflect on her own.

Did it seem like she was playing hard to get? *God, do I say yes to him right now?* By the play of events, Isi had done nothing to encourage his attention to her. The way everything had happened to this moment was nothing short of divine. It would be silly for her to wait any longer for no reason at all.

But what about Nelly? How would he feel if she suddenly announced her imminent marriage? He still struggled with the concept of God leading anyone into being together. *God, please help Nelly. Even if we can’t be together, I still consider him a friend. Let the eyes of his heart be flooded with Your light. Let him get to know You better and trace Your works in his life.*

Both of them remained silent for several seconds, each lost in the world of their thoughts.

“I know I haven’t been much of an open book,” he admitted. “I may have skeletons in my closet, but I’m willing to bare it all to you…if you’d have me.”

She bit her lower lip, feeling the pang of guilt as conviction pressed deep into her soul. A gentle prod that, despite her reservations and doubts, this was what she needed to do. Her gaze flickered up to him. "Yes.”

His brows furrowed as he narrowed his eyes. “Yes?”

“Yes, I'll marry you."

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1. meaning a person can feel and isn't immune to certain emotions.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ADENIRAN

ONDO

Hanging out with his niece and nephew was starting to be one of his least favourite things to do. Who knew they ran on a sugar high for a long stretch of hours? And that they loved talking at the same time. With no pause in between. How did his sister keep up?

God, I want to have kids but not all at the same time, he whispered the prayer under his breath.

Although, he did owe them something for giving him the tip to watch Frostlight. He wasn't a big fan of animated movies but seeing Isi's eyes light up and how much she enjoyed herself, made everything worth it.

He thought about Isi and a smile came to his lips and their date. She had said yes. She was going to marry him. He couldn't shake the elation that came with that momentary feeling that he was unofficially engaged. And it could only have happened through God.

It was a pity that he had to hurry back to Ondo, but he'd promised to take her around to his favourite places when she came. And that had been another part of their discussion. She had quit her job and could come to stay in Ondo. He was ready to discuss with her mother and set up a date for them. To an outsider, it might appear that things were moving too quickly between them, but Adeniran wasn't bothered, and he didn't think Isi was either.

Wunmi stormed into the room, interrupting his thoughts. “I can’t believe dad asked you to leave.” She sat on an olive-green loveseat and crossed her legs at the knee.

Adeniran said nothing.

“I don’t know what his problem is. Why does he have to be so stubborn?”

He chuckled.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because you are acting like you don’t know our father.”

“I had hoped he would see you differently after this.”

Adeniran scoffed. “Well, nothing has changed.”

“Obviously.” Wunmi sighed. “Would you prefer to stay here instead of staying in a hotel?”

“I don’t want to give you guys unnecessary attention.”

Sade was finding it hard to keep up with the sudden influx of attention. Her phone line buzzed with calls from all manner of people who wanted to congratulate him and pay him a visit. And since his father had practically kicked him out of his house, he needed somewhere else to stay. It didn’t exactly look decent for the emerging HRM Osemawe of Ondo to be entertaining guests at the hotel.

“So you would rather stay at a hotel?”

“I can always build my own house.”

Wunmi gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “That’s not necessary. You will be moving into the Palace soon. And what about Camille?” His big sister smiled mischievously. “Is there going to be a wedding in the nearest future?”

“Maybe. But not with Camille.” He didn’t want to give anything away.

“Who then?”

“Not telling. You’ll meet her at the coronation ceremony.”

“Wow. Is Sade aware?”

Adeniran shook his head.

“So you’re keeping her a secret from all of us. I just hope she’s not some kind of weird girl that will give Daddy more ammunition to use against you.”

“No. Then again, I have never had to provide our father with ammunition; he sources it on his own.” He picked up his phone and headed over to the local online newspaper and read the headline news: *Prince*

Adeniran Luke Aremeyin would be crowned as the next Osemawe, the 45th Monarch of the Osemawe Kingdom. He will succeed Oba Ojumirayo Ademola Esuola, whose three-month traditional funeral rites were concluded about three weeks ago.

There were a lot of newspapers carrying the news. Adeniran also had an interview with Punch Newspaper and The Hope Newspaper in the coming days. There were photoshoots to be taken. Dignitaries to be met. Sade had mentioned that Ari Mato had called the other day to book another interview with him—adding that she would meet with him at whatever location he chose.

"Are you excited about it?"

"Not yet. It's still kicking in."

"You have always been a public figure, so this wouldn't be too hard for you."

No. Only that his life was now about to get more open to the public than he would like.

"You know Mum would have been so proud of you," Wunmi said quietly.

"Yeah. She would have."

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Chapter Thirty-Five

Isimeme

With the way the two women kept looking at her, Isi had the impression that they had both planned this girls' hangout to gang up on her. She'd anticipated they were having a movie night—since it had been a while since they'd had one, and Isi had gone through the trouble of baking cheesecake and strawberry cupcakes, as well as a potato salad and a fruit punch cocktail. Only they had indicated that they would have a girl's discussion first before moving on to other affairs.

"Spill!" Odavwaro said with a cone of ice cream in her hand. She had arrived minutes before, dressed nicely in green belted high-waist trousers, a black top and a cardigan with a green headscarf; with a paper bag containing three tubs of different flavours of ice cream and a Ziploc bag packed with ice cream cones.

"Wait! I'm coming!" Erinma yelled out as she hurried down the hallway to them.

"Are you girls for real?"

Erinma plopped down next to Odavwaro. "I've had my fair share of time in the spotlight here. You have no idea how I felt when you and Odavwaro were all up in my business over my relationship with Andrew." Erinma tucked her feet under her and held the cup of creamy vanilla in one hand while turning down the TV volume with the other. "Okay. Start."

Isi sputtered out a laugh at their giddiness. "Start where?"

Odavwaro waved her cone of ice cream in the air like it was a pom-pom. “From the beginning? How did you guys meet? How did he approach you? You know… the whole shebang!”

Isi leaned back on the couch, her thoughts wandering to the man who was making her stomach flutter. He had sent her another bouquet first thing in the evening when she got back from work. Red Roses this time. She bit her lip and smiled to herself. With the note, *just because I found the best girl to spend my life with. Love, Niran*, she couldn’t help but smile. She’d called to thank him, but his phone had been switched off. No doubt he was most likely in a meeting. He’d already told her that he would be busy in the coming days leading up to the ceremony.

“Oh my gosh, see how she’s blushing!”

Isi’s eyes snapped up to them. “What?” She pressed a palm to her face, feeling the heat climb up her neck to her cheeks.

“No worries. When I eventually get a man I’ll have you guys over at my house so we can talk about it,” Odavwaro said, eyes twinkling with excitement.

“That’s if *Olori* Isimeme will have the time to travel down to have a girl’s night.”

Odavwaro had a star-struck look on her face. “That’s so dreamy.”

“It’s like a Cinderella story.”

Odavwaro squealed.

Isi raised her hands. “Okay, okay. Stop.” She took a deep breath. “What do you want to know?”

Odavwaro fired the questions at her with speed like she’d had everything already lined up in her head. Isi answered them

“How does Nelly feel about everything?”

Isi’s mood dipped at that. “I haven’t told him yet. That was something I planned on doing tomorrow. But, before anything happened with Adeniran, I told Nelly that we couldn’t keep being friends.” Isi drew her legs up to the couch, bringing her knees close together and resting her chin on them. “It was just too hard. And I feel bad for leading him on, all the while knowing God had told me it was going to be Adeniran I settle down with. But I kept fighting it. I didn’t want it to be Adeniran.” Isi locked her gaze on both of her friends. “Forget that he’s handsome and he was a prince; I didn’t find him attractive character-wise.” She kept asking herself if she was trying to play it safe because Adeniran had Camille.

“And now?” Erinma queried. “Has your perception of him changed?”

“It’s changing. I’m seeing a side of him I’ve never seen before. Don’t get me wrong, he still gets broody, but I’m starting to understand that there’s more to him than meets the eye. And not in a bad way.”

“Yeah, you probably should have prayed about it a little more.” Odavwaro sighed. “Poor Nelly.”

“I hope he can forgive me.”

“I don’t think he holds grudges,” Erinma said.

Isi forced a smile, but something told her that he did. After all, he still couldn’t let go of his father’s mistakes of the past.

Erinma suddenly sat up, eyes widened. “What are you going to wear for his coronation ceremony?”

“It had to be wowing. I know this amazing fashion designer, Adetoks. She makes beautiful wedding gowns and dresses. She’s good with [1]*Aso Oke* styles too.” Odavwaro grabbed her phone off the table. Switching easily into her usual work mode. “Let me open her IG handle so you can feast your eyes on some of her works.”

“Ooh-la-la. Those gowns are gorgeous. How come I’ve never heard of her?”

“You might have but you can’t remember. She was in African Voices sometime ago.”

Erinma nodded, her eyes glued to Odavwaro’s phone screen.

Isi stared at them. She hadn’t even put one word in and they were already planning her outfit for the event.

Erinma’s nose wrinkled. “Are you sure she’ll be able to make something in a short time frame?”

“She could. A distant cousin had her wedding gown made there. She claimed that for her evening wear the designer already had some exquisite ready-made gowns she’d named but with no owners, or something along those lines. I’ll make some inquiries and get her contact information and we’ll figure something out. Our baby girl must look hawt!”

Isi’s brows wrinkled with worry. “You guys, I’m not sure I’ll be able to afford that.”

“Consider it a gift,” Erinma said.

“You’ve done enough for me already.”

“Odavwaro are you hungry? Let’s eat.”

Adeniran's call came through late at night, after they had watched a movie and were high on sugar. Isi excused herself from the others who were debating which Jackie Chan film was the best, and Erinma gave her a knowing look as she scrambled out of the room. She had called him again and his line had gone through but her call had been left unanswered and she had been worried.

Should I mention my concerns to him now or should I wait? she wondered. Would she seem clingy?

“Hello?”

“Hey, Sunshine,” he said softly, his voice tinged with exhaustion. “I’m sorry for missing your calls. It’s been a series of meetings, with a long list of traditional rituals to complete before the big day.”

“Rituals? A-aren’t they diabolic?” Her cousin's passing interest in Yoruba films came to mind. Those coronation rites were crucial to any king ascending to the throne. Something about becoming superior and not being an ordinary man, or something like that.

“Yeah, a couple of them are. To be fair, they have stopped a few, but I already told them that I am not doing anything that goes against my faith.”

“And they accepted?”

“Yes,” he said simply. "As part of the preparation, there's something else I need to do."I’m also going to be in seclusion for several weeks leading to the coronation.”

“Oh…”

“Yeah. I’m bummed about it too. We might not be able to talk for a while.”

“And they aren’t going to make you do anything weird or obscene?”

He chuckled. “I did a few. Nothing obscene. I promise. Tomorrow I have photoshoots to take in the morning and mid-afternoon.”

“Okay. I’m sure you’ll look super handsome in your photos. Are you back at your sister’s place?”

“Yeah, just got in. I just want to climb into bed and sleep but I needed to hear your voice first.”

“No dinner?”

“I’m fasting.”

“Oh. You should have told me. I would love to join you.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

She frowned. “It’s not a bother, Adeniran. Fasting is another way for us to bond as a couple. You shouldn’t be thinking of doing things on your own now. We are a team and your battles are now my battles.” She felt an inner witness that there were lots of battles they would have to fight as a couple because of the position he was ascending to.

He sighed over the phone. “I’m not sure how you got into my heart, but I’m grateful.”

“Don’t try to flatter me.”

“By now, you should know that I don’t flatter.” He paused. “Can we do a video call?”

“Er… hold on a second,” she said, looking over her shoulder to see if any of the girls were looking for her and threaded softly to her bedroom. Closing the door gently behind her. “Okay.” His video call came in a few seconds later.

“You look refreshed.”

Isi sat at the edge of her bed. “Really? I feel like I’ve been railroaded into beauty treatments and shopping.”

Adeniran’s forehead wrinkled. “How so?”

“They are taking me shopping. According to them, I need to look spectacular to blow your mind.”

A lazy grin swept across his face. “I'd like to see that.”

Isi grinned. “I was thinking about meeting Nelly tomorrow.” She opened up to him about her feelings and her conversation with the girls. Her anxiety grew as she spoke because his face remained stoic. “I believe it is best if he hears about us from me.”

“I think that’s fine. I wanted to talk to him as well. And I wish we could do it together.

“But maybe it would be best if it came from me…”

“Since you guys had a thing.”

She nodded.

“Okay. Tell me how it goes.”

