ADESUWA O'MAN NWOKEDI



Giniha's Bridesmaids

BOOK THREE: IFE


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IFE

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Ginika’s Bridesmaids Book Three: Ife

By Adesuwa O’man Nwokedi

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DEDICATION

To Carmen, Claire and Benedict!

This is for you…with all my love!

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CHAPTER ONE

SITTING IN THAT dingy motel room, I looked up at the wall clock that was ticking louder than was normal, and I had to accept he wouldn't be coming that night.

I'm running a little late. Quick dash to take my son to the clinic, but it won't take long. Order something for me .

That was the text he'd sent almost four hours ago, but as the clock ticked closer to midnight, I knew I would be spending the night alone in the awful motel room. I briefly contemplated checking out and heading back to the comfort of my apartment, but knew driving all the way back to the island at that time of night wasn't in my best interest. In resignation, I reached for the grilled fish and plantain I'd ordered for him, food that was now stone cold, and idly ate it, not even tasting as I chewed, hating that, years later, this was still us; sneaking off to clandestine hideouts to steal some time together.

As I ate, I stared at the TV screen as an old Nollywood movie played, trying to distract myself with the testy dialogue between Patience Ozokwor and Ini Edo, thinking instead how, as the first month of yet another year was about to end, Olumide and I were no closer to living freely as a couple. Instead, there we were, still running around like teenagers, except even teenagers had more freedom than we did. And I found myself wondering why I'd agreed to go back to him after ending things fifteen months before.

It had been fifteen months ago that Moyo and her friend attacked me in a motel like this one. If it hadn't been for my own friend, Isioma, they might have killed me that night.

"She will never try it again! Is she crazy? I've seen to it that there will never be a repeat of what happened last night. I swear to you!" Olumide had ranted on the phone the following evening, shortly after I got home from

Isioma’s. As he raged and cursed over the phone, I couldn't but remember how helpless he’d been when the attack was actually happening, how he’d only been able to bleat ‘Moyo, please leave her. Moyo, please.’

I was the one being attacked and she was the one he was begging.

That was the night I realised the truth in everything not only Isioma had told me the previous night, but what my estranged sisters, Ibukun and Ibilola, had told me for years. Olumide was only using me. He had no real plans for me.

I’d felt surprisingly liberated ending the relationship, and, in the months that followed, even fantasised about one day meeting someone and settling down properly…away from Rahim, away from all the men, away from all the parties. But as the months went by, the thought of walking away from the comfortable life I’d grown accustomed to, scared me. I didn't have a relationship with my family and my teaching salary wouldn't take me very far. I was able to stay away from Olumide for seven months, the longest we’d ever been separated, but I’d eventually caved and given in to his incessant pleas, deciding it was better to have someone to love me the way he did, even if it meant sharing him with someone else. I faced up to the fact that Cinderella relationships didn’t happen in real life.

Well, except your name was Isioma.

Reaching for my phone, I smiled again at the picture she’d sent me a few days before, a picture of her hand with *that* finger brandishing a large diamond ring. After reconnecting over Christmas, her boyfriend, Karibi, had proposed to her on his 41 st birthday. Looking at the picture for what had to be a thousandth time, as overjoyed as I was for her, I couldn't help but feel a touch melancholy. But the truth was, she’d just been lucky. Happy endings didn’t happen for everyone. The rest of us had to make do with whatever hand life dealt us.

Which, in my case, was being stood up yet again.

I awoke before dawn broke the next morning, but lay in bed, eyes focused on the ceiling, wondering if having half of a man’s love was enough for me, wondering how long I was going to continue playing this game; running around with another woman’s husband, regardless of how much more claim

to him I thought I deserved. In the six months it had been since our reunion, there had been no other encounters with Moyo. On the face of it, it appeared she had once again retreated to the background, happy to allow Olumide do what he wanted. Except I knew she hadn't. By creating incidents like that night's, she was able to keep him away from me without even trying. She was able to win the battle without even having to lift a finger.

At a few minutes after 7am, I decided it was better to join the rush hour traffic back to the island, rather than spend another minute in that awful place. Deciding against a shower, I was slipping on my shoes when my phone rang.

"Are you still there?" Olumide asked. "I'm on my way."

"Why did you have me order you food if you knew you wouldn't come?"

"Baby, it's not like that. When we got back from the clinic, I wanted to leave, but Moyo had a headache and couldn't watch the kids."

I shook my head and chuckled. Of course she did.

"I'm leaving, Olumide," I retorted. "I'm not going to waste my day off work here. If you don't have my time, there are several others on my speed dial who do."

There was silence from the other end of the call, and I got satisfaction over how furious he got about my dalliances with other men, fury that was ironic, considering how quick he was to enjoy the proceeds of these dalliances…and how he had even been the brainchild of the first one I ever had back in our days at the Ogun State University…

"Wait for me, Ifedayo," he said, his voice firm. "I'll be there in less than thirty minutes."

He made it in twenty, and as we made love on the creaky bed beneath the noisy clock and equally noisy fan, as I clutched his back at the peak of my excitement, even in my euphoria, all I could do was wonder if good sex was really enough, and if my addiction was more to the physical act and the fantasy…than the person himself.

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Getting home after our tryst, I found that, unlike other times, it didn't elevate my mood or give me the healthy dose of oxytocin I needed. On the contrary, I returned in worse spirits than I'd left.

By the next morning, as I got dressed for work, I decided to elevate my mood the only other way I knew how. Even though I tried to keep a low profile at school by dressing as understated as I could, I decided that day could be an exception. By the time I was ready to leave, standing in front of my mirror in a white *Carolina Herrera* ruffle-front sheath dress, white and yellow *Sophia Webster* butterfly heels, my hair pulled back in a slick pony tail and my lips a glossy burgundy, I felt better already.

Taking the perfunctory selfie I did every morning, I sent it to Rahim via WhatsApp before leaving the house. He'd been holidaying with his Switzerland-based family for several weeks, and I felt obliged to send him pictures as often as I could. He'd come into my life seven years before and it had been a total game changer. Even though I'd already perfected my hustle and was living a pretty good life, Rahim had raised the bar several notches higher.

We met at a party in Abuja, and what had started off as a brief liaison soon led to him flying me to the capital city every weekend. I wasn't the only woman he was seeing, but I was the one he was most enamoured with. In less than a year, in addition to the plethora of lavish gifts he showered me with, he got me my flat and the first of many luxury cars. But as the years went by, our relationship became more filial and less sexual. With his political appointment coming to an end, he spent more time in Switzerland, Paris, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where his families and the majority of his businesses were, and increasingly less time in Nigeria, but he made sure I was well catered for and that my every need was met. His only condition was for me not to entertain any men in the flat. For everything I was getting from him, it was a condition I was happy to keep.

"You look lovely, Ife. Is it your birthday?" Mary Okore, a teacher of another class in my arm, asked as I walked past.

I smiled back as sweetly as I could manage, even though I could hear the sarcasm in her voice, loud and clear. Although I enjoyed a cordial relationship with most of the teachers, there were a few like her who had

their ears firmly pressed to the rumour mill, those who'd heard gossip about the men I dated. Even though I tried my best not to attract any attention in school, and made extra sure not to date any men affiliated with the school in any way, there were still whispers. Well, I guess the cars I drove and the bags I carried didn't help matters. As nondescript as I tried to be, those were the two areas I wasn't going to downplay for anybody.

"Thanks, Mary. But you know my birthday is in June," I gushed back, my smile just as syrupy. "But thanks for the compliment."

The smile on my face evaporated the moment I walked past her. The last thing I needed was any negative energy. I was barely keeping it together as it was. Thankfully, I was distracted from the moment I walked into my class, reviewing homework and then getting into the teaching program for the day. By noon, my Year 3 class had considerably cheered my mood, and I wasn't quite as despondent as I'd been when my day started.

As the school day drew to a close, I sat back in class, filling homework diaries while my students were in the science lab for their last lesson. I had my eye on the clock as I signed the booklets, with the intention of leaving the very minute the bell went off in about fifteen minutes. I had absolutely no plans to linger.

Which is why I was irritated when my phone rang, peeved about anything that wouldn't allow me finish on time. I frowned, looking at the caller ID. What was Ozioma calling me for? She'd probably also heard from Isioma and wanted to jubilate over her engagement. But the last thing I needed was to talk to the brash, lousy, loud-mouthed excuse of a woman. So I allowed my phone ring off. But when it started ringing again shortly after, I huffed in my irritation before answering it.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Ife. How are you today?"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm good. What's up?"

There was a momentary pause, as if she was trying to pick her words, further irritating me.

"Ozioma, can I help you?"

“Ife, you need to get out of where you are right now.”

I frowned. “Get out of where?”

“I just got very reliable information that Moyo and a few of her friends are waiting for you outside your school gate, with the plan to embarrass you. I’m told they plan to really humiliate you, to beat you up and strip you to your underwear if possible. You need to leave now!”

Now she had my attention.

“Who told you this?”

“Ife, time is going. Do you really want to waste valuable minutes asking me questions?” she exclaimed frantically. “Okay, fine. One of my friends is friendly with one of her friends. She called me a few minutes ago to gist me about what was about to go down. She said Moyo is furious that you and Olumide are still sneaking around, and believes a public humiliation will finally teach you a lesson.”

It was at that moment that my brain finally communicated to my body, and I realised Ozioma was very likely not telling a lie. Shoving the books I was signing aside, I grabbed my handbag. “You say they’re outside?” I asked, my voice quivering. “What should I do?”

“If there’s another gate, take it. If you have something you can use to cover your face, use it. Whatever you do, do not go near your car because I’m told they’re waiting for you there.”

I terminated the call, my anxiety now through the roof. There was only one entrance and exit, as the school’s backyard overlooked the lagoon. I was toast.

“Please can I borrow your scarf?” I stopped by Mary’s class to ask. As she did most of days, she had a silk scarf wrapped around her neck like a sailor’s cape. Many times before that day, I’d had several laughs over her choice of fashion decades older than she was, but that day, I was banking on her scarf of the day to be my lifesaver.

She must have heard the panic in my voice, as she quickly removed it without asking any questions. As she did, I was already summoning a taxi with the app I’d downloaded on my phone, grateful I’d had the good sense

not to delete it. Thankfully, the driver was a minute away from the school, and the very minute he notified me of his arrival, with the scarf draped over my face, I made my way through the security system and out the school gates. By this time, it was only about two minutes to when the closing bell would ring. Scampering out through the gates, my hands securing the scarf closed, I rushed into the waiting taxi, taking a quick backward glance. My mouth went dry as I spotted a group of about six women, one of whom was Moyo, advancing towards the gate. On the face of it, they looked like regular mothers there to pick up their kids, except their frowns and hard-set faces gave away the fact that this was no regular school run. Looking across at the car park, I noticed two women leaning on my car and immediately knew Ozioma was right.

This was planned to be an ambush.

As the taxi drove away, despite the fact they hadn’t seen me and I’d been able to escape unscathed, I was quivering like a leaf, shaken to my very core, the trauma I’d undergone after the last attack rising to the fore. By confronting me in front of my school, and at closing time when parents, kids and teachers would be about, their plan had been to embarrass me, destroy my reputation and compromise my livelihood.

I’d had a narrow escape.

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I was so shaken, immediately I got home, I turned off my phone, shut my blinds, and lay in bed with the covers over my face. When Olumide and I got back together, he’d made me believe the last attack was the worst she could ever do and that she would never bother me again. I couldn't help but note that, if Moyo and her friends had succeeded that afternoon, the last attack would have been child’s play in comparison.

After spending the night tossing and turning, I called in sick the next day. I had no choice but to accept the bitter reality. As much as I loved Olumide, it was no longer worth what it was doing to my own mental health. Whatever I was getting from him, the sex and the sporadic times spent together, were infinitesimal in comparison with the risks I now faced. It was time to walk away.

For good.

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The next day, I was on a plane to Tahiti, with earlier connections in Paris and Vancouver, my final destination being the French Polynesian island of Bora Bora. All it had taken had been a call to Rahim, desperately crying about needing a break somewhere far away, which had immediately been followed by a call from his Travel Agent to book me anywhere I wanted to go. As she reeled off the options of the Maldives, Seychelles, Cancun, Santorini, not only had I visited all those places before, they weren't far and anonymous enough for me. I wanted somewhere I could go to lose myself completely, somewhere I could think and reflect on life, largely because of what I'd just avoided with Moyo, but also because I was turning thirty-five that year and needed to take a few steps back to contemplate the current trajectory of my life, and if it was headed where I wanted it.

Though comfortable, it was a long journey. The resort was another ten-minute boat ride from the airport, and by the time I checked in, I was physically and mentally drained. But considering how far removed it was from outside life, it was the perfect place for me to get exactly what I needed; peace, quiet and anonymity.

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And for my first week, that was exactly what I got; peace, quiet and anonymity. There were days I didn't step out of my villa, days when I would only eat and sleep, days I wouldn't even as much as turn on the television. And there were other days when I would venture out to the beach, soothed by the gentle crash of the blue-green waves. It was the perfect escape for me, and most times, sitting there on the golden white sand, staring at the water which seemed to stretch forever into infinity, I thought of nothing at all. On those days, I wasn't the complicated woman with the even more complicated love life, but just a free soul without any care in the world.

But as my second weekend approached, I started getting a bit restless. The Ife who was desperate to recalibrate her life still craved the peace and quiet, but the social butterfly Ife had started to tire of endlessly sitting on the beach, watching honeymooners. And when a group of holidaymakers from

the nearby hotel water-skied past me as I sunbathed on the beach, I became desperate for a change of scene. I watched as they went by, one by one, young men who looked to be in their twenties, and made the decision to relocate to the other hotel, even if only for that weekend. A tall, high-rise, five star hotel, it was clearly the choice for people desirous of a more social, less reclusive getaway. And that weekend, that was exactly what I needed.

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The lobby of the hotel was bustling with activity, a far cry from the tranquil one I'd temporarily vacated. I smiled to myself as I was handed my keys, noticing several eyes on me.

Making my way to the elevator, I noticed two groups of men in the open restaurant; a younger group, some of whom looked like the ones I'd seen water skiing the day before, and a slightly older group, both of which were loud and rambunctious as they had their lunch. I deduced they were very likely separately celebrating bachelor's eves, or some other type of landmark occasion. I could identify the Australian accents of the younger group, but the older group was a varied mix of Caucasian, Hispanic and black men whose nationalities I couldn't immediately pinpoint. The conversation of the older group stalled as I walked by, and I made eye contact with one of them, the least talkative in the group. With skin the colour of rich dark chocolate, I figured him to be African American. Bald, spectacled and with a salt and pepper goatee, he wasn't traditionally handsome but there was something about him.

Still smiling, I looked away, satisfied by the effect I still had on members of the opposite sex, all the more determined to have as much fun as I could manage that weekend.

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Walking on the beach later that evening, it was so much different from what I'd become used to at my resort. It was full of people, young and old, male and female, sunbathers and daredevils fighting with the waves. I walked the entire length of the beach, aware of the several eyes on me, in my black, one-piece swimsuit, so shiny it looked patent. I added a sway to my stride, my toned thighs and pert bottom bouncy but firm, enjoying all the attention.

On the far side of the beach, a large boat was anchored, and I could see that there was some sort of party on it. I recognised some of the men on the deck as being part of the older group of guys, and got plenty of satisfaction from seeing that all eyes were again on me. This time, I smiled at them as I passed, enjoying the brief flirtation and relishing the boost to my ego. Even if I returned to my original hotel the following day, coming there had been just what I needed.

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By the time I returned for dinner later that evening, I'd changed into a white, yellow and pink colour block slip dress, which skimmed seductively over my curves. For the first time since being on holiday, I'd taken the time to apply some make-up, and, walking into the restaurant, I felt ready to conquer the world.

"Table for one, please," I smiled at the receiving attendant, allowing him lead me to a small table overlooking the pier.

After placing my order, I looked around at the patrons, holidaymakers having a good time. I noticed the guys from the boat were dining on the other side of the room, and smiled in their direction, ready to continue the flirtation. The bald guy from earlier in the day smiled back at me, and I chuckled and looked away, reaching for my glass of wine, amused over how enamoured he was. To my surprise, he rose to his feet and walked over to me.

"So, my friends insisted I come over to say hello," he said when he got to my table.

My amused smile still on my face, I gave him a thorough once-over, noticing how his large, black glasses were at odds with the tattoos that peeked from his shirt. Taller and leaner than I'd thought, he didn't appear quite as confident approaching me as men usually were.

"Your friends said you should come over to say hello?" I repeated, a brow raised. "Your friends had to tell you? Or are you just used to your wife doing the bossing around?"

He threw his head back in throaty laughter, before pointing at the chair opposite mine. "May I?"

I shrugged, trying to act indifferent, when, in truth, I was fascinated by this man.

“You’re very beautiful,” he said. “And no, I don’t have a wife.”

I leaned back to look at him, even more intrigued. “What are you and your friends celebrating anyway?”

“Nothing really. We’ve been friends since college and we try to get away once a year,” he smiled. “Okay, full disclosure. It’s my first time joining them in a long while. But you can probably tell.”

I found myself fascinated by his candour and bashfulness, attracted to the realisation he didn't do this everyday; walk up to women to strike conversation.

As my food was served, we made small talk about the hotel and the island of Bora Bora.

“It’s actually my first time here,” I admitted.

“The last time I was here was when I was dragged for my fortieth birthday a few years ago,” he chuckled. “Dragged, kicking and screaming.”

“You’re forty?”

“Forty-seven,” he declared proudly. “And I’ll take the look on your face as a compliment.”

“And you’re not married?” I asked, surprised. “Or you’re divorced?”

His smile dimmed. “Widowed.”

And I finally understood his nervousness. “And this is your first time joining your friends on holiday since she died?”

He chuckled. “Is it that obvious?”

We talked into the night, long after my meal was cleared and we’d shared a slice of chocolate cake for dessert. As we talked, my eyes strayed to his wide chest, toned arms, long fingers and full lips. The more time we spent together, the sexier I found him. And I found myself suddenly keen on something more. What better way to speed up my own healing than a tryst with this sexy stranger?

“Do you want to come up to my room for a drink?” I cut into what he was saying.

He looked at me and, inexperienced though he might have been, he wasn’t naïve enough not to know what I was really saying. Standing, I stretched my hand out and after a brief hesitation, he took it.

Walking into my bedroom, I decided there was no need for any small talk. We both knew what we were there for. He was still hesitant, so I pulled him by the collar and kissed him. That was all the prompting he needed and with strong arms, pulled me closer, kissing me with even more fervour than I was kissing him. I reached for his shirt just as he slid off my dress, and pulling him into the bed with me, we melted into each other with the electric passion of new lovers but exploring our bodies with the familiarity of old paramours. I’d been with many men but had never been with anyone that attentive to my needs, that focused on my pleasure, and what I’d thought would be a quick means of release led to the most intense, most explosive sexual encounter I’d ever had.

By the time we lay spent, it was almost dawn.

“If I tell you something, promise not to freak out,” he said, breaking the silence of the night. “You’re the first woman I’ve been with since my wife died.”

I stiffened upon hearing that. “And you chose your first time to be a one night encounter with a stranger?”

He tilted up my face. “Who says it has to be just one night?”

“You should have read the fine print, Mister,” I answered, tracing the outline of his jaw. “You don't know my name and I don't know yours. Why don't we just leave it at that?”

He was silent for a few minutes. “We leave tonight, anyway. Back to New York.”

“There you go! And I don’t live in New York, so…”

“But can you at least give me your number, so I can call you?” I shook my head and he chuckled. “Okay, we’ll do it your way then.”

I reached up to kiss him, silencing him from saying any more. And as both our desires reignited, we yielded to the gravitational pull of our bodies for one last time.

With his group set to leave for the airport early that morning, he reluctantly pulled himself away at a little past 7am. He lingered at the door, a wistful look on his face. “Can I at least know your name?” I shook my head, prompting a belly chortle from him. “Well then, mystery lady, my name is Diekola.”

I stiffened, hearing his Nigerian name. Even though I’d deduced his accent wasn’t completely American, I hadn’t been able to really pinpoint it elsewhere. So much for my quest for escapism!

“Goodbye, Diekola,” I said, smiling as I shut the door.

Even though it had been so much better than I’d expected, it had served its purpose for both of us; a quick release.

Now, it was time to return to my real purpose of being on the island in the first place.

Healing.

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CHAPTER TWO

RETURNING TO my original hotel, I spent another four weeks on the island, but this time in total seclusion, venturing to the beach only after dark, when honeymooners and holidaymakers had retired for the day. Sitting on the white sand under the canopy of the night stars, it became increasingly clear that Olumide no longer had a place in my life. In the past, anytime I weighed the pros and cons of being with him, the one pro was always that nobody ever made me come alive the way he did. It was always the only one I could think of, but it had enough gravitas to outweigh the plethora of cons I knew there were. But the one night with the man I wish had remained a mystery, but whom I now knew was called Diekola, had made me realise this to be a lie.

I'd had my fair share of one-night stands, many with men I didn't even remember. But days and weeks after that night with Diekola, he remained in my head as vividly as if we were still there, lying side by side. I knew better than to think it any more than it was, and nursed no fantasies of ever seeing him again. Rather, I recognised it for what it was; the universe telling me there was more to life than being Olumide's bit on the side. Not especially when it now posed a threat to my life.

All too soon, it was time to return to Lagos. After being away for the last half of the school term, I knew it was in my better interest to return well before the start of the new one. My Head Teacher had been understanding about me needing time off to 'deal with family issues', but six weeks was a long time to be absent.

As the plane taxied down the Murtala Muhammed International Airport runway, I knew it was time to quit sulking over leaving Bora Bora earlier than I wanted to, and psych myself back into real life. Yes, it had been a great getaway, but it was back to reality now. Reaching for my phone, I

turned it on for the first time since boarding the plane out of Lagos weeks before. No sooner had I done that did it started vibrating non-stop with a plethora of message notifications. Frowning, I checked and saw that almost all of them were from one person; Olumide. Hissing, I switched it to silent mode. I hadn't even disembarked the plane and he was already giving me stress.

Going through Immigration and Baggage Claim took a little under forty minutes, largely because, unlike my other trips, I had only the same single piece of luggage I'd left Lagos with. Once out, I was happy I'd accepted Rahim's offer of a car to pick me up. He had been more than generous with this trip, and hadn't even minded only being able to reach me via the telephone in my hotel room. Even though he was almost as much clutter in my life as Olumide, he took way too good care of me for me to consider walking away from him. Closing my eyes in the air-conditioned BMW, as the car made its way through the Lagos evening rush hour traffic, I knew I was lucky to have a man like him in my life.

"Welcome back, Ma," Adams, the man who manned the lift in my building, said as I walked up to it, closely followed by Rahim's driver toting my small box.

Smiling at him, for the first time I was happy to be back home. Yes, Bora Bora was heaven on earth, but not only was this home, over here I called the shots.

"Thank you very much, Ma!" Adams beamed as I squeezed several thousand naira notes into his hand.

Yes, over here, money was power, and with more than enough of it to spend, I could have anything I wanted.

–

Lying in bed later that evening, I pulled out my phone to read my messages. There was one from Ozioma, checking to see if I was okay, and a few invitations from some acquaintances to some party or the other, but all the others were from Olumide; all 83 of them. I pursed my lips as I read them, starting from the very first to the last. Save for wondering where I was, and why I hadn't told him I was going out of town, his primary concern was the

money he was expecting from me. And the last set of scales fell from my eyes.

To him, I was nothing more than a meal ticket.

As if on cue, my phone vibrated, startling me. No surprises, he was the one calling.

“Oh, thank God!” he exclaimed. “Baby, where did you disappear to for so long? I’ve been calling everyday!”

I shut my eyes to quell my rising anger, to keep my tongue from spewing the diatribe it wanted to.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” I finally answered. “I saw all your messages.”

“Baby, you just left without doing that transfer. Remember you said you were going to do it as soon as you got home, and the next thing, I couldn't reach you.”

“Olumide, are you aware that Moyo and her friends tried to attack me the day after we were together? Are you aware they came to my school, wanting to beat me up and make a fool of me in the place I work and earn a living?”

“Are you serious? I didn’t know anything about this.”

I rolled my eyes in my irritation. *How will you know?* I muttered to myself.

“They didn’t harm you, did they? The guards in the school were able to protect you?”

“They didn’t harm me because I got a tip off. And the person that should have been protecting me was you, Olumide. That was how she and her friend almost killed me that night in Surulere.”

“How am I supposed to know what hare brain plans Moyo and her friends come up with? I’m not a mind reader or magician. Do you expect me to be in several places at once?”

I shook my head, somehow not surprised by his attitude. Shirking responsibility wasn’t new to him. The only thing that surprised me was how

I’d overlooked it for so long.

“I’m sorry about what happened, baby. And, once again, I’m glad you didn’t get hurt,” there was a pause, and I could tell exactly what he really wanted to say next. “But back to the cash, will you be able to transfer it today? I’ve had people on my neck for weeks, and I’m not sure how much longer I can push these payments forward.”

“Olumide, I told you your wife almost attacked me. So traumatised was I that I had to run away from town, and what you’re more interested in is the money I promised you?”

“Ife, come off this. I apologised. What else do you want me to do? Go back in time to stop it?”

What followed was a lengthy silence, as I heard his words as if I were speaking to him for the first time, listening to the conversation like I was an outsider.

“Ife…”

“Last year when we broke up for months, how did you survive?” I asked. “We weren’t together for seven months. How did you manage?”

He scoffed. “Please, let’s not go there, Ife. For the very first time, my kids were thrown out of school for not being able to pay their fees; not one term, but twice. Let’s not talk about that time, please.”

“Olumide, you need to get a job. You can’t keep relying on me. You’re a family man, for crying out loud.”

“Who says I rely on you?” he exploded. “Please, Ife don’t say what you know will upset me this evening. Who says I rely on you? You know I’m chasing several big contracts, one even with the Ministry of Petroleum. All I need is for one of them to click and money will no longer be my problem.”

“Good. I’m very glad to hear this,” I answered. “So you can use the money from these your contracts to take care of yourself and these people who are ‘on your neck’.”

“Ife, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m done, Olumide. I’m done with this messy ‘situationship’ of ours. I’m done running around with you like a thief. I’m done looking behind my back, scared someone will one day pour acid on my face. I’m done putting my life in danger. I’m done waiting for you to leave her. Olumide, I’m done.”

“Ife, I’ve told you to be patient. I’m going to leave Moyo…”

“Olumide, I’m done hearing you sing that song,” I shouted, my own exasperation rising. “I’m no longer interested. Just stay with your wife and leave me in peace, I beg you.”

“Ife, you can’t be serious. This is a joke, right?”

I smiled and shook my head. The only joke was how much of my life I’d lost thinking I was in love with this man.

“Listen, I’ll do you that transfer. I’ll send you the money right now. Call it a parting gift, if you like,” I answered. “Take it, sort yourself out…but don’t call me again.”

“Ife, I…”

I terminated the call, cutting him off, after which I proceeded to block both his phone numbers. Knowing him, it was foolhardy as he was bound to call me from several anonymous numbers, just as he’d done the last time we broke up. But I was prepared to continue blocking as many phone numbers as he would call me from. This time, there would be no turning back.

Lying back in bed, I closed my eyes, waiting to be awash with the emotions I expected. I waited for the pain, the angst, the sadness over the finality of our goodbye…but none of them came.

All I felt was relief.

–

My phone rang, rousing me from sleep. It was past 11pm and I realised I’d fallen asleep after the call with Olumide. Reaching for my phone, I half expected it to be from whatever unknown number he was using to reach me, having realised I’d blocked him. But it wasn’t. Seeing Rahim’s Swiss phone number, I sat up.

“Oh, did I wake you?” he asked, when I answered. “Forgive me and my bad manners for calling you so late.”

“No, I’m the one with bad manners for not calling as soon as I got home,” I countered, smiling even though he couldn't see me. “I had a wonderful holiday. Thank you.”

“You’ve thanked me a million times, and for what? A short holiday in a no-name hotel? You know we’ve had much better getaways.”

The smile on my face waned. Yes, we’d been to several more exotic places and stayed in much nicer hotels, but none of them had accorded me the opportunity of discovering myself the way this one had. But of course I couldn't tell him that.

“Regardless, I’m glad you had a good time. But next time, I’ll go with you. It’s been too long since we went away together.”

“That’ll be nice,” I answered, forcing a smile. For some reason, the thought of that made my stomach feel heavy.

“I’ll be in Lagos next weekend,” he went on. “I can’t wait to see you, my Princess. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this has been the longest time we’ve spent apart. The last time we saw was before Christmas, right?”

“You’re correct, before Christmas,” trying to muster some excitement over our impending reunion. “I can’t wait to spoil you again.”

“And I can’t wait to be spoiled by you!”

“Okay, you better go to bed before Hajiya overhears you talking to your concubine at this time of the night.”

“You’ve gotten them mixed up,” he chuckled. “Hajiya lives in Abu Dhabi. The one here with me is anything but that.”

“Ah, my bad!” I giggled at my mistake, recalling it was his fourth wife who lived in Geneva, a former beauty queen from Jordan. His other wives were scattered across the globe; the first in Abu Dhabi, another in Dubai and yet another in Paris. I’d even heard unconfirmed reports that he had at least two others in Nigeria, in Abuja and Kano respectively. One didn't have to be a genie to tell that his one vice was women.

“Good night, my Princess. May your night’s rest be as beautiful as you!”

Putting my phone back on the nightstand, I couldn't help but smile. He was disarmingly charming, and even when I was in the worst of moods, he always found a way to make me feel better.

But lying back on my pillow, sleep eluded me as I wondered how much longer I could live this life. There I was, scolding Olumide over his dependence on me, but there I also was, just as dependent on Rahim. If not more so.

Convincing myself they weren’t at all the same thing, and that my life was fine the way it was, I shut my eyes in a bid to call sleep. I’d let go of the one thing that was cluttering my life. From then going forward, I would be just fine.

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CHAPTER THREE

STANDING IN FRONT of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, I rolled on the ruby red lipstick Rahim favoured, smacked my lips together and gave myself a once-over. In white satin shorts with black lace trim, a matching tank top, and red feathered kitten heels, I was dressed exactly how he liked to see me; provocative…sultry…sexy.

Running a hand over the expertly made bed to smoothen any creases, and plumping all the pillows, I proceeded to light candles in his favourite scent of jasmine and vanilla, not only in the bedroom, but in the bathroom and living room. Looking around the house after I was done, with the lights dimmed to the ambient illumination he favoured, everything was ready for him. It had been almost a year since he'd come to the flat, as the last time he was in Lagos, I'd met him at his guest house. Which is why I wanted to make sure every single thing was to his liking.

Restless, I walked to the kitchen to check the meals that had just been delivered by the very expensive chef from Yemen a friend recommended years before, the first time I wanted to impress Rahim with the Middle Eastern food he liked. With a Qatari maternal grandmother, he'd grown up eating those meals. There were tears in his eyes the first time I presented him with a spread of the best of Arabian food. He'd looked at me, amazed I'd gone through all that trouble just to please him, and that was the moment, the very moment, I knew I had him right in the palm of my hand.

The chime of my doorbell jolted me and I wiped clammy hands on a dishtowel, surprised how nervous I was at the prospect of seeing him again. Stealing one last glance at myself from the engraved, polished brass *Boca Do Lobo* mirror hanging in my hallway, I plastered a wide smile on my face as I opened the door to let in my benefactor.

“My! Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!” he exclaimed, sweeping me into an embrace that lifted me off the ground. “I’ve really missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I smiled, planting a kiss on his cheek and leading him in. As I closed the door, I saw his closest bodyguards standing out in the hallway, looking anywhere but at me. He’d had the same men in his security detail in the seven years we’d been together, and I could count on one hand how many times they had directly addressed me.

“How was your trip?” I asked, even though he’d already been in Lagos several days.

“The usual,” was his non-committal answer as he sat on the sofa and stretched out. “Ah, this place feels like heaven, just as always,” and then looking at me, an appreciative glint in his eye, added. “And you look even more spicy than I remember.”

“Spicy?” I chuckled, taking a seat next to him, slinging my leg over his. “That’s a new one.”

He ran his hand down my leg and I was grateful for the extensive waxing and body treatment at the spa the previous day, which had left my skin baby smooth and supple.

“Easy now, or we won’t make it to the delicious feast I can already smell from here,” he said, his voice heavy with his desire and a teasing smile on his lips.

“Ah, we can’t have that happen *o* ,” I said, pulling away from him. “I have all your favourites waiting for you.”

“I can smell *kabsa* ,” he said, his smile widening. “What else do you have?”

“ *Fasulia* , *kefta* , *ma'amouls* and *falafels* ,” I answered, rising to my feet and reaching for his hand. “Just the way you like them.”

“And you’ve refused to tell me where you get this great food, food that’s even better than what I eat when I’m in the Middle East,” he chuckled. “Or you want me to believe you make it yourself?”

I had a sly smile as I led him to the dining table. As if I would disclose my source and throw away one of the things that set me apart from his other women!

As we ate and made small talk, I knew I could have had it worse. Even at 64, Rahim was still a very handsome man. Lean and standing over six feet tall, he was still physically attractive. The only giveaway of his age was his fast diminishing stamina, which saw us having less sex than we used to. He still liked to talk a good talk, but half the time when we retired to bed, he would fall asleep even before my own head hit the pillow. Which was really just as well.

But that night was different. Maybe it was from not seeing me for a long time, maybe it was from the enhancers he took on occasion, whatever it was, I knew it wasn't going to be a quiet night for either of us. And for the first time, as he grunted atop me, I found myself fighting off feelings of revulsion.

"Ife, my Princess," he said, stroking my shoulder as we lay in bed afterwards. "You're a special one, you know."

In the darkness of the room, I didn't have to bother with any fake smile in response, and instead just lay in silence.

"Have I ever told you the moment I knew you were indeed special?" he asked, chuckling. "You were the first person not to steal from me. Remember I left you in the hotel room that morning? Everything was still intact after you left; the Rolex I left on the nightstand, and the money I had in the drawer. Foreign exchange, if I remember correctly. I'd never had that before. All the other girls I'd been with would have made sure they took something with them."

This elicited a snigger from me. Thinking back to that morning as I left for the airport to catch my flight back to Lagos, it hadn't even crossed my mind. He'd given me a wad of cash before he left earlier that morning, and stealing from him hadn't even been a consideration. "What kind of women were you picking up back then?"

"The wrong ones, clearly," he said, propping himself so that he was now looking down at me. "You're different, Ife. Of all the women I have in my life, none of them makes me feel as special as you do."

Under the glare of his full attention, I found myself suddenly uncomfortable. "I'm sure you tell all your women that," I teased.

But he didn’t even crack a smile.

“I mean it, Ife. I love you very much and I hate it when we’re apart. And we’re apart more frequently and for longer periods than I like,” there was a pause, before he took my hand in his. “Marry me.”

My eyes widened in my surprise before I dissolved into fits of giggles.

“What’s so funny? Did I say something funny?”

“Rahim, I’m sure you’ve already exceeded your allowance for legal wives,” I tittered. “Do I need to remind you that you have wives on almost every continent?”

“I am permitted to marry as many women as I deem fit, the only condition being for me to cater to them equally,” he countered. “And you and I know that won’t be a problem for me. I’m tired of going and coming, seeing you only on occasion. I want to wake up seeing you every single day of my life, whatever is left of it.”

Seeing he was serious, my laughter died on my lips.

“I’m not about to join anyone’s harem,” I muttered, pulling my hand away. “You can miss me with that polygamous life. I don't know anything about any of your wives, and I want to keep it that way, please.”

He smiled and was quiet for a while. “You’re young and you have needs that must be met. I get that,” he finally said. “That’s why I’ve turned a blind eye to all your escapades. It would be unfair of me to expect you to be celibate, considering how many times we’re actually together.”

I stiffened in his arms. While I made no attempt to hide any of my liaisons, he had never made mention of them before. Never.

“But I no longer want to share you with others,” he leaned closer to me. “And you also should be tired by now of dodging irate wives. From what I heard about your last couple of encounters, you might not be so lucky next time.”

I gasped and turned to look at him, prompting laughter from him.

“Don't underestimate me, my dear Princess. I know a whole lot more than you think.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“I want you to be mine exclusively,” he answered, all traces of laughter gone. “You don't want to marry me, fine. But I don't want you seeing any other men.”

Regaining my composure, I turned to face him. “That can only happen when it’s mutual. You have hundreds of other women but expect to be the only one in my life?”

As I said the words aloud, even I knew how brazen they were. After everything he did for me, the financial security he’d given me, he had every right to demand that and so much more.

“So you want me to divorce my wives or what?” he laughed.

“When you have no other women, wives or concubines, then we can talk,” I answered.

His loud belly laugh rang through the room, and as he pulled me back into his arms, I sighed in relief, realising I’d dodged a bullet.

As he slept, I lay awake in his arms, ruminating over what he’d said, his knowledge of my encounters with Moyo in particular. It left me wondering just how much he knew about the things I got up to, and if he had spies watching my every move. It also left me unsettled how he was able to turn a blind eye to all that for so long. I couldn't help but wonder if he was just bidding his time to react.

Extricating myself from him, I rolled to the other end of the bed, desperate for air. I felt claustrophobic, not just by his words, but by my life. By keeping tabs on me and having me so fully dependent on him, whether I liked it or not, I was his slave.

And the sudden realisation of that made me unable to breathe.

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CHAPTER FOUR

BY THE TIME Rahim left the following evening, I was spent; more mentally and emotionally than physically. It had never been that hard having him over. For the first time, it had taken more of an effort to host him, and I'd actually counted the minutes till he left. But I knew I couldn't afford to feel that way towards him. Not after everything he had done, and was still doing, for me.

The morning after he left, a Sunday, I woke up and contemplated going to Church. It had been years since I'd been, and I was surprised by the sudden urge, considering how horribly it had gone the last time I'd been to one. I shook off the memories that were trying to emerge, and quickly killed the idea. No, Church wasn't the answer.

Rising from the bed, I decided to marvel over Rahim's latest gift, a *bouton d'or* necklace from *Van Cleef & Arpels* . The stunning neckpiece in rose gold and diamonds was enough to make me smile, and modelling it in front of the mirror, I chided myself for sulking without any reason. So many women would kill to have what I had; a man who kept me comfortable and showered me with expensive gifts, while still giving me the latitude to do what I wanted. Yes, he'd finally expressed his desire for me not to see other men, but by insisting any exclusivity go both ways, I'd been able to buy myself some time in that regard…and I was going to take full advantage of it. With the cloud of Olumide and Moyo's drama no longer hanging over my head, I was determined to do just that.

My phone rang and seeing the unfamiliar number, just as I'd done in the week since ending things with Olumide, I ignored the call. After it rang off, another call came from the same number. I was momentarily tempted to answer it but, knowing how persistent Olumide could be, decided against it. The last time we broke up, there'd been a day he'd called almost a hundred

times from several numbers. No, I'd been there and done that before. Our last breakup had been the dress rehearsal for this one, only this time there would be no reunion. Not ever again.

Deciding a little self-pampering wouldn't hurt, I ran myself a bath, lit a eucalyptus spearmint scented candle and, with Kylie Minogue's *Slow* playing on loop, shut my eyes and luxuriated in the warm, soothing bubble bath. Thirty minutes into it, I reached for my phone and began to scroll through my Instagram timeline to see what people in town were getting up to. I noticed several people I followed were wishing some Debo guy a happy birthday, with several of them alluding to a 'turn up' later on. After several weeks in hiatus, I was suddenly eager for a good party. So I called someone I knew would know.

"Hey, babes," I said, when Yinka, who was more of a party buddy than a friend, answered her phone.

"Ife, where on earth have you been? You just dropped completely off the radar!"

"I needed a break. Lagos *wahala* was too much for me so I took a much needed holiday."

"Oh? Where to?"

I was amused by the hint of envy in her voice.

"Bora Bora. I was there for six glorious weeks," I answered, rubbing it in and loving it. Yinka, like many of my acquaintances, fancied herself in constant competition with me. But as much as she and the others tried to up me, Rahim always set the bar way too high for any of them to effectively compete.

"Ah, nice one," was her response, her tone indicating anything but. "I also intend to travel soon, you know, to make the most of one the long weekends coming...May Day or one of those. It'll definitely be an island getaway too, I just haven't decided which one yet."

"It's a pretty long trip, so Bora Bora might not be the option if you only have a weekend," I answered, enjoying myself a little too much. I could play this game for as long as she wanted to. But as I didn't want to waste all

afternoon on the mundane back and forth, I decided to get straight to the point. “Anyways, who’s this Debo everyone is wishing a happy birthday.”

“Debo Ogunfowora? You don’t know him?” she said, clearly delighted to have information I didn't. “He’s a Senior Vice President with *Hypnos Investment Bank* . He’s on the quiet side, so that might be why you haven’t met him. He hardly hangs out.”

“Oh? So, how come you know him?”

“We met at a bachelor’s eve sometime last year,” she answered, leaving enough mystery for me to wonder whether or not there was more to their alliance than that.

“Is it his fortieth?”

“Not at all. He’s thirty-six today, and he’s having an open house at his place. Wanna come?”

A slow smile formed on my face. “Sure. Send me the address.”

–

Glass of wine in hand, I stood in my walk-in closet, eyeing the columns and columns of clothes, trying to decide what to wear. I needed to meet someone new that night, a breath of fresh air, someone who would make me shake off the funk I suddenly found myself in. My eyes fell on the colour block dress I’d worn in Bora Bora, and I was teleported back to that night with Diekola.

“You’re very beautiful.”

I heard his voice as clearly as if he were standing right next to me. I closed my eyes at the reminder of my very memorable one-night stand, and felt a rush of heat course through my body. I’d long decided the allure of hooking up with a stranger on the romantic island had been why the sex had been that mind-blowing. Nothing more.

Bringing myself right back to reality, I settled on a white mini dress with thin gold straps and an embellished sash, paired with statement earrings and a metallic *Jimmy Choo* clutch. Simple and understated, yet sexy…that was the look I was going for, and as I slid on a pale pink, glossy lipstick, I smiled with satisfaction at my reflection in the mirror.

Ife was back!

Deciding against driving, I decided to call an *Uber* . Not only was I still smarting from knowing Rahim had such a keen eye on me, I also didn't want to be encumbered by a car if I met someone interesting. I needed to be free as a bird, free as a bird to follow the person wherever he wanted, if need be.

Getting to the Banana Island address Yinka sent me, walking in through the gates, I felt the gaze of pretty much everyone in the compound. Looking around, I realised it wasn't my usual crowd, but it didn't dampen my confidence. Instead, I sashayed into the house, walking with even more confidence than if the Debo had personally invited me himself. I knew I looked good. I knew almost all the men in the room were undressing me with their eyes. I knew I wouldn't be leaving the party alone, no matter how little or long I stayed.

"Ife?"

I turned around and saw a familiar, tall man standing there. I squinted, trying to jog my memory and he smiled.

"Banji. Ozioma's friend."

"Oh, DJ Banj!" I exclaimed, hugging him. "It's been ages. The last time we saw was at…"

"Ginika's wedding two years ago," he completed for me, still smiling.

"Wow! Time sure does fly!" I remarked, genuinely surprised Ginika's wedding had already been that long. "You weren't at Ara's last year."

"I was out of town, unfortunately. I really would have loved to attend."

"It was lovely!" I said, smiling at the memory of the beautiful ceremony.

"I heard."

"So…you're friends with Debo?" I asked.

"I guess you can say that. We work together."

I nodded, remembering Banji was also an investment banker and not a full time DJ.

“I’m also helping him out with the music tonight,” he went on.

I nodded, bobbing my head along to *Essence* , the song by Wizkid and Temz that was playing. “Good music, as usual.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

I took the liberty to look at him, really look at him, and I saw for the first time what an attractive man he was. From his lazy stare, to his perfect white teeth, to the dimple in his chin, he was a good-looking man indeed. And in a fitted white linen shirt that showed off his broad shoulders and well-defined arms, he was sexy as well.

“When was the last time you saw Ozioma?”

His question snapped me right out of my unabashed admiration. Hearing Ozioma’s name was enough to kill whatever ideas were forming in my head. A romantic liaison with the so-called best friend of my nemesis was completely out of the question.

“I haven’t seen her in a while,” I answered. “I actually do owe her a call at least. She did me a huge favour, and I haven’t had a chance to say thank you.” When he raised a brow in question, I shook my head and laughed. “Don’t ask.”

“I was with her yesterday,” he said. “She took me out for dinner to celebrate my birthday.”

“Awww, happy belated birthday!”

“Thank you,” he beamed. “Debo and I joke about almost being twins. I’m only a day older than he is.”

I frowned. “You’re thirty-six? So why does Ozioma call you her ‘baby brother’? I thought you were way younger, even younger than the rest of us?”

He shrugged. “Habit, I guess. She’s been doing that since we met in school. I was a year behind her.”

“And yet you allow her boss you around like that? Hooking you up with one friend after the other?”

“Well, if you put it that way,” he chuckled. “I just go along with it to make her happy. Her heart is always in a good place when she tries to match-make her friends, so I just play along,” he tilted his head. “I wonder why she never tried to hook us up though.”

I scoffed. “As if! You’re close enough to her to know of our, how do I put it, colourful history.”

He smiled. “Yeah, the whole Tagbo fiasco.”

“Fiasco is the right word for it,” I muttered, taking a cocktail from a passing waiter, surprised that was all he knew of me.

“Well, Ife, I need to get back to my turntable,” he said, giving me a side hug. “It was great seeing you again.”

“Same,” I said, lifting my glass to him before he walked away.

When he was gone, I looked around the room, hoping to spot Yinka or someone else I knew. It was a small gathering and it would be too easy to deduce that I had invited myself, if I were to remain standing there like a lone ranger.

Which is why I was relieved when I saw another familiar face on the other side of the room.

“Seb!” I called out, walking towards him.

The tall, bearded man smiled upon sighting me. “Ife, is this your face? It’s been a minute.”

“Yeah, I was out of town,” I answered, smiling at the man who’d tried to court my best friend the previous year. “How’ve you been?”

His smile waned. “Where you and that your friend left me,” was his wry answer. “Why did you allow me waste my time with Isioma, when she and Karibi were clearly an item?”

I shrugged. “Sorry,” was all I could manage to say to him in response.

“I hear they’re engaged,” he continued. “Good for her, I guess. It’s her loss though. She lost out on a fine specimen of a man when she dumped me. Even her mother could see I was the real deal…”

His voice trailed off as I continued to scan the room, hoping to spot someone else I knew. The last thing I wanted to spend my evening doing was listening to the rant of my friend's disgruntled former toaster. My eyes were on the door as a man walked in, and as recognition set in, it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Taking in a sharp intake of breath, I looked away, sure my mind had conjured him, certain my overactive imagination was making me see things, convinced I was imagining him there because he'd been on my mind just a few hours before. But looking back as he made his way into the room, and as he exchanged greetings with people there, one thing was for sure. This was no mirage.

