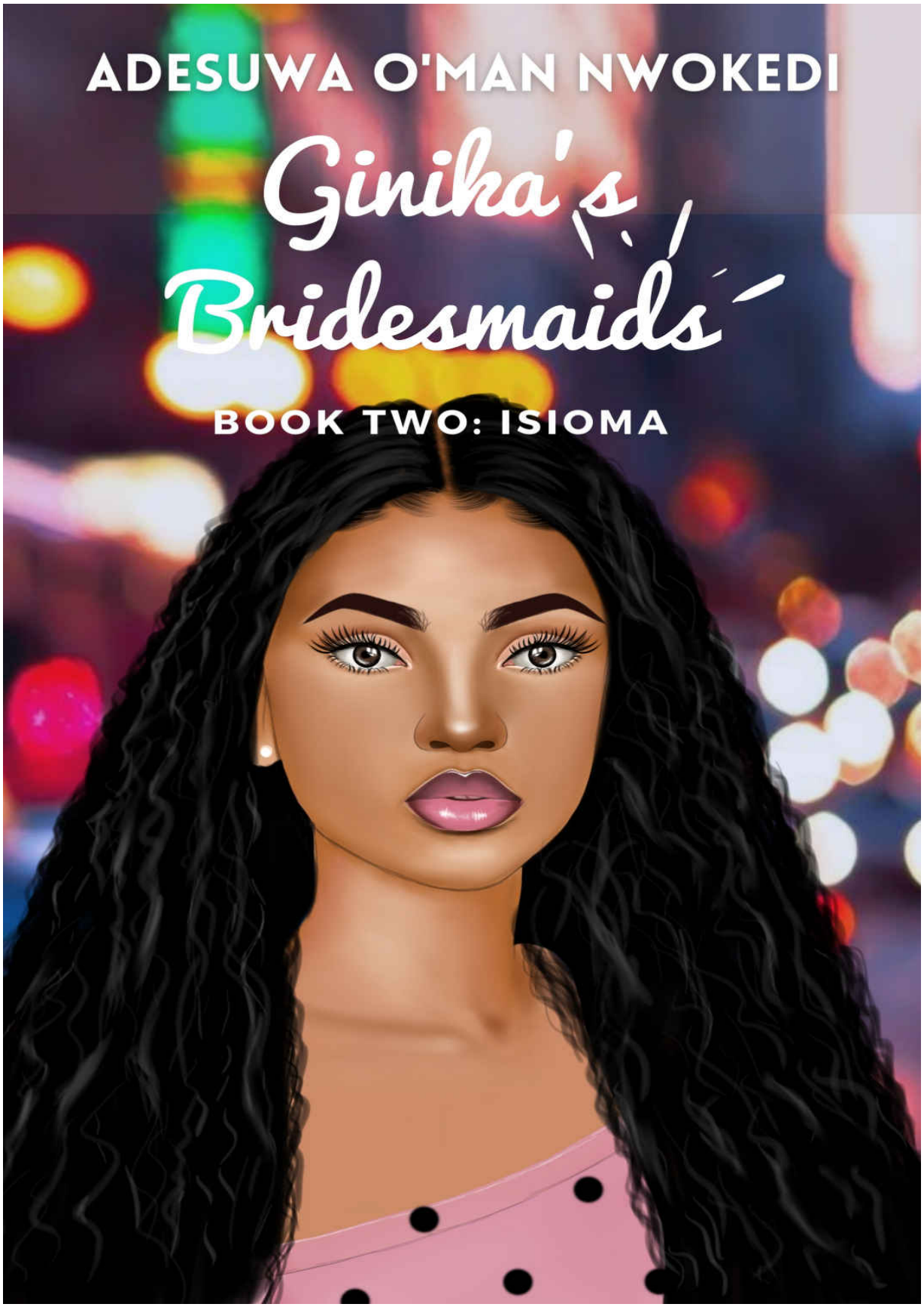
ADESUWA O'MAN NWOKEDI

Ginika's Bridesmaids

BOOK TWO: ISIOMA

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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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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER ONE

I BIT MY LIP, standing in front of my closet, wondering what I could wear that wasn't one of the few nice outfits I'd already rotated one too many times. What was reasonable to wear for an informal dinner anyway? Or at least, that was how Ginika had described it; an informal dinner to celebrate Ara and C.J.'s engagement.

Thinking about that made me smile. Nine months after their first meeting, and four months after dating, they'd gotten engaged. And to think her last relationship had lasted almost eighteen years, without even a whisper of the subject of marriage. It just showed that it wasn't about how long but how well. The smile on my face dimmed at the thought, as I remembered my own long-term on-off relationship.

"Are you going out?" my mother asked, peering into my room.

I nodded and smiled in her direction. "Ginika invited us for dinner. Ara and C.J. just got engaged."

"Ewo! That's wonderful!" she exclaimed, placing her hands on her chest. Even though she didn't know them, I'd told her enough about their love story to make her feel vested in the relationship. Like me, my mother was a hopeless romantic. "God will do it for all of you oh!"

I turned back to my closet, knowing fully well what she meant by that statement. She was not particularly my boyfriend, Andrew's biggest fan, and not just because our relationship appeared to be headed nowhere. Like everyone, she thought him to be lazy and directionless, a notion fostered by the fact he hadn't held on to a job for longer than three months and had instead chosen to sit at home, idle, waiting to 'blow' rather than do anything to make this 'blowing' happen.

“Don’t allow this boy waste your time, obi’m,” my mother had said to me so many times, I’d lost count. “God knows he’s wasted enough of it already.”

And the funny thing was that I agreed with her. The truth was that whatever I once felt for him had faded over the years. The butterflies had long gone and I no longer felt any sparks in his presence. But what was worse, I no longer found him interesting. I found his conversation shallow and I was sick of hearing him complain about his financial situation or lament about the system which made ‘the rich richer, and the poor poorer’. I was sick of having to sit with him and his loud, gregarious friends, as they made crude joke after crude joke, over bottles of beer. I hated that I couldn’t talk to him about things that mattered to me, like work and how difficult I was finding it juggling my finances. Whenever the subject of discussion didn’t revolve around him, his eyes would glaze over and even though he would nod intermittently, it was always clear that I was talking to myself. And so I’d stopped.

I’d outgrown the relationship a long time ago.

We met in my first year at the Yaba College of Technology. He was just starting his HND and we’d fallen for each other the moment our eyes clapped as we boarded a commercial bus from campus to town. With my house only a short distance from school, I’d decided to attend from home, so as to keep my mother company and help her out with my younger ones; my two younger brothers and a sister.

I’d taken one look at Andrew’s broad shoulders, sleepy eyes and dimpled jaw, and thought he was the most handsome man I’d ever laid eyes on. He was also quite taken by me and it didn’t take long for us to become a couple. Thinking back now, I realise I’d only been infatuated with him, but alas, I’d thought it to be love and had given him everything I’d promised myself only my husband would get. By the third month of our relationship, I’d given him my virginity.

Even though things had soured between us in recent years, for some reason, I couldn’t walk away from the relationship. The one time I did, two years before, it had been short-lived and not because I hadn’t wanted it to be

permanent. With all my heart, I'd been so ready to be done with him. But he'd come back at a time when my defences were low. Very low…

"Kedu ihe ị ga-eyi?" my mother asked with a cheeky smile, as she walked to where I stood. "We need you to look out-of-sight!"

"People don't say things like 'out-of-sight', Mom," I giggled.

"How about this lovely skirt?" she asked, reaching for a floral skirt that was not only too casual, but was one I'd worn the day we travelled to Asaba for Ginika's traditional wedding.

I shook my head, still staring haplessly at my closet.

"This? This one is nice!" she said, reaching for a black, frilly dress, a hopeful smile on her face.

I rolled my eyes. Not only did it not quite fit the brief for an informal dinner, it was the same dress I'd word for Ginika and Dike's pre-wedding dinner party.

"This one?" she asked, touching an embellished denim dress.

I shook my head. Too casual, and I'd worn it not only the first time I met the other girls, but also for Ginika's bridal shower and on at least three more occasions.

Before long, even my mother was staring at my closet, equally as confused. We eventually settled on a plum coloured dress I normally wore to work and accessorised it with some of her imitation pearls.

"How are you going?" she asked. "Is Ife coming to pick you up?"

I shook my head. I'd made up my mind not to drag Ife all the way to the mainland to pick me up yet again. Over the last nine months, we'd formed a very close friendship, and it truly touched me how she dropped everything anytime I needed help getting around. Even though she claimed to have a friend in my neighbourhood and that coming to me wasn't going out of her way, the last thing I wanted was to impose. Several times, she'd offered me some of her nicer clothes to wear and even cash on occasion, but I was always quick to politely decline. Yes, I wasn't raised wealthy, but I was raised by a very proud man who never accepted hand-outs from anyone.

“Is your car ready?” she asked, her tone flattening. Andrew had badly damaged my car in an accident and after spending the first few months promising he’d get the money to fix it, I’d eventually raised the money for the repairs myself. What I didn’t have the courage to tell her was that Andrew had convinced me to let him handle it and in the end had squandered the money, leaving the mechanic unable to finish the repairs.

“Not yet.”

“So you’ll take a taxi?” my mother asked, and I could hear the concern in her voice, as she knew that at this time of the month, I was always very low on cash. “Ị nwere ego? Do you have money?”

I nodded and smiled, hoping I looked reassuring enough when, in truth, the upwards of the five thousand naira a round-Uber trip would cost me was sure to leave a gaping hole in my pocket.

Just then, my phone rang. It was Ife.

“Hey, babe,” she said, her voice chirpy.

“Hi, sweetie,” I said, before mouthing ‘Ife’ to my mother, who nodded and waved. “Mom says hello.”

“Aww, say hi for me,” she answered, and I could hear the smile in her voice. Just like with me, she and my mother had taken to each other. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” I said, turning away from my mother. “I was about to call a cab.”

“Why? When I’m here? Girl, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Ife, I don’t want to put you to any trouble,” I groaned.

“No trouble at all, my dear,” she answered. “I’m already in your neighbourhood. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thank God!” my mother exclaimed, when I got off the phone. “At least, I won’t have my heart in my mouth while you’re there.”

I smiled, also relieved I wouldn’t have to spend money I didn’t have.

“I spoke to Ifeanyi today,” my mother said, rising to her feet. “He said you haven’t called him in a while.”

“I’ll call him,” I answered curtly.

“He sounded really well. You should call him.”

I nodded, my eyes not leaving my reflection in the mirror until the shut door signalled her exit from my room. It was only then that I exhaled.

Ifeanyi was my older brother, the only other person born from Hattie…the woman who had abandoned us as children.

–

My father, Nnamdi Ilonzeh, left for England in the late ‘70s. His plan had been to further his education, but he’d never quite managed to do that. Instead, ten years and several odd jobs later, he returned to Nigeria with a young British bride and two small children.

From everything I’d heard about Hattie, she was out of place from the moment she and her husband were welcomed to my grandfather’s cramped apartment in Olodi Apapa. I was told how my father had done everything he could to make her comfortable, including taking a loan to enable him rent a small apartment in Obalende. But none of that had satiated the young Hattie, who spent all her time crying about how much she hated Nigeria and how badly she missed her ‘Nan back in London. She lost weight so dramatically, everyone was convinced she had a terminal illness.

But her hapless husband continued to do all he could to make her happy, sometimes even taking my brother and I with him to the bank where he worked as a Clerk, just so his dear wife could have some time to herself. In the end, this proved to be his undoing, as he’d come home one day, his two small kids in tow, to an empty flat. Hattie had fled.

Ifeanyi was four and I’d only just turned two.

According to the story, our father had unravelled, heartbroken by the loss of the woman he loved so dearly. My brother and I were whisked off to our grandfather’s house while our father mourned his lost love, and that became our home for the next three years. In that time, our father recovered from his heartbreak, got himself a better job with Leventis and married the lovely Ebele. I will never forget the first time he brought her along for his weekend visit. I stood at the door, watching the shy, young woman sit and

answer all the questions thrown her way by my grandmother and aunties, while the men chatted outside. Our eyes met and my heart melted when she smiled. It was truly love at first sight for us. I had just turned five and that day, my father had come bearing gifts and biscuits, something he'd never done before. Even as young as I was, I knew I had the beautiful Ebele to thank for that. He brought her again the following weekend, and then again the next, until it got to a time when I started looking forward to his visits, something I hadn't really done in the past. By the end of that year, they were married and Ebele made sure Ifeanyi and I moved with them to the new apartment he rented in Surulere.

Ebele. She became the mother my little heart had always longed for. From that very first night in the room Ifeanyi and I shared, when she lay on the bed between us, reading us bedtime stories, she was my every dream come true. Even though my grandparents had been very loving, we'd never enjoyed the kisses and cuddles I read about in storybooks. Even my hitherto cold and distant father was now a changed man, showing more affection than he'd ever done. Ebele had restored love and joy to our lives.

She didn't immediately conceive her own children and I remember getting caustic looks from her relatives when they visited, overhearing them whisper to her how her husband's evil children to blame for her childlessness. But Ebele brushed aside all the malicious murmurs and continued to shower us with love. We were her children and she, our mother, and that was the end of the story. As I grew older and got interrogated about why my brother and I were so light skinned whilst both our parents weren't, I would simply shrug, maintaining the story with a straight face. Before long, even I started to believe it. I had no memory of the woman who'd birthed me anyway, so it wasn't too far-fetched to tell everyone that Ebele was my birth mother.

And I wasn't the only one who'd chosen to permanently wipe Hattie from my memory. The one time my father lost his temper with his beloved wife had been when he'd walked into the bedroom and overheard her telling us how our real mother had loved us very much but had been too lonely in a strange land. Ebele hadn't meant any harm and had obviously just empathised with whatever circumstances the woman who'd birthed us had

faced. But my father lost his temper in a way that shocked even me. He'd advanced at her almost like he was going to strike her, thick veins bulging from his head.

For the first time since our blissful existence as a family, there were raised voices that night.

"Don't you ever talk about that woman in this house!" my father had bellowed. "If you're tired of the kids, you better speak now!"

"Don't talk nonsense," Ebele had shouted back. She had never raised her voice before, especially not at her revered husband. "You know I love those children as if I gave birth to them myself. But you can't pretend their real mother never existed!"

"She never did, you hear? She never did. Not to me, and most definitely not to them!"

I'd cringed in my bed, squeezing my pillow for comfort. Looking over at Ifeanyi, I wondered how it was possible for him to sleep so soundly through the raucous. Didn't he know that our future as a family was hanging in the balance?

Luckily, by the next morning, dad and Ebele had reconciled, and an onlooker would never have believed they'd had such a bitter argument the night before. Whatever their pillow talk resolution was, it worked, as Ebele never talked about our mother again. She also never had another argument with our father, to the best of my knowledge.

The year I turned ten, she finally got pregnant. It was such a happy time in our household and I was so excited about the prospect of having a younger sibling that I never worried about the possibility of losing her affection. I guess she had made me so secure in her love that it wasn't even a possibility I considered. But it was the opposite for Ifeanyi who, at the age of 12, had been exposed to the stereotypical notion of the evil stepmother.

"Just watch what will happen when she has the baby," he whispered to me many nights after dinner. By now, we'd moved to a bigger house where we could afford to have separate bedrooms. "Everything is going to change. Just watch and see."

He’d succeeded in scaring me a little but thankfully, by the time our baby brother, Ikechukwu, arrived, those fears proved to be unfounded. I still don’t know how Ebele managed it. It felt like she held the baby with one hand and continued to coddle us with the other. She made us help out with our brother, ensuring neither of us felt left out in any way. And it helped, as the excitement of having another sibling left no room for any resentment.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t the case for Ifeanyi. It was like he had convinced himself so much of the inevitably of a change in our family dynamic that even though it didn’t happen, he was going to act out anyway. And act out he did, which was only worsened as he entered his teenage years. It started with rebellion at home, first to Ebele and later on, to our dad. He made friends of questionable character and got into trouble so many times that by the time he was in senior secondary, he was already in his fourth school. Thankfully, his grades didn’t suffer too much, and he was able to gain admission to the University of Benin to study Electrical Engineering.

But the year he got into school was when things changed for our family.

By this time, Ebele had given birth to two more children; another boy, Ifechi and a girl, Ifeyinwa. Ifeanyi had seemingly calmed down, and our lives had returned to being idyllic again. Until my father developed a cough that just wouldn’t go away. Sometimes, I would hear him cough all night. I tried to mask my worry and pretended not to notice that Ebele was also doing the same. I noticed her worried glances every time he coughed and even overheard her try to coax him into taking medicine for it or, better still, seeing a doctor. But my stubborn father blatantly refused. It wasn’t until he started coughing up blood that he finally agreed to go to the hospital. He was diagnosed with stage 4-lung cancer.

I was sixteen then and they tried to hide the information from me for the longest time. He started chemotherapy and on his treatment days, Ebele made sure they left the house before we awoke and returned when we were in school. She explained away his constant tiredness and seclusion in his bedroom as a bad case of malaria, which would soon go away. But as the man wasted away before our eyes, I knew this was no malaria. By the time they finally broke the news to us, he was too far-gone. He was dead within a month.

Ebele fell too pieces and it was hard for me to blame her for keeping his illness a secret from us for so long. Knowing my father, it had probably been his idea. I held on to the memories I had of him that last month, the few times I would sit by his bedside, holding his hand, neither of us saying a word. Unfortunately, Ifeanyi hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye, and when he returned from school following our father's death, he'd turned the house upside down. He accused Ebele of killing our dad, of deliberately keeping him, the first son, away so she and 'her kids' could inherit everything. If only he'd known there was nothing to inherit, as our father's treatment had depleted what there was of his money. Even though he had a good job with Nigerian Breweries at the time of his death, it was just enough to help us live in a decent neighbourhood and go to decent schools. Even with the support of his employer, his treatment devoured not only what he had by way of savings, but everything Ebele had as well, as she'd been forced to completely sell off her wares in the small commodities shop she had.

But Ifeanyi was unconvinced and the tension in our house worsened an already upsetting situation. It got so bad that I found myself counting the days till he returned to school. And he eventually did, leaving for Benin right from our hometown of Abagana, where we'd gone to bury our father. The very day of the interment, without so much as a goodbye, he'd flagged down a bus on the highway and left. But I was relieved. We all were. I was broken enough seeing Ebele, my beloved mother, going through all the widowhood rites. I hated that her beautiful, long hair was shaved off and she'd been forced to wear the dour widow's garb. But most of all, it broke my heart that my little siblings aged six, four and two would never know their father.

Over the following year, we were forced to radically downscale our lives. We had to move out of our nice Surulere duplex to a small flat in Yaba. But one thing Ebele refused to compromise was our education, channelling all my father's final entitlements towards paying for our education. And when that was gone, she took on all sorts of jobs; catering, sewing, hair braiding, anything she could do to raise money, just to make sure our education was never interrupted, most especially Ifeanyi's and mine.

But unfortunately, she didn't get the pay off she desired. Following my father's death, my grades took a nosedive, leading to very dismal results in not only my GCSEs but my JAMB as well. For a student who'd once been the best in her class, it was very disappointing indeed. As for Ifeanyi, he got embroiled in secret cult activities, which inevitably led to his rustication from school. I was actually grateful when he decided not to move back home, choosing instead to remain in Benin with his 'friends'. As for me, it took four years and just as many tries for me to finally pass my exams sufficiently enough to gain admission to YabaTech to study Hospitality Management, a far cry from my father's dreams of me becoming a lawyer one day. But Ebele never gave me grief for one day. Through all the years of re-sitting examinations, there was never a word of castigation or chastisement from her. All she would simply say was "I suppose we have to try again. Don't worry, you'll do better next time." What she told me years later was that I was already too delicate after my father's death and didn't need any additional pressure from her or anyone. In return, I did everything I could to ease her burden. I became her right hand. When she had a catering job, I was there running countless errands to Oyingbo market and carrying coolers of food all over Lagos. When she had clothes to make, I was on hand to help her cut patterns and even learnt how to work a machine so I could help her meet her many tight deadlines. And when people showed up at the house to braid their hair, I diligently helped straighten hair extensions and stood by the whole time she worked, handing her the extensions as she needed them. Even when I gained admission to school, all my free time was spent helping Ebele, my dear mother, much to the chagrin of my new boyfriend, Andrew. But not even the intense feelings I had for him at the time were enough to keep me from doing everything I could to assist the woman who had stood by me when she could have fled with her children, taking my father's final entitlements with her. She could have dispatched me to live with any one of my father's relatives, considering she was under no real obligation to add Ifeanyi and I to her burden. But add us to her burden she had, and I was eternally grateful to her.

It was far from the case with Ifeanyi. Once a month, Ebele would journey to Benin with the little money she was able to raise, and a basket of food, to make sure he was doing well. But he was hardly ever there. We were later

to find out that, even though he was no longer a student of the school, he was still a prominent member of the secret cult that had caused his expulsion. He had gained not just local but national notoriety for being a hit man, and was sent to other schools to ‘handle situations’ and ‘take care’ of erring members of rival cults. I guess with a nickname like Oyibo Assassin, it was to be expected. What followed over the years were several arrests and money we didn’t have spent on bail. Not even a yearlong incarceration had been enough to dissuade him from his nefarious activities. In the end, it had taken him almost losing his life after a retaliatory attack from a rival group, for the nightmare to end. Or so we’d thought.

What started after that was a whole new nightmare, first with his medical rehabilitation as he’d been attacked so viciously, he’d suffered severe injuries, including the loss of sight in his right eye, and then when he was back home with us in our cramped apartment, his drug and alcohol addiction.

There were a few good days though. A few good days when he was calm and mellow, days when we would reminisce about the old days with our father and he would regale our younger siblings with stories of how much better life had been for us when we were their age. On those good days, he would lend our mother and I a helping hand in whatever activity we were up to, be it delivering food or accompanying me to buy buttons and zips from Tejuosho market. But there were more bad days, days when it was in everyone’s best interest to stay out of his way. Those were the days when he would lock himself in his room with several bottles of local booze and marijuana for company, the days he would lash out at our young siblings, the days he would confiscate a whole pot of food meant for the house, the days when he would dare anyone to confront him. He once threatened our mother at knifepoint when she refused to give him the money he demanded. In the end, she realised she couldn’t put her other children at risk, just to save one. So she reached out to our father’s younger brother, Ejike, in South Africa, who’d agreed for Ifeanyi to join him there. The man clearly hadn’t understood the gravity of the situation, as no sooner had Ifeanyi landed there that complaints galore began. My brother was completely out of control and soon found a way to foster his burgeoning drug habit, which had now graduated from marijuana to cocaine and heroin.

Uncle Ejike had been ready to bundle him right back to Nigeria, but his wife, Aunty Uche, was determined to tame the beast. We were told about how she once wrestled Ifeanyi down, pinning him to the ground on their busy Johannesburg street, when he'd broken out in search of drugs. We were told how he'd once almost set their house on fire in his desperation to leave. But he had met his match in Aunty Uche, who hadn't been afraid to tackle him headlong, giving him the very tough love our mother hadn't been able to. By the end of his first year there, they succeeded in sending him for the first of many stints of rehab. It took him another three years to get completely clean, after which he enrolled for a diploma program in a small community college and now, at the age of 35, he was almost completing a degree program at the University of Pretoria. It felt so good to have my brother back to how I remembered him as a child; calm, gentle, kind and funny. For a while, we'd been the best of friends again, albeit long-distance.

Until he'd ruined it all…

–

True to her word, Ife arrived in less than ten minutes.

"Beautiful as always!" my mother remarked, beaming at the exquisite beauty in our living room. And beautiful she did look, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit, which I knew cost a fortune. There was no doubt about it; Ife was a class act.

I knew a few rich boyfriends funded her lifestyle. I'd overheard the name 'Rahim' enough times to figure out he was probably her main benefactor. I suspected it was he who'd paid for her expensive apartment, flashy cars and kept her in the expensive clothes, shoes and bags she favoured. But I chose not to judge her. To each their own. Who knew what her circumstances had been to make her choose that way of life? To me, she was the sweet, delightful woman whose company I'd grown to enjoy, and that was enough for me.

"Please, you need to teach your friend how to be as fashionable as you are," my mother was still raving. "Show her where you shop. I'm sure you're able to get some of these lovely things at bargain prices she can afford."

Ife gave me an I-told-you-so look and I smiled at my mother, hugging her as we left the house. If only she knew.

“Make sure you mingle o! I’m sure C.J. and, what’s Ginika’s husband’s name again, have nice friends,” my mother called out as we walked out of the house.

“Bye, Mom!” I called out as Ife and I dissolved into giggles as we made our way down the steep and poorly lit stairway.

As if!

–

It was a smaller group than I’d expected at Atmosphere, a restaurant the newly engaged couple apparently held special. I’d been there once before, for Ginika’s hen night, and as I enjoyed the ambience and my meal of balsamic-glazed steak rolls, I couldn’t help but marvel over the fact that, ten months ago, not even in my wildest dreams would I have imagined myself dining in such fancy places as this, with people who, on a good day, wouldn’t have given me a second look. Yes, Ginika and I had been very friendly as kids, but all that had changed when they’d moved from Surulere as her father’s business enjoyed the first of its many booms. In fact, for about fifteen years after, we didn’t hear from each other at all. It wasn’t until one December when I’d run into her, her mother and sisters at Tejuosho market as they shopped prior to their annual trip to Asaba for Christmas, that we’d reconnected. We exchanged phone numbers, befriended each other on our various social media platforms, but it had never really gone past that. Occasionally, usually on birthdays, we would talk on the phone and tell each other what we were up to, but we never actually made time to meet. She didn’t visit me and I didn’t visit her. Our lives were now too different, too parallel. Which is why I was surprised when she’d called, asking me to be her bridesmaid.

“Who doesn’t want a beautiful lady on her train?” my mother had remarked, when I told her. “Have you forgotten how she used to follow you around when you were kids, always eager to touch your hair?”

“Mom, we were kids then!” I’d giggled in response, remembering how truly enamoured with me Ginika had been.

As a child, everyone had thought I was as beautiful as an angel, with my pale skin and golden brown curls that flowed all the way to my waist. But as I grew into adulthood, people didn't really care as much. Yes, I was still paid the odd compliment here and there, especially by people meeting me for the first time, but afterwards, my inability to present myself as fashionably as my contemporaries could, took centre stage. I soon got used to being overlooked everywhere; at home, church, at work...everywhere. Which is why it was still so surreal that sophisticated ladies like Ife, Ara and Ozioma actually found me worth their friendship.

"So I brought her back here again, recreated the scene and proposed to her, praying it wouldn't be like the last time when she ran for the elevator," C.J. was saying, beaming as he told their proposal story.

I smiled, heart warmed anew. I'd already heard the story, first from Ife and then directly from Ara when I called to congratulate her. Just like he'd done early in their relationship, he'd booked the whole of Atmosphere, decorated it to recreate their memories, and proposed to her. And this time, she hadn't run away.

"Now THAT is a rock!" Ozioma beamed, as Ara displayed a large, 6-carat, Princess cut yellow diamond ring. "Remind me again why I'm not the one wearing this ring, C.J.!"

The table dissolved into laughter. In the nine months I'd known her, Ozioma had fancied just as many men. The only person who didn't appear amused was Ife, who instead took a sip of her wine, a bored expression on her face. I sighed inwardly, saddened that there was still no hope of friendship between the two of them. Despite the fact Ozioma had apologised a few times, Ife seemed adamant to keep her at bay, and I couldn't say I blamed her. Ozioma had publicly humiliated her not once, but twice. Maybe I also wouldn't have been as gracious and quick to forgive if I were in Ife's shoes.

"Weren't you and Francis an item?" C.J. teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he referred to Dike's groomsman the boisterous Ozioma had been briefly romantically linked with.

“Biko, talk about someone with sense!” she retorted. “I’m looking for a man, a real man, not someone hardly any better than a frat boy. So if you know any good candidates, holler at your girl!”

“Any ideas for the wedding yet?” Ife asked Ara, ignoring Ozioma. “Are you getting married here or should we prepare for a nice, destination wedding? Are we also signing up for bridesmaid duties?”

“It will be here, because C.J.’s dad can’t travel too far,” Ara answered, smiling. “But as for bridesmaid duties, sorry to disappoint you ladies, but we’re not having a bridal party.”

In the ensuing uproar from almost everyone on the table, I giggled, secretly pleased I wouldn’t have to shell out any money for an expensive dress or, worse, to travel. I was about to concur with the bride’s desire for a small wedding, when I saw him.

And the words died on my lips.

I bowed my head, not wanting to make eye contact with him, hoping he and the woman on his arm would just walk on by.

“Karibi!” Ginika waved, upon sighting him.

He turned and smiled when he saw her, his smile growing wider when he saw Ara. As he and his date approached our table, I busied myself with my drink, suddenly wishing I were invisible.

“It’s so good to see you,” he said as he embraced Ara, the woman who could have been his sister-in-law if love hadn’t prevailed. “It’s been a while. How have you been?”

“Engaged, is how I’ve been,” Ara answered, a mega watt smile on her face. “This is my fiancé, C.J. C.J. meet Karibi.”

Karibi could barely mask the surprise on his face. “Fiancé? Wow! It’s good to meet you, C.J.,” he said, shaking his hand.

Ara laughed, not missing his shock. “Oye and I broke up earlier in the year.”