“Alright. Go to bed. We’ll talk tomorrow. And please send a text if you’re too busy to call. I was kind of worried when I kept calling and couldn’t reach you.”

Adeniran pressed a fist to his mouth to stifle a yawn. “I’m sorry. I’ll do that henceforth.”

Silence danced between them. This was the point where a couple said they loved each other before they headed to bed. But they weren't that kind of couple. At least not yet. So Isi winked at him instead and ended the call.



"Adeniran is the guy you're so certain of?" Nelly said, his tone hardened. Betrayal, resentment, and hurt were written all over his face. "You prefer him over me? And because of what? Because he's rich or because he's going to be the next Oba in Ondo? Which is it, Isimeme? You don't lie so I don't expect you to start now."

An anvil of regret settled in the pit of her stomach. "I think you're being unfair to me."

But then, God, this is my fault. If I had asked…if I had followed Your will more, maybe this wouldn't be happening now. One of my closest friends wouldn't be looking at me like I wanted to hurt him on purpose. Isi had no one to blame but herself, though if she could reverse events would she even want to do things differently? *I guess I was selfish as well,* she told herself. The more she thought about it, the more everything revealed more of the true state of her heart. And she didn't like it. As much as she didn't like what she was doing to Nelly.

He pressed his lips together for a moment, then shook his head and said, "please answer the question."

Isi glanced around the room, relieved that she'd chosen a quiet corner of the fast-food restaurant for them to talk. Although she now wished they were seated on the terrace or in his car—both of which seemed more secluded than inside the restaurant with a handful of other diners seated having lunch. Her hands moved over the tulle fabric of her skirt and cupped her knees as she leaned forward. Exhaled.

God, please give me the right words.

"I'm not choosing him over you. To be honest, I liked you. I really cared about you, but I don't know," she lifted her hands and placed them on the table, "it's just not meant to be." She flinched inwardly, aware of how

flimsy the words sounded in her ears. “I don’t want us to stop being friends.”

Nelly snorted. “That’s a whole load of nonsense if you ask me.”

"But it's the truth." She hung her head. "I'm so sorry, Nelly. I'm sorry about everything."

Isi had spent hours praying about everything. She couldn’t sleep well at night and she had hoped, *prayed*, that God would make everything go well.

She gasped when he clasped her hand in his. She looked up at him, the tenderness in his gaze slowly easing away her worries. "I don't want an apology. I want you. Only you. Maybe you're confused about what you think God said to you. You can still take out time to think about it. I've waited these last couple of months for you. I can wait some more."

"I'm sorry but the answer will still be the same."

He let go of her hand and folded his arms across his chest.

“I’ve met girls like you. You act all sweet and innocent, meanwhile, all you’re looking for is the next big fish you can catch to make your life better.”

She recoiled at his words. How could he say that to her? She shook her head, trying to shake off the hurt his words brought to her. “Nelly don’t say words you’ll regret.”

“So you guys are dating now?” he asked, disregarding what she last said.

Isi nodded. “And he asked me to marry him. I said yes.” She refused to look at him as she said the last words.

Nelly pressed his lips together, let out a mirthless laugh and shook his head. “Aren’t you ever going to wonder if you made the right choice choosing him over me?”

“I might think about it, but I don’t hope for it to happen. If it does happen then I’ll hold on to the fact that God chose him for me. And I choose to love him. I choose to follow God’s will; subjecting my choice to His." She shrugged. "That’s what it means to live in complete abandon to God.”

“In other words, act like a Zombie.”

Isi didn’t like how the conversation was going. Or his line of thoughts. “Parents arrange marriages for their children. What’s so different about this?”

“They did it back then but it doesn’t mean they’re right to do so. They make mistakes,” he replied. “Are all those marriages working?” His voice rose a notch. “Tell me, Isi, are all the couples happily married? How many

of them have cheated on each other because they believed they met the love of their lives later on and it wasn't to the person they made vows to love and cherish for the rest of their lives?"

"Then why can't we trust in God's will when He's the only person who sees the future and has the very best interest in us–even more than our parents."

Nelly ran a palm down his face, looking exasperated. Defeated. Clearly, he had no response for that.

She gentled her tone. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Nelly. And I'm sorry if I led you on."

"About being friends… maybe not right now. It's hard to do that when I don't even know what to do with all of these feelings."

Isi gave a nod. She understood.

"I'm dying to kiss you right now." But it appears that I don't even have the right to think that." He pushed himself away from the table and stood up. "I want to wish you a happy life, but I'm not sure I can...knowing it won't be with me." He walked out of the restaurant and, most likely, out of her life...for good.

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1. pronounced ah-SHAW-okay, is a hand-woven cloth created by the Yoruba people of west Africa.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

ADENIRAN

The media were among the first set of people to herald his arrival as Adeniran stepped out of the Rolls-Royce Cullinan and then began his procession into the hall. There were banners of his face with ‘Long Live The King’ plastered on them along with the crest of Ondo Kingdom. There were steel barricades kept on both sides to keep the people from bombarding him as well as a whole lot of security details if people decided to escape the barricade.

He smiled and nodded and waved to a few people amid the throng and he managed to make eye contact with a few as he made his way in with a large group of entourage surrounding him. Talking drums were tucked underneath the drummer’s armpits as their drumsticks hit the surface of the drum with vigour. The excitement in the air was palpable.

All Adeniran felt was fear and trepidation at what was to come. *You're Omooba. The son of the King of kings*, his mother's words had come to him from memories tucked away—easing most of his fears, and now it made greater sense to him. About who he was and what he was worth when all that had given his life significance had been taken away.

He'd fasted for days, even though the expected pre-coronation traditional rites he'd have to perform. And right now, he was weak and tired, but he had enough strength to get through the day. Despite all of his prayers and connections to God, he still felt like he was walking in shoes much larger

than his. He'd asked himself what he was doing each time. Football was all he knew, and now he had to rule over a group of people. Then there were the voices telling him he would fail; that, like his father, he would be dethroned and humiliated.

God, please don't leave me alone here. You are King and I'm just a representative. Please, be with me. Direct me. Use all this to Your glory.

For You will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it. I will accomplish the good work I have started with you.

Adeniran said an inward 'thank You' to God. Feeling reassurance. They were finally in the hall and the crowds in the hall were equally as overwhelming as those outside. Chandeliers with light crystals hung over the hall, illuminating the throng of people in their various colourful and cultural attires. A few top dignitaries in Ondo state caught his eye as he got closer to the front and he raised a hand at them in acknowledgement; having come to know a few of them in the last couple of days. He also acknowledged the politicians, businessmen and traditional rulers from all across the country in attendance. The stage before the hall was decorated with flowers at the foot leading up to the wide stage and stationed at the centre of the stage was a lone majestic throne in gold and white.

He marched straight to the stage, waved at the crowd and took his seat. Thereafter the Nigerian anthem was sung, and Adeniran stood along with everyone else as they paid homage to their country.

Arise, O compatriots, Nigeria's call obey
To serve our fatherland
With love and strength and faith
The labour of our heroes past
Shall never be in vain
To serve with heart and might
One nation bound in freedom, peace, and unity.

As the MC of the programme listed what was to come, Adeniran knew that this was the moment everyone was waiting for. The kingmakers walked up to the stage to stand next to him, the beaded crown lay on a red cushion. The oldest and most respected of the kingmakers stepped forward, a microphone held close to his mouth. "The moment we have all been waiting for has arrived. We hereby crown Omooba Adeniran Aremeyin our new king, *Osemawe*, the reigning imperial majesty of Ondo Kingdom." The

beaded crown was lowered to his head and the applause from the crowd reverberated in his ears. He smiled and raised the[1] *irukere* given to him in acknowledgement as the people shouted in excitement. The chiefs of the kingdom came before him to pay homage, bowing their heads in reverence, and he raised the *irukere* and nodded.

Doesn't it feel good? See how they bow to you. See how much influence you wield?

Adeniran gave a slight shake of his head and blocked out the dark voice. *God, please, all of You and less of me. I don't want any of the glory. Take all the glory, Lord. Let pride be far from me.*

This was only the beginning, but Adeniran knew he would always gain victory as long as he kept his heart focused on Christ. He knew henceforth that he would have this inner battle to fight all the days of his life. He looked around, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by what he saw. Tears rushed to his eyes. The hall was filled with throngs of people from all over the country, and even some people from the diaspora. Ex-presidents and a handful of governors and their representatives were also in attendance. Sweat trickled down his back more from nervousness than heat. As the Osemawe of Ondo, he was regaled in the purple and gold Aso-Oke with matching trousers. Royal red beads decorated his neck dropping down to his chest and he held the *irukere* in one hand while the staff of appointment was in another. The eldest of the kingmakers had placed a beaded crown on his head, therefore making him the crowned king of Ondo Kingdom.

He was required to give a speech soon. But first, the choir was going to give a rendition. The crowd settled in their seats as the choir crossed the carpeted stage and sang what Adeniran had requested.

Rejoice, the Lord is King:
Your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks and sing,
And triumph evermore.
Lift up your heart,
Lift up your voice!
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

The press media inched closer to the stage with their cameras as Adeniran stood and received the microphone. He could hear someone in a

firm tone bidding them to not crowd the front. He glanced at the crowd, feeling the flutters in his stomach. He felt the beginning of tears sprung to his eyes but he held them back. His mother would have been proud to see this day. All her efforts hadn't been in vain.

"I want to give all thanks to God for making this day happen. And I want to thank every one of you for gracing this occasion with your presence. I especially thank the dignitaries and their representatives for taking the time to be here. For a long time, we have seen with breaking hearts and tearful gazes the state of things in different sectors of the country and the rate at which things have been deplored in the legal system of our beloved country, Nigeria. We have watched with earnest expectation for a better Nigeria, better leaders, better governance, and a better us—as citizens of our beloved country. But we will take it one state, one local government, one ward, one council, and one kingdom at a time.

Ondo may appear redundant, but I assure you that we have much to offer. And as the hymn rightly said, the Kingdom of God cannot fail. I, therefore, invite the Kingdom of God Most High to reign in our midst. While I acknowledge that the *Ifa* and our kingmakers have selected me, I also want to express my immense gratitude to God because I could not stake claim to this position without His backing. It was through Him that I could overcome the battles along the way because God has deemed it so, as is said in the Good Book, *I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it*." His eyes found their way to his halfbrother's grim expression; their father had refused to attend. Adeniran shifted his gaze to dozens of nameless faces in the crowd.

"It takes One Great God to lead the few, and it takes the few to follow God's calling upon their lives to make their homes, their community and their nation as a whole. It happens one change at a time. As my mother used to say, the light of God has come into Ondo Kingdom and it will surely spread far and wide. You can choose to be on God's side, or you can choose to take whatever side is left. As for me, I will serve the Lord and lead others to do so."

He smiled and nodded as his eyes combed the crowd looking for one person in particular. He sighted Erinma at first and when he found her he felt his heart ram into his rib cage and for a second or two, he felt he couldn't breathe. When she smiled at him, his heartbeat thrummed in his ears and an uncontrollable smile came on his lips. He couldn't make out

what she was wearing but he knew it was a purple dress. Adeniran wished he could cross over to where she sat and pull her into his arms. But that would be inappropriate and the headlines in the news would be a nightmare.

And putting Isi in the spotlight so suddenly would be too much for her. Their relationship was still new even though they were engaged. He got an engagement ring and was already planning a date when he could officially pop the question.

The ceremony was winding down. And all he could think about was being with Isi.

“Your highness, long may you live,” Governor Femi Lawal, the governor of Ogun state paid homage to him.

“Thank you for coming, your excellency.”

And that was how the rest of the day panned out, and with residents of Ondo Kingdom bringing him gifts. When Erinma and Isi made their way to him. While they both looked beautiful, Adeniran couldn’t take his eyes off Isi in her purple lace gown with a silver head-tie. Isi going on her knees before him all he could think about was what their traditional wedding would be like. As she raised her eyes to meet him, he whispered, “I owe you a date.” He didn’t care if Erinma heard him. All he cared about was the shy smile on her face.

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1. Horsetail in Yoruba culture is used by the king as a staff of office and symbol of authority.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Isimeme

Isi didn't mind that it would be a few days before he could take her out because he was too busy with meetings and settling into his new role as King. Nelly, Tito and Erinma had left for Lagos two days after the ceremony, but Isi had packed extra clothes because Adeniran had asked her to stay. She didn't know how long. She spent her days exploring her surroundings, reading her Bible, and sampling the various cuisines Ondo had to offer. But she mostly secluded herself in prayer: hoping she was still on the right path, pleading with God to have His way, reveal His plan for her, and show her how she could be of help to Adeniran.