He looked in my direction and squinted, before a slow smile formed on his face. I swallowed hard as he approached us, doing my best not to appear anything but unmoved about seeing him again.

"Hey, Diekola. It's good to see you," Seb greeted, shaking him.

"Hi, Sebastian," he greeted my companion, but with his eyes on me. "Hello, stranger."

"Hello," I answered, raising my glass to my lips.

Seb looked from Diekola to me, before deciding it best to leave us alone.

"I thought you were a figment of my imagination when I saw you just now," he said, smiling. "I didn't trust my eyes well enough to believe you were actually standing mere feet away from me, after I've spent so many weeks obsessing over you."

I smiled, listening to him echo my own reaction to seeing him. "I thought you said you live in New York. What are you doing here? Following me?"

He laughed. "If only I were that smooth! I'm here to wrap up a few things," he chuckled. "My goodness, I can't believe you're actually here. I almost didn't come for this party, but Debo was so insistent about wanting me here."

"He's a friend of yours?"

"Neighbour actually. I live nearby," he answered, before shaking his head. "This is so surreal. If only you knew how many calls I made to the hotel, trying to at least find out your name. Apparently, asking about 'the beautiful

black woman' in their hotel wasn't only sexist but politically incorrect as well."

I laughed. "That, and the fact I returned to my own hotel the very next day."

He said nothing for a while but his eyes remained on me. "That laugh. I've replayed it in my head over and over again."

I looked away, not wanting him to tell what I had replayed in my own mind over and over again.

"Will you at least tell me your name now?" he asked. "Mine remains Diekola."

I turned to look at him, contemplating whether or not to spoil the mystery. "Ifedayo," I finally answered.

"Ife-dayo," he drawled, savoring every syllable. "A beautiful name for a beautiful woman."

Another person called out his name and he waved, making me raise a brow. "For someone who doesn't live here, you know an awful lot of people."

"I used to live here in Lagos until about three years ago," he answered, a teasing smile on his face. "You're very inquisitive for someone who wanted to remain mysterious."

"I just don't like it when things don't connect," I shrugged.

As someone else called his attention, I took the liberty to look at him. He seemed more relaxed than the last time, more in his natural element. His head was clean-shaven, so his baldness wasn't quite as evident. In a simple *Hollister* t-shirt and jeans, he looked leaner and more athletic than I remembered, like he'd lost a few pounds or spent more time in the gym. I smiled at the paradox that was the combination of his large black glasses and tattoos, a full sleeve one on his right arm and a dragon on his upper left. I remembered the large eagle on his chest and flushed at how vividly I could see it…and the other impressive parts of his anatomy.

That was when I realised that he was the very distraction I'd prayed to find at the party. What better way to get my mind off my worries than guaranteed mind-blowing sex with a wealthy stranger who would only be in town a short while? It would also be a good way to demystify what we'd

had in Bora Bora, a way to prove there was nothing special about him, and he was just like any other man out there.

“So…you say you live nearby,” I said, when he turned back to me. “How nearby is nearby?”

He looked at me for what might have been a full minute before chuckling. “I just had a déjà vu moment, remembering you asking me back to your room for a drink.”

I placed my empty glass on a passing waiter’s tray. “Well, it’s time for you to return the favour, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” he stretched his hand. “It would be my pleasure.”

Placing my hand in his, I allowed him lead me outside.

“My house is down the road. It’s a bit of a walk, I hope you don't mind.”

I was grateful I’d opted for a pair of *Gianvito Rossi* plexi stretch pumps and not any of my higher stilettos. “Not at all.”

We walked in silence down the street, quiet, save for the party guests milling around their cars. Every home on the boulevard screamed affluence, and I couldn't help but pat myself on the back over my ability to pick the best ones.

“Here we are,” he announced as we approached the last house on the street, an impressive structure with large windows that took up entire walls and polished steel beams that broke them into yet more rectangles, making it look like it was made almost entirely of glass. It was unapologetically modern, but yet romanticized by the large white bougainvillea peeking over the high fence. Walking into the compound, the immaculately manicured lawn and array of celestial white flowers took my breath away.

“You have a lovely home,” I just had to say. “And these flowers, gosh, they’re beautiful. Are they roses?”

“Camellias,” he answered, smiling. “And I wish I could take the credit but my cousin handled everything about the house; the design, contractors, landscaping, everything. I saw it for the very first time when I arrived a few days ago.”

“Oh. I guess that answers what would have been my next question; if you lived here with your late wife.”

“No. I sold our place shortly before I left Nigeria.”

“Too many memories?”

He nodded, opening the door and ushering me into the house. The stark white, minimalist furnishing of the living room was in sync with its modern architecture, with teal coloured cushions and floor lamps the only pop of colour in the space. But what took my breath away was the glass wall facing the door, which gave a beautiful view of the Lekki-Ikoyi link bridge.

“I know, right,” he chuckled, walking to the bar. “I can’t get over that view either. What’s your preference? Wine, whisky, both?”

I turned to him. “Wine, please. Red wine,” I answered, before returning my attention to the view. “This is too much real estate to waste on only occasional trips to Nigeria.”

He shrugged, pouring us both glasses of wine. “We bought the land years ago and it was just sitting idle. Before I left the country, I came here with my Real Estate Agent with the intention of valuing and selling it off, but standing out back, looking at that spectacular view, I decided this would be the one piece of property I wouldn't sell,” he walked up to me and handed me a glass. “Cheers.”

A small smile played on my lips as I accepted it from him. “Cheers.”

As he took a sip from his own glass, as I watched his full lips circle its brim, his long fingers interlacing the stem, I had only one thing on my mind. I shrugged almost imperceptibly, making the thin straps of my dress fall a few inches, leaving my shoulders bare.

“Let’s sit,” he said, looking away quickly and leading me to one of the white sofas.

I followed, satisfied to see the effect I still had on him. On the sofa, I sat a few inches closer than I should have, crossing my legs to reveal more skin than was appropriate.

“Ifedayo,” he said, smiling. “That’s not why I brought you back here.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked, setting my glass down, taking his own glass from him and then leaning in and kissing him the way I’d wanted to from the very moment I set eyes on him that evening.

As we kissed, as I savoured the taste of his lips sweetened from wine and desire, my own desire rose to fever pitch, proving that what we’d shared in Bora Bora had been no fluke. I wanted more of him. A whole lot more.

But then, he pulled away.

“No, not this time,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m not going to lose my head like I did the last time.”

I reached for him again and when he pulled away, I stared at him, confused. “What is this? You brought me here to play games?”

Placing his hands on my shoulders, he shook his head. “This isn’t about games, Ifedayo. You don’t know how many times I kicked myself for not getting to know you properly in Bora Bora. I allowed myself get carried away, and didn’t treat you the way I should have treated a lady.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“When I saw you at the party this evening, I knew I’d been given another chance to do it right with you,” he continued. “We skipped so many steps before. Let’s do things properly this time.”

I hissed under my breath and pulled away from his hold. This had turned out to be a grand waste of my time. I pulled my straps back on and reached for my glass of wine, mentally contemplating returning to the party in good enough time for the evening not to be an entire waste.

“So, tell me, what do you do for a living?” he asked, smiling.

“I teach in a Primary School,” I answered, glancing at my watch and deciding the night was wasted anyway. It would be best to just return home.

“No kidding?” he exclaimed, leaning back. “I’m also a teacher, the only difference being I teach much older kids. College kids, actually. I teach Applied Physics at NYU.”

I blinked twice in my surprise, wanting to ask how he could afford such a grand house on a teacher’s salary, foreign exchange notwithstanding.

Shaking my head, I decided I didn't care either way.

“I have to go,” I said, reaching for my phone. “What’s your address, so I can order an *Uber* ?”

“So soon?” he asked, his disappointment evident.

“I’m really tired, sorry,” I said, rising to my feet. “Some other time, maybe.”

Some other time never!

“Can I at least drop you at home? It’s the least I could do.”

I pondered over this briefly, before shrugging in acquiescence. It was truly the least he could do after making me walk all the way to his place…for nothing.

He led me to a black Audi Q8 SUV, and, after asking me for my address, we drove in silence, with the exception of Wham!’s *Careless Whisper* playing from the car’s sound system. I closed my eyes to discourage any conversation, wanting the night to be over quickly. If nothing, it had at least served to demystify the encounter in Bora Bora.

“It’s that building over there,” I finally spoke, as we approached my apartment block.

Pulling up in front of it, he turned to look at me. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I really like you, Ifedayo.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ife. Everyone calls me Ife.”

“Ife,” he repeated, smiling. “I like you a lot. I’ve thought about you non-stop since being with you last time. You’re not a one-night stand to me. I want this to be so much more.”

Our eyes held, and I found myself equal parts uneasy…and intrigued. It had been a long, long time since any man wanted more from me than sex.

“Are you going to invite me up?” he asked, still smiling.

I raised a brow. “Asked by Mr. Take-It-Slow!”

“Just to continue the conversation we were having,” he chuckled. “Nothing more.”

I shook my head. “It’s my uncle’s house. I’m house-sitting for him and he doesn’t like me having guests,” the lie rolled off my tongue effortlessly.

He nodded in understanding. “Can I at least have your number?”

I looked at him, my interest renewed. Only minutes before, I’d been ready to walk away from him without as much as a backward glance. But now, I found myself curious about what exactly it was he wanted from me.

“Let me have yours,” I answered.

“The ‘ *Don’t call me, I’ll call you’* card? Why so harsh, Ife? After the universe brought us back together again?” he teased.

“Okay, bye then,” I said, reaching for the door handle.

“Alright, alright. A beggar has no choice,” he said, chuckling as he scribbled his phone number on the back of his business card. “That’s my Nigerian number.”

I nodded, looking at the card for *Diekola Holloway Ph.D* of New York University, surprised he hadn’t been pulling my legs after all.

“I’ll look forward to your call, Ife. Please don’t leave me hanging.”

I nodded noncommittally, and got out of the car. I could feel him watching as I walked into the building and smiled to myself.

Maybe he would be my distraction after all.

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CHAPTER FIVE

BUT IN THE DAYS that followed, I decided that he wouldn’t be. I was far too attracted to him to be as emotionally detached as I needed to be. After finally exorcising myself of Olumide, the last thing I needed was to get into another situation where my heart would rule my head.

So I threw his card in the bin.

The following week, I had to return to work. It was a few days to the start of a new term but, as always, academic staff had to resume earlier to prepare.

Driving into the school premises that morning, I had a flashback of Moyo and her friends waiting there, their faces set with the determination of militia about to slay their captive. The memory was so vivid, a chill ran down my spine. Intuitively, I drove towards the north side of the car park, which was further away from the entrance gate than I preferred to walk. But my safety was more important than any inconvenience, especially if Moyo and her crew now knew my hitherto favourite parking spot. Even though I had no intention of ever returning to Olumide, I couldn't take the risk. Getting out of my car, and after several nervous glances around, I made a mental note to ask Rahim to change it. I would be much harder to track down in a car different from the one they knew.

“Miss Fadahunsi!” Giselle Coetzee, the Head Teacher, called out as I walked by her office. “It’s so good to see you back. Is everything okay now?”

It took me a few seconds to realise what she was meant. “Oh, yes. Yes, everything is fine now. Thanks for asking.”

“The family emergency took you out of the country?” she prodded. “I tried to call you a few times but your phone was switched off.”

“Yes. Yes, it did,” I nodded, not obliging her non-verbal request for more information.

The diminutive Caucasian woman smiled. She was no fool, and I knew she could tell I was being economic with the truth. The sixty-two year old South African had over forty years of experience dealing with teachers like me, teachers who came with tall tales on occasion.

“Well, we’re glad to have you back,” she said, still smiling. “You look beautiful as always, and well rested.”

There was a bit of emphasis on the ‘well rested’, but I decided to ignore it. “Thank you, and so do you,” I beamed at her. “I have to run. Lots to catch up on. Are we still meeting this morning?”

“No, I’m meeting with the Senior Primary Teachers today. Junior Primary has been rescheduled to tomorrow.”

I nodded and smiled, before walking away. By the time I finally made it to my class, I’d had almost identical conversations with the other teachers I walked by, all of whom sympathetic about whatever family emergency had necessitated my long absence, while also marvelling over how good I looked, regardless. By the time I got to my class, I was drained, deciding I didn’t care if they believed me or not. They could think whatever they liked. What mattered was that I was back.

Settling in, the first thing I did was order a bouquet of flowers to be delivered to Ozioma at work. The display of gratitude was long overdue, regardless of how I felt about her. She’d saved me from what could have been epic humiliation, and I would forever be indebted to her. Considering our history, I wasn’t sure I would have done the same for her if the tables had been turned.

I was soon joined by the Substitute Teacher who took over my class in my absence, and listened as she brought me up to speed with the children’s individual progress. As she spoke, my eyes wandered to the pin boards on both sides of the wall, noticing she hadn’t updated them with any new visual aids. They still had the same Martin Luther King drawings the kids had done just before I left, and the last birthday flags were still from Mia’s on January 17. Off the top of my head, I knew there’d been at least five

other birthdays since then. As soon as she left, I proceeded to take down the out-dated posters and went about updating them accordingly. As I did that, my phone rang several times. I didn't recognise the numbers, so ignored the calls like I'd now grown accustomed to.

"Ife," Mrs. Adeoye, the Head Teacher's Secretary, called out, standing in front of my door. "Darasimi's mother just called the office. She said she's been trying to reach you." She looked from my phone on the table to me, accusation in her eyes.

"Oh really?" I feigned as much surprise as I could muster. "The phone is on silent. I'll call her back."

"Do that, please," she said as she walked away.

I made a face as she left, casting a glance at my phone, wondering which of the numerous strange numbers I was supposed to be calling back, hating that the device I used did not support the app that identified incoming calls. I considered going through my student records to check for that particular parent's number, but decided to call the number with the most frequency in my incoming call log.

Big mistake.

"Ife?"

I hissed upon hearing Olumide's voice, and made to terminate the call.

"Ife, please don't hang up. Please!"

"Olumide, stop hounding me. It's been two weeks. Surely you should have gotten the message by now. Calling me from strange numbers isn't going to make any difference. We're done!"

"Ife, I'm begging, don't do this," he pleaded. "Let's at least meet to talk. Look me in the eye and tell me you want to walk away from almost two decades of what we've built."

"The only thing I built with you was a house of foolishness and regret," I retorted. "I don't need to see you to be certain I want nothing more to do with you. I'm not going to put myself in harm's way because I'm waiting for a man who wants to keep eating his cake and having it."

“I’ve spoken with Moyo. I’ve warned her that the next time she does that kind of thing…”

“Next time *ke* ? There’ll be no next time *o* ! Let her save her aggression for the next girl you choose to deceive.”

“Ife, don’t say that.”

I shook my head, a rueful smile on my face. “That you can even refer to ‘the next time’ is all the confirmation I need that you truly have no plans for me.”

“Baby, it’s not like that. You know that I’m going to leave her. You know that-”

But I’d heard enough.

“Don't call me again, Olumide. I’m going to block this number now, and don’t call me from another one. If you do, I’m going to report you for harassment. I mean it.”

“Ife-”

I terminated the call and set the phone on the table, my call to Darasimi’s mother forgotten. I was more annoyed than flustered, longing for a way to wish him away like something that had never happened.

My phone rang again and I glared at it, prepared to throw it out of the window if the call was from another unfamiliar number, Darasimi’s mother or not. Luckily for the phone, it was from Ozioma.

“Oh my goodness! Thank youuuuu! These are the most beautiful flowers anyone has ever sent me.”

I smiled in spite of myself. “I’m glad you like them. And thank *you* .”

“For what, babe? I didn’t do anything a friend wouldn't. These flowers are gorgeous. They’ve truly made my day,” she giggled. “See how everyone here is peeping into my office, wondering which man is toasting me. Yes *o* ! Me *sef* don get toaster!”

I laughed, surprised speaking to her wasn’t grating on my nerves as it typically did.

“Well, I’m glad to know you’re fine and well. You had me worried when I couldn't reach you after…you know.”

I sighed. “I just had to get away…to think, clear my head.”

“Oh really? Where did you go?”

“Bora Bora.”

“Lifestyles of the rich and famous!” Ozioma remarked, and I didn't even hear her usual sarcasm. “I hope you had a good time.”

“I had a great time,” I answered, a small smile on my face. I would forever be grateful for the weeks I’d been able to escape from reality in the beautiful French Polynesian island.

“I hope you haven’t encountered Moyo again since your return. I’ve been trying to feel out my friend for information, but that one is angry with me for tipping you off last time.”

“There will be no more encounters with Moyo ever again,” I replied, loving the sound of saying it out loud to someone other than Olumide. “I’ve left her husband for her.”

“You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that. You deserve so much more than that *bonga* fish of a man. I couldn't understand the attraction. Dry, skinny man like that with two fine women dragging themselves over him.”

I chuckled again. Talking about it not only made it real, it further revealed to me just how foolish I’d been to put myself in that situation for as long as I had.

“I saw Banji two weekends ago,” I said, changing the subject.

“Yeah, he said so. At a party, right?”

“He’s a real dish…very good looking. I never quite noticed before. How come you never hooked…”

“Hooked you guys up?” she cut in, her voice rising in her excitement. “You like him? That’s a genius idea! How come I never thought of that before? He also did say you looked nice that night.”

“I was going to say yourself, Ozioma,” I interrupted before she got too excited and ran with it. “How come you never hooked up with him yourself? You made it seem like he was some young boy whereas he’s a full grown man.”

“It’s like the water you drank in Bora Bora has started making you hallucinate,” she retorted. “Banji and I? Are you joking? Apart from the fact that he’s nowhere near my spec, that would practically be incest. He’s like a kid brother to me,” she clucked her tongue. “Stop trying to dodge the subject. Should I set you guys up or not?”

“ *Wo* , Ozioma, leave me *abeg* . I’ll pass, please,” I laughed, stealing a glance at my wristwatch. Time was fast spent. “I have to go. I’m glad you like the flowers. And thank you, once again. I owe you a big one.”

“Anytime, babe. *Ciao* !”

Switching my phone off, I set about working on my lesson plan for the term. Without distraction, I was able to finish in a little over an hour. I was in the process of putting up the pictures of the kids with birthdays that term, when the school Janitor walked in with a large bouquet of red roses. I shook my head and smiled, amused Ozioma had not only chosen to reciprocate the gesture, but also by how quickly she’d done so.

Except they weren’t from Ozioma.

Ifedayo,

It turns out I can do a little sleuthing of my own.

I’ve tried to call you a few times but it always goes unanswered. I’m still here…waiting for your call.

Diekola

I read the note again and again, unable to wipe the smile off my face. After everything I’d done to convince myself otherwise, I was happy to hear from him again, flattered he’d gone through the trouble of getting my phone number and finding out where I worked. Placing the flowers in a makeshift vase, I put it on my table, charmed by the large red blooms, and feeling the flutter of butterflies in my stomach. As thoughtful and generous as Rahim

was, it had been a long time since anyone had surprised me with so romantic a gesture.

Picking up the card again, I saw that he'd again scribbled his phone number on the back. I decided that a call to say thank you couldn't be so bad.

Reaching for my phone before I had a chance to change my mind, I turned it on and I dialled his number.

"Ifedayo," he drawled my name in what was now his characteristic way, prompting an involuntary smile from me.

"Let me guess. Seb gave you my number. He's the only person we have in common."

"Guilty as charged. I had to ask him for it when it became evident you weren't going to call."

"Thank you for the flowers," I said, looking at the magnificent floral arrangement before me. "How did you know where to deliver them? Seb also?"

"Please, don't kill the guy," he chuckled. "I didn't want to get you in trouble with your uncle by sending them to your house."

"How did you know I'd be here?" I asked, crossing my arms and leaning back in my chair. "School doesn't resume for another week."

"You forget I'm a teacher as well," I could hear the smile in his voice as he answered. "And I knew this would be the best time to properly get your attention."

"Well, you did. The flowers are gorgeous, just the right pick-me-up I needed."

"Rough day?"

I shrugged, pushing the conversation with Olumide to the back of my mind. "Just busy."

"Ifedayo…Ife…I'm not going to ask you why you never called. I guess you had your reason why," he said. "But whatever that reason is, be rest assured that I *am* going to do everything I can to change your mind."

“There was no real reason. I’ve just been preoccupied, that’s all.”

“Too occupied to have dinner with me tonight?”

“Dinner?” I repeated, lightheaded at the very thought, and trying to think of a reason, any reason, to refuse.

“Or drinks, if dinner will take too much time.”

As much as I tried, I couldn't think of a reason not to.

“Sure,” I heard myself agreeing. “Where and when?”

“Um,” he stalled, clearly surprised I’d agreed so quickly. “Can I pick you up at 7?”

“Tell me where to meet you,” I countered, trying to regain some control by at least driving myself there and having the liberty to leave, if and when I had to.

“There’s this nice place I just discovered on Queen’s Drive. I forget the name, but it has some sort of nautical theme-”

“ *The Admiral* . I know the place,” I answered, confident that was where he meant. “I’ll meet you there at 7.”

“I can’t wait. See you then, Ifedayo.”

Disconnecting the line, I smiled to myself, still relishing the sound of my name the way he pronounced it. It had been a long time since anyone addressed me that way and, even though I liked to tell people otherwise, hearing my name, my full name, reminded of simpler, happier times. But as quickly as I was hit by the wave of nostalgia, I shook it off immediately, not wanting to go down memory lane, a lane that led only to sadness…and regret.

–

Despite the fact it was a Monday evening, I decided against an understated look, and instead opted for a coral, sleeveless, draped mini dress with deep cutouts on the side. With nude makeup, my hair pulled to the back in a ponytail, and large gold hoop earrings, standing in front of my mirror, I couldn't have been more satisfied with the outcome. For some reason I couldn't quite explain, I wanted to make even more of an impression on this

strange man who'd been making me feel things from the very moment I met him. He was an enigma I still wasn't sure I wanted to have around me, mostly because of the way I was reacting to him. But it was like the more I ran, the more pulled I was in his direction.

Getting into my Mercedes, I knew there was a possibility of him questioning my having such a flashy, expensive car, given what I did for a living. But then again, I wasn't the only one living large on a 'teacher's' salary. He had his own explaining to do about being able to afford expensive holidays and a luxury home as a College Professor.

I didn't walk into *The Admiral* until 7:35pm and upon seeing me, he waved and rose to his feet, remaining standing until I got to the table. One thing he definitely was, was a complete gentleman.

"Wow!" he said, helping me to my seat. "You look stunning."

I smiled at him, also looking dapper in a light blue shirt over indigo blue jeans, refraining from complimenting him as I'd given him too much encouragement already.

"I just can't quit staring," he said, once we were both seated. "You are very, very beautiful, Ifedayo."

I shrugged as I opened the menu, trying to appear as indifferent as possible, even though on the inside I was doing cartwheels, happy that he was just as attracted to me as the last time, if not even more so.

"So, a teacher?" he asked, after our drinks were served; a rum punch for me, and a passion fruit martini for him. "I never would have guessed."

I shrugged noncommittally. "I like kids."

"Ooookay. That was brief," he laughed. "Well, as for me, I grew up a campus kid. Both my parents were Professors at the University of Benin, so I guess you can say I was born into the academia."

"The University of Benin? Really?" I repeated, surprised.

"Really!" he answered, his smile widening at my apparent surprise. "I always thought I'd return there after gaining some experience."

"So what scuttled those grand plans?"

“Life happened. I was in my second year when there was yet another bloody cult clash on campus. My folks got scared and sent me off to the States to finish school. That was where I met Boma.”

“Your late wife,” it was more of a statement than a question. “You met when you were that young?”

He nodded. “We started dating that very first year. But that isn’t the story for tonight. I was trying to tell you what ‘scuttled my grand plans’.”

I smiled at his inference to my dig, quite enjoying the banter.

“We both stayed back for postgraduate studies after our first degrees, and the plan was for us to get teaching jobs there, to get some experience and then move back home. Well, that was *my* plan anyway. Boma always had her heart set on more,” he shrugged. “We got married, and I got a Graduate Assistant job at our University. Boma, on the other hand, developed an interest in commodity trading after visiting an old classmate in Europe. Before long, she’d developed enough relationships to start matching sellers of refined petroleum products with buyers in Nigeria. Her uncle was already a big wig in the oil and gas space, so, before long, she had lots of active deals and was making seven-figure profits on her deals. When she decided to move back to Nigeria to set up a company to do this as a proper business, I had to support her.”

“So you quit your job and came with her?”

“I was making less than $40,000 a year. It would have been foolish to hold her back because of my own ‘grand plans’,” he smiled. “We moved back to Nigeria, and the business exploded, growing rapidly year-on-year. For a long time, our company was the biggest oil trader in West Africa.”

“So, *she* was the one who had the money?” I teased, intrigued.

“Well, we both built the company,” he chuckled, his eyes twinkling in response to my goading. “She was the brains behind it, but I was the one who built most of the relationships that helped sustain the business. Boma was a hot head and very passionate. She wasn’t one to suffer fools gladly. Left to her, many of our business relationships would have gone up in smoke. I was there to pour some ice where she breathed fire.”

“Sounds like you were quite the team.”

His smile waned a little. “Yeah, we were,” he shrugged. “When she died, I kept the business going for a few years, but it just wasn’t the same. The only reason I’d been interested in it in the first place was because of her, and with her gone, it became a chore. It was still very profitable, but it got to a point where all it did was make me miserable.”

“So that was when you decided to sell off three years ago?”

“You remember!” he remarked, clearly pleased. “Yes, that was when I decided to sell off. I sold our house and other pieces of property, apart from where I now live, and appointed someone to run the company in my absence. But now, I have a buyer for the company itself. Her cousin runs an oil producing company, which now wants to diversify into downstream operations as well. That’s why I’m in town, to conclude the sale.”

“How did you end up teaching in NYU?”

“When I was ready, I called a former classmate who, by that time, was now a Professor. She put in a good word when I applied. Of course, it hurts that I’m a lot behind where I ought to have been if I’d stayed. My contemporaries are all Professors now but I concluded my Ph.D only last year. But you know what? I’m still way happier than I was running the company alone after Boma’s death.”

“What killed her?” I asked, suddenly curious about this powerful woman he’d had in his life.

“Cancer. Ovarian cancer.”

Silence followed as we nursed our drinks quietly. I didn’t quite know what to say after hearing that.

“So if you met her as a kid, and you hadn’t been with anyone after her death, does that mean you’ve only ever been with two women your whole life?” I teased, deciding making light of it was the best way to put us both at ease.

He laughed at my insinuation. “Unfortunately, you would be mistaken to think that. Right after our first degree, we broke up for a year, and I had a

very, how do I put this mildly, wild year. I was extremely promiscuous and more than made up for lost time."

"Was that when you got all those tattoos?"

"That was exactly when I got all these tattoos," he nodded, smiling. "There's a story behind each one. One day, I'll tell you."

"So you got back together after you'd had your 'promiscuous' year. You're lucky she took you back," I remarked. "She must have been mortified when she saw what you'd done to your body."

"She grew to love them," he answered. "She said it would make it easy if she ever had to identify me, or if I decided to get up to no good."

I laughed, amused by the woman his late wife had been. But I realised he wasn't laughing along with me.

"I love it when you laugh," he remarked. "You're always so guarded, that's the only time I get a glimpse of the woman behind this impenetrable armour of yours, the woman behind walls higher than the Walls of Jericho."

"Walls of Jericho?" I exclaimed, laughing at an expression I hadn't heard in years. "I didn't think you were the Bible-reading kind."

"What can I say? My mother was a praying woman," he quipped, smiling.

But his answer only served to regurgitate for me memories I'd long suppressed. My smile waned as I tried to regroup, as I tried to think of a comeback, some feisty quip to prove he hadn't caught any glimpse of anything, and that he really didn't know me at all.

"Hi, Diekola," came a voice. I looked up just as a couple approached us.

He rose to his feet to greet them, before introducing them as longtime friends of his. As I shook hands with the man, our eyes met, and I immediately recognised him from the Lagos party scene. He must have recognised me as well, as his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Turning to his wife, she was looking at me the way one would watch criminals in a Police line up. There was no mistaking the fact; they both knew who I was.

I kept my eyes averted as Diekola chatted with them, focusing on my almost empty glass, wishing I'd ordered food to busy myself with. After

what seemed like eternity, they left.

Taking with them any interest I had of continuing the evening.

“I have to go,” I said, glancing at my watch. “I have work tomorrow.”

“Oh no, not again,” he exclaimed. “I was hoping to convince you to have a meal or something. I’m really enjoying our conversation.”

I offered a stiff smile in response, looking around the bar to spot anyone else who knew me. From the other side of the room, I noticed the couple we’d just greeted seated with two women, who turned to look our way just in time for my eyes to meet theirs. They immediately looked away, proving what I already knew. I was the subject of their discussion.

Immediately, I reached for my handbag and rose to my feet. “I had a wonderful time. Thank you. I’ll call you.”

And with that, I walked away as fast as I could. From the corner of my eye, I saw him quickly summon the waiter so he could pay for our drinks, but I was already out the door before he could convince me otherwise.

“Ife! Ifedayo!” he called out as I made my way to where I was parked. I tried to ignore him, but when I stopped to open my car, he caught up with me.

“Ife, wait up. I’d really like to see you again. Please.”

I turned to look at him, surprised by how rattled I was by a few judgmental looks from people I barely knew, especially as I’d endured a whole lot worse in my lifetime.

“Are you free tomorrow? Can I take you out for drinks again? Or dinner this time?”

I shook my head. “I’m really busy.”

“Or to see a live band, if you don't want to eat. Or a movie? Or we could even go bowling?”

I sighed, equal parts endeared by his eagerness, but also not in a hurry for any more encounters with anyone who knew me.

“I have a lot of work to catch up on, Diekola. I don't think I can.”

“Ifedayo, please,” he said, shoulders slumped in defeat. “In case you haven’t noticed, I *am* trying to woo you. I’m trying to sweep you off your feet, but so far, I’m failing miserably. Help me out here.”

This prompted a smile from me and he smiled as well, encouraged.

“Okay, I’ll leave you this week. But how about this weekend?” he pressed. “How about a picnic at my place on Saturday? I have the best chef this side of the Atlantic, I kid you not.”

Everything in me wanted to scream no, but looking at him, I knew I wanted to have another evening like this, to spend more time in his company, even if it would be the last time. Besides, in his house, there would be no encounters with people from the Lagos social scene.

So I gave in. “A picnic sounds nice.”

A wide smile broke on his face. “It’s five days away, but I’ll take it. I’ll take it. What time should I pick you up?”

I opened the door of my car and got in. “Call me.”

“Nice car,” he called out as I shut the door.

I rolled down my window, wanting to lie that it belonged to my ‘uncle’, or that I’d won it in a competition, or some other random lie. But instead, I simply shrugged and smiled. “Thank you.”

As I drove away, I could see him still watching me, and I couldn't help but smile. It felt good to be on the receiving end of this kind of pure and genuine adulation. It wasn't something that came my way very often.

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CHAPTER SIX

FOR THE FIRST TIME in a long time, I went to bed with a smile and awoke with an even bigger one. I had a silly grin on my face all of the next day, giggling every time I remembered something he said the previous night, regretting not agreeing to see him that evening. Suddenly, the weekend seemed much too far away.

But as the hours went by, sitting in my apartment that evening, I stared at my phone, wondering why he hadn’t called yet. Convincing myself he’d probably been busy with his company sale, I went into the next day even more expectant. But settling into my bed at the end of yet another day, it became painfully evident that I would not be hearing from him that night, or probably ever again.

Shutting my eyes, I conjured images of people like the couple from *The Admiral* , filling his ears with stories about me, stories that would, unfortunately, be mostly accurate. That I didn't want him to know those things about me made me realise just how deeply I was beginning to feel for him. With my other romantic liaisons, Olumide inclusive, my reputation had never really mattered. But now, it mattered more than anything.

My phone rang just as I was drifting into a fitful sleep, and I reached for it with the speed of light, expecting it to be him, despite all the worries I had about him now knowing more about me than either of us would have wanted him to.

But it was Rahim.

“Hello, Princess,” he cooed. “Don’t tell me you’ve already gone to bed. It’s not even ten o’clock yet.”

I lay back in bed, disappointed almost to tears. “I was tired. It was a hectic day.”

“Ah yes, you’re back at that job you don’t need,” he answered and I could hear the smile in his voice. “You haven’t sent me any pictures in a while. You used to send me one on your way to work every morning.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I’m sorry, I forgot. I’ve been rushing out of the house. I’ll send you one tomorrow.”

The thought of having to pose for a picture for him made me feel physically ill.

“I’m in Rome for a meeting,” he continued. “You need to see the view from my hotel room. I have a perfect view of *The Pantheon* . It’s spectacular. I wish you were here to see it.”

“Mmmmm,” was all I could manage in response.

“You could come join me, you know,” he suggested. “I could organise to get you here by this time tomorrow. You’ll only miss two days of work.”

“I’ve taken too much time off already,” I mumbled, not having the energy to argue as vehemently as I felt about it. If there was one thing I was certain of, rushing off for a holiday with my sugar daddy was the very last thing I wanted to do.

“Understandable…disappointing but understandable. Maybe next time,” he answered, his voice cool and unruffled. In all the time I’d been with him, I’d never seen him lose his temper even once. “Remember when we holidayed in Venice about a year ago? That was a lovely holiday.”

I smiled at the memory. Indeed it was. We’d spent only two full days together, as he’d been busy with meetings, leaving me enough time, and money, to shop to my heart’s delight.

“Let’s go to South East Asia for our next holiday. We could go to Singapore and Malaysia. I hear there are some really lovely islands there. I’m told you can physically touch the clouds in Malaysia’s *Genting Highlands* .”

“Sounds good,” I said in response, hoping my voice was conveying the enthusiasm I didn't feel.

“If you lived with me, we wouldn't have to be planning holidays so far into the future.”

“Good night, Rahim,” I chuckled, ending the call, not wanting to be dragged into a discussion similar to the one we’d had weekends before.

Long after the call was over, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering what Diekola was doing that very minute, wondering if he’d written me off and moved on to someone else. For someone I’d known so briefly, the very thought felt like a million tiny needles piercing my soul.

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My phone awakened me the next morning. At 7am, I’d overslept, but seeing my best friend’s name on the caller ID was enough to put a big grin on my face.

“Thank God!” Isioma exclaimed. “I’ve been beside myself with worry. Where have you been?”

“I’ve missed you too,” I beamed, thrilled to be hearing from her. “I had to get out of town for a bit. I needed to clear my head.”

“What happened?”

I sighed, wondering whether or not to tell her, considering the last she knew was that Olumide and I were over. “I just needed a break,” I answered, deciding against it. There was no reason to anyway, especially as Olumide and I were now truly done.

“You didn't even send me a message or anything,” she answered, and I could hear the pain in her voice. “I was so worried after calling so many times and finding your phone always switched off, that I sent Ifechi to your house to check on you. It was your Doorman that told him you were out of town.”

“Awww,” I gushed, touched but not surprised she’d been that worried about me. She was one of the very few people I could call a friend. “I’m so sorry, it was very last minute. I turned off my phone just as the plane took off. I needed to be in a total communication vacuum.”

She was quiet and I knew she was even more hurt hearing it had been deliberate.

“I hope you got the rest you wanted,” she eventually said.

“I did. Thank you,” I answered, wanting so desperately to tell her what had chased me out of town like a bat out of hell. But apart from not wanting her to know of my brief reunion with Olumide, I found myself suddenly aware of the fact that she was nicely engaged and settled, and I was nowhere near that. I didn't want to be the one with all the drama in the world. “Awww, so Ifechi was here to look for me,” I said, changing the subject. “I hope he hasn’t been too lonely, being the only one in the house with your Mom since you and Ify left.”

“He’s actually here. He and Mom got into London last week,” she answered. “Ike arrives tomorrow morning.”

“ *Ahn ahn* , the whole Ilonzeh crew!” she laughed. “Oga Karibi has decided to relocate all his in-laws?”

“As if my mother would ever agree to relocate!” she giggled and I giggled along with her. Yep, Ebele Ilonzeh would be the last person to pack up and leave Nigeria for good.

“Ifechi is the only one staying behind,” she continued. “He’s starting a Postgraduate program here in August, so he’ll wait back. Ike just got hired by *Eldabra* so he’s more than excited to return to Lagos next week with Mom.”

I couldn't help the wide smile that formed on my face, hearing her family update. Things had turned 180 degrees for them in the last two years, and if there was any family that deserved the change, it was theirs.

“Have you and Karibi fixed a date yet? Will the wedding be over there or here in Lagos?”

She paused again before answering. “We’re having a small ceremony on Saturday.”

I sat up in bed. “Saturday, as in two days from now?”

“We’re resubmitting my paperwork for my passport, as Karibi doesn't want it issued in any other name but Graham-Hart,” she laughed at the last part. “He also really wants us married as soon as possible, and so do I, if I’m to be honest. So we decided to take advantage of my family being here. Ifeanyi has already been in London a couple of weeks.”

“Okay,” I said, mentally working out how quickly my agent could get me a ticket. “I’m sure I can be on a flight out tonight or tomorrow morning…”

“Um, the thing is…” she answered, clearly struggling with her words. “We agreed it would only be immediate family. If I have friends over, so will he, and you and I know how quickly that will turn into a circus. It’s just a small ceremony, so that we can get all the legal stuff done. There’ll be a traditional ceremony in Lagos sometime in July, and we’re having a big reception later in the year.”

“Oh,” was all I could say in response, pained to my very core not to be invited to her wedding. But as hurt as I was, I could understand their need for a small ceremony. As popular as Karibi was, that was the only way they could keep intimate.

“I’m happy for you, babes,” I said, and truly meaning it. “But *e pain me o* ! *I no go lie* !”

“ *E pain me more than you* . But I’m consoled by the other ceremonies we’ll have later on. You know you’ll be my wing man for those ones, one hundred!”

“But of course. You know I got you!” I smiled, trying to reassure her as best as I could. “Congratulations, hun. Make sure you send me pictures!”

“Knowing Ify, she’ll probably have it live on her Instagram.”

We laughed in unison, agreeing that wasn’t beyond her sister to do.

Long after the call was over, and even longer after I should have left for work, I remained in bed, contemplative. As happy as I was for my friend, I couldn't help but feel resentful and a tad envious. As if it wasn't bad enough that she’d snagged for herself the very best of them, now I was being barred from even attending the wedding.

And it sucked.

By the time I finally made it to work, I was in a sour mood, worsened as evening approached and there was still no word from Diekola Holloway. There I was waiting for the elusive phone call of a man who was fast seeming like a figment of my imagination, while my friend would be signing the dotted lines with the love of her life in a matter of hours.

By Friday evening, I had started sinking into depression, and was toying with the idea of actually joining Rahim wherever he was, when my phone finally rang.

It was Diekola.

“Hi there,” I said, trying to keep myself from smiling, lest he hear it in my voice.

“Hello, beautiful,” came his voice, sounding deeper and more sensual than I remembered. “I’ve been counting the seconds till the right time to call.”

“You certainly took your time,” I couldn't help but say.

“You said you’d be busy, and I didn't want to get in your way,” he answered, and I found the uncertainty in his voice even more endearing. “I hope I didn't leave it till too late and you haven’t made plans for tomorrow.”

As tempted as I was to tease him, I was too happy hearing his voice to even manage it. “No, you didn't. And no, I haven’t made plans for tomorrow. If I remember correctly, I was promised a picnic.”

“You remember very correctly indeed,” he chuckled. “I’ve spent all week thinking what to do to make it extra special. I can only hope it lives up to expectation.”

I smiled to myself. If only he knew that just seeing him again was all I needed for my own expectations to be met.

“What time should I meet you?” I asked. “It’s still at your place, right?”

“Oh no, I’m not going to let that happen a second time. I’d prefer to pick you up, if that’s okay with you.”

“Why? So I don’t leave abruptly again?” I teased.

“Well, there’s that,” he laughed. “And also the fact I’m old fashioned, and I like to be able to pick up my date.”

“That you use the term ‘date’ shows just how old fashioned you are.”

“I told you I was rusty,” he chuckled. “So what do you say? Can I pick you up by 5pm?” When I hesitated, he added. “I know your uncle is strict, so I can wait outside. I’ll just call you when I get there.”

I bit my lip, conflicted. I never encouraged anyone to come to my place for whatever reason, but I was also seduced by the thought of being driven by him. Even as irritated as I'd been the last time, there'd been something undeniably sexy about being in such close proximity with him.

"Okay. 5pm is fine," I said. "But isn't it a bit too late for a picnic?"

"It's a special kind of picnic…for a special kind of girl."

When the call was over, I exhaled deeply, relieved he had not only called but was still as charmed by me as ever. Rising to my feet and walking to my closet to decide what would be suitable attire for a home picnic, but was still hot and sexy, I was determined not to leave any loose ends the next time. We'd had enough of the song and dance. It was time for a reenactment of the night of passion we'd had in Bora Bora. I was more than ready for it, and, I was certain, so was he.

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After going through my entire wardrobe, I settled on a pair of distressed jeans, a floral flutter sleeved top and sling-back sandals, instead of the sexy bodycon dress I'd initially considered, deciding a less-is-more option was just as, if not even more, sexy than something more overt. With my hair pulled back in a ponytail, I smacked on a glossy burgundy lipstick. I might have toned it down with my attire, but my makeup was enough to let anyone know I still meant business.

My phone rang at 4:59pm and I smiled to myself, loving that he didn't put on any of the pretext or play any of the games other guys did, loving that he didn't hide his eagerness for me.

Walking out of my building, I spotted his black SUV parked almost opposite, and smiled as we made eye contact. He got out of the car as I approached, and the look on his face was enough assurance I needed of how stunning I looked.

"Hi," he said, sounding almost breathless.

"Hi," I answered, smiling as he led me to the passenger side of the car, his hand on the small of my back. I cast a quick glance at my apartment

building, to be sure nobody was watching, even as I was enjoying being in his company barely a few seconds in.

“You look beautiful,” he remarked, when we were in the car.

I looked at him, taking in how he looked in a red polo shirt and tan chinos, thinking he looked even better than I remembered. “Thank you,” was all I offered in response, wanting to retain the upper hand for as long as I could.

It was a longer drive to his house as a result of weekend traffic at both tollgates, and we didn't drive into his compound until a few minutes before 6pm.

“Aren’t you glad you agreed to have me pick you up?” he teased, helping me out of the car.

“Traffic in this town doesn’t bother me,” I countered. “With good music, I can drive for hours on end. What I am, though, is famished. I hope your picnic is everything it’s been hyped to be.”

“I hope so too,” he laughed, leading me through a small gate that led to the back of the house.

As we walked down the manicured lawn, I smiled as we approached a red gingham blanket placed on the grass. “We’re sitting on the floor?”

“That’s what people do at picnics,” he quipped, sitting on the blanket before reaching for my hand.

I looked at him for what might have been a full minute, equal parts amused and flabbergasted, grateful I hadn’t worn any of the skimpy dresses I’d considered.

“When you said picnic, I pictured a meal on your patio or something,” I said, accepting his hand and trying to sit on the blanket as gracefully as I could.

“What would have been the fun in that?” he beamed, just as a uniformed man walked up to us and set a tray full of drinks beside us. Diekola opened a bottle of wine and poured me a glass. Before I could even raise the glass to my lips, another uniformed man appeared with a tray of *hors d'oeuvres* ; bite-sized spring rolls, samosas, smoked shrimps, mozzarella sticks and sugar sprinkled *puff-puff* .

“You know a real picnic would have the food set in a basket, not served by waiters,” I said, a brow raised as I took a bite of a samosa, closing my eyes and letting out an involuntary moan of ecstasy.

“Now how would I have been able to get that reaction out of you from cold, nondescript food in a basket?” he chimed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “I promised you good food, and I’m a man of my word.”

“This is really good,” I said, taking another bite of the samosa, which was followed by an even more satisfying taste of the *puff-puff* .

“He’s amazing. I borrowed him from my cousin but I doubt I’ll let him go back when his employer returns,” he winked. “This is just the beginning. Wait till you taste what he has for the *entrée* .”

I raised a brow at his use of the term ‘ *entrée* ’ and it was on the tip of my lips to remark how this was a picnic, rich-and-famous style, but decided not to flog the obvious. As humble as he liked to present himself, he clearly had a lot of money.

True to his words, the main course was spectacular…and practical for a meal eaten sitting outside on grass, with limited access to cutlery. The meal of yam fritters accompanied with a spicy tomato dip and orange chicken skewers was easily one of the best I’d ever had. As a matter of fact, the evening was turning out to be one of the best I’d ever had. Sitting there as the sun set overhead the Lekki-Ikoyi Link Bridge, making small talk as we ate the delicious meal, Andrea Bocelli’s *Canzoni Stonate* playing from speakers I couldn't see, it was the most romantic experience I’d ever had.

“Joseph, my man! You outdid yourself with this one,” Diekola remarked when the Chef emerged with what was apparently our dessert, a cheesecake topped with chocolate-dipped strawberries. “Karibi and I are going to fight over you when he gets back.”

“Karibi? Graham-Hart?” I asked.

He looked at me. “You know him?”

“He’s engaged to my best friend. Married actually,” I added, looking at my watch and realising the ceremony would have long been over.

“What a small world! Yeah, married a few hours,” he beamed. “Isioma is your friend? She’s such a lovely, sweet girl! I keep telling Karibi he’s lucky to have her.”

“That he is,” I smiled, even though I was saddened anew by the reminder I hadn’t been at their wedding. “How do you know him?”

“He’s my cousin,” he smiled and shrugged. “Boma’s cousin actually, but he’s like a blood brother to me. He’s the one whose company is buying mine.”

“Oh really?” I remarked, the pieces falling into place. “You’re that close and you weren’t invited for the wedding either.”

He looked at me, and a knowing smile formed on his face. “Don't be upset with her. They wanted to keep it small. It’s pretty much just them, their parents and siblings. That’s it.” He leaned closer such that our shoulders were touching. “Don’t worry. Knowing his mother, there’ll be more than enough celebrations for disgruntled friends and family like us to attend.”

I chuckled in spite of myself, chiding myself for sulking about it. There would be more than enough occasions to make up for it. Allowing Diekola feed me a chocolate dipped strawberry, thoughts of Isioma and Karibi were soon the very last thing on my mind. All I wanted to do was bask in the splendor of the moment, the beautiful evening in the company of this intriguing man…and the anticipation of what would surely be an even more beautiful night.

“It’s getting a little chilly,” I said, leaning even closer.

“Really?” he said, clearly surprised. “I was just thinking to myself how humid it is.”

“Well, not all of us are used to sub-zero temperatures.”

“Touche,” he laughed, rising to his feet before stretching out a hand to help me up. “It’s time for the second part of our evening anyway. Since you refused to let me take to the movies, I brought the movies to you.”