“And I swept her off her feet immediately after,” C.J. added, winking.

“Well, good for you. The Da-Silva ladies aren’t very easy to sweep off their feet,” Karibi answered, a good-natured smile on his face. “How is Erin? I saw her a few weeks ago and she looked just about ready to pop.”

“That must have been shortly before they left the country,” Ara answered. “Yep, she’s ready to ‘pop’ any minute now.”

Erin was Ara’s older sister who’d been briefly involved with Karibi, but was now on the cusp of having her first baby with her husband, Emeka.

At this, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at his facial expression upon hearing about his beloved Erin. Knowing him, it would sting.

But that proved to be my undoing.

“Oh, hi,” he said, when he saw me. “Isi…”

“Isioma,” I answered, lowering my gaze. “Good evening, Sir.”

He nodded before turning back to the rest. My gaze stayed averted as he talked with Ara, congratulated Ginika and Dike on their wedding, and made small talk with a few people on the table.

“That man is a cup of hot chocolate!” Ozioma exclaimed, as Karibi and his date walked away. “But why do handsome men like that like empty-headed women? This is the second time I’ve seen him out and about with a woman who doesn’t look like she can even carry a sentence.”

“Notice how he didn’t even introduce her,” Ife chimed, before turning to me. “And why are you shaking like a leaf? Is that the kind of ship he runs at work? Ruling by fear?”

“I’m not shaking like a leaf,” I retorted, taking a sip of my drink. “It’s cold out here.”

As the topic of conversation on the table moved to other things, Ife’s gaze remained on me for a while.

“You okay?” she asked.

I smiled at her. “Never better.”

She shrugged and returned her attention to the table, while I did everything I could to still my racing heart.

And get rid of the memories I'd thought I'd been able to erase.

–

Two years before, I'd been surprised when I got an email from one of the leading oil and gas companies, Eldabra, inviting me for an interview. I'd been languishing in a small, family-owned business that barely paid me enough to transport myself, let alone do anything tangible, when I applied for a vacancy I'd seen in the newspapers. Just like the plethora of applications I'd sent after graduating from school, I didn't expect anything to come out of it. Even though I'd finished with a Distinction in my HND and had recently qualified as a Human Resource Project Manager, the vast majority of my applications went ignored.

I'd gone for the interview dressed in my best black dress and a red and black shell necklace my mother loaned me, and had been interviewed by a pleasant, elderly woman. It was a simple interview, with her asking me questions about why I'd chosen to certify in Human Resources after studying Hospitality Management and if I thought I could cope in a fast-paced organization, considering I'd only worked in small companies. It had been more of a chat than an interview and I'd left hopeful but also prepared not to hear from them again. So I'd been completely bowled over when I was invited for yet another interview, and subsequently offered employment. The position was only a step higher than entry-level but the salary, though not exciting, was still leaps and bounds better than the peanuts I was being paid. I happily accepted, determined to prove to them how good I was, and hopefully rise through the ranks very quickly.

But all those hopes were dashed on my first day at work.

It turned out that the woman who'd interviewed me for the role had just retired, and the new Hiring Manager, Dobra, was appalled about my being hired at all, let alone joining their Human Resources department.

"Edwina must have been out of her mind," she'd said, looking through my CV, aghast. "A HND in Hospitality Management," she turned to her colleague, handing her my CV with as much indignity as if I'd been presented to them a stark illiterate.

“You’re joking!” the colleague, Mosun, exclaimed in her thick British accent, grabbing the CV to see for herself. She looked up at me. “So why on earth are you here? Why aren’t you working in a hotel or something?”

I’d shifted from foot to foot, so scared I would lose this new lifeline. “I’m a certified HR professional.”

“And she has a HND?” Mosun repeated to Dobra as if I wasn’t standing right there. “She has a HND?”

“I swear, Edwina must be suffering from dementia,” Dobra muttered, shaking her head. “She should have retired years before now,” then turning to Mosun. “We need to continue the process to fill the HR vacancy. We’ll need to hire someone else for that role.”

My stomach crashed to my feet when I heard that and it took everything in me not to burst into tears right there and then. But the pride my father instilled in us didn’t allow me. Instead, I stood there, holding my bag, awaiting my fate.

In the end, they decided to send me to the Admin department. I will never forget the look of disdain the Head of the Department, Salewa, gave me as Dobra spoke with her. She looked at me from the crown of my well-brushed hair all the way down to my equally well-polished shoes, but I could tell that she was impressed with neither, nor anything in between.

“We’re lowering our standards in this company,” she’d complained to Dobra. “This is the third graduate from a Nigerian school you’re sending me, and this one is even from a Polytechnic. What’s next? University dropouts? GCSE holders? My department isn’t a dumping ground, you know.”

With much reluctance, I’d been allocated a desk and assigned to another member of the team, Chidinma, whom I was supposed to understudy. But even she had been condescending.

“I don’t have the time or patience to explain anything twice,” she’d said as I sat with her that first day. “So either open your ears or go get a job in some hotel or restaurant where you really should be.”

News of my qualifications had clearly made the rounds.

“I’m a certified HR professional,” I answered, determined to at least pass on that piece of information.

She’d grunted, unimpressed. “Just listen when I speak. I won’t say anything twice.”

And she hadn’t been joking. Not only did she never repeat anything she said, the little she did share was said so quickly and offhand, that it was almost like she deliberately wanted me to fail. And fail and stumble I did that first week. With very little training, I’d been thrown straight into the deep end, and fell behind on all the requisitions, reports and paperwork I was expected to deliver. It was another member of the team, Jubril, who’d patiently explained the processes to me and answered the very many questions I had.

But that hadn’t been the only thing I’d been dealing with that first week.

–

On my second day at work, Ifeanyi called me.

“I found her, Isioma,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. “I found our mother.”

It felt like all the blood in my body had just been drained. “What mother? Our mother isn’t missing.”

“I mean Hattie.”

“You’ve been looking for her?” I exclaimed, shocked he would do such a thing. “Why?”

“Isioma you were a baby when she left, but I remember her. I remember everything about her, even her smell. I remember how she would sing Hushaby Mountain to put us to sleep every night,” he answered. “I just wanted to ask her why she left us?”

“How did you find her?” I asked.

“Uncle Ejike told me her surname, so I’ve been searching on the Internet for a few years,” he answered. “I must have e-mailed at least a hundred Hattie Woods, but none of the few who replied had ever been to Nigeria, let alone married to one. When I was about giving up, one of them replied,

giving me the phone number of a Hattie Wood she knew who fit the description, except she had since remarried and was now known as Hattie Jones. I called her and when I introduced myself," his voice broke. "When I introduced myself, she started crying, Isioma."

I could vividly hear our father's voice as he forbade anyone from ever talking about her, and felt my heart harden. "What was she crying for? Did anyone force her to leave? What kind of animal abandons her own kids, let alone kids as young as we were?"

"Isioma, she was no more than a kid herself," Ifeanyi answered, his voice patient. "Please hear her out…"

"Don't you try giving her my phone number, Ifeanyi!" I shouted, grateful the call had come when I was already at home and not still at work. "Don't you even dare!"

"No problem. I won't give her your phone number, but I will give her your e-mail address," he answered firmly. "She's going to write you. She's going to tell you everything she told me. So it will be left to you to either delete the message or be sensible and respond. We're not kids, Isioma. At 31, you're a good decade older than she was as a young mother of two kids in a strange country. You shouldn't be holding on to old grudges. This is your birth mother we're talking about."

I hissed and got off the phone, angered with Ifeanyi for further rattling my boat after yet another awful day at work.

"Ị dịkwa mma?" my mother, my real mother, said peering into my room. "Everything okay?"

I forced a smile. "Everything's fine, Mom. I'm just tired."

"How was that Chidinma girl today?" she asked, her face sympathetic. "Did she explain what you didn't understand yesterday?"

I didn't have the courage to tell her that my second day had been exponentially worse than my first. "Yes, she did."

Andrew came to visit later that night and, desperate to get it off my chest, I told him about what Ifeanyi had said.

“You mean your real mother, the white woman in the U.K., wants to reach out to you?” he exclaimed. “And you want to ignore her? Are you crazy? Do you know what the exchange rate is now? Do you know how much richer you can be if she just sends you a few Pounds?”

I’d hissed under my breath, regretful about sharing the information with him, knowing I shouldn’t have expected any different.

True to Ifeanyi’s words, the e-mail from Hattie came the following day.

My darling Isioma,

It fills my heart with joy, so much joy, to finally be able to write to you. I have longed to do this from the very minute the plane took off from Lagos, the very minute I realised it was too late to change my mind, too late to return to you.

My beautiful baby girl. My golden child. Ifeanyi showed me your picture and, 29 years later, you look just the way I remember, exactly the way I have carried you in my heart all these years.

There is so much to say. So, so much. And hopefully, you will give me the chance. I look forward to building a relationship with you, my Angel.

Forever yours…then, today and always.

Mom

I grit my teeth as I read and re-read the e-mail. How dare she call me her baby girl? Her angel? I was her angel, her golden child, yet she’d still left? And she had the nerve to sign off as ‘Mom’. She was no ‘mom’ to me. I already had a mother and had no space to accommodate any imposter.

For some reason, I didn’t delete the message. I knew I eventually would, and even very likely block her, but that would be after I’d read the message a few more times.

But as I tried to focus on work that day, my heart was heavy. As I rode in the staff bus on the way home, tears fell from my eyes uncontrollably. The truth was that, even though I’d been blessed with a maternal substitute very early on, deep in my heart still lay the pain of abandonment and rejection by the very one who should have loved me the most. I’d pushed the feelings to the furthest alcove of my mind, never ever allowing them see the light of

day, which is why I was surprised by how badly I was reacting to her message. There was absolutely no way I was going to allow her back into my life. Not only because it would disrespect my real mother, but also because she, Hattie, didn't deserve to have any access to me. Not ever again. Not after what she did.

The next day, I still felt a bit gloomy, but by Thursday, my work travails were enough to keep me occupied. Thankfully, that had been the day Jubril took me under his wing, so I had a lot more to think about than Hattie Jones, nee Wood…who also once had been Hattie Ilonzeh, wife of Nnamdi Ilonzeh.

A week passed, and I was beginning to feel more comfortable at work, having better understood the ropes and what was required of me. Even though there was still a lot of condescension from several people who felt, with my Nigerian qualification, from a Polytechnic no less, and with my label-less bags and equally unspectacular clothes and shoes, I didn't deserve to be there, there were the others who were nice, friendly, and always ready to lend a helping hand when I was stuck. These were the people I cleaved to, the people I spent my time with, taking care to avoid anyone bent on tearing down my self-esteem.

Ironically, as the days went by, I realised a lot of the condescending ones, Chidinma especially, weren't quite as smart as they liked to believe they were. I realised one of the reasons she had speed-talked her way through a lot of what she taught me was because she didn't understand most of it herself, and instead relied heavily on her subordinates to do most of the heavy lifting. With Jubril's help, by the end of my second week, I was already able to do more than what she even had the capacity to.

It was a Friday, and as work was winding down, I decided to quickly check my private e-mail. And that was when I got the shocker of my life.

There was another mail from Hattie.

My darling Isioma,

I'm so happy to have heard from you. My darling baby girl. I'm so excited about getting to know you and building a relationship after so long.

I’m so sorry to hear you’re having financial difficulty and would love to do anything I can to help. I have copied the e-mail address I sent the first message to, just for authentication. Please reply me from it, including how you would want me to send you the money.

Love always and forever,

Mom

My vision turned crimson as I scrolled down and saw a ‘reply’ to her, from an email account that clearly didn’t belong to me.

Dear Mommy,

I’m so happy to hear from you. I have gone so many years without a mother in my life. I’m really looking forward to getting to know you.

I wish I could write more but I am having serious financial difficulty, as I have some medical issues. I hate to ask but could you please send me some money? The doctors say I need £10,000 for my treatment, but anything you send will be fine.

I love you.

Isioma.

Reading it, I was so angry, my body quivered. I was so angry, if I hadn’t been at work, I probably would have yelled myself hoarse.

It had Andrew written all over it.

So even though I hadn’t planned to, I decided to reply her, to set things straight.

Hello,

The email you got didn’t come from me. I need nothing from you; not your money and definitely not a relationship with you.

Thank you.

Isioma

Hitting the Send button gave me immense satisfaction, and I crossed my arms waiting for Andrew's reaction, as I'd also copied the fake e-mail address he'd created for the scam.

Getting back to work, as we had to finish our weekly report, I missed the staff bus. By the time I was picking up my bag to leave, it was already dark.

My phone rang as I walked out of the building, headed towards the gate where I hoped to find a bus going to CMS. Not surprisingly, it was Andrew.

"I'm in front of your office, Isioma," he barked.

I hissed and disconnected the line, not surprised he had the nerve to call me. He was such an entitled low-life, and I was approaching the very end of my rope with him.

Walking out of the gate, truly he was there, skulking. Upon sighting me, he grabbed me by the arm. "Why did you do that? Why did you send her that mail? She was going to send me…us that money!"

"Will you get your hands off me!" I yelled, pulling my hand out of his grip. "You actually have the nerve to face me after what you did? You hacked into my account to send her that mail, and you still have the nerve to show your face. Please get out of here and get yourself a life."

I turned around to walk away, when he suddenly grabbed me from behind. "Isioma, I'm not going to allow you spoil this for us. The money she'll send will be enough to get us a car. You better pull out your phone now and send her a mail, telling her that you were just kidding, and that you really do need the money."

"Let go of me!" I shouted, trying to wrestle myself out of his grip, but he was too strong for me.

Then suddenly the gates opened and a black Mercedes SUV pulled out. The back door opened and a man stepped out of it. "What's going on here?"

I went limp in Andrew's arms when I saw who it was. It was none other than one of the Executive Directors himself, Karibi Graham-Hart. On my first day at work, as I listened to Dobra and Salewa complain about being burdened with a recruitment error like myself, I'd looked out of the window and seen him emerge from this same SUV, looking dapper in a fitted black suit, white shirt and red tie. My lips had parted as I watched him, my first time seeing him in the flesh, and all I could think was how he looked so much more handsome in person than he did in magazines and newspapers.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, his voice raised. "Let go of her, immediately."

Intimidated, Andrew released me suddenly, causing me to stagger forward.

Karibi reached to steady me. "You work here," he remarked, noticing my ID card. He turned to look at Andrew, and from the look in his eyes, he was nowhere near pleased. "You better get out of here before I get you arrested."

Regaining his confidence, Andrew reached for my hand again. "With all respect, this is a private matter, Sir. I'm her boyfriend, and she is out of your company premises. This doesn't concern you."

Without any warning, Karibi shoved Andrew hard, sending him sprawling to the floor. "Get out of here right now, or I'll make you understand what a family matter really is."

Andrew scampered to his feet, cast a fleeting glance at me, before half walking, half running away. Looking at him as he hurried down the road, I couldn't help but think how pathetic he looked.

"Thank you, Sir," I said, beyond grateful. Andrew had never been that violent with me before, and there was no telling how far he might have gone to get his way this time.

"I'll have Security make arrangements for you to be taken home," Karibi said to me. "Try not to work this late again, and make sure you let your people at home know what happened. On no account must you be left alone. If that guy ever comes back, make sure you call the Police, boyfriend or no boyfriend."

I nodded. "Thank you, Sir."

He smiled again, got back into his car, and was driven away.

I was still standing there, looking in awe at the SUV as it disappeared down the street, feeling as starstruck as a teenager who'd come face to face her with crush, when one of the Security Men peered out from inside. "Madam, we've been instructed to ask you to wait inside until the car to take you home is ready."

I nodded and immediately complied, and less than ten minutes later, I was ushered into the back seat of one of the executive pool cars, a brand new Toyota Camry.

"You can drop me at CMS," I said, not wanting to inconvenience anyone to make the drive all the way to Yaba.

"I've been instructed to drop you at home, Ma'am," the driver answered. "Fola Agoro, right?"

I nodded, amazed by how quickly they'd been able to retrieve my personal information. Closing my eyes and savouring the air conditioning and plush comfort of the leather seats, I soon fell fast asleep and didn't awake until the driver notified me we'd arrived at our destination. Smiling my thanks and not knowing how appropriate tipping him would be, I got out of the car. I looked around, suddenly afraid Andrew would be there, lurking, but realised that, as he'd probably had to resort to public transport himself, was very likely still on his way back home.

Once in the house, I told my mother everything, from receiving the email from Hattie, Andrew hacking my account, me setting things straight, and him lying in wait for me at work to attack me.

"Have I not told you that man is no good?" she exclaimed. "You mean he sent your mother an email, asking for money? £10,000? Has that man no shame? And he now wanted to beat you in front of your office? When you too, you won't listen! Ị naghị ege ntị! Maybe now, you will agree that this long bondage with that good-for-nothing should come to an end!"

I'd endured her continuous rant, heaping curse after curse on his head, and saying all the things she would do to him if he were to ever show his face again. I was also thankful my younger brothers were away in school, as there was no telling what they would have done to the hapless Andrew. But

one thing that struck me was how my mother didn’t ask for more details about Hattie. Not once.

Eventually, I was able to excuse myself and as I lay in bed that night, even though I was still shaken from the incident, I had a smile on my face as I thought about my Knight-In-Shining-Armour, the one who had rescued me.

Thankfully, that weekend and in the weeks that followed, there was no sign of Andrew. Maybe it was shame over what he’d done, or shame over being humiliated in front of me, whatever it was, I was happy he stayed away. Hattie had also not sent any more emails, which was just perfect for me, as I didn’t need her in my life at all.

After my first month, the company held its annual retreat at a beach resort in Epe. We were all transported in staff buses there, from the lowest to the most senior member of staff alike. Upon getting to the resort, we’d been paired in twos in the accommodation chalets. I’d been paired with a Semilore, a loud lady in Finance who, though boisterous, was actually one of the very nice ones.

As we settled into our chalet, she looked at me. “Isioma babe, I hate to love and leave you, but I can’t stay here. No offence intended, but I will die of boredom.”

I smiled, not at all offended. With our chalet all the way on the other side of the beach, the fun place to be it definitely wasn’t going to be. As she left to share a place with some of her other friends in Finance, I was only too glad to have the chalet to myself.

That evening, we had dinner as a group. Considering our number, we hadn’t been able to fit into any of the restaurants, so we’d had to dine, picnic style on the beach, under the moonlight. It was so refreshing seeing everyone in the company, from the highest to the lowest, sitting there having a relaxed evening. Another of our Executive Directors, Sotonye Graham-Hart, was telling funny stories of her travails as a 30-something single woman, and everyone was in stitches, from the youngest youth corps to the oldest person on the verge of retirement.

“What did I miss?” came a voice approaching the group.

I was suddenly light headed at the sight of Karibi. Having not seen him earlier in the day, I'd assumed he wasn't coming for the retreat, thinking he was probably on one of his many trips abroad. I watched as he took a seat next to Sotonye, his younger sister, but noticed he had a faraway look in his eyes the whole time. It was like he was there but really wasn't. I tried to make eye contact with him, to at least wave or something, but he didn't look my way even once. After a little under an hour, he'd excused himself and left.

"It's no wonder he looks depressed," the lady sitting next to me, Adeline, whispered in my ear. "Did you hear what his fiancée did to him? She professed love for another man on the radio!"

"I heard she's even given him back his engagement ring," Ninma, my colleague sitting on the other side of me, said. "The girl must be a big fool!"

I said nothing as the information sank in. I had no idea he was engaged, lest of all that he'd been publicly dumped, and I felt sorry for him.

The next day after breakfast, we had several sessions focused on defining strategy for the coming financial year and reiterating the company's mission and vision statement. After lunch, we were split into groups for several team-building exercises, including a Scavenger Hunt and Charades. I was a master of the latter and helped lead my team to victory in the game. There was so much laughter that it suddenly no longer mattered who was whose friend in the office, or who thought who was cool or lame. Sitting there in the large conference room, all of us in the company t-shirt atop jeans, we were all equal. I laughed as Karibi attempted to play along, and was pleasantly surprised by how active and agile he was, especially during the Scavenger Hunt. He might have been Executive Management, but he was incredibly fit.

That night, we had a bonfire party to celebrate a successful retreat. Sitting alone, I had a smile on my face as I watched my colleagues dance around the bonfire, loud music playing from someone's speakers. It was a full-on party.

"Hi there," came the voice that gave me butterflies. "Why aren't you dancing with the others?"

I looked up at Karibi and smiled. “I’m not much of a dancer. I prefer to watch.”

As he sat next to me on the sand, I literally stopped breathing for a full minute, not believing he was actually there, right beside me.

“Thank you for the other day,” I said, turning to look at him, my expression of gratitude long overdue.

“I hope your boyfriend isn’t disturbing you anymore,” he said, a sly grin on his face.

“No, he’s history,” I laughed, happier than ever that he truly was.

We sat in silence, watching as everyone danced, before he turned to me. “Do you want to take a walk?”

I looked at him in surprise, all the words I wanted to say in response colliding in my throat. He mistook my silence for hesitation. “If you’d rather stay here, it’s okay.”

“No. No, I’d love to walk,” I said, scrambling to my feet.

“Easy,” he said, pulling me up.

I swallowed hard, the electricity I felt from his touch surging through my body. My heart was pounding so hard, I thought it was going to stop any moment.

“Mind if I ask what it was about? The family business?” Karibi asked.

I sighed. “He hacked into my account and sent an email to someone I don’t want to have anything to do with, asking for money.”

“Whoa! There are at least three telenovellas in that statement of yours,” he laughed. “He hacked into your account to demand money from someone you don’t want anything to do with? How can an innocent, pretty young thing like you have all that drama? And who is this someone you don’t want to have anything to do with? Another boyfriend?”

“My birth mother, actually,” I answered.

“Oh. That was inconsiderate of me. I’m so sorry,” he apologised.

I smiled shyly. “It’s okay.”

“Can I ask why you don’t want to have anything to do with her?”

I shrugged. “No big reason. She left us, my brother and I, when we were still very young. And then she suddenly reappeared, what, a few weeks ago, asking for a relationship,” I shook my head. “Thanks, but no thanks. I already have a mom.”

“So let me guess. Your birth mother clearly isn’t Nigerian, and your boyfriend decided to try to cash in on some hard foreign exchange?”

“Bingo.”

“Why on earth are you with a guy like that?”

“I’m not with him anymore,” I reminded him. “I guess it was just habit. We met in school and have been together ever since. It’s been easier to just keep things going than to walk away.”

“So I guess you have your birth mom to thank for getting you out of that one,” he smiled.

I shrugged, never having thought of it that way. “I guess.”

We walked in silence for a few more minutes, before he turned to me. “I’m going to say something, and let me know if I’m overstepping.”

I nodded, curious.

“I think you should hear what your birth mom has to say. You never know what could have prompted her to walk away from her children. That must have been very hard for her to do.”

My lips thinned and I shook my head.

“Okay, it was just a suggestion,” he chuckled. “Look how red your face has gone. It must be a very sore subject for you.”

“Very sore,” was all I offered in response. Then feeling the need to shift the spotlight to him, “I heard about your fiancée. Sorry about that.”

His smile disappeared and he shrugged. “It’s one of those things.”

“No, you don’t get to do that,” I said, smiling at him, feeling suddenly emboldened. “You had me spill my guts about a family secret, and all I get from you is ‘it’s one of those things’?”

He looked at me and smiled in spite of himself. “Okay, you want the truth? It hurts. It really hurts. I really love her and had thought we’d be planning our wedding by now. She’s my soul mate and it kills me how she’s ready to throw it all away over what really? A fling with a nobody.”

It didn’t escape me how he still spoke about his feelings for her in the present tense.

“We fell in love on a plane and when we got to Nigeria, lost each other’s contact information,” he reminisced, a faraway look in his eyes. “For months, I looked for her. I was almost out of my mind, trying to locate her. I was ready to pay any amount of money, just for information about her. And just like magic, we found each other. God led her right back to me.”

“Then you should fight for her,” I said. “If she’s this special to you, you shouldn’t let her go.”

I saw him clench a muscle in his jaw and could see how deep his pain was…and my heart went out to him. I interlinked my hand with his, to express my empathy and he squeezed it.

“She’s everything to me,” he said, as we continued to walk. “I haven’t been with another woman since we fell in love on the plane. She wanted us to be celibate and I’ve been exactly that for almost a year. Just for her.”

“She must be really special,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’m sure you guys will work things out.”

“At this point, I no longer know if that’s possible. By expressing love for someone else on the radio, that might have been her way of telling me she’s done.”

I shook my head, unable to understand the woman’s thought process. “If that’s the case, then she’s very foolish. Who could be a better catch than you?”

It was out of my mouth before I could stop it. He turned to look at me just as I looked up to see his reaction to my slip-up.

And then he suddenly cupped my face and lowered his face to mine. My eyes were as wide as saucers as he kissed me, but closed as I succumbed to the feel of his soft lips as they probed mine. I raised my hands, encircling

his neck, never wanting the kiss to stop. But even I knew that it wasn't in either of our best interest to be kissing out there in the open, where anyone could see us.

"Is your chalet nearby?" he asked.

I nodded, and we were soon walking in the direction of the small bungalow I had all to myself. We were barely inside when he pulled me back to himself in another kiss. Soon his hands were reaching under my t-shirt, and I took the liberty to allow my hands explore his own body as well, loving the feel of his toned arms and rock-hard abs. When he reached to take off my t-shirt, I offered no resistance, not then, not when he lifted me off my feet and carried me to the bed, not when he took off my jeans, and not when I lay naked before him. I watched him undress and couldn't help but marvel over how beautiful he was. To me, he was pure perfection.

Getting into bed with me, his kisses were more urgent this time and I closed my eyes enjoying the feel of him exploring my body, not only with his lips, but with his hands and every part of his body. And as we rode together in rhythmic passion, I had to stop myself from screaming in ecstasy, mindful of the other chalets nearby. Andrew had never taken me to such heights of passion, never driven to me such delirium. Karibi took me to a place I never imagined possible. Afterwards, falling asleep in his arms, our bodies entwined, felt like the most perfect thing in the world and I didn't want the night to ever end. I wanted him to hold me, own me like that forever.

When my eyes opened, I saw him getting dressed. I stretched and smiled, content as the cat that got the cream. "Good morning."

He smiled at me. "Good morning. I didn't want to wake you."

"Why are you up already? It's still pretty early," I asked, noticing that dawn had barely broken.

"I thought it would be best to leave before anyone is out and about. That would be a bit hard to explain, don't you think?"

I nodded, sitting up.

"So, thanks for everything," he said, when he was fully dressed. "For the listening ear and…everything."

“I liked having you here,” I answered, wishing I could say more but not knowing how much more would be appropriate.

“Okay then. I’ll see you around,” he said, bending to kiss me on the forehead, before walking out the door.

I lay back in the bed, snuggled against the pillow he’d used, his smell still lingering. Closing my eyes, I relived the night over and over and over again. By making love, we had started something beautiful and I couldn’t wait for it to grow wings and take flight.

Karibi didn’t come for breakfast, and when I asked someone casually, I was told he’d already left for town. After a short recap, the retreat ended and we were soon on our way back. I realised I’d not only forgotten to give him my phone number, I’d forgotten to get his as well. But I wasn’t worried about that, especially as we spent the better part of every day on the same premises anyway.

Getting home, I was practically walking on clouds. Not wanting to share it with my mother yet, and certain she’d guess something was up just by looking at me, I remained sequestered in my room. I found the story of his former fiancée on the blogs, and wondered what was so special about her anyway. But after the night Karibi and I’d had, I was sure she was already a thing of the past.

The next morning, I was up as early as 3am, unable to sleep. I soon found myself in the kitchen, where I baked a banana, cinnamon and raisin loaf and a chocolate cake.

“What’s going on?” my mother asked, walking into the kitchen, her brows furrowed in concern. “You’re baking on a Monday morning?”

I shrugged, unable to wipe the smile from my face. “Don’t ask. I’ll let you know everything in good time.”

A slow smile formed on her face. “Eziokwu? I like the sound of that. As long as it has nothing to do with that time-wasting degenerate, I’m all for it.”

Getting ready for work, I selected a white chiffon top I’d just bought, pairing it with a fitted, knee-length skirt. I also took extra care with my

makeup, making sure I looked my very best. I had to look perfect the next time he saw me. Holding the basket of cakes, I knew it would be difficult to explain if I rode in the staff bus, so decided to pamper myself with a taxi ride to the office. Being the first to get to my office, I had the luxury of tucking the basket away from sight, and proceeded with my daily tasks as normally as I could.

“You’re not leaving with the staff bus?” Jubril asked, as the office emptied at closing time.

I smiled and shook my head. “I want to catch up on a few things.”

“Don’t stay too late,” he said, before leaving.

Once the office was empty, I checked my hair and makeup, smoothed my skirt and reached for the basket. Taking a deep breath, I walked down the hall and got into the elevator, pressing the button for the 20th floor, the executive floor, for the very first time. When the elevator door opened, I stepped onto the marbled floor and felt like a fish out of water, not having a clue in what direction his office was.

“Hello. Are you here to see anyone?” a kind-faced woman I recognised as Sotonye’s Personal Assistant asked.

I swallowed hard. “I’m looking for Karibi’s office please.”

She looked momentarily puzzled before pointing down the long hallway. “Last door on the left.”

“Thank you,” I smiled, turning around to head that way, so eager to be reunited with my new love.