There were still a few times that she questioned everything: if she had made the right decision coming down here. If she wasn’t already in over her head. If she wasn’t making a mistake with Nelly due to his cold silence.

Because, whether she liked it or not, the future with Adeniran remained foggy. While she’d met a few of his siblings at the ceremony, it bothered her how little he spoke of his father. Even when they spoke later in the evening every day.

They talked for at least an hour at night, swapping stories about their days. She listened as he told her about how he was adjusting and the pressing issues he needed to address. Getting to know each other. But on one of those nights, she'd broached the subject of his father.

“My father doesn’t approve of my being the Osemawe,” he’d told her with a sigh.

“Why?”

“It’s a long story, Isi. It’s not something I want to talk about right now.”

And so the subject was dropped with Isi waiting for the best time to bring it up again.

Tonight, however, was different.

“I would love to take you out tomorrow.”

Her breath caught as she considered the possibility. “Are you sure that you have the time?”

“I do. And even if I didn’t, I would make time.” A small pause followed. “I’ve missed you, Isi.”

Funny enough, she could say the same.

“Do you think you’ll be able to fit me into your busy schedule of food tasting and self-retreat?”

“I think I should be able to,” she retorted.

The call ended shortly after that when they agreed on a time to meet the next day. She was relieved that she'd had her hair done in box braids before leaving Lagos, so she didn't have to worry about it. Isi set about going through her clothes looking for something to wear when she received a text from him. It said:

I’m sending a package your way. I hope you like it.

She frowned. There was a knock on her door not long after she read the message.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you were sending something over when you called earlier?” She asked him after she’d received and opened the pink box package along with a bouquet of red tulips.

“I wanted that element of surprise,” he said, the smile in his voice evident. “Do you like it?”

“I love the outfit. Thank you.”

“You’re highly welcome.”

“I’m not mistaken that you would like me to wear this tomorrow, right?”

“It’s not compulsory, but I would love it if you wore that. It would be a little more appropriate for where I’m taking you to.”

For a brief moment, she considered the multi-coloured midi dress, navy blue fedora hat, parchment beige canvas and dark blue stretchy three-

quarter length jean trousers with scepticism, hoping it wasn’t an attempt to lure her into something eerie.

I don’t know him that well, she reasoned. What if he was directing her to a ritual? All of the Nollywood movies she'd seen began to resurface in terrifying details of people's lives who had blindly trusted others only to be disappointed in the end. What if the same thing happened to her?

But then a sense of calm enveloped her, and Isi exhaled slowly, allowing herself to be excited about their upcoming date. She couldn't even guess where he was taking her, but knowing their first date had gone so well made her feel at ease. Her lips raised in a smile. It meant a lot to her that he took time out of his busy schedule to think about her and plan their date. His words from their first date came back to her as a reassuring reminder that he intended to keep his promise: *I know I haven’t been much of an open book. I may have skeletons in my closet, but I’m willing to bare it all to you…if you’d have me.* It drew her heart a little closer to him.

“I look forward to it,” she finally said softly, and when she ended the call she counted the hours till when she saw him next.



They were currently on a boat ride at Igbokoda Waterfront for their second date so that they could have some privacy away from the public eye although he had attendants at his beck and call. They weren't the only ones who had considered taking in the fresh air and the beauty of the waterfront. A few canoes were loaded with tourists. There were also a couple of fishermen, one of whom was bringing in their latest catch. Isi was awestruck by everything.

"Thanks for bringing me here." There were several things she already loved about Ondo town. It wasn't like Lagos, but it had its special appeal to it that contributed to its status as the Sunshine State that it was. Isi had already fallen in love with the beautiful Idanre hills after he had taken her there. The place was rich with history and culture and traditions of its own. It had stairs that led up to the top of the hill, which was 3000 feet above sea level and offered a spectacular view of the city and its occupants.

While it hadn’t been an easy climb up, with over six hundred steps up the hill, there had been a few rest-stops so they could catch their breaths. But, sweaty or not, getting up the hill was so worth it to her. If permitted, Isi would have joyfully set up camp there, sitting on the large rock and gazing at the spread of houses beneath, taking in the greenery and basking in God’s goodness while the sun dipped into its resting place for the day. Staying there wasn’t on the agenda for the day, but she had made Adeniran promise to take her there again.

And now, as she gazed at the waters, she was overcome with love and awe for God. *In His hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is His also. Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together.* The Scriptures came to her heart swiftly, as if God was affirming her thoughts of praise for Him. *You're an amazing God.* Isi wrapped her arms around herself, unable to contain her emotions.

“Are you cold?” Adeniran stepped close to her.

“No. I’m fine. Just very deep in my musings.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“How amazing God is.” She faced the waters before them. “Plus I love the company. Thanks again for the outfit.”

"You look beautiful," Adeniran murmured.

Isi turned, giving him a small smile. "Thank you."

“I’ll have them set up our meal if you’re ready to eat.”

“Maybe later. Thank you.”

He gave a slight nod and faced forward.

It was hard to believe that this would be her new home. He was going to be her husband. And she was going to be the wife of a king. There were times like now when she wanted to pinch herself. So far, everything had seemed surreal. And now, more than ever, she felt a sense of calm that she hadn't felt in months.

God, You really do write the best love stories.

The coronation was beautiful. Seated with her friends as she watched him walk down the path before him with rose petals cast on the floor. Dressed in his royal regalia of rich purple Aso-Oke and the excitement of the crowd when he made his way down to the front where the kingmakers stood, waiting to throne their king. It was thrilling, and Adeniran's speech had given her goosebumps.

She felt like this was a moment she'd been waiting for all her life and hadn't known it. All those times she'd second-guessed God for months, agreeing with a voice she shouldn’t have allowed to gain access to her thoughts, listening to her heart that swayed more to her wants and desires than to God's; wanting her way. Thinking if she tossed out those unsolicited thoughts of what He'd said about Adeniran from her mind, she wouldn't have to ever consider it. Silly her. Meanwhile, God had given her the choice of whether or not to accept His will. Isi gave a sidelong glance at Adeniran.

Who am I that You’re mindful of me?

He was dressed in a two-piece white kaftan and a beige and white dashiki jacket that stopped at his knees and a Yoruba cap to match the attire, but prior to that he was dressed in casual jeans, a polo shirt and sneakers—appropriate for their climb up the hill.

“I saw Nelly seated with you and Erinma. I was surprised he came. Did you get to talk to him again?”

She shook her head.

"You're still bummed about him?"

Isi nodded. "But I'm no longer emotionally attracted to him. Those feelings have passed." She frowned a little. "I'm just worried about him."

She tried contacting him two days ago, but he didn't answer. Erinma had mentioned that he was finally finished with the Topaz project he'd been working on for months, and she'd wanted to congratulate him. She'd finally settled on texting.

"He’s not talking to me either. He'll be fine. Eventually."

"I know."

"I, for one, won't be too shy to say that I'm glad your feelings for him are waning."

She gave a soft laugh. “I didn’t think you were the jealous type.”

“Every guy is jealous for the woman he’s interested in.”

“You surprise me every day, King Adeniran.”

“As long as I’m not boring you, I’m fine.”

"It’s just…I’m not sure what I'm going to do here. I'm unemployed and I have no idea what role I'll play by your side.” She shrugged. “I'm mostly overthinking things, as I usually do. It's just something that's been bothering me."

He took her hand in his and it sent a ripple of shivers down her spine. The heat from his gaze smouldered hers. “First things, we are going to get

married as soon as possible. It’s top of my list.” Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. “And I can’t wait to start the next chapter of my life with you. You will be the Queen of Ondo Kingdom. There will be responsibilities for you to oversee. The women and children in the kingdom need a female leader they can look up to. Someone who would lead them in the right path as she’s also following God.”

“But what if I’m not enough?” She whispered more to herself. Doubts clouded her mind, whirling around like a storm even as his words tried to sink in.

His palm pressed against her cheek. “It is not as important as where God is taking us, Sunshine.”

She smiled a little at the endearment. “That’s true.”

“This may be considered a taboo because the King doesn’t bow to anyone—but I can’t be bothered about that right now..”

“What?” Isi’s brows drew together in confusion then gasped as King Adeniran got down on one knee and lifted a ring box to her.

"Isimeme Oboh, you're a one-in-a-million kind of girl. You fascinate me with everything that you are—your beauty, kindness, and the way you put others first. You’re driven and go after what you want. You believe in the best in people no matter how badly they treat you. The part of you that trips me, which is my favourite part of you, is your inner beauty, which reflects your relationship with God and how much joy you radiate. You deserve everything good in life, Isi. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be the fortunate guy who gets to give you a taste of it.”

He opened the ring box and her stomach flipped at the sight.

“Will you marry me, Isimeme?”

Tears trailed down her cheeks as she bobbed her head. “Yes. Yes.” Then she laughed out of sheer joy when he stood and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close to him.

“Thank you,” he whispered against her head.

“I have a request, though.”

He pulled back, searching her eyes. “What?”

She swiped at the tears on her cheeks. "I want to see your family home. I want to meet your father and your stepmother." Isi had a strong pull to go there. It was the one place she'd been eager to see but he'd dodged everything about it. And judging the hard set of his jaw he didn't favour the idea. "When will you take me there? Are you hiding me from your family?"

She added the latter tease to lessen the built-up tension that occurred within seconds.

"I don't want to take you there."

"Why?"

King Adeniran smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. "Can I lie and say that I want to have you all to myself?"

“No, you can’t.”

He sighed heavily. Nodded. "I'll take you there as soon as I can.” Then he smiled more genuinely this time, maybe more for himself than for her. “Let me make introductions of who you are before they think they can parade a list of young women in front of me to change my status as soon as possible."

"Is that so?"

"I told you I'm not lacking female company," he replied.

“I never doubted that.”

“But all I want, all I’ll ever need, is you.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ISIMEME

Isi still felt like she was in a dream and when she woke up, everything about her and Adeniran would stay in her dreams. But this was her reality and it was here to stay. She shifted on her bed and grabbed her phone. She smiled. As usual, there was a text from him already.

Good morning, Sunshine. Hope you slept well. My sister will pick you up at noon. I've attached her phone number. I'll meet you ladies there later in the day. Can't wait to see you. Have fun.

Still smiling, Isi typed.

Good morning, Adeniran. I did, thank you. Hope you had a restful night as well. I'll try my best to have fun. Can't wait to see you too.

Sade called Isi a few minutes before noon to say she was outside waiting. Isi checked to make sure she had everything she needed before leaving the hotel. Sade was already standing by her car, dressed in a multicoloured [1]Ankara jumpsuit. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail that reached her shoulders. She exuded class, chic, and elegance.

"Hi, Sade."

"Sister-in-law," Sade said, pulling her into a firm hug. "It's good to see you. I seriously can't believe my brother had you hidden in Lagos. My big

brother has always been secretive but this is a new level.”

"Trust me, it's all new to us as well." Adeniran had mentioned making a formal introduction to his brothers and sisters about their relationship, but he'd told Sade about how things began between them.

“Well, I’m hoping we get to know each other a little better today.”

The car door opened and a good-looking dark-skinned man stepped out. He stretched out his hand. “Hi again, I’m Mosadi. We met on the beach some time ago.”

“I remember.” Isi shook his hand. “Nice to meet you again.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Sade quickly jumped in. “I told him he could hang out with us. If you don’t want him here, I can ask him to leave.”

“And I would,” Mosadi said.

Isi shook her head. “No, it’s fine. The more the merrier.”

“Great, let’s go.” Sade walked to the driver’s seat and got in. Isi and Mosadi did the same, Mosadi offering to take the backseat while Isi sat in front with Sade. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ll take you to a nice joint in town. They serve the best [2]O*gi and Akara*.”

“Awesome.”

Sade peered at the rearview mirror. “Are you okay back there?”

“I’m fine, Sade. Eyes on the road, please,” Mosadi spoke calmly even if his tone held a seriousness to it.

Sade laughed. “Are you scared of me driving you off the road? For a soldier-boy, I thought you aren’t scared of anything.”

Isi's brows rose. He's a soldier? She hadn’t known that. He had the tough look, the hard face, the athleticism, and the discipline. She'd met a handful of them in passing. She'd heard from friends about their repugnant behaviour. She couldn't tell if Mosadi was different, despite his polite disposition, but his mood and gestures seemed off. Preoccupied.

“We both know what scares me these days,” he said quietly. “So just focus on the road.”