He led me into the house and I was charmed anew by its minimalist simplicity. But rather than go upstairs, he led me down the hall to what turned out to be his home theatre; a large room with a blue color scheme

that gave one the illusion of being underwater, plush recessed couch seating and a large screen that took up an entire wall.

“You must really like movies,” I remarked.

He shrugged. “Not really. It was Tekena’s idea to include it.”

I nodded as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, remembering he’d mentioned his cousin had handled the house, and also remembering Karibi had a younger brother called Tekena. I didn't know him personally, but we had a good number of mutual friends. The latter thought made my pulse race a bit faster.

“So we have a few options,” Diekola said, taking a seat beside me and reaching for a remote control. “What kind of movies do you like? Thrillers? Romcoms? Your wish is my command. Except it’s horror or sci-fi, because I don't have any of those.”

Deciding we were wasting too much time talking, I leaned forward and kissed him. As our lips met, I could feel his resolve crumble and I took advantage, leaning even closer and wrapping both arms around his neck. As his own strong arms encircled me, even though I’d been the aggressor, I felt a sudden rush of helplessness, a surging tide of both yearning and yielding, and I realised this wasn’t like any other seduction for me. This time, I was losing control of much more than my body…and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

And then without warning, he pulled away. “No, Ifedayo.”

I glared at him, not believing he was rejecting me a second time. “Then why did you go through all this? A picnic at sunset? Feeding me chocolate strawberries? Why did you go through all that if sex wasn’t the end goal?”

“I did all that…this…to impress you, not get into your pants!” he reached for both my hands. “We did things in reverse before. Trust me when I say it’s taking everything, and I mean everything, in me not to carry you upstairs to my bedroom and do to you everything I did the last time…and so much more. You don't know how many times a day I think about that night. But I just want us to take it slow this time.”

Sitting back in the chair, I realised there was no point getting angry with a man who was choosing to respect me. It wasn't worth spoiling what had so far been a magical evening.

"Any movie is fine," I shrugged. "And a drink wouldn't be a bad idea either."

He smiled, rising to his feet and walking to the small bar in the corner of the room. "What would you like to see? *Pulp Fiction* ? *Silence of the Lambs* ? *Her* ?"

"Let me guess. Your favorite movies."

"Top three!" he grinned, pouring us both glasses of wine.

Later on, as we watched Joachim Phoenix fall in love with his Artificial Intelligence system in the movie *Her* , I glanced at him, taking in his profile as he watched the film, engrossed as if watching it for the first time. I smiled when he pushed up his glasses to rub his eyes, noticing the small crow's feet around them, noticing also that there were more strands of grey in his goatee and that his hairline seemed to have receded even further than I remembered, but still finding everything about him insanely attractive; his imperfections and all. As he took a sip of his drink, I noticed an indentation on his finger, an indicator he'd only recently stopped wearing his wedding ring.

"How long has it been since her death?" I asked.

He turned to look at me, surprised by the sudden question. "It was nine years on New Year's Day."

"And you hadn't been with anyone since?" I asked, astonished anew by that piece of information. "Why me? Why did you choose your first time to be with a woman you hardly even knew?"

He was quiet for a while, his eyes still holding mine. "It felt right," he finally answered. "Since her death, I'd been on several dates, match made with random women by almost everyone who knew my name. None of those ever progressed beyond the first phone call or date. But with you," a slow smile formed on his face. "I guess you had me from the moment you

sashayed into the hotel that afternoon. And when the first thing you did was accuse me of being bossed around by my ‘wife’.”

I laughed at the memory, remembering how intrigued I’d been by him even then. He took my hand in his as he returned his attention to the movie, and unlike how horrified I’d been the first time he’d told me I was his first since his wife, this time I felt pleased by that piece of information, honoured beyond words.

“Karibi’s friends are organising a trip to Rio for his bachelor’s weekend,” he said when the movie was over. “Come with me.”

I raised a brow. “Come with you to where? To Rio?” when he nodded, I laughed. “You’re so funny. Is that how people just up and go? Isn’t a visa needed to go to Brazil?”

“Yes, and that can be handled,” he answered. “All you need to do is send me your passport and it’ll be taken care of.”

As much as I loved his company, I wasn't about to subject myself to that. “Thanks, but I think I’ll pass.”

His shoulders slumped and I hated having to disappoint him, but my own self-preservation was more important.

“Can I at least see you tomorrow?” he asked. “I don't think I can survive having to wait another week before seeing you again.”

I smiled. Now that, I could do. “I’d love to see you tomorrow,” I said, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek, now accepting of the fact that was as far as we would go.

About an hour later, pulling up in front of my building, he turned to me. “Thank you for a wonderful evening. It was so much better than what I ever could have imagined.”

“I should be thanking you! The food was amazing and the view from your backyard is simply out of this world,” I smiled. “And I didn't think I’d enjoy it, but it was a really good movie.”

“It’s a stellar masterpiece. Joachim Phoenix’s best, in my opinion,” his smile waned and even in the dark, I could sense his nervousness. “Can we

do brunch tomorrow? Or we could do lunch, or even dinner, if brunch will be too early in the day?”

“Brunch sounds perfect. Pick me up at noon?”

“I’ll be counting the seconds till then,” he said, as I got out of the car. “I hope you won’t get into trouble for leaving the house unattended for so long?”

It took a moment for what he said to register. “Um, no. No trouble at all.”

I stood by my gate as he turned his car around, waving as he drove back in the direction of the connecting street to the Lekki Express Way, feeling both saddened about parting and excited about reuniting in a matter of hours. It had been a long, long time since I’d felt this excited about a man. That night, whatever ember of attraction I’d had for him before had become a roaring flame, and I was more than happy to allow it burn.

“Ife!”

I jumped at the sound of my name, turning around to glare at the owner of the voice I knew too well.

“Ife, who is that man?” Olumide asked, emerging from the shadows. “Who is that man you were just with?”

“What do you want?” I snapped, my enamourment now a deep irritation. “What are you doing here?”

“Is he the reason you broke up with me?” his voice now several decibels higher. “Is he why you went as far as blocking my numbers, Ifedayo?”

“Olumide, go home. Go home to your wife. When will you get it through your head that we’re over?”

“Ife, come back here!” he made to follow me into the compound and I turned to glare at him.

“Are you out of your mind?” I snarled, shoving him in the chest and away from the premises. “Have you forgotten you’re not supposed to be anywhere near here?”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw, and there was a very visible vein bulging from his throat. “Ife, you’re testing me. You’re really testing me.”

“Olumide, get the entire fuck out of here!” I retorted, my patience fast spent. “It’s been almost a month, for crying out loud. Do you need me to take out a newspaper ad for you to finally get the message?”

He shook his head and laughed mirthlessly. “Ife, Ife, Ife! Am I the one you’re talking to like that? Me? Me, the person you owe every single thing you’ve got going for you? If it weren’t for me, do you think you’d have all of this?” he gestured towards the building. “I made you, and you better not forget it.”

A wave of anger swept through me as I was hit by memories I wanted to forget. “That you can stand there and boast about that shows what a sorry excuse of a man you are. That you’re wearing it as a badge of honour is a complete disgrace! That you once pimped your own girlfriend to different men is something you should be ashamed of, not bragging proudly about,” I retorted. “And for the record, I owe you nothing. It’s my body that’s been through the ringer, not yours. So you better get out of here before I have the guards throw you out.”

He glared at me, fists clenched, his eyes giving away his desire to beat me to a pulp. If it hadn’t been for the people that were about, he probably would have. “Ife, you want to see the other side of me.”

“Go show all your sides to Moyo, Olumide,” I said, turning around to walk away. “I’m sure she’d love to see every angle of you.”

Walking past the guards, I hissed under my breath, upset about the scene they’d had to witness, and even more so with Olumide for putting me in that kind of position. Riding up the elevator to my apartment, I had to shut my eyes tight to suppress the old memories he had evoked, hating him all the more and hating myself even more for enduring it for so many years.

But it was out with the old and in with the new, and as I opened the door of my apartment, thinking of the ‘new’ brought a smile to my face. Never, ever again would Olumide have any access to my life.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BRUNCH THE FOLLOWING DAY was followed by drinks the next day, karaoke the day after, dinner at a restaurant with a live band the day after that, and drinks again the day after, all of which I enjoyed so much that when he asked if he could see me again the next day, I gave a resounding yes every time. Apart from the fact I enjoyed his company, he made no secret of the fact that he enjoyed mine, something no other man had ever done. With all the other men I'd been with, my wit and charm were secondary to my sexual allure. Every single date I'd ever been on always had the anticipation of what was to come later hanging in the air. With Diekola, it was obvious that his yearning to be with me came from him wanting to *be with* me, and it made every date, every outing, that much more special. Even though I remained guarded, I was happy to get to know even more about him.

"Your wife, Boma," I remarked, one of the evenings we were out. "I couldn't help but do a little digging on the Internet and I found several pictures of the two of you. You were a cute couple."

It wasn't a compliment that was easy for me to pay. It had smarted seeing those pictures, pictures from their wedding many years before, and of them at several social functions, pictures with him looking so happy and in love with someone who wasn't me.

"You clearly don't have a type," I continued, a teasing smile on my face, in reference to how different she and I were. With her light skinned and thickset, we were nothing alike physically.

He'd smiled. "True, you two are very different in many ways, but also similar in some. Like you, she was very quick to speak her mind. But unlike you, she was an open book. She wore her heart on her sleeve," he looked at me so closely, it was almost like his eyes were boring holes through mine,

scanning my brain. “You, on the other hand, know how to keep your cards very close to your chest.”

I smiled and took a sip from my glass, not saying anything to affirm or deny his assertion. Keeping my cards close to my chest was exactly where I wanted to be.

But it didn't change the fact that I enjoyed being with him. I enjoyed being with him so much, I no longer even cared about running into people who would recognise me. Yes, there were a few glances here and there, but for the most part, we were able to avoid run-ins like the one with the couple at *The Admiral* . Maybe it was because our dates were on weeknights, maybe it was because the places we chose to go were no longer very popular on the Lagos social scene, whatever it was, I was happy to miss the distraction of seeing people. I was happy to have him all to myself.

I was also happy for him to be as far removed and insulated from my reputation for as long as possible.

“Are you sure you don't want to come with me to Rio?” he asked, as we had dinner at his house on Friday night, at my insistence. I’d used my craving for the Chef’s cooking as an excuse, but the truth was I didn't want to be out and about on a Friday night.

I shook my head and smiled at him. “You guys should go have fun. It’s next weekend, isn’t it?”

“What kind of fun would I have without you?” he asked, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek.

“Plenty!” I chimed, smiling. “Those Brazilian women are smoking hot. Is their Carnival happening while you’re there?”

“No, we’ve missed that. The annual Rio Carnival happens earlier in the year,” he answered. “But there’s a whole lot more to Rio than just the carnival. It’s actually one of my favourite cities in the world, and no, not because of the beaches and pretty women. Do you like *bossa nova* ?”

“What’s that?”

He kissed me again. “One of the many things I’d like to introduce you to.”

“Tempting, but no. I’ll definitely pass.”

We continued to make small talk as we feasted on the exquisite meal of *jollof* rice and braised goat leg in *obe ata* . This time, we were on a small table on his patio, which still gave us access to the spectacular view of the Lagos lagoon from his backyard. Sitting there, eating the wonderful meal and looking at the exquisite view, life couldn't have been better.

But the penny was about to drop.

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Early the next morning, I woke up to a call from Isioma. It had been a week since her wedding, and apart from some pictures she'd sent that day, I hadn't heard from her all week.

"Mrs. Graham-Hart!" I exclaimed, ecstatic to hear from my friend. "Have you gotten used to your new moniker?"

She laughed. "That's all he calls me, so yeah, I'm getting used to it."

"How are you, hun? I figured you guys were on some kind of honeymoon."

"Yeah, we went away after the wedding. I can't leave the U.K., so we went to a resort in the Lake District for a few days."

"Awww, lovely," I gushed, having been to the popular northern England vacation destination. "You looked so beautiful on your special day, Isioma. Apart from the pictures you sent, Ify has posted like a thousand of them on her Instagram page."

"Trust her!" she laughed. "My sister the social media queen!"

"I know, right!" I laughed along with her. "But seriously though, you looked absolutely beautiful!" And beautiful she'd truly looked in a champagne coloured, tiered tulle dress, with red roses in her curly brown hair.

"Thanks, babe. I really wish you'd been able to come," she said, and there was sincere regret in her voice.

"Don't worry, July is just around the corner. That's when the traditional wedding is happening, right?"

"It's actually been fixed for the end of June, but it's looking like I won't even have my passport by then. From all indication, it might take several

months for me to get it," she moaned. "There's a high chance the traditional ceremony is going to happen without me there."

"You mean, in absentia?" I exclaimed.

"Yeah. My mother and in-laws are adamant about it going on, regardless, insisting I really don't have to be there."

"What does Karibi think?"

"He's happy to go along with whatever they say. He's just glad we're already legally married. For him, every other thing is extra."

"It's okay. People get married in absentia all the time," I said, trying to sound as reassuring as I could, even though I was probably more bewildered than she was. "And there's still the reception later on. Or don't you think you'll be able to travel by then?"

"I better be! If they even as much as suggest having the reception without me, that's when they'll truly see my red eyes."

I laughed at her attempt at sounding tough. Isioma was the sweetest, most gentle and pure hearted person I'd ever met. She also wasn't one for confrontation, so I knew she'd more than likely go with whatever both families decided.

"I hear you," I chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll be glad to assist in whatever way I can."

"Please," she said, clearly relieved. "Party planning isn't my mother's forte, and she's going to need all the help she can get."

"I'll be more than glad to help her. When is she back?"

"She and Ike moved their flight by a week, so they'll be in Lagos next weekend."

"Great. I'll give her a call as soon as she gets here."

"Ummm, Ife," she said, suddenly sounding uncomfortable. "There's one other thing. I hear you're seeing Diekola…Diekola Holloway."

A wide smile broke on my face. "You took that right out of my mouth. I was waiting for the right time to tell you about him. Apparently, he and

Karibi are cousins."

"Something like that."

"He's amazing, Isioma," I gushed. "I haven't had this great a time in, like, ever!"

There was a short pause before she continued. "Ife, can you please stop seeing him?"

I recoiled, surprised by what she'd just asked, convinced I hadn't heard her right. "Huh?"

"A lot of people have seen you two together," she continued, her discomfort rising with every word. "And his family members are uncomfortable about him dating you."

I straightened, the implication of what she was saying hitting me. "By family members, you mean your husband."

"It's not just Karibi, Ife," she continued. "They're all very protective of Diekola. He hasn't been with anyone since his wife died…"

"And they clearly don't think I'm good enough for him," I cut in. "Neither do you, from the sound of it."

"I've met Diekola a few times, and I think he's a kind and wonderful person…almost child-like. He's unable to date the way you do, Ife."

"Date the way I do? What does that even mean?" I exclaimed, my voice rising. "Isioma, what the hell does that mean?"

"It means dating casually," she answered, her voice rising as well. "It means dating however many people at the same time. It means dating just for the heck of it, with your eyes remaining open and looking out for the next one," she sighed. "Diekola, on the other hand, is probably there thinking he's met his next wife."

There was a lengthy silence as her words sank in, the revelation of how my friend really thought of me taking center stage.

"I can't believe you just said that, Isioma," I finally said, when I found my voice.

“Tell me you and Olumide are not still running around with each other,” she answered. “You think I don't know you got back with him last year? And your taking off and running out of town for weeks, you think that doesn’t have Olumide stamped all over it? I don’t have to have a crystal ball to know it was probably Moyo who ran you out of town.”

“What did Ozioma tell you?”

“Ozioma *ke* ?” she answered, confused. “I haven’t spoken to Ozioma in weeks. And you’ve just confirmed that I’m correct.”

“You have no right to judge me. Olumide and I are over.”

“Assuming that’s correct, assuming you and the so called love of your life have called it quits,” she continued. “What about Rahim?”

My heart sank. It was a low blow.

“I can’t believe you’re using what I told you in confidence against me, Isioma!”

“Ife, the whole world knows about you and Rahim,” she moaned. “You don't know how I wish things were different. You think I don't wish I could be happy about you dating a man who’s as close to my husband as a brother? But I can’t. I’ve tried so many times to argue, to defend you and your choices, but with all the receipts out there, it’s become impossible,” she sighed. “I love you, Ife. I love you like my own blood sister…”

“But? There’s a ‘but’ there, I’m sure,” I retorted, tears welling in my eyes.

“But Diekola can’t handle a woman like you. He’s only just coming out of a very long period of mourning his wife. He won’t be able to handle getting hurt again. He’s very special to Karibi and if anything happens to him, he’ll be crushed as well. As much as I love you, Ife, and you know I do, I also have to protect my husband.”

By now the tears were falling freely down my face. But I’d be darned if I showed her just how much she’d hurt me.

“Well, I’m sorry you feel that way,” I answered, my voice as steady as I could manage. “But Diekola isn’t a child. And neither am I.”

“Ife, please listen…”

“Thanks for the call, Isioma. Regardless of what has just transpired, I’m still going to call your Mom next week to give her a hand with the wedding. Unless, of course, my reputation would sully the occasion.”

“Don't talk like that, Ife. You know I’ve only spoken the truth.”

“The truth and nothing but the truth,” I scoffed. “Good night, Isioma.”

As I terminated the call, I dissolved into tears, heartbroken by the dagger the person whose friendship I valued the most had just plunged into my heart. It was one thing to know how most people thought of me, it was yet another to realise my best friend thought the same.

After about an hour huddled under my sheets, I wiped away my tears, sat up in bed and reached for my phone.

“Hey, babe,” Diekola answered, his voice groggy. “Are you okay? It’s not like you to call this early.”

“I’ll come,” I answered. “I’ll come with you to Rio. Let me know when you need my passport.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

IN THE HOURS IT TOOK to see him later that day, my resolve to accompany him to Rio didn’t weaken. By the time I handed him my passport that evening, I was more determined than ever to come face-to-face with Karibi, and the other people who thought me less than ideal for their beloved Diekola. I was done hiding, done avoiding people who could feed him with information about me. Clearly, I hadn’t done a good enough job of it if my friend, my own best friend, could brazenly tell me that he deserved better than someone like me. No, there would be no more hiding. I was going to look his friends, his nearest and dearest who thought he shouldn't be with me, in the eye and dare them to do something about it.

The following Thursday evening, walking out of my gate with a small suitcase in hand, I smiled when I saw Diekola standing by his car, looking like a kid on Christmas morning, a broad grin on his face. He walked over to take my suitcase from me, which his driver in turn took from him. I had to suppress a smug smile, seeing the way Diekola was looking at me. Dressed in a form-fitting velour tracksuit from *Juicy Couture* , whilst practical for the long journey ahead, it was also incredibly sexy, proof of which lay in the way he looked at me like I was a glass of cold water in the Sahara desert.

But as we were driven to the airport, I had butterflies in my stomach at the prospect of us being in such close proximity for a whole weekend. We hadn’t spent more than a few hours together, and the thought of being with him all day, every day, made me light headed…and excited.

“Are we flying with…with the others?” I asked, as we approached the airport.

“No, the guys left yesterday,” he answered. “Karibi and another guy left from London, also yesterday,” he kissed my hand. “I wanted us to travel

alone. You don't know how much I've been looking forward to this weekend."

The glow I felt radiated from my stomach through my entire body. But as excited as I was, much as I didn't want to admit it, I was also nervous about the prospect of seeing the other members of the party.

Getting to the airport, everything was seamless; from check-in to boarding, through the almost seven-hour flight to Schiphol, Amsterdam, the seven-hour layover, and the twelve-hour flight to Rio de Janeiro. There was no awkwardness flying together for almost thirty hours. Instead, we were as comfortable in each other's company as if we'd known each other for years; when we were awake and chatting, when we were in companionable silence, or even when either, or both, of us were asleep. Nobody had ever made me feel that comfortable, that secure, and when we finally touched down in Rio at 8pm the following night, he looked at me with just as much longing as he had over thirty hours prior.

"I love this town," he remarked, as the taxi took us to our hotel in Copacabana. "After Boma died, I spent almost a year here."

I looked at him, surprised by that tidbit of information. "Oh really?"

He nodded. "I just needed an escape, and the city provided just that," he turned to smile at me. "I can't wait to show you around."

As we approached the hotel, my excitement grew. Located right across the famous Copacabana beach, I was immediately nostalgic with memories from my Bora Bora holiday. Enthusiasm and anticipation soon overtook my nerves, and I was glad I'd accepted the invitation to come.

Walking into the hotel, he checked his phone and smiled. "The guys are having drinks at the bar," he said. "Let's go say hi before we check in."

And the nerves resurged with a vengeance. I wasn't prepared to come face-to-face with them so soon. But rather than cower, I stood straighter and nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

Our suitcases with the bellboy, he took my hand in his and made his way across the lobby to a bar on the other end of the hotel.

“You seem to know your way around,” I remarked, trying to sound calm, even as my heart was thumping so loud, it was deafening me.

“Yeah, I’ve stayed here a few times. It’s the best of the hotels around here. Gives you the feel of actually being on the beach,” he winked at me. “Almost like Bora Bora.”

I smiled but it didn't get to my eyes, as I recognised the group of about six men at the bar. They stopped talking as we approached them, and one didn't have to be a genius to see they were not impressed with their friend’s choice of companion.

“Diekola! So glad you finally got here!” Tekena exclaimed, rising to hug him. “It only took you twenty-four more hours!”

As the others rose to welcome their friend, my stomach sank as I recognised three of them as men I’d been intimately involved with.

“Yeah, I couldn't leave till Thursday,” Diekola answered, oblivious of the undercurrents circling under the surface. “Guys, this is my friend, Ife. Ife, these guys are my family. That’s Dipo, Aaron, Reuben, Yaks and Tekena. You already know Karibi, the man of the moment.”

The look in Karibi’s eyes was anything but welcoming. “We’ve actually never met.”

Tekena cleared his throat. “Welcome, Ife. I hope the trip wasn’t too long and stressful.”

“Yes, welcome, Ife,” chimed Yaks, one of the men I already knew. I’d dated him a little over three years before. “It’s so nice to *meet* you.”

I looked at him, and his sarcasm was more than evident in the derogatory smirk on his face. But I was not going to be subdued.

“Thank you,” I answered, unwavering.

“Okay guys, we’re off to get some well-deserved rest. We just wanted to say a quick hello,” Diekola said. “What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“We leave for the casino right after lunch,” Reuben, another of my former paramours, answered, his eyes still on me. “After which we hit the clubs.”

“Sounds good. See you then,” Diekola said, before giving Karibi another hug. “It’s about time we made a decent man of this guy.”

“A little late for that, considering I’ve been married two weeks,” Karibi chuckled. “It’s nice to see you, man.”

I let out an imperceptible sigh of relief as we walked away from them. I had absolutely no idea how the weekend was going to go, in the company of three men I’d already been sexually involved with. Worse still, I was certain that the three I hadn’t been involved with were very aware of my history with the other three. It was an even worse situation than I’d envisaged.

“I’m exhausted. I can’t wait for us to get to our room and get some rest,” Diekola said, when we got to the hotel reception.

“You and I? In the same room?” I asked, my brow arched. “What happened to taking things slow?”

“I think we’ve taken it slow enough,” he answered, a coy smile on his face. “Any slower and we’d be in reverse.”

I leaned forward. “So what are you saying, Mr. Holloway? That you want me in your bed?”

He shook his head and chuckled. “If you want me to spell it out, then yes.”

I smiled at him before turning to the amused Front Desk Agent. “I’ll have another room, please. Your best sea-view room, if it’s available.”

The woman suddenly looked confused and turned to look at Diekola.

“Ife, what are you doing?”

Still smiling, I brought out my Gold Visa card from my wallet and returned my attention to the Front Desk Agent. “Fernanda, right?” I asked, reading the name on the badge pinned to her jacket. “You were about to tell me about your best sea-view rooms.”

She cast another look at a now amused Diekola, who was watching us with his arms crossed, before she turned back to me. “We have Standard, Premium and Deluxe Ocean View rooms available…”

“I’ll take the Deluxe,” I said, handing her the card, flashing Diekola a triumphant smile at the same time, happy to be the one calling the shots. He

wasn't going to get the satisfaction of having me just because he now felt it was time.

“Are you really doing this?” he watched in amazement as Fernanda swiped my card and handed me the key to my room.

“Sleep tight, Mr. Holloway,” I cooed, as another bellboy appeared to take my suitcase.

Walking away from him, I’d never felt so gratified. It almost made me forget the uncomfortable situation I’d found myself in.

Almost.

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The after-effect of the long trip hit me like a ton of bricks the very minute I walked into the luxurious room with a spectacular view of the beach, and I was barely able to tip the bellboy before collapsing on the plush bed, falling asleep the very minute my head hit the pillow. As the sun rays hit my face the next morning, awaking me, stretching on the bed, I was glad I’d opted for my own room, and gladder still I didn't have to leave till afternoon.

As I ate a meal of waffled brioche French Toast, fried eggs and the most refreshing pineapple juice I’d ever tasted, I decided not to be a part of the group activities, especially as it didn't appear the other men had come on the trip with any dates. The less interaction I had with them, the better.

After another nap, it was afternoon by the time I awoke again. Deciding to finally take a shower, I’d just stepped out of the bathroom when there was a knock on my door. Dressed in nothing but a bathrobe, I opened the door.

“And there I was thinking I’d had a late start to the day,” Diekola teased, standing out on the hallway.

“I’ve been awake for a while,” I said in my defense. “I just decided to take my time to recover from that long journey,” I cocked my head to the side. “I thought you’d have left for the casino by now.”

He grimaced and shook his head. “Gambling isn’t really my thing,” he smiled, a twinkle in his eye. “I was hoping to take you somewhere special.”

I smiled, intrigued. Now the sound of *that* , I liked. “Give me an hour to get ready.”

His eyes widened. “A whole hour?”

“Perfection takes time,” I winked, closing my door.

Turning back to my room, I smiled as I brought out a yellow, cap-sleeved mini dress, embellished with copper beads and embroidery, which was simple enough not to look out of place for an afternoon outing, but short enough to keep the look sexy. With my brown and gold braids pulled up in an updo, I proceeded with my makeup, sticking to nude and pastel colours. Forty-five minutes later, standing in front of my mirror, I was more than happy with what I saw. And from the look on his face when I met him in the lobby downstairs, so was he.

“So, where are you taking me?” I asked as we got into a waiting taxi.

“I want you to experience my favourite part about this town,” he answered, a glint in his eye.

I opened my mouth to inquire further but decided against it, realising I was going to see it anyway, whatever it was. A very short ride later, we arrived at what looked to be a cul-de-sac, a very narrow street closed at one end.

“This right here is *Beco das Garrafas* , otherwise known as the Bottle Alley. It’s the birth place of *bossa nova* ,” Diekola said with unmistakable pride as he helped me out of the taxi.

I looked around at the bustling little street, which looked both ancient and modern at the same time. It was only 4pm, and the place was already brimming with activity. Walking down the narrow lane, we soon arrived at a rustic pub.

“This place is called the *Little Club and Bottle’s* ,” he went on with his narrative. “It was opened as far back as the ‘50s, and a lot of the big names in *bossa nova* started here. I’m talking Sergio Mendes, Durval Ferreira, Tiao Neto, Milton Banana, Bebeto, Dom Um Romao.”

“I take it *bossa nova* is a type of music,” I remarked as we took our seats. It was clearly a music bar, as a pianist and drummer were performing on a

stage near where we were seated, creating a melodic fusion of jazz and samba.

“That it is,” he answered in the affirmative. “It’s a beautiful musical sound birthed right here in Brazil. And this is where it all began.”

Even though the place wore a fresh coat of paint, it wasn’t hard to believe it dated as far back as he said it did.

“It was reopened only a few years ago, after being closed for a long time,” he continued, swaying to the music. “There are several *bossa nova* clubs here in Rio, but nowhere captures the spirit like this place.”

Looking around at the other patrons there, some drinking, some nibbling, it was clear their primary reason for being there was neither food nor drink… but music.

“Why did you choose to come here after she died?” I asked.

“I wanted to get as far away as possible from the sadness, from the pity. I wanted to go where we hadn’t made any memories, somewhere I’d go and not think of her.”

I nodded, both in understanding and silent satisfaction that this was one memory he hadn’t shared with his late wife. “And you chose to stay here for almost a year?”

“I fell in love with the place,” he shrugged. “It was just what I needed. It was the perfect therapy for the broken man I was.”

We ordered cocktails and just as our drinks arrived, a woman joined the musical duo on stage. A wide grin appeared on Diekola’s face when she started singing.

“That’s *Desafinado* ,” he said, referring to the song she was performing. “Originally done by Joao Gilberto and sampled by so, so many others, from Ella Fitzgerald to Kenny G to Eliane Elias. One of the greatest *bossa nova* songs of all time.”

I watched him as he swayed to the music, and I smiled seeing how taken he was by it, how taken everyone there was with the melodic sound. As the evening wore on, I found myself relaxing and appreciating the music. Even

though it wouldn't have been the first choice on my playlist, before long, I too had started enjoying the rhythmic samba melodies.

With Diekola's arm around me, I leaned on his shoulder and closed my eyes as the singer belted out a song called *Vida* , made famous by Eliane Elias, feeling like I was in heaven. I was suddenly overwhelmed with jealousy thinking about him being like this with the woman he'd spent so many years of his life loving. Suddenly, I didn't want to think of him with anyone else, whether before or after me. Suddenly, I wanted him for myself, and myself alone.

"Do you think about her a lot?" I asked, surprising even myself.

We both knew whom I was talking about. "You never really stop thinking about loved ones you lose."

I nodded in agreement. "It's just the degree that changes."

He looked at me and smiled. "Did the mysterious Ifedayo just share something personal about herself?"

I chuckled and turned away. As we both returned our attention to the performer, I closed my eyes again, but this time to push back memories I'd inadvertently released. I couldn't afford to entertain those memories; not now, not ever again.

All too soon, it was time to return to the hotel so Diekola could join the other guys for what they had planned for the night. As the hotel wasn't too far away, we decided to walk back this time. Walking hand-in-hand on the cobbled streets under the moonlight, I couldn't have asked for more.

"Did any of the other guys come with their partners?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. Just me. Because Isioma couldn't come, the guys decided not to make Karibi feel bad by bringing along their own wives," he smiled. "But they made an exception for me."

I couldn't help but wonder if that had been before or after they knew I was the one he was bringing.

"Are you sure you don't want to come tonight?" he asked, standing in front of my bedroom door. "Nightlife in Rio is a lot of fun."

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I just want to have a nice, long bath, order room service and relax.”

“I’m not going to have any fun without you,” he pouted.

“With all the beautiful, scantily clad Brazilian women that’ll be there? Nonsense,” I said, giving him a playful shove. “Go and have fun. That’s the reason you flew to the other side of the world.”

Closing the door of my room, I was haunted by images of him with these beautiful, scantily clad women. It took a very concerted, deliberate effort to brush the images off, and I proceeded to soak myself in a long bath to keep from thinking of the possibilities that lay ahead for the partying men in a town that had what many thought were the most beautiful women in the world. After about an hour in the tub, and just as long scrolling through my Instagram feed, I got out, slipped into my nightgown and began to flip through the TV channels, in search of something reasonable to watch.

A knock on the door interrupted me and, opening it, I was surprised to see Diekola there.

“You’re back so soon?” I asked.

“I left them there,” he answered. “All I did was think of you.”

Our eyes held and there was no mistaking what he wanted…what we both wanted. As his lips claimed mine, it was different from any of the kisses we’d shared. It was more passionate than the last few weeks, more intimate than even Bora Bora. It was with a yearning and longing that was unmistakable, but also with a tenderness that came with familiarity and deep affection. The kiss deepened with a swift gradation of intensity that made me cling to him as the only solid thing in my suddenly dizzy and swaying world. Pulling him closer, inhaling his intoxicating scent of vanilla, tobacco and raw masculinity, I wanted more of him.

He slipped off my dress just as I snapped open the buttons of his shirt, losing some of them in the process. As he lifted me in his arms and placed me on the bed, as he shed the rest of his clothes and mounted the bed to join me, unlike in Bora Bora, this time we were not strangers.

Through every touch that electrified every nerve in my body, through the intense throes of passion that sent us both over the edge, our eyes held. Even as we both reached the peak of our ecstasy, we didn't break our gaze even once. This was not nameless, faceless sex with a stranger. This was a union of souls. Our bodies fit together as if we were made just for this, to fall into one another, to feel this natural rhythm, to fall hopelessly and completely in love with each other.

And that was the realisation I had as he held me in his arms afterwards.

That I had fallen in love with him.

–

Opening my eyes the next morning, ensconced in his arms, it was hard to tell where I began and he ended. I listened to his rhythmic breathing as he slept, gently rising and falling with his chest, and in that very moment, every single thing about my life, my entire existence, was perfect. It felt like a new day for me, a fresh start, a clean slate with this man who treated me in a way no man ever had. I realised with a stark sense of clarity that I wanted to be with him. For the first time ever, I could see a future that wasn’t bleak and dreary, and I wanted it. I wanted to stay and be a part of it more than anything I’d ever wanted before.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” his groggy voice announced his awakening.

“Good morning,” I answered, feeling suddenly self-aware.

As if sensing it, he tilted up my head and kissed me gently on the lips. Our eyes held as our lips parted and I knew what I’d felt the previous night had been no fluke. I’d lost my head and heart to this man.

“You have the most beautiful lips I have ever seen,” he said, tracing the outline of my cupid’s bow, before grazing my face with his fingers. “And your skin, it’s just like satin. You are beautiful, Ifedayo.”

I lowered my gaze, feeling self-conscious. “Tell me about this,” I said, tracing the outline of the full sleeve tattoo on his right arm. “You said there was a story to it, and all your other tattoos.”

“A lot happened the year I got this one,” he said, referring to the full sleeve. “I’d just finished my first degree, Boma and I had broken up, and a few

months after that, my father passed away. He'd been ill for a while, and was receiving medical care in Paterson, where his brother worked as a doctor. It was end-stage renal disease, so we knew the end was near. The time on the clock," he said, touching the face of a Grandfather clock in the heart of the sleeve, "symbolizes the moment he stopped suffering and was at peace once again. 11:54pm. Fela was his favorite artist, so while he was in the hospital in a medically induced coma, we started playing some of his music. My dad peacefully passed away in the middle of the first song we played, *Water no get enemy* . That's what's written right here, beneath the clock," he pointed at a bird that looked like it was flying away, even though it was nestled on a bed of large roses. "The dove symbolizes my dad going off on his new path to heaven. He was my first hero, my first mentor. I always wanted to be like him. The tattoo just keeps him close to me forever," this one, he pointed at the large dragon like creature on his other arm. "is all about me rising like a phoenix, from the ashes of heartbreak, despair and disappointment."

I was intrigued, but also very curious about something else. "Did you get any when your wife died?"

He was quiet for a few seconds before pointing at the eagle on his chest. "She was strong, proud, fearless. A lot of people called her a hawk when she was still alive, because of how ruthless she was in business. But to me, she was more of an eagle, as she was fiercely protective of the people she loved."

I nodded, almost regretful I'd asked. It grated even more hearing him speak so fondly of his beloved wife, worsened further by the strategic place he'd placed the tattoo in her honour, right over his heart. It left me wondering if there would ever be room in there for anyone else.

"Pack your things and come with me to my room," he said. "It's way better than this one."

"I got the deluxe, or didn't you hear her?"

"Well, my room is twice the size of this one and several floors higher," he chuckled. "You didn't think Fernanda would give you a better room than mine, did you?"

“Silly heifer,” I snarled in mock indignation. The truth was I was more than happy to pack up and leave, and it wasn't just because of the heavy daily charges incurring on my card. I just didn't want to leave his side.

Throwing a few things into my tote bag with the aim of returning later for the rest, I followed him up to his suite, eight floors higher and with an even more spectacular view of the ocean. That was about the only thing I was able to notice, as no sooner had we walked in than he took me in his arms, with kisses that soon reignited our desire for each other. And on his super king-sized bed, every other thing was pushed to the back burner.

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“Are you coming to join us,” he asked later that evening, throwing on a t-shirt. Karibi and the other guys were unwinding on the beach and had asked Diekola to join them. “I think you should.”

I lay in bed, beneath the sheets. After spending most of the morning discovering each other, what had started as me taking a shower had ended with him joining me there, and we’d eventually found our way right back to bed.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I shrugged.

“Come, please. I want to show you off,” he said, bending to kiss me on my forehead.

And that was all the encouragement I needed. “Okay. I’ll be down in a bit.”

Realising I hadn’t brought along with me to his room anything appropriate for the beach, I returned to mine to get ready properly. If I was reuniting with so many demons from my past, I owed it to myself to look drop dead gorgeous in the process.

Thirty minutes later, dressed in a printed white tank top and hot pink, crochet shorts, and exuding just the right amount of sexy, and perching a large sun hat on my head, I made my way down to the beach.

It wasn’t hard to find them, as they were sitting under a canopy near the bar. I took slow, measured strides, not in any hurry to get to them, and it was with much satisfaction that I saw that all eyes were on me, not just theirs, but everyone’s on the beach. I was grateful for the wide brim of my sunhat,

which helped hide the satisfied smile on my face. Diekola's friends could think whatever they wanted about me, but it wasn't going to change the fact that, deep down inside, they all probably wanted me.

Nearing the canopy, I decided instead to sit on the sand, rather than join them, Leaning back on both hands, I watched the waves gently drench the sands, giving anyone who looked a good view of my flawless, long legs. It was my way of letting them know I too didn't care for their company.

"You're easily the most beautiful thing to behold on this entire beach," Diekola said, a wide grin on his face as he approached me. "Aren't you coming over to sit with us?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Too much testosterone for me. I'd rather stay here and look at the water."

He laughed, turned back to look at his companions, before dropping to sit on the sand next to me. "It's really calming. But isn't the sun too intense to sit out here without any shade? I know you're a melanin queen, but still."

"Boy, please," I chuckled. "First of all, I have my sun hat. Second of all, the SPF of my sunscreen is like a million. Don't worry. I'm good."

"Can I at least get you a drink?" he asked.

"Sounds nice," I said, noticing there was a proper bar where they sat. "Just ask the bartender to mix me something nice and sweet."

"Nice and sweet," he said, rising to his feet. "Got it."

"How was their night out yesterday? I hope they weren't too mad you ditched them."

"I don't think they even noticed," he laughed. "Most of them are still nursing hangovers, so I guess that's a clue to how much fun they did have."

I smiled as he walked off, loving that he'd given up a night of fun with his friends for me. As he strode towards the shade, I couldn't help but stare at his toned arms and the way his bum moved with each step. I could think of other things I wanted a whole lot more than a nice and sweet cocktail.

"Hello, Ife," came a voice over me. "May I join you?"

I looked up and was surprised to see Karibi. Turning to look in Diekola's direction, I saw him smile and wave in our direction, clearly pleased to see me with his beloved cousin-in-law. Karibi smiled back and waved, but I was close enough to see that the smile did not reach his eyes.

"Sure," I answered, sitting up.

"Are you enjoying Rio?" he asked. "Had you been here before?"

"No, it's my first time," I answered, before forcing a smile of my own. "Congratulations on your wedding. Isioma is a very dear friend of mine."

"Thank you," he answered, before turning to look at me. "What exactly are you doing with him?"

"With who? Diekola?" I asked. "That's an odd question, especially when it's clear I'm here with him as his date."

He pursed his lips and sighed. "Diekola is like a brother to me. He's a tender soul, trusting to a fault. I'm not going sit by and watch him get hurt by someone as streetwise as you."

My mouth dropped open, shocked by his directness. "I beg your pardon!"

"I know who you are, Ife," he continued. "I know you're Rahim Sukai's courtesan . I know of your reputation in Lagos," he looked in the direction of his group of friends. "I also know you've been involved with four of the seven men on this trip."

I glared at him, enraged by the confrontation…and by the fact that everything he'd said was true.

"Well, everyone has a past," was all I could manage to say in response, as I looked away.

"Indeed," he scoffed. "But for someone like Diekola, perhaps not a woman with one quite so…interesting" he sighed again. "Listen, he doesn't have to know about any of it. We can resolve this with him being none the wiser. I can pay for you to be on a plane out of Rio this very night. I can also give you a nice seven-figure sum for your trouble. But on the sole condition you don't contact him again, for whatever reason."

I laughed. “You’re very funny, Karibi,” I turned to glower at him. “You think you can bully me? You think you can run me out of town the way you did Erinkan’s husband, Emeka, years ago?” I chuckled and shook my head. “A seven-figure sum indeed. Seven figures that I would have easily blown on a night at the casino if I’d followed you guys yesterday. Seven figures that I spend thirty minutes into scrolling on my phone. Seven figures that I can spend on a single drink in a bar. And you’re here, talking about paying for me to be on a plane out of Rio tonight. Boy, I can buy myself a first class ticket out of here this very second, if I so please.”

He smiled, but there was no iota of humour in it. “You’ve just validated everything I said.”

I glared at him, my anger starting to boil over. “In case you missed my point, nothing can make me leave Diekola. Not here in Rio, and maybe even not ever.”

He shrugged before rising to his feet. “Then you leave me with no choice but to tell him everything about you.”

My heart was racing but I kept my stare blank and indifferent, maintaining a stance as cool and unbothered as I could manage. “Go right ahead.”

I watched him walk back to their group, and saw Diekola crane his neck in our direction, having clearly not wanted to interrupt our conversation. I saw him rise to come to me, my drink in his hand, but then I saw Yaks place a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. I watched as Karibi approached them, and as he and the others huddled around him, very likely telling him all they had struggled not to reveal all weekend.

And I knew the gig was up.

Rising to my feet, I walked off the beach and back to the hotel, going straight to Diekola’s room to get the things I’d left there, before going back to the lobby to drop his key. Returning to my room, I began to put my things together. There was no point hanging around. After Diekola got an earful from Karibi and the other guys, he wasn’t going to want to set eyes on me ever again.

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CHAPTER NINE

I WAS CHECKING OUT the airline’s website to see if there was an earlier flight I could get on than the Tuesday one Diekola and I were booked on. For the first time, I regretted not roaming my Nigerian line, as getting me on the next available flight was something my travel agent would have been able to do in a heartbeat. It was almost midnight in Nigeria, but even that would not have been able to stop her.

I was typing her a message on WhatsApp, when there was a knock on my door. Closing my eyes, I prepared myself for the difficult conversation, steeling myself to come face-to-face with a man whose impression of me would have gone from a hundred to zero. Taking a deep breath, I walked over to open the door.

“Why did you leave?” he asked, walking in.

I shrugged. “You looked busy with your friends. I didn't want to get in the way.”

The silence that followed was a weighty one. Looking at him, with his furrowed brows and a frown on his face, he looked every one of his forty-seven years.

“So is it true about you and Yaks? And Reuben? And Dipo?” he finally asked.

Standing straight and with a steady gaze, I nodded. “Yes.”

Rubbing his neck, he sat on the bed. “I’m not going to lie that it isn’t a lot to take in,” he said, before sighing deeply. “But there’s no way a good looking woman like you won’t have some dating history. I guess it’s just coincidental I happen to know three of the men from your past.”

“But it’s not just them though,” I said, surprised how philosophically he was taking it. “I’ve dated quite a lot, and I mean a *lot* . Back in Lagos, at almost every turn there will be someone I’ve been involved with, from both the recent and distant past.”

He shrugged and looked up at me. “Everyone has a past.”

How ironic that, only an hour before, the same phrase that had been my defense was now his justification.

“Everyone but you, Mr. Goody Two Shoes,” I teased, sitting next to him on the bed.

“You forget I had a very promiscuous year,” he chuckled, but then the laughter waned. “That year, I dated so many people that for years afterward, Boma and I couldn't go out without running into at least one woman I’d slept with. So I get it. I understand.”

We sat there in some more silence, my hand interlaced with his, until he chuckled again. “There was this ridiculous insinuation about you having some rich sugar daddy. I guess it's normal for people to think far and wide when a person seems to be living beyond their means, especially with you driving a nice car and living in a luxury apartment. I didn’t bother letting them know you’re house-sitting for your uncle, and that even the car is his.”

I blanched. “I never told you the car was his.”

“You didn't have to. I figured it out,” he squeezed my hand. “Ifedayo, you get to choose what you do or don't share. Let people think whatever they want,” he caught sight of my open box on the couch. “I hope that’s you moving your things up to my room and not something else.”

My eyes remained downcast as I contemplated making the confession complete, and telling him that there was no uncle, telling him that I, indeed, did have a sugar daddy situation.

“Ife?”

I turned to look at him, saw in his eyes nothing but unconditional love, and decided I wasn't going to lose that love…not for anything in the world. I decided there and then to end what I had with Rahim. If I ended it in good time, there would be nothing to confess.

“Yes. I was packing the rest of my things to come upstairs to join you.”

He leaned forward to kiss me, drawing my mind from its far-flung places and rooting me firmly in the here and now.

“The guys leave tomorrow morning,” he said, in between kisses. “I sure can’t wait to enjoy a full day with you, and only you.”

As we were scheduled to leave on Tuesday, we had all of Monday to ourselves, it now appeared.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked coyly, knowing exactly what I wanted to spend all day doing.

“Plenty,” he winked.

And he wasn’t joking.

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Right after breakfast, just as the other guys left for the airport, we set off in a taxi of our own, to ‘see the town’ as he put it.

And see the town we did. Starting with the nearby flea market on the *Avenida Atlântica* , *Feira de Copacabana* , from where we proceeded to the bigger street market, *Feira Hippie de Ipanema* , from both places he bought me handmade souvenirs of arts and crafts, paintings, and semi-precious Brazilian gemstones. After feasting on delicious street food of *pipoca* , pop corn with chopped bacon, and *açaí* , crushed açaí berries blended with ice and sugar and topped with granola, honey, chopped strawberries and bananas, we set off to see some of the popular sights; the famous botanical gardens, *Jardim Botânico* , and the *Cristo Redentor* , Christ the Redeemer, the statue of Jesus Christ standing with arms outstretched to the city from above the staggering 2,330-foot elevation of *Corcovado Mountain* .

We didn't get back to the hotel till well past 7pm, and after a quick shower and change of clothes, headed out again, but this time for a night of fine dining in the city’s upscale Leblon area, in a multi Michelin-starred restaurant that served an array of Portuguese and French fusion cuisine. By the time we got back to our hotel at a little past midnight, I was sated in every way. My heart was full. I’d visited a lot of countries, seen impressive sights in a good number of them, but this was without a doubt the best

experience I’d ever had, and not just because it was one of the most vibrant cities in the world…but because I was in the company of someone who was fast becoming my very favourite person.

The next evening, we set off for the airport for another marathon trip but this time back home. After all the excitement of the last few days, we both slept almost the entire twelve-hour flight to Schiphol. We had a 23-hour layover this time and had to check into one of the airport hotels, but so happy were we in each other’s company, we didn't even mind.