Getting to the office, I was dismayed to walk straight into the office of his Personal Assistant, a very stern, elderly woman known as Mrs. Fisher.

“May I help you?” she snapped, looking over her glasses like a wicked Principal. “Did you miss your way here or something?”

“Good evening, Ma. I’m here to see Ka..Mr. Graham-Hart,” I said, giving her my sweetest and most disarming smile. “Is he here?”

“You’re here to see Mr. Graham-Hart?” she repeated in all disdain. “Do you have an appointment? Did your boss send you here? Do you have anything

to deliver?”

“Ummm…” I stuttered, not knowing whether or not to declare the cakes as goods to deliver. “I just want to see him, please.”

“So that would be no to all three questions,” she retorted. “Because there aren’t any meetings in his calendar, your boss didn’t send you and you clearly don’t have anything of import to deliver.”

I inhaled deeply. “Its rather urgent, Ma. Please.”

“Young lady, Mr. Graham-Hart is a very busy man. I’m afraid he isn’t available to see you,” she answered. “So I’ll do us both a favour and pretend this conversation never happened. If you’re still insistent on seeing him, send me an email and I’ll check with him before plugging you into his calendar at a future date.”

Walking out of the office, I was momentarily discouraged, wondering how long it would take if I were to go down that route of trying to get into his calendar. But then it hit me. He was clearly in his office. If he was in the building, one thing was for certain. He’d have to leave it eventually.

Buoyed, I returned to my office, grabbed my handbag and headed downstairs to the lobby on the ground floor, my basket in tow. Taking a seat in front of the elevators, I was determined to see him that day, no matter what happened.

It was 5:30pm when I took my seat there, and I sat there for first an hour, and then another, ignoring curious looks from people as they walked out the elevator doors and towards the exit. It wasn’t until 8pm when the elevator opened, and he walked out in the company of two Caucasian men who didn’t work in our company.

I rose to my feet upon seeing him and he, in turn, looked a little confused.

“Jaques and Olivier, please give me a minute,” he said to his guests. “I’ll meet you outside.”

“Hi,” I beamed. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Hi,” he answered tentatively, glancing from me to the basket I held.

At that moment, the elevator door opened, and a disapproving Mrs. Fisher walked out. “Good night, Karibi.” she said, giving me an angry, pointed look.

“Good night, Mrs. Fisher. My love to your family,” Karibi called out, before turning back to me. “Why have you been waiting for me?”

“I forgot to give you my phone number, or get yours for that matter,” I said, smiling even though I was quivering like a leaf inside. “And I baked you a cake. Actually two. Banana, cinnamon and raisin, and chocolate. I hope you like banana and raisin…or chocolate…or both.”

He looked around to make sure there was nobody within earshot. “Erm, Isi…”

“Isioma,” I completed for him.

“Isioma. The other night was a lot of fun, but I hope I didn’t give you the impression that it was anything more than that,” he said. “If I did, I truly apologise. I thought you understood it for what it was.”

And just like that, all the castles I’d built in the air came crashing down.

“Yes, of course,” I said with a forced smile. “I’m aware of that. I just…I just thought you’d like the cakes, that’s all.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” he smiled, and I could actually see pity in his eyes. “Could you please drop them with my PA tomorrow? I’m taking those guys out for dinner and I’m not sure it will be a good look for me to get to the restaurant holding a basket of cakes.”

I nodded, my forced smile still on my face. “Of course.”

“I’m sure they’re delicious. I can’t wait,” he patted me on the shoulder. “Take care, Isioma.”

I stood in the lobby watching him exit the building, feeling like a prized fool. Picking up my handbag, I ordered an Uber and when it arrived, I walked out of the building in a complete daze, not believing what had just transpired, not believing how off the mark I’d been about what had transpired between us. Casual sex was something I only read about in novels and gossip magazines and had never really believed it to be a possibility. In my mind, sex was something to be shared by people who

loved each other, and not only that, the fact he'd defended me when I was in trouble had me convinced he had feelings for me. I hadn't for once anticipated he would call the beautiful experience we'd shared 'a bit of fun'.

There was heavy traffic headed to the mainland, and when I finally got home, as I got out of the taxi, the first person I saw was Andrew sitting on a stone slab in front of my house, wearing a long face. He rose to his feet as I approached, and as he walked towards me, I didn't even have the energy to chase him away.

What was the point anyway?

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"You sure you're okay?" Ife asked, as she drove me home. "You acted really strange when Karibi came to the table. I've never seen you that way before."

I looked at her, wondering whether to share what had transpired between myself and the heir to the Graham-Hart dynasty two years before, but thought against it.

"It's nothing."

And that was what it was.

Absolutely nothing.

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CHAPTER TWO

THERE WAS A SLIGHT drizzle as I got out of the staff bus on Monday morning and I cursed Andrew once again for the set back. It had been seven long months since he wrecked my car, seven long months of resorting to the staff bus and public transportation only a few short months after I'd finally been able to gain access to a car loan to buy a small 2009 Toyota Camry. Now, with the way things stood, I had no hope of getting the car back anytime soon.

A colleague with an umbrella huddled close to me and I smiled at her in appreciation.

"Are you okay, Isioma?" she asked. "You barely said a word since you got on the bus. Rough weekend?"

Rough weekend. Well that was one way to put it. Seeing Karibi had brought to the fore emotions I'd spent the last two years trying to banish.

"Just a busy one," I answered, smiling at her. "Thanks, Jumoke. I really appreciate the concern."

As we filed into the lift, I made more of an effort to greet everyone, with the trademark smile I'd become known for. It was this smile that had had made friends of foes, winning over even those who still felt I didn't belong in such a prestigious company. Regardless of whether I was happy or sad, it was always on my face, my smile, alongside a kind or polite word. It was what I was known for, and even though that day, all I really wanted to do was bury my head under my pillow to tend an old wound reopened, I knew I had no choice but to face the world…with my trademark smile on my face.

But once in my office, sitting at my desk reminded me of my foolishness two years before, sitting on that very desk, under which hid a basket of cakes, cakes baked for a man I'd given myself to like a cheap prostitute. I

still cringed anytime I thought about how naïve I'd been, yielding first to his kiss and then…

"Is everything alright?" Jubril asked, jolting me out of my reverie. "You look a bit pale."

I forced a smile. "I have a bit of a headache," I heard myself lying.

"Sorry to hear that. How is it coming with your Mom's shop?"

Jubril was one of the few people I'd confided in about my plans to raise money to fulfil my mother's lifelong dream of owning a shop in Balogun market. "Still slow, hence the headache," I chuckled, trying to make light of it. "But enough about me. How did your weekend go? I hope things went well with Misty's dad?"

He proceeded to tell me what happened when he went to see his girlfriend's father, to ask for permission to propose to her, and I smiled and nodded perfunctorily, adding laughter where it was required, grateful for the distraction. The last thing I needed was any unnecessary trip down memory lane. It was still a mystery to me how I'd even survived the days that followed that awful incident two years before.

The day after Karibi's rejection, I'd walked into the building feeling like my shame was stamped all over my face, feeling like everyone knew of my disgrace, feeling like they all could see that I had slept with the big boss, shamelessly thrown myself at him, only to be spectacularly rejected. So much was my shame that I couldn't make eye contact with anyone. From the corner of my eye, I saw my basket of cakes still where I'd left it, on the floor by the row of lobby chairs, and said a silent prayer that nobody would match it to me. All I wanted to do was wish the incident away…to forget it ever happened.

As the days progressed and it became evident nobody was laughing or sneering at me, I relaxed enough to feel less embarrassed. But a week later when I walked into Karibi in the lobby, the shame returned a thousand-fold. Our eyes held briefly before I proceeded to quickly lower mine, scurrying past him like a frightened rabbit, hoping, praying he wouldn't say anything to me. Thankfully he didn't, and I continued to do that anytime I saw him;

avoid eye contact. Before long, even he started walking past me without acknowledgment. And that was how it had been for two years.

Until Friday.

“Isioma, Salewa wants you to come explain something in your report,” Felix, a new member of our team, said as he walked into the open-plan office. “She’s waiting for you in the board room.”

Jubril shook his head. Even he knew that wasn’t good news. “You better get to it. We’ll talk later.”

He stepped away from my desk and I looked at Felix like he’d just spoken another language. While it was typical for me to prepare the report our boss presented at their Monday morning leadership meeting, it wasn’t typical for me, or anyone else for that matter, to be summoned there.

I could barely feel my legs as I made my way to the 12th floor conference room. Two years in that company and the mere thought of being in the presence of senior management still made me light-headed. But my nerves were amplified by the thought of being in such close proximity with Karibi, especially now that I knew he did remember me. Pushing my way through the heavy mahogany double doors, my heart was pounding so hard it was all I could hear. Even though all the Heads of Department were seated, the meeting itself hadn’t started. I was relieved to see that Karibi wasn’t yet in the room. Spotting Salewa, I darted to where she sat.

“I’ve told you not to make the report so wordy. I hardly have time to read anything too long on a Sunday evening, so how am I supposed to make enough sense of it to make a decent presentation first thing on Monday?” she whispered angrily. “And didn’t I ask you to put the inventory information in charts.”

“I did the charts in a separate document,” I answered. “I sent it along with the report. I didn't want to change the format.”

If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead right there in that board room. If there was one person who was still immune to my charm, it was her. But how was I to be blamed if she neither read the email I sent nor opened all its attachments? Without further prompting, I took her notepad

and did a rough sketch of the pie chart I'd earlier prepared, the data still fresh in my memory.

"You're sure you haven't left anything out?" she asked, her own anxiety high, as Executive Management was expected in the room any minute. "If these figures are wrong, you're toast. Now go!"

I didn't need any further prompting and tried to make my way out of the room as quietly and quickly as I could. But before I could get to the doors, they opened to let in Leo Burton, the CEO, closely followed by the Executive Directors. I stood back to let them through, wishing I could become one with the wall I was leaning on. My breath held as Karibi approached and even though I initially averted my eyes, I found myself looking up to steal a glance at him, and in his fitted black suit, snow white shirt, navy and sky blue tie, he was pure perfection. He looked my way and gave me a curt nod, a reminder that I was still standing there, gawking. Desperate to retain whatever was left of my dignity, I quickly let myself out, walking as fast as I could down the three flights of stairs to my office, wondering why, after successfully avoiding him for so long, Friday's encounter had brought me right back to square one.

I had to endure an earful of insults when Salewa returned to the office about an hour later. Over the years, I'd accepted that there was very little I could do to please her. If my report wasn't too short, it was too long. If it wasn't too busy, it didn't have enough information. If it wasn't too wordy, it didn't have enough narrative. We both knew if I'd dared include the charts in the report, the complaint would have been about changing its format. There was no pleasing her.

But despite her constant complaining, I was the one she delegated to the most, even often choosing me over Jubril. I chose to believe that had to speak for something.

Thankfully, the day ended soon enough and as I got out of the staff bus at my bus stop, I said a silent prayer asking God not to allow my path cross with Karibi's anytime soon. It was bad enough that a woman my age was still nursing such an unhealthy infatuation. So what if I'd had sex with him? People had flings and one-night stands everyday and were able to move on.

It was high time for me to forget anything had ever happened between myself and the almighty Karibi Graham-Hart.

–

“My darling, nnọọ,” my mother called out from the kitchen as I let myself into the house. “Traffic wasn’t too much today?”

I leaned on the kitchen door. “Not too much,” I answered. “How was your day?”

She shrugged. “Usual. Ify and I went to Iddo market to buy a few things. We just got back less than an hour ago.”

I noticed her skin looked more tan and my heart broke that I still wasn’t able to give her the quality of life I wanted to. Thinking of her and my younger sister hopping from one bus to the other, foodstuff in tow, broke my heart. The returns from her sporadic catering business in no way justified the stress, time and effort that went into it.

“Where is Ify?”

My mother sighed. “She went down the road to see Funto, who’s leaving for Akure this weekend. She got admission into the Federal University of Technology there.”

I shook my head. That was yet another of my sister’s friends to gain admission into University while she was still stuck in JAMB limbo. At 17, she had already tried it for the second time, and from the look of things, a third attempt was imminent. I prayed she wouldn't be as unlucky as I was, only successful the fourth time.

“I’m off to change. I’ll be right back,” I mumbled, dragging myself to my bedroom, feeling like I had the weight of the whole world on my shoulders.

I’d barely slipped into a free-form boubou when my phone rang. I frowned upon seeing Andrew’s name on the caller ID.

“Babes, so sorry I didn't call you from the mechanic’s place like I promised. You won’t believe what happened to me on my way there!”

I rolled my eyes as I listened to him rattle on about how the Uber he had taken had been stopped by Police and how he’d had to bribe them with the

Twenty Thousand Naira he had on him to mobilise the mechanic.

“You bribed the Police with Twenty Thousand Naira?” I repeated, unable to mask my disbelief. “You, a passenger in an Uber? Why didn't you just walk away and get another cab?”

“Hey babes, I couldn't have done that. That would have been really mean. I was the one who asked the guy to get on a one-way road because we were running late and…”

“So what now?” I cut in, my patience running thin. “You were unable to give the Mechanic the money, right? No problem. Another time, abi?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m working on a deal with Ahmed, and if it clicks, it will be huge! Real, real huge. I could even buy you a brand new car.”

“Just fix this one, Andrew. I have to go. Later.”

Disconnecting the line, it surprised me how little patience I had with this man who, at some point, I’d thought to be the love of my life. Now, I barely tolerated him. I’d taken him back after the Karibi incident, but it was evident there had been an undeniable shift. I’d tried to attribute the change in my behaviour to my anger over what he’d done and he’d professed deep remorse, promising to make me trust him again. But I knew it was so much more than that. I just didn't love him anymore and it was getting harder to keep up the act, even if I was still comforted by the familiarity that came with him.

My phone started ringing again and I grit my teeth, thinking it was Andrew calling again. But it wasn’t. It was Ifeanyi. I looked at the ringing device, tempted to ignore the call as I’d done his last few calls, but finally decided to answer it.

“Thank God!” my brother exclaimed, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “I was about to hop on the next flight to Lagos to make sure I still have a sister.”

“Hi,” was all I could manage, my anger over his continued relationship with our birth mother making me unable to say any more.

“Isioma! So because I went to London to meet her, you’ve turned me into persona non grata?”

“What you choose to do with your free time is your business.”

“Aren’t you even curious? Don’t you even have any questions about how it went, how it was seeing her after over thirty years?”

“I don’t care, Ifeanyi,” I retorted, even though nothing could have been farthest from the truth. I did care. When he’d told me our birth mother had sent him a ticket to visit her over the summer, I’d felt so betrayed he would even consider it. It was bad enough that he’d let her back into his life after what she’d done. And when he was there, I’d refused to look at any of the pictures he sent, even though I was dying inside, wondering what they were talking about, wondering how much he was telling her…or she was telling him.

“She really, really wants to talk to you, Isioma,” he continued. “But after your last mail to her, she’s scared to reach out again.”

“And so she should be!” I snapped. “Listen, Ifeanyi, I’ve had a bad enough day. This is the last conversation I need to have. I’m glad you had a good time and that you’re back in Jo’burg, safe and sound. When you’re ready to have a conversation that isn’t about her, you can call me. Good night!”

“Isioma!” came my mother’s voice from my door. “Take it easy with your brother.”

“Mom, please. I don't need a sermon, I beg you,” I said, walking past her to the kitchen. “All I want to do is eat dinner and sleep. I have work tomorrow.”

“You need to give Hattie a chance,” she continued, following me. “Listen to the poor woman at least.”

I hissed and wished I had it in me to talk back at her, to order her never, ever, to mention that woman’s name near me ever again. But as I didn't, I grit my teeth as she continued pleading with me to ‘hear her out, even if only once’. Indeed. Hattie had lost the chance to be ‘heard out’ when she walked out on me as a mere toddler.

I had barely dished some stew over my plate of boiled rice when I heard shouting coming from outside.

“These people have started again!” my mother muttered, walking over to the window to peep at what she thought were our neighbours fighting.

“I know she is in there hiding! Ifedayo, I know you’re there! You and Olumide think you’re smart, but I will show you that I’m smarter! I will wait here all night if I have to!”

My eyes widened at the mention of Ife’s name and from the perplexed look on my mother’s face, it was clear even she knew this wasn’t a neighbour’s tiff. I looked out of the window but that proved to be a mistake.

“You! Oyibo! You’re the one hiding her! You’re the one hiding a husband snatcher. You better bring her out now or I swear I will burn this place down.”

I ducked out of view and the horror on my mother’s face I’m sure mirrored mine.

“Chineke!” she exclaimed. “Isioma, onye ka ọ bụ? Who is she? Who is she looking for?”

I said nothing in response, listening as the woman continued to yell. But when I heard curious voices begin to gather, I knew I had to address the situation once and for all.

“Isioma, where are you going?” my mother cried as I rose to my feet and walked out of the kitchen.

I didn't answer and instead made my way down the three flights of stairs. Downstairs, a curious crowd had already gathered around the shouting woman, a woman who looked no older than myself. As I approached, we made eye contact, and the tears I saw in hers took me aback. I had expected to see an irate person spoiling for a fight, not someone who looked broken to her very core.

“Where is she? I know she’s here with you. Bring her out now!” the woman screamed, tears streaming down her face.

“Madam, please,” I implored. “There must be some sort of misunderstanding. I think you’ve come to the wrong house.”

“Oh, really? Ifedayo isn’t your friend?” she demanded. “With my own two eyes, I have seen the two of you together, so please don’t try to insult my

intelligence any further."

"Nne, please. What is going on?" my mother asked, having also made her way downstairs.

"Tell her to warn her friend to keep away from my husband!" the woman said to my mother, but with her eyes still on me.

"No, there has to be a mistake. My daughter doesn't keep such friends…"

"Tell Ifedayo that she and Olumide have played me for a fool for long enough," she said, this time to me. "You tell her Moyo was here, and tell her that I'm ready for the two of them. I'm ready."

And with that, she turned around and got into a waiting Honda Accord, driven by a woman with a hard-set facial expression that showed she was equally as upset.

I stood and watched as the car disappeared down the street, shaken by the incident, less because of the embarrassment but more because of the hurt I'd seen in her eyes. Even as my mother and some concerned neighbours talked about how it was clearly a case of mistaken identity and how the lady had obviously gotten her information wrong, deep in my heart I knew that wasn't the case.

"…Would you say you have given Moyo a happy home? A marriage filled with love and happiness? Or have you caused a woman like yourself endless grief from the very moment she married her husband? Have you not been the third party in that marriage even before they said 'I do'? And have you not been shamelessly sleeping with Olumide for all of the ten years of their marriage?"

Ozioma's accusation at Ginika's bridal shower rang in my head and my heart sank.

Ife had a lot of explaining to do.

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CHAPTER THREE

“I’M SURE IT WAS one of these women who do nothing but trail their husbands all over Lagos,” I laughed, speaking to Ife on the phone later that night. “She needs to flog whomever her source is. Imagine her coming here to accuse me of complicity in this husband-snatching business. They didn’t tell her that I can’t even hold on to single guys, talk less of a married one.”

So desperate was I to make light of the situation, I didn’t even bring up the fact that the irate woman had called her by name…her full name.

“What exactly did she say?” Ife asked. “Did she say anything about coming back? Did she say anything about knowing where I live?”

Taking a deep breath, I knew there was no dodging the elephant in the room. Her reaction was proof that this was no random incident.

“Do you know her, Ife? This Moyo woman, is what she said true? Are you really dating her husband?”

Her silence was my answer and I shut my eyes, inhaling deeply. From the bottom of my heart, I’d hoped it would all be a lie.

“She’s the person Ozioma mentioned at Ginika’s bridal shower,” I stated, not asked. “What she said, is it all true?”

“Babes, it’s a long story,” was all Ife said in response.

“I don’t have anywhere I need to be,” I prodded, wanting desperately to know how and why this person, who in less than a year had become my closest friend, was dating a married man.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. She won’t bother you again. I promise you that.”

Sighing deeply, I knew I had to be content with that.

–

After a fitful night tossing and turning thinking about it, I resolved I had more than enough problems of my own to occupy my mind. And as I made my way to my bus stop at 6 am the next morning, my umbrella doing little or nothing to protect me from the heavy rain, it wasn't hard to move Ife's drama to the bottom of my list. Sitting in the early morning traffic on Third Mainland Bridge, I shut my eyes, wondering how long it would take me to save for another car, considering I'd already taken advantage of a car loan. For a split second, I was tempted to use the money Ifeanyi and I had already saved for our mother's shop to get myself one, but quickly killed the thought. Not only was the money nowhere near enough to get anything decent, gifting our mother what had been her heart's desire for so long trumped any inconvenience not having a car was causing me. Even if I almost always got to work partially drenched. It would be better for me to either get a bigger umbrella or keep an extra set of clothes at work, if I felt so strongly about it.

Getting to work, I took advantage of being alone in the office to say my prayers and meditate. One of the advantages of using the staff bus was arriving early, and it helped me get into the right headspace for the day. In the early days when I'd faced so much animosity, and also after the encounter with Karibi, I'd used this quiet time to steel myself for what lay ahead that day. But now, it was just my time to gather my thoughts, and after what happened with Salewa the previous day, I knew I had to work extra hard to get out of the doghouse. But then again, with her, I was always in the doghouse.

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I smelt her perfume even before she walked into our office. Looking up, I saw Sotonye Graham-Hart, Executive Director and the company's Director of Facilities, walk into Salewa's cubicle. I saw a few of my colleagues exchange glances, and with good reason to. It wasn't everyday we had members of Executive Management walk into our office.

"What happened to Ande?" I heard Salewa ask.

"He's not at work today," Sotonye answered. "Which is why I desperately need help. The board meeting is on Thursday."

“I understand, but we’re also quite overwhelmed. Louis is breathing down our necks because of this same board meeting.” Louis was the company’s Chief Operating Officer whom Salewa reported to. “There’s no way I can spare Jubril, not even for an hour.”

“Isn’t there anyone else? You have over a dozen people here. Surely you can release one, even if only for today.”

I tensed, trying to act like I hadn’t heard anything. From the way everyone else was suddenly so engrossed in their work, it was obvious they were also doing the same.

“Chidinma would have been a great candidate, but she’s taken the week off,” Salewa answered, sounding anything but sorry.

“What about her?” Sotonye asked. “Leona Lewis.”

“Leona who?” Salewa asked and then laughed. “Oh, you mean Isioma?”

I looked up upon hearing my name and made eye contact with Sotonye, who smiled and nodded. “Yeah, her.”

“Sotonye, I can not guarantee that she has the capacity to give you the assistance you need,” Salewa chuckled. “She’s barely even qualified to do her own job.”

I lowered my head, overwhelmed with shame, disappointment and a raging anger, furious with my boss for putting me down before Executive Management, when I had done nothing but work my tail off for two years.

“She’ll do fine. I’ll guide her.”

Salewa chuckled, enraging me all the more. My head was still lowered as Sotonye left the office and as Salewa, still ever so amused, relayed the conversation to someone on the phone.

I kept my eyes glued to my computer, ignoring any eye contact with my colleagues in the workroom, some of whom I knew would be concerned and the others probably amused. I realised that with Salewa especially, no matter how much effort I put into my work, I would never be good enough. I would always be the girl with the HND, the one who was forced on her, the very square peg in a very round hole.

Salewa waited till the close of business to officially inform me of Sotonye's request. And even then, all she said to me was "Tomorrow morning, go straight to the 20th floor. Ms. Graham-Hart needs your help with a few things."

I watched her as she sashayed out of the office, the resentment I felt so intense, I could taste it.

"Hmmm, good luck with that," Jubril said, walking by my desk as I shut down my computer, eager not to miss the staff bus. "Sotonye is a perfectionist and very hard to please. It's no wonder Ande keeps falling sick. The poor guy is always at his wits end with her."

Ande was Sotonye's Technical Assistant, and he never let anyone forget it. Hired shortly after I was, he fancied himself a member of Executive Management as well, and carried himself that way. He didn't hide his condescension of anyone he felt was beneath him, which was pretty much 90% of the workforce, so I was surprised Jubril was privy to any challenges he was having with his work.

"Gee, thanks!" was my sarcastic retort. As if I needed anything to further fray my already worn nerves. Salewa's ridicule had shattered my confidence and all I could feel as I walked out of the office and squeezed myself into the waiting elevator…was inadequate.

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The next morning, it felt like the lift was going faster than normal, as it charged its way up to the 20th floor. I wished there was a way to slow it down, but before I could even gather myself properly, the doors opened on the Executive Floor. Stepping out, I exhaled several times, trying to compose myself. I'd worn one of my more presentable outfits; a black fitted dress accentuated with a multi-strand faux pearl necklace Ifeanyi gifted me for my last birthday. My makeup was lighter than normal and my hair was in a tight bun away from my face, as I needed neither to distract me that day especially. Even though I'd spent the better part of the previous evening and the bus ride to work that morning reading all I could about Sotonye's department, Facilities, I still felt like a fish out of water, worried that I would do nothing but flail…and fail.

But if I were to be honest with myself, my fear of failure was the secondary reason for my nerves.

Walking down the hall to Sotonye's office, my heart raced as I passed Karibi's. It had been two years since I'd stalked him like a lovesick psychopath, and being on that floor was bringing all the memories back in full force. I desperately hoped not to run into him, not only that day but anytime ever.

Getting to Sotonye's door, I said a silent prayer before opening it and, peering inside, expecting Doreen, her Personal Assistant, to beckon me in. I was surprised to find an empty office. Tentatively, I stepped inside, wondering whether I was expected to knock on the door that led to Sotonye's private office, or wait there till someone put me out of my misery. The door leading to Ande's office was also shut, and I wondered if Salewa had just sent me there to make a fool of myself.

Thankfully, Sotonye soon walked out of her office and smiled when she saw me.

"Ah, Leona Lewis!" she exclaimed.

"Good morning," I greeted, trying to keep my voice steady, reminding myself that I had no reason to feel so nervous before someone who was only a few years older than I was…even if she was an Executive Director.

"You're here nice and early."

I nodded. "The staff bus gets here early." It was such an inane reply, I felt like kicking myself.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," she beamed, beckoning me into her office. "Come in."

Walking in behind her, I was hit by the heady scent of oriental spices. Looking around, I was surprised by how almost informal the space was, with the black and red leather executive table and visitors chairs. A large red vase, with an equally large opuntia cactus, was perched atop the glass coffee table, a red 80s-style rotary-dial phone was on the executive table, and a large Andy Warhol portrait of a younger Queen Elizabeth II hung on

the wall behind her chair. The office was fun and quirky and not at all what I expected.

“Have a seat,” she gestured towards the chairs by the coffee table, giving me a good look of the engagement ring I’d heard so much about. Recently engaged, she was finally on her way to leaving the singles’ club she’d joked so much about being a prominent member of. “I’ll make it quick, as I’m aware Salewa is also under pressure to get things ready for the board meeting.”

I nodded as I sat, opening my notepad and snapping on my pen. “Doreen isn’t in today?”

Sotonye sighed. “She’s indisposed. Can you imagine? My T.A. and P.A. both away when I need them the most,” she sat beside me on the sofa, placing her laptop on the table. “You don’t have to worry, it’s not a lot. I just need to update the Company’s asset catalogue for the Board. All the information is here,” she clicked open a spreadsheet, but I just need to…” she stopped and smiled as I wrote. “Is your notebook actually colour-coded?”

I felt my face flush in my embarrassment, wishing I’d had the presence of mind to remove my colourful post-it flags.

“It’s so refreshing to see someone who still actually writes things down,” she continued, still staring into my notepad in awe. “Amazing! So neat and organized!” she looked at me. “May I?”

“Sure,” it was out of my mouth before I remembered that I also had personal information in there.

“Even the text is colour coded,” she remarked, flipping through the pages, making me suddenly conscious of the three-coloured multi-pen in my hand. “And is this your to-do list?” she asked, when she got to my daily activity bullets, with accomplished tasks highlighted green and roll-over tasks circled red. “You also take meeting notes?” she asked, reading some pages. “How are you able to capture so much and still keep it so neat?”

I shrugged, feeling both uncomfortable and flattered. I’d often been teased about my obsession with writing everything down, taking the time to highlight what I considered more important in red ink, underlining in black

for emphasis, while keeping all other text blue. It had been my pet peeve as far back as secondary school and only on very rare occasions had it been greeted with admiration and not mockery.

“Balogun Market Project,” Sotonye read aloud, flipping to the last section of the book. “Interesting project name. Something your team is working on?”

My eyes widened with horror, realising what she was looking at. “It’s a personal project,” I answered, before quickly adding, “Something my brother and I are doing for our mother. We want to get her a shop there.”

“In Balogun market?” she repeated, looking considerably surprised. She flipped through a few more pages before shutting the book. “Forgive me for the intrusion. I’m a nosy person and your book with all its colours was calling my name. Forgive me. So…where were we?”

“Asset catalogue,” I answered, happy to return to the matter at hand.

“Ah, yes,” she said, returning her attention to her laptop. “This is what Ande was working on, but it’s nowhere near finished. I just need help sorting it out. I’ll work on the other things myself.”

Looking at the spreadsheet, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. If all she needed me to do was sort out information, I had nothing to fret over.

“His office is open,” she said, handing me a flash drive. “It’s the only file saved on it. You can use the Guest profile on his computer.”