Sade laughed and directed the conversation to Isi. They talked about Isi's job for a while, and Isi reciprocated Sade's questions, learning that she had started a shelter for battered women and their children in Ondo town. The shelter also attempted to help women with mental illnesses and a few

incarcerated women. The majority of the women were carefully interviewed to ensure they were a good fit for the programmes they provided.

“I'd love to visit one of these days.”

Sade turned to smile at her briefly. “That can be arranged.”

“This is delicious,” Isi said after she swallowed.

“I love that they make it crunchy on the outside and moist on the inside. And then there’s the pepper kick.”

“And she deals only with Akara and Ogi?”

Sade nodded, carefully tucking another bean fritter into her mouth.

Isi was equally impressed by the simple and direct dish. And the number of people drawn to the small food joint by her food. Despite its simplicity, the owner had managed to invent varied creative ways for people to enjoy Akara. Her menu included shrimp Akara, prawn Akara, extra spicy Akara, and the plain classic Akara without any flourish. Even the Ogi side dish was given a makeover: Ogi with ginger, Ogi with groundnut, and plain white, yellow, or brown Ogi. All served with milk and sugar if desired.

There was also the option of eating it with fresh, fluffy bread.

Isi was currently eating the ogi with ginger and a combination of prawn and extra spicy Akara.

“Is everything okay with Mosadi? He seems withdrawn.” He’d eaten and avoided joining in on their conversation right from the time they got in the car until they were seated in the food shack. Even when he stepped outside to take a phone call, he appeared troubled.

“Oh. That’s just how he is. You’ll get used to him with time.”

Isi wanted to ask if she was sure but side-stepped it. She was still an outsider. Still getting to know everyone else.

Sade looked at Isi. “I’m happy for my brother. He hasn’t been like this for as long as I’ve known him. I don’t get to see him smile so much, but these days he’s much more a different person than I've ever seen him. It’s a good change and I have you to thank for that.”

Isi was a little taken aback. “I haven’t done anything. A person can’t change unless they want to. And only God can bring about long-term change.”

"I know. Some of the women who come to the shelter are emotionally broken and have low self-esteem. After everything they've been through and the lies they bought from men who were supposed to protect them, it takes a lot to get them to believe in themselves again." Sade sighed, a small smile

on her lips. "However, several months later, the transformation of these same women is amazing and liberating. They laugh. They believe in God even though they are unsure of what the future holds. They have hope, which I haven't seen in Adeniran in a long time."

"Since your mother passed?"

She frowned slightly. "My mum died when I was a baby. I can barely remember her and I'm not as pained as Adeniran was—he was sort of the closest to her because of his reading disorder."

"Reading disorder?"

"My brother has dyslexia." Her brows drew together. "He didn't tell you?"

Isi shook her head and gave a small smile. "We're still getting to know each other."

"Then it wasn't my place to have said it then. Mum had been giving him lessons after school hours to help him. After mum died, I was told Adeniran got worse at school. Dad sent the two of us to Lagos to finish our primary school education. Maybe he expected Adeniran to improve, but it didn't happen that way. He had a difficult time at school. At least he had Nelly and Tito as friends; they stood up for him. He left after secondary school when an opportunity came for him to play football in the UK." Sade gave a sad smile. "I half expected him not to look back. But he kept in touch on occasion and returned years later. Dad was unimpressed. I believe that only made Adeniran angry at himself for wanting to please Dad and earn his respect. It never happened."

Isi imagined a younger Adeniran, who had lost his mother and support system and had to start over. It explained some of his anger and resentment toward his father.

There's more to the story, the still small voice whispered in her heart.

"And till now you still don't know what happened with your mum?"

Sade reclined in her chair. "No. I still don't know what caused her death; all I know is that it had something to do with some mental health issues, possibly postpartum psychosis." Sade smiled wistfully. "She was said to be a good woman who loved her children. Adeniran took it the hardest. He was the one who was closest to her."

Isi didn't ask any more questions, pondering the scant information Sade had given her. She was determined to understand why God wanted her to learn more about the Aremeyin family. Given that Adeniran would be her

husband, it made sense. But another part of her, the nagging part of her that knew there had to be more to it, knew it wasn't just for her benefit, but also Adeniran's.

Sade took her to a high-end shop full of laces, damask, silk materials and Ankara fabrics after their meal, while Mosadi stood near the entrance, phone in hand, looking more like a bodyguard. Sade, unfazed, wasted no time perusing the vast selection of fabrics and ended up selecting a few fabrics that she thought would complement Isi's skin tone. When Isi heard the prices, she wondered how she was going to politely break it to Sade that she could afford only one of the many Ankara. Just doing the maths in her head, the total was close to half the monthly salary she had been making at Urban Mojo, and she'd still sent Nosa something from her last paycheck.

Isi had informed Nosa before travelling down that she had lost her job and would no longer be able to send her anything. Unsurprisingly, their conversation had progressed as usual.

"I hope you don't expect me to take you back," she'd huffed over the phone. Not bothering to ask why Isi had lost her job in the first place.

Isi cleared her throat. *"No. I'm thinking of leaving Lagos soon."*

"You're going back to Benin? I hope it's not at my sister's place. She doesn't have room and she has a lot on her plate right now," Nosa prattled on.

"No, actually. I'm moving to Ondo."

Nosa's loud laughter rang in her ears. "Chai! Dis girl, you sabi waka o.[3] *Why Ondo?*" The disdain and mockery in her voice were apparent. "*Have you found yourself a new boy toy?*" She clucked her tongue. *"I would tell you to be careful but then you're a big girl; you can handle yourself. You believe that you're intelligent and you know what you're doing.* [4]JJC you! *You're on your own if you become pregnant! Bring no child to me; instead, gather some brains and figure out what to do."*

"I've heard. Thank you."

The conversation drifted into the back of her mind, returning to the fabric store and the pile of fabrics on the cashier's counter as they waited for the total cost of everything to be purchased.

"I can only afford one of the fabrics, Sade," Isi said quietly so the cashier didn't overhear her.

Sade shrugged. "It's fine, Isi." She went ahead and paid for the items and they were bagged. "I have a nice tailor and he's very creative. But if you

have styles that you prefer, he can do them justice. But since you're going to be the future queen of Ondo Town, it would be best if you have something especially suited for you. You'll be a trendsetter." Sade turned to look at her. "We love fashion here in Ondo."

Isi had already figured that much out on her own. Her small research and scouring the small parts of town had presented that much information to her.

"Did Adeniran put you up to this?" Isi asked as they loaded their purchases in her car.

"At all. This is all on me.

"Thank you. I don't know how to repay you."

Sade grinned. "Just be good to my brother."



Adeniran was running late and she and Sade had just arrived at their family house. Stunned was the least of the words Isi would use to describe her first intake of their home. And it was obviously fit for royalty.

Sade glanced at her watch. "I might have to leave. I have a meeting in an hour." They were still seated in her car.

Isi unbuckled her seatbelt. "It's fine. You can go. Nice meeting you, Mosadi." She grabbed her purse from the floor of the car and opened the door.

Sade stepped out of the car. "My brother would be annoyed if I left you here by yourself."

"Why? I'm sure he would understand."

"I doubt it." Sade's phone buzzed again and she answered it swiftly. Turning her back to Isi, she spoke softly into her phone. Isi turned to see that Mosadi had also gotten down from the car, eyes firmly locked on Sade and Isi was certain there was something up. For several seconds Sade stayed on the phone and then nodded vigorously and ended the call. She spun around. "Okay, I really have to go."

"Is there a problem?" Mosadi asked bleakly.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me leaving you?” Sade asked, completely ignoring Mosadi’s question.

“Very.”

Sade pressed her lips together and came towards Isi and gave her a brief hug. “It was great meeting you again and spending time with you.” She pulled back. “I believe we’ll have more time in the coming days.”

Isi nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Let me get you your things and take you inside then I’ll be off.”

A house staff greeted them as they walked in and Isi took it all in the ambience, the furnishings, and the precision of the house staff. It sort of reminded her a bit of what Queen Sheba might have felt like when she was shown around Solomon’s palace. As expected, the inside of the house was even grander than the outside. A woman dressed in a bright-coloured flowing [5] *Bubu* walked towards them with a smile on her face. Her hair was covered with a turquoise blue turban.

Sade and she exchanged pleasantries before the woman turned her gaze to Isi. “Good afternoon, Ma.” Isi went down on her knees.

“Good afternoon, my dear. You’re welcome. Please get up.”

“This is Isimeme, Adeniran’s fiancée.”

“Oh really?” The woman embraced her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Isimeme.”

“I have to leave now. Adeniran said he would be on his way shortly. But __”

“It’s fine, Sade. You can go.”

Sade tossed a look at Isi but nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you later, Isi.” With that, she hurried out the door.

“Isi, where are you from?”

“Edo state, Ma.”

The older woman’s eyes glimmered. “Ah, a fellow Edo woman. You’re welcome, my dear. Let’s go to the living room and get comfortable.” Isi followed the woman past the large living space to another living room that was less ostentatious and more relaxing. Warm. “Please, have your seat.”

“Thank you, Ma.”

“Isi is short for?”

“Isimeme. Isimeme Oboh.”

“Isimeme Oboh,” She repeated.

Isi’s palms were sweaty. “Your home is beautiful, Ma.”

“Thank you, my dear,” Adeniran’s stepmother said. “I’m surprised. When Adeniran brought a woman here months ago I thought it was for the sole reason of introducing her as his wife. You know who I’m talking about?”

“Yes, Ma,” Isi replied. Where was her line of conversation leading? Her stomach twisted in knots.

“But then here you are. What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a chef.”

“Oh.”

Isi didn’t know what to read into that one statement. Was she disappointed? Was she seeing how far below she was in social class? Isi gripped her purse a little tighter. *God, why am I even here? What if she hates me? What if she tells Adeniran’s father that I’m not good enough? What if they thought she was a gold digger? What if they disapprove of our relationship?* The thoughts whirred in her mind and her discomfort grew by the second. She took a steadying breath and told herself to calm down.

“I worked at Urban Mojo in Lagos. It’s a prestigious restaurant under the group of Marigold Royale Hotels. It’s owned by the Nejo family.” Isi realised then that she was rambling.

The older woman nodded. “That’s beautiful. Your parents must be proud of your accomplishments.”

“Yes. My mum is.”

“And your father?”

“He died a long time ago.”

Sympathy graced her features. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s fine. God has been very faithful. He has helped us through the years.” Maybe she should have listened to Adeniran and followed his pace. They were his family, he knew them best. *God, I believe You are in control of this meeting. I don’t understand some things now, but I trust You. Have Your way here, Lord. Do what only You can do and let everything go smoothly.*

Her phone chimed with an incoming message and Isi fished her phone out of her purse and relief washed over her when she saw it was from Adeniran.

I’m on my way. Will be there shortly. Hope you’re okay. Don’t take anything till I get there.

Isi typed fast: *I'm fine. Expecting you.* And then returned her phone to her purse when no reply came immediately after. She felt the weight of the older woman's stare from her position on the couch opposite her, and Isi allowed herself to smile as she forced her gaze to wander around the room to the white walls, the polished wooden room divider that stood close to the wall that held family photos, decorative bowls, wooden artefacts of elephants and beautiful stone sculptures of African woman statues with cornrows.

"Oh, that portrait is really beautiful," Isi remarked, gazing at the painting of the yellow hibiscus flower.

"That belonged to Amelia, Adeniran's mother." Isi turned her eyes to the woman.

"She loved flowers. Most especially that strain of flower. I think somehow it reminded her of good things. Happiness. Joy. Brighter days. We had a strain of those flowers growing in the former house before it withered away and died not too long after her passing."

Isi stood and refocused her attention on the portrait. She squinted her eyes at the inscription beneath the flower: *I have told you these things, that My joy and delight may be in you, and that your joy and gladness may be of full measure and complete and overflowing.* Her gaze shifted to the photo frame beneath it.

"Was that Adeniran's mother?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. She was a beautiful woman, wasn't she?"

"Yes." Isi could see the resemblance. Adeniran took after his mother with her fair complexion and her eyes. Her face was devoid of any expression. The woman had to be in her mid-twenties when the picture was taken. *What was she like? How did she end up being a fifth wife?* Isi didn't realise she had verbalised her thoughts till Adeniran's stepmother started to respond.