Waiting in the lounge to board our flight to Lagos the next afternoon, I had my head on his shoulder as he read a magazine. A young man on a table opposite ours was listening to music on his phone, and I smiled at the familiar sound of Wizkid and Blaq Jerzee’s *Blow* . After only a weekend away, I was already excited to be returning home to Nigeria.

“I love this song. It makes me think of you,” Diekola said, squeezing my shoulder.

“You do know it’s a very suggestive song, right?” I teased.

“ *You have captured my heart o baby o!* ” he sang along, much to the chagrin of the young man, and the amusement of the other people nearby.

I laughed along, snuggling closer to him, thinking how he had, indeed, truly captured my heart.

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CHAPTER TEN

WE DIDN’T PULL UP in front of my apartment until almost 10pm on Thursday.

“Well, here we are,” Diekola remarked, his voice heavy with regret over our impending separation.

I leaned over to kiss him. “Thank you for the most wonderful trip ever. I had an amazing time.”

He held on to me. “It doesn’t have to end now,” he cast a glance at the building. “It’s late enough for nobody to notice you brought home company.”

My eyes widened and I shook my head. “No, Diekola. I already told you that my uncle…”

“I’ll be as quiet as possible. Trust me, none of your neighbours will see me.”

If only it were that simple.

“It’s too risky,” I answered. “Trust me, I don't want this to end any more than you do. If I hadn’t promised my Head Teacher I’d be in school tomorrow, I’d have followed you home right now.”

“Why can’t you go to school from my place?”

I bit my lip, not quite knowing how to let him know I had to check in with Rahim that night. It had been a full week since I’d gone off the radar, and I knew he’d be looking for me. Yes, I planned to disengage from that relationship but it was going to have to be a gradual disengagement, not an abrupt one.

“Tell you what,” I smiled at him. “I’ll pack a few things and come over right after school. Tomorrow is Friday, so that gives us the whole

weekend."

"Make that a lot of things, as I'm going to keep you with me for a while!"

"How long is a while?" I laughed.

"Well, until I leave for New York next week Friday."

My smile waned. "You're going back to New York?"

He nodded. "I didn't think the paperwork for the sale would take this long. I only planned to spend about a month here in Nigeria. But here we are, now in June, and it's still not done. I need to go back to take care of a few things and to get more time off work."

"How long will you be gone?" I asked, my heart making a slow descent to the floor. Just when I'd started getting used to the idea of being with only him.

"A couple of weeks. I'll be back the morning of Karibi and Isioma's traditional ceremony."

I was immediately consoled. Two weeks wasn't too long to be apart.

After a final parting kiss, I got out of the car, my small box in hand. Walking into the compound, I didn't make eye contact with the guards at the gate as I answered their welcome greetings. Who knew if they were part of Rahim's espionage team? I made a mental note not to allow Diekola drop or pick me up from there anymore. Yes, Rahim and I were not exclusive, but there was no point rubbing it in his face.

Unpacking my suitcase, I smiled at the souvenirs from Rio, setting the gemstone birds and female figurines on my bedside table and the mantelpiece in my living room, strategic places where I would see them and be reminded of the most magical few days of my life. Save for the incident on the beach with Karibi, the holiday had been pure perfection, and I wanted to remember it forever.

My phone rang, startling me, and seeing Rahim's name on the caller ID, I felt like kicking myself for allowing him beat me to it.

"Where have you been, Princess? Your phone has been switched off."

I cleared my throat. “I’m so sorry. I meant to tell you that I had to travel for my friend's wedding.”

“All the way to Brazil?”

I frowned. “If you know where I went, why are you asking?”

“No need to get defensive, Princess,” he chuckled. “All I was told was that you went to Rio with friends. I hope the wedding went well.”

“Yes, it did,” I answered. “How are you yourself? Are you back in Geneva now?”

“I’m in Dubai right now, but the weather is getting too hot for me to hang around here for long.”

“Will you be coming here anytime soon?” I asked, trying to sound casual, even though I prayed with every fiber of my being for him not to answer in the affirmative.

“Not for a few months. I have meetings in the States for most of July, and in August I have to take my kids away for our annual vacation. We’re going to Cappadocia this year.”

I nodded to keep myself from heaving a sigh of relief. He could take as much time as he needed. Hopefully, by then, I would have figured out a way to extricate myself from the relationship as neatly as I could possibly manage.

When the call was over, I went through the messages that had delivered when we landed, relieved not to find any from Olumide. From all indication, he’d realised my decision this time was final and that we were well and truly done.

Scrolling further, I saw a text message from Dike and smiled when I saw it was an invitation for a surprise dinner for Ginika’s 35 th birthday the following week. Even though her birthday wasn't until the end of July, he wanted to surprise her before their scheduled trip to Europe. It had been a while since I’d seen her and the girls. Of all the groups of friends I’d had over the years, this was the most sincere and least competitive. Being with them was always a breath of fresh air, and I was excited about the prospect of hanging out with them again.

It was fast shaping up to be a great month

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Diekola picked me up from school the following day, with a member of his staff driving my own car ahead of us. Getting to his house, it was a thrill to finally be ushered up to his private quarters upstairs. As I set my things down and got myself comfortable for the next few days, I couldn't help but envision myself there permanently.

Sitting on the bed, I smiled, imagining that as my bedroom one day, with our wedding pictures on the wall and my clothes making better use of the walk-in closet. If I'd ever questioned settling down one day, being with Diekola made those reservations disappear in a poof of smoke. He was aware of my reputation and had accepted me even with that. There was nothing more I could have asked for. Yes, there was the issue of Rahim, but if I handled it well enough, even that would fizzle away quietly and without incident.

Things were falling into place for me, and I couldn't have been more grateful.

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The days that followed proved that the magic Diekola and I had in Rio was no fluke, amplifying the beautiful connection that had bloomed there. After the nightmare that had been my relationship with Olumide, I was slowly learning how to dream anew, how to believe that I deserved to have the love of a good man, a good man all to myself. In the short time I'd known him, Diekola had become more than my anchor. He had become my rest, the calmness that soothed my flames to a steady heat instead of the consuming inferno that had always raged within, unable to quell. As one day led to another, one thing became clear; I wanted my forever to be with him.

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"Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you?" he asked as he dropped me at *Sinzu* , the new Thai restaurant Dike had chosen for the party.

I smiled and shook my head. We'd made too much progress to risk running into anyone who thought the way Karibi and his friends did. Even though I knew we would have to face the Lagos public soon, I was ready to delay the inevitable for as long as I could.

Walking into the building, with its elaborate floral backdrop walls in vibrant pinks and orange, I smiled when I saw the familiar faces sitting around.

"Hello stranger," Ara exclaimed, embracing me. "Looking gorgeous as always."

I beamed, pleased with the reactions the green, silk, off-the-shoulder jumpsuit with puff sleeves and wide pants, was getting me. With my hair in a slick bun, and my makeup nude and glossy, I knew I indeed looked gorgeous.

"You too," I said to her, and meaning it. In a fitted navy blue blazer over a slogan t-shirt and jeans, it was classic Ara, and just as she always did, she pulled it off.

I shook C.J.'s hand, noticing how his eyes still twinkled when he looked at his wife, and how they seemed to have a non-verbal mode of communication. A few months before, I wouldn't have been able to understand it. But now I did, and it made my heart glow for Diekola even more.

"See my bestie!" Ozioma squealed, rushing over to me. "You guys, Ife and I are now besties, in case you didn't know."

"Really?" a bemused Ara asked. "Since when?"

"Since a while now," Ozioma chimed. "Or am I lying?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "No lie at all," I affirmed, putting an arm around her as we greeted. "It's great to see you," then looking her in the eye. "And thank you again."

She clicked her tongue. "Will you quit all this 'thank you' rubbish! We're sisters."

I smiled, amused we'd gone from 'best friends' to sisters in a matter of seconds.

“Well, I’m glad to see that you two have buried your age-old hatchet,” Ara remarked. “You’re going to have to tell me how that happened.”

Ozioma and I exchanged a glance, before she shrugged. “Nothing really. I guess we just figured we were fighting over absolutely nothing.”

Our eyes still holding, I nodded slightly in a silent thank you to her. The last thing I needed was to relive the horrible incident that had brought it about, even with our friends.

Just then, C.J. got a call. “They’re here. Places, everyone!”

The lights went off as we all stood around the entrance, coming on just as Dike and Ginika walked in. She squealed in delight when she saw what it was, turning around to hug her husband. I placed a hand over my chest as I watched them, still exuding so much love and happiness two years later. I remembered vividly the issue with her ex-boyfriend only days to their wedding, an incident that had almost scuttled the whole thing, and was just happy that she’d been able to put all that behind her. If she could do it, then so could I.

“Ife, is this your face?” she exclaimed when she saw me. “So you too were in on this plan?”

“Happy birthday, babes,” I said, handing her a gift bag which had a dress from the new collection of a local designer I knew she also liked.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes lighting up. “And you look amazing, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I beamed, tempted to tell her that my glow wasn’t just from my amazing outfit.

I sat and looked on as she exchanged greetings with everyone, happy to have been invited, happy that, despite what most people thought about me, there was still a group of people proud to be associated with me.

This brought Isioma back to my mind, and as furious with her as I still was, I couldn't deny the fact that I wished she were there. In a gathering like this, she would have been my partner, and I missed her something awful.

“Do you hear from Isioma often?” Ara asked, as if reading my mind.

Not wanting to air our issues even with our close friends, I smiled and nodded. “We spoke about two weeks ago.”

“I’m so happy for her. Karibi is a great guy. They make such a lovely couple!”

I beamed, still proud of the person I was closest to. “Yes, they do.”

“She looked beautiful in her wedding pictures,” Ginika remarked. “Even though I’m still beefed she didn't invite me *sha o* !”

“Get over yourself, babe,” Ara laughed. “It was just their immediate family, or didn't you notice?”

“ *Nne* , if I wasn't invited, then is it you they would have invited?” Ozioma quipped. “Besides, we’re going to throw it down at the traditional wedding anyway.”

Ginika made a face, before turning to talk to someone else.

“So, you,” Ozioma said, sitting closer to me. “Rumour has it you’ve caught yourself a juicy fish.”

“A juicy what?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“You’ve been seen out and about with Diekola Holloway. I even hear you were his date for Karibi’s bachelor weekend in Rio.”

My mouth dropped open, stunned by the level of detail she was privy too, and this prompted laughter from her. “You better not swallow a fly *o* ! You know I hear these things.”

Realising there was no point denying it, I shrugged, hiding a smile behind a sip of my drink.

Ozioma beamed. “That good, huh?”

I wiggled my brows. “Even better,” then placing my drink down, I decided to confide in someone what had been eating me up for almost two weeks. “Isioma really upset me the last time we spoke. Can you believe she actually asked me not to see him again?”

Ozioma shrugged, not looking at all surprised. “That’s to be expected. I know he’s related to Karibi, and there’s no way they’ll be excited about him

being with you.”

I pulled back, surprised by her candor.

“Babes, this is true talk, isn’t it?” she said, sitting to face me. “We’re speaking frankly, aren’t we?”

I was still so stunned, all I could do was nod in response.

“Diekola has been widowed for a while, and from what I’m told by people close to him, they’ve been trying to get him to date for years…” she left the rest unsaid, but we all knew what the concluding part of that sentence was. “Don’t be upset with Isioma. Diekola is very dear to Karibi, and Karibi is very dear to her. She’s just trying to protect him, that’s all.”

I shrugged in reluctant acquiescence.

Ozioma watched me for a while before setting down her own drink. “At the risk of jeopardizing our very new and fragile friendship,” she began, my prompt that I wasn't going to like what she said next. “Why have you chosen this life? Living off a sugar daddy and being sugary all over Lagos?”

“Wow!” I exclaimed, too shocked to even be upset. But her gaze didn't even waver, indicating she was waiting for an answer. Sitting back in my chair, I shrugged. “It was Olumide who led me down this path. He’s the one who got me started and, for a long time, I did it just to make him happy.”

“That’s bullshit!” she retorted. “And you know it. Olumide got you into it indeed. Was he holding a gun to your head even back then? Is he holding one now? The man is a wretch, yes, but he ain’t no pimp. You got into this life with clear eye because you wanted to, because you loved the trappings that came with it.”

I glared at her, wanting to argue, wanting to tell her she had no idea what she was talking about. But I remained tongue tied, largely because deep down inside, I knew she was correct.

“The only reason I’m speaking exactly what’s on my mind is because we’re cool now,” she arched a brow. “We’re cool, right?” without waiting for an answer, she continued. “Look, from what I hear, Diekola really likes you. Quit the game and focus on this one. Don’t mess it up.”

I stared at her for a while, not knowing whether to hit her or burst into tears for being read for filth like that. In the end, all I could do was nod and smile. “Don't worry, I won’t.”

She put an arm around my shoulder and squeezed hard. “That’s my girl!”

“This one that two of you are forming besties,” came Ginika’s voice as she sauntered over to where we sat. From the way she was giggling, it was clear she’d already had one too many to drink. “What are you two talking about?”

“We’re just lamenting our single status *o* ,” Ozioma chimed. “ *Na only us remain* ! We too want to get great husbands that will take care of us the way Dike is taking care of you. *Nne* , you’re really shining!”

Ginika giggled and spun around, showing off her print, satin dress I recognised as Versace. And if I remembered correctly, it cost a very pretty penny indeed. “He tries, he tries,” she giggled. “You know I got a car for my birthday present? A Range Rover Vogue SE!”

I raised an appreciative brow, just as Ozioma cackled loudly, prompting curious looks our way. “God *o* ! Answer my call *o* !” then turning to her cousin. “G-baby, I hope you wake up every morning thanking God for such a wonderful man,” then narrowing her eyes, added. “I also hope you’ve been a good girl and that there haven’t been any more suspect trips to London.”

Ginika’s inebriation appeared to miraculously abate, and she and Ozioma locked gazes in a non-verbal exchange that spoke a thousand words.

Eventually, Ginika smiled. “There have been no more trips to London.”

“I hope not,” Ozioma reiterated. “ *Dike bu ezigbo mmadu, ị mara.* He’s a good one.”

“ *Ama’m* ,” Ginika answered, her mood definitely not as bright as it had been seconds before. “I know.”

By this time, I was very confused. “What are you guys on about? What’s so bad about taking a trip to London? Am I missing something here?”

Ginika turned to look at me, seemingly confused. “Isioma never told you anything?”

“Told me what?”

She brightened. “Nothing. Nothing at all,” then blowing us air kisses. “I better get back to my adoring public.”

As she sashayed away, I turned to Ozioma, wanting to ask what it had all been about, but instead decided to leave it be, especially as it really didn't concern me. She was reading a message on her phone and I watched her with keen interest, recognising it as the look of a woman in love.

“Tell, tell,” I prodded. “You know so much about my love life, at least share a little tidbit about the man putting that smile on your face.”

She giggled like a schoolgirl, before leaning closer and showing me the picture of a man on her phone. “His name is Onochie. We just started seeing each other.”

I smiled, approving of the good-looking man on her screen, a handsome man who was so buff, his muscles were visible even through the suit he wore.

“He’s a former football player. NFL,” she thankfully clarified, as I’d already started thinking *Super Eagles* .

“He played with the *Dallas Cowboys* , after which he got an Engineering degree from Yale, and an MBA from Harvard. He runs his own software engineering company in Atlanta,” she continued, very proud of her love interest’s achievements. “A friend introduced us about a month ago and we've been seriously vibing. He's everything I’ve ever prayed for, and I honestly pray this is the real deal, because babe *I don tire* !”

I heard the earnestness in her voice, and saw that she was already emotionally vested. “When you say ‘vibing’, I hope it’s not just telephone and Skype ‘vibing’. I hope you two have met face-to-face, so that you can be sure you’re not being catfished by some low life.”

“Nobody can ever catfish me. *They fit? ”* she hooted, very amused. “No, we haven’t met yet, but trust me when I say I’ve had everyone I know in the States check him out. But I hear you. I agree that we need to meet each other face-to-face ASAP. We’re working on making that happen.”

“In that case,” I said, lifting my glass to her. “I’m very happy for you.”

“And me, you,” she beamed, doing the same. “We just might leave this single’s circle soon and join the other gals in wedded bliss!”

I laughed as we clinked our glasses, silently echoing her wish but not having the courage to say it out loud.

But walking out of the restaurant about an hour later and into Diekola’s waiting car, I was filled with even more appreciation for him.

“Did you have a good time?”

I leaned forward to kiss him. “It would have been better if you were there.”

And I meant it. As we drove back to his place, I had a mental picture of all of us, Ara, Ginika, Isioma and even Ozioma, dining with our significant others, and it put a smile on my face. One day.

One day.

–

Waking up in his arms on Friday morning, I was overwhelmed with mixed feelings, and it wasn't just because he was leaving town that night, but mainly because it was my birthday. Like it happened every year, I awoke with what felt like a boulder-sized weight on my chest, and it wasn’t because I was getting older. No, it was much deeper than that…deep enough for me to pretend the day didn't exist.

Apart from Olumide, anyone who happened to know me from long ago, and my employers that had my personal information on file, nobody knew my birthday. Anyone I’d met in the last decade believed I kept my birthday quiet for religious purposes. Rahim had long stopped badgering me to at least let him have a date, finally accepting and respecting that my ‘childhood religious inclinations’ precluded me from doing this. Olumide either knew better than to bring it up, or had probably long forgotten it himself. It wasn’t on any of my social media handles, and apart from mundane birthday messages from my school, the day now went by unacknowledged, just the way I wanted it. There was absolutely nothing about the day to celebrate.

I decided against going to work, choosing to spend as much of the day with Diekola as we could manage. As he dropped me off at home before leaving

for the airport, I suddenly turned to him.

“It’s my birthday today,” I said, surprising even myself.

His eyes widened. “And you’re only telling me now? Ife!”

I shrugged, falling back into my forced indifference about the day. “It’s no big deal.”

“It’s a very big deal, young lady,” he said, leaning over to kiss me on the bridge of my nose. “We’ll have to have a redo when I get back.”

The realisation of our two-week separation hit me again, and I had to force down the lump that was trying to form in my throat. No, I hadn’t cried over a man in years, and I wasn't about to start doing that now

I stood at my gate, waving until his car disappeared from view. Maybe this separation was a good way for me to regain some control of my emotions where he was concerned. As much as I hoped for a future with him, no good could come from me loving him as uncontrollably as my heart wanted to. It was necessary, critical, to apply some restraint.

I had just turned to walk into the compound, when I heard my name.

“Ife!”

I froze in my steps and grit my teeth, tempted to ignore the call and walk into my compound. But instead, I turned around. Sure enough, it was Olumide.

“Happy birthday, Ifedayo!” he said, a wide grin on his face. “Did you think I’d have forgotten?”

I sighed deeply. So much for thinking he’d gotten the message. “What do you want?”

“ *Ahn, ahn* , can’t I greet you on your birthday again?” he asked, feigning surprise over something he hadn’t done in almost a decade. “And your new Chairman couldn't even treat you properly on your special day? Oh no, wait, he doesn’t know, does he? We’re still keeping it a secret, aren’t we? I wonder how much of you he really does know.”

Something in his tone sent a chill down my spine. Deciding I’d given him too much of my time, I turned around to leave.

“Ife, Ife, Ife! I’ve been prepared for such a time as this,” he laughed, making no attempt to stop me. “I’ve sent a little, how do I put it, birthday gift to your phone. Enjoy it!”

He was still laughing as he walked away and the sense of foreboding I had, worsened. Brushing it off, I walked into the building, determined not to allow him upset me, and dreaming of the large glass of wine I would use to numb myself from the bad memories associated with the day.

I had just walked into my apartment when my phone vibrated with an incoming message. On another day, I probably wouldn't have given Olumide and his threats much regard, taking them as the benign pieces of garbage they typically were, but that night, there was something different, something almost sinister.

Reaching for my phone, true enough, there was a message from a number I didn't recognize, a message I would ordinarily have deleted. Clicking it open, I saw it was actually a video. Reluctantly, I downloaded it and pressed play.

And I immediately wished I hadn’t.

The video was grainy and it took a few seconds for it to register what I was watching…until I saw the curtain, the worn red curtain with the large white circles I’d stared at through the ordeal…and I knew exactly what the recording was.

My handbag dropped to the floor as I recognised myself being pummeled from behind by a well-known politician, while performing fellatio on another man. I cringed as I watched myself suck on the man’s penis, just as one belonging to yet another man was pushed in my face. I shut my eyes, the memory of that night so vivid, I could still smell the awful combination of body odour, cigarettes and expensive perfume. Even though my eyes were closed, I could hear my bogus moaning and the grunts of the men I was servicing. I also remembered I’d been astride another man who was fondling my breasts and that there was yet another man, a fifth one, standing naked nearby, masturbating as he watched and waited his turn. Opening my eyes, I saw with dismay that it was there, it was all there, captured forever in the awful video.

I dialled the number, not even wait for him to call me.

“I’ve been expecting your call for the last, what,” he chuckled. “Sixty seconds. You like it? That’s some Hollywood stuff right there. Fucking five men at the same time? *Na wa for you* , Ifedayo!”

“How did you get this?” I asked, my voice raspy, even though as the question came out of my lips, I realised its futility. The politician, Abegunde Mabayoje, had been a friend of Olumide’s, his *egbon* as he’d fondly called him back then. Olumide had been the one who’d taken me to his hotel room that night.

“I knew *ogbeni* liked to swing both ways, so I hid a camera in his room,” he sniggered. “I got so much money from him because of this video. Right until he died in 2016, he was still sending me money steady, just because of this video. I’ve kept it since that time because I knew there would come a time, such as now, that you’d believe in your head that you want to leave me and move on with your life.”

I grappled my way to a nearby seat, remembering him fiddling with what I thought was a light bulb that fateful night, as I got myself ready for the Senator. He’d insisted on staying to make sure I was safe until the guy got there, saying it wasn't a safe place to leave me alone at night. If only I’d realised how out of character it was for him to have been so concerned about my welfare.

“What do you want?” I barely managed to ask, my heart racing a mile a minute.

“If you want to leave me, you’re free to, babes,” he cooed. “But I’m going to need some money to take care of myself. Or else, this video will be released for the whole world to see.”

I gripped the arm of the chair, my entire world spinning around me. If my reputation was bad already, this video would cremate it.

“Please, Olumide,” I pleaded. “I’ll do anything, just don’t release this.”

“That, my dear Ifedayo, is exactly what I want to hear,” he answered, all traces of humour gone. “Two hundred million naira transferred to my account in forty-eight hours.”

I blanched. As much money as I had saved from my generous allowances from Rahim, it was nowhere close to that amount. “Where am I supposed to get that kind of money?”

“That’s even me being reasonable. One of your numerous chairmen should be able to assist. It’s chicken change for them.”

I racked my brain, mentally working out how much I could raise if I pooled all my funds together. “I can do forty, Olumide. I can transfer you forty by tomorrow.”

“Don’t insult me,” he retorted. “Forty million for this juicy video? You must be out of your mind.”

“Olumide, please…”

“You have till the end of the week. In the meantime, you need to unblock my numbers as I have no intention of still carrying all these burner lines just to reach you. The next time I call and it’s still blocked, be rest assured your video will be released immediately,” he snarled. “If I’m unable to reach you or if you make me wait, that amount is going to double.”

The line disconnected and I sat there, staring into space. Just when I thought things were beginning to fall in place. In one fell swoop, the rug had been pulled right off my feet.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I GREW UP the second of three girls. I wasn't born with a silver spoon, but it wasn't a wooden one either. Even though we weren’t wealthy, my sisters and I never wanted for anything. Both our parents were civil servants, and they worked hard to give us the best of everything. We went to good schools and spent almost every weekend making memories as a family, from trips to Bar Beach, to playing Monopoly and WHOT on Sunday evenings. There wasn't much money, but there was plenty of love and laughter in our family. There was also plenty of church. My mother was very active in several church societies, so it wasn’t unusual for us to spend entire Sundays, and even some weekdays, there. But none of us complained about it. Apart from when we were older and told small fibs to get out of some choir practice or workers’ meeting, we not only remained active, we were genuinely happy to serve the Lord.

The year I gained admission to the Ogun State University, OSU, we moved into our own house in Dopemu, a building project that took almost a decade to complete, not to mention the bulk of any income both my parents made. But moving in, none of us remembered the sacrifices we’d all had to make for it to happen. We were just so happy to be moving into a house of our own, a house where we could all have our individual bedrooms and not have to share a toilet. For me, it was well timed, especially as I was about to start a new life away from home. Even though we’d kept our apartment in Ogba nice and clean, the same couldn't have been said of our neighbours, and I often saw the look of horror on my older sister, Ibukun’s, face, whenever her friends from Unilag had to sidestep overflowing dustbins and clogged drains whenever they visited. That was something I wouldn't have to worry about.

I was also looking forward to finally being able to get myself a boyfriend. Under our parents’ watchful eye, dating had been completely out of the

question. But with all we had going on both in school and church, my sisters and I hadn’t minded much. Not until Ibukun got into Unilag and started dating Elvis, a tall, fast-talking guy with a wide smile and even wider charm. In his baggy jeans and large motif, faux designer t-shirts, he was nothing like what we were used to. But even though he didn’t have much money, and drove an 80’s model Volvo that heaved and huffed more than it moved, he made my sister happy. I found myself envying her when she lay in bed, giggling as she talked with him on the phone into the wee hours of the morning. Suddenly, I too wanted a guy to send me love letters and whisper sweet nothings in my ear.

Getting to OSU as a young JAMBITE, life wasn’t as attractive as I’d imagined it to be. It was far removed from what I’d seen visiting Ibukun in school. The tiny room I had to rent in town was nothing like my sister’s Moremi Hostel, with its glamorous occupants. Here, in the very rustic neighborhood handpicked by my parents for supposedly being the safest part of town, I was surrounded by other students who were either just as green and naïve as I was, or already jaded and unbothered by the system. And I was bitterly disappointed. Once in a while when I was on campus, I would see the same kind of flashy girls I saw in Unilag, heavily made up, dressed to the nines and looking more like they were headed to a party than for lectures. But they could as well have been on another planet; so far removed were they from the lackluster world my school experience had become. From the kind of people I surrounded myself with, I had inadvertently made myself invisible to the kind of people I really wanted to associate with.

That wasn't to say I didn't get attention from guys. Quite the contrary, I got a lot, but not from the kind of guys I’d spent several afternoons daydreaming about back home in Lagos. The kind of guys who approached me were too local, too nerdy, too boring and, a few times, too rough. I was never short of adjectives to disqualify the guys who vied for my attention. I was disappointed not to have found anyone to sweep me off my feet, but also grateful I hadn’t been noticed by the really dangerous guys who belonged to secret cults. After seeing what happened to a classmate of mine who’d rejected the advances of the prominent member of one of the major

ones, it became my primary prayer point not to ever cross paths with any of them. It was better to be invisible than dead.

My first semester was almost over and I'd already resigned myself to the fact that my own university experience was going to be much different from Ibukun's, and that there would be no Elvis for me there…when I met him.

Olumide.

My last lecture for the day had just ended, and the class was emptying out when he sauntered into the room with a few other guys, looking for someone. Our eyes met, and when he smiled, he reminded me a lot of Elvis. In his bright red HUGO Boss t-shirt and True Religion jeans, he was the very epitome of cool to me. Lanky and only a few inches taller than I, his bushy brows, mischievous smile and dancing eyes reminded me of Tupac Shakur. Even though I looked away almost immediately, our brief eye lock had given him enough encouragement to approach me.

"Do you believe in love at first sight or should I walk past again?"

My eyes widened, first with shock that he was speaking to me and then with glee as I dissolved into giggles, tickled by the cheesy pick up line. "Excuse you?"

"Is there an airport nearby or is it my heart taking off?" he went on, happy to have gotten a reaction from me. "You're so beautiful, but I'm sure everyone tells you that. You look just like Naomi Campbell. Where have you been hiding on this campus? How come I've never seen you before?"

And just like that, with the snap of a finger and a sprinkling of cheesy charm, I was his. As we talked, we were soon in a world of our own. I ignored my friend who was torn between impatience and curiosity about the handsome stranger I was talking to, and he was unbothered when his own companions left him there.

He took me out for lunch, a small cafeteria off campus I'd never been to. It wasn't fancy, as a matter of fact, it was downright dingy, but so enthralled was I by this handsome, funny, charming guy, we could as well have been dining at Federal Palace Hotel.

A year ahead of me, it turned out he'd only just resumed for the semester. With only a couple of weeks left till exams, he and his fellow truant friends had been hustling for assistance with their course work, and that was what brought him to my class. But after that day, our forthcoming exams soon became of least interest to both of us.

By the time we shared a bike back to my place, it was already dark.

"Thanks for lunch," I said, flushed and unable to even make eye contact. "I enjoyed it."

"Trust me when I say the pleasure was all mine," he said, tilting my head up, forcing me to look at him. "Ife, Ife. If you were a fruit, you'd be a fineapple!"

I flushed again, both flattered and also mindful of being seen by my very conservative neighbours. "Thank you."

He lingered a bit longer, before finally leaving. Returning to my room, I collapsed in my bed with a big smile on my face, the butterflies in my stomach almost lifting me off it. And then my phone rang. Seeing his name on the screen caused me to levitate higher still, and as we talked all through his bike ride to his place, and for several hours after that, I was so happy, grateful, that I'd finally found the kind of love I'd been longing for.

From that day on, we were inseparable. He came to pick me up every morning so we could make our way to campus together, but rather than attend lectures, I ended up just hanging around him all day. I dumped my study group and abandoned my friends, just so I could spend more time with this guy who'd stolen my heart. And, after that first week, when he took me to the apartment he shared with a few other guys, I put up very little resistance when he seduced me, giving him my virginity without as much as a second thought and nary a single regret afterward. He was the one I'd dreamt of, the one I'd fantasised of for so long. Bonding sexually with him was simply a no-brainer.

The only downer came when exams started and, even before seeing my results, I knew they would be very poor indeed. But even that wasn't enough to dampen the euphoria of being in love for the very first time. By this time, I'd pretty much moved in with him, squeezing into the tiny flat he

shared with his friends. But they didn't seem to mind, which was just as well, because I would have stayed even if they'd complained. So far gone was I that I would have stayed with him if he was sharing a sty with a drove of pigs. All I wanted was to be with him.

Breaking up for the holidays, we were happy to continue our love affair back home in Lagos. He came to visit me several times, and I was proud to finally be able to show off my boyfriend to my sisters, the way Ibukun still did with Elvis. He reasonably impressed my younger sister, Ibilola, but not Ibukun.

"He talks too much," she said, after he'd visited a second time.

"Says the girlfriend of the guy whose mouth never shuts," I retorted, furious she wasn't raving about him the way I'd raved about Elvis.

"But at least, Elvis doesn't tell lies. What's with all the name- dropping? *'My uncle is this' , 'my father's friend is that'* ? Does he think we're kids?"

"What makes you think he's lying?" I'd defended him, even though some of his tales, especially the one of riding with his cousin on a private jet to Abuja to satisfy his relative's *kilishi* craving, were pretty far fetched. "I've never questioned anything Elvis has said here in the three years I've known him. Why have you made up your mind not to give Olumide a chance?"

"Ifedayo, I know his type. I see them in school everyday. Sly and sugar-mouthed." she'd maintained. "Be careful. Guys like that are usually after only one thing."

I'd ignored her and our relationship soured for the rest of the holiday, with us barely on speaking terms. I was further enraged when she made no attempt to be friendly to him on his subsequent visits, and even more so when Ibilola, who'd seemed initially keen, soon started acting cold and detached to him. The only person who was friendly was Elvis, anytime he happened to meet him there. Even though I was later to learn he shared his girlfriend's opinion of him, he still made an attempt to be friendly.

It was soon time to return to school. As expected, my results were atrocious. But what was not expected was the sharp turn in Olumide's behavior.

From the very first week back, it was clear something was different. I hadn’t been allowed to return to his flat because another friend’s girlfriend was in town, and his visits to me went from a raging shower to barely a drizzle. And the few times he did show up, he was always in a hurry to leave, looking at his watch incessantly. Something was clearly up.

And I soon found out what it was.

As the weeks progressed, first one friend, and then two, and then several of my neighbours, spotted him out and about with other girls. The very same places I’d come to consider ours were the venues for these several sightings. I didn't want to believe it. I refused to believe that the guy I’d only recently given my heart, body and soul to was already throwing them away into the garbage.

And then one rainy Friday night, after a friend called to tell me she’d seen him on a bike with a girl, headed in the direction of his apartment, I finally decided to confirm with my own two eyes if the rumours were true. Flagging down a bike, I didn't even care how heavily the rain was pouring. I was so full of adrenalin that I didn't even realize I was soaked to my skin by the time I got to the house. Not bothering with the door, I made my way to the window of his room, opening it from outside as I knew it could. The sight that met my eyes stunned me into silence. I stood there, watching him pound a buxom, light skinned girl, groaning the way he did with me, the way he only should have done with me. It wasn't until they decided to change position and his partner decided to straddle him that I finally found my voice.

“Olumide!” I screamed like the incensed banshee I’d become.

This was enough to startle them. His companion dismounted him, grabbing the bed sheet to cover herself. But that remorse was missing from my boyfriend, who simply glared at me, rose to his feet and shut the window securely from inside, closing the curtains for good measure.

Now fully enraged, I pounded on the window so hard, a pane cracked. When this drew no reaction, I ran over to the front door, where I was prevented entry by his friends, guys I’d thought were my friends as well. If it hadn’t been for his neighbour, Doyin, a a lady in her final year and a

staunch member of the school's Scripture Union, who pulled me into her apartment to give me the shelter I was too foolish to seek for myself, I probably might have stayed there all night, under the rain, fighting for a man who clearly no longer wanted me. Doyin, bless her, gave me a change of clothes and a good talking to about the stupidity of losing my sanity over a man, but alas, as soon as dawn broke and I sighted Olumide's vixen leaving his apartment, I rushed out of Doyin's apartment and charged at her like a raging bull, throwing her to the floor. Well, she was no shrinking violet and fought back just as hard. There we were, two girls who should have known better, punching, scratching and screaming in the mud, while everyone, Olumide included, watched in amusement. Doyin and a few other concerned neighbours finally pulled us apart, but rather than go home and save whatever shred of dignity I still had, I followed Olumide back into his apartment.

"You shouldn't have come here like that," he retorted. "When you show up in a man's house unannounced, he can't be held liable for whatever you see."

"Is she the reason why I don't see you again? The reason why you've changed so much?" I cried, smarting not just from my physical bruises but more so from the deep wound in my heart.

"I'm a young man, Ife. Surely, you can't expect me to be with only one woman. Not at this age," he said, putting an arm around me. "I love you, babe, but I'm too young to be with just one woman."

And rather than run for the hills, I was soon doing with him what he and his prior female companion had done all night.

After that day, anytime I heard about him with another woman, I would find a way to waylay him at his place, or lure him to mine, hoping that sex would be enough for him to realise he didn't need anyone but me. But as happy as he always was to take whatever I offered him, he was just as happy to continue fooling around with other women.

It didn't take long for me to get desperate.

One night, a friend, Joko, called to tell me she'd just seen him at a party she was attending in the nearby town of Ijebu-Ode, as usual with a girl. Without

thinking twice, I applied some makeup and wore the most provocative thing I had in my wardrobe; a black, figure-hugging jersey dress, with the intention of not just storming the place but showing him just what he stood to lose.

Walking into the large hall where the party was happening, it didn't take long for me to spot him with his companion, a pretty girl I knew well from campus. Deciding against causing a scene, I found a seat and sat there with my arms crossed, boiling. I watched as he danced with her, as he whispered in her ears to make her giggle the way he did with me, and it brought hot tears to my eyes. If I had a knife, I would have stabbed him to death.

“ *Sisi* ,” a young girl said, walking up to me. “ *Otunba n pe yin* ,” she said, pointing in the direction of the table where a much older group of men sat. “He is calling you.” The Otunba in question, the owner of the hotel, winked as we made eye contact.

I frowned in their direction, and it was on the tip of my tongue to tell both her and the Otunba off, when I noticed Olumide was watching the exchange.

“ *Ṣọ fun un pe mo n bọ* ,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’ll be right there.”

When she was gone, I looked in Olumide’s direction again, to see if it would rattle him enough to leave his friend and come to me, but instead he’d looked away and was nibbling on her ear lobe. That was all the prompting I needed.

“ *Duro!* ” I called out as the girl walked away. “I’ll come with you.”

Soon, she was leading me to their table.

“Good evening, Sir,” I greeted with a slight curtsey, the home training of eighteen years still very much in place.

“ *Tani iwọ n pe Sir* ? Who is your Sir?” the man and his friends laughed, amused. “Sit down beside me, fine girl. I’ve been watching you since you came. You’re here alone?”

I flinched as he put his arm around mine, looking in Olumide’s direction. My consolation was that he was looking back at us. Satisfied that I was getting his attention, I returned mine to Otunba, nodding and smiling

politely as he spoke, trying to look interested and not as repulsed as I was. But after about an hour, I'd had enough.

"So soon?" Otunba exclaimed, as I rose to my feet. "I was looking forward to spending more time with you."

"I have to go, Sir," I said, ignoring his protest over the title. "Thank you."

"What are you saying 'thank you' for? *Kini iwo n dupe lowo mi* ? I haven't done anything and you're saying thank you," he grinned, reaching into his wallet and pulling out several crisp notes. "Use this to buy yourself a drink."

My eyes widened, surprised by the unexpected gesture. "Thank you, Sir," I curtsied even deeper this time. "Thank you, Sir."

" *Maṣe dupẹ lọwọ mi bayi* ," he answered, placing plump fingers on my shoulder. "Don't thank me now. You can thank me better next time," he raised a brow and leaned closer. "Can next time be tomorrow? It'll be quiet so we can have more privacy."

I grit my teeth, reaching the end of my capacity to tolerate him fawning over me. "Okay, Sir," I managed, before walking out of the hall as fast my feet could manage, hopeful it wasn't too late to find a taxi headed back.

"Ife! Ifedayo!" came Olumide's voice behind me.

I didn't stop walking until I was outside, when I finally spun around. "What?"

"What were you doing, talking with Otunba Kamson?" he demanded. "And what's that in your hand? Money?"

I'd forgotten I was still holding the wad of notes. I wanted to ask him why he cared, especially as he'd been busy with his 'date' all evening, but instead I shrugged.

"You're so stubborn, Ife," he chuckled, pulling me to himself. "You mean you came all the way to Ijebu-Ode to spy on me."

And just like that, he had me right back in his arms. We went back to Ago-Iwoye together, back to his apartment, and it was just like old times. He made love to me with renewed intensity and the next morning, he didn't

hurry me off the way he'd now taken to doing. Instead, we lay in the afterglow for several hours, enjoying each other's company.

"How much did he give you?" he asked.

"I haven't even counted it," I said, reaching for my purse where I'd stashed the money as we'd boarded a taxi back.

Taking the money from me, he whistled as he counted it. "Ten thousand naira, just for saying 'hello'. You girls are really enjoying *o* !"

I giggled. "Ten thousand is nothing. Imagine what he gives his girlfriends."

"Exactly!" he said, sounding wistful. "I'd do anything for someone to give me this kind of cash now. I desperately need to pay Ajayi for his course, so he doesn't give me a carry-over, and Bamidele has told us we all have to move out of this place soon. I desperately need cash."

I looked at him, feeling empowered by the fact I was in a position to help. "You can have the money. I don't need it."

"You're the best!" he exclaimed, pulling me closer.

As he made love to me yet again, all I could do was think how this was just like old times. And I never wanted it to end.

"I hear the guy settles his babes very well," he said, as we ate our first meal of the day, rice and fish stew from a restaurant we hardly frequented as, even though the food was better, it was way more expensive than the others nearby.

"Which guy? Otunba?"

He nodded. "I hear he's extremely generous," he answered. "Are you going to call him? He included his complimentary card with the cash."

"Call him for what?" I scoffed.

"Ife, can you imagine all the things his money can do for us? We'll be able to get a place of our own, that's for sure, instead of squatting here."

I turned to look at him, not sure I understood. "What are you saying, Olumide?"

He pushed his plate aside and pulled me closer. “Can you imagine being paid for only a few minutes of service? Can you imagine getting rewarded for doing this thing that you and I do all the time?”

I froze, the full realisation of his words sinking in. Surely he wasn’t implying…

“You want me to sleep with another man? You want me to sleep with Otunba?” I was so incensed, I was vibrating.

“Baby, think about it,” he answered. “It’s only meaningless sex. Trust me, I won’t mind. What you and I have, this thing between us is lovemaking, and it’ll be nothing like that. A man his age probably won’t last longer than two minutes. It’s just a transaction. Think about it like that.”

“Please, stop talking. Stop talking before you get me really upset!” I answered, my voice quivering, not believing the cavalier way my own boyfriend was discussing me sleeping with someone else.

He raised his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Forget I said anything.”

And that was what we did as we melted into each other’s arms again. But for the first time, my mind wasn’t on him as we made love, but on what he’d actually propositioned. I was heartbroken that he was ready to share this thing, this precious thing we had, with a third party.

Waking up the next morning, Sunday, I was surprised to see him already on his phone. He was texting and, from the smile on his face, I knew it was with a woman. The bubble of intimacy we’d had the previous day had already burst.

“Who are you texting?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Oh, nobody,” he answered, putting his phone down. “I’m off to town soon. Do you want us to share a bike?”

My heart sank. We were back to him sending me away at the crack of dawn. I was suddenly awash with despair, miserable at the thought of returning to the way things were between us. I was desperate for that not to happen, desperate for things to remain just as they were the day before, the way they used to be in the past.

“I’ll call Otunba,” I said, as he reached for his towel on his way for a shower.

He turned to look at me, surprised.

“You’re right. It’s no big deal,” I said, trying to sound as aloof as he was about it. “The money will be good for us.”

The broad smile that emerged on his face was my confirmation I’d done the right thing. His bath forgotten, he hugged me and watched eagerly as I called the number on the business card Otunba had sent.

Later that day, Otunba sent a driver to pick me up, and as he grunted on top of me that night, as I did everything I could to banish the tears welling in my eyes, I thought about the long kiss Olumide had given me before I left, and him telling me I was the best thing that ever happened to him. I held on to that as the justification for what I was letting the old man do to me, if not for anything else.

Upon my return, the look on Olumide’s face as he beheld the fifty thousand naira I’d been given as a parting gift made up for the horrific experience. That I finally had his full attention the way it had been in earlier days, if not even more so, made it easier for me to accept the other invitations that came from Otunba. With the money I got, we were indeed able to rent a small flat and he was able to get out of his myriad of debts. But the best part was that there were no more women, no more side chicks. There was no more running around on his part. Instead, he pretty much worshiped the ground I walked on. The more money I got from Otunba, the more his devotion to me increased.

It didn't take long for the stakes to get higher. Olumide soon befriended Ponmile, a guy well known in school for sourcing girls to introduce to wealthy politicians, and it wasn't too long before I was frequently attending parties in Abeokuta, Ife, Osogbo, Ibadan, and Ado-Ekiti, cavorting with men old enough to be my father. Even though the encounters were far from pleasant, the monetary pay-off got higher, and the look on Olumide's face whenever I returned was always worth it. Or at least, that was what I convinced myself.

The day before the encounter with Senator Abegunde Mabayoje, Olumide had been excited about his ‘ *egbon* ’ coming our way for the wedding of a close associate’s daughter. His was a familiar name Olumide had bragged about in the now three years of our relationship. After holding several portfolios in Lagos, he’d recently been elected to the Senate, with plans to someday run for the Governorship of Ogun State, or even the Presidency, if Olumide was to be believed.

“I’ve told *egbon* about you and he’s really excited about meeting you,” he’d raved.

I was no longer naïve enough not to know exactly what that meant.

“He is very, very, very generous, Ife,” Olumide continued, confirming my fears. “Much more than the small time local champions here.”

“Olumide, I don't know,” I protested. It was days to the end of that academic year, and with Olumide finally graduating, I was looking forward to not having to put myself through the ordeal of having sweaty old men ravage my body. Not only did I think we’d made a reasonable amount of money, I was now secure enough in our relationship not to have to continue doing it. It was too late to salvage my reputation in school, as everyone now knew me as a ‘runs girl’, but at least I could salvage what was left of my sanity.

“Just this last time,” he pleaded. “I promise, it’ll be worth it.”

I should have seen the red flags when he insisted on accompanying me to the hotel to wait for his egbon. I should have smelt a rat as he fiddled with light bulbs and tinkered around. I should have known that his motives were as dark and sinister as the life he’d led me to.

I remember my stomach dropping when the Senator walked in with four other men. I remember the fear that gripped me as Olumide left the room after prostrating in deference to the older man.

“For once, my *aburo* wasn't exaggerating,” the Senator said, smiling in appreciation as he leered at me. “You’re even more beautiful than I expected.”

Before I could even say anything in appreciation, he was already on top of me, licking my face like a puppy, as both hands pinned me down. My eyes were open as I looked around at the other occupants of the room, wondering why they hadn't given us the needed privacy. Until they started undressing. That was when I realised exactly what I'd gotten myself into.

As one of them started tugging on my skirt and underwear and another reached to grope me just as another started undressing the Senator, I knew I had no choice but to play along and follow the script. I had no other choice. Even if I'd screamed myself hoarse, nobody would have dared come into the room to save me. So I yielded, doing their bidding and adding the enthusiasm experience had taught me men liked to see and hear. The torment went on for hours, with the men rotating between getting their pleasure from me and from each other. Even though my body was there in auto-pilot, mentally I had shut down. My eyes were open but I forced myself to block out everything, focusing instead on the room's garish, bright red curtain with its white, irregular circles.

At five hundred thousand naira, it was the biggest payoff I…we…had ever gotten. And as we enjoyed the money in the last weeks of the session, as we made plans for the future and how we would get married as soon as I was out of school, I decided that, for one last hurrah, it had been worth it.

That was until Olumide got Moyo pregnant during his NYSC year. That was until he crashed every single dream I had about us building a life together. I imploded when I heard the news. I'd already barely made it to my final year, and the news completely derailed me. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to kill her. But worst of all, I wanted to kill myself. Life was no longer worth living.

Somehow, I was able to pull myself from the brink. And as I prepared for my final exams, I started the process of expunging the memories of the past and focusing on passing my final exams for once. I'd been able to pay my way to get to this point, but I decided to redirect my energy to studying this time, determined to achieve a decent result as some way of recompense. But then, just when I'd already let him go, he showed up again.

I spotted him standing outside the door of the apartment even before the bike transporting me got there. Our eyes met as I alighted, and I glared at

him, all the rage I thought I'd been able to contain once more bubbling to the fore.

"What do you want?" I demanded, not caring that my voice was raised and I was attracting the attention of nosy neighbours, neighbours who'd all heard the gist about him dumping me for another woman.

He dropped to his knees, pleading and sobbing. He held on to me as I tried to shove past him, tearfully begging my forgiveness, and, I softened. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen him that broken. And so I let him back into my home…and my heart.