I nodded and rose to my feet. “I’ll get to it.”

“Thanks, Leona Lewis.”

Feeling a bit more comfortable in her company, I finally had the courage to ask, “Why do you call me that?”

“You look exactly like her. Hasn't anyone told you that?”

“No. Nobody,” I laughed, highly amused by the comparison with the glamorous British singer.

“Your hair is a few shades darker, but apart from that, the resemblance is uncanny!”

I was still smiling when I got to Ande’s office, surprised by how easy it had been to talk to her. I’d always thought her approachable but had been thrown by Jubril’s reference to her as being a hard-to-please perfectionist. But if she’d been so impressed with something as simple as my notebook, I figured it wouldn't be too hard not to bungle my assignment.

Sitting in Ande’s office, I was surprised by how bare it was, completely bereft of any of his personal effects. But the bigger surprise came when I opened the spreadsheet and was faced with what could only be described as a mess, with all the data dumped with no distinction between the maintenance records of fixed and operating assets, whether in the company’s offices in Lagos, Port Harcourt and Warri or its six field bases in the Niger Delta.

I considered going about the task just as I’d been instructed, the easier way, which was basically flagging the assets by maintenance date and depreciation life, but I knew there was no way I could return the document in that state. So I proceeded to do it the way I would have if it were my own document, creating different tabs for each location and categorising the assets not only by type, maintenance date and depreciation, but also by purpose, age, cost, and operations & maintenance contractor information and history. This had me spend more time than the couple of hours I’d anticipated the task would take. It also saw me place several calls to Odiri, the Head of Technical Facilities who, thankfully, I had a good relationship with. And sequestered there in Ande’s office with no distractions, I was able to complete the document by lunchtime. I had a final look through it and by the time I hit the Save button, I was very satisfied with what I’d done.

Tapping on Sotonye’s door, I was less nervous this time.

“You’re a lifesaver, Leona Lewis!” she said, taking the flash drive from me and beckoning me to sit.

I sat and as I watched her face as she opened the document, my nerves returned. I was suddenly no longer as confident as I’d earlier been, worried that she would scold me for deviating from the brief, worried I would be reprimanded for being a know-it-all and maybe even for insubordination, worried that Salewa would literally eat me for dinner after my goof, worried that I would even lose my job, worried that…

“You did this in just half a day?” she finally said. “How did you get the Asset Life Extension information for the FPSO? And even the turbines we’re still expecting from Capstone?”

“I…I got them from the Technical Team,” I answered, not wanting to get Odiri into any trouble.

She continued to click through the document and I must have cut off blood supply to my fingers with the way I was wringing my wrists under the table, wishing I had just stuck to the brief as instructed.

“What exactly is your background again?” she asked, finally looking up.

“Hospitality Management.”

“I thought that’s what Salewa told me,” she said, returning her attention to the document. “Then how do you know so much about depreciation and amortisation? How do you know so much about…” she clicked on another tab, “…asset disposals?”

“I took an accounting course in school,” I answered, an audible quake in my voice as I berated myself for trying to show off in the first place.

“And the maintenance schedules for almost all the assets? The O&M information? Those are company specific.”

“I’ve just been paying a lot of attention,” was my lame response, wondering just how much I was expected to know and if Jubril had overstepped by teaching me so much. “I’m so sorry for veering off what you instructed. I honestly have no excuse.”

“Are you kidding?” Sotonye laughed incredulously. “This is brilliant. I spent months trying to get Ande to do something like this but had to stop insisting when it just wasn’t happening. I was beginning to wonder if maybe I was the one asking for too much.”

Relieved, all I could do was smile back, scared to say anything that would make her Technical Assistant look bad.

She looked at me for a while, clearly lost in thought. “What do you know about putting a presentation together? Ande was meant to have done this but, of course, he never got around to it. I’ve got so much on my plate and

I’m struggling. I promised Leo he’d see a draft tonight, but the way it’s going, it’s not looking very likely,” she smiled. “Wanna take a crack at it?”

I nodded enthusiastically. If there was one thing I could beat my chest about, it was putting together a good presentation.

“Great!” she said, saving the file to the same flash drive. “I’m also saving some supporting documents; an action items list, a risk register and the Facility team’s meeting reports for the last three months. If you could just find a way to incorporate them into the presentation, I’ll be a happy bunny,” she handed the flash drive to me and rose to her feet. “I have to rush off for a meeting and I might be gone for a while, so you’ll be here by yourself, if that’s okay. You could email me the document when you’re done. If I’m not back when you want to leave, you could lock the door and give Mrs. Fisher the key, if you don’t mind. Her office is a few doors down.”

Oh I knew exactly where Mrs. Fisher’s office was, and I sure as heck had no intention of setting foot there again.

“Is it alright if I work on it in my office?” I asked, the fear of running into Karibi again trumping the fear of offending his sister.

She shrugged. “Sure. I actually don’t blame you. Ande’s office is quite depressing.”

It was when she picked her handbag I realised I was still sitting and quickly shot to my feet, grabbing my notepad. “I’ll email this to you before the close of business.”

She smiled. “That would be great. And thanks so much for the spreadsheet. That alone has already solved more than half of my problems today. You’re a superstar.”

You’re a superstar.

Those were the words that chimed in my head as I floated, yes floated, all the way back to my office, my confidence restored.

“How did it go? I’m surprised your hair isn’t standing,” Jubril remarked.

“Where did you get the notion of her being difficult to work with?” I asked. “From working with her first-hand or from Ande?” From the shift in his

eyes, I already had my answer. “Be careful what you believe, my dear Jubril.”

Still with a smile on my face, I inserted the flash drive into my laptop and was soon immersed in reading the supporting documents, extracting what I thought was useful information and using that to build the presentation. So engrossed was I that I didn't mind missing the staff bus. It didn't even matter to me that, considering my financial situation, it would be another ride home with public transport. What mattered most to me was sending Sotonye an excellent presentation, one that would impress her even more than what I’d done earlier. And when I finally hit the Send button at 7:35pm, I was extremely satisfied with it.

I checked the Uber app on my phone to see how much a ride home would cost and balked when I saw that, due to a surge, fares had as much as trebled. Just as I resigned myself to the fact it would be a bus ride after all, I was alerted by the notification of a new message to my private email account. Clicking it open, I was surprised to see it was from Hattie. She hadn’t tried to contact me since my last caustic message to her two years before, so I was curious to read what she had to say.

My darling Isioma,

I was at my ‘Nan’s and found these. I thought you’d like to see them.

Love,

Hattie

I noticed she hadn’t signed Mom this time, and was surprised this disturbed me a little. Opening the attachments, I couldn’t help but smile at the three pictures of a very young Hattie cradling an infant; an infant I reckoned was me. But the pictures could wait. What was more important was getting home on time. It was late enough already.

As I waited for the elevator, I couldn't help but think about what a rewarding day it had been. Not only had I thoroughly enjoyed what I’d done for Sotonye, getting the validation that I’d done good work was

everything I needed. It was all the reassurance I needed that I wasn't just a waste of space.

The elevator door opened and I already had one foot inside when I noticed the other person in it.

Karibi.

I immediately stepped back.

"Aren't you coming in?" he asked, using his hand to keep the doors from closing.

"Umm, no. I'm waiting for someone," I lied. He looked behind me at the deserted hallway and I swallowed hard. "She…she's in the toilet. I'm waiting for her."

"Okay. If you're sure," he answered. "Just try not to work too late. Remember what happened the last time."

I tried to say something, anything, in response, but looking at him, my brain went completely blank.

"Good night, Isioma," he said with a smile, as the lift doors closed.

I shut my eyes, embarrassed by the encounter. I wanted to kick myself for choosing that time to go tongue-tied. I hated how I must have come across as a star struck, infatuated teenager. But what I hated most was how my heart was still racing a mile a minute. I hated the effect he still had on me and I wondered if there ever would come a day when I would be as indifferent to him as I wanted to be…as I needed to be.

Getting a bus to CMS was even more difficult than normal that evening, and after spending over two hours in traffic on Third Mainland Bridge, it was easy to see why. By the time I disembarked at my bus stop, I was well and truly drained.

Walking to my house, I frowned when I recognised Andrew's form, sitting in a makeshift beer parlour a neighbour had created with a few plastic chairs around a mounted television. He rose to his feet when he saw me.

"Baby, what happened today? Traffic?" he asked, walking to me.

I looked at my watch. It was past 10pm. "What do you want, Andrew?"

“What’s with you? You’ve been cranky for days. I’m not feeling this behaviour of yours. It sucks, if you don’t know,” he retorted, his brows furrowed. “Is it because of your car you want to keep giving me attitude? A car that I’ll soon be able to replace five times over.”

“But you haven’t though.”

“The deal with Ahmed is about to click. That’s what I’ve been waiting here to tell you,” he said. “I just need to raise a bit of money, about fifty thousand, as my own contribution to the deal, and the money, the big money we’re expecting, should be out in less than a week.”

I smiled and shook my head. The cost of fixing my car was about two hundred thousand naira, and he was still trying to get me to part with a quarter of that amount. I looked at him and realised I was done listening to his lies. He would never change.

“Andrew, if I give you the car, will you leave me alone?” I asked.

He looked at me, surprised. “Huh?”

“If I tell you to keep the car,” I repeated, this time firmer. “If I tell you not to bother with the repairs and that you can sell it as scrap if you want, will you leave me alone?”

“Leave you alone? You mean, break up?” he exclaimed. “You want us to break up? After all these years, Isioma?”

I smiled. He couldn't fool me. Despite his theatrics, I could recognise the glazed look in his eyes, the look he had when it came to issues of money. I decided to make it easier for him.

“I’m saying you can keep the money from the car, Andrew. All of it,” I said. “It’s all yours. All I ask in return is for you to just go away, please.”

“You’re serious?” he asked. “You want me out of your life that bad?”

“Andrew, we’ve been over for years,” I answered, sighing. “Let’s stop wasting each other’s time,” I touched his arm. “The papers are in the glove compartment. Everything you need is in there. It’s all yours.”

As I walked past him and into my building, I knew my mother would lose her mind over my surrendering the car to him. But it was just as well as,

knowing Andrew, unless I raised the money myself to fix it, not only would nothing happen in the foreseeable future, he would still try to extort however much more money he could from me.

And I was so done with that. So, so done.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIRST THING I felt when I opened my eyes the next morning…was relief. The relationship with Andrew was dead weight I'd carried around for way too long. Even though it had cost me my car, having him out of my life, permanently, was well worth it.

Getting to the office, the first thing I did was open Hattie's mail again. Looking at the pictures with fresh eyes, I found myself unable to look away from the wide-eyed new mother. With her freckled face and her hair in an untidy ponytail, she looked like a teenager. In one picture, she was smiling down at the infant in her arms, in another she was kissing the head of the same infant cradled on her shoulder and in the third, she was smiling at the camera, her green eyes tired but joyful, one arm cradling the infant and the other around a curly haired little boy. And for the very first time, I understood.

She had been no more than a child herself.

Tears welled in my eyes as I looked at the way she kissed the infant… me...and also the protective way she held onto both her children. If these pictures were anything to go by, not loving her children was one thing the young Hattie couldn't be accused of. Whatever had been her reason for running away, she had been punished enough.

Dear Hattie, I started to type, nowhere near ready to call her anything else. Thank you so much for these pictures. They're lovely. My fingers paused over the keyboard, not knowing what else to type. I couldn't say I understood why she did what she did, because I still didn't. I couldn't tell her I forgave her because I wasn't quite sure I did. I just need some more time was what I finally I decided on, and it was the truth. I did need more time. How much, even I didn't know.

No sooner had I hit the Send button than a reply from her dropped in my inbox.

My darling Isioma,

You will never understand what reading from you this morning has done for me. I am overjoyed beyond any words could possibly express. You can take as much time as you need. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here.

Love you forever,

Mom

I smiled seeing that she'd signed off as Mom again. Even though it would be one heck of a long shot for me to ever consider her one, I couldn't help but be pleased she was still making that effort. I toyed with the idea of calling Ifeanyi, but decided that could wait till later.

As people filed into the office, I logged off my personal email and started working on the tasks that had suffered the previous day, determined to finish at least half of them by midday. I was still trying to get out of the doghouse with Salewa.

Just as I was about to start, my desk phone started ringing. My heart flew into my mouth when I saw who it was; Mrs. Fisher. Why was Karibi's Personal Assistant calling me at 8am in the morning? My head was racing with a million and one possibilities, from a scolding for lying to him the day before…to him summoning me so he could declare his undying love for me.

"Are you going to answer that?" Salewa retorted as she walked past my desk on her way to her office.

With shaky hands, I reached for the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello, Isioma," came Mrs. Fisher's voice. "I'm calling on behalf of Ms. Graham-Hart. Could you please come up to her office? On the 20th floor."

She was off the phone before I could give her a response. I cast a glance at Salewa's office, wondering how she would take me being summoned by

Sotonye yet again.

It turned out I had nothing to worry about, as Salewa waved me off impatiently when I went to her office to let her know, engrossed in whatever she was reading on her screen. I quickly made my way out of the main office before she had a chance to change her mind. The truth is I was eager to hear what Sotonye thought about the presentation. I was still basking in the euphoria of her praise from the previous day. It felt good actually doing something without the constant worry of failing looming over my head.

“Hiya,” Sotonye called out, as I walked into her office. “I’m so sorry I had to ask Mrs. Fisher to fetch you. I hope she didn’t give you too much of a scare.”

I smiled and shook my head. “Doreen still isn’t back?”

“Nope. It’s still just me,” Sotonye sighed. “But enough about me and my staff issues, I got the presentation. I moved some things around to improve the flow, but other than that, it was near perfect. The dashboard you included was sheer genius. It never would have crossed my mind to put all the charts on the same slide. Well done, Isioma.”

I beamed, unable to hide my pleasure. “I’m glad to have been of help.”

“You’ve been more than ‘of help’. You’re a lifesaver, that’s what you are,” she said. “Salewa is going to kill me, but I’m going to need your help with a few other things. The After Action Review document Ande prepared after the incident at the Uwheru Field last month is in no shape for me to share with the Board tomorrow. Could you please help tidy it up? I’ll email it to you.”

I nodded, trying not to appear as excited and enthusiastic as I was. “Sure.”

“And do you think you could sit in for Ande in a meeting with Bonatti this afternoon,” she continued. “With everything that’s on the agenda, I’ll need someone there to take notes.”

My eyes widened. Bonatti was one of the company’s major contractors.

She looked up. “Is that fine? Do you think Salewa will be able to spare you for about an hour? Two at most? It’s scheduled for 2pm.”

“I’m not very busy,” I lied. “I’ll be here.” Who knew the next time I would be given this kind of opportunity? As for Salewa, I would find a way to handle my boss.

“Great!” Sotonye beamed. “I’ll look forward to the finished document and also seeing you at 2pm. The meeting will be in the conference room down the hall. If it won’t be too much of a bother, could you come up earlier to make sure the place is set up? I had to ask Mrs. Fisher to help with that since Doreen is out, but she might get busy and forget.”

“It’s no problem at all,” I answered, grinning, not even caring how eager I looked. “Consider it done.”

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At exactly noon, I’d not only sent Sotonye an updated After Action Review document but had set up the conference room; readying the projector and video conferencing facilities and working with the Executive Floor’s Welfare Officer to ensure there were adequate refreshments. By the time Sotonye walked into the room with the Italians a few minutes after 2pm, everything was set.

During the meeting, I took notes meticulously, sure not to miss out anything. As I always did, I had the recorder on my phone on as a back up, something I knew I would need considering the thick Italian accents of the contractors. Ninety minutes later, the meeting was over and as Sotonye and Odiri saw the visitors off, I had already started making mental notes about what structure the meeting minutes would take. I decided to stay in Ande’s office to work on it, taking advantage of the quiet to listen to the recording on my phone multiple times, crosschecking this with what I’d captured on paper. At 4pm on the dot, I was able to hit the Send button to Sotonye.

I was in the process of shutting down the computer when she walked into the room.

“I was hoping you’d still be here,” she said. “I didn’t want to have to ask Mrs. Fisher to call you again.”

“I just sent you the minutes,” I answered, worried it perhaps hadn’t delivered.

She nodded. “I know. I’ve seen it,” she shook her head and smiled. “It always took Ande a minimum of three days to send me a scanty draft, but you sent me something so detailed and thorough in only a couple of hours,” she shook her head again. “Just when I think you can’t amaze me more, you raise the bar even higher.”

“Did I capture everything?” was my lame question, as my brain was suddenly unable to piece together anything more sensible.

“So much I actually have to edit it down,” she answered, smiling. “Which is a first for me. I usually have to add a lot of information he missed.” The smile disappeared. “I haven’t been quite honest about Ande. Last week, we made the mutual decision to part ways. It just wasn’t working out for either of us and, to be honest, I’d already engaged HR about getting a replacement. But on Thursday, Ande and I had an honest conversation, and he admitted struggling with the role. We decided it would be best for him to leave and I promised him a good recommendation.”

“Oh,” I said in response, feeling sorry for the pompous Ande.

“This week, HR kick-started the process officially and Dobra just informed me that they have slated a few interviews for next week,” Sotonye continued, still with a keen eye on me. “But I’ve decided I don’t want to interview anyone else for the role. I want you.”

My lips parted in my shock. “You want me to interview for the role?”

She laughed. “If these last couple of days haven’t been interview enough, I don’t know what else is. You’ve aced everything I could have possibly wanted to test.”

I stared at her, completely tongue-tied.

“I’m offering you the role, Isioma,” she chuckled. “I wanted to tell you before communicating it to HR.”

“But I’m…I’m a Level 8 Officer…” I stuttered, well aware that the Technical Assistant role was a Management position.

“Mere details, my dear. Leave that to me,” she answered. “All I want to know is if you’re interested or not. Are you?”

I nodded, feeling equal parts excited and terrified. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Great!” she beamed, walking out of the office.

I stared at the door long after she’d left, wondering if my mind had conjured it all. With shaky hands, I gathered my things and walked out of the office.

Making my way back to my floor, it felt like I was floating above my body and watching the world from a distance. The closer I got to my office, the more I knew this would never fly. I could just imagine Dobra’s face when she got the message. If she’d been incensed I’d been hired in the first place, Sotonye’s request was sure to make her burst a blood vessel or two. It was never going to happen.

“Oh, you’re back,” Salewa retorted, when I peered into her office. “And at closing time. How convenient!” she looked up at me, her displeasure evident. “I hope you have no plans of leaving early. You owe me several reports, all of which I expect today.”

I nodded. “Yes, Ma. I’ll work on them now.”

“You better,” she muttered, returning her attention to her screen.

It was with a heavy heart that I returned to my desk just as my colleagues filed out to catch the staff bus. It was going to be another ride home via public transport. Settling into my work, I realised it would only be foolhardy to think anything was going to change. Sotonye clearly had good intentions, but I was at the very bottom of the system’s food chain. There was no way that was going to change overnight.

By the time I was done with the four reports, it was almost 6:30pm. After sending them to Salewa, I peered up and saw that she was on the phone. Deciding that she didn't need to discuss them with me anyway, I shut down my laptop, put my things together and reached for bag, not at all excited about the long journey that lay ahead. At this time, traffic headed to the mainland was at its thickest and I knew I wouldn't get home before 9pm that night.

As I made my way to the elevator, Dobra rushed past me, with Mosun hot on her tail. Neither of them looked pleased.

“Good evening, Ma,” I greeted Dobra, before turning to Mosun. “Hi, Mosun.”

Dobra threw me a caustic glance without answering, while Mosun responded with a non-committal wave, neither of them breaking step. I turned around and saw that they had entered my office, and it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, Sotonye had already told them her plan.

Unable to help myself, I made by way back to the office, walking quietly so I wouldn't be heard. Once in, I stood by the door, leaning in to hear whatever they were saying to Salewa.

“It’s the biggest joke of the century!” Dobra was already ranting. “I’ve told Mosun that she probably misheard her. Surely, she wouldn't have called to make such a ridiculous request when we’ve already lined up several fantastic candidates for the role.”

“No, she’s not joking,” I heard Salewa chuckle. “I just got off the phone with her and she told me the same thing.”

I heard Dobra curse and there was silence for a few minutes.

“Hi, Sotonye,” came her voice again. “I missed you earlier. Mosun said you came by the office.”

“Hi Dobra,” came Sotonye’s voice, making me realise she’d been put on speaker. “Did she give you my message?”

“About that,” Dobra answered, and it was evident she was doing all she could to rein in her anger. “There must be some sort of a mistake. There is a job description for that role, with the required qualifications clearly defined. We’ve shortlisted some amazing candidates, several from Ivy League universities, one of whom even worked with the United Nations in several capacities. Another, a lady, was even…”

“I heard all these things when we hired Ande,” Sotonye cut in. “And we both know how that turned out.”

“Point taken, but I can assure you that we have painstakingly selected better candidates this time. We’ve ensured the only people you’ll interview will be the very best you can find anywhere.”

“And I don’t doubt that, Dobra. But I’ve already interviewed the person I want. I threw her right into the deep end, and she swam like a champ.”

“With all due respect, this is preposterous. The very notion of it is just crazy!” Dobra exclaimed.

“Dobra!” cautioned Salewa.

“Why is it so preposterous, Dobra?” Sotonye asked. “Do you doubt my judgement? Are you trying to imply I’m unable to decide who I can or can not work with?”

Even a deaf person would have heard the edge in Sotonye’s voice, something that was out of character for the pleasant-natured Executive. I held my breath, scared things would go out of control all on my account.

“Not at all, Sotonye,” Dobra conceded. “But as Head of Human Resources, it is my job to advise on all employment matters and I don’t think is a good idea.”

“And why is that, Dobra?”

“For one thing, she’s a Level 8 Officer…”

“Isioma already had six years of relevant experience when she joined this company. You and I know she should never have come in so low.”

“I don't know what you classify as relevant experience, but I sure wouldn't call working in a Printing Press ‘relevant experience’,” Dobra retorted. “She doesn’t even have a university degree. I’m still flabbergasted that Edwina was not only allowed to hire someone with a HND, but in Hospitality Management of all things!”

“Yet, in only two days, she has outperformed Ande with his fancy MBA from Stanford.”

There was silence and I could only imagine the look on Dobra’s face.

“She’s going to have to go through the process,” she finally spoke. “She’s going to have to interview like everyone else.”

“You can go through your process, Dobra,” Sotonye answered. “Interview her if you like. But I’m not seeing any of your candidates. I’ve made my decision and its final. Kindly have your staff draft her an offer, at the very minimum at par with Ande’s. Thanks.”

The silence that followed was proof that Sotonye had exited the conversation.

“Can you imagine that?” Dobra exclaimed. “Did you hear that? How on earth did this happen under your watch?”

“She walked in here asking for one of my staff. Was I expected to say no?” an exasperated Salewa answered, before sighing. “If I’m to be very honest, I’m not surprised Isioma impressed her like that. She’s very hard working and pays extra attention to detail. Losing her is really going to hurt.”

My mouth dropped open, hearing Salewa sing my praise.

“Just do what she wants, Dobra.”

“She’s right,” came Mosun’s voice. “Why go through the tedious process of interviewing people when she has already made her decision?”

“Schedule the girl for an interview tomorrow morning,” Dobra cut in. “Invite everyone that was meant to be on the panel. I don't care what Sotonye says, if the panel is able to make a strong enough case for why she’s unsuitable, I’d like to see her still proceed with this hare-brained notion of hers.”

Hearing Salewa’s door, I immediately scampered out of the main door, ducking into the restroom as Dobra and Mosun walked onto the hallway. Leaning on the closed door, I wished Sotonye had just let me be. Knowing Dobra, she was bound to do everything to discredit me and make me look even more incompetent than she’d already made everyone believe I was.

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Walking into the conference room, I couldn't help but think how different it felt compared to when I was interviewed by the very warm and friendly Edwina, a little over two years before. There hadn’t even been a panel. This time, I was seated across a stone-faced Dobra, an unsmiling Mosun, and two Managers from the Facilities team I barely knew. It wasn’t until Odiri walked in that I finally relaxed.

“Ah, who do we have here?” he exclaimed. “I was so excited when Dobra told me this morning, but not entirely surprised,” he looked at his HR counterpart. “You need to read the meeting minutes she prepared yesterday.

So detailed, anyone reading it would feel like they actually attended it. Well done!”

Dobra cleared her throat. “Thank you for that, Mr. Adams, but we’re here for an interview,” then looking at me. “You have been recommended for the role of Technical Assistant to our Director of Facilities. What do you understand about that role?”

“I know that the primary remit of the department is to oversee the maintenance of all the company’s facilities, from its corporate offices to its upstream and midstream assets, managing everything from maintenance, repairs, construction, renovations, to even landscaping. The Facilities Director oversees all of this, working hand-in-hand with the Technical Team mandated with managing the fields’ facilities. The Technical Assistant is expected to support the Facilities Director in this role,” I answered, doing everything I could to keep my voice steady and retain eye contact.

“And how would you as a Hospitality Manager be able to provide this support to the Director?” Dobra asked, smiling.

I saw one of the men wince and, rather than recoil at the not-too-subtle dig, smiled at her. “As an Administrative Officer in this organisation for the last two years, I have a very good understanding of the corporate facilities not only here in Lagos, but in Port Harcourt and Warri as well. The Group Consolidation exercise we had last year also helped me get familiar with our swamp and offshore facilities. I pay a lot of attention, and as an avid reader of the quarterly newsletters of the various departments, I have been able to gain even more of an understanding of how the various units work.”

Dobra scoffed. “Reading newsletters? Is that the best you can do?”

“She’s actually on to something,” the man who winced said. “You’ll be surprised what kind of useful nuggets that can be found in those newsletters. I’ve personally become a health and safety guru just by reading them,” he smiled at me. “Hello Isioma. We haven’t been properly introduced. My name is Tor, and James and I,” he turned to the man seated next to him, “work very closely with Ms. Graham-Hart.”

I nodded and smiled at them. I'd seen both their names in the documents produced for Sotonye.

"You rightly mentioned one of the primary functions of the Facilities department as maintenance and repairs," he said. "I couldn't attend the meeting with Bonatti yesterday, but like Odiri said earlier, I didn't miss anything as the meeting minutes was so detailed. Anyway, I'm sure you gathered the primary reason for the meeting was to discuss the change order they are requesting, which, if approved, will cost us a lot of money. What are the issues being faced with our other contractors and how would you suggest we avoid them from reoccurring?"

I inhaled deeply and shut my eyes, but not before seeing the smirk on Dobra's face. I remembered the Risk Register I'd used for Sotonye's presentation and tried to remember the issues noted. Opening my eyes, I reeled off the names of the French contractor we were having payment issues with as a result of their inability to meet our defined terms, the Asian contractor that had overrun their delivery date by almost a year, and the Nigerian contractor that hadn't even reported to site months after being mobilised.

"It all comes down to contracting. At the end of the day, only an airtight contract can protect us from contractors who try to box us into a corner. Bonatti has found a loophole and knows it will cost us more to start over. We need to work even more closely with our Legal & Contracting team to ensure everything from scope, timelines, performance, change orders, payment pre-requisites are all well articulated."

Tor nodded. "Very good. I'm also glad you mentioned working with the Legal & Contracting team. What other departments do we work closely with?"

Again, I mentally scanned the report I'd prepared for Sotonye.

"The Finance team, for budgeting, cost forecasting and inventory management. The Planning team, for scheduling and team coordination. The Procurement team, for the acquisition and warehousing of critical spares and supplies," I answered, before smiling at Odiri. "And of course the Technical team, for maintenance schedules and replacement programs."

Odiri smiled back at me. “Perfect answer, Isioma. Synergy and teamwork are important, and not just for the Facilities department. We all rely on each other to be able to execute our duties effectively. And that is what your predecessor didn't understand.”

“Mr. Adams!” Dobra cautioned.

“It’s the truth,” James cut in. “Ande walked around with his shoulders so high, never bothering to interface with anyone or ask for the help he needed, and I think it was evident in the quality of his output,” he looked at me. “Isioma, I have absolutely no questions for you. Not only did I see the impressive minutes from the Bonatti meeting, I’ve also seen the asset catalogue and the presentation you prepared for this afternoon’s board meeting. The last person who held this office couldn't even dream of producing half that output.”

“Mr. Maduemezia!” Dobra snapped, her face flushed. “Let’s maintain the necessary decorum, please!”

James raised his hands in submission, before leaning back in his chair.

“Do you have any more questions, Mr. Akoso?” Dobra asked Tor. When he shook his head, she turned to Odiri. “Mr. Adams?”

“I’ve worked with Isioma before and I know she’ll be perfect for the role,” he answered. “So no, I have no questions.”

Silence followed for a few more minutes as Dobra rustled through some sheets in front of her, clearly flustered.

Mosun, noticing her boss’s agitation, quickly stepped in. “We have a long list of more qualified, more suitable candidates for this role. Why should we choose you over them?”

I stared at her, my mind blank. She was asking me the same question I’d been asking myself. Why me?

“Because I’m a quick learner,” I finally answered with a helpless shrug. “Because of my ability to get my work done even in the face of difficult obstacles. Because I’ll do everything I need to do to help Ms. Graham-Hart achieve her objectives…” I shrugged again, wishing I’d been able to come

up with something that sounded smarter. But it was honestly the very best I could do.

Mosun looked at Dobra, before turning back to me. “Thank you, Isioma. We’ll get back to you before the close of the day.”