"It wasn't something she wanted to do. When she first came into the house she was always sad and crying. Who could blame her? She was young. She'd finished her studies in the university and was soon told she was going to marry a man twice her age." The woman chuckled to herself. "It didn't matter to her that he was a prince and potential king. She was more interested in pursuing her career. She majored in Mass Communications but aspired to be a teacher. As an only child, she was responsible for caring for her ageing father, who thought it best to send his

daughter off to be married rather than die thinking she would spend the rest of her life suffering."

Compassion washed over Isi. She wanted to weep for the woman who had her hopes and dreams taken away without her consent. A woman who was forced into an arranged marriage by a father out of love or selfishness…or maybe both. Whatever the case, it wasn't the life she'd planned. And Isi felt a connection to Adeniran's mother.

"But then, Adeniran's father was quite taken with her. Very much so. And there was nothing he wouldn't have done for her." She spoke without bite or bitterness. "The portrait was given to her as a gift from the wife of one of our husband's business partners. And seeds to grow them. She was a Christian woman. She and Amelia just got along with each other like old friends. After that visit with the woman, something about her changed. Like she resigned herself to her fate and decided to live her life forward. She became more involved but then none of the other wives liked her. They thought she was a snob. I thought so as well. She had what I tried but could never have and I despised her for it."

Alarm bells sounded in Isi's head. "Why are you telling me all this?"

She sighed. "Because I don't know what Adeniran has told you about this family. Or about me." She rose and walked across the room to where a collection of framed photographs rested on a polished wooden room divider, where she picked up a small picture frame of Adeniran when he was a little younger than a teenager. "That boy grew up going through things he shouldn't have. Of course, none of this would have happened if his mother had been alive. And I know she would hate to see him like this."

At the woman's candour, Isi relaxed a little. "Adeniran doesn't talk about his family. But I'm interested in getting to know you and everyone."

The woman studied her again for a few seconds. Isi wondered if she'd said anything wrong and watched as she turned around and placed the picture frame back in place. She made her way back to her seat and sat down.

"I didn't know that time, but Amelia was the best friend I ever had." The older woman released a prolonged breath. "It was sad to see her go."

"What happened to her?"

"My dear, it's a long story. But a story that brings pain and sorrow. No one really knows what happened. Everything seemed to happen so fast."

“But you do.” Isi had meant for the words to come out as a question but instead, it was a statement.

“Not everyone wants to know the truth. A lot have preconceived ideas of that day.” She looked at Isi wearily, like thoughts of the past held too many things that were hard for her to say. “But it is well. It’s not something we should discuss on your first day here. Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat? I have prepared pounded yam and egusi if you are interested. Or would you prefer something more English?”

“I’m fine with anything, Ma.”

“Are you sure?”

Isi laughed. “I’m very sure. Is Adeniran’s father around? Will he be joining us?”

Something akin to sadness flickered in her eyes and it was gone in seconds. “He had to retire to his room, but I’m sure you’ll get to meet with him soon. After all, we have all the time.”

Isi was a bit taken aback by that but nodded.

It wasn’t too long after that they moved to the dining area. Like the small living room, it was also tastefully furnished with a round dining table and four cushioned side chairs and had more of an intimate setting. They talked more about other topics—none close to their previous discussion. Isi listened to her talk about her days in Edo state and later, how she came to know Christ a few years ago.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life.” Tears welled in her eyes but none slid down her cheeks. “I don’t know why I’m saying this to you. Maybe God sent you here for a reason. Maybe you’re the glue to fix this mistake I caused.” She exhaled and picked up her spoon, but her hand shook and she dropped it back on the plate. “One day I hope all will be forgiven.”

The sorrow and guilt in her eyes tore at Isi’s heart and Isi felt sorry for her. “I know God has already forgiven you.” *Dear God, she said she came to You a while ago. You alone know the heart of a person. Please let her know that You love her, and let her release the load from her heart and walk in the peace that comes with Your forgiveness.*

“Adeniran is lucky to have you.”

A door slammed in the distance, an annoyed tone which resembled Adeniran’s and hurried steps came towards them. They both glanced at the door as Adeniran appeared. He was dressed in a white agbada with beautiful

detailing on the chest region. But Isi shelved her admiration for him and took in his gaze that darkened when he saw the food in front of Isi.

Isi rose. “Welco–”

“Why are you eating alone with her?” He snapped at her. “Where’s Sade?”

“You’re welcome, Oba Adeniran. Please, why don’t you take your seat and join us.”

Isi looked at his stepmother and back at Adeniran’s angry gaze. “She left for a meeting.”

“Where’s my father?”

“He’s resting in his room,” Adeniran’s stepmother answered.

“Is he coming anytime soon?”

“No.”

“Let’s go, Isi.”

Isi’s eyes widened. “But—”

“Now!” He spun around and walked out.

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1. African wax prints
2. Typical breakfast in Nigeria consists of corn porridge and fried bean cakes.
3. Wow! You really get around!
4. Johhny Just Come to describe a person that's new to a place.
5. a long flowing garment worn by men and women alike.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

Adeniran

Adeniran was working hard to calm himself down. When he walked in and saw her seated at the table with food in front of her, he thought he was going to have a heart attack because his heart was pounding so hard against his chest. They were still in his family house, seated in his car. He'd told his driver and head of security to wait outside the car. He couldn't take Isi to her hotel without drawing unwanted attention to themselves, and it was obvious they needed to talk.

"Why are you so upset?" She inquired quietly.

Her soft voice helped to calm him down, but not completely. "I gave you a clear warning, Isi. "Don't you believe I have a right to be upset?"

"I know. And I apologise. Did you expect them to poison me?"

"What's the point of telling you what I think when you're apparently going to do whatever you want?"

"You know it's not like that. I prayed before eating. I didn't get any nudges to not eat."

He almost scoffed at that. "Then what's it like?" He could feel his rage rising. "I'm saying it again, Isi. I don't want you talking to that woman, let alone eating anything she has ever cooked."

"Then why did I come here if not to meet and speak with your parents?"

"She's not my mother."

"Alright, *step*mother."

“Stepmother or not, she means nothing to me.”

Isi’s brows drew together. “Why? At the very least, give me a reason.”

“Because she’s not who you think she is!” Adeniran paused for a moment to collect himself. Then he glanced out the tinted windows, relieved that no one on the outside could see in. “She murdered my mother,” he said quietly.

“I- I didn’t know.” He could hear her hesitation. And the last thing he wanted was her pity. Or, worse, treating him as if he were some lost boy still fighting his childhood battles. “She confessed to it?”

“I know because it all points to her.” And he was looking forward to her confession.

“Why would you think so?”

His gaze snapped to hers.

“I’m not saying she didn’t do it. I only want to understand.”

“You shouldn’t trust so easily, Isi. People constantly hide their true selves behind masks.”

“I’m just trying to understand,” she repeated. “I think it would help me put the pieces together. Maybe I can help.”

“It’s not your place to understand!” When he saw her flinch, he tried to soften his tone. “You are going to marry me. Not them. I’m the one you need to be concerned about. I’m the one you should try to understand. I expect you to trust me and follow my instructions when I give them to you.”

Her lips were pressed together.

“I’m sorry if it looks like I’m bossing you around. I- I just don’t trust anyone right now.”

“Even your own family?”

“Sade, Wunmi and Funsho are exceptions. I don’t trust anyone else.”

"What if there's more truth to be found that will change everything?" What if you're clinging to your perception of reality because you want it to be true and are unwilling to accept anything else?"

Adeniran frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Be still and listen, Adeniran, the small voice spoke to his heart.

“What if your stepmother has information about your mother’s death that can help you heal? Would you listen?”

“What did she say to you?”

“It’s not what she said. It’s what I observed.”

He narrowed his eyes.

"We talked while I was waiting for you. She pointed out your mother's picture to me. I noticed how she talked about your mother, and she sounded remorseful about whatever happened all those years ago. She stated that they were friends." Isi glanced at him, her eyes shimmering with tears. "Adeniran, she spoke with such pain, and I believe you should listen to what she has to say. You never know what you might discover."

Adeniran swallowed forcefully. That was his greatest fear. He had no idea what he would find. Everything up until that point had been a dead end. His discoveries all led to nothing concrete because everyone was tightlipped about it. He hadn't come across the truth, but everything pointed to Oseye.

"Adeniran?"

"Isi, please, leave things as they are. Don't even consider doing any detective work here. I don't intend for you to have anything to do with them after we are married."

"I know what God told me."

He dragged his gaze back to her, wary of the direction the conversation was taking. "What did God say?"

"That there's more to the story. And I believe if you would only listen, you would get more out of this. According to what I've heard, your mother was a kind-hearted woman who loved you. She won't like seeing you like this."

His jaw hardened. "So everybody says. It's best if we end this discussion."

"Okay. But will you at least consider everything I've said?"

"I'm not certain."

Adeniran caught a glimpse of sadness in her eyes before she shifted her gaze. His gaze moved down her frame, taking in the one-shouldered Ankara gown she was wearing, which had a knot cinched around her tiny waist. Her braids fell her back and a scarf of the same material was half-wrapped around her head. He hadn't even taken the time to compliment her on her appearance.

"You look stunning."

She didn't respond. He tried not to think about whether he'd been a little too harsh in his words. But he told himself he had to be. *It's for her good.* He couldn't bear the idea of something happening to her.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry the day turned out like this. I’ll arrange for a driver to take you home.”

Her silence undid him.

“Isi, talk to me.”

He watched her take a slow breath and turn to him with a faint smile. “I’m tired. And I need some time alone.”

“Okay. Can I call you later on at night?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should just talk tomorrow instead.”

He gave a single nod. “Alright then.”

When he called his sister later, he was going to give her an earful.

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CHAPTER FORTY

ADENIRAN

It had been a sleepless night. Nightmares of his mother staring lifelessly at the ceiling, her face transforming into Isi, this time laying on the floor with foam oozing from her mouth. When those dreams occurred, he awoke twice, sweat pouring down his brow and fear overwhelming him. He'd called her the first time to ensure she was okay. Her groggy voice, roused from sleep when she answered, washed over him relief. He went back to sleep, and the second time it happened, he fought the urge to call her, instead spending the remaining hours talking to God while Isi's words rang in his head, making him doubt himself and everything he'd believed all along.

I know what God told me… that there's more to the story…

Adeniran had no idea what to think or feel other than the hostility and blinding pain he'd known for years. *What do You expect of me, God?* When he told Isi that he didn't want anything to do with them, he meant it. I don't want to be a part of a family like that. Even so, he couldn't shake the heaviness in his chest. *What do You expect of me, God?* There was no clear response. Only minutes of agonising silence.

"What would you have me do, God?" He repeated the question aloud this time into the open space of his bedroom.

A long-forgotten Scripture came to mind: *I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth, you will have many trials and*

sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. Whatever the case may be, he would speak his mind to Oseye. Isi was right; he had to stop fighting. He had to face his fears head-on and after that, he could make the necessary decisions. And whatever happened, happened.

Later that morning, as soon as the car pulled into the compound, Adeniran stormed into the house, ignoring the people who had gathered to greet him. He'd rescheduled a few meetings for later in the day, knowing that he couldn't postpone his conversation with Oseye and his father.

“Ọba,” Talabi prostrated.

“Where’s my stepmother?” He snapped out.

“She’s in the visitor’s living room.”

Adeniran marched in that direction, ignoring the pain in his leg. He pulled the door open and saw her sitting by the window, a pair of petite reading glasses perched on her nose with a book in her hand. She stood to her feet, confusion written on her face.

“Ọba Adeniran? What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know what lies you’ve been telling Isi but it has to stop now! Stop spreading lies about what happened.”

Oseye shook her head. “I’m not spreading any lies. What I told her is the truth.”

"You're giving up the impression that you're innocent."

"No. I cannot be exonerated from what happened, but I did not kill your mother."

“Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not lying!” Her voice cracked. “I’m telling the truth. I wasn’t the one who killed your mother,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “but I am still just as guilty as if I was the one that did it. I knew what Mummy Ore and Big Mummy were planning. I knew she was going to give you those sweets. But I did not prevent it from happening. I had no idea your mother would take it.”

Adeniran slumped against the wall. “Don’t,” he whispered.

“It’s the truth.”

He closed his eyes tightly, and the memories rushed back to him like a raging flood, the force of the water tearing down the walls of his memory he'd worked so hard to keep back—to keep it far away so he wouldn't have to revisit. He’d walked into his mother's room. He assumed she had simply missed seeing his face because she had sent Ore to find him. He'd just

walked in, thinking he didn’t need to read because his mother had only just given birth.

He was wrong.

"You're late," his mother said.

Adeniran only stared at her in stunned silence.