"She was a mistake," he said as we lay in bed that night. "I was drunk and…" he shook his head. "It never should have happened. And now, I'm stuck."

"Why didn't you make her get an abortion?" I demanded. "And why do you have to marry her?"

"She told her parents and it was too late for anything else. Her folks came to see mine, threatening fire and brimstone," he sighed deeply. "Now, we're left planning a wedding we can't afford. Her parents have demanded over a million naira from mine, and God knows where we'll be able to raise that kind of money."

And there it was; a window of opportunity. He still needed me.

"I'll make a few calls," I said, more than happy to dive back into a life I'd turned my back on, if it meant having an edge over the woman who had trapped him with a pregnancy.

"Oh, Ife!" he exclaimed, bursting into fresh tears. "I don't deserve you."

The gratitude when I raised double the amount he asked for, gave me a rush. It became like a drug to me, to have him depend on me, to give him what he couldn't get anywhere else. It had been that high, that intoxication of being the very air he breathed, that kept me holding on, so many years afterwards, believing his lies about one day being with me for good. I'd lived off that high, and now it was standing beside the grave it had dug for me.

But I'd be damned if I was going to fall into it.

Realising what he really wanted was money, I chided myself for not doing things more intelligently. I'd created a monster, and I'd made a mistake thinking I could walk away, leaving it hungry. As long as I kept it fed, I would have no problems.

Reaching for my phone, the first thing I did was to delete the video. The next thing I did was to transfer a decent amount to his account. As long as I continued to keep him happy, I had nothing to worry about.

Before putting down my phone, I moved the rest of the money from my personal account to the one Rahim had opened for me. Many years before, Olumide had been able to hack into my personal account, and I didn't want to risk him repeating it and sweeping all my money as he'd once done.

Going to bed that night, I pushed Olumide and the dirty video to the back of my mind, focusing instead on the beautiful man God had sent to me, to make up for all the lost years and wasted emotions. But one thing was for sure. Diekola could never, ever, set eyes on that video.

There would be no coming back from that.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I HAD NIGHTMARES so vivid, it felt like I was right back in that awful hotel room, with the different sizes and smells of penises being thrust and shoved in every orifice of my body. After what had to have been the tenth of such dreams, I rose from my sweat drenched sheets and went to make myself a cup of coffee, accepting the fact that, despite it being only 2:30am, there would be no more sleep for me that night.

Settling myself on my recliner in the living room, I binge watched *Money Heist* on Netflix, immersing myself in the crime drama series, to keep from remembering a door from my past that had just flung itself open, a door that led to the dirtiest, filthiest place of my mind that I wanted to forget ever existed. I checked for any message from Olumide acknowledging receipt of the money I'd sent him, but there was none. Convincing myself it was still too early and that he'd do that the following day, I started to relax after a while. There was no way he was going to do that to me, release that kind of video for the whole world to see. We had too much history for him to do that kind of thing…way too much. He'd sent that video to send me a message, one I'd received loud and clear. Never was I going to make the mistake of cutting him off financially ever again.

I must have drifted off to sleep as I was jolted awake by my ringing phone. I frowned when I saw that it was Isioma calling, disrupting yet another Saturday morning. I watched it ring off the first time, and frowned as she persistently called a second time. Between the awful things she'd said to me the last time we spoke and the stunt her husband tried to pull in Rio, I was tempted to not just ignore her calls, but also permanently block her phone number.

But I decided to answer it.

"What do you want?"

“Ife, please,” came her voice, sounding just as weary as I myself felt, proof that neither of us had done much sleeping the night before. “I’ve been trying to make this call since…since the last time we spoke. Ife, I feel so awful about how that conversation went.”

“Awful about how it went or awful about the things you said,” I retorted. “Those are two very different things.”

“Both,” she sighed. “Even though…even though a lot of the things were things I’d already said to you. You know very well what I think about Olumide…and Rahim…and all the others.”

I pursed my lips in defiance, despite the truth being that she indeed had. “Whatever the case, Isioma, you shouldn't have chosen him over me. You’re more like a sister to me than a friend. You shouldn't have picked him over me.”

We both knew ‘him’ wasn’t Diekola…but Karibi.

“I didn't handle it well, and I apologise. I was just caught in the middle, you know,” she answered, sounding like she was carrying the weight of the world on her dainty shoulders. “Karibi was just so worried about Diekola, he was literally going crazy over here. But regardless, I should have handled it better.”

I shrugged, helpless as my own anger seeped away. Apart from her contrition sounding genuine, I loved her too much to be angry for long. Besides, with the current upheaval in my life, I didn't even have the bandwidth to carry that kind of emotional load for an extended time.

“I hear you were with him in Rio,” she said.

And my defensive bristles came flying right back up. “Yes, I was. Despite everything your husband and his friends tried to do to the contrary.”

“Did Karibi say anything to you?” she asked.

I frowned, wondering if it was a trick question and if she really didn't know. “He didn't tell you anything?”

“He just said you were there with Diekola. I could already tell he wasn't happy about that, so I didn't push further,” she answered, sounding genuinely perplexed. “Did anything happen between you both?”

I hesitated a while, before deciding against going into any detail. “No, not really. It was just a bit awkward, you know with Yaks, Reuben and Dipo there.”

“You dated Reuben too?” she exclaimed. She already knew about my brief flings with the other two. “That must have been crazy awkward.”

Not half as awkward as your husband offering me money to leave town , was what I wanted to say, but instead I shrugged. “It was actually not too bad. Diekola found out and he was fine with it.”

“I’m not surprised. He’s a good one, Ife,” she said and I couldn't help but smile, despite everything. He sure was.

“Don’t worry, babes. I have no plans to hurt him,” I answered, still smiling. “As a matter of fact, I plan to keep this one.”

“Hearing that makes me so glad,” I could also hear her smile. “Don't worry, I’m sure Karibi and everyone else will come around eventually. He already knows you’re my best friend, and that has to count for something,” her voice broke. “You’re like a sister to me, and I only want the best for you, Ife.”

This prompted tears from me, and as we cried together, all the angst from the last few weeks was forgotten. By the time the call was over, not only had we fully made up, I’d promised to immediately call her mother to help her with the traditional wedding, which was now only a fortnight away.

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In the two weeks that followed, I threw myself into preparations for the ceremony, often times driving to Yaba to see her mother and, on two occasions, her paternal uncle’s house in Okota, where the ceremony was scheduled to hold. With renovations underway at the house in Lekki that had just been bought for her mother, I also accompanied her there on several occasions, to make sure everything was going according to plan. I was more than grateful for the distractions, as it not only helped the days go by quicker, but also kept reminders about the awful business with Olumide at bay. He hadn’t contacted me again, proving I’d been correct after all, and that sending him a little something to keep him going was what the stunt had been about. Never again would I be caught napping. On the very first

day of every month, I would be sure to always send him some money…for my piece of mind, and to ensure the recent ugly episode never, ever repeated itself again.

The morning of the ceremony, I got to Isioma's uncle's house at 10am. Hardly any larger than her own mother's house, when I'd asked why the ceremony wasn't taking place there, she'd gasped at the very insinuation of it. Apparently, traditionally, in the absence of her father, the onus was on her uncle, the most senior living member of their family, to give her away.

Smiling as I entered the compound, I was impressed by the magic Tomi, the Event Planner, had wielded in the modest storey building. With the tapestry of draping and suspended floral arrangements in white, orange and pink, the small compound that was shared with three other flats, was completely transformed. Even inside the apartment, where the main ceremony involving the payment of the bride price was to happen, had also been gaily decorated with fairy lights and flowers. It was so beautiful, it almost made up for the fact that the only representation of the bride would be a framed picture.

"Ify, thank you so much! You've done well! This place looks like heaven!' 'Uncle Chimezie, I didn't recognise this place again o! Are you sure we will allow these people carry their decorations when they are going?" was what Isioma's relatives chimed as they arrived, one by one. In the two weeks I'd been assisting with the planning of the day, I'd befriended many of them and no longer corrected them when they called me 'Ify'.

" *Biko , biko* , this powder is too much!" Isioma's mother was complaining when I walked into the bedroom where she was preparing, as the makeup artist fussed in front of her face. " *Abụghị m onye na-alụ* . Don't use all the makeup on my face just because the bride isn't here!"

"Nonsense! You look gorgeous, Ebele," Hattie, Isioma's other mother, her biological mother, chimed from the other side of the room. Already fully dressed in the sparkling white blouse, bold red and green double wrapper, and sequined *gele* the mothers of the bride were wearing, nobody would believe she'd only arrived town twenty-four hours before. From her bold red lips and contoured face, I could see she'd already taken full advantage of the makeup artist. "Let her work her magic on you."

As Isioma requested, I dialled her and her sister, Ifeyinwa, in and they soon joined the voices of those goading on the makeup artist to fully transform their mother. When her other relatives realised she was on my screen, it soon became an opportunity for them to chat with and pray for her, one after the other. By the time I was ready to get dressed, I had to leave my phone with one of them, before sneaking into one of the other bedrooms for a quick change of clothes. Being her only friends there, Ozioma, Ginika, Ara and myself had agreed to all wear white lace outfits with orange *gele* . Slipping into a fitted, beaded, white coupion lace dress, lined with orange silk, I felt beautiful, even as I was left with the responsibility of tying my own *gele* and applying my makeup myself. Finishing the look with a coral and gold jewellery set, with a thick choker necklace interlaced with rubies and Swarovski crystals, I was more than pleased with my look.

Ara and C.J. were the first to arrive.

“Wow, Tomi really threw it down here,” Ara remarked. “But then again, she always does.” Our first encounter with Tomi had been when C.J threw a surprise birthday party for her when he’d still been trying to woo her. Remembering the Queen-themed party still brought a smile to my face.

“You just missed her. She has another event on the island so had to leave,” I said, embracing her. “You look lovely!” And lovely she did, keeping it simple as she always did in an *iro* and *buba* set, in white chord lace. Her orange *gele* was in the same *aso-oke* fabric as her husband’s *fila* . “You should dress like this more often.” I added with a wink.

“Are you kidding? Only for you ladies would I squeeze my head into this kind of monstrosity. Whoever invented the *gele* must have been a sadist.”

“Yet, you look like it was made just for you,” C.J said, kissing her on the cheek.

“You guys are the cutest!” I couldn't help but remark as I watched them.

“Ginika and Dike aren’t here yet?” C.J asked. “When I spoke with Dike, he gave me the impression they were already on their way. I hope they didn’t use the Third Mainland Bridge. There’s mad traffic on that route.”

“Hi, people!” came Ozioma’s voice as she walked into the compound, dressed in a floaty, white tunic and an orange turban. “ *Oh boy* , it took me

three good hours to get here! I left home at 11am, hoping to get here early enough to help set up."

"You came through Third Mainland?" Ara asked.

"If I was driving myself, God knows I wouldn't have dared venture this far without checking Google Maps. But my father's driver thinks the thing is American Wonder!" she answered, embracing Ara and C.J., before turning to me, a broad smile on her face. "Hello, you!"

"Hello, you," I said in response, embracing her. Who would have thought that, in just a few short months, I would have gone from loathing the mere thought of her to being so heart warmed by the sight of her.

"Girl, thanks so much for helping with this," she said, still hugging me. "Isioma told me how helpful you were to her Mom. God bless you."

"Yes, well done!" Ara chimed. "It mustn't have been easy, especially with work and everything."

"Guys, stop," I flushed. "I didn't do anything a friend wouldn't have done."

"Ah, in that case, maybe I'm an enemy, considering I didn't do more than make a few phone calls to her mother," Ozioma cackled, taking a seat.

"At least, you even called. I kept on meaning to, but work has been crazy," Ara said.

"Still working on the project for the Presidency?" Ozioma asked and when Ara nodded, my own interest was piqued.

"A project for the Presidency? *Na wa o* , Ara, remember us when you get to your kingdom." I chimed.

"My dear, it's not all glitz and glam. It's taking way too much of my time, and for what, really? A small bonus at the end of year? It's actually got me reconsidering a lot of things," she remarked.

"Finally!" Ozioma exclaimed. "I've been telling you for ages that you're way too talented to be working at some firm. You need to branch out on your own."

C.J. nodded and I had to agree with them. One of the most talented architects I knew, it was high time for her to be reaping the fruits of her

hard labour.

“So…how are ‘things’?” Ozioma asked, as we walked into the flat, having left Ara and C.J. behind. She wiggled her brow and I laughed, knowing exactly what she was asking.

“‘Things’ are fine,” I answered, beaming. Apart from the blip that had been the incident with Olumide, the last few weeks had been nothing short of a dream. I couldn't remember ever being this happy.

“Will he be here today?” she asked.

I nodded. We’d spoken the previous day, just before he boarded his return flight to Lagos, and I could barely contain my excitement over the prospect of seeing him again after two long weeks.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” she said, squeezing my arm just as we approached the room where the mothers were. “You look happy, and that makes me so glad.”

“And how are things with you and Mr. NBA?” I asked, winking.

“First of all, it’s the NFL,” she corrected, struggling to contain a smile. “And second of all, well, things couldn't be better.”

“Any plans to see him soon?”

She nodded. “Hopefully next month, if I can get some time off,” she answered, before switching mode when the door opened and we were before our friend’s mothers, aunties and cousins. I sat back and watched as Ozioma bantered with them like she’d known them all her life, when that was the first time she was meeting most of them. Hattie had the same look of amazement on her face as we watched them converse in their melodic language, and even though we might not have understood what was being said, it didn't make us feel any less involved, any less a part of the beauty of the occasion.

If only Isioma were there!

“ *Di anyi abiala* !” came an excited shout from outside, and joining the other women looking out the window, I felt a warm glow radiating right from the core of my being when I saw him.

Walking into the compound and flanking Karibi alongside Tekena, was Diekola. They were closely followed by several other people; friends and family of the groom, with the octogenarian father, septuagenarian mother and a handful of older relatives closing the ranks. But even in the sea of people, all I could see was him.

Dressed in a sparkling white *agabada* and a red *fila* in the same colour of wrapper Karibi tied beneath a long white silk shirt, Diekola looked even better than my heart remembered. I watched as the younger men prostrated before Isioma's uncles and older brother, Ifeanyi, an ode to the groom's mother's south western roots, and as Diekola bantered with the older men, playing the role of the groom's older brother, it felt like my heart was going to explode. The other women at the window with me soon dispersed, headed downstairs to welcome the guests properly, leaving only me standing there. At that point, Diekola looked up and even though his eyes were shielded by his *Tom Ford* sunglasses, I knew the smile on his lips had radiated all the way to his eyes, crinkling them as it always did. He blew me an almost imperceptible kiss and I blew him one right back, no longer inclined to play it cool. I was ecstatic seeing him again, and had every plan to show him just how much.

When Karibi's family members were in the flat, I made my way out of it, to make room in the small place. Walking to the door, I made eye contact again with Diekola and, with his sunglasses now off, he winked. I smiled, no longer caring what Karibi and any of the others thought of me or how suitable they thought I was or wasn't. All that mattered was what Diekola thought, and from the way he was looking at me, he'd missed me just as much as I'd missed him.

Getting outside, I saw Ginika seated with Ara and Ozioma, with Dike and C.J. deep in discussion on the other end of the table. Despite being seated opposite a large industrial fan, Ginika was fanning herself like she was at the very heart of a raging furnace.

"Babe, chill. And I mean that literally," I laughed as I hugged her. "It's not that bad."

"Easy for you to say, looking all pretty and unruffled. My makeup has probably melted off completely!" she grumbled. "You made it seem like

this place wasn’t that far away, with how many times you said you came here to help out.”

“I never said so,” I laughed. “Besides, it really isn’t that far away. You were just unlucky to get into traffic.”

“Only Isioma could have made me travel all this way,” she muttered, reaching for her compact mirror.

“My friend, will you keep quiet? Who even begged you to pack all those feathers on your dress? *Ị bụ nnụnụ* ? Are you a bird?” Ozioma jibed, prompting giggles from Ara and I. Glamorous though her outfit was, with its confection of feathers and ruffles, it might not have been the most ideal for the occasion. “Your own engagement, didn’t we have to go all the way to Asaba?” Ozioma continued. “Or have you forgotten mine will happen in Enugu?”

“In the year 2075!” Ginika scoffed, prompting a scowl from her cousin.

“Don’t say that *o* . From what I hear, it could be sooner than we think,” I countered, winking at Ozioma.

“Oh really?” Ara remarked, leaning forward. “I’m all ears.”

“You guys don't learn your lesson. I’ve been hearing about her meeting ‘Mr. Right’ for years and years,” Ginika retorted, snapping her fingers for emphasis.

“I don’t blame you. Snapping those skinny fingers like *nte* ,” Ozioma hissed.

“For real, for real though,” I insisted. “I’m the one telling you, not her. This one sounds like the real deal. Former NFL player and everything.”

This caught Ginika’s attention. “Former NFL? Please, tell me more.”

I smiled as Ozioma told the other two all what she’d told me about Onochie, and I said a silent prayer this wouldn't be like the very many others that had ended just as quickly as they’d started. As she talked, I excused myself so I could check on the other guests. Even though Tomi’s ushers were capable, I still felt the need to make sure everything was progressing well.

Noticing a man who'd accompanied Karibi sitting alone on a table, I walked up to him. "Are you good? Have you been served yet?"

"Oh, I'm good, Ife," he answered, with a wink. "Good, just like you know it."

Too late, I recognised him as Osaze, one of the many flings from the past. Hissing under my breath, I returned to the table with my friends, deciding to allow Tomi's ushers and Isioma's relatives do the hosting. There were way too many landmines for me to risk it any further.

"Well, I'm happy for you," Ginika was saying, when I took the seat I'd just vacated. "And I agree with Ife's suggestion. The sooner you guys see, the sooner this becomes more of reality and less of fiction."

"I don't know why, but I have a good feeling about this one," Ara said, smiling. "And I think it has more to do with how excited you look talking about him, than how minted he sounds," and then looking at me, still smiling. "And from the way a certain gentleman has been looking at you, Ozioma isn't the only one with a love interest."

Turning in the direction of her gaze, I smiled when I saw Diekola watching us from where he stood by the main building.

"Excuse me," I said to them, but with my eyes on the man my entire being was singing for; heart, body, mind and soul.

"Hi," I said, when I got to him, keeping a considerable distance out of respect for Isioma's family and any onlookers, thinking it wouldn't tell well for one of the bride's friends to be openly cavorting with someone from the groom's family.

But he had other plans, as he pulled me closer and kissed me. "Hi to yourself. After two weeks of torture, you don't get to welcome me back with just a 'hi'."

"Diekola!" I protested feebly. "People are watching."

Kissing me again, he released his hold. "That's the only reason why I'm even restraining myself," we stood apart, and he smiled, his eyes a mirror of the longing I had for him. "I hope this ends soon. I've missed you too much."

I wanted to tell him just how much I'd missed him, how I'd been counting the days, hours, minutes and even seconds till his return. But all I could do was smile in response, still not wanting to give too much away.

Sighting someone at the other end of the compound, his eyes lit up. "Come, let me introduce you to someone."

Following him, we walked up to a woman who looked just a few years older than I. Her eyes were on me as we approached and after lighting up upon seeing Diekola, they dimmed as they rested on me.

"Furo, I'd like you to meet someone really special to me," he beamed when we got to her. "You've been on my case to introduce you to a special someone, and now I can finally do that," then looking at me like I was solid gold. "I'd like you to meet Ifedayo, my girlfriend," he squeezed my hand. "Babes, this is Ibifuro, Boma's younger sister."

Hearing that she was his late wife's sister sent my nerves into higher overdrive. I smiled at her but she didn't smile back.

"Ifedayo," she said, with a small nod. "I know you. Aren't you Rahim Sukai's mistress?"

My eyes widened, surprised by the directness. Diekola, in turn, shook his head, confused.

"Or am I lying?" she prodded, a sardonic smile now on her face. "Aren't you Ife? Rahim's babe? Aren't you the one I see him with every year at the Polo Club? I know you *nau* ."

"Furo, please stop this," Diekola cut in. "What the hell are you on about?"

"In fact, from the minute I heard about you and my brother, I went searching for this picture," she said, pulling her phone out of her designer clutch bag. "I saved this picture a while back, because I liked what you were wearing, but isn't this you and Rahim? At Nuhu Sheriff's wedding in Monaco?"

She lifted the phone to me, and my stomach fell when I saw the now infamous picture of me sitting, arm interlinked with Rahim's, at the extravagant wedding ceremony of the son of one of his relatives. In my bespoke, bejewelled dress from *Iconic Invanity* in a bright red that called all

attention to itself, and a large red and white *Stephen Jones* fascinator that stood almost a foot tall, pictures of me from that event had ended up on several society pages, blogs and fashion magazines, and even dubbed one of the top fashion moments of 2017. In the particular picture on Furo's phone, I was leaning in to hear something Rahim was saying, our cheeks touching. There was no other inference to be made from looking at the picture, no other conclusion to be drawn apart from that the couple pictured were lovers.

Diekola took the phone from her, and as his brows furrowed in confusion, I stood straighter, determined not to be broken, not even if I'd been boxed into a corner, not even if my world was already crashing all around me.

"Well, isn't it you?" Furo raised a brow. "Aren't you Rahim's babe?"

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Diekola turn to me, his gaze imploring, begging me to say something, anything, to refute what his former sister-in-law was saying, but I refused to look at him, terrified that if I did, all my resolve would crumble, and I would burst into tears then and there. Instead, still looking at Furo, I squared my shoulders. "Yes. Yes, it's me."

"Ife," Diekola's voice was only a little louder than a whisper.

Furo chuckled as she put her phone away. "When I heard you'd gotten your clutches on my brother, I almost lost my mind. I actually wanted to look for you wherever you were, to give you a dirty slap. But I decided to just be patient, knowing I'd see you here."

Every single defence I'd trained myself to have over the years rose to the fore and I, in turn, smiled back at her. "Diekola is a grown man and, correct me if I'm wrong, hasn't been formally linked to you for over nine years."

That was enough to wipe the smile off her own face, and she took a step forward, but Diekola quickly stood in between us. "Woah! Furo, what do you think you're doing?"

"You better get your stinking, gold digging claws off my brother," she seethed, glaring at me with enough venom to kill.

"Or what? What are you going to do if I don't?" I answered, prompting Diekola to turn to me.

“Ife, stop!”

“Or I’ll make your life a misery in this town,” she snapped back. “Or I’ll have you thrown out of here.”

“Out of where? Here?” I laughed, enjoying taunting her. “Here, where I’m as good as family?”

She shook her head. “If I hadn't already met Isioma, I'd have wondered what kind of girl my cousin is marrying, keeping a filthy, gutter girl like you as a friend. First class hustler! I mean just look at the way you’re dripping in gold, enough gold to feed a small country!”

“Furo, enough!” Diekola commanded, his voice loud enough to attract curious glances.

Hissing, I turned around and walked away, head and shoulders high, not wanting them to see how shaken I was by the confrontation, how crushed I was by the revelation of my secret, how I was dying inside. I retained that stance walking past everyone, walking up the stairs and into the apartment, crumbling only when I’d found the privacy of a toilet.

The cat was finally out of the bag.

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I remained inside, in the inner room, providing help and assistance even where it wasn’t needed. I helped the makeup artist retouch family members in need of a revamp, I helped relatives sort out bags of souvenirs for distribution, I helped count money Isioma’s mothers and other relatives were sprayed, I helped with everything I could, anything to avoid venturing outside again. Not even when Ozioma, Ara and Ginika located me there to convince me to re-join the party did I agree to. Not even the loud noise of merrymaking from downstairs was enough temptation for me to leave my safe alcove. I was determined not to venture out until the groom and every single one of his family members had left…Diekola especially. It was bad enough he now knew what I was really about. The last thing I wanted was to have to face him again.

“Ife, are you still here?” Isioma’s mother exclaimed, walking into the bedroom much later on, to find me there still counting money. “It’s getting

too late to drive all the way to the island *o* ! Or are you sleeping here?”

I smiled at her and stole a glance at the wall clock. She was right. It was past 8pm and indeed getting late.

“It’s fine, Aunty. I can drive,” I answered. “Have Karibi and his family gone?”

“They just left,” she answered, looking at me with concern. “You were here the whole time, you didn't even enjoy the party and all the dancing. You didn't even see *Erelu* digging it down!”

That Karibi’s mother liked a good party was no secret.

“I heard it from here,” I forced myself to laugh, even though laughing was the last thing I wanted to do. “Thank God for a successful event.”

“My dear, thank God *o* !” she said, sitting down in a heap. “I was so worried about having this thing in Isioma’s absence, but we all agreed it was better to get it out of the way, especially as they’re already married.”

I nodded in agreement. “Where’s Hattie?”

“You know that one likes to gist,” she chuckled, her endearment for her daughter’s other mother evident. “She’s there chewing off someone’s ears with stories about how different Nigeria is now from when she used to live here,” then turning to look at me. “Ife, thank you. And not just for today. Thank you for being a good friend. You were there for Isioma when very few were, giving her rides when she didn't have a car, providing a listening ear when she and Karibi were still trying to figure themselves out. Thank you.”

As we embraced, I had to fight off the tears that had been sitting patiently, waiting for the right outlet. “Thank you, Aunty. You’ve been the best mother she could ever have hoped for. God bless you for everything.”

“Ike can drive you home,” she insisted. “Hattie and I are not leaving here till tomorrow. He can take you, so you at least have someone with you tonight.”

I smiled and shook my head. “That won’t be necessary, Aunty. It’s only 8pm. What would you have done if it were 10pm? Send me home with a police escort?”

“ *Nne* , I just might have *o* !”

We bantered for a few more minutes, with Hattie joining us later. After thirty minutes, when I was sure the coast was clear, I grabbed my bags and made my way downstairs.

Alas, it wasn't clear enough.

“Ife!”

I froze as I made to open my car, not believing Diekola was still there. Turning around, I saw him standing a few feet away from my car, looking nowhere near as fresh and composed as he had when he’d arrived earlier in the day.

“I couldn't find you anywhere. I looked for you everywhere in the house,” he said, walking up to me. “So I figured I’d wait for you by your car, because you’d have to leave sometime, right?”

He looked so distraught, so broken, I couldn't bear to look at him. “What do you want?” I asked, turning back in the direction my car.

“Ife, what the hell is going on?” he asked, placing his hand over mine and preventing me from opening the car. “What the hell was that picture? And what on earth was Furo going on about?”

“Maybe you should have asked her, instead of waiting here to ambush me!” I snapped, glaring at him.

But his gaze didn't break. “What she said, what Furo said…”

“All true,” I retorted. “Yes, Rahim Sukai is my sugar daddy. Yes, he’s the one responsible for my lifestyle. My designer clothes, fancy crib, car, all thanks to him. I’m a courtesan, a kept woman, a runs girl…have your pick!”

He recoiled as if he’d been struck, and it took everything in me not to reach for him, not to tell him that was my past and a past I wanted to walk away from. But instead, I stood stoic, my gaze cool and steely, realising all that would be futile now.

“So everything the guys said in Rio…”

“All true. Everything.”

There was a visible clench to his jaw. “So, is that what all this has been about? You and I? Have I been just one of the guys you hook up with in exchange for something?”

“In exchange for what? What could you possibly have for me? The trip to Rio? Please!” I forced myself to laugh. “Compared to the kind of men I usually date, you don't even stack close. I was just using you to while away time. Excuse me,” I said, brushing past to him and entering the car.

This time, he didn't stop me. He just stood there like a statue as I started the ignition and put the car in reverse. He remained there, in the same position, even as I drove away.

It wasn’t until I turned on to the Apapa Oworonshoki expressway that the floodgate of my tears broke, and I wept like a woman bereaved. It did indeed feel like bereavement, a loss of the most beautiful love I’d ever known. I convinced myself it was for the best. We’d only been delaying the inevitable. After the kind of life I’d lived, I’d been a fool to imagine any kind of happy ever after.

By the time I got to Oniru, my eyes were heavy and bloodshot and my head pounding from crying so much. But I wasn't even all cried out. I longed for the comfort of my bed, where I could continue to mourn the relationship that could have been, the love we could have had, and the life we could have built.

So deep was I in my reverie that I was jolted when a figure emerged before my car as I made to drive through the open gates of my compound. I stepped on the brakes just in time to avoid running him over.

“Olumide, are you out of your mind?” I cried, transferring all my anger and aggression to him. “Do you have a death wish?”

“I should be asking you the very same question, Ife,” he said, tapping his wristwatch. “It’s been three weeks.”

I frowned and turned off the ignition of my car, before getting out of the car. “I sent you some money. I sent you money that very night…”

“Six million naira? Ifedayo, were you being serious?” he chuckled, making me wish I had run him over. “I thought that was a little something to

apologise for your bad behaviour and keep me happy till the real money came."

"Real money? What real money, Olumide?" I exclaimed. "Where do you want me to get two hundred million naira from?"

He glared at me, before suddenly reaching forward and grabbing my arm. "Do you take me for a fool? Is it because I've been lying low all these years, accepting the crumbs you throw my way, that you take me for a fool? You think I don't know what your sugar daddy is worth? You think I don't know?"

I struggled to free myself from him, and shook my head in response to the concerned look from the security guard. Any intervention would only make things worse.

"Olumide, please. Let me send you what I have…"

He let go of me abruptly, making me stumble backward. "I'm giving you one more week. One more week, and the whole world gets to see you for the dirty slut you really are."

As I watched him walk away, I realised I'd been wrong when I thought things couldn't go worse that day.

So very wrong.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MY MIND WAS IN OVERDRIVE all night, as I brainstormed how to raise two hundred million naira for Olumide. I realised I'd been naïve to think he'd been bluffing and wouldn't want to put me in harm's way by releasing the video. After that night's encounter, one thing was crystal clear. He was prepared to do whatever it took to get that money.

I contemplated transferring him everything I had, but even with the recent inflow from Rahim, it wasn't even up to half of what he was asking for. And from every indication, nothing short of the full amount would appease him.

I just had to figure out a way to ask Rahim for the money. If I told a valid enough story, he was very likely to give it to me. The only question was, what? For that large an amount, he would want to be involved in whatever it was that was prompting me to ask. If I said I wanted something, he'd offer to buy it for me; if I said I was in trouble, he would insist on 'fixing' the cause of my distress himself. And if the look of his bodyguards was anything to go by, there was a slim chance of Olumide surviving any reprisal from them. Besides, I didn't want Rahim knowing about the video either. I just had to think of another way to get the money from him.

With that resolution, my mind drifted to Diekola, the visual of him standing, crestfallen, on the dusty street, breaking my heart anew. Just as bad as the realisation that what we had was over, was knowing how deeply I'd hurt him…and I hated myself for it. But that had been my only defence mechanism, my only means of protecting myself. Because if I hadn't hurt him, if I'd made the mistake of thinking we could have gotten past him finding out about Rahim, I would have been the one to get hurt in the end.

But he wasn't about to make it easy.

He called me incessantly the next day, over and over again. Looking at the phone as it rang, I was tempted several times to answer it, to tell him I meant none of the things I'd said to him, and to declare my undying love for him. But as much as I wanted to throw all caution to the wind, I couldn't afford to drag him into the hornet's nest that was my life. Not with Olumide's blackmail even more of a reality, hanging over my neck like the noose it was.

With the dawn of a new week, I returned to school, looking forward to the distraction, but he kept on calling. And I wasn't able to bring myself to block his phone number. As much as every call reopened the wound anew, it was the last thing of him I still had. Even if answering the calls was out of the question, seeing his name on the screen of my phone was the only part of him I could still hold on to.

But by Wednesday, they stopped; leaving in their place a hollow void I knew would never be filled.

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Just as I'd done all week, I stayed back in school much longer than I typically would have. In those few hours after the last of the kids, and even teachers, had left, it was my safe refuge, the one place I could run away from the mess that was my life, the one place I didn't have to worry about how to raise almost a quarter of a billion naira from the man who was both the reason I had a luxurious life, and the reason I'd lost a chance at a happy one. Sitting in my class, losing myself in grading classwork and preparing lesson plans, I didn't have to face what was now my reality, until 7pm when I was forced to leave…and thrust right back into it.

Headed to my car that Friday evening, I was deep in thought. It wasn't lost on me that I had less than twenty-four hours until Olumide resurfaced again, and I knew I had to act fast.

"Ife."

I looked up, and my eyes widened in surprise when I saw Diekola. I was awash with both happiness over seeing again…and resentment over the

painful reminder of my loss. I looked away and quickened my pace, not wanting to tarry and prolong any longer our final separation.

“Ife, please wait!” he insisted, chasing after me.

“What do you want, Diekola?” I exclaimed, turning around to face him. “Why are you stalking me?”

“I just want answers. We went from a hundred to zero in a matter of seconds, and my head is still spinning,” he answered, his voice heavy. “I need answers, Ife.”

I looked away, unable to bear seeing the pain in his eyes. “Forget about me, Diekola. Go find yourself someone else and stop looking to me to replace your wife.”

He shook his head. “You’re nothing like Boma.”

It couldn't have hurt more if he’d punched me in the stomach. Hearing him verbalise my deepest, unspoken fear about never measuring up to his late wife, was a low blow. Without another word, I turned around and continued walking to my car.

“Ife, what do I need to do to get your attention?” he called out, still walking after me, himself also agitated. “If it’s money you want, tell me. Let me know how much I have to pay for a few minutes of your time?”

I spun around, incensed, giving him a resounding slap in the face. “Fuck you!”

I turned around to walk away, the tears I’d been fighting with now rushing freely down my face, my body reverberating in my rage. A lot of insults had been thrown my way in my lifetime, but none of them, not one of them, had cut as deep.

Throwing my handbag to the floor, I turned around again and walked back to where he was still standing and shoved him hard in the chest repeatedly. “How dare you! How dare you insult me like that? How dare you?”

He put his arms around me, and I lost all the fight I had. Instead, I dissolved into more tears. He held me as I cried, and as I held him, I felt something I hadn’t felt in a long time. Safe.

Leaving my car in the school park, I returned home with him. And as we lay in his bed, I was the most vulnerable I had ever been, vulnerable, but yet safe. Lying in his arms, it was passionate, but yet tranquil. His gentle hands made feel renewed, as if I was being reborn in my most perfect form. In his embrace, the world stopped still on its axis and time didn't exist. Nothing else mattered. His kisses drew out the pain I'd buried deep in my bones, allowing what was toxic evaporate like morning dew. His love was pure, unselfish, undemanding, and all I felt was an incredible peace.

"For years, I convinced myself it was all his fault," I said, telling him about Olumide, as we lay cradled together in the early hours of morning. "It was his idea, after all. I convinced myself that I did it, dated guys for money, just to please him, to make him happy," I was quiet for a while before continuing. "It wasn't until recently, when a friend pointed out that I could have walked away if I'd wanted to, that I had to accept the truth. I had to admit to myself that I did it because of the kick I got from the power I had over, not only Olumide, but everyone. The kick I got from being able to snap my fingers and have everything I wanted." I shrugged. "I could lie that I did it to take care of my family, but the truth is I haven't seen them in ten years," my voice faltered as the demons I'd been trying to run away from, emerged. "Exactly ten years."

"What happened?"

"When I got into this lifestyle, I hid it from them for as long as I could, but news of my escapades in school eventually got to my older sister in Unilag. She didn't like Olumide, so we already had a strained relationship. Anyway, she confronted me about it, but I was defiant, and this strained our relationship even further."

Memories of the shouting matches between Ibukun and I came to me, more vivid than I'd allowed them in a long time, memories of her calling me a disgrace and threatening to tell our parents what I was getting up to in school. But despite all her threats, she never did.

"When I moved to Lagos after school, I could only keep up for so long the lie that the flat I shared with friends in Dolphin Estate, and the brand new car I drove, came with the job I had as a Youth Corper. My parents weren't stupid, and it didn't take long for them to have questions. Every time I went

home, they would grill me about how I was maintaining such a flashy lifestyle on my meagre NYSC salary. By this time, my younger sister, Ibilola, had also heard rumours of what I got up to, but she was more understanding, and instead only pleaded with me to manage things better, especially considering our mother's ill health."

"Your mother was ill?"

"She was hypertensive," I answered, remembering how, having heard her chant so many times about her high blood pressure, I no longer took her condition seriously. "She also urged me to settle down with one of the men and quit the lifestyle. Like Ibukun, she didn't care for Olumide much. But I couldn't imagine myself doing either; giving up my lifestyle or leaving Olumide."

I didn't realise tears were streaming down my face until I felt them pool on Diekola's chest. I was charting territories I'd left abandoned for years. A big part of me wanted to stop talking, to push the memories back into their box, lock it and throw away the key, this time forever. But I'd already come this far. There was no going back. Not anymore.

"After a while, I grew tired of hiding it, even from my parents. I grew tired of lying and no longer tried to conceal anything. They too had started hearing the whispers, and it was causing them, my mother especially, a lot of distress. She'd always been religious, but she threw herself headlong into it, with my deliverance as her major prayer point. She even left the Church we'd worshiped in since before I was born, for another one, one where she would camp for days on end, from one prayer vigil to the other," inhaling deeply, I willed myself to continue talking. "On my last visit home, my parents and I had yet another argument. I'd been photographed by a newspaper, in the company of a much older man at a State House function, and even my normally mild-mannered father was furious, telling me my promiscuity was now in black and white for all the world to see. Things got very heated, so heated that Ibukun and I almost came to blows. It was ugly, and I left the house vowing never to return."

My voice broke as sobs took over my words, my heart broken again over what happened a decade before.

“Later that week, my mother slumped in Church. She had a massive stroke and died before she got to the hospital. She died on my twenty-fifth birthday,” I forced myself to continue, through my tears. “I don’t even remember much from when my father called to tell me. One minute, I was answering my phone, still intending to give him attitude because of what happened the last time we saw, and the next minute, I was wailing on the floor, surrounded by my flatmates at the time,” I shook my head. “I knew it was my fault…that she died because of me. If it hadn’t been for me, she…” my voice got caught in my throat and I had to take a deep breath to steady myself. “I was filled with so much guilt, I couldn't face them. I couldn't face my dad or my sisters, so I didn't go home. I didn't go home for the funeral. I didn't go for my mother’s funeral.”

He allowed me cry, and as he held me, I found the release I’d been longing for, for so long.

“I stayed away from them. I changed my phone number and did everything I could to keep as far away from them as possible,” I managed to continue. “I stayed away when Ibukun married Elvis, her long time boyfriend, about a year later. But a few years later, when I heard Ibilola was getting married, I credited her account with a nice seven-figure amount. But the money was paid back into my account that same day, proof that even my only ally in the house had turned against me. That was when I accepted that I’d lost my family, and was now all alone in the world.”

“It’s been ten years. Have you considered maybe going back to see your dad?”

I shook my head. “He wouldn't want to see me. I know he blames me for her death. I know they all do.”

“I’m sure they don't, Ife…”

I shook my head, not wanting to say any more, the magnitude of what I’d already shared shocking even to me. But as shocking as it was, it was cathartic, as if a mountain-weight load had been lifted off my chest. “I haven’t talked about this with anyone,” I finally said.

He squeezed my shoulder in silent gratitude that I’d chosen him to tell.

“I was on the verge of asking Boma for a divorce before she got her diagnosis,” he said, breaking into the congenial silence in which we lay. “To the outside world, we were the perfect couple, when in truth, we were struggling. She was a very passionate person, passionate about everything she did, and even though that was why I fell in love with her, her obsession, first with the business and then fertility treatments when we were unable to conceive, soon drove a solid wedge between us. It got to a point where we were fighting constantly and the marriage was draining us both.”

He sighed as if also relieved by shedding that load of information, and it was my turn to hold him in solidarity.

“We’d just had our fifth failed IVF cycle, and I was mentally spent. As usual, she wanted us to keep going, but I just needed a break. I needed a break from the hospitals, the doctors, having to give her shots, and all the dashed expectations. She refused to consider adoption, and was instead adamant about us going on for yet another cycle. She called me selfish for wanting to stop, and we said a lot of horrible things to each other. That night, I moved out of our bedroom and had even started making plans to move back to the States,” he smiled and shook his head. “Boma being Boma, she decided to go ahead with the cycle without me, determined to use what was left of my frozen semen sample, or maybe even get a donor if she had to. That was when they discovered the mass on her ovary.”

“Goodness.”

“The evening she walked into the guest room, I’d already booked my flight for the following weekend. I’d even started talking with my lawyer about divorce options,” his voice trailed off and I knew that he too was circling a territory hitherto uncharted. “She walked into the guest room that evening, and I was already bracing myself for yet another argument. But when I saw the look on her face, I knew something was horribly wrong. She’d been diagnosed with Stage Four ovarian cancer.”

Tears pooled in his eyes, and as a few fell down his face, I wiped them away with my hand, understanding very well his guilt, his pain.

“I felt guilty about not even being there with her when she got her diagnosis, for allowing the stress of what we’d been going through tear us

apart. So, I gave everything up, all my plans to leave, and stayed to care for her. She suffered greatly. She went through very intense, very painful treatment, which didn't do much good, and when she died, I felt like I'd let her down. She didn't fight the disease as passionately as I knew she could have, and I felt like she didn't fight because of how things were between us when she got the diagnosis," he sighed again. "After she died, rather than leave immediately, I stayed back for years, trying to continue the business. I refused to date other women, and instead chose to immortalise her in my heart, to make up for the times I hadn't. But years later, when my friend from college let me know there was an opening at NYU, I decided it was time to put myself first for a change. That was when I left the country."

We lay in silence, just as the night skies changed from jet black to the soft dove grey of dawn.

"Why me?" I asked. "Why did you choose me?"

He smiled and was silent for a while. "I was initially drawn to how super attractive you are. How wildly opinionated, hyper-confident, strong and secure you are," he answered. "But the real pull came from the very moment you smiled. Right from that first time in Bora Bora, even despite all the walls you hid behind, every time you smiled at me, I could see the beautiful and vulnerable woman that lay on the inside. That's the woman who keeps on drawing me with a force greater than the force of gravity."

It was truly greater than the force of gravity, especially if he kept returning to me, despite everything he'd seen and heard to be true.

"Why me, Ifedayo?" he threw the question back at me. "Why did you pick me?"

I looked at him, and knew there could be no more holding back. "You're the first person to see me… *really* see me. You've never held back, you've cared for me unconditionally, even when I didn't deserve it…don't deserve it. You've blindly defended me, despite everything you now know. You see my vices, things others run from, and you find them beautiful instead. Nobody has ever done that for me," I hesitated for a few seconds, before continuing. "You're the first person I have truly loved."

He cupped my face with both hands. “I love you, Ifedayo. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone,” he paused and I held my breath, worried about what would follow. “Yes, you have a past, but what we have is strong enough for it not to matter. It doesn’t matter to me, Ife,” he hesitated, but this time, I knew what was coming next. “But it has to be on a completely fresh slate. Total honesty from now on, okay? Deal?”

I bit my lower lip, thinking about the mess I was in with Olumide, and how I still needed Rahim to fix it. As much as I wanted to share everything with Diekola, the thought of him even knowing about that video made me want to throw up. He’d already forgiven and overlooked enough.

“Deal,” I answered.

“Good,” he said, a smile forming on his face. “Let truth be our water…and love our sunshine.”

I giggled. “You’re so cheesy!”

He laughed along with me, but his laughter soon faded. “That man Furo talked about…the older gentleman. Whatever it is with him has to end. I need you out of his house and completely out of that situation.”

“I will, but I need time,” I answered, and meaning every word. “He doesn't live in the country so you don't have to worry about him being near me. I need at least a month to sort myself out.” And get the money I needed to pay Olumide.

“I can get you a place today,” he insisted. “Or you could even move here.”

“That’s very generous of you, but no to both offers,” I answered, leaning in to kiss him. “It’s not yet the right time for me to move in with you.”

“So you agree that one day, it’ll be the right time?” he goaded, returning my kisses with renewed desire. “One day, you’ll be mine for good?”

Taking advantage of his distraction, I pulled him closer and soon, all talk about Rahim was forgotten.

For the time being.

I knew I had to act fast. I had to quickly get the money, pay Olumide and set about deleting the pair of them from my life. I couldn't afford to lose

Diekola again.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE SOON DRIFTED off to sleep, but I remained awake, watching him as he slept, unable to believe that, despite everything I'd done, despite how I'd lived my life, God had still thought me worthy of so wonderful a gift. Watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest, the eagle emblazoned on it seemingly taking flight with each motion, marvelling at the beauty that started from his soul before radiating outward to create his final form, if all the events and experiences in my life had been designed such that it would lead me right there beside him, then it had all been worth it. With him, I had finally found my peace. In a matter of days, the issue with Olumide would be over, I'd rid myself of Rahim, and my joy would finally be complete.

Well, almost.

Checking the time on my phone, it was 6am, but sleep had still not come for me. Figuring a shower would do me good, I rose to my feet and walked the few paces to the bathroom. Standing beneath the shower faucet, I closed my eyes beneath the cascade of warm water, but no matter how hard I tried to block it out, the need to close the final loop in my circle weighed so heavily on my heart, it was almost suffocating me.

It was time.

Out of the shower, I found some underwear I'd left behind, and slipped into the pair of jeans I'd worn the previous day and one of Diekola's tee-shirts. Another glance at the bed showed he was still fast asleep, and it was truly just as well. This was something I had to do myself.

Summoning a taxi on the app on my phone, I made my way out of the house and into the vehicle when it arrived, beginning a trip to a place I hadn't been in ten years.

Home.

The roads were clear but my nerves, which I'd kept contained since leaving Diekola's house, were now a raging mess. I snapped and unsnapped my fingers as we approached Ojodu, tempted to ask the driver to turn around and take me back where he'd picked me. But my anxiety didn't even allow me open my mouth, and all too soon, we were in Dopemu, on Oniwaya Road, approaching the turn-off that led to my parents' house.

From the beginning of the street, I could see the house, even though it was much further down. It wore a brighter shade of the green paint my mother had chosen for it, and as we got closer, I saw the figure of a very familiar person sitting on the balcony and reading a newspaper, just as he'd always done. As the car approached the house, he looked up and rather than look away, his eyes remained on the vehicle, almost expectant.

As the cab came to a stop in front of the house, I inhaled deeply to calm myself, clenching my fists to stop the shake in my hands.

"Can I end the ride, Ma?" the cab driver asked.

I wanted to scream a vehement 'No!'. I wanted to ask him to wait, as I was sure it would be a very, very short trip. But instead, I nodded. "Yes, you can end it."

With one final deep intake of breath, I got out of the car and looked up at the balcony. As we made eye contact, my father and I, he rose from his cane chair.

"Ifedayo!" he called out, a wide smile on his face. "Ayinke! Ànìké! Àshàké! Ajoke! Apeke! Ayoka!"

Tears filled my eyes hearing my *oriki* names, the names my father had used to praise me from the very day I was born. I dropped to my knees and bowed my head, too choked up to even utter the words of greeting I intended. Moments later, a hand on my shoulder made me look up and I was soon looking into the face of the very first man I fell in love with, into the kind eyes of the one who had always loved me unconditionally.