“Thank you,” I was able to say before rising to my feet and leaving the room. Even though the feedback from most members of the panel had been positive, I wasn't sure it would be enough to sway things in my favour.

Returning to my desk, I started attending to emails I’d missed while working with Sotonye, and tasks that were still open. I was grateful for the distraction of work, and even more grateful that it didn't appear anyone of my colleagues had heard anything. The fewer people to know of my rejection from the role, the better.

As the day progressed, I had my eye on the clock the whole time, determined not to miss the staff bus again. Which was why when Salewa summoned me to her office at exactly 4pm, I wanted to pull my hair out.

“Have a seat,” she said, beckoning at a chair, an actual smile on her face.

I did as she’d instructed, almost scared by her uncharacteristically friendly behaviour.

“Congratulations, Isioma,” she said, handing me an envelope. “You deserve it.”

Opening the envelope, my eyes widened when I saw what it contained; an offer letter for the position of Technical Assistant to the Director of Facilities. My hands shook as I read the terms, when I saw that the Managerial position not only came with a salary several multiples higher than what I was earning, but also an official car. I was grateful I was sitting, because there was no way my legs would have been able to keep me standing. I raised my hand to my mouth to steady it, but also to keep from screaming at the top of my lungs. Surely, this all had to be a dream.

“The duckling finally became a swan,” Salewa said, the smile still on her face. “I’m really going to miss you here. I know I don’t say it enough, but you’re a good one, Isioma. And I’m glad this has happened for you.”

I looked at her, the tears in my eyes making me unable to even see her properly. This was all too much for me.

“Sotonye said you should come see her as soon as I give this to you,” Salewa continued. “I think she wants to have a word with you before you send your acceptance to HR.”

I nodded, rising to my feet. “Thank you, Ma. Thank you so much.”

She smiled before turning back to her computer. “Okay, leave before people start to wonder what I’ve done to make you cry.”

I walked out of her office feeling like I was in a dream. It had to be a dream, because it was too absurd to be real life. It was either a dream or a very cruel joke.

Making my way up to Sotonye’s office, catching the staff bus was the last thing on my mind. As I waited for the elevator to take me up, it didn’t even matter that my colleagues were headed the other way. I wanted to hear from Sotonye that this, this letter in my hand, was real. To get confirmation from her that, indeed, I had just been given the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Leona!” she called out, when I peered into her office. “I’ve been waiting for you. Have you seen your letter?”

“Yes,” I answered, my voice barely audible. “Thank you so much for this opportunity. I don’t have the words to express my gratitude…” and the tears finally came.

“Oh, Leona,” she said, rushing to me. “Gratitude for what? I’m the one who’s grateful for finally finding someone who can work on my wavelength,” she ushered me to the sofa. “I’m the one who should be thanking you for accepting,” she raised a brow. “You do accept, don’t you?”

I laughed through my tears. As if she had to ask! “Yes, Ma. Yes, I do.”

She shook her head. “Rule number one, no ‘Ma’ business over here. My name is Sotonye.”

I nodded and smiled, ready to address her however she wanted to be addressed.

“But that’s not all,” she said, suddenly serious. “There’s a reason I asked to see you before you accept this offer.”

My stomach dropped. Of course there had to be a catch. It was clearly way too good to be true.

“Doreen just sent in her resignation,” she continued, referring to her long-term PA. “She’s pregnant after a long time of trying. Over the weekend, she had a threatened miscarriage so she’s been put on bed rest for the rest of her pregnancy. She and her husband have decided it’s best for her to leave for the United States immediately,” she shrugged. “So, I’m without a P.A.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage in response, feeling both happy and sad for Doreen.

“I desperately need a Personal Assistant,” she continued. “With everything I have going on, and with my wedding only a few months away, my life is a total mess right now,” she looked at me and smiled. “And I haven’t been able to get that notebook of yours out of my head.”

“My notebook?” I repeated, confused.

“The organisation and attention to detail…” she reached for my hand. “That’s exactly the kind of order I need now, with my daily management and planning, not just at work...but for my wedding also.”

“You want me to be your P.A. instead?” I asked, confused.

“Oh no, please don’t get me wrong. The offer you’ve been made to be my Technical Assistant still stands. I was just…I don’t know. I was just hoping maybe you could be both?” she shrugged. “I know it's a lot to ask and you’re free to say no, but my gut tells me you’re just the person I’ve been looking for.”

If only she knew that, at that very moment, I would have jumped in front of a moving train for her. “I would be honoured,” I answered with a smile. And it was no lie. One of the many hats I’d worn in my last company had been Personal Assistant to the Managing Director, and it was something I knew I could do with my eyes closed. I was even more honoured and excited about the prospect of helping her with something as intimate as her wedding.

What a surreal day it was turning out to be!

She smiled at me. “I’m really glad,” she rose to her feet and walked to her desk. “I just had Dobra draft me this,” she said holding an envelope. “It’s an offer for the position of Executive Assistant, which is basically a combination of both roles. She wasn’t too pleased about having to create a new position, and her team is still putting finishing touches to the job description,” she walked over to where I was seated. “But I wanted to give this to you myself.”

I rose to my feet like someone in a trance. As I read the contents of the letter, as I saw that this came with an even higher salary and more perks, I sat down again, unable to comprehend the events of the last sixty minutes of my life.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she laughed.

Before I could say anything in response, her door opened. And Karibi walked in.

If I was short of words before, I was completely speechless now. I rose to my feet, keeping my eyes lowered, not wanting, not able, to make eye contact.

“You know Leona Lewis, don’t you?” Sotonye asked her brother. “Well, she’s my new Executive Assistant. And yeah, you better get used to that title.”

“Leona Lewis?”

“Doesn’t she look like her?” Sotonye insisted. “She’s her doppelgänger as far as I’m concerned.”

I could feel his eyes on me and I looked up. As our eyes held, I felt suddenly lightheaded and wished I was still seated.

“She’s way prettier than Leona,” he said. “Congratulations on your new role.”

As he turned to talk to Sotonye about the just concluded board meeting, I lowered myself back to the chair, my heart still racing. Even after he left her office, I was still a bundle of nerves. I was barely able to comport myself as Sotonye discussed converting the wall that separated Ande’s office from

Doreen’s open space to a glass one, so that I’d have privacy but still get a good view of her office. I managed to smile and nod as she raved about having me as her assistant, insisting I not only send my acceptance to HR the next day but immediately move my things up as well.

“We’re going to have so much fun, Leona!” she enthused.

I smiled, no longer feeling quite as excited as I’d been a few short moments before.

Standing and waiting for the elevator, I realised just what I’d signed up for, and wondered if I had the ability to work in such close proximity with a man still able to reduce me to a bumbling, fumbling mess.

And for the first time since being made the offer of a lifetime, I was tempted to turn it down.

But as the elevator doors opened, I knew there was no way I could do that. This offer was great, not only for me, but my family as well. I would finally be able to get my mother her shop and give my family a much better life. This job was a God-answered prayer, and I wasn’t going to jeopardise it for anything.

Not even if I was still in love with my boss’s brother.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SITTING AT ATMOSPHERE WITH Ife, Ginika, Ozioma and Ara, I couldn't believe how much my life had changed in just a month. As Ozioma raised her glass for a toast, my smile was from ear to ear as the others girls joined her. Only one month before, I couldn't even afford to transport myself there, and now there I was, footing the entire bill.

“Girl, here’s to even bigger and even better!” Ife toasted. We’d already had our own private celebration, but I’d wanted to wait till payday before breaking the news to the others.

Payday. It still made me smile just thinking about how I felt seeing my pay slip. Even though I knew it was coming, seeing the number blew my mind. But as carried away as I was tempted to get, I had to remind myself of the urgent obligations I had, top of which was getting my mother a shop. I smiled at the memory of the look on her face when I’d told her the good news. She’d wept so hard, I’d almost regretted telling her.

“I see everything turning around for my good. Turning around for my good. Turning around for my good!” she’d sang through her tears, eventually prompting tears of my own. Yes, considering the hard life we’d lived, things were definitely turning around. Without any mention of the plan to surprise her with the shop, we proceeded to talk through other important things to do, including getting Ify into school. When I mentioned plans to get her a car and move us to a better flat, she’d balked at the idea.

“Mba, my dear. All those will come later. After we sort out Ifeyinwa, you must invest. Let it be from the dividends of your investment that we start living large. We’re fine as we are, biko. Let’s take it one day at a time.”

Whilst I agreed with her, one thing I did do when I got paid was get myself some new clothes. As much as I wanted to be frugal, as Sotonye Graham-

Hart’s Executive Assistant, I knew I had to at least look the part.

The day after getting the letter, I’d resumed in my new office on the 20th floor and the news spread through the company like wildfire. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people that were genuinely happy for me, and I was overwhelmed by congratulatory calls and messages from people I didn't think knew my name. Even the stone-faced Mrs. Fisher had dropped by to welcome me to their floor.

But there were also the few who, like Dobra, still thought I was under-qualified not only for the role, but for leapfrogging from Level 8 all the way to a Managerial position. Chidinma, who was on leave, had actually returned to the office, demanding to meet privately with Sotonye. When she walked into my office, if looks could kill, I would have dropped on the floor, stone cold dead.

“You better not get used to it here,” she’d spat, full of disdain. “You’re only here because I wasn't around. Once Sotonye realises her mistake, you’ll be out of here like yesterday’s newspaper. And don't expect Salewa to take you back either. I can assure you that she won’t, so you better dust up your CV.”

I’d smiled, saying nothing in response which, if the rough way she turned the pages of the magazine in her hands as she waited, almost tearing it, was anything to go by, infuriated her the more. And when she was ushered out of Sotonye’s office only a few minutes after being called in, the look on her face was anything but pleased.

“If any suitable vacancies come up, I’ll be sure to let Salewa know,” Sotonye said, patting a flummoxed Chidinma on the arm.

I flinched at the emphasis on suitable and it took everything in me not to gloat as she left the office, tail between her legs. Nobody but God had blessed me with this job, and nobody but Him could take it away. She and the other people still vexed about it could go take it up with Him.

Because it just had to be Him. From my very first day on the job, it was clear that the chemistry Sontonye and I had was no fluke. Sitting with her as she ran me through my list of tasks, both the outstanding items Ande was to have taken care of and those she hadn’t yet been able to delegate, I was almost surprised by how easy it all was, effortless even. I’d taken the rest of

the week to put things in order, acquainting myself with the department and all that was required in the near, mid and long term. But the real fun had come from helping her sort out her personal calendar. There were only a couple of months to her Christmas wedding in London, and there was still a lot to be done. But as hectic as it all was, helping her get organized was a task right up my street.

“I’m so, so happy for you, Isioma!” Ara said, beaming at me from across the table, her glass still raised. “You deserve all of this, and so much more.”

“When I saw you get out of that car, I legit had tears in my eyes,” Ozioma said. “Ị chọrọ ka m bee akwa n'ebe a. You want me to start crying here,” she shook her head and smiled, her eyes glistening. “The first time I met you, you were hopping off a bike in front of Ricardo’s, one of the hottest joints in town. You no send anybody at all, and I admire you for that. You’re that girl who walks into a room with her head held high, no matter who else is there. I remember how, when we were in Asaba, even as the rest of us were fussing and complaining about our clothes, with that your red lipstick on, you just walked around very happy and confident in your simple dress. You have a heart of pure gold and nobody deserves this like you do.”

“Here, here!” Ginika said, raising her glass.

“And please, I don’t want to hear that your yeye boyfriend spoilt this car o!” Ozioma exclaimed, prompting laughter from the rest of the table.

“That one is history. Tell them the story, babes,” Ife prompted.

I smiled and told them how I’d gotten the offer for my new job the very day after finally breaking up with Andrew.

“This is just proof that all we need to do is take that leap of faith, believing in something better. It wasn’t until I let Oye go that I found my own true love,” Ara chimed. “And in your case, when you decided to let go of the person holding you back, your door finally opened.”

“Hei, let me think about what I need to release o! Whatever thing that is stopping my bobo from locating me,” Ozioma chuckled.

“How has it been though?” Ginika asked me. “You know we women can be difficult. How has it been working with Sotonye?”

I shook my head and smiled, still amazed at my good fortune. “It’s been perfect. We get along so well and are in sync about pretty much everything.”

“Ife said you’re also doubling as her Personal Assistant. How has that been?” Ginika pressed.

“It’s a dual role, so yes. And I think I even enjoy that more. She’s getting married soon and it’s been really fun helping her plan that.”

“Oh yeah, Erin mentioned,” Ara said. “Some guy she’s known almost her whole life?”

I nodded, recalling Sotonye tell me how she and her childhood friend, Dagogo, had suddenly found love.

“He was in town and called me, like he always did, asking us to meet up for drinks,” she’d reminisced. “I met him after work and as we were gisting, he suddenly asked why we weren’t together. He said he’d always liked me, and the truth is I’d always liked him as well. I asked him why he waited until we were both three years shy of forty before telling me.”

I’d laughed with her, heart warmed by the story, praying that my own Prince Charming would also soon sweep me off my feet.

Prince Charming. I’d long since stopped thinking that was Karibi. Contrary to my fears, I’d hardly seen him in the month I’d been working on the 20th floor. From what I overheard, he and the Corporate Finance team were on a European Road Show, trying to raise external investment for some of the company’s assets. And that suited me just fine. If it meant I wouldn't have to walk on eggshells, doing all I could to avoid him, my wish was for him to stay away for as long as possible.

“The wedding is this Christmas, right?” Ara asked.

“Yeah. The traditional wedding held sometime in August.”

“I hear it’s in London,” Ife said. “You do know you’ll be expected to be there, right?”

I guffawed at the very thought. “How now? On top why? They have everything under control. Her wedding planner is on top of things and everything is sorted at this stage. She won’t have any need for me there.”

Four sets of eyes stared back at me like I'd lost my mind.

"She told you that?" Ife asked. "She said she won't need you there?"

"Are you minding this one?" Ginika retorted. "Abi you don't know the meaning of Personal Assistant?"

"Nwane'm, of course she's gonna need you there. Don't talk nonsense!" Ozioma stated.

As I looked back at them, I was suddenly awash with anxiety. "But I don't even have a passport, talk less of a visa," I shook my head, determined not to bother myself with something I knew wouldn't happen. "Anyways, enough about me. What's been up with you guys?"

We proceeded to catch up on each other's lives. Ara and C.J. had fixed Valentine's Day of the coming year for their wedding, and Ozioma was seeing someone new.

"One Ogbonna guy I met in Abuja. We've been talking everyday since I got back and, I must admit, the chemistry is electric," she giggled. "He ticks all my boxes…"

"Rich, Igbo and over 40?" Ginika teased.

"You garrit!" Ozioma squealed. "Don't forget fine as hell and never married. He's coming to town in a few weeks, and I'll be sure to introduce him to you guys."

"Let's hope this one sticks around," Ginika muttered under her breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear, prompting a scowl from her Ozioma.

"I don't blame you. It's the foolish men that have been blocking my way that I blame," she retorted, hitting her cousin's arm playfully. "Very soon, I too will be able to quit my job and cross my legs in my husband's house, living a life of leisure from morning to night."

There was an uncomfortable silence and I could tell Ara and Ife were just as uneasy as I was about the subject. Ginika had refused to return to work after getting married to Dike. The lengthy leave she'd taken, first for the honeymoon and then to recover from her tragic miscarriage, had stretched indefinitely until she'd finally resigned. Months later, she was showing no plans of returning to the work force.

“Well, hurry up, because it’s damned fabulous having all your needs met without having to lift a finger,” Ginika giggled, seemingly oblivious of our discomfort. The rest of us might have been concerned, but she appeared not to have a single care in the world. “Just make sure you marry a man that can afford it.”

“You better enjoy it before you have a house full of kids screaming all over the place,” Ife teased.

The smile on Ginika’s face waned and I immediately saw regret in Ife’s eyes. That Ginika was still trying to heal emotionally from her loss was no secret. But she recovered quickly. “Abi o. Before one brat comes around to steal my peace,” then turning to Ozioma. “So tell us, when exactly are we meeting this Ogbonna fellow?”

–

“That was so much fun,” Ife smiled as we made our way back to the mainland. For the first time in our now ten-month friendship, I was the one giving her a ride. She’d come to the restaurant in an Uber and was headed to the mainland to visit her friend, this mystery friend I had never seen. “We really need to hang out more often.”

“That we should,” I nodded in agreement, grateful that the bridge was traffic free. Yes, it was a Saturday, but Saturdays in Lagos were sometimes even the worst when it came to congestion.

“This ride is sweet!” Ife remarked, reclined in the leather seat of my Honda CRV. “There’s nothing like a brand new car. Don't you just love this fresh, un-used smell?”

I smiled and nodded in agreement. I still had to pinch myself to believe this car, this beauty on wheels, was actually mine. Since getting it, I often would close my eyes and inhale deeply the smell of brand new plastic and rubber. It still felt like a dream.

“So how are you getting back to Oniru tonight?” I turned to her. It was almost 10pm.

“My friend will drop me,” she answered, as I made the turn at Stadium, on to Alhaji Masha Road.

I pursed my lips, knowing better than to ask about this ‘friend’. The few times I’d asked about this ‘friend’, she’d been flippant and brushed it off as ‘nobody important’. But given the number of trips she made to see this ‘friend’, the person was clearly anything but.

Turning off Adelabu Street, I frowned as she directed me through a labyrinth of streets, worried I wouldn't be able to find my way out unaided. Finally, we turned into a small, quiet close and she motioned me to stop in front of what looked to be…a motel.

“Is this where you’re meeting your friend?”

“Isioma, I’ll be fine,” she smiled at me once out of the car. “I’ll be home in one piece.”

“Tonight?”

“Goodnight, Mommy!” she laughed as she turned to walk in through the double gates.

The smile was still on my face as I put the car into reverse. She had the look of an excited teen off to spend time with her lover. Who was I to rain on her parade? As I pulled into the front foyer of another compound, I noticed two women get out of a waiting car and rush into the motel, but I thought nothing of it.

Until I heard the raised voices.

As I made to drive away, from my rear view mirror I saw the same women drag out another from the compound on to the hitherto quiet close, yelling obscenities. I could see a man trying to separate them, but he was no match for the angry women. It wasn’t until their victim raised flailing hands that I recognised the bright yellow organza fabric.

It was Ife.

Without thinking twice, I reversed sharply all the way back. Looking up and seeing my car gave her the strength she needed to break away from her assailants. I threw the passenger door open just as she jumped in, the angry women hot on her tail. Without even waiting for the door to close, I stepped on the accelerator, causing my car to hurtle down the narrow road, missing a gutter by a whisker. Casting another look at my rear view mirror, I got a

good look of the face of the woman still chasing after the car and I gasped in recognition.

Moyo.

I didn’t stop speeding, not even when we got onto Adelabu Street or the more familiar Western Avenue. For someone who’d worried about finding her way out of the area, I’d been able to navigate with remarkable dexterity. It wasn’t until we turned in at Jibowu that I was able to relax. The same couldn't be said of Ife, who was still panting like someone just completing a 10-km run. At the traffic light, I got my first proper look at her…and it broke my heart. Her wig was off, her blouse was torn so badly her bra was visible, and there were angry, red lines on her face and chest, from where she’d been scratched and beaten.

“Ife, what is going on?” I demanded, exasperated. “What kind of mess is all this? Does this have anything to do with Moyo’s husband?”

She shook her head and shut her eyes, and I knew that was her plea for me to leave her alone. The traffic light turned green at that point and it took all my willpower not to insist. We drove in silence till we got home…my home.

Parking the car in front of the block of flats, I was grateful the street was quiet. My neighbour had relocated his beer parlour a few blocks down so the place no longer had people milling around.

“Wear this,” I said, handing her a pashmina I left permanently in the car. I didn't want to have to explain her bruises and torn clothing to my mother.

“Welcome o! How was your dinner? Did you ladies have fun?” my mother called from her bedroom, as I tried to sneak Ife into mine. But we weren’t quick enough. “Oh, oh!” she remarked, sighting her as she walked out of her room. “Ife. What a surprise! I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“Good evening, Ma,” Ife forced a smile as she curtsied.

But my mother was too astute to miss a thing. “Are you okay?”

“She’s fine, Mom. Just tired,” I said, smiling to douse her suspicion. “We had a great time and we’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. Good night.”

Once inside my bedroom, I locked the door to make sure she didn't follow us. Knowing her, she was in no way fooled. Taking off her shoes, Ife collapsed on the bed. When I turned to look at her, she had an arm flung over her eyes, making me unable to see if she was crying or asleep. Resigned, I undressed and got into the bed beside her. I lay awake for a long time, my mind replaying the ugly incident, wondering how on earth things could have degenerated to that extent…whatever those things were.

When my eyes opened, even though dawn had broken, I could tell it was still quite early. Looking over at Ife, I saw she was also awake.

“Up already?” she asked, her smile more of a grimace.

“How long have you been?”

“I haven’t slept at all,” she answered, and I knew it wasn’t just because of my lumpy bed.

“Ife, what’s going on?”

She was silent for a while, her gaze fixed on the ceiling. Just as I was about to turn over to try to get more sleep, she finally spoke.

“Olumide is mine. He’s been mine for years. If anyone should be all up in their feelings about it, it should be me. Not her.”

I sat up, stunned by what I’d heard. “How is a married man yours, Ife?”

“She’s the one who took him from me. She got pregnant and he had to marry her.”

I looked at her, equally as surprised by her calm tone as I was by what she was saying.

“Olumide and I have been lovers since our University days. He is the love of my life, just as I’m his. He finished school a year before I did and met Moyo in NYSC camp. He had to marry her when she got pregnant.”

“You were ‘the love of his life’ and he got another woman pregnant?”

“It was a mistake. Haven’t you made a mistake before?” her voice was still so level, she could have as well been talking about what we were having for breakfast.

“So they’ve been married at least a decade?”

“Twelve years.”

“And she just found out about you?”

“Moyo has always known about me,” Ife scoffed. “Ungrateful cow! Where does she think the money for their rent or their children’s fees comes from? Where did she think he got the money to pay for her to have her last two kids in America? I didn’t matter when she was there living large and buying up the whole Atlanta. It’s now that she’s suddenly remembered Ife.”

“You pay their bills?” I exclaimed. No, I had to still be asleep. This was clearly a dream…a nightmare. It was only in that kind of twilight zone that what she was saying made any sense.

“The three of us have always co-existed. I support Olumide because I want to, and all Moyo had to do was turn a blind eye. That’s how it’s been…how it’s always been,” Ife continued. “Until last year, when she suddenly developed a problem with the arrangement. She suddenly became testy about the time he spent with me, picking fights with him anytime she thought he’d been with me. We used to have a small apartment a few streets away from here, Olumide and I. For years, that was where we met, where we spent time, but she showed up there one day and almost burnt the place down. That was when we started meeting up in hotels instead, hotels outside of Yaba. We couldn't go back to my place because even though Rahim knows I see other guys, I’m not allowed to bring anyone back to the apartment.”

I scratched my head, the person next to me a complete stranger. From bits and pieces of information, I’d been able to deduce this Rahim, a former Minister and member of a prominent Northern family with links to Emirati royalty, was the one maintaining her lifestyle. But I couldn't quite comprehend the sordid twist to this tale.

“You’re seeing multiple men?” I repeated, my head spinning. “You’ve been funding Olumide and his family, when he’s clearly been playing you for a fool for years?”

“You don’t know anything about what Olumide and I have-”

“The guy is eating his cake and having it, for crying out loud!”

“He’s leaving her for me!” her cool veneer finally cracked. She turned to look at me, her eyes wide with rage…and a hint of frustration. “He’s been waiting for the right time.”

I shook my head and sighed. “Twelve years and however many kids later? He hasn’t found the right time all this while? Babe, I thought you were smarter than this.”

She recoiled and I knew I’d touched a raw nerve. She looked away and shrugged. “You don’t know anything about us.”

“Clearly not,” I answered.

After sitting in silence for what seemed like eternity, I got off the bed. “Let me go whip up some breakfast. Do you want anything?”

She shook her head and threw her arm over her face again, effectively ending the conversation. As hurtful and disappointing as the exchange had gone, I was relieved that she was at least still there. I’d half expected her to pick up her bag and leave.

The house was quiet, indicating my mother, Ify and my youngest brother, Ifechi, had gone to Church. My immediate younger brother, Ikechukwu, was in Abuja for his National Youth Service. Tinkering in the kitchen, I fried plantains, sweet potatoes and made a spicy, pepper sauce, all in autopilot mode, my mind burdened. Whilst I’d suspected Ife was up to stuff, I was stomped by the sheer magnitude of it.

Regardless of her refusal to eat, I dished two plates of food and carried them back to the room on a large tray.

“Breakfast!” I announced, trying to sound way more cheerful than I felt.

“That smells good,” she said, sitting up.

I took out my plate and handed the tray to her. While she attacked her food like someone who hadn’t been fed in days, I picked at mine, my appetite gone. When she was done, I cleared the plates and busied myself in the kitchen, cleaning and washing up. My mother and siblings would return home any minute and I knew they would be happy breakfast was already waiting.

I returned to the room to see Ife sitting up in bed, staring ahead at nothing.

“Time for part two of this sleep!” I declared as I fell back into the bed, even though I knew I was more likely to find myself on Mars than fall asleep.

“I’m sorry about what I said,” Ife said after a while. “You’re the closest thing to a friend, a real friend, I’ve had in a long time and I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.”

I wanted to reassure her that she hadn’t, but didn't want to risk her retreating into her shell. I wanted to hear what it was she had to say.

“Everything you said, believe me, I know. Olumide has been promising to leave Moyo from the very year they married, but it’s always been one thing after the other, one excuse after the other, one pregnancy after the other. But this time, he means it. He’s leaving her. I think that’s why she’s now so desperate to get me out of the picture.”

I sighed, not having the heart to tell her it was very likely not going to happen.

“He’s actually the reason I’m with Rahim,” she said, a sad smile on her face. “And every other man I’ve been with since school. I love that he is dependent on me. I love that I’m able to give him what Moyo can’t.”

“Money?”

“Money, security. Everything they have has come from me. Everything! Even if he doesn’t leave her, he will never, ever leave me. He can’t,” she shrugged. “Yes, I love the luxurious lifestyle but I would give it all up in a heartbeat the minute he’s ready to be with me.”

And I could suddenly see it for what it was; a no-good man taking advantage of a woman who should have known better. I realised he was probably the one encouraging her to sell herself, her body, to wealthy men just so he could have a slice of the pie, a fat slice from the sound of it.

“And you’re happy with that?”

She shrugged. “It is what it is. Besides, I see other people, so I guess we’re even.”

No, I wanted to scream, you're not even! He is taking so much from you than you even realise. But I was wise enough not to.

"It's one of the reasons I understood why you were with Andrew for so long," she smiled. "The first cut is always the deepest, isn't it?"

"Now that Moyo is on the war path, what are you going to do about her? See what she did last night. What if she hurts you next time? From what I saw, the Olumide didn't look like he had any control of the situation."

The smile on her face faded. "Trust me, it won't happen again. By the time she and her kids starve for a few weeks, nobody will tell her not to look her gift horse in the mouth next time."

Those words echoed in my head long after she'd showered, changed into one of my clothes and taken an Uber back home, my heart heavy that she was content to be referred to as a 'gift horse' just to hold on to the man she loved.

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CHAPTER SIX

THAT WEEK, FOR THE first time in my new role, I struggled to remain focused at work. Apart from worrying about Ife and her complicated love life, I also feared for her safety. From the look of things, Moyo was not there for fun and games, and I was worried about what her next move would be because, contrary to what Ife tried to convince herself, there would surely be one.

I tried to look Olumide up on social media, but didn't have much to go with. All I had was the visual from the glimpse of him on Saturday night; a tall, slim, almost frail looking, man. But as brief as the sighting was, I'd noticed his crisp designer shirt and heavy gold necklace. He clearly had expensive taste and it pained me that my friend was being hoodwinked into funding his lifestyle. Eventually, I had to shake off all thoughts about them and concentrate on work. Olumide had Ife, and Ife had Rahim. I had only my job.

By the following week, I'd managed to do just that. Until another problem hit me across the face.

"We've been invited by Schaeffler for a tour of their new facility," Sotonye said, as we rounded up a meeting. "Have Adeline book us both tickets to Nuremberg. We might have to connect through Munich or Berlin. Also have her include Paris somewhere in our itinerary, as I have a final dress fitting. Oh and London too, for obvious reasons."

My head started pounding and my mouth went completely dry, the girls' prediction coming true right before my eyes.

"Isioma," Sotonye called out. She'd long stopped calling me 'Leona'. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I erm…I don't have a visa."

“Oh my, that was a mistake. I should have had that taken care of as soon you moved up here,” she said, biting her pen, before shrugging. “But that can be fixed. I’ll reschedule the tour to sometime next week.”

I knew I had to come clean, completely clean.

“I don't have a passport either,” I said, my eyes averted in shame. “I’m sorry.”

“When you say a passport, you mean a Nigerian or British one?” she asked, her brows knotted in her confusion.

It was my turn to look confused. “Neither. I’ve never owned any.” Well apart from the one I’d had as a child, I reckoned.

“But I thought Karibi said your mother is British.”

I had a flashback to the night we spent together, the night at the beach when I’d confided in him and I found myself ever so slightly tickled that he remembered after all this time.