"You thought we wouldn't have any lessons because you now have a little sister?" His mum shook her head. "Grab a book and sit down. We have a few hours to catch up."

"But—"

"Excuses are just reasons to stay in mediocrity.” She jutted her chin at her bookshelf. “Take a book on my shelf and let's start."

Adeniran's hand instinctively moved to the sweets and chocolates hidden in his pocket. He'd been looking forward to eating them in private.

"The longer you stand there, the longer our lesson will be. You have already missed a few lessons and we need to catch up."

He pushed his feet forward to the bookshelf, located the book and took the chair next to his mother’s bed. A small cough came from the bedside crib on the other side of his mother’s bed and his mother turned to pat his sister for a minute then returned her attention to him. “Let’s start.”

For what felt like hours they pored over the book together, speaking in low tones as they read. His stomach grumbled from time to time. The ache in his tummy worsened and he could hardly concentrate. With his other hand, not holding the book, he reached into his pocket and dug out the edge of the wrapper, pulling it out slowly so the sound of the nylon wrapper wouldn’t alert his mother.

“What are you doing?”

His hand froze on the sweet. He raised his eyes at his mother’s narrowed gaze.

“Where did you get sweets and chocolates from?”

Adeniran knew his mother didn’t like him taking sweets from any of his siblings or stepmothers.

And so he lied.

"Mosadi gave them to me."

She raised a brow. "Mosadi?"

Adeniran's head jerked up and down.

“Give them to me.” She stretched out her hand, open palm.

“But Mummy—”

“No buts. Give them to me. All of them.”

Grudgingly, he placed everything in her palm. Tears pooled in his eyes.

“But I’m hungry,” he whined as she tucked them away in her drawer.

“Well, you can’t have any sweets until you finish your reading for today.”

“But mummy…”

“No, Adeniran. No reward till you get your work done. You’ve barely read the first paragraph in the last hour.” Then her voice softened. “We have achieved a lot already. Don’t let it all go to waste. If you’re hungry, go to the kitchen and let the cook give you some food. Plus it’s late, you know you can’t have sweets before dinner.”

Pouting, Adeniran did as he was told.

A week later he found the sweet wrappers in the bin when he went to sharpen the pencil. “You ate my sweets?”

She winced. A guilty expression swept across her face. “Yes. I’m sorry, Adeniran. I’ll get you new ones. My mouth was bitter last night and I needed something sweet. Some of them were starting to spoil. Don’t worry. If you do very well today, I’ll send one of the drivers to get a pack and I’ll give you more than what Mosadi gave me.”

“It wasn’t Mosadi that gave me,” he muttered.

“What did you say?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“How was school?”

“It was fine.” His English teacher was half impressed that he could read a line with rhythm and without sounding robotic.

“Okay. Let’s begin.” They were barely twenty minutes in when she complained of exhaustion. “I don’t think we’ll be able to do much today. I have a headache.”

Adeniran perked up. “Can I go?”

She waved him away. “Yes. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

He dashed out the door before she could change her mind. Tomorrow became the next and the next. When Adeniran wanted to check on her a week later after school, he saw Big Mummy holding Sade close to her chest, dancing in slow circles so she could sleep.

“Your mummy is sick and not in the right frame of mind.”

“Since when?”

“Don’t ask me stupid questions. Isn’t it your fault? You passed on whatever was wrong with your brain to your mother.” The shock of Big

Mummy’s words had caused him more pain than his teacher had when he mocked him at school. With Wunmi and Funsho away at the boarding house, he had no one to ask or speak to. Every one of his stepmothers were staring at him strangely, and all Adeniran could do was hide away in his room and cry.

Days later, Adeniran snuck into his mother’s room and discovered it in disarray. The crib beside her bed was gone. His mother’s gaze was distant. Cold. Soulless. He took slow steps towards her till he was only a few inches away from her.

“Mummy?” He could hear the fear in his voice.

His mother’s eyes moved to him. “Me?” She directed a finger at herself. “Are you talking to me?”

“Mum–”

"Who's your mother? What is your mother’s name?” She screamed at him. “Your mother is mad! She's an evil witch! Get out! Get out!"

Adeniran flinched.

She didn't even give him a chance to move when she slapped her palm against his chest, knocking the breath out of him. Because of the force of her push, he stumbled backwards and heard a crack of glass as he stepped on something. His back slammed into the wall, causing pain to shoot up his back. Adeniran looked down and saw shards of broken glass, as well as the cracked picture frame of her yellow hibiscus flower. His eyes widened as his father entered the room, his gloomy demeanour confirming Big Mummy's statements that perhaps it was his fault.

Things went from bad to worse after that.

Adeniran let the memory fizzle. Not able to bear recalling it anymore. He fixed his gaze on Oseye. “So Ore’s mother orchestrated everything?”

Oseye sighed and shook her head. "It's not just her. We were all guilty. But it was Big Mummy who suggested it first. Because I was the closest to your mother, I only provided what we required." She paused for a moment. "One night, I crept into her room. She was fast asleep. Your mother once told me that she kept a memento of each of her children's births. Their first hair, their first tooth—she mentioned making a mini scrapbook to give you all. I stole yours from her closet. And that's what we did."

“How do I know you aren’t lying? That you aren’t pointing fingers when they are not even here to defend themselves?”

Oseye’s shoulders sagged. “I wish they were here; so we could confess together. Your mother trusted me, but I betrayed her. But she wasn’t supposed to be the one. It was meant to be you. We all knew you were going to be great. We heard what the pastor said on your naming. None of the other wives wanted that to happen.” She gave a sad laugh, resting a palm on her stomach. “Oh, Oseye Asemota! Look at you. See what you’ve become. I had no children and I was completely lost. I didn’t know what my life was about. Bitter. So I had nothing to lose and nothing to gain except the disgusting satisfaction of hurting your mother, because somehow… somehow she found joy in a situation where I was miserable. I didn’t know it at the time, but your mother was teaching me to be joyful no matter my circumstances.

“Like your mother, my parents married me off. But unlike her, my parents were well-off. I was the problem. They claimed I was becoming too difficult for them to manage. I was given to your father as a gift, along with some of my father’s lands. Your father was never particularly interested in me; when he was, I was elated, but when he wasn’t, I was miserable. His interest waned considerably after I was unable to bear children for him. When Amelia arrived—beautiful, yet sad, it was as if I didn’t exist. When your mother gave him more children, I became nothing more than a piece of property to him.” She sighed. “Big Mummy delivered everything to the spiritualist, and the job was completed. We were all given the candy to give you. Only you. The others had to be more cautious because of their kids. After all…one of them had a better chance to be the next Oba.” She peered at him, tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks. “That’s the full story. Amelia did not die of postpartum psychosis. She died because of the bitterness and envy in the house. Because of me.”

And Adeniran had fallen into their hands. He felt sick. “You’re worse than all of them.”

Oseye bowed her head and fell to her knees. "I apologise. I'm truly sorry. Please forgive me."

“Why did you keep quiet all these years?” He looked at her, his anger once again rising. “Why didn’t you tell my father? Why didn’t you tell any of us instead of letting us think you were the only one?”

“Because I asked her not to say anything,” his father said behind him. “Oseye, will you get up! You’re disgracing yourself.”

“You had no right to keep it away from us.”

His father walked over to a couch with the aid of his walking stick. “I do what I believe is best for the entire family.” He sat down and glanced at Adeniran without a show of remorse. “Of what benefit would it be to let the whole of Ondo know the secrets of this family?”

“I’m not talking about other people; I’m referring to your own family.”

“Don’t think there’s full-blown love between everyone in this family. Everyone is always looking out for themselves. When the word gets out to every member of the family, it would have eventually gotten to the press with the highest bidder and every member of this family will have to suffer for it. Think about the scandals and what the kingmakers would say. And what about our business affiliates? You think they wouldn’t be touched by the news?” His father’s gaze narrowed. “And how do you think you’ll have ascended the throne? How do you expect to achieve all the promises you made in your flowery speech? I did you all a favour. I took the enemy away from this household in honour of your mother. Be grateful.”

“She was my mother!”

“Amelia was my wife before she became your mother,” was his father’s cold response.

Adeniran stared incredulously at his father—his explanation made little sense to him. “In all the years, I thought I was the only person you despised, but it seems you have no love for anyone but yourself.”

His father sighed.

“You think you did all this for everyone but you were only protecting yourself and your failures.”

“Adeniran…” Oseye pleaded.

“Don’t try to placate him,” his father ordered.

“I am not placating him, Ezra. Amelia was my closest friend. She wouldn’t want to see the two of you going at each other like this.” Oseye gazed at her husband. For how long will this go on? I’ve watched the two of you for years, praying to Papa God that the both of you will truly love one another.” Her gaze shifted to Adeniran. “You need to discuss your issues and make peace.”

“Even if we make peace we can never be close. That’s life for you.” He rose to his feet, walking stick in hand, and walked out of the room.

“I’ll keep praying for the both of you.”

Adeniran didn’t see the need. “I’m sorry for everything. My actions over the years were wrong.”

Oseye smiled. “It’s okay.”

Adeniran had no more words to say, and so he left.



Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

Adeniran sat in his home library, which also functioned as his office in the palace. The walls were lined with dark wood built-in shelves. Leather furniture and polished hardwood ceilings with modern light fixtures gave the room a contemporary and sophisticated appeal. Like the rest of the palace, a lot of money had been spent to keep the Palace looking regal. He'd been intimidated by the weight of responsibility placed on his shoulders when he first entered the palace, but he'd felt the Spirit of God upon him, along with a deep assurance that all would be well. Now, doubt tore apart his confidence to the point where he thought he'd suffocate in his fears.

Maybe his father was right. Maybe he wasn’t cut out to be the Osemawe.

And all he wanted to do now was flee and never return. Take Isi far away from the lies and hatred on his father’s side of the family. He gave an angry shake of his head: What on earth was he thinking? Would she want anything to do with him with all this drama? What woman wanted that kind of life? Isi didn’t deserve that.

“Oba?”

Quickly, he wiped away his tears at the sound of his PA’s voice. “Come in.”

His PA bowed. “Miss Oboh is here to see you, Oba.”

“Let her in.” He’d asked Sade to bring Isi with her to the Palace, knowing the discussion they needed to have.

"Hey," she said, dropping her purse on an upholstered armchair, and Adeniran drank in her presence like a parched man in the desert. After a few days of not seeing her, he had made decisions he knew were best for him; now he dreaded what he had to say. She approached him with a smile, but her expression changed to one of concern as she got closer. "Are you alright?"

He shook his head.

She took a seat next to him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I spoke with Oseye.”

“Oh. How did it go?"

"Not very good." He shook his head. "I believe it’s best if you leave." He didn't want her to go, but he also didn't want her to see this side of him. This shattered torn-up part of him that wept at the horrors of his childhood, that still mourned the death of his mother, and the rage inside him at the kind of father he had. It all reached its peak when he realised that everything he'd known and believed had been a lie. Adeniran looked at her and noticed the puzzled expression on her face. "You don't have to stay in Ondo any longer."

“Y-you want me to leave?”

He heard the hurt in her voice. “You don’t understand—”

“Then explain it to me, Adeniran! Don’t shut me out. If you talk to me…I could understand.”

Then he stared her in the eyes. “You don’t belong here, Isimeme. Not with me. I’m just a man who keeps making mistakes. You’ll probably be happier with Nelly.” In his ears, his words sounded cold and defeated. He might as well just have given up because he was sick of everything.

“Would you like me to leave you alone? Is that really what you want?”

“Yes.” He ground out; even though it hurt to say the words aloud. “Get out of my life, Isi. I’m not good enough for you.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

ISIMEME

Is this the life she wanted? She'd lost track of how many times she'd asked herself that question. She'd spent days seeking God's face after the driver had dropped her off, repeatedly asking if being here was His will until Sade called that Adeniran had asked her to bring Isi over to the palace. She could easily call her mother and inform her that they had broken up. Isi stood to lose nothing. *In your prayers, remember him.* God only encouraged her to pray for him and assured her that His will for her was good. Was this good objectively or subjectively? Because, from where she stood, Adeniran possessed qualities that she couldn't stand. Isi had been desperate to speak with Nelly and seek his advice.

Wouldn't it be easier to settle for a life with Nelly? the harsh voice whispered to her, coming from one corner of her mind that fed her doubts.

I see not as man sees. I know the heart of man. I know what I have put in place for Adeniran, a softer, gentler voice settled in familiar territory in her heart.

That much was true. And no one was perfect. Everybody had their flaws.

So? Is this the flaw you want? the harsh whisper again.