"Ifedayo," he said, smiling at me. "Welcome home."

I shot to my feet and flung my arms around him, crying over the lost years, over the way I'd hurt him, over the pain I'd caused the entire family…but

also over the comfort and familiarity of holding him again. Apart from a few more lines on his face, he looked and smelled just the same. It was bitter sweet, but a long time coming.

The Prodigal Daughter had found her way back home.

–

“You look well,” I said, sitting beside him on a sofa in the living room, my hand in his. Since leading me into the house, he’d refused to let go of me, like he was scared if he did, I would disappear again. “The entire place looks good.”

“Your sisters have been taking good care of me,” he smiled, his eyes crinkling the way they always had.

Somehow, hearing this stung. Looking around the living room, from the newly reupholstered sofa set, to the plush carpeting, to the large, wall mounted television, they were taking very good care of him indeed.

“I see Ibilola’s hand everywhere,” I said, smiling at the bright patchwork throw pillows and large potted plants with flowered cacti. My younger sister had always had a flair for the arts and home décor.

The old man brightened. “Everywhere, I tell you. Didn’t you see your mother’s garden downstairs? Didn't you see what ‘Lola has done with what used to be an arid piece of ground?”

My shoulders fell. Yes, I had noticed the brightly-coloured flowers all over the compound, but hearing him refer to my mother brought back to the fore the guilt I’d been grappling with for so long.

He squeezed my hand, and looking at him, in his eyes shone compassion. “We all miss her. I can only imagine what it was like for you, mourning her all by yourself.”

“It was my fault she died,” I sobbed. “The argument the Sunday before, all the worrying and stress I caused her.”

“Ifedayo, don’t talk nonsense!” he exclaimed, tipping up my chin. “Is that why you stayed away all this time? Is that what you’ve made yourself believe for so many years? Your mother died because she didn't prioritise her health. She died because she chose to eat the words from her Pastor

over her medication. She died because her blood pressure and blood sugar were out of control and her death, though devastating, was no surprise. She was already a ticking time bomb. She died because she got carried away by false prophesies and promises," he shook his head. "Not because of you."

I stared back at him, no longer sure what to believe. "But Ibukun and Ibilola…"

"Were both angry when you didn't even show up," he answered, his own eyes glistening. "And so was I. You not being there was the real heartbreak. We lost two people that day, not just one."

I covered my face as my whole body was racked by my sobs, hating myself anew for all that my foolishness had caused me. He enveloped me in his arms, holding me as I cried, reminding me that long before I'd found my refuge and safe place in Diekola, I'd already had it with my father.

"Lola has kept me updated about you," he said proudly, reaching for his phone and scrolling through until he found a folder. The folder was named *Ifedayo* . "Every time she sees a picture of you online, she saves it and sends to me," he said, scrolling though rows and rows of images of me, some of them dating several years prior. Even the infamous picture of Rahim and I at the Monaco wedding was there. "I print most of them and save them in an album. I'll show that to you before you leave."

I did nothing to stop the tears that were again rolling freely down my face, seeing how closely to his heart he had kept me.

"What about Ibukun?" I asked, not having the courage to complete my question, which was whether she also talked about me.

"Ibukun and Elvis live in Dublin now," he answered, oblivious of why I was really asking. "They have a son, Michael. Here's his picture."

He showed me the picture of a boy who looked to be about eight years old, and was in the process of showing me more pictures when the sound of the gate opening, followed closely by what appeared to be the voices of children, made us both look up.

"Ah, they're here," my father said, beaming.

I didn't get the chance to ask whom, before two girls burst into the room, closely followed by a young man carrying large bags.

“Essy girl! Osa girl!” I watched my father call out as the girls jumped into his arms, feeling the strongest sense of déjà vu ever. Apart from the fact it was the way he’d always punctuated our names when we were younger, calling us *Ibu-Girl* , *Ife-Girl* and *Lolly-Girl* , the adorable girls, who looked to be about six and four years old, with their chubby cheeks, tilted eyes and full, black hair barely contained by their ponytails, where the spitting image of my sister, Ibilola.

“Hey, hey! One by one,” the young man shouted. “You girls are getting too big for Grandpa to carry at the same time.”

“Nonsense! I’ll still carry them like this till their wedding day!” my father laughed, before turning to me. “Girls, this is your Aunty Ifedayo.”

The older girls’ eyes lit up. “Is she the Aunty Ife Mommy always prays for?”

I melted completely upon hearing this, and had to bite my lower lip to fight back any more tears, not wanting to frighten the young girls with the imagery of a strange woman weeping in front of them.

The young man looked uncomfortable. “Esosa, what you should do is greet the way polite children greet their elders.”

Esosa pouted, upset by the admonition, before turning again to me. “Good morning, Ma.”

“Good morning, Ma,” the younger girl echoed her sister.

“Yes, you are very correct, Esy-Girl,” my father chimed. “This is your Aunty Ife that we all pray for. And God has finally heard our prayers,” then turning to me. “Ifedayo, meet the beautiful Esosa, and the adorable Osasu, Lola’s children,” then looking at the young man. “And this is the Osagie the great, the powerful man amongst three beautiful women.”

Osagie smiled at me, and reached to shake my hand. “I’m glad to finally meet you, Ife.”

“I’m glad to meet you too,” shaking the hand of the kind-faced man my sister had married. I turned to the girls and smiled at them, praying the tears

that were still threatening wouldn't find their way out. “I’m glad to meet you as well. You’re both very beautiful.”

“Look what I made you, Grandpa,” Osasu said, her attention already shifted, as she handed him the piece of cardboard in her hand, one which had a network of wide straws crisscrossing it. “It’s called a marble run,” she continued, gesturing animatedly. “You put a marble at the top and it goes all the way down. You still have the marbles from last time?”

“Of course I still have the marbles!” my father answered with as much seriousness as if he was asked if he still had custody of State secrets.

“You like arts, like your mommy,” I said, smiling at her.

“They both do,” my father beamed, pointing at the mantelpiece, which I now saw had paintings, coloured rocks, and paper dolls, clearly made by the little girls. “Okay, go and join Agnes in your playroom. She’s been waiting for you.”

The girls seemed excited about the Agnes person, and quickly hopped off their Grandfather’s laps, squealing as they ran out of the room.

“Agnes helps watch them when their mother is out of town,” my father explained.

“Is she out of town often?” I directed this question at Osagie.

“She does a lot of travelling with her job,” he shrugged. “She left for Yenagoa this morning, but she’ll be back by Tuesday,” as if sensing my next question, he smiled. “She’s a Compliance Officer with *Point Bank* .”

I nodded, taking it in. The last time I saw her, she was just fresh out of school and about to start her Youth Service. It was yet another reminder of how much time had passed.

“Let me go and make sure those girls don’t bully Agnes into giving them all the sweets I got them for the weekend,” my father said, rising to his feet and walking out of the room. Somehow, I had a feeling it was more to give Osagie and I privacy to talk.

“Ibilola talks about you all the time,” Osagie said, smiling. “I’ve probably heard about every shenanigan you guys got up to as kids.”

I could only manage a weak smile in response.

“Thank you for the contribution to our wedding,” he went on. “I was overjoyed when she told me how much you’d sent her.”

“But she returned it, didn't she?”

His smile waned. “My jaw dropped to the floor when she told me she’d sent it back. That money would have covered pretty much everything we needed for the wedding. But she felt strongly about it, so…” he concluded with a shrug.

I nodded in understanding.

“But she misses you. She misses you a lot,” he said, compassion in his eyes. “I see it whenever she talks about you to the girls, or prays for you every single night,” his smile returned. “She’s going to be so happy when I tell her you were here.”

A part of me wanted to ask him to call her, to ring her up so I could speak with her, but as he didn't offer, I decided it was best not to rush things. He probably knew she wasn't ready for that and, to be honest, I didn't think I was either.

We made small talk for the rest of the morning, with my father joining us later. And later on when he left for his shift at the General Hospital, where he worked as a Pediatrician, he embraced me.

“Welcome home, Ife!” he said.

Holding him, I closed my eyes, imagining he was doing it, welcoming me back home, not only for Ibilola, his wife, but also Ibukun, and even our late mother.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

–

“I wish you’d let me go with you,” Diekola said as we sat on the rocking cane chair on his patio, his hand over my shoulder as my head lay rested on his, later that evening. “I was so worried when I woke up and you weren’t there.”

“It was something I had to do alone,” I answered, before smiling up at him. “But you’ll definitely come with me next time. I’d really love you to meet my Dad.”

He smiled and kissed the bridge of my nose. “I like the sound of that.”

Still smiling, I nestled myself closer to him and returned my gaze to the picturesque view of the Lagos lagoon. Leaving my father’s house had been bittersweet. On the one hand, I wanted to remain there forever, listening to the man fill me in on everything I’d missed in the last decade while also reminiscing about years gone by, but on the other hand, I’d been desperate for a chance to digest everything that had unfolded that day…alone. The visit had gone so much better than I’d imagined, and I was looking forward to rebuilding a relationship with him…and my sisters too, if I was lucky enough. All in all, I felt blessed and content.

But there was also the issue of Olumide’s money, and with it being Saturday evening, it was already a whole week after his last ultimatum.

“Do you really have to go home tonight?” Diekola asked, nuzzling his face in my hair. “We could always send someone over to your place to get more clothes, if that’s what you’re worried about. I already had Fatai retrieve your car from your school this morning. He took it to your place because you won’t be needing it while you’re here.”

As comfortable as I was in Diekola’s company, I had to go home to start the process of working on Rahim for the money.

“I’ll be back tomorrow evening, don't worry.”

“And you’ll bring enough with you for more than a few days?” he prodded.

“I’ll bring enough for as long as you want me here.”

“I guess that would be enough for forever and a day then.”

I laughed. “You’re so cheesy!”

As our laughter punctuated the silence of the evening, I too wished I didn't have to return to my apartment. But it was what I needed to do to clear out all the skeletons from my cupboard.

–

“Here we are,” Diekola said, as he pulled up opposite my building the next day. “I’ll be here to pick you up at 3:59pm.”

I giggled as I kissed him on the cheek. His enthusiasm for me never got old. “And I’ll be eagerly waiting.”

Getting out of the car, I waved at him before crossing the road to my building. Once in front of my gate, I turned to wave at him again, which is why I didn't see Olumide until it was too late.

“You must really take me for a fool, Ifedayo,” he growled, grabbing me by the arm and startling me. “Is it because I’ve given you so much time, you think you can ignore me?”

“Olumide, please!” I said, gently trying to free my arm from his grip without causing a scene. But casting a look towards Dikeola’s car, I saw it was too late for that, as he was already out of it and storming across the road towards us.

“Will you get your hands off her!” he yelled, shoving Olumide so hard, he fell to the floor.

But his intervention was the very last thing I needed.

“Diekola, please,” I said, placing both hands on his chest. “Don't worry, I have this under control.”

“Is this the Olumide guy?” he asked, still glaring at his rival. “Is he the one?”

Once on his feet, Olumide rushed towards Diekola, who in turn moved out of the way, sending him stumbling face forward and falling mere inches from the busy road. Pulling him up, with one hand holding him by the collar, Diekola punched him hard across the face several times.

“Don't you ever let me see you around her again!” he yelled, throwing him back to the floor, his own chest heaving in his rage. “I’ve heard all about you and you should count yourself lucky you’re leaving this place still breathing. Now get out of here before I change my mind.”

Olumide scrambled to his feet, his nose bleeding but with a wry smile on his face. “Ifedayo, is this your new Chairman?” he asked, chuckling. “Is this the same guy I saw the last time? On your birthday?”

“Olumide…” I said, walking towards him, before turning back to Diekola. “Diekola, please I’ll handle it. He’ll go, I promise you. Just give me a minute to talk to him. Please!”

Diekola looked from me to Olumide and back to me. “Okay. I’ll give you five minutes to dismiss him,” then turning back to Olumide. “I’ll be over there watching, so don't get any funny ideas. Any wrong move from you, and I’ll break every bone in that little body of yours.”

Olumide chuckled as Diekola walked away, his laughter at odds with his bloodied face. “Wow! I have to give it to you, Ife. You know how to keep us foolish men in line. That one probably has a wife waiting for him at home.”

“Olumide, please. You’ll get your money. Just give me a few more days.”

“You’re a fool to open your mouth to say that to me,” he snapped, all humour gone. “After giving me the run around for a month? After standing back and allowing your boyfriend do this to me?” he spat out a mouthful of blood. “Sure, you can have a few more days…but the stakes just got higher. Four hundred million naira or your video goes out. If your bulldog boyfriend is anything to go by, you have more than enough chairmen you can raise the money from.”

“Olumide, please. Please!” I pleaded. “I’ll raise the two hundred…”

He shook his head, his smile having returned. “Four hundred million, Ife. Not a kobo less,” then with an exaggerated bow. “I’ll leave you to your Romeo now. Until next time.”

Dismayed, I watched him walk away. There I was, still struggling with how to raise money from Rahim, only for the amount to be doubled. How on earth was I supposed to manage that now?

“Are you okay?” came Diekola’s voice from behind me. “What was that about?”

I forced a smile on my face. “He’s just struggling to accept that it’s really over between us. He’s been like this since I ended our relationship, even before my Bora Bora trip.”

He nodded, as if in understanding. “Not surprising. I know the feeling well.”

“Thank God you never have to feel that way ever again,” I said, hugging him. “Well, for the second time, goodnight my love. Till tomorrow.”

He didn't let go of me, forcing me to look up at him. “I want to come up, Ife.”

Our eyes held as we stood out on that busy street. In his, I saw a yearning to tarnish the love den I had with Rahim, effectively knocking him off any pedestal that still remained. I wanted to refuse, to convince him to wait the less than twenty hours till our next meeting, but I found myself also wanting him there with me, in the very apartment I’d never entertained any other man in. And it wasn't just to prove to him my commitment both to him and to leaving Rahim…it was also for me. Somehow, it was a demonstration of the fact that, very soon, I would soon be free.

Taking him by the hand, we walked into the compound and into the building. We rode the elevator to my floor and stepping out of it, I walked ahead until I got to my door. Opening it, I turned to him and held my hand out for his, inviting him not only into the apartment, but also to break the last barrier that still remained between us.

Once in the house, he reached for me and as we kissed, it was with more intensity, more demand than there had ever been before, his touch electrifying every nerve in my body. Lifting me off my feet, he carried me across the living room and down the hallway, correctly guessing that the door at the end led to my bedroom. I was tugging at his shirt even before he placed me on the bed, and before long we were as naked as the day we were born, an intoxicated dance of limbs, loving each other with not only our bodies, but our eyes as well, our souls mingling in the quiet moments between passion and stillness, igniting the bedroom in a way it never had been in the seven years I’d lived there.

It was magic.

–

“He didn't spare any expense with this place,” Diekola remarked, as we lay awake the next morning. “Everything here is pretty exquisite.”

“And you can tell this even though you’ve only seen the four walls of this bedroom,” I teased.

“From this bedroom alone, I can tell,” he said. “The bed, the lights, the fittings, even the sheets, everything is very luxurious,” he was quiet for a few seconds before continuing. “I also know I need you out of here like yesterday, Ife. How much longer do you plan to remain here?”

I stiffened, thinking how I still hadn’t engaged Rahim for the money. But given Olumide’s new ultimatum, the sooner I did, the better.

“One month tops,” I answered. “I just need to sort myself out.”

“Okay,” he answered, after another lengthy pause. “So, not a day beyond August 30, right?”

“Not a day beyond.”

He nodded and sat up. “Okay, let’s get out of here. This place is beginning to give me the creeps.”

“Not to mention you left your car out on the street all night,” I giggled, also sitting up.

“Not to mention that!” he laughed along. “Let’s hope we at least have a set of wheels to take us back home.”

“Us?”

He leaned to kiss me. “You, young lady, are coming back with me. No arguments, no excuses.”

I threw my hands up in mock surrender. “Yes, Sir.”

As I packed my things into a bag, it niggled that I still hadn’t reached out to Rahim but I shook it off, telling myself I’d find time to do it during the week. Besides, I needed time to plan the best way to get the money from him. Generous though he was, he also was no fool.

Walking behind him as he helped carry my two heavy bags, I pushed Olumide and Rahim to the back of my mind, focusing instead on the euphoria I felt at the prospect of spending time with the man I loved more than anything else.

Every other thing would take care of itself.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RETURNING TO Diekola's place was just what I needed, the perfect sanctuary for me to take refuge from all the ugliness surrounding Olumide's blackmail. And as one day faded into another, the less I prioritised the need to find a solution to the predicament I was in. How could I have thought about Olumide or Rahim when I was so blissfully happy?

I fell in love with the routine of waking up in Diekola's arms, of the sweet nothings we said to each other in those early hours of morning, of preparing for our respective days together, of heading back there after school and prepping both myself and the home we now shared in anticipation of his own return, of talking about our respective days as we ate dinner together, of retiring to bed together and giving in to passion more intense than the day preceding it, of falling asleep in his arms. Just as I fell deeper in love with him, I fell in love with the predictability of our routine, of finally being able to live as a couple. And I wanted it to be that way forever.

But the universe had other plans.

After dinner on Thursday morning, I was reclined in the living room watching TV as Diekola sat in his study responding to emails, when my phone rang. My eyes widened when I saw the name on my screen. It was Rahim.

Casting a nervous glance in the direction of the study, I rose to my feet and walked out on to the patio, tip toeing so as not to attract Diekola's attention.

"Ife, my Princess," came Rahim's mellow voice. "I'm so sorry for being incommunicado these last few days. I've been here in Kuala Lumpur, meeting with top officials of PETRONAS regarding some of their partnerships with some indigenous oil companies. Remember I told you about it?"

“Um, no,” I answered, casting another worried glance into the house. “You said you had a series of meetings scheduled for the States next month.”

He sighed. “Yes, those are still happening as planned. From here, I head straight to Washington DC, for another crazy few weeks.”

I forced a smile, trying to find whatever words I ordinarily would have said to make him feel better. But my head was suddenly blank. All I wanted to do was ask him what I’d been dilly-dallying about, what I desperately needed to solve my current predicament.

“Rahim,” I said, unable to use any of my usual terms of endearment. “I have a bit of a personal issue. Something…” I hesitated, not wanting to use them as an excuse, but realising they were the only ones he couldn't investigate, considering he knew nothing about them. “Something involving my family.”

“Oh? It sounds serious. You’ve never spoken about them before,” he remarked.

I cleared my throat, willing myself to continue. “It is. I…I hate to ask, but I need your help.”

“You know I’ll do anything for you, my darling. Why don’t I get my agent to book you on the next flight here, so we can talk better?”

“No!” I exclaimed, louder than I ought to have. Looking around again, I cleared my throat. “I mean, I’d have loved to but I can’t get time off now. We’re halfway into the term.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” he answered, sounding regretful. “And I’m not in Lagos until early September, at the earliest.”

“I could…we could discuss it over the phone?” I suggested, praying he would not only agree but also bite the entire bait.

“I guess that’s our only option,” he answered. “It’s very late over here, almost 1am. I’m also busy all of tomorrow. How about we talk maybe on Sunday evening?”

I scanned my brain, checking if there were any conflicts. Despite my earlier reservations, I’d agreed to accompany Diekola for a party at his older sister’s house to celebrate her husband’s birthday, but thankfully, that was

scheduled for Saturday. Sunday was free. I just had to find a way to stall Olumide if he contacted me before then.

“Sunday is perfect,” I answered, just as I saw Diekola walk back to the living room from the study. “Let me let you go,” I said quickly, desperate to be off the phone as quickly as I could. “Take care of yourself.”

I terminated the call even before he had the chance to say anything in response, and walked back into the living room, a smile on my face.

“I was wondering where you were,” Diekola remarked.

“Bad service,” I answered. “I got a call from a friend but couldn't hear a word she was saying.”

He didn't question me further and as he sat to join me watch *Outlander* , the series I was watching on Netflix, I said a silent prayer for Rahim to agree to give me the money on Sunday. The sooner I could close the chapter of that dreadful video, the better.

–

Getting dressed for the party on Saturday, I had golf-ball sized knots in my stomach, apprehensive about not just venturing out, but meeting his family no less. Since our reunion, we’d remained in our own little cocoon, in our own little bubble away from the outside world. Even though he was now aware of my reputation, the encounter with Furo was still too fresh. The mere possibility of another such encounter gave me goose bumps…and not the good kind.

“Baby, my sister isn’t anything like that,” he assured me. “Apart from the fact she’s far removed from any form of gossip, she’ll be too excited that I’ve finally moved on, to even be bothered with anything else.”

“And the other people who’ll be there?”

“It’s just a small get-together for Gbenga’s birthday. He’s turning fifty-three, so there won’t be any pomp or pageantry. Just close family and friends having a good time, I promise.”

Inhaling deeply, I set aside my reservations and set about making sure I looked as beautiful as I could manage. His assurances aside, I couldn't run

away from people forever, especially as I was hopeful of being in his life permanently.

Sitting in the back seat of his car as we were driven to his sister's house in Victoria Garden City, he squeezed my hand, sending me the reassurance he knew I still needed. Grateful, I squeezed back, drawing strength from him. With him on my side, I didn't need anything else.

We were there in thirty minutes, and walking into the compound, I held on to his hand even tighter. With several small tables spread out on the spacious lawn, there were more people than he'd said there would be. And all eyes were now on us.

"I'm sure they're all asking themselves 'Who is that girl and why is he with her?'" I said to him, trying not to betray that my heart was racing a mile a minute.

"Well, if they ask me, I'll tell them 'Her name is Ife…and because she said yes!'"

This made me smile. "Isn't that right out of a movie, Diekola Holloway? You're so cheesy!"

He raised my hand to his lips. "And you love me that way."

"Diekola!" called out a woman who was walking across the lawn to us. "I'm so glad you're here," then looking at me, her dimpled smile widened. "You brought a date?"

"Hello, darling," he said, planting a kiss on both her cheeks, before turning to me, beaming. "And she's more than a date. Derin, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Ifedayo."

The petite woman with whom he shared the same facial bone structure, smiled even wider, her happiness so evident it looked like she would burst any minute. "I've been waiting so long for this day," and then without any warning, pulled me into an embrace. "I'm delighted to meet you, Ifedayo!"

I hugged her back, relieved.

"Ife, this is Derin, my older sister," he smiled at a man approaching us. "And Gbenga, her husband."

“This is Ifedayo, Diekola’s girlfriend,” Derin announced to Gbenga, still grinning from ear to ear.

Gbenga’s brows shot up and his own wide smile was evident, even through his thick salt and pepper beard. “Wow! Really? This is the best birthday present ever!”

“And she’s so beautiful!” Derin remarked, before turning to me and repeating herself. “You’re so beautiful, Ifedayo.”

“You can call me Ife,” I said, feeling uncharacteristically shy. I wasn't a stranger to compliments and usually knew how to receive them well. But in the company of the family of the man I loved, I was desperate to make a good impression. In a purple jumpsuit with a halter neckline, I’d chosen a look that was decent but still stylish, and it was clearly paying off.

“Happy birthday, man,” Diekola said, handing Gbenga the bottle of wine we’d picked up on the way.

“Thanks. You know what I like!” Gbenga smiled. “Come into the house. Dipo and Joke are already inside. They got here a few minutes before you did.”

Even though meeting his sister and her husband had gone better than anything I could ever have predicted, I still held on to Diekola’s hand like my life depended on it, scared what venturing into the house would hold.

As soon as we walked in, a guy who could have passed for his twin, albeit a slightly heavier version and with a fuller head of hair, walked up to us. I stood back as they embraced and exchanged pleasantries.

“Dipo, this is my girlfriend, Ifedayo,” he introduced. “Baby, this is my younger brother, Dipo.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, shaking his hand, feeling more confident.

“Believe me, the pleasure is all mine!” Dipo beamed, shaking my hand enthusiastically. “You look so familiar though. I can’t quite figure out where I’ve seen your face before.”

The smile on my face waned and I lowered my eyes, not sure how best to answer. Luckily, we were interrupted as a heavily pregnant woman joined us.

“Diekola, what is this I’m hearing about you coming with a girlfriend?” she exclaimed, hugging him even as her eyes remained on me.

Dipo put an arm around the woman I figured was his wife. “Live oh! Diekola has finally gotten himself a girlfriend. To God be the glory!”

“Idiot!” Diekola chuckled. “It’s so good to see you, Joke. You look like you’re cooking my little niece nicely.”

“Your little niece is dealing with me!” she exclaimed. “Her brothers didn't put me through torture like this when I was carrying them *o* !”

“Well, she’s clearly high maintenance, just like her momma,” Dipo chuckled, dodging a playful punch from his wife.

“Anyway, Joke, let me officially introduce you to Ifedayo. Baby, this is my beloved sister-in-law, Joke.”

Joke’s brows furrowed as we shook hands. “You look so familiar.”

“I know, right!” her husband exclaimed. “I was just saying the exact thing before you got here.”

“Are you an actress or some other kind of celebrity? I think I’ve seen you in a magazine, or on Instagram or something like that.” Joke asked.

“She’s just a beautiful woman that happens to get her picture taken everywhere she goes,” Diekola answered, coming to my rescue. “To answer your question, she teaches at Saint Barts, so, no, she’s not an actress or celebrity. Just a good-looking woman who gets noticed.”

Joke nodded, even as her brows remained furrowed, clearly still trying to jog her memory.

“Can we go sit down? I’m getting hungry,” I whispered to Diekola, even though food was the last thing on my mind. I wanted to leave the presence of his brother and sister-in-law, before they figured out just exactly where they’d seen my face.

He nodded, and after a few more pleasantries, led me to a vacant spot on the sofa. It was immediately clear I wouldn't have his attention all to myself, as one by one, people kept walking up to us to chat. He was clearly well liked even there, and it wasn’t surprising. He introduced me to everyone who

came by, and I soon started to relax when I realised not one of them had given me the same condescending, judgemental look I'd come to expect from that kind of crowd.

We'd been there about an hour and I'd started getting comfortable, comfortable enough not to mind when he went off with a group of gentlemen who pulled him aside to discuss business, despite his insistence that ink was about to go to paper to finalise the sale of his company.

Sitting alone and sipping on another glass of the very tasty *Chapman* I'd been served, between people-watching and scrolling through my phone, I was quite enjoying myself. Until I heard the voice, which, even though I'd only heard it for the first time two weeks before, I wouldn't miss, even in my dreams. Or nightmare, as it was about to turn out.

Furo walked into the house, arm-in-arm with Joke. They were deep in discussion and from the frown on Joke's face, I didn't have to be a genie to know they were talking about me. I watched them walk to the other end of the living room, where Derin sat. I watched as Joke gesticulated animatedly and as Furo talked, obviously telling her the same thing she'd just told Joke. I watched as they all looked in my direction, and from the flatness in Derin's gaze, a far cry from the twinkle that had been in her eyes when we were introduced, I knew Furo had exposed me yet again.

I continued to sip on my drink, which had now lost all its appeal, scanning the room for Diekola. I'd overstayed my welcome, and it was time to go.

"Hi, Ife," Derin said, walking up to me a few minutes later. She was smiling, but unlike before, the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Where's Diekola?"

"He stepped out with a few guys," I answered, returning the smile as brightly as I could. "They're out on the lawn, I think."

"Oh, lovely," she answered. "Would you mind coming to the kitchen with me for a sec?"

"Sure," I answered, even though my heart was beating loudly.

Walking with her to the kitchen, I felt the Furo's and Joke's gazes from where they sat at the dining table. They had been joined by Dipo, and as

they watched me, I felt as bereft as a lamb being led to slaughter, desperate for Diekola to immediately come to my rescue.

Once in the kitchen, Derin shut the door behind us, still smiling at me. “Ife, I’m sure you’ve seen how popular my brother is around here. He is the kindest, sweetest, most loving person I know. Diekola would give away the clothes off his back just to make the next person comfortable. You’ve seen that, haven’t you? You must have already seen that about him.”

I nodded. “Yes,” was all I could manage to say.

“Since Boma died, the whole family has been praying for him to find love again. For a few months short of a decade, that has been our prayer point,” she hesitated as she looked at me. “But you aren’t the one we’ve been praying for, Ife.”

Even though I was expecting an ambush, her directness took me aback.

“Listen, I’m sure you’re a nice girl. But I’ve just been told about…about your very interesting reputation.”

“Everyone has a past,” I said, using the words as a crutch in a way that was tragically reminiscent of when I’d done the same in Rio.

“Yes, my dear, I’m aware everyone has a past, and I’m not naïve enough to expect Diekola to end up with a virgin,” she answered. “But perhaps not with a past quite so scandalous.”

I looked away, biting my tongue so as not to lash out the way I typically would have to defend myself.

“If you truly love him, if you really want the best for him,” she said, placing her hand on my arm. “You’ll let him go. You’ll release him to find the right woman for him, one with the kind of baggage he doesn't need to carry.”

Tears pooled in my eyes as I looked at her, heartbroken that, yet again, I’d been reminded of how unsuitable for him I was. Maybe she was right. Maybe they were all right. “Okay.”

“Thank you, Ife. Thank you for your understanding,” she said, squeezing my arm and I could tell she hadn’t done it from a place of malice, but sincere concern for her brother. And that made it hurt even more. “Can I

have one of my drivers take you home? Let’s take advantage of Diekola being distracted to prevent any sad goodbyes.”

My default answer would have been to vehemently refuse, to demand who the hell she thought she was, ordering me away like a common thief, but looking at her, I had no more fight left in me. “Okay”. Suddenly, that was the only word I could find in my vocabulary.

I stood there in the kitchen as she sent someone to retrieve the metallic clutch bag I’d left on the sofa, and offered no resistance as I was ushered out through the back door and into a waiting car on the other side of the compound. I sat in the backseat in a daze, as the car pulled out of the premises, made its way out of the estate and on to the expressway. I wondered what Diekola would think when he realised I’d gone and if his family would be able to convince him I was truly no good for him.

Because one thing was for sure, they sure had convinced me.

–

I directed the driver to my apartment in Oniru, and getting out of the car, I realised I truly had no plan. I was barely lucky to have had my house keys in my handbag. With my things still at Diekola’s, I had to really think about how we would go about the process of detangling, because detangling we had to. As much as we liked to pretend it didn't matter, we couldn't live in a bubble forever. And with every single person that was close to him thinking so badly of me, it was only a matter of time before he did too.

Walking into the compound, I mumbled in response to greetings from the guards. As the elevator made its way up, I shut my eyes remembering the last time I’d ascended it, in the company of the man my heart, body and soul burned for. We’d barely been able to keep our hands off each other, even then. And now, it was all over.

Just like that.

Slipping my key into the hole, I frowned when it didn't open after the usual two clockwise turns. I looked at the key holder again, wondering if I’d switched it at Diekola’s by mistake. But the miniature Eiffel Tower that dangled from the circle of keys confirmed it was indeed mine. I frowned. This was the worst time for the keys to be acting up.

Reaching for my phone, I was about to call the Building Superintendent, when a man emerged from the shadows. My breath caught in my throat as I recognized him as one of Rahim's bodyguards. Without saying a word to me, he walked up to the door and opened it with his own set of keys.

I stared at him, wanting to demand an explanation, but there was something about his deadpan look that made the words dry on my lips. Walking into the house, the feeling of foreboding I had increased with each step. Something was very, very wrong.

The man didn't enter with me, but instead, stood in front of the door, sending across the clear message I would not be exiting the apartment anytime soon.

Looking around, the place was exactly as I'd left it. Walking into my bedroom, the bed was still unmade from the weekend before, and holding up the pillow, I closed my eyes as I inhaled Diekola's perfume, which still lingered not just on the pillowcase, but the sheets and the entire room. His smell even lingered on my own clothing. A tear rolled down my face, as I realised how difficult it was going to be expunging him from my life.

The sound of footsteps into the apartment made me look up. Rising to my feet and walking to the living room, my eyes widened in surprise when I saw Rahim standing there. As our eyes met, for the first time, what I saw in his wasn't longing or desire…but rage.

"I asked only one thing of you, Ife. Only one thing," he said, his voice calm and steady, but his face a mask of his fury. "I've turned a blind eye to your promiscuity over the years, your jumping from one man to the other. But by bringing a man back here, to this place I got for you and only you, despite me explicitly telling you I wouldn't condone it, you crossed the line."

I gripped the arm of the nearest chair, my heart racing as he was joined by not only the bodyguard I'd already seen, but another one. If they decided to kill me there and then, nobody would be able to stop them.

"Enough is enough, Ife. I've clearly given you too much freedom," he continued, glaring at me. "You're going to pack your things right now, and you'll return with me to Geneva. I have relocated Noor and her kids to

Amman, so you will be the only one there. I'm done sharing you with others. You are returning home with me…as my *wife* !"

The trepidation I felt upon hearing that was just as bad as when I'd feared he was about to kill me. But as frightened as I was, there was no way I could agree to that.

"I'm sorry, Rahim, but I'm not going to do that," I answered. "I can not marry you."

He smiled, but rather than soften his face, it just made it appear even more sinister. "Diekola Holloway, is it? That's his name isn't it? The man you went to Brazil with, the man you've been practically living with, the man you were with when you took my call a few days ago, the man you dared bring to this house," he chuckled and shook his head. "I flew into Lagos the very day after I heard there'd been a man here. And surprise, surprise, you were nowhere to be found. I had to take a vacant flat upstairs, waiting for you to return," he looked at me and a chill ran down my spine. "You underestimate me, Ife. You think because I've given you a free hand all these years, you can play me for a fool? You think if I want this Holloway man to permanently disappear without a single trace leading back to me, I can't make it happen?"

Upon hearing that, I dropped to my knees. "Please, Rahim. I beg you, leave him out of this. He's done nothing wrong. I'm the one to blame for everything, not him. Please!" I wiped tears that were now falling fast and furious down my face. "I'll do whatever you want. I'll marry you and follow you back to Geneva. Just please don't harm him. Please."

He glared at me for a long time. "That the only reason you'd agree to marry me is to save your lover makes it lose every single appeal," he clucked his tongue and shook his head. "I had such great plans for you…for us. What a shame!"

He raised his hand to beckon to one of his companions, and a small suitcase was rolled into the room.

"This was the size of suitcase you came into this house with," he said. "And it is exactly the one you'll leave with. I give you an hour to pack your things and leave my house. Ghaffar and Amir will be here to ensure you

don't leave with anything other than this suitcase…so pack wisely. Both your cars downstairs have already been removed," he smiled, enjoying being the one to have the last pound of flesh. "I hope this was all worth it."

With that, he turned around and walked out of the apartment. I stared at him as he left, wanting to remind him that prior to coming to the flat with only one suitcase, I'd already spent a full week moving my things prior. But I knew doing that would be foolhardy, and if the stance of the bodyguards who remained in my flat was anything to go by, sixty minutes was indeed all I had to leave that place.

Walking into my bedroom, I threw open the door of the walk-in closet, staring at the columns and rows of expensive clothes, shoes and bags, wondering how I was supposed to pack them all into a single, small suitcase. I started grabbing the dresses that meant the most to me, the colour-block dress I'd worn the first time I met Diekola, the pink tweed *Chanel* skirt suit that had been my first couture buy almost a decade before, the tulle *Christian Dior* ballet skirt I'd bought last minute before attending a New York Fashion Week show in 2018, and the leopard patterned *Diane von Fürstenberg* dress I'd worn to attend a former President's 80 th birthday party, all of which had cost me a fortune. But the items alone already almost filled the box, leaving room for little else. I looked around the room, perplexed, not knowing what to do.

And then it occurred to me that my account might have been frozen or, worse, wiped completely clean. Rahim had insisted on being a signatory and even though I hadn't seen any reason why not at the time, I now realised that had been a very costly mistake. In a panic, I reached for my phone and logged into the app, remembering I'd transferred to it even money from my private account for fear of Olumide clearing that account as he'd once done. My fears were confirmed when my dashboard came on the screen, wiped down to a zero balance. I was completely screwed.

That was when I decided that clothes and shoes were the very least of my problems. Walking to my jewellery safe, I emptied its contents into the box. I made my way to my dressing table, and did the same thing, using my hand to sweep all the necklaces, earrings and rings there into the box, grateful that Rahim's weakness over the years had been gifting me very expensive

trinkets. I filled the little space left in the box with two pairs of my favourite shoes, a pair of *Manolo Blahnik* 's jewel blue Hangisi pumps and a pair of two-tone *Chanel* slingbacks. Grabbing one of my *Hermes* Birkin bags, I stuffed in it as many of my expensive underwear and negligee as I could manage. I was still looking around in confusion, trying to decide what I still could or couldn't squeeze in, when the one-hour mark elapsed.

“Your time is up,” called out the bodyguard I’d seen first.

Straightening, I lifted the box and slung the bag over my shoulders. With only sixty thousand naira left in my salary account, and four thousand naira in my wallet, I had no idea what I was going to do or where I was going to go. But one thing I did know was that I was going to hold on to whatever modicum of dignity I still had, and walk out of that place with my head held high.

The two guards said nothing as I walked past them. Once out in the hallway, I turned to take one final look into the apartment I’d called home for so long, but the door was immediately shut in my face.

Once out of the building, with half of what I had in my wallet, I called a taxi and headed to a small motel I’d seen a few streets away, desperate to go somewhere I could clear my head.

As the taxi made its way to the motel, my phone was vibrating incessantly. I’d ignored it while trying to pack my things but now chose to answer it, thinking it had to be Diekola wondering why I’d abruptly left the party. But it wasn't him.

It was Olumide.

“Ifedayo, this is another week gone by. What do you take me for? What do you really take me for?” he yelled. “I’m done playing with you. I give you forty-eight hours to pay me five hundred million naira or…”

In spite of the heartbreak, confusion and desolation I felt, I couldn't help but snigger. “Why not just make it a billion?”

“I beg your pardon!” he exploded. “Do you think this is a joke? Ife, I’m going to release that tape if you mess with me…”

“Olumide, go ahead and release it,” I said, no longer able to carry the weight that was his blackmail. Having already lost Diekola, it didn't matter anyway. “Release the tape, if you must. I don't have any money to give you.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a while. “Don't try to call my bluff, Ife. It’s not in your best interest to do that.”

“Olumide, please do whatever it is you like. It no longer matters to me.”

“I’m giving you till Monday,” he cut in. “Enough time for your brain to reset. If I don't hear from you by then, the whole world is going to see what a dirty dog you really are.”

My stomach dropped, thinking of Diekola, his family and friends seeing the tape, confirming how truly bad for him I was. But at that point, it didn't even matter. They’d already made up their minds about me anyway. A tape of me as the principal participant in a disgustingly filthy orgy wouldn't make any difference.

I didn't have any reputation worth salvaging.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SITTING ON THE BED in the small motel room, I stared vacantly ahead, the box and overstuffed handbag all I had to show for the last seven years of my life. But my material losses were nothing compared with my other loss…my major loss. Not even close.

I could feel my phone vibrating in my bag, and knew it was Diekola still trying to reach me. In the hour since I'd been there, I'd ignored the persistent call notifications but turning to look at my bag, decided to answer it.

"Ifedayo, I've been going out of my mind trying to reach you!" he exclaimed, the loud traffic noise in the background letting me know he was walking on the road. "I've even been to your apartment, but was told you weren't there."

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I left about an hour ago."

"Baby, I'm so, so sorry about what my sister said to you," he said. "She told me, when I was about to turn the party upside down, looking for you."

"She's right, you know," I answered, a sad smile on my face. "You showing up with someone like me is not what they've been praying for all these years."

"Ife, don't talk nonsense," he retorted. "Where are you?"

I hesitated, thinking it would be better to dismiss him and not delay the inevitable. But heck, what did I have to lose?

"I'm in a motel along Palace Road," I finally answered. "Rahim kicked me out. He found out about you coming to the flat."

“Well, I can’t say I’m sorry to hear that,” he scoffed. “It was long overdue, and I’m glad you’re finally out of that situation.”

I smiled in spite of myself. Honestly, so was I.

“I’m getting back into the car, so you should see me in a few minutes,” he said, sounding like he was jogging. “I’ve been walking down your street hoping to find you. The guards said you didn't go with your car.”

“So you’ve been walking aimlessly along the streets of Oniru, Diekola? How romantic!” I laughed.

“Laugh all you want. All that matters is that I’ve found you. You’ll see me in less than ten minutes.”

The smile remained on my face long after the call ended. Yes, our separation was inevitable, but as I still had a few more hours till Olumide leaked the video and all hell was let loose, surely I could enjoy being with the man I loved one last time.

Eight minutes later, I walked into the lobby, holding my suitcase and handbag. After the night I’d had, seeing Diekola standing there, worry etched all over his face, brought out the emotions I’d been trying to contain all evening. Without a word, he took me in his arms and rocked me as I cried.

“I’m so sorry, Ife,” he said, kissing the top of my head that was nestled on his chest. “I promise never to allow anyone treat you that way again. I messed up this time, but I swear, it will never happen ever again.”

I nodded, wishing with all my heart I could simply go along with his beautiful words. While I knew he meant every word of what he’d said, our problems ran so much deeper than he even knew.

“Is this all?” he asked, looking at my suitcase.

I nodded again, not having it in me to give him the sordid details of my unceremonious eviction from a place I’d called home for so many years. Thankfully, he didn't prod further and we were soon in his car, headed back to the place that I now knew as my sanctuary…even if only for a few more hours.

Getting home, he led me to our bedroom, and as I sat on the bed, he knelt to remove the crystal embellished *Amina Mouaddi* pumps that had been on my feet since leaving the house earlier in the day. They'd stayed on my feet all night, even through the encounter with Rahim. "You were limping so figured they'd started to pinch."

I watched as he gently massaged each foot, one by one, the tenderness of his action, the reminder of what I was losing, breaking my heart anew. After the massage, he ran me a bath and slipping into a tee-shirt and comfortable pair of sweatpants afterwards, I was grateful for the clothes I still had in his house.

"I had Joseph cook you something," Diekola said, walking into the bedroom, once I was dressed. "You must be hungry by now."

I wasn't, but loved the idea of sitting to eat with him again. Taking his hand, I allowed him lead me to the patio where a table had already been set, from where we dined, first on roast sweet potatoes with beef stew, and then an apple and butterscotch pie. We ate the delicious meal in congenial silence, with him giving me the space he knew I needed. Several times, I caught him looking at me, and I had to smile back in reassurance each time. Even if for that night alone, I was going to pretend that there wasn't a dark cloud hanging over us, gearing up to offload a storm of pain and despair. Even if for that night alone, I was going to enjoy him, savour him, create the last of the very many memories that would be etched in my heart forever.

Later that night, I kissed him like it was the last time, because it was. Holding his face, I stared at it, wanting to memorise every perfection, every flaw, wanting to capture it and keep it in my heart forever, wanting to delay for as long as I could when this dream, this beautiful dream, would become the nightmare that awaited me.

"You're the best thing that has ever happened to me, Ifedayo," he said, as we lay in bed. "Not a day goes by that I'm not grateful for agreeing to go on that trip with my friends. You're everything my heart had been waiting for."

I said nothing in response, closing my eyes to keep from crying.

Propping himself up, he reached for something under his pillow. "This belonged to my mother," he said, holding up a ring, a beautiful white gold

ring with a large ruby. “Dad gave it to her a few years before he died, for their twentieth wedding anniversary. She cherished it even more than her wedding ring,” he took my left hand. “I want you to have it.”

I gaped at him, not believing what he was doing. “Diekola…”

“I know I promised not to rush you, but Ifedayo, I want to be with you… away from all this,” he said, still holding my hand. “All documents have been executed and the sale of my company to Karibi’s is as good as complete. I’m pretty much done here. Come back to New York with me, Ife. Let’s leave this place and everyone that feels entitled to an opinion about us being together. Marry me.”

I stared from him to the ring in his hand, my mind vacant of anything that made any sense. “Did Boma ever wear it?” was what did make its way out of my mouth.

He smiled and shook his head. “My mother outlived her, unfortunately. I’ll get you a brand new ring, if you’d prefer.”

“No, this is perfect,” I said, staring at the beautiful piece of jewellery.

“So, is that a yes?” he asked, looking at me with so much longing and earnestness, it brought fresh tears to my eyes.

I nodded just as the tears rushed down my face. “Yes.”

He beamed as he slipped the ring on my finger, a perfect fit. Still crying, he took me in his arms, clearly mistaking my tears for tears of joy, and not the tears of a woman about to have her heart ripped out of her chest.

If only things could have been different.

–

Early the next morning, I sat in the living room waiting for him, both my suitcases packed. Having awoken hours before, I’d had a bath and dressed up in the same colour block dress I’d worn the day we met, to symbolise us coming full circle, my inane attempt to reach some sort of closure. My initial plan had been to flee before he awoke, but there was no way I could have left without at least a goodbye. He didn't deserve that.

“Ife, what’s going on?” came his voice a few minutes before 8am, as he walked into the living room. “How come you’re already dressed? And what are those boxes about?”

“Thank God for the things I still had here,” I laughed, attempting to joke. “Or else it would have been a disaster.”

But he didn't smile. “Ife, what’s this about?”

I rose to my feet. “I wanted to leave before you woke up, but decided you deserved a proper goodbye.”

His brows furrowed. “Goodbye?”

I nodded, but instead of the smile I tried to force, tears welled in my eyes again. “I’m no good for you, Diekola. Now I understand why the people who love you want to protect you from me. Heck, even I want to protect you from me.”

“Ife, I know you’re still hurt by what Derin said to you…”

“Not just Derin, Diekola. There’s Furo, Karibi, and a host of others. And they can’t all be wrong. You’re too wonderful a man to end up with a horrible and despicable person like me.”

“Ife, don’t say that,” he said, his own eyes glistening. “You know it’s not true.”

“Oh, but it is. It is,” I answered, willing myself not to buckle. “Do you know I didn’t dismiss Rahim, not even after we’d agreed to a clean slate…a fresh start?” I nodded in emphasis. “That night I was on the patio on a call, I was talking to him. I was trying to get more money off him.”

He looked at me, stunned, and I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to continue.

“I guess old habits die hard,” I laughed, wiping tears from my face. “You say you don’t care, but you would when you find we can’t walk two paces without encountering one of my former lovers. Even at Karibi and Isioma’s wedding, there was yet another man I’d slept it. The awful part is I didn't even remember him at first,” I shook my head. “You think us running away to New York will solve the problem. I’ll bet even there, my past would be there, waiting to choke all life out of this love we think we have.”

“None of that matters, Ife. What more do you want me to say to make you understand that?”

As tempted as I was to believe him, to buy into his daydream of a happy-ever-after, I knew there was no way I could.