“I don't have a relationship with my birth mother. I was raised by my stepmother and late father.”

“Oh, no wonder. I was wondering what you meant about getting your mother a shop in Balogun market,” she chuckled. “I couldn't quite reconcile the visual of a middle-aged Caucasian woman pushing her way through a crowd and fighting her way through touts.”

Indeed it was a funny visual and we were both soon laughing hysterically.

“My stepmother is the only mother I’ve ever known. She raised me like her own,” I said, when the laughter had subsided.

“I’m sure it wasn’t easy for her, raising a mixed race child as a black woman, especially in the nineties. Do you have any siblings from your biological mother?”

“An older brother.”

“Wow, two children. God bless her,” Sotonye remarked, before reaching for her desk phone, issuing instructions to Atoni, the Chief Protocol Officer, to expedite the issuance of a passport for me, alongside the necessary travel

documents. I just sat there watching her in awe, amazed by how easily my seemingly insurmountable problem had been solved.

And Atoni lived up to his reputation as the company's 'handler', the man who always had a solution, no matter the problem. The very next day, I was at the Ikoyi Passport office and before the end of that week, I had my passport. The next week saw me at the British Embassy and the week after at the German embassy. Sotonye rescheduled the tour at the German facility and her dress fitting to the last week in October, by which time I had all my travel documents.

Just like that!

The Friday before we left, I was at work till late, closing out my open tasks. The last thing I needed to do on my first trip out of the country since I was an infant, was worry about work. I already had the change in weather to fret about. Even though Ife had given me a box full of warm clothing, the thought of the cold October weather scared me.

"Trust me, it's not that bad. If you were going in January, that's when I would have been praying for you," Ife giggled. We hadn't spoken about Olumide and Moyo since that fateful weekend and I'd decided to just let things be. If she wasn't worried, then I had no cause to be either. "Just make sure you shop. Get yourself some nice things. There are good deals this time of year."

I'd nodded in agreement, even though I had little plans of doing anything with my foreign exchange per diem, other than converting it to naira upon my return and adding it to my savings for the shop.

Those were my thoughts as I walked out of our office that Friday. Sotonye had left earlier, leaving me to lock up our space.

"Hi, there," came his voice.

I turned around and there he was, Karibi, standing in front of his door, smiling at me.

"I keep forgetting you're up here now," he said. "How've you been enjoying it? It's been, what, six weeks?"

“Seven,” I answered, trying not to sound as flustered as I was. “I didn't realise you were back from your trip.”

“Last night. We got back last night.”

“How did it go? The Road Show.”

He shrugged. “Not as great as we would have liked. There isn’t much of an equity market for oil and gas assets right now, and we don’t need any more debt. We’re geared enough as it is,” he sighed. “But we have to keep trying. I leave for Athens first thing in the morning to meet with another interested party.”

I tried to stay focused on what he was saying and not be distracted by how strong his arms looked, with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. “Good luck,” was what I did manage to say.

“So how have you been enjoying working with my sister? She sings your praises all the time.”

I smiled, always pleased to hear how Sotonye was just as excited about our partnership as I was. “It’s been excellent. Life changing.”

He smiled back and as our eyes held, I couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking about that one beautiful night we’d shared, if he still thought about it as frequently as I did, if standing with barely a foot between us was also making it increasingly difficult for him to breathe…

But then his phone rang, and the moment was gone.

“I have to take this,” he said, retreating into his office. “Have a good weekend.”

I stood there for a full minute afterwards, looking at the closed door, hating myself for still not being able to compose myself in his presence.

“You better let the winter breeze blow small sense into this your thick skull,” I muttered to myself as I finally made my way down the hall. Riding the elevator downstairs, I closed my eyes and fantasized about meeting a handsome stranger on the trip, someone who would sweep me off my feet and make me forget about Karibi…permanently!

Walking to my car, my phone rang.

“Babe, did you remember to bring along the Technip contract?” Sotonye asked, referring to French contractor we wanted to meet while in Paris.

“I did. I also brought your wedding folder along, just in case.”

“Fantastic! Did you remember to scan the table setting ideas from that magazine to Omolara?” Omolara was her Wedding Planner.

“Done,” I said, getting into my car. “I just saw Ka…your brother. He didn’t look too happy about the Road Show.”

“Don’t feel sorry for that one,” she chuckled. “He and his team are also being very picky about who we partner with, so that might be why they haven’t made much progress yet. Besides, Karibi always combines business with enough pleasure. I’ll bet he was able to…ahem…‘entertain’ himself while they were away,” she laughed again and at that moment, I could have killed to know what exactly she was remembering. “Anyways, see you on Sunday at the airport.”

Driving home, all I could do was wonder what she meant by combining ‘business with pleasure’. Was she referring to women? Did he have a woman, or women, in every European country? Even though I’d seen him with other women, the very thought still felt like a million ants crawling all over my body, biting. But why did I even care so much? Gripping my steering wheel harder, honking my horn and yelling at other drivers at the slightest provocation as an outlet for the anger I felt, I knew I had to snap out of this sudden funk. Karibi had every right to cavort with who wanted to, just as I did also.

And on Sunday night, as the plane taxied down the Muritala Mohammed International airport runway before finally launching into the air, as I marvelled over how beautiful my city, my city of Lagos, looked as it receded further and further away, until it was just a network of beautiful, tiny lights that looked like someone had taken a handful of glitter and thrown it as far as the eye could see, I finally felt excitement. Going abroad was the fulfilment of a childhood dream and I’d be damned if I allowed anything, least of all thoughts about Karibi, spoil it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FIRST FEW DAYS were…an experience. I thought I knew what to expect, I thought I'd watched enough movies, done enough reading to know what being abroad would feel like, but from landing in London Heathrow and immediately getting on a connecting flight to Istanbul from where we got on a direct flight to the German industrial city of Nuremburg, I couldn't help but marvel how things felt so different…but also the same. Everything looked brand new and there was an order that was alien to me. The weather, though not as harsh as I'd expected, oscillated between a dry, frigid gust that penetrated right through my thick clothing to the mild coolness one would get from standing in front of an open refrigerator.

"If you're all bundled up like that now, what will happen come December, when we return for my wedding?" Sotonye laughed as I emerged from my hotel room the next morning, a quilted jacket over the thick cardigan I wore over a turtleneck top, with a bulky scarf wrapped around my neck, woollen mittens protecting my hands and a knitted hat on my head. "Isioma, you look ridiculous!"

In the end, she'd made me lose the jacket and hat, and even though I'd worried I'd freeze to death without them, by the time we arrived at the Schaeffler facility in Herzogenaurach, I didn't feel as bad.

Our tour lasted four days, and the technology and innovation I saw blew my mind. But I followed Sotonye's cue and put on a poker face the whole time, careful not to let our hosts see just how impressed I was. And this paid off when we discussed their contract on the fifth day, a contract up for renewal the following year. We were able to well manage their demand for a review in terms, deciding instead on a marginal upward variation agreeable to both parties.

By the time we left for Paris, I had already started getting used to our German hosts, having gone through the stages of being fascinated by everything around me on my first day, then frustrated and anxious by the language barrier and seemingly unfriendly service at the café where we had lunch on our second day, to slowly adjusting by the fourth day and learning simple German words to help me communicate with the hotel staff. But when we got to Paris, the whole process started all over again. The upside was that the Parisians I met weren't as rude as the typical stereotype made them out to be. Even though the meeting with our French contractor was not quite as congenial as with our German one, I had a much better time in Paris. From the gorgeous view of the Seine from my hotel room, to the decadent desserts and frankly the most delicious meals I had ever had in my life, the week spent in Paris was amazing.

And to cap off a phenomenal week, Omolara, the Wedding Planner, arrived and we set off for the boutique of a French bridal designer, Rime Arodaky, in downtown Paris. Sitting and waiting for Sotonye to wear her gown, as I browsed the wedding dresses on the racks, resplendent confections of glitter, tulle and lace, all I wanted was that to be me one day, trying on these gorgeous gowns. But with the kind of price tags they had, they were way out of my league.

I gasped as Sotonye emerged, dressed in a fit and flare dress with an entire top bodice in a sheer, polka dot tulle, the bottom in a fitted satin which flared slightly at her knee, with a slit that revealed the same polka-dot tulle as the bodice. She was a vision of loveliness. If I'd wondered why she hadn't chosen any of the more conventional designers and instead settled on this less known French one, I had my answer. Quirky and elegant at the same time, it was perfect for her.

"You look beautiful!" I gushed.

"Didn't we agree to have it more snug around the hips?" Omolara asked the Consultant, clearly not as impressed as I was. "It's still swishing a lot more than I like."

I listened on as the three of them argued about just what was too much swish, still completely enthralled by the dress. In the end, it was decided that, with just about a month to the wedding, further alterations wouldn't be

a good idea. Finishing embellishment touches would be made and the dress would be delivered to London within the fortnight.

“We leave tomorrow and I haven’t seen you buy a single thing for yourself,” Sotonye remarked, as we headed out of the boutique. Omolara had already left for London for ‘an urgent appointment tonight’. “You don’t like to shop?”

I shrugged, ashamed to admit that I was saving my money to the very last cent.

“Well, I insist. How can you come to Paris and not hit the shops?” she insisted, her arm interlinked with mine as we walked to our waiting chauffeured car.

We were soon on Avenue des Champs-Elysées, and as we walked from one luxury store to the other, I had to make excuses for why none of the extravagantly expensive items appealed to me. Truth was many of them did, and I stared with longing at the blouses she picked up at Christian Dior. But with four-figure price tags, there was no way I would spend money on, nor even allow myself be gifted, anything there. It wasn’t until we got to the High Street stores of Zara and Banana Republic that I managed to buy a few things for myself and my family back home. But even though I didn't shop till I dropped, it was a fun time hanging out with her, as we tried on clothes and as we enjoyed a decadent meal of rocha pear with chestnut honey and saffron granola from L’Orangerie. As I closed my eyes to sleep that night, apart from the fact that I’d had the best time of my life, I hadn’t thought of Karibi even once.

But as we pulled up in front of their family house in Knightsbridge the following afternoon, all my newfound confidence evaporated in one puff of smoke. As we only had a few days in London but a lot to do, Sotonye had insisted on my staying at their house. But getting out of the car on Rutland Street, and standing in front of the row of imposing three-storey, brickstone terrace buildings, I found myself wishing I’d insisted on a hotel.

“We finally get to meet the famous Isioma!” a beautiful, silver-haired woman exclaimed when we walked inside, pulling me into an embrace. “Welcome to our home.”

I stuttered a greeting, not knowing whether to courtesy as well. I hadn't prepared to be in the presence of the Karibi-White matriarch.

"And such a beautiful young woman too. Look at those golden eyes. Just like an angel!" the older woman remarked, making me blush. "Soti has told us how helpful you've been, especially with the wedding preparations. And honestly, I can tell. Before she hired you, she was almost driving me nuts with the things she was forgetting. I had to remind her that I already had my own wedding over forty years ago!"

"But you know what they say, the wedding is more for the parents than the bride and groom," Sotonye said, kissing her mother on the cheek.

"Omolara says you're here to finalise with the decorators and also Sugared Saffron?" her mother asked.

"Both this afternoon, so even though we hate to love and leave you, we gotta go," Sotonye said, taking my hand as she issued instructions for our boxes to be taken upstairs.

"I didn't know your mom would be here," I protested, as the car made its way to Limehouse. "She must be wondering why you invited your staff to stay over."

"My friend, Isioma. I don't know about you, but I consider you a friend, not staff," Sotonye said, patting my hand, completely disarming me. What could I have said in response to that?

"Since my father took a step back from the business, he and my mother now spend a lot of time here," she continued. "Even though my brothers and I were raised in the States, London has always been special for us. Our parents met here and most of my mother's family members are here," she smiled, a dreamy expression in her eyes. "I also always fantasised about getting married in London…a Christmas wedding…a white Christmas wedding."

"And you're getting just what you hoped for," I said, heart warmed again for her.

"Well, maybe not white as it hasn't snowed on Christmas Day in years," she laughed.

“Your wedding is a few days before Christmas, so you never know. Anything could still happen.”

She smiled at me, her eyes twinkling. “True. You never know.”

Omolara was waiting for us at Sugared Saffron and as we sampled different flavours of cake, from vanilla and raspberry, to white chocolate, to salted caramel, I closed my eyes in ecstasy, savouring the rich layers and Italian meringue buttercream of each one, all of them heavenly decadent.

“This is so different from my last time,” Sotonye said, as Omolara finalised with the Attendant. “Planning this wedding has been so joyful and stress free, I almost want to pinch myself.”

“Your last time?”

“I was married before. I fell in love with my gym instructor when I was twenty-two,” she chuckled. “I met him one Christmas I was in Lagos and a holiday fling turned into marriage. My family tried to make me change their mind, but I accused them of looking down on him because he didn’t come from money,” she shrugged. “Well, it turned out they were right and he was a gold digger after all. The marriage didn’t last a year.”

“Oh no. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was the one who left when I realised he was still sleeping with half the women at the gym. He was only with me to see how far my surname could carry him. I’m glad I had the good sense to leave as early as I did,” she shook her head, as if in amazement. “With Dagogo, it’s so different, so effortless. Yes, there is passion, but he’s also my friend. I didn't have that with Afolabi. It’s just proof that all’s well that ends well.”

I nodded in agreement. All was most definitely well that ended well. And I knew I too would have a wonderful end to my own story too.

Our next stop was the wedding venue at Marylebone, where the decorator was waiting. I sat back as they discussed the elements of her vintage theme, not at all surprised the wedding colours were rust, copper and aqua. It was so like her.

“Let’s quickly get to Bond Street. It’s about a four minute walk from here,” Sotonye said, after Omolara left. “I need to pick up something.”

I smiled and nodded, not at all surprised. My boss…or friend…was a confirmed shopaholic.

As we browsed the shops, I couldn't help but marvel over what a parallel life this was to mine back home. Up until a few months before, the bulk of my shopping was done in the local markets. Now there I was, waltzing in and out of luxury stores like it was my regular.

At Tiffany & Co., as Sotonye checked out a bracelet she wanted to gift Dagogo as a wedding gift, I walked out to people-watch shoppers on the oh-so-popular Bond Street…and walked into the last person I expected to.

“Ginika!” I exclaimed.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Isioma! What are you doing here?”

“It turns out you guys were right,” I chuckled. “I need to listen to you a whole lot more.”

“You’re here for the wedding? I thought you said it isn’t until Christmas,” she said, her eyes distracted like she was looking for someone.

“Yeah, it is. We’re just finalising a few things,” I said, looking around to see what she was looking for. “Are you okay?”

She brightened and smiled. “I’m great. Don't mind me. I’ve been here since morning. I was actually on my way to grab a bite.”

“I wish I could join you, but I’m with my boss. She’s in there,” I said regretfully, pointing at the store.

“Tiffany. But of course,” Ginika grinned. “No worries. We can always catch up some other time. How long are you here?”

“We leave tomorrow,” I sighed, disappointed. While we might not have been best friends, it sure would have been fun and novel hanging out with her in London.

“Aww. Next time then,” she said, before blowing me air kisses. “I have to run. I’m back in Lagos next week so we can catch up then.”

I watched her as she walked away. No, there was definitely something off about her. As I walked back to the store, I noticed someone familiar on the other side of the road. A tall, dark, hulking man who looked a lot like her

ex-boyfriend, Muyiwa. I turned back to look in Ginika's direction and saw she was still walking straight ahead. Even though she wasn't looking his way, the man had his eyes on her as they both walked in the same direction, albeit on opposite sides of the road. I frowned, wondering if it was just coincidence and prayed with all my heart that she wasn't up to no good.

Sotonye's parents had retired for the night when we returned. Having stuffed ourselves with food during the day, dinner was the last thing on my mind.

"My room is that one," she said, pointing down the hallway. "Luckily, our flight isn't until evening so you can have a nice lie-in tomorrow morning. After the last few days we've had, you deserve it."

Walking into my room, my breath was taken away. Twice the size of my bedroom back home, and with drapes and bedding in a rich plum purple and sparkling white, it was fit for royalty. From the upholstered bed, to the cushioned headboard, to the recessed lights in the ceiling, to the sunburst mirrors on the wall, the room was modern but yet opulent and sophisticated. We'd stayed in the best hotels on the trip but none of them was half as elegant as this. If this was a guest room, one could only wonder how lavish the other rooms were.

After a quick shower, I fell asleep the minute my head hit the feather light pillow. The next morning, a stream of light peeping through the point where the drapes didn't quite meet, awoke me. A quick glance at my phone showed it was a little past 8am. Stretching like the cat that got the cream, all I wanted to do was bask in this luxury for as long as I could. After a few minutes lying in the lavender scented sheets, I got out of bed and walked over to open the drapes.

Looking outside, I saw a man standing on the pavement under my window, adjusting his cufflinks. As he crossed the road, I realised it was Karibi. Once on the other side, he stood there, eyes focused on the road as if waiting for something…or someone. Clean shaven and immaculately dressed in a navy blue suit, light blue shirt and burgundy tie, he looked like he just stepped off the pages of a magazine…but then again, he always did. Leaning on the window frame, I watched him, loving the vantage position that was allowing me such an unfettered, undisturbed view of this man who

still had a hold on my heart. He exhaled deeply, as if nervous, and rubbed his hands together. I had never seen him look this vulnerable, and it only endeared him to me all the more. A black Mercedes E-Class soon pulled up in front of him and just as he was about to get into it, he looked up…and our eyes met. I quickly ducked to the floor, not wanting him to see me watching him, but knowing it was probably too late for that. I remained in that crouched position long after the soft purr of the engine indicated the car had driven off. So much for wanting to comport myself better in his presence.

As I showered, got dressed and put together my bags, all I could do was wonder what he was doing there in London. Nobody had even mentioned he would be there.

“Oh, you just missed Karibi,” Sotonte said, as I walked into the dining room where breakfast was served. “He just left for a meeting at Canary Wharf.”

“I didn’t know he was here,” I remarked as I took a seat opposite her, hoping I looked and sounded casual.

“He got in last night. Even I wasn’t expecting him. After leaving Athens, he and Dimeji have been in Geneva talking to another group of investors. Apparently, the meeting in London came up last minute.”

Dimeji was the Head of Corporate Finance.

“Karibi’s experience as an Investment Banker has really helped this capital raise process. He’s determined only to bring in the right kind of money.”

I nodded, my attention not leaving the slice of bread I was slathering with butter, desperate for her to change the subject of discussion.

“But if what he said is anything to go by, after this meeting, the Road Show is over.”

My heart skipped a beat. “So he’s coming back to Lagos?”

“Not until after the wedding. He’s taking the rest of the year off to relax, and I can’t blame him. The last few months have been very busy,” she chuckled. “So he’ll probably be here unwinding with whomever his flavour of the month is.”

Flavour of the month.

That phrase echoed in my head all through breakfast, right up to when we left for the airport, checked in and boarded our flight back to Lagos, wondering who this ‘flavour of the month’ was. With a heavy heart, I realised that, wonderful though it was, the trip had done little to diminish the feelings I had for him. And if that morning was anything to go by, maybe, just maybe, it had even amplified it.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

“I’M NOT HAPPY ABOUT you being away for Christmas,” my mother pouted, on our way back from Church.

I smiled as I drove, having heard the same complaint every day in the month since my return from the last trip. With Sotonye’s wedding two days before Christmas, she’d insisted on my staying back a few days afterward to ‘rest and enjoy a different kind of Christmas’. And I hadn’t argued with her. Just the thought of spending time in the beautiful purple bedroom I’d fallen in love with was more than enough incentive for me to do just that.

“But let me not be selfish. I’ve had you to myself for many Christmases,” my mother said, turning to look at me. “It’s good exposure for you, and I’m very grateful for the opportunities this new job is giving you.” I stole a quick glance at her and she laughed. “Biko, egbula anyị. Don’t kill us, I beg you. Keep your eyes on the road. I still can’t understand why you insist on driving all the way to the Island just to look for bread!”

I smiled to myself without saying anything in response. After Church, we were on our way to Lagos Island, under the pretext of trying a tasty brand of bread a colleague had told me about. But it was just a ruse. My siblings and I had decided that Sunday, the first Sunday in December, was the perfect day to present her with her Christmas gift; a fully stocked shop in Balogun Market. Ify, Ifechi and Ike had left ahead in an Uber and were already there, waiting for us.

“Are you going to see her when you get there?” my mother asked, and we both knew whom she meant by her. Since my last exchange with Hattie almost three months before, there had been no further communication.

“I don’t think so, Mom. I’ll probably be very busy with the wedding.”

“You should make out time. Ifeanyi has already made his peace with her. You should too.”

“Mom, please,” I looked at her imploringly. “We can talk about this some other time.”

Thankfully, she didn’t persist and we continued our journey in silence. Turning into Broad Street from Marina, the streets were clear and traffic-free, making me glad we’d chosen to do this on a Sunday morning.

“Is this the place?” my mother remarked, perplexed. “What kind of bread do you want to buy in the market? Are you sure about this your colleague?”

“I’m sure,” I said, doing everything I could to stop from breaking into a wide grin. I got out of the car and walked over to the other side to help her out, but she’d already beaten me to it.

Before walking away from the car, I tipped a young boy who was already hopping from foot to foot as I parked, letting me know he was ‘in charge’ of the space. The frown on my mother’s face indicated her displeasure, but I knew better than to leave my brand new car there without making a custodian out of the nearby area boys.

Holding her hand, we soon turned off the road and onto one of the side streets, which was quiet that day but usually bustling with human traffic. I smiled when I sighted my siblings standing in front of the shop we’d paid for, a big, bright red bow tied on its entrance gate. With its fresh coat of paint, it stood out, regal and distinct amongst the row of shops in the plaza. With more square footage than its neighbouring ones, we’d been very lucky to secure it.

“Ahn ahn. What are you people doing here?” she exclaimed when she saw her children. She looked at me. “Isioma, what’s going on here?”

I looked at Ify and she nodded, holding up her tablet to show me that she had already patched Ifeanyi in. Even though Ifeanyi and I had contributed the bulk of the money, we all felt equally vested and responsible for this gift we were bestowing on this woman, the love of all our lives.

“Surprise!” we all yelled in unison, startling her and sending her hand to her chest. She crumbled to her knees as realisation set in, sending all of us

jostling to help her up.

“Mom, it fills our hearts with so much joy to be finally be able to do this for you,” Ifeanyi beamed from Ify’s screen. “We know this has been your dream for so long, right from the small store you had in the garage back then in Surulere. You selflessly gave that up, and in the seventeen years it’s been since Dad’s death, you have thought of everyone but yourself, putting yourself last every single time,” his voice broke just as the rest of us, my tough kid brothers inclusive, were wiping away tears of our own. “Well, it’s time you came first for a change, Mom. Merry Christmas!”

“Ewo! Ewo!” she kept on exclaiming, from the time we were able to get her to her feet, to when Ike opened the gates and we led her into the shop, stocked from ground to celling with cosmetics, toiletries and provisions. With her hands clasped over her mouth, she wept, screamed and squealed as she made her way through the shop, prompting more tears from the rest of us. The icing on the cake came when we handed her a cheque with enough money to restock at least three times over. All the sacrifice over the last few years had definitely been worth it.

Even though we’d tried to avoid it, we soon attracted the attention of people in some nearby stalls, most of whom were mothers like her and all of whom got equally emotional when they realised what was happening. In the end, in addition to our mother’s, we got prayers and blessings from about a dozen other women, all of them praying that our children would do even more for us. With a new year on the verge of dawning, I held on to that prayer with both hands, praying that, as I looked thirty-four in the face, this would be the year I found my husband and got about making those babies.

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“You know you can’t go there and dull,” Ife said, as she rummaged through her closet. It was Saturday the 15th and she’d invited me over to her apartment to give me some outfit options for the wedding. I’d accepted after finding out the hard way that, in Lagos, there were little options for elegant dresses I could wear in the winter. “You have to show up correct. If the people I’ve heard are leaving Lagos for this are anything to go by, there will be a lot of very eligible bachelors there.”

“I like that one,” I said, as she held up a royal-blue, velvet, long-sleeved dress with a deep v-neckline and diamante embellishments at the wrists.

“And check this out,” she beamed, turning it to reveal a cut-out in the back. “Just the right amount of naughty to prevent it from being too conservative.”

Even though I was happy with that, she insisted on giving me a silver dress in laminated voile which also came with its own cape, prompting a bemused “Ah, when I’m not the bride,” from me.

“Be there, dulling,” she hissed, throwing in a maroon, A-lined organza dress with exaggerated, puffed sleeves.

By the time she was done, she had packed me a large suitcase of clothes, for the wedding and ‘anything that comes along’. As much as I wanted to protest and decline the offer, there was a big part of me that wanted to prance around in my friend’s designer clothes, a part of me that wanted to fit in with Sotonye’s crowd in London. That part won.

“So you leave on Wednesday?” Ife asked, as we reclined in her living room, sipping Baileys.

“Yep, the 19th. Sotonye left yesterday, after our Christmas party.”

“She must be so excited!”

I nodded and smiled. I was just as excited to watch her marry the very lovely, very friendly Dagogo. After all these weeks of prep, it was finally here.

We sat in comfortable silence, the only sound coming from the artificial waterfall in her living room. It was my first time there after my confirmation that, indeed, the Rahim I’d been hearing so much about, was behind her lavish lifestyle and it made me look at the place with different eyes. It was now only too obvious that the luxurious furnishing hadn’t come from her pay cheque as a Primary School teacher.

“Have you run into Moyo again?” I asked, twirling my glass and avoiding eye contact. It had been eating me up to know if there had been any repeat of the incident that had gone down two months before.

“No, but maybe it’s because I haven’t seen Olumide either,” she answered. I looked up and she shrugged. “I did a lot of thinking after that night at your place, and I’ve taken some time off the relationship to re-assess things.”

I put down my glass, gladdened by what I’d heard but also nervous about saying anything unsettling.

“So you don’t have to worry about anyone pouring acid on my face anytime soon,” she chuckled.

Though troubled by the visual, I laughed with her. She could joke all she wanted, what mattered was that she was removing herself from the messy love triangle. And I was happy to be content with that. Even though there was still more to discuss concerning her ‘benefactor’ Rahim, I decided that could wait for another day.

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Walking into the Graham-Hart house on Wednesday evening, I was taken aback by how different it was from only a few weeks prior. The place was a beehive of activity, packed with relatives. As Mr. Bankole, the elderly butler, ushered me in, I was greeted warmly by people I didn't even know, but who, from the look and sound of it, were relatives from Mrs. Graham-Hart’s south-western part of the family. I had a large grin on my face as I watched them chatter on in excitement, sauntering from one end of the house to the other, realising that they were just like any other family preparing for a wedding. Thankfully, my old room had been reserved for me.

“Ms. Graham-Hart said to let you know she might be home late, but insists that you get as comfortable as possible,” Mr. Bankole said, ushering me into my beloved purple room. “Would you like your dinner served up here, or would you like to join everyone downstairs?”

“Up here, please,” I answered. As attractive as the thought of meeting their relatives was, I was in no way prepared to come face-to-face with Karibi yet. I knew it would be inevitable, but the longer I could put it off, the longer I would.

“As you wish, Miss Isioma,” Mr. Bankole said, with the faintest hint of a smile. “It’s nice to have you back.”

An hour later, and after tucking into a delicious meal of smoky jollof rice and chicken stew, I fell fast asleep. The next morning, downstairs I met a very chirpy and exuberant Sotonye.

“I was just about to come wake you. It’s T-48 hours to my wedding day!” she exclaimed, buoyed by her equally excited friends, Enitan, her Chief Bridesmaid, and Tari, her childhood friend. Since working with her, I’d gotten to know them well and was pleasantly surprised by how friendly and down-to-earth her friends were.

I smiled back nervously, realising the excitement I was seeing in their eyes had very little to do with the wedding and everything to do with whatever they had planned for that day. And I was correct, as we spent the whole day sitting and laughing in the living room as they told anecdote after anecdote about their dating lives of old. They also made several jokes about Sotonye’s first marriage, and I was both surprised and happy that she was able to laugh about it. I guess with only hours to marrying the love of her life, she now could.

As the day progressed, I had just started getting comfortable when talk about the hen night started. Thinking it clearly had nothing to do with me, I was about to make myself scarce when Enitan threw a plump arm around me. “The limo gets here gets by 5 because I need us out of here by 6 o’clock stat. There’s lots to do and very little time to do it,” a cheeky laugh accompanied the last part.

I stared back at her, not quite sure how to let her know the night’s festivities didn’t include me. As friendly as Sotonye and I had become, I didn't think we’d become that friendly. That would just be crossing the line, in my opinion.

“Erm, I don’t think I’m-”

“Ehn? You don’t think you’re what?” Sotonye yelled from across the room. “Who else is going to keep me from getting up to no good? Not these crazy cougars, that’s for sure.”

And just like that, I was roped in.

In my bedroom, sorting through my clothing options, I eyed a leather mini skirt Ife had insisted I take. ‘Just pair these with these knee-high boots and

you’ll be smoking hot’. Not liking the mental picture of myself in the boots, my eye wandered to a red latex jumpsuit. ‘Wear this and finish them! Finish them!’. Except I didn't want to finish anybody. The last thing I wanted to do was stand out, especially not when I wasn’t quite convinced it was appropriate for me to attend my boss’s hen night in the first place.