Was it? Isi squeezed her eyes shut. She could walk away. She could forget everything that happened with Adeniran and beg Nelly to forgive her and take her back. Deep down he still loved her. And she still cared for him…only, not like before, although deep down she knew those feelings

would arise if needed. But was it God’s will for her? And the answer was as clear as rainbows in the sun after a rainy day.

“My uncle almost abused me sexually.” She peered at him. “I was a teenager.”

He swung his eyes at her in disbelief, and she felt his rage of anger deepening, washing over him when he clenched his hands into fists. *“What?”* She flinched at the sharp edge in his voice.

“It was a long time ago.” She inhaled deeply. “We were alone for long periods on the days my aunt either had to go to work or to her daughter’s house to help with her new baby. And then one day we were alone in the living room. He was sitting on the chair reading the newspaper. I dozed off while watching TV. I woke up when I felt his hands on me.” She squeezed her eyes, as though trying to block the memory but it forced its way through anyway. “I slapped his hand away, jumping out of the chair and moving far away from him. I asked him what he was trying to do. He said that I was pretty and we would be fast. That aunty Edehia wouldn’t know. It would just be the two of us.” His agony mirrored her own when she opened her eyes. She wanted him to take her in his arms, but it was best he didn’t. She knew he needed to give her space to say whatever she needed to say.

“I told him no. He promised to pay for my catering school and send me abroad to culinary school with what was left of my father’s money after he sold the house and took the proceeds for his own family. I still said no. I couldn’t do it. Not even to reclaim what was legally mine and my mother’s. I ran out of the house to a nearby pay phone and called my mother with the little money I had on me. She came over the next day, ready to fight. And my aunt was present. My uncle looked remorseful, he blamed it on the devil and promised my mother it would never happen again.

“I took precautions; I locked my room all the time and made sure I was never alone with him. Even then, the rest of my time in that house was a nightmare. My cousins were unaware of the full story, but they knew things were bad between their parents and me.” She shrugged. “They just thought it had to do with money and me being ungrateful. However, each time I looked at my uncle, his face held regret and shame. He couldn't make eye contact with me for a while, and then one day, I guess he couldn't deal with the shame any longer and resort to anger. Like his wife, he blamed me for everything."

“And you didn’t think to correct them? Your cousins?”

She gave a half-shrug. “They wouldn’t have believed me anyway.”

“Why?” He asked hoarsely. “Why are you telling me this now?”

Isi faced him. “Because I wanted to let you know that I didn’t have it all easy—and that my family has their share of idiosyncrasies, and it’s okay for you to be vulnerable with me. I’m not blindly looking for some Prince Charming or someone without flaws or a not-so-good backstory.” She touched his arm. “And also because I’m afraid you would go back to being your broody self. Everyone’s backstory is different, but you don’t have to let yours dictate your life.”

Adeniran lowered his gaze to his hands. They were shaky. “Picturing any man putting his hands on you with force is not a good thing to think about right now.” He relaxed his hands briefly then balled them into fists again. “Even if your uncle is dead.”

She laughed lightly, shaking off the heavy weight of tension on her shoulders. “I know. And I’m where I am today because of God’s goodness. Having Jesus in my life is my joy.”

“My mother used to say the same thing. That Jesus was her joy.”

She smiled. *Dear God, please help him. Help him see Your light that’s always been there,* she prayed silently.

“I’m dyslexic,” he said quietly. “It’s a reading disability. I was doing badly in school, but my mum took it upon herself to help me. My dad hated it, but my mum persisted. I started getting better at reading—even though I still hated it. I spent most of my free time in her room, reading over her book collection. She was pregnant with my sister and could still whoop me if I messed up so I tried my best not to. She encouraged me when my step-siblings teased me. Everything was going well for us until things changed.”

He unfurled his hands and looked down at his palms.

“At first she lost her appetite and then she became seriously ill to the point she couldn't even breastfeed her baby. Different doctors were brought in to help her, but they all said the same thing: she was beyond medical assistance and there was nothing they could do." Adeniran flinched as he remembered that moment. He’d gone numb all over. "And then gradually she lost complete cognition. She had this distant look in her eyes when she looked at any of us. When our father walked into the room, she had no idea who he was. She had no idea who her children were. She didn’t recognize any of us."

Isi placed a hand on his back. Just a hand there so he could feel her comfort without her saying the words.

"I couldn’t stop wondering what had happened. For years, I assumed my stepmother had a hand in it. It was entirely my fault. If I had only told her the truth…Those sweets were meant for me and I lied and gave them to her. I’m just as much to blame as they are. It should have been me who died." He felt sick just thinking about how long he'd held Oseye captive in his thoughts. Mentally cursing her for all the pain she caused his brother and sisters, meanwhile, it hadn't even been her who concocted the whole thing. "It was supposed to be me who died. Not her." Tears filled his eyes. "I'm only a waste of space here. I don't have a college degree. I don't have football anymore. I'm basically nothing."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. Money isn't all that matters. I've failed my mother in every way."

"No, you haven't," Isi replied softly. She cupped his chin and turned his face to her. The tears in her eyes made his chest tighten. He didn't want to make her cry. Even worse, he didn't want her to shed any tears for him. But he couldn't take his eyes off her pained expression. "Adeniran, you are not a failure. And just because you made a mistake doesn't make you one. It only makes you human and reminds you of how much you should rely on God."

He shook his head, but her hand remained firmly against his jaw.

"I believe in you, Adeniran. You have come this far. You’ve spent years trying to prove to your father and family that you are more than capable and enough. And, I'm sorry to say it, but even if your father never realises how great you are, you need to know that our heavenly Father sees how great you are."

He took her hand from his jaw, squeezed it gently and shook his head, fighting the words and whatever effect they seemed to have on him. "I’m not so great. Life moulds you into the person you are. This is who I am."

"I disagree. Life puts you to the test—it stretches you to your limit but never to your breaking point, but it's up to you whether you want to break down or get back up. You get to choose who you want to be."

“What if I’m not sure of who I want to be? Sometimes it scares me how much I could fail.” He chuckled softly, but Isi could sense his anguish. “I actually thought, like Joseph was in a high position, that being Osemawe would make me laugh last. I was wrong.”

“Then you need to go back to God and let Him remind you. Once in a while, we forget who we are. We always have to trace our steps back to God, soak up His Word and fellowship in His presence. God put Joseph in that position to help His people, and there's a reason God put you here as Osemawe."She pointed at his chest. “You need to get that stony heart out and replace it with a heart of flesh. Since God’s Spirit lives in us we should be willing to bear fruit that is consistent with our new life in God’s Kingdom.”

“You remind me of my mum.” He gave a low chuckle. “She said a lot of things that I didn’t understand until now. She would say when we give our lives to Christ, the Holy Spirit plants a seed in us, and in order to bear fruit that is consistent with Him being in our lives, we must follow Him. It’s how much we yield ourselves to Him, His pruning, that we get to bloom and shine….just like her yellow hibiscus.”

“Hmmm…I love your mother’s heart.”

He looked down at his hands. “I haven’t done much of that lately… allowing the Holy Spirit to accomplish a lot in my life.”

“You talk like it’s too late,” she said softly.

Adeniran turned to look at her. “She would have loved you.” He looked away. “Probably would have smacked my head for how badly I’ve treated you. I’ll understand if you change your mind about us.”

“Yes, you have. But, as much as I know it’s God’s will, my being here with you is also my choice as well, and I’m trusting that you’ll be good to me.”

He took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips. Her insides roared as he kissed the inside of her wrist, despite her silent stare. "I won't hurt you, Isi," he stated emphatically. "I'll do my best not to, with God assisting me and being present in our lives at all times." He gave her a timid smile. "In this love triangle we're in."

Her lips curled in a smile.“I gave my heart to God, and He’s entrusting it to you.”

Adeniran leaned close, his mild cologne suffusing her senses and making her breath catch. As his lips brushed her cheeks, she closed her eyes.

"Isi…You smell like raspberries," he said against her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

It’s not yet time, Beloved.

She heard and she wanted to obey, but she was weak. *Please, God, let him just kiss me once…*

Adeniran suddenly drew back. “I’m sorry, Isi, but I will need to put some space between us.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she felt a little light-headed and disoriented. “Oh?” And a little embarrassed.

“Our proximity isn't really helping matters because all I want to do at the time is to close the gap between them and claim your lips. I’m restraining myself and pushing the thoughts to the back of my mind because I know I can’t.” He got to his feet and rubbed his neck. “I need to clear my head a bit. I’ll take a shower and we can go out for lunch.” He glanced at his watch. Grimaced. “Or dinner?”

As she laughed, her shoulders relaxed. Her heart rate had returned to normal. "All right."

“I’ll be back.” She watched him as he left the room.

Isi understood. She also needed to put some physical space between her emotions and what she wanted him to do.

When he returned they didn’t wait in his study but headed straight for the door. Sade, who had made herself scarce, was back in the picture. Beaming at them. “Glad to see all is well with you two.” Adeniran asked if they could have dinner at her place. He was sure tongues would be wagging in the palace with Isi’s private meeting with him in his study.

Sade shrugged. “Sure. You’re obviously buying.”

“When are you going to tell your brother and sisters about Oseye?” She said to him when they were in his car, heading to Sade’s.

“Soon. I’ll like to pray about everything some more. I want God to lead me on this.”

“Be gracious.”

“I will.”

Adeniran

He ached to pick up where they'd left off when he'd felt compelled to step back and wait for the appropriate time when they were married and she was his alone to have and hold. *He who finds a wife finds a good thing. Don't ruin this good thing.* The instruction was clear, as was the warning. Knowing she was keeping herself until marriage, he was also doing the same. For years he'd killed off his desire to be with a woman. Even still, knowing the woman next to him was glaringly God's choice, he couldn't help how he felt especially knowing she felt the same way about him.

Patience, Adeniran. Patience. Again, he pushed the tempting thoughts from his mind and instead he settled for holding her close.

"I'm sorry for pushing you away."

"You should be," she teased, liking that things were easy between them on another level.

Following their laughter, Adeniran's expression became solemn. He stared at her silently for a few seconds before cupping the nape of her neck and gently bringing her into his arms. He felt her hesitate briefly and then she circled her arms around his waist, gradually allowing her weight to press against him in quiet surrender. He tucked his nose close to the slender curve of her neck and breathed her in. Her perfume's lingering flavour and the faint scent of raspberry. Marvelling in this woman whose life made him want what she had—making him realise how hungry and thirsty he'd been for God's joy in his life. He admired her for her ability to remain strong after everything she'd gone through. And he counted his blessings—thanking God for her. Nothing about her or them felt forced. It was all entirely natural, and he could spend an eternity in her embrace and warmth.

"How did I end up so lucky to have you?" He murmured against her ear.

The sound of her laughter reverberated against his chest. "It doesn't have anything to do with luck." She palmed his cheek, smiling. "God brought us together for a reason. And I'm glad I get to know the man God is shaping you into as we do life together."

Adeniran groaned. "I want to kiss you."

Isi placed a finger on his lips, shaking her head. "Not now."

“But isn’t that what your fairy tale movies are like? The man and woman kiss at the end of their declaration of love?”

She dropped her finger. “What?”

His lips curved in a smile. “I guess what I’m trying to say in so many words is that I love you. I love you Isimeme Oboh. And with all my heart, I choose to love you.”

Isi grinned. “I choose to love you too.”

“So can I have my kiss now?”

Isi jerked back, laughter in her eyes. “Not until the wedding.”

“You’re seriously going to make me wait that long?”

She nodded.

“I’ll send you a rose every day that you make me wait for you.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

NELLY

The wedding invitation was delivered a month ago. She was getting married in a matter of weeks and there was nothing he could do about it. The other day he heard someone laughing loudly and felt his gaze looking for the source, only to find a tall slim lady with a pretty smile, but it wasn't her. Isi was always with him even if she wasn't. The lyrical sound of her laughter was something he would have to live to forget. Only the more he tried to forget, the more he saw her in places he went to. He stopped himself so many times when he wanted to send her a text about something funny that had happened to him in the course of his day.

Why did he have to miss her?

Because you fell in love with her, you idiot. Isi was the only woman who had held his attention long after she'd caught it. He could lie to himself all he wanted but it didn't change the truth.

He slammed his fist on the horn even though there was no car in front of him.

"Are you alright?" his mother asked.

"I'm okay." His throat tightened. He would be. If his plans went through.

"I enjoyed my trip so much. Your sister was in tears when I was leaving. Someone that was busy making friends and didn't even have my time."

"I'm sure she'll be okay."