“In a matter of hours, a very nasty video of me is going to be leaked. When I say nasty, I mean to the millionth degree,” I forced myself to look at him. “It’s a video of me having sex with five men. One, two, three, four, five men,” I added, counting each number with my finger. “If your family hates me now, can you imagine what will happen when they see it?” I shook my head. “Diekola, my reputation will always follow me wherever I go. Your sister was right. You deserve so much more,” I pulled off the ring that was still on my finger. “I don’t deserve to wear this. One day, you’ll meet a lovely, wonderful and scandal-free woman who’ll be better for you than I ever could be. You need to keep this for her.”

He made no attempt to collect it from me, and instead, we just stood there facing each other, the reality of our breakup standing in between us. I lowered my eyes, unable to look at him, unable to look at the pain I was causing him.

“What hope do we have if our biggest saboteur is you?” he finally asked, his voice barely a whisper. “If we’re fighting all these battles with everyone around us, how can the person to fight the biggest battle with be you?”

Realising I was only minutes, maybe even seconds, from a complete breakdown, I placed the ring on the glass coffee table, picked up my boxes and walked out of the room. He didn't stop me, not as I made the walk to the front door or as I made my way to the front gate. Once outside, I kept walking, carrying my suitcases as I made my way down the street, that quiet Sunday morning, not wanting to stop lest I lose my resolve and rush back to him, taking back everything I’d said.

As painful as it was, as badly as it hurt, I had to accept the bitter truth.

It was time to let him go.

–

Getting out of the taxi, I stood in front of the house the same shade of green as the inside of a kiwi fruit, for the second time in a little over a week. As my taxi had made its way across the Third Mainland Bridge, I'd sent my father a message, a short message that carried a whole lot more weight than the five words it was made up of.

Can I come back home?

There had been no reply, and the nearer I approached, the more nervous I got, worried that he too would turn me away. An impromptu visit had been one thing, asking to come back home another entirely.

"Can I end the trip?" the taxi driver repeated his question, peering out of the window.

I stalled, unsure how to answer. As agitated as I was about being turned away, the honest truth was I had nowhere else to go.

And then, the gate opened and my father walked out, but this time, with Ibilola by his side. Upon seeing me, she rushed forward and we were soon locked in a tight embrace. She'd always been a few inches taller and as she held me, I buried my face in her bosom as heavy sobs racked my body.

"Praise Jesus! Praise Jesus!" was what she kept whispering over and over.

Allowing her and our father lead me into the compound, for the first time in the last twenty-four hours, I felt relief, a sense of reprieve almost. Bitter sweet though it was, it was a homecoming nonetheless, and one I was very grateful for.

Especially considering everything else I considered dear had just gone up in smoke.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AND SITTING IN my old bedroom, on the same old bed I'd left behind years before, I told my father and sisters everything. With Ibilola holding my hand, and Ibukun on the screen of our father's tablet, I told my family everything.

I told them all about how Olumide had influenced my sleeping with men for money, how greed and the desire to have a hold on him kept me doing it, how Rahim totally changed the game and elevated my lifestyle several notches higher, how I'd been attacked by Moyo, how I'd finally decided to walk away from Olumide, and how he'd ended up blackmailing me.

"How bad can that tape possibly be?" Ibukun asked. "What gives him the confidence to demand that kind of money?"

"It's bad," I answered, stealing a glance at our father, unable to go into any of the gory details. "Very bad."

"He knows the Rahim guy can afford it," Ibilola said. "The guy is extremely wealthy and Olumide knows he's good for the money."

"What happened between you and the Rahim anyway?" Ibukun asked.

And I was forced to tell them about Diekola…meeting him in Bora Bora, reuniting in Lagos, falling in love with him and all the opposition we'd faced from his friends and family.

"I can't blame any of them for protecting him the way they did," I said, wiping a tear from my eye. "With my reputation, I was a fool to deceive myself into thinking things could ever work. And with Olumide about to release this tape, it's just as well," I shrugged. "Anyway, Rahim found out about Diekola and I, and kicked me out of the house. I'd already made up my mind to leave him and had started fantasizing about building a life with Diekola, but…"

“But you were stalling to see if you could raise the money Olumide wanted?” Ibukun asked.

I turned to the screen, looking for what used to be her usual judgement and condemnation, but all I saw in her eyes was compassion.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I thought I could get the money before walking away from him,” I smiled sadly. “I guess he beat me to it.”

Ibilola squeezed my hand and I squeezed back. While there was nothing I could do about the explicit tape on the verge of release to the world, the solid support from my family was my assurance that I wasn’t alone.

“I’m actually thinking of selling my jewellery and seeing if the proceeds will be enough to appease Olumide,” I said, after we’d sat quietly for a few minutes. Even though I had mentally prepared myself for the disgrace, the last thing I wanted was to drag my father and sisters into it. “Rahim was very generous and spent a lot of money gifting me very expensive jewellery.”

“Will you be able to raise the five hundred million from those?” Ibukun asked, sounding sceptical.

I shook my head. Not even close. “I’d be lucky to raise a fifth of that.”

“Then don’t bother,” my father said. He’d remained silent the whole time and looked to have aged several years, but his hand that remained on my shoulder was evidence of his own support. “As a matter of fact, I wouldn't even advise you pay him even if you did have the five hundred million naira. The thing with blackmail is that it never ends. If you pay him, be rest assured that he’s going to keep coming back for more. Ugly though it may be, it is best for us to call his bluff and allow him do what he wants.”

I thought about Senator Abegunde Mabayoje and how Olumide alluded he’d received money from the man until his death, and knew my father was correct. Even if I were to raise a billion naira, Olumide would never let me go. It was best to bite the bullet and accept the shame from the sex tape once and for all.

“But I don't want to bring you any more shame…”

“Nonsense!” Ibukun said. “You can never bring us shame, Ife. We are family, and what affects you affects us all,” her voice broke. “For so many years, I have regretted pushing you away the way I did. If I hadn’t been so determined not to like Olumide, if I hadn’t been so quick to castigate you over your choices, you wouldn't have felt unable to confide in me as your big sister.”

“But you were right about him along,” I answered, my own tears returning. “I wish I’d listened to you.”

“I wish I’d been there for you. I wish I’d understood you,” by now, she too was in tears. “I said some mean things to you that last Sunday you were home, and I know that contributed to your decision to keep away.”

“Well, all that is water under the bridge now,” Ibilola said, smiling through her own tears. “All that matters is that you’re home now, Ife. Every other thing is past. We might have lost ten years, but God willing, we have scores more to make up for all the lost time.”

I turned to look at my younger sister, the one who’d dropped everything and rushed over to the house when our father called her after getting my text, letting her know I was on my way home. And I grieved for the lost time anew. There I’d been for so long, living like a lone ranger, when I had such a strong support loving me even through our estrangement.

“Scores?” our father exclaimed. “Speak for yourself.”

“Daddy, you easily have at least two score years left,” Ibukun teased. “Don’t you want to be a centenarian?”

“Not if it means people carrying me on the back, or wearing a bib when I’m fed. Count me out!”

“Daddy, you’ll be strutting like a peacock even when you’re 150 years old”

As we all laughed, it occurred to me how, only a few short hours before, I never would have believed I’d ever laugh again. Yes, my heart was broken, and yes, I was on the verge of monumental disgrace, but with my family by my side, it now felt a bit tolerable.

After Ibukun had logged off the Skype call, and our father had retreated to his room, Ibilola and I remained on the bed, my hand still in hers.

“Your daughters are your carbon copy,” I remarked. “And not just physically. They even talk like you.”

“They’re my world,” she beamed. “I’m so grateful to have such a wonderful co-parent in Osagie. Especially with this job I have.”

I looked at her, wishing we were having this conversation when I was liquid enough to ask her to quit her job until she found a better one that would give her more time with her family. But apart from what I expected to get from the sale of my jewellery, I had nothing else. I didn't have to be a soothsayer to know the release of the sex tape would also lead to the loss of my job.

“That Diekola guy,” she said, a bit cautiously. “It sounds like he really loves you, with the way he’s always defended you. Why didn't you tell him about the tape? I’m sure he would have helped you with Olumide.”

“I couldn't bear the thought of him knowing anything like that even existed,” I shook my head. “There's only so much a man can take.”

She didn't insist but instead squeezed my hand again. I smiled at her, the deep sadness I felt over losing Diekola resurfacing, and I resigned myself to the fact that the pain would be my companion for the rest of my life.

–

Opening my eyes on Monday morning, I braced myself for what that day would bring. It was the day my life would change forever.

I forced myself to eat breakfast, making small talk with my father as we sat at the dining table, eating toast bread, eggs and hot cocoa, my eyes on my phone the whole time. I hadn’t heard anything from Olumide since his last call on Saturday night, and I was dismayed he hadn’t even given me one last chance to make good on his demands. But I was more dismayed by what he’d decided to do to me, dismayed that, after everything we’d been through, it had all come down to this.

I distracted myself with TV, skipping from music channels to telenovelas, to even children’s shows, anything to keep from thinking about what was going on in cyberspace. By the time it was 4pm, I wondered if he’d already sent the video to the blogs, which of the blogs, and when they would decide

to run the story. I cringed at the thought of whatever salacious headline they would come up with, and how it would ignite gist lines within my social circle…my former social circle. But even as troubled and anxious as I was, I knew it was something that had to happen; the public crucifixion of Ife, the runs-girl. That girl, the girl who drove the flashy cars and lived the high life, was gone forever. Hard as it was, it was time to shed my old skin and start over.

–

By Wednesday, I'd started panicking. Not only had I still not heard from Olumide, there wasn't a whiff of any gist with my name tagged to it on any of the blogs. I started to wonder if he was playing mind games, possibly to demand for more money, or if he had already released the video and the blogs intended to run it as a weekend exclusive, because an exclusive it most definitely was. Ife, the infamous sugar baby, in a sex video with five men, one of whom was a former Senator. The video, whenever it saw the light of day, was definitely going to break the Internet.

Ibukun and Ibilola called me on the phone almost round the clock, they too also on the lookout for this video. But as comforting as the support from my family was, I did have my dark moments. There were a few times I wondered if everyone wouldn't be better off if I were dead. If I ended everything, not only would I not have to endure the humiliation of the video, people would be more focused on offering my dad and sisters condolences rather than scorn and disdain. It also didn't help that I had no idea what to do with myself, with my old life now over. It was my third day away from school and I still hadn't even as much as sent them a message or answered the many calls from the Head Teacher's office to explain my absence. Was I to look for another job, or maybe even change my name? When the euphoria of having me back home died, surely even my family would tire of me sitting at home, day in and day out, with no plans for the future.

But taking my life wasn't the answer. Not only would it break my family, as bleak and hopeless as things appeared, I held on to the hope that something good just had to come out of it. The loss of my livelihood, reputation and, most painfully, the love of my life, had to be for something. I had no clue

what that something was, but all I could do was hope against hope that it would be all worth it in the end.

–

“You have a visitor, Ifedayo,” my father said, peering into my room as I took a nap on Thursday afternoon.

Roused from my restless sleep, I sat up, wondering whom it was. “Is it Olumide?”

Dad shook his head. “She says her name is Rejoice. She’s still outside. I didn't want to let her into the house till you saw her for yourself.”

I frowned. Rejoice? I knew no such person. My stomach dropped as I pondered the possibility of it being a reporter, wanting to verify the salacious scandal she was about to expose. But how on earth had she tracked me to my family house?

Rising to my feet, I slipped on a *boubou* over the tank top and shorts I wore and, without bothering with any make up, made my way downstairs. It wasn't until I was downstairs that I thought it could also be someone from Diekola, someone he’d sent in his place, for fear of me turning him away, and it made me regret my careless attire.

But pushing the gate open, it was neither an unfamiliar reporter nor an emissary from Diekola. It was Moyo.

“So you know Moyosoreoluwa means ‘rejoice in God’s gift’, right?” she tittered, clearly amused by the look of surprise on my face.

Looking at her filled me with unexpected rage, memories of first of all resenting her for so many years for being the one Olumide chose, and then fearing her when she became my predator. She was the last person I expected, or wanted, to see.

Hissing, I made to close the gate but she held it with her hand.

“I have something for you, Ifedayo,” she said, brandishing a flash drive. “Trust me when I say you want this.”

I hesitated, looking from her to the flash drive. I had nothing to lose listening to her. She was alone after all, and my father and Agnes were

within hearing distance. Stepping aside, I gave her entry into the compound.

“ *Na wa o* ! So after all your *shakara* , you ended up right back where you started!” she laughed, shaking her head. “The great Ife looking so ordinary and unspectacular, and in a *boubou* of all things. I never thought I’d see the day.”

I suddenly regretted the decision to let her in.

“What do you want here?” I demanded. “And what’s in the flash drive?”

“The video I suspect chased you back here,” she answered.

My eyes flashed in my surprise and she laughed again.

“I see it rings a bell. Very nasty stuff!” she said, stretching her hand to give it to me. “I thought to bring it to you myself, so it doesn't get into the wrong hands. Well, another wrong hand.”

I accepted the flash drive, still confused. “How did you get this? Did Olumide give you this?”

“I overheard him talking to you on Saturday. He sounded so angry, and my curiosity got piqued when I heard him demanding for five hundred million naira. Five whole hundred million naira!” she answered. “So when he went to bed, I checked his phone, and I eventually found the message he sent you from one of his new lines…the message with the video,” she made a show of shuddering. “My God, Ife. I had no idea you had it in you to be that perverse!”

“So, what? You want to continue where he stopped with the blackmail?” I snapped, not wanting her to see how frightened I was by the prospect. Moyo being in possession of the tape would be infinitesimally worse for me than anything Olumide could ever do.

“And you’re stupid too, from the look of things. You think I’d give you the flash drive if I wanted to use it to my advantage?” she retorted. “While he was still sleeping, I deleted the video from his phone, not just the phone’s memory but from his entire message history,” then with a sly smile added. “I did the same with his two other phones, his computer, email box and cloud drive. The only place that video exists,” she pointed at the flash drive in my hand, “is right there.”

I stared at her, speechless, not trusting that I was hearing right, not trusting that my predator had become my saviour.

“Why?” I finally asked, when I found my voice. “Why would you do this for me?”

She shrugged, still smiling. “Because you returned to me what I’ve been asking you to all these years. Yes, Olumide is lazy, selfish, spineless and mean…but he’s mine, and I like him that way,” she held my gaze. “A few months ago, I was going through one of his phones and saw several messages he’d sent you, begging you to take him back. None of the messages were delivered and I realised you’d probably blocked his number. From the tone of the messages, you’d dumped him earlier in the year,” she smiled again. “I guess around the time my friends and I came to your school to…to talk to you.”

That was all the reminder I needed about the kind of person I was dealing with.

“How am I sure you haven’t saved a copy for yourself, so you can start blackmailing me later?” I asked.

“Be rest assured, I haven’t and won’t. That’s not my style,” she hesitated a bit. “Look, I know I’ve never acknowledged it but I know all what you did for my family. I know it’s been from you we’ve survived all these years; paid rent, school fees and every other major expense. Heck, even me going abroad to have my kids didn’t come from Olumide’s half-hearted attempts at ‘hustling’. Yes, I’ve always known this, but you sleeping with my husband was too much a price for me to pay. I felt you were taking more from me than I was getting from you. Regardless, this is just me saying a much overdue thank you.”

We stood there staring at each other, neither of us knowing what to say. Her admission had clearly made her uncomfortable and I was still trying to process it all.

“How do we know he doesn't have this saved somewhere you couldn't find?” I finally asked.

She shrugged. “We don't. All we can do is hope.”

I nodded, seeing the glimmer of hope for the very first time. “Thank you, Moyo.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome, Ifedayo,” she turned around to leave but then turned back to me. “And don’t remain holed up here forever. It doesn't suit you.”

“How did you even find me?”

“When the Guards at your apartment,” she smiled when I raised my brow. “Of course I knew your apartment. Anyway, when they told me you were away, I asked myself where I’d go to hide if I was being threatened with something like this. Your parents’ house was a very easy guess.”

I remained there long after she’d walked out of the compound and even after I heard the sound of her car driving away. I looked at the flash drive and let out a loud cry, falling to my knees. The cloud, the very dark cloud that had been following me for months, had finally lifted.

The nightmare was finally over.

–

Both my sisters, and even my usually calm and stoic father, broke down crying when I told them what happened. It was only then that I saw how worried they’d been about the whole blackmail saga. Now it was finally over, and we all could finally breathe.

And now there was really nothing standing in the way of reuniting with my love.

Lying on my bed that evening, I dialled Diekola’s number, my heart racing, feeling equal parts anxious and excited about hearing his voice again, of being able to tell him how sorry I was, of telling him how I loved him more than anything, of asking if we could pretend the last few days never happened and if we could rewind all the way back to the night he asked me to marry him.

But to my dismay, his phone was switched off.

Looking at the time, it was past 6pm and too late for him to still be in any meetings. Nonetheless, I decided to give it another hour before calling him again. But it was still switched off.

Not wanting to accept what I knew deep inside, I decided to call Joseph, his cook. It had only been three days since I'd left him. Surely, he couldn't have up and left town already.

"Good evening, Madam," came Joseph's deep baritone.

"Good evening, Joseph. I'm trying to reach Mr. Diekola. Is he at home?"

"Ah, Mr. Diekola has gone back to America, Madam," he answered. "He left yesterday morning. In fact all of us left yesterday, even Ige and Remigues. He paid everyone off and locked the house."

Ige and Remigues were his long-time staff who'd minded the house even in his absence.

"Oh," I said, the last thread of hope I had fraying before my very eyes. "Thank you, Joseph."

With the phone still in my hand, I sat on my bed, the finality of the end of my relationship with Diekola hitting hard. Even with my decision not to return to him as the release of the sex video loomed, him permanently uprooting himself from his home hadn't even been a consideration. At some narcissistic level, I'd thought he'd always be there, waiting for me to return. But instead, he'd left barely two days later.

I chided myself for thinking there could be a happily ever after, after all. Yes, there would be no leaked sex video, but nothing had been done to change my reputation. No matter how reformed I now fancied myself, I would pay for the mistakes I'd made till the day I died. It was time to leave him to find a woman unencumbered with a murky past like mine, and rebuild his life.

While I focused on picking up the pieces of mine.

–

But my past was in no hurry to let me go.

A few days later, on Saturday evening, I was walking back to the house from a nearby supermarket, where I'd gone to buy cereal for my nieces' dinner. Ibilola and Osagie were attending a wedding on the island, and their kids were spending the night.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Ibilola had asked that morning, for what might have been the umpteenth time. “The guy Nancy is marrying knows a lot of people and I’m sure it’ll be lots of fun.”

I’d smiled at her naiveté. I was the very last person she wanted with her at any social function. She, Ibukun and our father might have given me a brand new slate, but the rest of Lagos definitely hadn’t. “Please allow me spend time with my nieces. We have lots of catching up to do.”

But she hadn’t been quite as naïve as I’d thought she was. “You can’t run away forever, Ife.”

But run away was what I had every intention of doing. On Thursday, I’d finally sent my resignation letter to the school, right after calling the Head Teacher to apologise for not giving any notice. She’d been understandably upset, and with good reason. I was leaving them hanging, at a critical part of the term. But there was no way I could return there. For as long as I could manage, I wanted, needed, to pretend that my former life hadn’t happened. It was the only way I knew how to heal.

I heard the rumble of rain in the far distance, and quickened my steps. Even though cereal had been the reason I’d gone to the store, I’d spent longer than I should have, picking biscuits and candy for the girls, partly to treat them and partly for my own self-indulgence. In the days following Moyo’s visit and my finding out about Diekola’s departure, I’d taken to sitting with my father in the living room, watching whatever he was, with a bowl of something to nibble beside me at all times. I found that the sugar rush, though temporary, took me to a happy place, a place where there were no memories of the past.

“ *Omo mi, bawo ni* ,” Chief Bankole, an octogenarian who lived down the road, greeted as I walked past him.

“ *E ku irole, Sir* ,” I greeted, courtesying.

Another thing I loved about being back home was the familiarity of it all. With the greater number of our neighbours still the same, it felt like time had frozen almost twenty years. The same people still leaned on their balconies waving at passers-by, took evening strolls, and loitered around the same convenience store. With the ease and familiarity with which everyone

greeted me, it was almost like the last decade had never even happened. And I liked that.

Approaching our house, I frowned when I saw a car parked in front of it. Recognizing the black BMW 7-series, my frown deepened. Was Rahim still spying on me?

I was tempted to turn around and go anywhere but there, uninterested in whatever message he'd sent his emissaries to deliver. But the pull of my curiosity was too much.

As I got closer, Musa, the driver I knew too well, got out of the car. I braced myself to hear what he'd been sent to tell me, but was surprised to see the bodyguard I now knew as Ghaffar, emerge from the front passenger side. Seeing him brought back memories, awful memories of what had occurred exactly a week before, memories of having only an hour to pack my things while he, Ghaffar, kept a watchful eye. My heart rate quickened and I found myself suddenly struggling for air.

"What do you want?" I demanded, glaring at him.

The window of the back passenger seat slid down. "Get in the car, Ife."

I stared in shock at Rahim, shocked that he was actually there in the car that had driven all the way to the other side of town. But stunned though I was, I was still in full possession of my faculties. Who knew if he wanted to mete out yet more punishment? Maybe he felt I'd gotten off easy and wanted to get more retribution.

"What do you want?" I repeated the question, this time to Rahim, my wide eyes and flared nostrils enough indication that I was going to do no such thing as enter the car with him.

"Ife, please. I've come all this way," he pleaded. "I just want to talk to you."

I crossed my arms, still unsure whether or not to believe him. I hadn't gone through the week I had just to be done away with by him and his goons.

"Okay, I'll come out to talk to you then," he said, reaching to open the door.

And I panicked. Greater than my fear of being abducted was being seen by my neighbours talking to an older, and clearly very wealthy man. So instead, I opened the door close to me, and got in.

“How did you find me?” I asked, trying to sound calm when inside, I was a frenzied ball of fear.

“Ife, we’ve been together more than seven years. Do you really think I wouldn't have checked out your family? I’ve always known this to be where you grew up, and where your father lives.”

It wasn't lost on me that he still referred to us in present tense or that he knew a whole lot more about me than I’d given him credit for.

“Listen,” he said, touching my knee. “I overreacted. I shouldn't have thrown you out of the flat. I was just so angry that you’d not only brought that Holloway fellow there but that he’d also spent the night. When I heard, I was furious!” he chuckled at the last part. “But I had no reason to be angry, not especially when I’d already given you too much freedom.”

“You had every reason to be angry. You were very explicit about not wanting any men there, and I flouted that rule.”

He nodded. “True. But was it enough to throw everything away, just like that? Yes, my ego was also bruised when you turned down my marriage proposal, but I should have known that, like all women, you probably need a little more convincing.”

A little more convincing? Turning to look at him, I saw that he still thought we were as much a couple as we’d been before that awful evening.

“Look,” he said, taking my hand. I was too shell shocked to even withdraw it from his hold. “I know your lover has gone. I’m told he’s returned to his base in the States. It was just a harmless fling, and I’m prepared to overlook it,” he raised my hand to his lips. “I’ve come to take you back home. I could have sent them to get you, but thought it would show just how sorry I am if I came myself.”

“You want me to go back to the flat?” I repeated. “After you threw me out like a thief? After you made me leave with nothing more than a small suitcase?”

“And I’ll make it all up to you, my Princess! I’m ready to do anything, anything at all, you ask. Name the amount and I’ll credit your account right now. Call the destination and we’ll be on our way tomorrow. I’ll spend the

rest of my life making it up to you, Ife. And I'll wait as long as I have to for you to be ready to be my wife. I was serious when I said I've dispatched Noor back to Jordan. I'll wait for you for as long as it takes," he reached for a box in his pocket. "And just to show you that I'm serious…"

He popped it open and I gasped at the sight of the large, emerald cut diamond ring.

"Fifteen carats!" he declared proudly. "You can wear it while you take your time getting ready to be my wife."

I stared from the magnificent ring to him and then back to the ring again. Here he was, offering me a golden ticket back to the life of luxuries I'd become accustomed to. I had the chance to return to my luxurious apartment, to lie on my beloved bed again, to wear the plethora of designer clothes and shoes I'd been forced to abandon. Rahim never made empty promises, and if he said he was giving me a blank cheque to ask for anything I wished, he meant it. I could see he was ready to do ten times what he'd ever done for me, and that was a lot. My eyes still on the ring, a voice in my head asked what I was trying to prove to the world. I had no reputation to protect and I'd already lost Diekola. What good was it doing me anyway, sitting in my father's house, not knowing what I was going to do with my life? All I had to do was say yes, and I'd have my old life of glitz and glamour back.

Except that glitz and glamour were no longer of any interest to me.

"Rahim, I can't accept this," I said, turning back to him. "I can't go back to living like that."

"I know you're angry with me for how I treated you, and I'm sorry. Tell me what you want me to change, and consider it done," he insisted, holding my hand a bit tighter in an uncharacteristic display of anxiety. "Whatever you want, just say the word, and it's yours, Ife. Just come back home, please!"

I clasped my other hand over his hand that held mine. "Rahim, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for everything you did for me. You treated me so well, you made me live like a queen, and I will forever be grateful. But it's time for me to live my life differently."

“Differently how? In this…this place?” he retorted with as much disgust as if the neighbourhood were a pigsty. “You want to waste away here for the rest of your life?”

I smiled, withdrawing my hands from his. “Not waste, Rahim. Rebuild. Rediscover. Restore,” I glanced in the direction of the house. “I’m afraid I have to go. My nieces will be hungry by now. That,” I gestured at the bag by my feet, “is their dinner.”

His eyes fell on the yellow and black striped plastic bag and looking back at me, I could see just how perplexed he was. But then he straightened and smiled, the cool and composed smile I was more accustomed to returning.

“You need time, and I’m prepared to give it to you,” he said, sounding more confident than he had mere seconds before. “As soon as you’re done ‘rediscovering’ yourself, give me a call.”

“I won’t be calling you, Rahim.”

“Please give this to your nieces,” he said, reaching into his pocket and handing me a fat bundle of one thousand naira bills, a hundred thousand naira, from the look of it. “I look forward to meeting them one day.”

I contemplated refusing the money and insisting that I had no plans of going back on my decision not to return to him. But I knew that would only prolong the discussion more than was required. Besides, in my current situation, the money would come in very handy indeed.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the bundle and getting out of the car. I stood by as they drove off, to be sure they were leaving for sure, and as the car disappeared in the horizon, I knew exactly what I needed to do.

Dropping the money into the plastic bag, I reached into my pocket for my phone. In one deft movement, I unscrewed it and removed the SIM card. While I had no control of who visited me, I did have control over who could reach me. Now that he’d come to express his desire for me to return, he was sure to bombard me with calls pressuring me to change my mind. And I didn't trust myself not to buckle and give in to temptation. I didn't trust myself not to yield when I got the inevitable call from someone ‘checking on’ me or inviting me to a party, hangout or any other place I

didn't need to be. If I was serious about starting afresh, I had to severe all ties to my past.

And throwing away the SIM card, that was the very last one.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BUT STARTING AFRESH was to prove much harder than I expected.

In the weeks that followed, even though I was able to achieve the communication blackout that I wanted, I soon found myself at the center of high society gossip, with exaggerated accounts of my breakup with Rahim all over the blogs. There were so many versions, it was hard to keep up; from Rahim finding me in bed with another man, to being caught stealing from him, to me issuing him ultimatums to marry me or else, they were so creatively spun, I was almost tempted to believe them. But the common thread they all had was of me being kicked out of the luxury apartment with pretty much only the clothes on my back. At first, I suspected Rahim's PR machinery for being behind the leak, but the varied insinuations and postulations made me decide otherwise. If he'd been behind the stories, they would have been more accurate, and Diekola wouldn't have been spared either. But thankfully, there was no mention of his name. Not even when the original story of being dumped by Rahim morphed into several stories about my escapades over the years. The comment sections of these posts were agog with people who knew about some guy or the other I'd snatched from some woman, or some rich guy who'd taken me on the same cruise his family was on, or how I'd been up to such antics as far back as my University days. It didn't take long for the blogs to latch on to these stories and run with them, and for weeks after, you couldn't open any of them, web or social media blogs, without reading at least three stories about me, stories about my dalliances with more men than I could count, stories that were mostly true. So much for not wanting to break the Internet!

This put paid to my prior desire to find a way to reach out to the four people I now considered my best friends; Isioma, Ozioma, Ginika and Ara. After destroying my old SIM card, I planned to contact them from my new number, to let them know I was okay. But when the scandalous stories

started to break day after day, I decided against it. Painful as it was, it was really for the best. It was bad enough that a few of the stories referenced my relationship with the almighty Karibi Graham-Hart's new wife. The fewer people that were dragged into the dark hole with me, the better.

I could only imagine how justified Diekola's family would be now, and I was certain even he would be relieved things had ended when they had.

So I retreated deeper into the shell I'd created for myself, building my life only around my father, sisters and nieces. I took over most of the domestic chores from Agnes, the school run from Ibilola and Osaze, and spent the rest of the day in my father's company; sitting with him on the balcony and chatting idly about nothing in particular, watching his favorite *Telemundo* shows and complaining about all the awful things going on in the world as we watched the evening news. I created for myself a bubble of security, and I was happy to remain safely tucked inside it.

I was able to sell my jewellery and, even though I knew I hadn't exactly gotten their fair market value, I got enough for me to start planning for the future because, comfortable though I was in my bubble, I knew I couldn't remain there forever.

"You should come over here," Ibukun repeatedly suggested. "You could start a program at the University College here. Elvis has a few friends there and getting you in shouldn't be hard."

As grateful as I was for that suggestion, my heart was set on going somewhere I could have a completely fresh start. I was also wary about striking the right balance between my plans and the associated costs, as I didn't want to spend everything I had without at least leaving money behind for my father.

I didn't plan to leave before the end of the year, so there was more than enough time to decide what my next move would be.

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But I should have known my friends wouldn't allow me remain in my self-created bubble forever.

I was sitting with my father on the balcony one Saturday morning towards the end of August, when I recognized the bright red Toyota Rav-4 making its way down the street. It was Ozioma.

Rising to my feet as she got out of the driver's seat, as our eyes met, she shook her head, her face a mix of anger and relief.

"You this girl, *ehn* !" she exclaimed, her voice loud as usual as she wagged a finger. "You want to give us heart attack, *okwiya* ?"

"Madam, no noise! This is a residential area," I answered, laughing, never happier to see her.

I was downstairs in a matter of seconds, and from the moment I opened the gate, she threw her arms around me, suffocating me in a deep embrace. As we hugged, a lump rose in my throat, emotional over the reunion with my friend.

"Ife, you almost killed us with worry," she said, as we pulled apart, the tears swimming in her eyes showing I wasn't the only emotional one.

"I'm sorry," was all I could manage to say in response.

But once inside and after introducing her to my father, sitting in the living room, I had to satisfy my curiosity. "How did you find me?"

She hissed and shook her head. "Ife, I should really smack you for this stunt you pulled," she answered. "When your gist suddenly became a hot news item everywhere, I decided to reach out to you. I actually wasn't surprised when your phone was switched off and thought maybe you'd travelled or something. But Isioma, bless her, was literally climbing the walls with worry. With all the stories about how badly that Rahim man treated you, she was convinced something more sinister had happened. She made me go check your school, and when I got there and heard you'd resigned, even I too started to panic. It was like you'd just vanished into thin air," she shrugged. "It occurred to me that you might have decided to return home, and the only person I could think of who knew you far back enough to know your address, was Moyo. So I went to see her."

My eyes widened. "You did?"

“I tried to go through my friend, but that one didn't want to get involved. So I got her number from another mutual friend and went to see her. She’s the one who told me how to find you.”

I nodded and smiled, surprised that my one-time nemesis had done me not one, but two favours.

“Before we go too far, let me call Isioma. She made me promise to call if I found you here,” Ozioma said, reaching for her phone.

The call was answered after barely ringing once, as if the person on the other end had been staring at the phone, willing it to ring.

“Did you see her? Is she there?” came Isioma’s panicked voice.

“Hey, babe,” I called out, smiling even though I was overcome by emotion hearing the extent of my friend’s love.

“Ife! Ife, why did you just disappear like that?” Isioma wailed, bursting into tears. “Do you know all the awful things I’ve thought of? All the horrible things I imagined happened to you?”

“I’m so sorry, babe. Everything happened so quickly,” I answered, my own voice now shaking as tears streamed down my face.

With Isioma still on the phone, and an equally teary Ozioma holding my hand, I told them everything; Olumide’s blackmail, my decision to get the money from Rahim before leaving him for good, Rahim finding out about me bringing Diekola to the apartment, the breakup with Diekola, and Moyo thwarting her husband’s evil plan.

“Babe, you should have told me that fool was blackmailing you!” Ozioma exclaimed, incensed. “I would have finished that guy, and I don't just mean legally. I know enough people in town who would have fucked him up so badly, he’s the one that would have been begging.”

“And even if you decided to give him the money, you could have called me, Ife,” Isioma cut in. “Karibi would have been able to help.”

I smiled ruefully, regretful I hadn’t trusted my friends enough to confide in. Maybe if I had, my whole world wouldn't have imploded the way it had.

“And it was Moyo who destroyed the video in the end?” Ozioma remarked, shaking her head in amazement. “Wonders will never end! Someone that wanted your head on a platter only a few months back.”

I shrugged. “Turns out, all she wanted was her husband back.”

“Was it the Rahim guy that leaked those stories to the press?” Isioma asked.

“I believe it was one of your neighbours,” Ozioma answered before I had a chance to. “If it had come from the man himself, the stories would have been consistent, not having several different heads and tails,” she shrugged. “It’s just unfortunate that the blogs decided to unearth all the other stories.”

There was silence as we all pondered over the several salacious stories. One thing was for certain; my reputation was shot to pieces…permanently.

“Babe, don’t worry about a thing,” Ozioma said, placing a comforting hand over mine. “Very soon, it will all blow over. As a matter of fact, it’s the story of Doro Laguda’s new baby mama everyone is talking about now.”

I smiled, appreciative of her attempt to make me feel better. While she may or may not have been correct, I was comforted that she cared enough to try. After speaking with Isioma, she made similar calls to Ara and Ginika, both of whom had also been worried about me, and I was comforted knowing that their friendship ran deeper than anything I ever could have imagined.

“I applaud you for walking away from it all,” Ozioma said, as we sipped on soda, after we were done speaking with the girls on the phone. “That took guts.”

I shrugged, remembering anew the pain that came from losing the most beautiful love I’d ever experienced, and didn't feel quite so brave.

“But the peace and quiet suits you though,” Ozioma remarked. “You look good.”

“And several kilograms heavier!” I retorted, with an eye roll.

“And whoever said that’s a bad thing?” she laughed in response, prompting laughter from me as well. “Seriously though, it only looks like a couple or so extra kilos, and it’s made you even more luscious and attractive than before.”

“ *Na so* !” I tittered. “Anyway, about Moyo. I’m still so shocked about the turn around with her.”

“I know, right!” she exclaimed. “She’s actually doing better for herself now. She got a job with the Lagos State Government and has started selling human hair on the side. She already has a reasonable following on Instagram.”

I nodded, impressed but not surprised Moyo had been able to quickly pick herself up.

“As for Olumide, I heard he’s converted his car to an Uber. Foolish, lazy man!” Ozioma cackled, with more than a little malice. After what he’d done to me, it was a whole lot more than he deserved.

“So, how is Onochie?” I asked, eager to change the topic. “How goes it with Mr. NFL?”

“Fantastic!” she answered, beaming. “I finally made it to Atlanta earlier this month.”

I clasped my hands in glee. “You guys finally met? It wasn't a catfish?”

“No catfish, but still a very big fish,” she answered, with an exaggerated wink. “In the flesh, he’s even more handsome and his wealth *no be audio o* , my sister! The guy is swimming in money!”

I smiled at her, genuinely happy that, finally, after all the false starts, she was getting her happy ever after. “So, what next?”

“We’re still talking, and he’s said he’ll be home this Christmas,” she gushed. “I suspect his people might want to meet mine then.”

“I’m so happy for you,” I said hugging her, feeling both glad and wistful at the same time, reminded that soon, I’d be the only one unattached.

She pulled away and looked at me intently. “Ife, for a woman as assertive as you are, you let Diekola go without any fight at all.”

I smiled and shook my head, knowing there was no way she could ever understand. “Ozi, sometimes, you just have to know when to let go. There was too much opposition from the people around him…”

“But you yourself just told us how he was always fighting for you, defending you!”

“For how long would he have, Ozioma? Even the best of men would soon tire of having to repair something he had no hand in breaking,” I sighed and shook my head. “And that was when it was only just gist, before every sordid story from my past was spread out in the open like a bad sore. Can you imagine how much more opposed they would be to me…to us, now? He’s better off finding someone else.”

Ozioma’s gaze remained on me for a while, and I could see she wasn't convinced. But rather than push, she shrugged and decided to change the course of the discussion. “So, what are your plans? How much longer do you want to stay here?”

“I plan to leave the country after Christmas, go somewhere and start over. My older sister wants me to come to Dublin, but I’m actually thinking of somewhere more anonymous. Maybe Paris or somewhere like that,” I shrugged again. “I’m still trying to decide.”

“You still have time,” Ozioma said, squeezing my hand. “Don’t worry. All will end well.”

Squeezing back, all I could do was echo that prayer. All had to end well. It just had to.

Later that evening, long after Ozioma had left, Isioma called me on the new phone number I’d shared with them.

“When we couldn't find you, when it was like you’d vanished without a trace, never was I more frustrated about this delay with my passport. I would have been in Lagos to personally search for you myself,” she said, still sounding emotional. “Ife, I know I messed up a few months ago, but I hope you know I’ll be there for you no matter what. I hope you know that I will always, always, have your back. Never think you can’t talk to me, Ife. Promise me.”

“I promise,” I answered, smiling, understanding how deeply hurt she was, knowing all I’d had to endure alone. “How is Diekola?” I finally found the courage to ask.

“From the little I know, he’s back in New York,” she answered. “He did tell Karibi you two had broken up, but that’s about all he’s said.”

I wanted to ask so many questions; if he was still hurting, if he’d already met someone, if he hated the mere mention of my name, but I didn't have the courage to hear the answers to any of those questions.

“Our wedding reception is planned for November, but as soon as my passport is out, I’ll be there in Lagos to see you face-to-face, to hug you properly so you can see in my eyes that I love you and I’m here for you, through thick and thin.”

“I don't need to see you face-to-face to know you’re my ride or die!” I laughed. “My besto for life.”

“And never you forget that!” she answered, before hesitating. “We just found out we’re expecting a baby.”

I let out a delighted squeal, thrilled by the news. “Oh my goodness! Congratulations! I’m so happy for you two. Karibi must be so thrilled!”

“He’s been walking on clouds since we found out yesterday,” she answered. “We’re not sharing the news yet. You’re the first person I’m telling. I can’t keep this kind of thing from you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I said, heart warmed, the significance of her confidence not lost on me.

“He’s already started implying that we might have to cancel the Lagos party, and I’ve told him not to try himself!” she giggled.

“But he might have a point though. Will you be able to manage?”

“I’ll be in my second trimester by then, so it shouldn't be a problem,” she answered. “Girl, don't join those raining on my parade *o* ! I need that party *abeg* !”

“Okay *o* ! Lagos party loading then,” I laughed. “Just let me know whatever it is you need me to do, and I’ll be at your service.”

We chatted about the plans her mother-in-law already had in place for the grand Lagos party, and lying in bed after the call was over, as excited as I was about the impending bash, I was also worried about showing my face

again in the Lagos high society, worried that my presence at her party would ruin it for her.

And I suddenly wasn't sure if attending would be a good idea.

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But I didn't have enough time for that notion to take root.

Less than three weeks later, in early September, Isioma showed up in my father's house.

"My passport came out yesterday morning!" she declared, as we embraced. "I told Karibi that if he didn't want *wahala* , I had to be on a flight out of town that very night. I arrived this morning."

"This woman, you're crazy *o* !" I exclaimed, embracing my friend again.

Pulling apart, we giggled as we looked at each other for the first time in over a year. She had the glow of a woman at peace with life, her slightly fuller cheeks the only evidence of her pregnancy.

"You look so beautiful! Karibi is taking good care of you!" I remarked, meaning it. No matter what I felt about her husband, that he was making her happy was very evident.

"He is," she gushed, as we walked into the house. "Of course, it's hard with him having to shuttle between Lagos and London, but thank God that will soon be over. By the time we have the reception, I'd have handed in my dissertation in school, so I'll be back here in Lagos with him. In fact, one of the reasons I'm here is to have a look at the new house he just bought. That's where we'll live."

"You don't want to live in that his famous bachelor pad?" I teased.

"Lord no! That place that was once a revolving door for women? No, thank you," Isioma laughed, as we took our seat in the living room. "New house, new start."

I smiled wistfully, remembering when that had been the same thing I'd longed for with Diekola.

"I heard he really loved you," she said, recognizing the look in my eyes. "I heard he had eyes only for you when you guys were in Rio."

“He did,” I answered, nostalgic. “It was beautiful. He didn't care about my flaws, my imperfections, my past. He loved me for me, and those few months with him were the best of my life. He was my soul mate and I know I will never find another love like that. One can only be so lucky once in life.”

“Then why don't you call him? I could get his phone number from Karibi? You guys could…”

I shook my head. “No, babes. It’s best this way.”

My voice was firm enough to communicate my desire not to discuss the topic any further, and we were soon talking about the reception, a little over two months away. I didn't have the heart to tell her I was considering not attending.

“I promised Karibi I wouldn't stay long,” she said, after we'd chatted for about an hour. “I literally just dropped my suitcase before getting back into the car to head over here.”

“How long are you going to be in town?”

“Only a few days. I have to go back so I can continue working on my dissertation, especially if I want to be able to hand it in before the party,” then with a wide smile. “Babes, come with me. Come, so I can show you our new place.”

I balked at the suggestion. Since returning home, I hadn’t as much as ventured to Ikeja, talk less of all the way to the island.

“Ife, you can’t hide here forever,” Isioma remarked, astute as ever. “Go on and get dressed. I’ll wait for you.”

And then I saw what she was really doing. Her invitation was less about showing me her house than demonstrating to me, and indeed anyone we came across, that she well and truly had my back.

“I’ll go change,” I said, smiling.

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The drive to their Alexander Drive home took a little under an hour, as we were now against traffic. Getting to the house, I smiled as the car entered

the compound, thinking it was nothing less than what I expected Karibi's new home to look like. A large two-storey building, complete with gables, dormers, a screened-in front porch, a free-standing garage and gazebo, and a garden that seemed to stretch on to infinity…it was truly a masterpiece.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

"Ara helped a lot with the reconstruction. It looked nothing like this when he bought it," Isioma said, unable to contain her pride.

Walking into the house, it was just as spectacular as the exterior, with its polished wood floors and an elegant banister that curved up toward a soaring second floor gallery. Large arched windows let in a good dose of sunlight, illuminating the sweet-toffee browns of the wooden floor, and the walls were a kaleidoscope of the couple's memories, adorned with photographs, each of which conjured the emotions of the sweet eternal moments that were captured. I smiled as I looked at the pictures; him in a dapper navy blue suit and her in a champagne coloured tiered tulle dress with red roses in her hair on their wedding day; both of them laughing as he carried her over what looked to be the threshold of his family house in London; them pictured from behind, holding hands on the beach; them dancing forehead-to-forehead and looking at each other like there was no one else in the world. And as many as the pictures were, there was still enough space for pictures of their now growing family.

The living room itself was no less spectacular. With a high ceiling, white and claret coloured sofas contrasted by brightly floral ottomans and an alpaca rug and floor cushions covered in Dedar velvet, all in the same colour pallete, fringed side chairs in a dusty pink, a cube-shaped glass coffee table, a Victorian-styled mantelpiece, a silver pendulum chandelier, a 1930's French orange lacquer sideboard, an Indian antique bench, a Keralese tiger sculpture, it was the perfect combination of elegant and eclectic.

"Wow, Isioma," I marveled. "This place is beautiful."

"Thank you. Karibi wanted us to use a professional decorator, but eventually allowed me do it myself," she answered, very proud of her work. "I started buying pieces right after we got engaged. But I've only been able

to finish the living room, our bedroom and the kitchen. After the reception, I'll work on the nursery, the family den upstairs and maybe a guest room. Everywhere else will have to wait till after the baby gets here."

"Babe, you need to consider making a business out of this," I remarked. "It couldn't have looked better if a professional decorator had been hired to do it."

"We'll see," she shrugged, before smiling. "Are you hungry? Our cook is fantastic. I could ask him to make us something to snack on."

And just like that, the sadness that had been my silent, but ever present, companion for months, reared its head. "Joseph?" I asked.

Isioma's smile waned as realization dawned. "Ah yes, he was with Diekola for a while, since Karibi was spending more time in London at the time," she placed her hand on my arm. "That was insensitive of me. I'm so sorry."

"Nonsense," I forced myself to smile. "And yes, I'd love nothing better than to feast on one of his delicacies. His smoky *jollof* rice is to die for!"

"Girl, you're still able to read my mind!" she giggled, walking away. "I'll be right back. Let me go hook us up."

I took a seat on one of the sofas, looking around the room, still in awe that my friend had decorated it herself. Too vividly, I could remember visiting her in the very modest apartment she shared with her mother and siblings in Yaba. If only she'd known back then what beautiful things the future had in store for her! She most surely would have worried a whole lot less, and just gone with the flow of life, confident she would reach her destination in the end. That was what I used as my consolation, sitting there in that beautiful living room. If someone had told me this time last year that I'd be back home in Dopemu, stripped off the luxury life I'd grown accustomed to, I wouldn't have believed it. Likewise, there was no telling what still lay ahead for me. There was no telling what my own story would be in another year or two. All I could do was hope and pray it would be better than my today.

Footsteps made me look up, and my stomach dropped when Karibi walked into the living room. Suddenly uncomfortable, I rose to my feet.

“Good evening. I was just waiting for Isioma…”

“Please, do sit, Ife,” he said, a kind smile on his face. “As a matter of fact, I’m glad you’re here.”

I raised a brow in question, but said nothing in response. If our last meeting was anything to go by, ‘glad’ was the least thing I expected him to feel upon seeing me.

“First of all, thank you so much for all your help with the traditional wedding,” he began. “I was told how helpful you were to my in-laws in putting the ceremony together, so thank you. I apologise that it’s belated.”

I shrugged. “You don't have to thank me. Isioma is like a sister to me.”

He nodded in acknowledgment and was quiet for a while, long enough for me to cast longing looks towards the hallway my friend had disappeared into, wishing she could return to quell the awkwardness.

“Also, and from the bottom of my heart, I would like to apologise for the things I said to you in Rio,” he continued. “I was disrespectful to you, I was disrespectful to my wife…and I was disrespectful to Diekola. Regardless of what I had or hadn’t heard, I should have trusted my wife’s judgment for choosing you as her closest friend, and I should have trusted Diekola’s judgment for choosing you as the woman he wanted to give his heart to. I apologise.”

I looked at him, confused. I searched for mock and scorn in his eyes, but all I saw was sincerity. “But you weren’t wrong. Everything you said was true. You had every right to protect him.”