In the end, I settled on a black, form-fitting wool dress, cinched at the waist with a gold chain belt. With thick black tights, an even thicker jacket and minimal makeup completing the look, I pulled my loose curls into a ponytail before grabbing a small handbag and walking out of my room just a few minutes before 6pm.

From the top of the stairs, I saw that not only was everyone else already down, there were a lot more ladies than there were earlier in the day…at least a dozen more. Looking at what they were wearing, most of them were dressed like we were going on a night out in Lagos. I couldn't help wondering if I was the only one feeling the effect of the biting cold. And then my heart caught in my throat when I saw Karibi sandwiched by two of the new women, laughing heartily at something one of them said.

“Oh Isioma, there you are!” Sotonye called out, when she saw me. “Great, I think we’re all here.”

Hearing my name wasn’t enough to make him look my way. The one who had his attention, a tall, slender woman who could pass for a supermodel leaned in and whispered something, which made him laugh again.

“Please, have mercy on us mere mortals,” he chuckled. “It’s women as beautiful as you that cause us men to do crazy things.”

I suddenly wished I’d worn the jumpsuit.

“Karibi, can’t we change your mind about coming along? It’ll be fun,” Enitan cooed from where she stood, completely transformed from her homey look earlier in the day, wearing tight, high-waist jeans, a tight red lace top and makeup so severe, I couldn't tell if her lipstick was black or just a very dark red.

“I’m underdressed, I’m afraid,” he answered, laughter in his voice.

“Nonsense, you look good enough to eat,” the supermodel said, looking like she meant every word. And he did. I’d gotten so used to seeing him in suits that I’d forgotten just how athletic his body was, and couldn't take my eyes off how bulky his chest and arms looked underneath the sweater. My mouth went dry as vivid memories of being held by those arms, of lying on that chest, accosted me.

“I’m sure you ladies will be fine,” he was still pacifying his friend. “Besides, the last thing I want to see is some stripper winding his ass all over my kid sister’s face.”

Sotonye rolled her eyes. “I promised ‘Gogo there would be no strippers,” she looked at her watch.

“Really? And you’re sure there won’t be any at his bachelor’s eve party? With the friends he has, I doubt that,” Karibi chuckled. “Anyways, because I wouldn't want you cramping my style at my own bachelor party, I’ll let you enjoy yourself tonight.”

“And we know that bachelor party, whenever it happens, will be totally wild!” Enitan cackled.

“The talk of the town!” the supermodel chimed, giggling.

Standing in the background, I could feel my good mood start to dissipate. Taking another look his way, this time he did see me and our eyes held for a nanosecond, before I tore mine away and pretended to fiddle with my phone.

“Ladies, the night is young. Can we please forget about my foddy-doddy brother and go have a good time?” Sotonye called out, eliciting a wild cheer from her friends as everyone proceeded to file out of the house. Clutching my handbag, I made sure not to look again Karibi’s way, determined not to allow his flirting with the supermodel get to me. It was best to accept the bitter truth. I was nowhere in her league.

Outside, the hyper ladies filed into two waiting limousines. I was ushered into the same one as Sotonye, and champagne was popping even before it pulled out of the street. By the time we got to the Karaoke Bar in Mayfair, most of the ladies were already wasted, and as we hopped from club to club, from Studio 338 to Ministry of Sound to XOYO to Cokobar, I made

sure I stayed sober, keeping a keen eye on Sotonye as she and her friends wilded out, making sure that, indeed, she didn’t get up to no good. But as the night wore on, I realised I had nothing to worry about. Inebriated though they were, these were mature women who were able to strike the right balance between being high enough to have a good time and lucid enough not to embarrass themselves.

One thing that did surprise me was the amount of attention I was getting, even as nondescript as I was looking. From the first place we entered to the very last, from friends of theirs to total strangers, I could barely go five minutes without someone offering to buy me a drink, asking me to dance, or downright trying to get me to follow them home. I couldn't understand it, especially not with the way I was dressed.

After a fun and eventful night out, we got back home at about 3am. For someone like me who never kept late nights, I’d barely been able to get out of my clothes before falling asleep. Alas, my eyes had opened on cue at 8am the next morning. Groaning, I buried my face into a pillow, willing myself to sleep a little longer, but sleep eluded me. I had no choice but to resign myself to the fact that my day had started just as early as it normally did, my club hopping the previous night regardless.

Throwing on a sweatshirt over a pair of jeans, I made my way downstairs to see if I could make myself helpful and was surprised to find the house quiet and pretty much empty. Sotonye, Enitan and Tari were still asleep, and Mrs. Graham-Hart and her sisters had left for an early appointment. Settling into the dining room as I was served a hearty English breakfast, I still couldn't believe this was me, living and dining with the rich and famous.

“Hi,” came Karibi’s voice from the door.

I looked up and had to will myself not to stop chewing. No, he wasn’t going to get me all wound up like a clock all over again.

“Hi,” I answered.

“I didn’t expect any of you would be up this early,” he said, sitting opposite me. “From what I hear, you had quite a wild night out.”

I smiled. “Yeah, it was fun.”

“And you’re just an early riser?”

I shrugged. “Something like that.”

As he poured himself a cup of coffee, I busied myself with my food, which now tasted very much like sawdust. How was I expected to enjoy my meal with him sitting right in front of me?

“Isioma, there’s something I’ve been meaning to say to you,” he said suddenly.

I looked up with wide eyes, and he set his cup down.

“I’m really sorry about what happened…what happened last time.”

“Last time?” I repeated even though I knew exactly what time.

“The night of the retreat. That night at the beach,” his voice wandered off. “I’m really sorry for acting like a jerk afterwards. I was in a really bad place at the time.”

I bit my lip and knew my face had probably turned beetroot red, awash anew with the embarrassment from two years prior.

“I totally understand,” I said with a forced smile. “You don’t have to apologise for anything.”

“Oh but I do. I was selfish and I really didn't mean to send any wrong signals…”

“You didn't,” I cut in, getting even more uncomfortable. “We were both consenting adults and it just happened. No big deal.”

He smiled looking considerably relieved. “You don't know how happy I am to hear that. I’ve been living with the guilt for a long time,” he chuckled. “And I still regret not taking those cakes. Mrs. Fisher never did give them to me. I’ll bet she took them home to her family.”

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I’d abandoned the said cakes and they’d probably ended up in the trash.

“So, tell me,” he said, leaning forward. “How are you enjoying the job? And how are things with your mother? And that awful boyfriend of yours?”

Before I could answer, Enitan and Tari walked into the room like they were being dragged in with rope.

“Aaaaargh! Someone should pour me some coffee now!” Tari cried, plopping in the seat next to me.

“Hangover?” Karibi teased.

“From hell!” Enitan answered. “I had to come down to eat or else I would have thrown up all over Sotonye, sleeping beauty!”

“After all these years, you guys haven’t learnt that my sister can drink us all under the table,” Karibi laughed.

And just like that, our moment was over.

I watched them as the topic of conversation shifted to the night before and as the ladies raved about what an ‘epic’ night it was, smiling and nodding where I needed to, even though deep in my heart, I was wondering where the discussion with Karibi could have led if we hadn’t been interrupted, wondering what else he could have said.

Wondering what if.

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CHAPTER NINE

SITTING IN SOTONYE'S BEDROOM on Saturday morning, as Enitan and Lanye, her cousin, got her into her beautiful dress, I couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked stunning, and it wasn't just because of her flawlessly applied makeup. She was glowing from the inside, radiating the kind of glow that only came from total and complete happiness. Not once did she even raise her voice or look rattled. She was as cool as a cucumber, with a smile that didn't leave her face. I smiled as I watched her friends and relatives make jokes and sip champagne, enjoying the congenial ambience. I'd been with many brides on the morning of their wedding and this experience was unlike any other.

"You look lovely, Isioma," Mrs. Graham-Hart said, walking into the room, herself looking exquisite in a dress that had its top part a bright forest green satin and its bottom a green and orange patterned brocade. A large, wide-rimmed red hat with green and orange feathers accentuated her face, and I couldn't help but marvel over how beautiful she looked, even at her age.

"Thank you, Ma," I answered, blushing as I rose to my feet to greet her. I'd opted for the royal-blue dress and had woken up an hour earlier than I should have, just so I could straighten my hair and apply my makeup as expertly as I could manage. At the very last minute, I'd decided against the red lipstick I favoured for occasions like this, choosing instead a pale, glossy pink. With my hair in a loose chignon and with Ife's pearl drop diamond earrings the only jewellery adorning my body, I was happy with the result; pretty without taking anything from the bride.

But as a collective gasp went through the room as Sotonye's veil was placed on her head, I realised nobody could have taken anything away from her, not even if they tried. She was ethereally beautiful with a radiance that was

almost celestial. Without a doubt, she was the most beautiful bride I'd ever seen.

Mother and daughter clasped hands and with their foreheads touching, they exchanged words only both of them could hear. As the older Graham-Hart woman dabbed her eyes, everyone else in the room was doing the same. It was truly beautiful.

As we made our way downstairs, Dr. Graham-Hart was waiting at the foot of the stairs. Whatever ailment that had prompted his retirement and retreat from the public eye had done nothing to steal his stance, as he stood straight and regal, dapper in a black tuxedo with a shiny satin lapel, his green and orange tie and pocket square complimenting his wife's attire. His sons, Karibi and Tekena, both looking just as dapper in the same attire, flanked him. I kept my eyes lowered, not wanting to make eye contact with Karibi, not wanting to start the day already destabilised.

When we got to the foot of the stairs, their father tearfully kissed his daughter on the forehead, clearly emotional. From what I'd previously heard, he hadn't even attended her last wedding, talk less of give her away. Placing a hand on her head, he prayed for her and as all the Amens and Hallelujahs resounded through the hallway, I realised they were just like any other family. I was hit by a sudden wave of emotion at the realisation I wasn't going to have my father pray for me on my own wedding day, and had to bite my lip to stop myself from crying, reminding myself that day wasn't about me, but Sotonye.

All through the prayer, I could feel Karibi's eyes on me, but I kept my head bowed the whole time, not daring to look up lest I turn into a pool of mush, right there and then.

Riding with Sotonye's bridesmaids, we trailed the silver Rolls Royce Ghost that conveyed her and her father, but the moment we got to Saint James Catholic Church, I broke away from the family and bridal party and went in search of Omolara and the rest of the planning team, determined to make myself useful. Along with one of the ushers, I helped guide guests to their seats, paying particular attention to the several of our colleagues that had made the trip for the wedding from Lagos. From Leo Burton the CEO, to all

the Executive and Non-Executive Directors, to Odiri, Dobra, Salewa and even Mrs. Fisher, the Eldabra family was well represented.

The wedding ceremony was beautiful, sweet and short, and as pictures were being taken afterward, I set off for the nearby reception venue with Omolara's designated team. I gasped as I walked into the impressive Soane Hall, the décor taking my breath completely away. Suspended from the 27-foot ceiling were chandeliers, each comprised of a round metal frame from which large, transparent balls encasing single bulbs, hung. The tables were covered with shiny copper cloths with centrepieces of live roses, anthuriums and ferns ensconced in rustic lanterns, and a circular peach and white rose floral arch had been mounted over the couple's area. There was nothing cheesy about the décor and there wasn't a single fairy light, balloon or drape in sight, but it was still beautiful and so very romantic. I closed my eyes and swayed to The Girl from Ipanema playing from the sound system. There was to be no band or DJ, just the sounds of Bebel Gilberto and Eliane Elias serenading guests the whole evening.

"I like the song too," came a voice from behind me.

I turned around and my heart almost flew out of my chest when I saw Karibi. I'd been so captivated by the décor that I hadn't even noticed guests begin to file into the hall.

"And that's saying a lot because I don't really like contemporary music. Except this isn't exactly what you would call contemporary, is it?" he was still saying.

Averting my eyes, I nodded in agreement, needing to do something with my head, my body. "It's a very nice song."

"You look really beautiful, by the way," he said, after a short pause.

I looked up at him, suddenly tongue-tied.

"Blue is your colour," he added, smiling.

"Thank you," I was finally able to say, knowing fully well that my cheeks were flushed. "It was a lovely ceremony, wasn't it? Sotonye and Dagogo looked so happy."

"They're perfect for each other."

There was a faraway look in his eyes and I wondered if he was still thinking about his sister and her new husband, or reminiscing over a long lost love.

“Would you like to-” he started saying, but was cut off when a curvaceous woman of Mediterranean descent walked up to him and interlinked her arm with his.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

He turned to smile at his companion, a smile that made me realise she was no ordinary acquaintance and very likely his ‘flavour of the month’. “I came here right from Church. If you’d been there, you would have found me.”

“Who’s your friend?” she asked, looking at me, the smile on her face not quite as friendly, further confirming my hunch that they were sexually, maybe even romantically linked. As upsetting as that realisation was, I was glad that she was at least threatened by me. I smiled back and stood straighter, emboldened.

“This is Sotonye’s Assistant, Isioma,” he answered.

Assistant. Just like that my bravado came crashing right back to earth.

“Lovely to meet you, Isioma,” she said, her smile brightening. She held out a dainty hand. “I’m Ava.”

Her skin was supple soft and I allowed myself take a good look at her. Dressed in a forest green, fitted dress with a plunging neckline that revealed an ample bosom, her olive coloured skin was flawless and the green of her eyes matched the colour of her outfit. Standing beside her in my conservative attire, I could have as well been a schoolteacher.

I watched as they walked into the hall together, and as she threw a protective arm around him when they took their seats. I chuckled and shook my head, wondering how I could have allowed myself think, even for a moment, that he could be interested in me. This was his crowd, his natural element, and I was just an imposter passing through. In a few days, I would be back in my own reality, leaving him very much in his.

The bride and groom soon arrived, smiling and walking into the hall hand-in-hand, without the usual pomp and fanfare, but with just as much

excitement as your typical couple. With the reception underway, I fully deployed myself into ensuring our colleagues were well catered for and that everything was proceeding as seamlessly as possible. I finally took a seat as the couple danced their first dance to Save your love for me by Eliane Elias. Chewing on a gift favour macaroon, I watched them, happy for her but also wondering if it would ever be me one day, as in love and happy as they were.

“She finally decides to sit still,” came an unfamiliar voice beside me.

I turned and saw a tall, bearded guy take the seat next to mine. I frowned in my confusion, wondering if he was talking to me.

“I’ve been trying to catch your attention all evening,” he said, leaning close and giving me a whiff of his spicy perfume. “Myself and pretty much every unaccompanied man in this room.”

I laughed in spite of myself. “Oh, really?”

“Oh, really!” he answered, chuckling. He stretched out his hand. “My name is Sebastian, but everyone calls me Seb.”

I smiled as I shook his hand. “Isioma.”

“Isioma!” he exclaimed. “So you’re my Igbo sister? Perfect cherry on an already beautiful cake.”

I shook my head and laughed again, grateful for the distraction. Light skinned and with piercing brown eyes, he wasn’t a bad looking man either.

“Make my day and tell me you live in Lagos and are only in this town for the wedding,” he said, his baritone voice low and flirtatious.

I smiled before answering. I might not have been very experienced, but I knew his type.

“I do actually,” I answered, playing along.

“In fact, can we get married right now? Can we just run right back to the Church and have the Priest marry us?” he teased. “Because so far, you’re a 10 out of 10, girl.”

By now, I had started getting tired of the conversation. I was too old, too wise, to fall for lines like that.

“So tell me,” he leaned closer. “What do you do for a living?”

“I work with Sotonye,” then looking at him pointedly, added. “I’m her Assistant,” wanting to put him off…the same way Karibi had put me down before his lady friend.

My eyes wandered to their table and even though she was chatting animatedly with another couple, her arm was still slung across Karibi’s, firmly marking her territory.

“That’s great,” Seb said, not sounding at all put off. “Sotonye is a smart girl so that means you must be sharp as well.”

I shrugged, looking around the room, wondering how I could make a quick escape from the flirtatious man. He must have noticed my distraction as he smiled and reached into his jacket.

“This might probably not be the best place to talk properly,” he said, handing me his complimentary card. “I leave for Lagos tomorrow. Let’s talk when you’re back in town.”

I accepted the card, a stiff smile plastered on my face more out of politeness than interest. “Sure.”

He threw his head back in laughter. “I know the meaning of that ‘sure’. Don't worry, if Mohammed doesn't come to the mountain, be rest assured the mountain will surely go to Mohammed. I know your name and where to find you,” he rose to his feet, his eyes still on me. “I’ll see you in Lagos, kid. In the meantime, you better brace yourself. There are at least six guys waiting for me to leave so they can take my place.”

And he was right. No sooner had he left than first one of the Graham-Hart’s cousins, Gilbert, and then a Chuks guy who claimed to be an old friend of their family’s, and then a Greek guy, Panos, who said he went to business school with Dagogo, came up to chat with me. Soon, I couldn't even keep up. I couldn't understand why I was getting all that attention, especially as I wasn't even close to being the prettiest woman in the room.

Later that night, as we helped Sotonye pack a few suitcases for her honeymoon, I was teased relentlessly about it.

“Omo, this Isioma girl, which ‘boys follow me’ perfume did you spray?” Enitan teased. “All the guys there were drooling all over you.”

“Oh you noticed too?” Sotonye cackled. “Some of them were even coming to ask me, the bride, about you. I had to remind them of the reason they were there, in case it had skipped their minds.”

I was so embarrassed, I wanted the ground to swallow me whole. This kind of attention was alien to me.

“Girl, no need to be embarrassed. Own it!” Tari said. “You’re a beautiful woman, of course men should be falling over themselves for you.”

“True that!” Enitan chimed.

“The girls are right, enjoy all the attention now while you can, before some man comes and snaps you up like Mr. Ekpebu has snapped me up,” Sotonye said. “Make sure you enjoy this extra week you have in London. Let your toasters take you out. Let them wine and dine you. Have fun, even if you’ll be freezing in London while I’ll be luxuriating in the sunny Bahamas.”

Thankfully, the conversation switched to her trip, and by the time we ushered her downstairs to her waiting husband, I was no longer the subject of discussion.

Once back in my room, I emptied my purse of the numerous complimentary cards and the hastily scribbled phone numbers that been handed to me. Looking at the pile on my bed, all I could think of was the one man who hadn’t paid me any attention at all that evening. Gathering all the cards and pieces of paper, I threw them all into the bin.

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CHAPTER TEN

AFTER SPENDING ALL OF Sunday in bed, I had to gather my courage to dine with the family on Monday morning, Christmas Eve.

“Hello, beautiful lady,” Mrs. Graham-Hart beamed when I walked into the dining room. “I was beginning to worry that you were trying to avoid us.”

“Don’t bother the young lady,” Dr. Graham-Hart said, his eyes twinkling. “After such a busy day on Saturday, she deserves all her beauty sleep.”

I smiled shyly, taking a seat opposite the couple, relieved they were the only Graham-Harts I would be dining with.

I spoke too soon.

I kept my eyes down as Karibi walked into the room and as he exchanged greetings with his parents, wondering if I’d made a mistake agreeing to stay back in their house in Sotonye’s absence.

“Hello, Isioma,” he said, taking his seat beside me.

“Good morning.”

“Words will never be enough to express my gratitude for everything you did on Saturday,” Mrs. Graham-Heart said, smiling at me. “All my friends have been raving about how lovely, friendly and helpful you were to them.”

“Very helpful,” her husband nodded in agreement.

“It was my pleasure, Ma,” I answered, smiling. “And thank you so much for having me in your beautiful home.”

“Nonsense! The pleasure is all ours,” she answered. “It’s just a pity we’re leaving today. I would have given you a wonderful treat here in London!”

“You’re leaving today?”

“But of course. How can we spend Christmas here?” she laughed at the absurdity of the mere suggestion. “My husband and I have been in this town long enough. It’s time to go back to get some Lagos sunshine.”

“And attend some Lagos parties,” her husband said, throwing his wife a knowing glance.

“Exactly,” Karibi chuckled.

“Let them say what they like. All I know is that I need to be back home,” Mrs. Graham-Hart laughed, and from the twinkle in her eyes, I could tell her husband and son weren’t wrong. “Anyway, enough about us. What are you up to today?”

“I’m not too sure,” I shrugged. “Probably find my way to town. Maybe do some window shopping or sightseeing.”

“Alone? All by yourself?” she exclaimed, before turning to her son. “Are you busy today? Why don’t you take her?”

I almost choked on my coffee. “Oh, no Ma. That won’t be necessary. There’s a tube station down the road and I’m sure I can find my way around.”

“It’s no problem. I’d love to take you,” Karibi said, to my surprise.

“Thanks, but I can manage. I have a tube map and-”

“Nonsense. What kind of sightseeing would it be if you went on your own? Karibi will take you and that’s that.” Even though she said it with a smile, I knew there was no room for any further argument.

I lingered on my plate much longer than I needed to, pushing around the cinnamon loops in my bowl of milk, not wanting to leave the table before my older hosts, hoping everyone, Karibi included, would forget the ludicrous suggestion of him being my tour guide. He very likely only agreed to appease his mother and I wanted to spare us both the discomfort.

When the older Graham-Harts finally left the room in readiness of their trip, I pushed my plate forward and rose to my feet.

“So…do we meet back here at 11? I think that would be a good time to leave,” Karibi said, from where he sat reading a newspaper.

“You’re not taking your parents to the airport?”

“They’re traveling with Tekena. They don't need me,” he said with a grin. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fun.”

If he considered having a gazillion fluttering butterflies in one’s stomach, fun.

Back in my room, all I did was wear a thicker sweater over my jeans, throw on an equally thick scarf and a quilted jacket, and apply a dusting of powder on my face and clear lip gloss to my lips, not wanting to deceive myself into thinking this was anything more than a gesture of kindness on Karibi’s part. There was no point wasting my time with anything more elaborate.

“Nice and functional,” Karibi remarked, when I walked into the drawing room where he sat waiting for me.

I didn't even know if it was a dig or a compliment.

“Shall we?” I asked, raising my shoulders in a half shrug.

“Ouch, don't look too excited now,” he chuckled, standing. He too had changed clothes but in his polo shirt and jeans, he looked less like someone who’d hastily thrown available clothes together. “I think we should go with your plan of taking the tube. We’ll cover a whole lot more that way.”

“Perfect. I haven’t had a chance to and I really want to experience what it’s like.”

“Excellent!”

And so we set off, leaving the house a little after 11am.

“So, where do you have in mind?” he said, slipping on his sunglasses. “The malls? Leicester square? The London Eye?”

“Houses of Parliament, actually,” I answered, smiling. “And then Downing Street and maybe even-”

“Let me guess, Buckingham Palace.”

I nodded. “And Westminster Abbey, if we can manage it.”

He looked at me, his brows furrowed. “You’re full of surprises,” he looked at his watch. “Well, if that’s your order, we could start with Westminster

Abbey. It’s just a few stops away from here. The train station is about ten minutes away. Would you rather walk or wait for the bus?”

“Walk,” I answered, despite the ice-cold gust of wind in my face.

“Good choice.”

As we walked to South Kensington station, I was grateful for my warm, practical clothing. Not only was the walk longer than ten minutes, it was bitterly cold.

I insisted on buying my own travel card, but after several unsuccessful tries with the dispensing machine, had to step back to let him help me.

“And stubborn too,” he said, smiling as he handed me a 1-week all zone card, which was more expensive than what I’d intended to get.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, accepting the card. As if things weren’t awkward enough already.

On the eastbound Circle Line train, St. James Park was only three stops away.

“So, why Westminster Abbey?” he asked, as we navigated our way to the famous church.

“Why not Westminster Abbey? Where all the Kings and Queens have been coronated since William the Conqueror? Where almost all the important royal weddings, with the exception of Charles and Diana’s, has held?”

“I never would have fancied you a royalist.”

I chuckled. “I take it you aren’t.”

He shrugged. “Let's just say some things should have gone with the last century.”

We were soon standing in front of the imposing, gothic structure, which, with its pointed arches, ribbed vaulting, and flying buttresses, was everything I thought it would be, and more.

“Would you like to go inside?” he asked.

I shook my head, my interest already satisfied. “I just wanted to see it, to be in its presence,” then handing him my phone. “Could you please take a

picture?”

He looked amused as he accepted it. “Sure.”

I managed a few smiles as he snapped away and was quite happy with the pictures. “They’re great! Thanks.”

“You’re a natural,” he answered, winking. I couldn't help but suspect he was having a good laugh at my expense. “Next stop, Houses of Parliament or, more correctly put, Palace of Westminster.”

It was a short, three-minute walk to the Houses of Parliament, and as we walked the length of Bridge Street, I stared in awe at the long expanse of towers and column buildings built in the similar gothic architecture as the abbey. As he took pictures of me with the structure in the background, I was a bit more at ease, smiling a little bit more. We’d been together for almost an hour and I was already getting more comfortable in his company.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but Downing Street isn’t open to the public,” Karibi said, bursting my bubble.

“Oh no! So you mean I can’t get a picture in front of that black door?” I moaned.

“I’m afraid not,” he chuckled, clearly amused by the whole thing.

“So, Buckingham Palace next?” I asked.

“Well, it’s about a thirty minute walk from here. Or we could get on a train at Westminster station over there,” he said, pointing ahead at a train station.

I shivered under my coat, wondering if it was worth all that stress, just to look at the Palace from the outside.

“Second thoughts?”

“I’m thinking maybe another time. It might be crowded, today being Christmas Eve and all.”

“I quite doubt that, but good call. The London Eye is just around the corner though. Do you want to check it out?”

“Sure.”

Around the corner ended up being a ten-minute walk.

“So…favourite Prime Minister?” Karibi asked, as we walked.

“Tony Blair.”

“You can’t possibly be old enough to know anything about Tony Blair.”

“I beg your pardon. How old do you think I am?” I exclaimed, pretending to be insulted.

“Not old enough. I thought your choice would be Theresa May or something.”

“Sexist much!”

“Mine is David Cameron. The guy stuck to his guns to the very end.”

“Favourite President,” I cut in. “Nigerian President.”

He gave me a strange look. “Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“Obasanjo, for obvious reasons.”

I nodded in agreement. “Same.”

He grinned, baring perfect teeth. “We actually have a similar political view. Surprise, surprise.”

As we approached the London Eye, I had seen the long queue even before he let out an exasperated sigh.

“Even on Christmas Eve?” he exclaimed. “I thought these queues were only here in the summer.”

It wasn’t even on my list, so I wasn't too dismayed.

“Fancy a cup of coffee or something? Maybe the queue would have reduced by the time we’re done,” he asked.

Considering I’d played with my breakfast more than I’d eaten it, my stomach had already started growling, so the suggestion was a welcome one.

We were soon in a small, nearby café, which not only had a perfect view of the London Eye but the River Thames as well.

“So, you were quite the hit on Saturday,” he remarked, as we sipped on cappuccinos out of Styrofoam cups.

I peered at him from over my cup. “Huh?”

“At the wedding reception, all the guys were flocking to you like bees to a honeypot.”

I grunted, tempted to ask how he noticed when he was wrapped around Ava’s slender finger the whole time. “It was nothing.”

“You must be used to that kind of attention. I’ll bet even back home, men flock to you in droves.”

I looked at him. “Not all of them.”

“Touché, Isioma. Touché!” he chuckled.

I looked out of the window and sighed at the beautiful view. Even though it was just gone 2pm, the sun had already started to set. “I really would have loved to see some snow, you know, a White Christmas. But I’m told it doesn't snow here until later January.”

“There have only been four White Christmases in London in almost fifty years, the last of which was in 2010. So I’m afraid you might not get your wish.”

“Yeah, I know. But it would have been really nice,” I chuckled. “Don't laugh but I used to daydream about being abroad in Christmas time, a white Christmas, with Boyz II Men's 'Let it snow' playing in the background.”

“I don't even know that song,” he sniggered.

I smiled and returned my gaze to the scenic view in front of me, loving the afternoon…and loving my company.

“Your mother lives in London, doesn’t she?” he asked. “Do you have plans to see her?”

I shook my head. “I don't think so. Things aren’t as bad with her as…as the last time I told you about it, but it’s unlikely I’ll see her while I’m here.”

He leaned forward on the table. “Why not? Why waste a good opportunity?”

I shrugged. “I’m just not ready.” I opened the chat app on my phone. “Funnily enough, my brother has been hounding me about the very same thing. Just last night, he sent me her address.”

He took my phone from me. “She lives in Bow.”

By this time, my curiosity had started to get the better of me. “Is that far?”

“Nowhere is far, when you have a train station right under your nose,” he prodded. “What better time could there be than Christmas Eve to see her?”

“I don't know…”

“All you have to do is stop by and say a quick hello. I don't know the woman, but I can only imagine how happy that would make her.”

I was quiet for a while, thinking about it. Even though it was like diving right into the deep end, what better way to break the ice than to…well… break the ice?

“Let’s do it,” I beamed, feeling all of a sudden excited by the prospect.

Before long, we were on a train headed to East London, disembarking at Mile End Station. It was a ten-minute walk from the station, but with each step nearer our destination, my confidence diminished, wondering how I could have allowed him convince me to do something so rash and impulsive.

“Here we are,” he said, when we found the house on Tredegar Square.

The house in front of us was one in a line of modest terrace houses. With colourful Christmas fairy lights, garlands and a dancing Santa on its front porch, the occupants of the house were clearly ready for the holidays. I suddenly felt like an intruder.