“Yes. I know it.” She sighed. “At first I was worried about her not going to church and forgetting everything we have taught her at home. But I was surprised that most of her friends are even church friends. God is good, Nelson. He has been good to me. I was so happy to see my sister after so many years that she’s been there. Your Aunty sends her gratitude and love.”

“It's good to know that you had a great time.” At least one woman he was caring for was enjoying his hard-earned money and appreciated him. “I love the pictures you sent me.”

“Maybe next time I can go with your father.”

Nelly shook his head. “I won’t be footing that bill.” He was too old for his mother to try to rope him to do something he wasn’t willing to do.

“You can’t continue like this. The relationship between you two should be fixed.”

“I’m not the one that broke it.”

“But you’re doing everything within your power to keep it broken.”

“I told her about what happened with your father. She was shocked and not happy about it. But I also told her I had forgiven him. If I was to live my life in bitterness and resentment, it wouldn’t get me anywhere.”

“You could have left him. Why didn’t you? Mummy, he caused you pain. He disrespected you.”

“At first I stayed because of you children. I was afraid of what would happen if I left and I would be alone fending for you children. And then I didn’t want to give up my position to let another woman come into my house. I may not have built the building but I built the family within it through my blood, sweat and unceasing prayers. I wasn’t going to let another woman raise my children or destroy my home. I chose to guard my heart and fight the real enemy of my marriage.” She exhaled again. “Your father isn’t perfect, Nelson. I still loved him and I was willing to fight if he was also willing to repent and work on making our marriage work. So if you want to be angry at him, be angry at me also for not doing as you expected.”

Nelly swiped a hand down his face. “It’s not like that, Mom.”

“No.” She sniffed and reached for a tissue from the tissue box on the dashboard. “I should have spoken to you about this sooner. I should have told you my reasons earlier instead of watching the relationship with your father crumble.” She blew her nose. “I also take responsibility. Forgive us.”

“You don’t owe me an apology.”

“Then forgive your father. I’m letting it go, why can’t you as well?”

He wished it were as simple as that. Only Nelly knew he would be lying to his mother if he said he would. He hadn’t even told Isi all about it, how it had brought forth attributes in him that never existed before discovering his father’s infidelity that led to a second family. Isi saw him as fun, capable, and trustworthy. He couldn’t stand her figuring out the depth of his flaws. Now he had lost her completely. Though no fault of his, maybe if he had been more open… she would have seen his need for her in his life. Regret dug into him like a disease, spreading through his body like some kind of untreatable cancer.

His mother left him to his thoughts as he drove them to the house.

“It’s good to have my precious wife back home with me.” Dad wrapped his mother in his arms in a warm embrace once they were at the house. “I missed you, [1]*iṣura mi*.” His mother held a sweet smile, blushing like a high school girl. Nelly dropped his mother’s luggage in a corner of the living room, feeling uncomfortable with their open affection for each other and he wanted to leave.

“I’ll excuse you two.”

“Son, wait.”

Nelly looked at his father. questioningly.

“Thank you for all you’ve done for this family. Your mother and I appreciate it. I know I’ve done a lot of things that are wrong before God and your mother, and are also wrong to you and your sisters. I hope one day you’ll find it in your heart to let things go and we can build our relationship as father and son.”

His mother looked at him expectantly. *Sorry, mum, it’s not going to be today.* “I’m going away for a while. At least for a few weeks.”

“Where are you going?” his mother asked.

“I need a break.”

“From what?” His father asked.

“Life, work.” None of his family knew about Isi. He had planned on telling them when things were official between them.

“And when will you return?” His father cleared his throat. “Your younger sister is—”

Nelly clenched his teeth. Was that all his father cared about? The money he was giving the other woman and her children? His mother seemed to sense his annoyance because she pressed her lips and slowly shook her

head. He understood the message, *don't widen the crack between you and your father.* Unfortunately Nelly didn't see a way out of it. "I'm aware she's preparing for a project and I'll sort it out. Don't worry about it."

His father glanced down and looked back at him. "Nelly—"

Nelly took two steps back. "Dad, it's okay. I'll see you and mum later."

He was in his car when his mother hurried over to him with a gift bag. "Are you certain you won't stay for dinner? At least let me catch up on what I've missed for the last few months," she pleaded.

He smiled. "We can always catch up later, Mum. I just need to clear my head. I'll be back before you know it."

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. "Okay then." She handed him the gift bag. "I got this for you."

"You shouldn't have."

"I'm your mother, I can still get things for you."

The corner of Nelly's lips twisted up in a smile. "Thanks, Mum."

"See you soon."

He nodded and drove off.

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1. My Treasure, a pet name in Yoruba.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

ISIMEME

TWO AND A HALF MONTHS LATER…

Nothing beats a private ball to commemorate the start of their new life. Adeniran's joke had been to throw a Beauty and the Beast-themed party, and Isi had agreed. Only because she mistook it for a joke. When he invited a party planner and Adeniran mentioned Isi's love for the Beauty and Beast story, she began tossing around ideas for a masked party in yellow and royal blue colour themes, with rose petals scattered across the tables and floor, and an enchanted rose under glass as centrepieces. Her ideas sounded so ridiculous, yet elaborate, romantic, and fairy-tale-like, that Isi had agreed to the party concept.

Her friends had wasted no time in assisting Isi in planning everything she would need, from helping her choose her wedding gown and hairstyles to lingerie that promised to have her man, husband, and king begging to make her his.

"Your life feels like it's been ripped from the pages of a storybook," Odavwaro exclaimed as she tried on her lovely floor-length french blue gown. It was made of a stretch velvet material with soft flutter sleeves and a modest back.

Erinma emerged from the dressing room wearing a Fuschia chiffon gown with a halter neckline and an A-line skirt. "It's mind-boggling to think that God had all of this planned from the beginning."

"That, I believe, is the best part of all. I went to Lagos because only God told me to. And then I met Nelly, and we reconnected." She paused, still distressed by Nelly's silence. Despite the invitation she and Adeniran had sent him, he was unsure if he would attend the wedding. Still, she smiled, knowing that God had something better in store for him. "You know, Adeniran said almost the same thing to me about God writing our love story."

"I never would have guessed Adeniran could say such things. He's always taken himself so seriously."

Isi smiled at them. Erinma had happily agreed to be her chief bridesmaid, and Odavwaro had agreed to be her bridesmaid. Her best friends would not have wanted it any other way. It didn't matter that their dresses were made by one of the country's top fashion designers. She could get married in a shapeless white cloth, or skip out on the beautiful one-shoulder canary yellow mermaid evening gown, and still be content that God had already blessed her far beyond her wildest dreams.

Isi and Adeniran had gone to her church in Lagos in preparation for the Big Day. Pastor John had agreed to fit them into his schedule and to see them for marriage counselling. Because of Adeniran's schedule, they'd had to publicise their upcoming wedding, and Isi had to accept the abrupt change in her lifestyle and privacy as the spotlight settled on her. Even so, Isi was taken aback by how calmly she handled everything. It was also unusual for her to have a PA, a lady attendant, and a bodyguard but something she had to get used to.

Then there were the rumours about her. What were they not calling her? A high-maintenance woman. Parasite. Moneysucker. Gold digger.

Interviews had been granted in the weeks leading up to the wedding, and the few gossip waggers who believed she was only out to get his money had been temporarily silenced when news got around about their God-orchestrated love story. Only Isi had blocked their words from her mind, refusing to let them affect her.

And now, despite the personal and external obstacles they had to overcome, they were man and wife.

“I love you,” she said to him, her words sincere as they swayed to Morian Peters' “I'll Wait For You”. The traditional wedding took place in Ondo after a family introduction in Benin, where Adeniran's siblings and Oseye met Isi's parents. The white wedding was held in Florence, Italy, in a

beautiful castle with breathtaking scenery. They exchanged vows in a private chapel in front of their friends and family, including many of Adeniran's teammates and Camille with her parents.

“I love you too,” he said.

She stood on tiptoes, cupping his cheeks. And pressed her lips to his. His touch on the small of her back was gentle. She locked her arms around his neck, beyond elated that they had found each other with God’s guidance in their lives.

“I can’t wait for you to show me all the fun places around here.” They planned to spend two weeks at his home in Florence before returning to Ondo.

With a sly grin, he leaned in close, telling her what he couldn’t wait to show her, and she slapped his arm, feeling the heat on her cheeks.

He laughed, then became solemn. “I know I’m no Prince Charming, but…”

She placed a finger on his soft lips. “You are my prince charming. And I love you.”

Read Erinma's story here

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Next Read...

Tito

She woke up from her spot beside the very obvious presence of a man and felt like she was going to be sick. *Ugh*, she groaned inwardly. *How much did I drink last night?* She opened her eyes and pressed both of her palms at the sides of her head. The room was spinning around her in circles like in a carousel of horses in an amusement park. Her head pounded as she took in her surroundings which were sort of familiar but at the same time so unfamiliar.

What else was new? This occurrence wasn't new to her; waking up in an unknown apartment happened at least once a month. And it hadn’t happened since she met Omar Jimoh, a real estate mogul. He was much older than she was, which was why he held onto his old-fashioned ideologies that a woman shouldn’t work, let alone handle a bottle.

Men! She rolled her eyes.

There were pillows pressed by her side and she blinked her eyes open to fully access her surroundings. The room was dark but not dark enough for her not to make out the grey walls, the flat-screen TV and the very obvious fact that this man had a clean, organised space. She'd been with different men and she'd seen all types of crazy. She lowered her gaze to the beige duvet covering half of her body. And then she finally roamed up the length of her bedmate's body and sighed in relief when she saw it was only Nelly, her longtime friend.

“You told me you couldn't sleep without me cuddling you. So I stayed with you. At first, I said no." He pressed his lips together, uncertain if he should keep talking. "Then you started crying and begged me to stay. So I did."

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Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts on Christians holding leadership positions in a traditional setting like in the case of Oba Adeniran?
2. As an opposite sex, would you rather fix a broken friendship with a male or female friend when romantic feelings are involved, or let it go? Why?
3. Which of the book characters would you most like to meet, and why?
4. Isimeme experienced a lot of uncomfortable situations throughout her life, discuss the measures she took to keep her joy intact.
5. Do you have any limits when it comes to forgiveness? How do you handle either having a limit or not?
6. Do you avoid confrontation? What conclusion did you reach without confronting the individuals involved, as in the case of Adeniran and Oseye?
7. What's your view on God being the exclusive Person that chooses a life partner?
8. Have you experienced unrequited love before? How did you get over it?
9. Do you have issues with your parents? And what steps do you believe you can take to address them?
10. Adeniran's football career was over, but his reign as king had just begun. When one door closes, how do you anticipate the open door?
11. How has Jesus brought you joy in the midst of your current difficulties?
12. Just as Isi prayed against Adeniran being God's choice for her, have you been in such a situation praying against God's perfect will for you? What was your final conclusion and if you accepted what was the journey to acceptance like?

Side Note: Do a search in the Bible for Scriptures on Joy and write some that resonate deeply with you. Remember these Scriptures in times you feel things are tough, overwhelming, or even when you have a great day.

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About Author

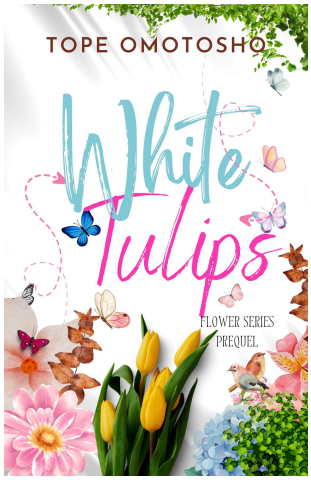
Tope Omotosho is passionate about impacting the world through timeless wisdom and knowledge found in her thought-provoking stories. Her stories and articles cut across love, relationship and romance in a way that does not deny the relevance of God in our everyday life.

She is a devoted Christian passionate about bringing people to the knowledge of God's true and unfailing love. You can read more about her stories and articles on www.lifegodandlove.com

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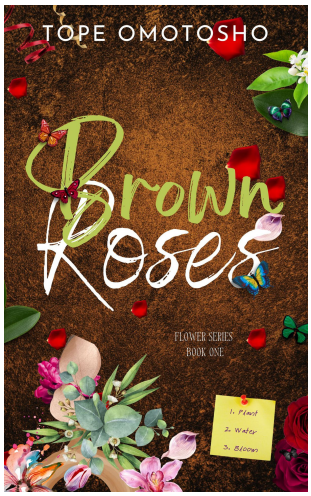
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