“True but, just like you said, everyone has a past,” he answered. “I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of. Imagine if Isioma had turned me down because of all the things I did after my last serious relationship ended.”

I smiled, happy for the temporary distraction that was the memory of his ill-fated engagement to Erinkan, Ara’s older sister.

“Thank you very much for this, Karibi,” I said to him, feeling like a heavy weight had been lifted off me. “It really means a lot.”

“It means a lot to me too,” he said, before smiling. “You look well. Very well rested.”

“Thank you,” I beamed, reveling in the compliment. “Retreating from the Lagos social scene has its benefits.”

His smile faded as his gaze deepened. “I was wrong about you, Ife. Very wrong. Not many people would have walked away from a man like Rahim Sukai without looking back.”

I chuckled. “Well, according to the blogs, I was thrown out on the streets, dumped like yesterday’s garbage.”

“We both know that wasn't the case.”

“Oh, but it was. He did throw me out, and with only a small suitcase.”

A knowing smile crossed his face. “Ife, I have it on good record that he was desperate to marry you, and that you were the one who turned him down several times.”

My own laughter faded with the realization of how interlinked these people were.

“What I regret most is seeing Diekola retreat even deeper into himself than he did even after Boma died,” he continued. “We all looked forward to the day he would find love and happiness...but we were all too blind to see when he finally did.”

And the pain returned. “How is he?”

He shrugged. “Just back to being the withdrawn man we didn’t want him to be,” he smiled and shook his head. “Not even when he was with Boma did I see him as happy and excited as he was in Rio. And from what I’ve heard from the people who saw him in Lagos, he was a totally different person; happy, lively, vivacious. And it was all because of you. Now, it’s back to square one. He’s even informed me he won’t be able to make it for the party in November. I reckon it’ll be too hard for him.”

I bit my lip, fighting back the tears that threatened. Hearing that he wasn't doing well didn't please me. Quite the contrary, it broke my heart.

“Ah, good!” came Isioma’s voice, as she walked into the room. “I hope you’ve apologized like you said you would.”

Karibi and I shared a smile before he turned to his wife. “Yes, Ma’am. Just like you ordered, Ma’am,” then turning back to me, still smiling. “Ife and I have ironed out our differences.”

The atmosphere remained congenial even as we dined on a meal of smoky jollof rice and goat meat stew from Joseph’s kitchen, but through all the chatter and laughter, thoughts of Diekola still weighed heavily on my mind.

Time had done nothing to diminish the way I felt about him.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

ALL TOO SOON, it was November and mere days to the reception.

“Can someone explain to me again why Isioma isn’t arriving until Thursday? How are we expected to plan anything for her in forty-eight hours?” Ginika ranted.

The four us, Ginika, Ara, Ozioma and I, were on a conference call, trying to figure out how to celebrate our friend. Having played a major part in the wedding festivities for both Ginika and Ara, Isioma deserved just as wonderful send-offs as they’d had. But with so little time, it was already proving difficult.

“She arrives in the morning, so maybe something that Thursday night?” Ara asked.

“ *Eldabra* is hosting them to dinner that night,” I answered, remembering the *soiree* Karibi’s company, and the place where their love story began, was hosting for them, a party I’d been invited to but wouldn't be attending.

“And Friday is cutting it too close, right?” Ara asked, her frustration showing in her voice.

“They have five dinner parties that Friday alone,” I chuckled. Karibi’s friends had been falling over themselves to host the couple. From what I gathered, there were more than five dinner parties planned for that evening, the others the couple sadly wouldn't be able to attend.

“ *Na wa o* !” Ozioma remarked, also exasperated. “Is this how we’ll be filling form to see her because she’s married to Mr. Hot Shot Karibi?”

“Girl, don’t talk rubbish!” I laughed. “We can always take her out after the reception. They’ll be back here in Lagos when they’re home from their honeymoon.”

“How many honeymoons are people even allowed to have *sef* ?” Ginika retorted. “Didn’t they go for one after the wedding they refused to invite anyone for?”

I smiled to myself, not bothering to let her know there’d been yet another getaway, this time to Isioma’s great grandmother’s York home, after the traditional ceremony.

“They can go for hundred if they like. God knows my man and I are going to have a whole lot more than one,” Ozioma quipped, with an exaggerated wink.

“ *Na so* ,” Ginika scoffed.

“How’s Mr. Onochie?” I asked, happy for the distraction and even happier that my friend’s relationship was still waxing strong, months later.

“He’s perfect! God just saved the best for last, I tell you,” she cooed. “I told you guys he’s coming home for Christmas, right? And that he’ll very likely see my parents.”

“Has he told you that? Madam Very Likely!” Ginika retorted.

“ *Dey there dey look film* ,” her equally snarky cousin retorted. “My traditional wedding is next April, so if you like, don’t say you weren’t informed on time.”

“ *O! I don hear* .”

“He’s asked me to attend his sister’s birthday party on Wednesday. She’s turning fifty,” Ozioma went on. “He wants me to go there and meet his whole family. Does that sound like someone who isn’t serious?”

“Oh, wow!” Ara remarked. “That *is* huge. If he’s introducing you to his family, it must be serious.”

“ *Na today* ?” Ginika cackled. “Do you know how many other women he has ‘sent to meet his family’? *Nn* e, when he asks you for your hand in marriage, then we can talk. Until then, *everything na audio, abeg* !”

“Girls, focus please!” Ara cut in. “Look, I think we have to accept the fact that we won’t be able to do anything for her before Saturday’s party. Ife

knows her itinerary better than any of us, and if even she is suggesting we wait till after their honeymoon, then we wait, I guess."

"But won't she be too heavy by that time?" Ozioma exclaimed. A few weeks into her second trimester, Isioma's pregnancy was no longer a secret.

"I don't think so, but even if it is, we could as well throw her a baby shower at once," I teased. "Heck, I could even host it here."

"You know, that's actually not a bad idea," Ozioma mused. "Your house is really spacious, not to mention that beautiful garden of yours with those gorgeous flowers…"

"You and who?" Ginika cut in. "No offence, Ife, but count me out of going all that way *o* ! I hear it's even further away than Isioma's uncle's house."

"Much further away!" I laughed, enjoying teasing her.

"I actually think it's something to consider," Ara said. "I'd love to be able to see you again after so long, especially now that you have plans to leave the country."

"All the more reason why we have to hurry up with this thing for Isioma!" Ozioma exclaimed. "Ife, you leave before Christmas, don't you?"

"No, plans changed a little," I answered. After missing so many Christmases with my family, I'd decided to spend that last one with them before leaving. "I leave for Dublin in January, and from there I'll head for whatever school offers me admission, admission that comes with some form of Graduate Assistant Job. A tall order for someone who barely made a Second Class Lower."

"You'll get it, don't worry," Ozioma said in reassurance. "So, it's settled. Isioma and Karibi should be back in early December, last last, so we should do something for them then."

"That very week, if possible, before they leave for London for Christmas," I said, remembering what Isioma had told me.

" *Na wa for hard to pin down o* !" Ozioma exclaimed. "Okay then, the weekend after they return, we have a bridal slash baby shower for her, and Ife is hosting. It'll also double as a farewell party for her. So, Madam Gigi, if you like don't come!"

I laughed as I listened to the cousins banter, thinking to myself how much I was going to miss them…all of them. I was also happy about the opportunity of hosting them before leaving to start my new life. Yes, we would keep in touch, but things would never be the same. The way Ozioma and her new boyfriend were going, in a few months, she too would be married, and that would put paid to our unofficial fab five-some.

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I spent the next few days working fervently on my university applications, not only to schools in and around Dublin, but also in France, Belgium and The Netherlands. I didn't even worry about the language barriers associated with the latter options. In addition to hoping for some sort of scholarship or graduate assistance, as much as I wanted to be with my sister, I also craved starting life again, somewhere as far removed from my old one as possible.

I was in the middle of completing my application to the University of Montpellier, when I remembered it was Wednesday and the day Ozioma was to meet her prospective in-laws. Smiling, I reached for my phone.

Good luck today, babes. Charm them your usual way!

My smile widened when I saw that she was already typing a response seconds after my message delivered.

I'm shitting bricks here. I'm so nervous! I've turned my closet inside out trying to find something to wear. What do you even wear to meet in-laws for the first time?

I shook my head as I replied. ***Babe, don't overthink it. Just be yourself. They'll love you. They have no choice.***

Thanks. I'll send you a picture when I eventually decide on what to wear.

I put my phone down, not wanting to distract her any further, or myself, as a matter of fact. I needed all my applications sent off before December, if I wanted to get in for the Spring Term.

I was struggling with my essay, wondering if writing it in English would count against me, when there was a knock on my door. Agnes peered in.

"Someone is here to see you," she stated in her usual matter-of-fact way, before immediately closing the door.

I shook my head and chuckled at my father’s long time maid. I’d come to realise that her curt, almost abrasive way, wasn't her being rude, but just her personality. She preferred to be at work and didn't like to tarry. The only people who brought out the soft side of her were the girls none of us could resist, Esosa and Osasu. Once in a while, she spared a smile for the old man, but for everyone else, it was monosyllables and a poker face.

Rising to my feet, I picked up my wallet from my bedside table so I could pay the Plumber I’d called to fix the toilet in my father’s bedroom. He’d said he’d return, and that was about the time I was expecting him.

But it wasn't him.

As I descended the stairs leading to the living room, as the smell of musky vanilla grew stronger and stronger, my heart already knew he was there.

Diekola.

He rose to his feet when he saw me and for a few seconds, neither of us said a word.

“Wow, what a surprise!” I finally broke the silence, taking tentative steps towards him. We embraced awkwardly and I could see that he was just as nervous as I was.

“It’s good to see you, Ife,” he said, a fleeting smile appearing and leaving just as quickly, like he too didn't know what to do with his face.

“Sit, please,” I said, doing the same, as my legs were fast turning to lead and unable to support me any further. “You’re here for the reception? I didn't think you were coming.”

He shrugged as he took his seat again. “There’s no way I could have missed it. Karibi is like a kid brother to me.”

We sat in some more awkward silence.

“I knew I had to make it for the party,” he finally said. “And I also had to see you. You look well,” he added, smiling again, but this time not as fleetingly.

“If by well, you mean fat, then, yeah,” I chuckled, extremely self aware of my messy hair and the faded dress I wore, a green jersey dress that still

hung in my closet a decade after I'd left home but which was still as comfortable as ever. "Hazard of being home all day, every day."

"By well, I mean well, Ifedayo," he answered, still smiling. "You look beautiful, as always."

Hearing him say my name with his typical drawl pleased and saddened me at the same time. Seeing him again, looking at the man I had spent the better part of the last four months missing, brought a lump to my throat.

"You don't look bad yourself," I said, and meaning it. Even though not as lean as the last time I'd seen him, in a plain white Ralph Lauren shirt over blue jeans, he was even more handsome than I remembered. "How've you been?"

He shrugged. "Back to school and back to normal life, I guess," was his evasive answer. "And you? How have you been?"

Looking at him, I knew there was no way I could be as evasive. "Missing you. Missing you everyday. Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought about you…about us."

He lowered his eyes and the rapid movement of his Adam's apple was the only indication he'd heard me. "But you broke us," he finally said, looking up at me. "You broke us. I would have gone to the moon and back for you, but you chose to break us."

"You deserved so much better than me, Diekola…"

"Don't tell me what I deserved!" he said, his voice higher than I'd ever heard it. "I'm sick and tired of everyone believing they know what I deserve. I was head over heels in love with you," he looked away before finally turning back to me, " *am* head over heels in love with you. I've longed for you every second of every minute of every hour of every day we've been apart, wishing back the time we spent in each other's company, wishing back the happiness that came from having you by my side. Surely, *that's* what I deserve."

Our eyes held, and in his I saw the same desolation and despair I knew he could see in mine. He was just as broken as I was.

“Leaving you was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. It wouldn't have hurt more if I’d physically torn open my chest and ripped my heart out,” I said, doing everything I could to keep from crying. “But it was something I had to do.”

“Why? Why, Ife?” he demanded. “I told you so many times that what people said didn't matter. I showed you how committed I was to building a future with you. How much more could I have shown you that the only thing I cared about was being with you?”

“Give me a minute. There’s something I have to show you,” I said, rising to my feet and walking out of the living room.

Making my way up the stairs, my heart pounded hard against my chest as I contemplated the brazenness of what I was about to do. It wasn’t only audacious, it was downright foolish. But it was something that had to be done.

“This,” I said, walking back into the living room, the flash drive Moyo had retrieved for me, in my hand, “has the video I told you about, the one with me having sex with five men, the one Olumide used to blackmail me. It was supposed to have been leaked to the blogs the very day after I left your house,” I shook my head and smiled. “But in the most unlikely turn of events, his wife, of all people, thwarted his plans. She destroyed his copies of the video and saved it on this flash drive for me. As far as we know, this is the only place the video exists in the whole wide world.”

His gaze didn't waver. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I want you to watch it,” I said, handing it to him. “I want you to watch it and see the kind of person I once was, and still even might be, who knows? I want you to watch it, as vile and horrible as it is, and if afterwards you still want to be with me, then we can talk.”

He took the flash drive from me, his eyes never leaving mine. Then reaching for his pocket, he brought out a lighter, struck the sparkwheel and put the flash drive over the yellow flame, eliciting a gasp from me.

“I guess some good has come out of me returning to my bad smoking habit,” he chuckled, as the hitherto bright silver of the connector began to darken.

“Diekola, what are you doing?”

He didn't answer and we sat in silence as the device burned for a good ten minutes, but with little material damage save for a darkened and slightly bent connector. When he was satisfied, he took it off the flame, put it in his handkerchief and handed it to me.

“These things are sturdier than they look,” he chuckled. “Destroy it. Throw it away or flush it down the toilet. It means nothing to me.”

I gaped at him, unable to properly grasp what he’d just done. In all the time that had passed since Moyo brought me the flash drive, I’d kept it in my bedside drawer, looking at it every night before going to bed, unable to destroy it. Even though the threat from Olumide had passed, the guilt from that fateful night years before, and other similar nights, still hung around my neck like dead weight, and on some level, I still felt I deserved some kind of punishment for it all. But in mere minutes, Diekola had put paid to that.

“Why?” was all I could manage to ask.

“Because I don’t want to see it. I don't need to,” he said, taking my hands in his. “You’re not that woman any more. It doesn't matter to me anything you did before I set my eyes on you on the beautiful island of Bora Bora. The only thing that matters to me is making you believe and trust in the love we have,” he tilted up my face. “I love you, Ifedayo. And nothing is ever going to change that.”

And for the first time, I believed it. For the very first time, I saw, truly saw, the depth of his love.

As our eyes held, I knew that the safety I felt with him had been no illusion. I knew that as long as I had him on my side, I had nothing to worry about. I knew that he would always remain my safe place and that his love would always be my valour…my virtue. With that love, I…we…didn't need anything else.

We were inches away from a kiss when footsteps in the direction of the room made us pull apart. My all-knowing father was already smiling before he entered the room.

Upon sighting him, Diekola prostrated flat on the floor. “Good afternoon, Sir.”

“Good afternoon, young man,” the old man smiled first at me, and then at the man lying before him. “Diekola, is it? Please, get up, get up.” When Diekola was seated, my father turned again to me. “Ifedayo, why aren’t we entertaining our visitor? Please get him some wine,” he turned to Diekola. “I have some fine Chardonnay my other son-in-law got me from South Africa last year.”

It wasn't lost on any of us that he’d indirectly referred to Diekola as a son-in-law.

Long after the said wine was served, I sat back and watched as the two men talked, first about Diekola’s switch to the academia later in life, then their shared experiences of growing up as campus children, and then comparing Nigeria of the past to its dire current situation. Nobody would have believed the two men had met for the first time only that afternoon.

After what seemed like forever, but in fact was just a little over an hour later, my father rose to his feet, smiling like the cat that had gotten *all* the cream.

“It’s time for *Deal or No Deal* . I’ll go watch it in my room, so I don't disturb you two,” he said, beaming. “I look forward to seeing more of you, Diekola.”

Diekola rose in deference and bowed his head. “You most surely will, Sir.”

We remained standing until the old man’s footsteps faded away, after which we turned to look at each other.

“Where were we?” he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes, as his lips claimed mine in the most glorious of kisses.

It still wasn’t clear if I’d dreamed that moment to life, and my eyes remained half open, just to make sure the kiss, and him being there, weren’t a figment of my imagination. But the warmth of his breath, the stirring of every single nerve there was in my body, the unfurling of all my senses, the levitation that felt like we were floating in air, were proof that this was no dream.

My love had returned to me. And this time, I was never, ever letting go. No matter what the rest of the world had to say about it.

“So,” he said, when we finally pulled ourselves away from each other. “Will you be my plus one?”

“For the reception?”

He smiled at me. “I was thinking more like forever.”

The End.

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PREVIEW: GINIKA'S BRIDESMAIDS BOOK FOUR: OZIOMA

FINALLY, AFTER UPTURNING my entire closet, with half of it on my bed and even the floor, I finally settled on a black rouched dress with lace sleeves. It wasn't my usual style and would never have been my first, second or even third choice, but after trying on pretty much everything else that would have, it was the only thing able to conceal my extra girth…and only just. Even with the heavy-duty waist trainer I wore, there was still a sizeable bulge. I stared with longing at the patterned jumpsuit I really would have loved to wear, but which now no longer zipped beyond my bottom, and I regretted being careless enough to lose my waist. I'd always been a big girl, but my small waist always kept things balanced. Now, I just looked like one big, shapeless blob.

"But you is still a fine beeyatch!" I said to my reflection in the mirror, blowing the crimson-lipped woman with the signature frizzy bob, a kiss. Yes, I was heavier than I liked but if it didn't matter to Onochie, it wouldn't matter to his family.

With a pout on my face, I took a picture and sent it to Ginika, Ara and Ife. It was time to get the party started.

" *Ọ bụ ihe ahụ ka ị na-eyi* ?" my mother asked, as I emerged from my room. "Is this what you want to wear? This dress that makes you look ten years older?"

Her curled upper lip showed her displeasure and I had to do everything I could not to laugh. At sixty-five, my mother, Maureen Ibezimako, was still a fashionista to the core. Even that evening with nowhere to go, she was dressed in a ruffled *Gucci* blouse over smart black pants, with a full face of

makeup. The woman was always ready to go, and we all got that from her, my sisters and I. Well, some of us more than the others. While my older sisters, Olaedo, Obioma and Ozinna were all like her, small, dainty and no heavier than 60 kilograms, my brothers and I were heavier set, like our dad. But I'd never let the fact I was larger than my sisters daunt me, and pushed the fashion envelope just as far as they did.

"What about that lovely blue jumpsuit that fits you so well? You know, the one with the floral pattern. Or the *Marchesa* dress Olaedo got you for Christmas?"

I shrugged and her pursed lips showed full understanding of what the shrug meant. Luckily, she didn't press further.

"Behave yourself, *ịna-anụ* ?" she said, patting down my curls. "This is not just you attending a party. He is sending you there for his people to assess you. Will his mother be there?"

I shook my head. From what he'd told me, his mother was with his youngest sister in London, helping her with her newborn baby.

My mother inhaled deeply, and I could see she was even more nervous than I was. At thirty-seven, I was over a decade older than all my sisters had been when they'd married, and both my parents were now extremely anxious.

" *Asa nwa* , relax!" I said, hugging my mother, using the term of endearment my father used for her. "They will love me, just like everyone does. And don't worry, I will buy new clothes to fit this my new body."

"Or you will lose weight, and fit back into your nice, old ones," she retorted.

"Someone is feisty this evening. That time of the month?" I teased, with an exaggerated wink.

" *Biko, pụọ* ," she laughed, giving me a playful push. "You better not get there and start talking nonsense."

"Yes Ma'am!" I laughed, walking away.

Once out in the compound, I got into my car and took a deep breath. Much as I tried to use humour to cover it, I was extremely nervous about meeting

the family of the man I hoped to marry. After all the several failed relationships and hook-ups, finally meeting Onochie in July had been a breath of fresh air. The strong connection we had over the phone had translated even better face-to-face. Muscular and standing over six-feet tall, he was the perfect fit for my own five-foot eleven frame. We had the same sense of humour and could talk for hours on end, not to mention that he had enough money to keep me nice and happy. Yes, I had a good job, but just like my father still did for my mother, I expected to be well taken care of by my man. It wasn't being materialistic. It was just being realistic. Add to that the fact he'd just turned forty-one, and that his village was only a ten-minute drive from mine, he ticked every single box on my wish list.

"Let's get this party started!" I said, setting Phyno's *High Way* to play on the sound system, pumping myself up. I had nothing at all to worry about.

I bobbed my head and sang along all through the drive from Lekki Phase One to his sister's Chevron Drive home, and by the time I got there, all my insecurities were forgotten. Yes, I wasn't looking as hot as I typically would have, but that didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

Parking outside the house, I wasn't surprised that it was as grand as it was. Even though he wasn't born into wealth and had been lucky to make it to the States on a sports scholarship, his oldest sister had married, and divorced, well. Between the two of them, they'd transformed the lives of their parents and siblings.

After quickly touching up my makeup, I reached for the large gift bag, which had the air fryer I'd bought her as a gift. It wasn't my preference to buy her an appliance, but Onochie had insisted that was what she'd like.

"Good evening, I'm here for Mrs. Celine's party," I said to the guard at the gate. "My name is Ozioma."

Upon hearing my name, he immediately let me in, giving me even more reassurance of their eagerness to meet me. I had a smile on my face, walking into the compound, which was already brimming with guests, smiling and nodding at anyone who made eye contact with me. Recognising a light-skinned woman from Onochie's Instagram page as one of his sisters, I walked up to her.

“Good evening. Uju?”

She nodded, a large smile on her face. “Yes, I’m Uju. Are you one of Celine’s friends? She’s inside the house.”

I laughed. “No, I’m Ozioma. Onochie’s girlfriend.”

The smile on her face vanished and her eyes widened in surprise. “You are Ozioma? You?”

My own smile waned as I answered with a hesitant nod. “Yes.”

Her eyes scanned me, all the way from my frizzy curls down to my strappy sandals, and a smile returned to her face. Except this one was more amused than friendly. I sucked in my stomach so hard, I wasn’t even breathing, but from the condescending look on her face, that hadn’t done much to help the situation.

“Come,” she said, walking ahead of me.

I followed her like a puppy, my confidence evaporating into thin air. As we approached the house, she waved over a woman sitting on a nearby table.

“This is the Ozioma,” she said when the woman walked up, the unmistakable sound of suppressed laughter in her voice.

The woman blinked several times, her long lashes fluttering like the wings of a bird about to take flight. “Stop joking!”

“I swear to God!” Uju laughed, no longer able to contain herself. “She just got here.”

My mouth parted in my surprise. These women weren’t even doing anything to hide their disdain.

“Ozioma, this is Kambi,” Uju finally composed herself to say. “Onochie’s longtime girlfriend.”

My brows raised and the Kambi laughed.

“Ex-girlfriend, my dear,” she laughed.

As she laughed, I took a better look at the tall, slender woman before me, who, in a fitted black sequin and lace mix dress, was not only pulling off the lace look much better than me, looked like she had just stepped right off

the runway. With flawless pecan-brown skin and legs that seemed to stretch to infinity, it was no wonder they were surprised by Onochie's new choice of woman. It also didn't help that she didn't look a day older than thirty.

"I'll see you later," Uju said to her. "Let me take her inside to meet Celine."

"Nice meeting you, Ozioma," Kambi waved as we walked away, the same amused smirk on her face.

As we resumed our walk to the house, I was angered not only about Onochie omitting to let me know his ex-girlfriend was still close to his family, but by the fact she thought I was clearly no match for her. And that stung.

Inside the grand house, it wasn't difficult to spot the celebrant, a willowy woman in a gold, layered tassel dress, and skin so pale, she could almost pass for Caucasian. The gold of her dress was only eclipsed by the gold of the heavy earrings, choker and bracelets she wore. She looked expensive and something told me that was how she looked everyday, birthday or not. Standing in the company of two women who looked just as high-maintenance as she did, she was laughing and clearly enjoying her day.

"Sis, she's here *o* ," Uju announced, the same mischief in her voice. "Onochie's babe."

All three women looked in my direction. One of them even sniggered.

" *Onye* ?" Celine asked, her pencil-thin brows raised. " *Nke a* ? Her?"

"Yes, her," Uju laughed. "The thing shock me too."

On a good day, I would have had so many comebacks, I would have injured them with my words. I would have had so many things to say in response to all their jibes, they would have been the ones reeling. But very unlike me, I found myself tongue-tied and unable to say anything in response.

"You are welcome, my dear," one of the ladies with Celine, the nicer of the two, smiled at me. "What's your name?"

"Ozioma," Celine answered, her eyes not leaving me, her wrinkled nose evidence of her displeasure and disappointment. "Ozioma Ibezimako. *Anslem Ibezimako bụ nna ya* ."

Her companions, especially the one who'd sniggered earlier on, looked impressed by the information that I was the daughter of the popular industrialist and philanthropist, Anslem Ibezimako,

"Happy birthday," I said, my tongue finally finding its freedom. "I got you a little something."

She made no move to accept the bag from me. "What is it?"

I stared at her, wondering if she was really expecting me to declare the content of the carefully wrapped gift in the bag. But when four sets of eyes looked back at me, I realised that they *all* expected me to do just that.

"Um," I cleared my throat. "It's an air fryer."

Celine and her friends exchanged glances before bursting into hysterical laughter, even the one I'd thought was nice. At that point, I could have stabbed Onochie with a knife for making me humiliate myself buy getting that kind of gift.

" *Ọ ga-enyere ya aka karịa* ," the one who'd sniggered whispered to the others, but loud enough for me to hear her remark about the air fryer being of more benefit to me.

Another lady walked up to us at this point. With the same light skin and facial features as Celine and Uju, I realised with dismay that it was yet another sister.

" *Wepụ ya* ," Celine said to a still laughing Uju. "Take it from her and keep it in the kitchen with the rest," then turning to me, a thin smile on her face. "Thank you. You can go back outside. They'll serve you there."

And that was that. I was effectively dismissed. I watched with dismay as Celine, the celebrant I'd come to see, walked away with her friends, and could feel a heavy lump in my throat.

"This is Onochie's babe, by the way," Uju said to the lady who'd just joined us, her eyes dancing with mischief, enjoying being the one to announce what was apparently very astonishing news to everyone.

The lady looked momentarily surprised but, unlike her sisters, caught herself and smiled. "Ozioma, right? It's lovely to meet you. Onochie has told us much about you."

I nodded and forced a smile. It was too little, too late.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, not even asking for her name, as Uju hadn’t even bothered to proffer it. “I’ll be outside.”

Turning around, I walked out of the house, but not before I heard Uju’s loud cackle. I had never felt more humiliated in all my life. Once outside, I looked in the direction of the available seats, and saw Kambi and three unfamiliar women looking in my direction, their hostility palpable. And I knew there was no way I could hang around. I had to leave that place.

I’d already walked out of the gate when I heard my name. Turning around, I saw a guy walk up to me.

“Hi, Ozi,” he said. “We spoke on the phone when you were with Onochie in August.”

“Oh, Osondu.” I nodded at my boyfriend’s younger brother, my enthusiasm now down to zero.

“Are you leaving already? I saw you arrive you only a few minutes ago.”

I made to answer but instead of words, a sob broke out of nowhere. He put his arm around me and I quickly regrouped. It was bad enough that I’d stood by like a fool while his sisters insulted me. I sure as heck wasn't going to break down in front of them.

“I should never have left you alone with Uju,” he muttered. “I just assumed she would at least try to behave herself. That was my mistake.”

“It’s fine,” I said, dabbing away recalcitrant tears from my eyes. “I didn't plan to stay long anyway.”

But Osondu wasn’t buying any of that. Taking me by the hand, he led me back into the compound, sitting me on a table far away from my antagonists.

“What can I get you to eat?” he asked. “Would you like to start with small chops first?”

I smiled and shook my head. Food was the very last thing I wanted.

He took a seat opposite me. “Don’t take anything my sisters said to you personally, okay?”

“But why would they be so mean to somebody they barely even know?” I asked, anger beginning to take the place of the despondency I’d felt earlier.

“Ozi, I’ll be frank with you,” he said, addressing me the way his brother did. “You’re not like the women Onochie typically goes for. I guess they were just surprised,” he shrugged. “If I’m to be very honest with you, so was I at first. But then he told me how wonderful you are as a person; kind, smart and very funny. And after we spoke on the phone, I could understand his attraction to you.”

I listened, not sure how to feel about hearing my boyfriend was attracted to me less because of my looks and more because of how ‘funny’ I was.

“It also doesn’t help that Uju and Kambi, Onochie’s ex, are very close friends,” Osondu continued, glaring in the direction of the glamorous ex-girlfriend and her pals. “I won’t be surprised if she was prepared to dislike you, regardless.”

I sighed. Honestly, I didn't need this kind of drama.

“Thanks, Osondu. Thanks for making me feel better,” I said, smiling at him. “But I think it’s best for me to leave now. What’s important is that I’ve met everyone.”

“No, please wait,” he said. “It was actually Nkoli who asked me to come get you, when she saw you leaving.”

Nkoli. That was the name of the third sister.

“Just wait,” he said, rising to his feet. “I’ll send you some food and a bottle of wine. Just relax until the party empties out a bit. I think they want to talk to you.”

My eyes widened, the mere thought of being back in the company of the group of vultures sending shivers down my spine. This made Osondu chuckle.

“Don’t worry, I won’t leave you alone this time. Promise.”

And so I sat there, watching the other merry makers have a good time. I watched as Uju joined Kambi and her friends, realising that they were just as close as Osondu had said. I watched as even Celine and Nkoli embraced her fondly when it was time for her to leave, realising just how popular she

was in their family. That alone was enough for them to treat anyone else with contempt, overweight or not.

My phone vibrated with messages from my friends, wanting to know how it was going, but I was in no mood to even reply. Unless I was going to lie, the honest reply would have been that it was going awfully, a whole lot worse than anything I could ever have imagined possible.

I sat there as the guests left, one by one, and as the compound slowly emptied out. At a little after 9pm, Osondu emerged from the house and beckoned at me.

Judgment time had come.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for my handbag and walked to the house with as much composure as I could manage, even though all I really wanted to do was run for the hills.

Walking into the living room, the three women were seated. Apart from Nkoli, who smiled at me, the other two didn't look any more pleased to see me than they had hours before. And that hadn’t been a lot.

“Sit,” Celine beckoned, the heavy bangles on her wrist jangling in response.

I did as I was told, and Uju made a face and shook her head.

“My dear, the only reason I’m still having any discussion with you is because I know you’re from a good family. Otherwise, I would have asked my brother if *i nyere ya ihe ka o rie* .” Uju giggled and Celine threw her hands up. “Yes now. Because this one is like bewitchment!”

“Ozi is a very lovely girl,” Osondu cut in. “Onochie is very fond of her.”

“He says you finished from the London School of Economics? Cambridge as well?” Nkoli asked, smiling at me. “First in your class?”

Relieved to finally have a prop to lean on, I nodded.

“He also says you’re *Crowe & Clayton’s* Chief Legal Officer?” she went on.

I nodded again. “For the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa.”

Celine nodded and even Uju no longer looked quite as hostile.

“That’s impressive,” Celine remarked. “And that’s why we have called you here to advise you. My dear, it’s bad enough that you’re even so close too his age , *Onochie no dey follow fat women o* ! If you want to marry our brother, you have to lose all this fat you are carrying about, fat that is making you look more like my own age mate than his!”

“As in *ehn* . I thought she was a friend of yours when she got here,” Uju tittered.

“You won’t keep quiet there!” Osondu barked. “You’re there laughing at someone they want to marry, instead of you to be there, praying for your own.”

It took everything in me not to give him a high-five as the laughter immediately evaporated from Uju’s lips, leaving in its place a glower.

“My sister is correct,” Nkoli said, placing a hand on mine. “Right from when he was a teenager, Onochie has always had a type; tall and athletic. Apart from being a former athlete himself, I’m sure you know how fanatical he is about fitness. I guess that was the reason we were all surprised when we saw you. But we’re ready to help you. If it’s okay, I can send you a meal plan you can follow, and it will really help. It’s a low carb, low fat diet and you can lose up to 10kg in a month, if you’re serious.”

I stared at her as she talked, no longer even hearing the words. Not even when Celine and Uju chimed in about the benefits of the diet. It felt like I was in some kind of twilight zone. I’d gone there to meet my boyfriend’s family, but instead was getting schooled about how to lose weight. My brain could no longer grasp it.

“And here is his number,” Nkoli was still saying, handing me a card. “His name is Vinnie, and he’s an excellent personal trainer. Combined with the diet, he could help you could lose even more weight.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the card, before rising to my feet. “I have to go.”

Celine looked taken aback. “ *Ebee ka ị na-aga* ? We’re still talking to you.”

“Thank you, but I have to go,” I repeated, stumbling over my feet in my desire to get the hell out of there. “Good night.”

Once outside the house, I walked as fast as I could, praying that none of them, Osondu especially, would come out to stop me. Because the truth was I needed to leave that place before I exploded. I'd put myself through enough for one night.

–

My parents had retired for bed when I got home, which was just as well, as I had no idea how I would have answered their excited queries about how the evening had gone. An evening from the pit of hell, one that had started antagonistic, and ended patronizing and downright insulting.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, I struggled to see what all the fuss was about. Yes, I'd put on some weight, but I was a long way from being grossly overweight.

" *Chai, Ozioma, you don suffer* !" I remarked, biting my finger, remembering all the jibes that had been thrown my way, regretting that I hadn't given it back just as badly as I'd been given. My consolation was that Onochie loved me the way I was, so his family really could go to hell for all I cared. And that was what I had every intention of telling him.

Except he turned out to be the one with an axe to grind.

"My sisters said you walked out on them," he said, when we video chatted later that night, looking anything but pleased. "Is it true?"

I shook my head and clapped my hands. "Onochie, if you see the insults I chopped because of you today!"

"Insults because they were trying to help you?" he retorted.

"Wait *o* ! You're aware of it? You're aware of the things they said to me? You know about them trying to make me lose weight?"

"What's wrong with losing a few pounds, Ozi?" he countered. "Didn't I also tell you the same thing when you were here in August?"

"No, Onochie, you never said anything to me about losing weight!" I snapped, my anger returning. "Since when has my weight been an issue?"

"All those times I suggested healthier meals? Invited you with me to the gym? What did you think that was about?"

My mouth hung open, shocked beyond words. “So you think I’m fat?”

“I think you could lose some weight, yes,” he answered. “When you came in August, you were much larger than I thought you’d be. If I wasn’t already emotionally invested…” his voice trailed off.

“If you weren’t emotionally invested, what?” I demanded. “What would have happened, Onochie? I didn't misrepresent myself to you. You saw my pictures, you saw me on several video chats like this one, how come you were suddenly surprised when you saw me face to face?”

“Ozi, you’re blowing this out of proportion. What’s the big deal in losing a few pounds for my sake? Is it really that bad?”

“How big am I that your whole family wants to have a stroke on my account?” I exclaimed, exasperated. “I’m just a size 16, for crying out loud!” The truth was I was now closer to a 20 than 16, but that was just a mere detail. “Is it because I’m not as thin as your beloved Kambi?”

“Oh, you met her?”

“Yes, I met her! And how come you never told me about her? From the way your whole family was fawning over her, they don’t appear to be over her, and neither are you, from the sound of things!”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Ozi. Don’t try to run away from the real issue here!”

I sighed, trying to compose myself, trying to stop the violent eruption that was on the verge of happening if he pushed me further.

“Onochie, just so you know, you see one single kilo like this, I’m not going to lose,” I finally said. “I’m thirty-seven years old *o* . I’m not one small girl your family can push about. I’m not going to allow any of you change a goddamn thing about me. So if you don't like me the way I am…” it was my turn to allow my voice trail.

“What, Ozioma? What happens if I don't like you that way?” he demanded, his face expressionless.

I heard the edge in his voice and hesitated. I’d never heard him sound that angry, and it made me realize I was on the verge of losing the best relationship I’d had since Tagbo broke my heart years before. I’d already imagined myself married to him, us living together happily ever after in his

Buckhead, Atlanta mansion, and I was on the verge of kissing all of it goodbye.

“If you don't like me the way I am, Onochie,” I said, regardless. “Then you’re free to go and look for who will fit your spec.”

“Don’t push me, Ozioma,” he said, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was a threat I heard in his voice.

“Your sister also passed a comment about me being too close to your age,” I continued. “Is that really a problem? Are the girls you typically go for very young? As young as that Kambi girl?”

“Ozi, you need to get over this obsession with Kambi, okay?”

“Obsession with Kambi?” I exclaimed. “It’s like something is wrong with you, Onochie. It’s like *isi adighi gi nma* . It’s like you’re crazy or something!”

And then, without any warning, he leaned forward and ended the call.

My mouth hung open as I stared at the blank screen, all my hopes and dreams shattered. Just like that, I was back to square one.

–

Sitting alone on my table, I watched the new-ish couple dancing the electric slide to the song *Candy* , along with several of their friends. I couldn't help but smile at the sight of my friend, Isioma, grinning from ear-to-ear as she danced next to her husband, her burgeoning baby bump well hidden by the empire cut of the pink chiffon dress she wore. They’d been married over seven months, but looked just as excited as if they’d only just signed the dotted lines. When they first got together, I hadn’t thought Karibi able to properly commit to her, especially after being so badly hurt by Ara’s older sister, but he’d proved me wrong. And watching them dance, I was happy to be wrong, happy that they had found happiness in each other.

Dancing a few feet from the couple were Ara and her husband C.J., with Ginika and Dike also dancing nearby, close enough for the two sets of best friends to laugh and joke, while trying to out dance each other. I smiled wistfully, thinking how, only two years before, Ginika had been the only

married one, with the rest of us single. But they had all gone on to find love. Even Ife.

My gaze travelled to where Ife sat with her fiancé, Diekola, and I smiled, happy for her anew. In only a few short days, her life had completely turned around. From what she'd told me, Diekola had shown up at her house that same Wednesday I'd gone for the party from hell, and the rest was history. Now, even she was all loved up and planning to return with him to New York.

Lucky girl.

I watched them as they sat, with eyes only for each other. He had a protective arm around her, and even though I'd also heard a good number of whispers that afternoon, and seen unpleasant looks thrown their way, the couple remained oblivious to it all, in a world of their own. In time, everyone would have to get used to the idea of them being together, but in the meantime, they looked happy and ready to face the world, regardless. And that was truly what mattered the most.

Watching everyone dance, it occurred to me how that would have been me on a good day. Under normal circumstances, I would have been up there with them, dancing along. But that evening, it was the last thing I wanted to do. My heart was in the pit of my stomach, desolate over yet another breakup. I'd been so sure, so very sure, Onochie was *the one* , certain I'd finally found my Mr. Right. So, to find myself back to being solo was a very painful pill to swallow. It was worsened by the fact that, of the five of us, despite being the oldest, I was now the only single one.

"Hey, beautiful," came Banji's voice, sitting on the empty chair next to me. "It's not like you to be a party pooper."

I laughed, the first time in days. "How am I being a party pooper? Because I didn't join them for the electric slide? I'm just not in the mood."

"Snap out of it, girl," he said, nudging my shoulder with his. He was the only one I'd told about the fiasco with Onochie. "The guy is an asshole and clearly doesn't deserve you."

I shrugged, still not wanting to write him off, despite how broken I was. It had been three days since our heated conversation, three days since he'd

broken my heart and shattered my dreams. “It’s not that easy, Banji.”

“I don't like to see you like this,” he said, his worry etched on his face. “You’re a beautiful woman, Ozioma. He’s a fool not to see that.”

He put his arm over my shoulder and I leaned my head on his, grateful for the support of my best friend. He was right. Onochie was clearly not worth my moping around and not enjoying my friend’s party.

And then Flavour’s *Doings* came on. A wide smile broke on my face and Banji winked at me, confirming it was his ‘doing’. Without any further prompting, I stood and danced all the way to where the others were, my new favourite song shaking off my gloom. I joined Dike and C.J who were already dancing to the unofficial anthem of the south-east. The three of us were soon dancing in a semi-circle, hopping from foot to foot as we sang along.

Who no know go know

na mehn donye iru n'iga amaa

Obodo edelu jim-jim

Soon, we were joined by Isioma’s brothers, and pretty much everyone from the region, rapping in unison with Phyno’s verses. I danced in my typical carefree and uninhibited way, not caring how I was or wasn't presenting myself. Nothing had come out of packaging myself to be who I wasn't anyway.

As the song faded and Fireboy’s *Scatter* came on, the dance floor filled even more, with Banji locating me where I was. And we, my best friend and I, danced in sync like we always did, from *Scatter* , to Mayokun’s *Geng* , to Bella Schmurda’s *Cash App* , to Naira Marley’s *Opotoyi* . I danced myself into a sweaty mess, not caring how I looked or what anyone watching thought of me. By the time the party was over, my hair hung lank on my face and my clothes were drenched with sweat. But I felt better.

“ *Wo, abeg* ,” I said, removing my shoes as Banji walked me to my car. I’d chosen not to drive, and had instead come with my father’s driver. “My feet need freedom.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to see you back to your old self.”

I smiled back at him. “Thanks, Banji. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d have moped around the whole night.”

“Anything for you, babe,” he said, hugging me.

“Hugging me, even though I’m drenched in sweat like a pig,” I laughed, hugging him back. “You’re a true friend. Thanks for making me feel better.”

“Always,” he said kissing me on my forehead, and then the bridge of my nose.

I looked up, and our eyes held. And then he lowered his head, his lips claiming mine. My eyes widened in surprise as he kissed me, but as his soft lips prodded mine, I found myself suddenly lightheaded, suddenly wanting more. Throwing my arms around his neck, our kiss deepened, right there in the car park, all time frozen. Sweet and soft…and I didn't want it to end.

Until it finally struck me what I was doing…and whom I was doing it with.

I immediately pulled away. “Banji, what the hell?” I exclaimed. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“You kissed me back,” he countered, a clench in his jaw “Ozioma, I’ve been standing in the background for years, and I’m tired of it. I’m tired of just standing and waiting. You know I’ve always been in love with you. Don’t tell me you don't.”

“What are you saying?” I exclaimed. “What is this one saying? Waiting for what? Which love? Is it that your puppy love from hundred years ago? From when you were just a little kid?”

As a new student at LSE, the young, wide-eyed Nigerian teen had bombarded me with daily declarations of love, gestures my friends and I found cute and charming. I’d politely turned him down, and instead took him under my wing as my unofficial ward. It was from there that our friendship blossomed and grew over the years, his initial romantic overtures forgotten…or so I’d thought.

“Ozioma, I loved you then and I love you now. I’ve never stopped loving you.”

“Oh, God!” I groaned, covering my eyes with my hands, wondering how things had gone so far downhill. “Banji, this is madness. You’re my best

friend. Aren’t you the same one I’ve tried to hook up with almost everyone I know?”

“Everything I’ve done all these years, agreeing to some foolish date or the other, indulging your every whim, has been just to make you happy. I’ve been too scared to say or do anything to spoil things between us, but I can’t do that any longer.”

“So you’d rather spoil it now?” I moaned. “Nothing can ever happen between us, and you know that.”

“Why? Why, when there’s clearly a connection between us?” he answered, his gaze holding mine. “You kissed me back, Ozioma.”

“That was just impulse. Banji, this is crazy!” I exclaimed, exasperated. “You’re just a kid.”

“I’m less than a year younger than you, Ozioma. Not a decade.”

“There are other things…” I bleated. “You’re my best friend, and this will just complicate things,” I stamped my foot on the ground. “Damn it! I was banking on you to console me and help fix my relationship, not further mess with my head.”

He opened his mouth to reply me but was cut off when my phone started ringing. It was the Usher Raymond and Alicia Keys song *My Boo* , the ringtone I had for Onochie. And Banji knew this.

We remained in a stare hold as the phone rang, neither of us making to move, neither of us making to stop the phone from ringing.

“Don't answer that,” he finally said. “He doesn't deserve you.”

But instead, I reached for my bag and did just that. “Hello?”

“My baby,” came Onochie’s deep baritone. “You just abandoned me like that. I’ve been miserable without you.”

“You’re the one who hung up on me, or have you forgotten?” I said, turning around so I was no longer facing Banji.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I’m really sorry about everything I said to you that night,” Onochie continued, sounding sincerely contrite.

“I’m in love with you, and your weight doesn’t matter to me. I’d rather have you, thin or large, than to live one more day without you.”

I smiled and tried to muster the required happiness. This was exactly what I’d been praying to hear, wasn’t it?

“I’ve bought my ticket for next month,” he said. “I just paid for it. I’ll be in Lagos next month, and we’re going to make it official, *nwunye’m* . I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said, turning around to see Banji still watching me, his eyes expressionless. “Let me call you in a bit. I’m erm…a bit tied up right now.”

I put the phone in my bag, and we just stood there for several minutes, neither of us saying a word.

“Sounds like all’s well now,” he finally said, a stiff smile on his face. “If you’re happy, then I guess I’m happy.”

“Banji…”

“About before,” he continued. “Just forget it, okay? Forget I said anything,” he shrugged and chuckled. “I did have more than a few bottles to drink.”

I responded with a stiff smile of my own. “I guess.”

“Do you want me to give you a ride home, or you’d rather go with Mr. Linus? Even if you probably won't get home tonight.”

I laughed in response to the joke about my father’s old driver, who drove so slow, it was usually quicker to walk. “I’ll take my chances.”

He nodded, and even though he was still smiling, I knew him well enough to know it was a superficial one.

“Okay, then,” he shrugged. “I guess we’ll see on Tuesday?”

We were scheduled to meet with the management of the hotel we’d both invested in, that coming week.

“Yeah, Tuesday,” I answered in the affirmative.

He nodded again. “Alrighty then. I’ll see you Tuesday.”

As he walked away, my heart constricted in my chest, and an unexpected pain descended on me like a dark cloud. I was devastated not only about hurting him, but about the possibility of losing our friendship.

“Banji!”

He turned around, and even though he was several few feet away, I could see the look of hope and expectation in his eyes.

“Thank you,” I called out. “Thank you for tonight. Thank you for everything.”

He said nothing for a few moments, before saluting and turning around again. This time I let him go.

Walking to the car, I was overwhelmed by a deep sadness, a sadness I couldn't understand. The man I loved, the real love of my life, had just declared his love for me and desire to make me his wife. My long-desired wish was about to come true. So why was grief over the possibility of losing my best friend in the world now eclipsing that joy? Why could I still taste Banji’s lips, and smell the spicy aromatic notes of his cologne?

Shaking off the disturbing thoughts, I redirected my mind back to the present. The kiss with Banji had been a blip, a mistake that never should have happened. Onochie was my future, the man I’d waited for all my life.

And THAT was my reality.

To be continued.

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Book 2 – Isioma

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