“This was a bad idea,” I said, backing away. “Please, let’s go.”

By now it was completely dark, even though it was only a little past 4pm.

“Just knock, say Merry Christmas…”

“Let’s go, please!” I repeated, my voice several octaves higher than I intended.

Before he could say anything in response, a woman alighted from a bus a few feet away and started making her way towards us, arms laden with shopping bags. One look at her and I knew it was her. She looked different from the picture she'd sent. She was a few pounds heavier and her hair shorter, the honey-blond colour she had in the picture now several shades lighter. She stopped with a start when she noticed us and as we made eye contact, the bags in her hands dropped to the floor.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, raising quivering hands to her face, taking a step back and then another forward, in her confusion. "Isioma?"

"Hi," I answered, raising my hand in a weak wave, feeling terrified, anxious and excited at the same time. "I was in the neighbourhood, and-"

Without waiting for me to finish, she jumped over her bags and enveloped me in a crushing embrace. "This is a dream! This has got to be a dream!"

I stood with wide eyes and straight arms as she hugged me, not quite knowing how to respond. Casting a pleading look at Karibi, he smiled and mouthed I'll be back before turning around and walking away.

"I can't believe this is real," she said, pulling away to look at me, brown eyes like mine dancing with delight. "You're even more beautiful than I imagined."

"Let me help you with those," I said, looking at the discarded bags on the floor.

"Oh, I didn't even realise I'd dropped them," she giggled as we both reached for the bags. I noticed her hands were still shaking and a lump formed in my throat, suddenly full of emotions upon meeting the one woman who had once been the most important person in my life. "It's just me at home. Karen and Keith are both away for the holidays," she said as we walked into the small living room.

"Your children?" I asked, surprised by the stab of pain I felt.

She nodded and smiled at me. "Oh, they'll be so glad when I tell them," she pointed at the picture of a smiling young man with bright blue eyes and blond hair gelled into a quiff. "That's Keith. He and his girlfriend are spending Christmas with her family in Lisbon," and then pointing at a

picture of a pouting woman with a deep tan and long blonde hair hanging down her shoulders in loose waves. “And that’s Karen. She’s with my ‘Nan in York for the holidays,” and then without warning, she burst into tears. “Nan is going to be so emotional when I tell her. She took care of you…she took care of all of us.”

“Your…your grandmother?” I asked, quite surprised.

She smiled and nodded. “88 years old and still kicking strong. She’s been the only mother I’ve ever known. My mother had us, my sister and I, very young and was never really interested in being a mom.”

Doing the mathematics, I could see I came from a line of young mothers. “Is she still alive? Your own mother?”

She shook her head, and I could see it still hurt. “She died a few years before I met your father.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” I said, before adding. “Is it okay if we don’t talk about any of…of all that?” I asked, my stomach tightening at the reminder of what had led us to where we were.

“Of course, of course. Anything you want, my darling,” she put down the bags in her hand and cleared magazines off one of the chairs. “Please have a seat. I’m so sorry about the mess. Everywhere is in a right state.”

Her nervousness was endearing and I found myself begin to relax as I sat on the chair she offered. “It’s fine.”

“Can I get you anything? Some tea? Coffee? Juice?” she giggled. “Something stronger? I think I’ll be needing me one of those.”

I smiled. “Nothing, thank you. We had some coffee before coming here.”

“You and your bloke?” she grinned. “He’s gorgeous.”

“He’s not-” I began before deciding against it. My love life wasn’t any of her concern.

“Let me quickly pop these in the fridge and put a kettle on. I’ll be right back,” she said scurrying away.

Alone in the living room, I looked around. There were other pictures of Karen and Keith and several with all three of them, but from the look of

things, there was no husband in the picture.

“I proper needed this,” she said, walking back to the living room, a glass of what looked like brandy in her hand. “You sure you don’t want a glass?”

“No, thank you,” I answered. “So…what do you do?”

“I work with the local council. I’ve worked there for over twenty years,” she answered proudly.

I shook my head, confused. “You clearly live a very simple life. How were you able to help pay for Ifeanyi’s college tuition last year? Or his ticket here over the summer? And when my ex asked you to send £10,000, how did you plan to do that?”

“I would have re-mortgaged my house if I had to. Gladly! When I thought it was you who needed the money, I would have sold a body part if it meant helping you,” she answered, eyes blazing with passion. “But don’t get me wrong. I might not make a lot, but I am comfortable enough. Keith and Karen both have decent jobs and they also help out.”

“How old are they?”

“Karen is 27 and Keith just turned 25.”

“What do they do?”

“Karen is a Buyer at Selfridges,” she answered, her smile reflecting her pride. “And Keith is a Graduate Assistant at City University.”

I nodded, letting the information sink in, struggling with rising feelings of envy for these children she’d chosen.

“Well, thank you for a lovely time,” I said, hitting both palms on my thighs before rising to my feet. “It’s getting late and we live far from here.”

“Aww, already,” she said, also rising. “Will you come back before you leave? So we could spend some time together? Chat some more?”

“Maybe,” I smiled at her, even though I knew we both knew that wouldn't happen.

She stepped forward as if to hug me but then stepped back, folding her arms as if to control herself. But even though she tried to restrain her body, her

glistening eyes betrayed her emotions. “This has been the best gift I could ever have hoped for. Thank you.”

A tear rolled involuntarily down my face and I walked over to hug her. “Merry Christmas, Hattie.”

She held me and for a long time we stood there, neither of us saying a word. The wetness on my neck was the indication of her tears, and my own blurred vision the indication of mine. I was glad I’d allowed Karibi talk me into the visit. It might have been short and we might not have unpacked any of the things we needed to, but it had been well worth it.

Opening the door, I was relieved to see him standing outside.

“Hello,” Hattie called out, with an excited wave.

I interlinked my arm with his as he waved back, dragging him away before he found out I’d claimed him as my boyfriend.

“Are you okay?” he asked, as I wiped away some tears that still lingered. “Did it go okay?”

“It was lovely. Thank you for making me come.”

He smiled at me. “You’re welcome.”

“Can we go back to the London Eye? Do you think there’ll still be a queue?”

He looked at his watch. “It’s about 6:30 now. We might not get there until about way past 7. The last ride is at 8:30, so I guess we could try.”

I rested my head on his shoulder for the entire length of the 23-minute train ride, my eyes closed as I savoured not only his closeness, but from starting the process of healing a 31-year old wound.

By the time we got to Westminster Station, it was so dark, it was hard to believe it wasn’t closer to midnight than 7pm. The area was busier, with more frenzied last-minute shoppers shoving their way through the throng of people on the streets. We walked, arms interlinked, back to the London Eye, but on getting there, saw that the queue was still as long as ever.

“Should we join it?” Karibi asked, even though I could hear the apprehension in his voice.

“Maybe some other time,” I answered, leaning on his shoulder from where we stood on the Westminster Bridge, looking at the famous monument. “Let’s just stay here a little while.”

He put his arm over my shoulder and in that moment, that very moment, I was in heaven.

“Thank you for an amazing day,” I said, looking up at him. “Best Christmas Eve ever.”

Our eyes held and I saw everything I was feeling reflected in his; longing… and desire. Leaning down, he kissed me…and I succumbed, falling into the kiss like someone wilfully plunging into a black hole. He cupped my face, deepening the kiss and I wrapped my arms around his shoulder, never wanting to let go, never wanting that magical moment to end.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, hailing a passing black cab.

We were barely inside it when we started kissing again, exploring each other’s lips, unable to get enough of each other for the entire twenty-minute ride home. Getting to the house, he let us in and I was surprised that everywhere was dark and quiet.

“Where is everyone?”

“Gone for the holidays. It’s just the two us.”

Even in the dark hallway, I could see the yearning in his eyes. Pulling me closer, both our breaths were shallow as he leaned to kiss me again, but this time more intense, more urgent than before. I closed my eyes as his lips trailed my neck, moaning as the world faded away, along with any resistance, any resolve I had left.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I OPENED MY EYES with a start the next morning, afraid I'd dreamt it all or, worse, that he'd left me just like the last time. And then I felt his breathing on my neck and a strong arm slung over me. A slow smile formed on face as I looked at the form spooned behind me, fast asleep. The smile remained on my face as I remembered the night before, how we'd made love right there in the hallway, how he'd carried me up to his bedroom, both of us as naked as the day we were born, how we'd made love so many times I lost count. Turning around to face him, I watched him as he slept, my heart so full, it felt like it would burst. Surely, this was what heaven felt like. Nothing, absolutely nothing could be better than this.

I must have drifted off to sleep as I was awoken later by the sounds of a very familiar song; Boyz II Men's Let it Snow.

"Finally. I thought you planned to sleep all morning," he teased from where he lay beside me. He bent to kiss me. "Merry Christmas. I didn't get you a gift so I had to search online for this song of yours. Unfortunately, I couldn't get any snow to complete the White Christmas."

That he even remembered my fantasy was more than enough for me. As Boyz II Men serenaded us, we kissed and I couldn't remember a more magical Christmas.

"Merry Christmas," I said, so content I felt like I was going to burst.

His eyes on mine, he ran his hands through my hair. "I've never seen you look more beautiful than you do now. You're gorgeous, Isioma."

He leaned closer, our foreheads touching. Looking at him, I realised there was no turning back for me. I had fallen wholly, totally and completely in love with him.

We made love again and fell back asleep. When I awoke later that afternoon, my eyes wandered around the room as he slept. With shades of silver and grey, and crystal pendant lights dropping from the four corners of the ceiling, it was just as opulent as I imagined it would be. I found myself wondering how many women had been entertained there, but quickly banished the thought as quickly as it came, determined not to spoil the magical moment.

It wasn't until evening that we staggered our way downstairs, me in one of his sweatshirts and him in a pair of boxers. Walking past our heap of clothes on the hallway, rather than make me ashamed filled me with even more desire for him. It must have been the same for him as we made love again, right there in the hallway.

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"So what's the deal with Ava?" I asked, as we lay in front of the fireplace in the living room, having finally eaten the roast potatoes, turkey and cranberry sauce the cook had left behind for us.

"No deal with her. She's just a friend."

"She seemed like a lot more than 'a friend'."

"Yeah, she's interested in me and we've dated occasionally, but it's not gone past that. I haven't had a girlfriend in a very long time."

I was quiet for a while, wondering what his definition of 'dating occasionally' meant.

"I've seen you with quite a number of women, and none of them has been your girlfriend?"

He shrugged. "After getting my heart broken two years ago, I'm not quite in a hurry to give it away again."

Those words echoed in my head as we lay there, in the romantic setting of the fireplace. But by the time we got back to the bedroom, all it took was one kiss from him and all my worries dissipated. It wasn't possible for me to be the only one feeling this magic. He had to be feeling it just as strongly as I was, if not even more.

The next day, we decided to have brunch at a nearby café, and walking there hand-in-hand, life for me was perfect.

“So, I’m leaving for Lagos tomorrow,” he said, as we sipped on our lattes after finishing our meal of waffles and sausages. We were sitting side-by-side, hips and elbows touching.

I turned to look at him, surprised. “Tomorrow? I thought we were both leaving on Sunday.”

“You assumed. I never told you that.”

I sat back, deflated. “I’ll change my ticket so we can leave together. I’m sure if I call Atoni, he can do something-”

“No, no, don’t do that. We can’t possibly fly back together. How would we able to explain that?” he exclaimed. “Listen, Mr. Bankole will be back in the house this evening, and the rest of the staff by tomorrow, so you’ll be fine.”

I recoiled. “We can’t fly back together? Are we hiding this?” I pointed at the space between the two of us. “Was this just a Christmas fling?”

He chuckled and held my hand. “My beautiful sunshine, you’re so melodramatic. You know better than to ask that,” and then he went serious. “I just want us to keep this private for now.”

I was moody walking back to the house, suddenly haunted by memories of what happened two years before when, after a night of passion, he had dumped me like a bad habit.

“So what do you want to do today? I could get us fast track tickets for the London Eye.”

I shook my head. “I think I just want to lie down.”

Sensing my sunken mood, he pulled me to himself. “Sunshine, it’s only a few days. Soon you’ll be back in Lagos and we can pick up right where we left off.”

“But in secret, I’m sure.”

He tilted my chin up. “For now. You and I know that’s what would be best for us now. The last thing I want is for anyone to think you got to where

you are in the company because of me.”

As much as I hated to admit it, he was right.

We eventually made it to the London Eye. Our tickets helped us skip through the long queue and once inside our capsule, with his arm draped around me, we enjoyed the panoramic view of the city of London as the sun set.

The next morning, bidding him farewell, I had to steel myself from crying. Kissing him breathlessly, all I could do was pray this wasn't the end for us, and that he wouldn't forget about me the moment he got on that plane.

“Don’t miss me too much,” he said, smiling as he broke away from our embrace.

“I won’t.” Never was there a more brazen, unconvincing lie.

Later that day, I retraced my steps to the train station and was soon on my way, first to Oxford Circus and then the Westfield Mall at Shepherds Bush. But the retail therapy wasn’t enough to lift my gloom. Sitting in a café after my shopping spree, all my bags surrounding me, I couldn't help but relive the days following our last affair. I was thrown back in time to baking in the early hours of the morning, blinded by my naiveté. I remembered vividly the perplexed look on his face as I offered him the basket of cakes after accosting him like a stalker, and I knew that couldn't be me ever again. If what we had was to continue, if anything was to happen between us in Lagos, he would have to be the one to instigate it. After how burned and broken the last encounter left to me, it absolutely wasn’t going to me.

Sitting in my room later that evening, I decided I might as well fill the second of the two holes in my heart. So reaching for my phone, I dialled the number Ifeanyi had sent me along with her address.

“Hi Hattie,” I said, when she answered. “This is Isioma. Are you busy tomorrow? Can I come over?”

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I was at her house before noon and had to smile at the difference. The place had been painstakingly cleaned and the heady smell of air freshener still lingered. She was trying not to act nervous, but it was obvious that she was.

I’d accepted her offer of muffins and tea, and we sat there, eating and exchanging nervous smiles.

“Why did you leave?” I asked, finally cutting to the chase, addressing the 31-year old elephant in the room.

She nodded, as if she’d been preparing for this question, and I suppose she was…for a lot longer than the twelve hours since my call inviting myself over.

“I still ask myself that question everyday. My excuse back then was that I was homesick and that life in Nigeria was too different for me…too hard,” her voice broke off as she stared ahead at nothing. “But I had no reason to be homesick. Nnamdi was so good to me. He was loving and kind and did everything he could to make me comfortable and happy. It took me marrying a beast to realise how good I’d had it with him. If I could go back in time now, I would tell that little girl to be patient, to just give it time. All she really needed was a bit more time.”

“They said you left in a hurry,” I repeated what I’d overheard my Grandmother and Aunts discuss. “They said you left behind half of your things and that the stove was even still hot by the time we got back home.”

“I was given only a few minutes to prepare. I had befriended another British woman in Church and she connected me with someone from the embassy. The lady showed up that afternoon, telling me they’d been able to get me on a flight to London that evening,” she shook her head and smiled. “I just grabbed whatever I could lay my hands on,” her smile faded. “But I knew it was a mistake the minute I got on that plane.”

“So why didn’t you come back?”

“I wanted to. God knows I wanted to, but I couldn't afford the trip back. I barely even had enough to make it back to my sister’s place from the airport,” she looked at me and the sadness in her eyes broke my heart. “But I wrote him.” I knew ‘him’ was my father. “From the minute I got back, I wrote him. I wrote him every week for five years,” she reached for a yellowed pile of envelopes on the table, bound with a frayed rope. “But they were all returned unopened.”

I took the pile from her, slipping one envelope out and opening it. It was dated March 15, 1988. Reading it, it was clear to me that homesick though she might have been, the young Hattie had been desperately in love with her Nigerian husband. Reading letter after letter, I heard the voice of a young woman who had made a mistake and was pleading with the love of her life to give her another chance. As the dates of the letters progressed, the letters took on a more desperate tone. I looked at her, seeing for the first time that she too had been left with a broken heart.

“I was able to raise enough money eventually,” she continued. “April 1992, a little over five years after I left, I was finally able to raise money to return to Nigeria.”

“You came to Nigeria?”

She nodded. “I saved every penny, and I did. I went straight to the flat but was told Nnamdi had moved out years before. So I went to Big Daddy’s house.” Big Daddy was what my Grandfather had been addressed. “Your Aunt Adaobi was too happy to tell me that Nnamdi had remarried,” she looked at me, her eyes glistening. “And that you and your brother had a new mother,” she reached into her purse, pulling out a worn picture of my late father, my mother, Ifeanyi and I at the Apapa Amusement Park, taken shortly after their marriage. “They showed this to me, and that was when I realised I’d lost you all. I asked her if I could keep it and she agreed.”

In the picture, my father had a wide smile and had an arm over the shoulder of his new bride, Ebele, herself too with a big smile. A nine-year-old Ifeanyi stood by our father, a pout on his face and with arms akimbo. Ebele had a protective arm on my shoulder and I, in turn, had both arms around her waist, a small smile on my face. We were the picture-perfect family. Looking over at Hattie, she too was looking at the picture, her face still reflecting the hurt she must have felt the first time she saw it.

“I could see you were happy,” she said, her voice raspy. “So I had to let you go,” then patting her chest. “But I never let you go in here. You’ve always been in here, Isioma, you and your brother. And that’s where you’ll be until the day I draw my dying breath.”

And the very last shard of ice in my heart melted.

Reaching for her, we embraced, really embraced, not as strangers who had only just met, but as two pieces of one heart finally reunited.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I GOT HOME ON New Years' Eve and my mother was beside herself with joy, less about the gifts I'd brought back and more because I'd finally reunited with Hattie.

"Oh, my Jesus be praised!" she exclaimed as I told her the same story I'd told her over the phone. "Chukwu Daalụ! You don't know how much I've been praying for this. From the very moment I heard her story, I have felt nothing but sympathy for the poor woman. Can you imagine having to give up your own children? That woman must have been a living dead all these years."

"She has other kids, Mom," I chuckled.

"It doesn't matter. Even if she has a hundred more, losing even one is enough to make a mother shatter to pieces. Now, just like Ifeanyi is doing, you have to build a relationship with her to make up for all this lost time."

"If I didn't know better, I would have thought you were trying to pawn me off," I teased.

And she took my bait. "Pawn you gini? Nobody can take you away as my child o. That one can never happen," then with a wink, added. "But I'm happy to share. Nsogbu adighi."

The rest of the day was spent with my siblings, loving the looks on their faces when they saw everything I got for them. Smiling as Ify jubilated over her knee-high PVC boots and plethora of glitter tops, the stress of walking around the shops of London, all while my heart was breaking, well worth it.

Later that evening, we went for Midnight Mass where we ushered in the New Year. Through all the praise worship, jubilations, banter and fireworks, all I could think about was that I was going to turn thirty-four years old that year; thirty-four years old and with a love life as uncertain as the weather.

The next day, New Year's Day, after our typical long lie-in, we huddled in front of the TV as we had our breakfast. This was the first time we were doing this in front of the new, high-definition, 50-inch wall-mounted TV our mother had reluctantly allowed me install, and everyone's excitement as we channel-hopped on the equally new satellite TV decoder was palpable.

"Anyị na-esi nri, don't forget o!" our mother interjected in between scenes of the soap opera we were engrossed in on the Telemundo Channel. "Let's not forget ourselves and go hungry."

Eventually, Ify and I peeled ourselves away from the TV and headed to the kitchen. As I chopped away at carrots, I was tempted to call Karibi, but immediately decided against it. He was well aware of my travel itinerary and if he'd decided not to reach out twenty-four hours after my return, then it was confirmation that what we'd had in London had been nothing but another fling.

And then my phone rang.

It was a number I didn't recognise, and after already exchanging New Year pleasantries with my nearest and dearest, there was nobody else I was waiting to hear from. Wiping clammy hands on my apron, I answered it.

"Hello, Sunshine."

A smile spread across my face, and casting a glance at my sister who was chopping away at vegetables, bobbing her head to music coming from her headphones, I slipped out of the kitchen.

"Hi," I said, once in the safety of my bedroom, leaning on the door closed behind me. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Isioma. It's good to hear your voice again. I've missed you."

A warm glow started in my stomach and radiated all over my body, melting away all my worries, all my doubts. I lay on my bed, still smiling like an idiot.

"I've missed you too."

"Can I see you today?"

I thought about my sister in the kitchen, with my mother set to join her, us, there any minute. I thought about my brothers lounging in the living room, waiting for us to eat together as we always did on New Year's Day. But none of that mattered as much as seeing the man I loved.

"I'd like that."

"Fantastic. I'll send a car to get you," he said, before adding. "And Isioma, please don't be in a rush to leave when you get here."

And that was all the prompting I needed. Rushing into the bathroom, I had yet another shower before proceeding to search for something suitable to wear. Without the constraints of weather and practicality, I was determined to show Karibi a side of me he had never seen before. With light makeup and my hair in a loose bun, I settled on a short, floral wrap dress, which skimmed delicately over my modest curves. As much as I wanted him to desire me, I also didn't want to come across as easy.

"Ahn, ahn. Are you going out?"

I jumped, startled by mother's voice. Turning to smile at her, I nodded. "I'm going to see a friend."

She frowned. "On New Year's Day?" and then as realisation set in, a slow smile formed on her face. "Oh a friend! Is that right? I like the sound of that. Tell me more about this friend."

I giggled. "I'll tell you all about him when I get back," my phone rang again and I gestured to her as I answered. "Hello? Okay, I'll be right down."

Her eyes brightened. "He's here?"

"No, his driver."

"His driver?" she repeated like it was a curse word. "He sent a driver to get you?"

I reached for my bag, wishing we weren't having that conversation. "He's a public figure and coming to this neighbourhood might be risky for him."

She raised a brow and I knew she wasn't at all impressed by my answer. Her eyes strayed to my large bag and her frown deepened. "Aren't you coming back today?"

I gave her a quick hug. “Trust me on this one, Mom.”

And with that, I was out of the door before she could say anything more. Getting downstairs, I smiled at Karibi’s driver, Nosa, as he held open the door of his silver BMW 8-series Gran Coupe, careful not to make eye contact with my curious neighbours straining for a better look at the flashy car. Once inside it, behind the protection of the tinted windows, I closed my eyes in ecstasy as I inhaled his smell, Karibi’s smell, a heady mix of vanilla and incense, and my heart raced at the thought of seeing him again, of being held by him again.

The roads were clear and in less than thirty minutes, the car was pulling up in front of the high-rise building in Eko Atlantic that Karibi called home. I smiled again at Nosa and declined his offer to help me with my bag. Walking into the building, my heart leapt at the sight of Karibi standing by the lift.

“How long have you been waiting there?” I asked, amused.

“Too long,” he said, reaching for my hand and pulling me into the elevator.

The door had barely closed when he cupped my face with hands, enveloping my lips in a soft, tender kiss. As the glass box turboed up to the penthouse floor, and as he kissed me nonstop, I knew this was what heaven must feel like. I was in heaven.

The elevator opened into the foyer of his apartment and I gasped at the scenic view from the floor to ceiling glass walls that made it seem like we were floating above the Atlantic Ocean. It was everything I imagined it would be…and more.

“Wow!” was all I could utter.

“You like?” he asked, leading me in, his hand on the small of my back.

I was about to tell him how amazing I thought it was, but the words dried on my lips at the sight of the large portrait hanging right above his dining table. He caught the direction of gaze.

“You know Erinkan, right?” he remarked casually. “Ara’s older sister.”

I nodded, my eyes still on it. “And also your ex, if memory serves me correct.”

He turned to look at me. “Memory does serve you correct. I had the drawing commissioned at the time, and it’s been there ever since.”

“Almost three years later?”

He shrugged and headed for his bar. “Would you like something to drink? A glass of wine, maybe? I have a nice Chardonnay I’m sure you’ll like.”

I said nothing in response, unable to take my eyes off the image of the woman before me. With a half smile and eyes that looked like they held a secret, she exuded a confidence and sophistication I would never be able to match.

“How do you know her sister, Ara, anyway?” he asked, handing me a glass of wine.

“We were both bridesmaids for a mutual friend. Ginika.”

“Really?”

The astonishment in his voice rankled me. “Why does that surprise you?”

“I just never would have imagined you as friends, that’s all.”

It was the wrong answer.

“Let me take this inside,” he said, picking up my bag. “You coming?”

“I’d like to wait here, if that’s okay,” I answered, turning away from him.

As I nursed my drink, I stewed over the fact he still had Erinkan’s picture, and also his indirect inference that Ara and I didn't belong in the same social circle. Looking around the lavish apartment, maybe he was right. Maybe I didn't belong in a place like that…or with a man like him.

I was distracted by a feather light kiss on the back of my neck. I turned to him, wanting to tell him just how upset he’d made me, but one look at him, and I could barely even remember my name. His lips brushed mine and my senses were seduced.

“Isioma,” he whispered my name slowly, prolonging each letter as if to savour them.

I clasped my hands on either side of his face, kissing him, no longer interested in Erinkan or social circles. None of that mattered, not when he

called my name that way, not when he kissed me that way.

Lying in his bed that night, he trailed his finger down my collarbone as he lay propped on his elbow, looking at me. “You’re so beautiful. Just like an angel.”

I touched his face, my heart bursting. At that very moment, everything was perfect with my world and nothing, absolutely nothing else, mattered.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WE DIDN'T COME UP for air for the next four days.

It wasn’t until the following Sunday that I finally made it back home, and that was only because work was resuming the next day.

“Who is this man? Who is this man that has made you lose your senses and act so out of character?” my mother demanded, as I unpacked my bag, a bag full of clothes I hadn’t even worn, considering my only item of clothing had been his shirt. I smiled at the memory, and that only incensed my mother all the more. “Ị na-ege nti? Are you even listening to me?” she exclaimed, clapping her hands in my face.

“Mommy, what’s all this nau? I’ve told you you’ll meet him soon.”

She sat on my bed and crossed her arms. “Ngwanu, I’m all ears. You said you would tell me about him. Who exactly is he? You say he is a public figure, what kind of public figure is he? I hope’s not a married man, Isioma. I don’t have the strength to fight anybody, I beg you.”

“Mom, he’s not a married man,” I chuckled, shaking my head. “I’ll tell you everything in good time. Just trust me, please.”

“My only consolation is that Hattie said she saw him when he brought you to her place. She said he’s a gentleman and that he even waited patiently for you while you two talked.”

“You spoke to Hattie?” I asked, surprised. “Since when have you been speaking to Hattie?”

“Since the two of you made peace,” she answered defiantly, daring me to confront her. “Around the time she reconnected with Ifeanyi, she also reached out to me, wanting to talk, but I told her that I couldn't, not until

you were fine with it. After your visit, she called again, and this time we did talk."

I opened my mouth to speak but closed it again, realising it was all just as well. Even though I hadn't spoken to my biological mother since returning to Nigeria, she and my adopted mother had clearly become better acquainted.

"So you should take her word for it then," I said, rising to my feet and walking to my closet, hoping that was enough to communicate the end of the discussion.

With a deep sigh, she also stood. "Kpachara anya, my daughter. Be careful. As much as I want you to settle down, let's not jump from frying pan straight into the blazing furnace, I beg you."

Watching her leave, I wished I could call her back to tell her just how blissfully happy I was, to tell her what an amazing guy Karibi was, to tell her the very many ways he made my body, my heart, my soul come alive. But Karibi and I had agreed it was best to keep things quiet for now, and I just had to respect that.

Returning my attention to my closet, I proceeded to pick my wardrobe not only for the next day, but the entire week. I had a lot more at stake now.

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The next day, the first day of work in the New Year, I got to my office very early, even before the staff buses. With Sotonye still on her honeymoon, I was expected to sit in for her at the Weekly Executive Meeting that morning. Even though I sometimes attended the meetings with her, it would be the first I'd attend with Karibi also there, considering he'd been away on the Fundraising Road Show for so long. The thought of seeing him again made me smile. Confident in a white blouse, a fitted knee-length skirt in a grey hounds-tooth fabric, and a delicate white gold necklace, I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he saw me again.

As the board room slowly filled with the other Executives and Managers, I felt as giddy as a teenager. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours but the thought of seeing him again was making me so light-headed, I could hardly breathe. I smiled through all the small talk about how lovely Sotonye's

wedding was and how I was glowing after the holidays, my eyes on the door the whole time, waiting for a glimpse of my man.

Exactly a minute after 8 o'clock, the mahogany doors were pushed open as Leo, Karibi and Wole, the Chief Financial Officer, walked in. As he approached, looking debonair in a fitted black suit, I smiled, trying to make eye contact. But he just looked right through me.

Rattled, I struggled to concentrate as the meeting began with light banter about what people got up to during the holidays, heavy knots forming in my stomach. I knew that look. It was the look he gave me when I was invisible to him, when I was still the no-name minion he had slept with and tossed to the side like yesterday's newspaper. Leo gave a welcome address, reiterating the agreed company objectives for the new year, after which Karibi a gave a run down of the past year's fund raising activities, emphasising the importance of getting the right kind of investment into the company, to allow it spread its risk, free up cash for planned acquisitions of oil blocks in Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe, and properly grow its midstream and downstream businesses.

I scribbled as he spoke, taking the necessary notes for the summary I would send to Sotonye, but all that I did on autopilot, not believing that, just like that, it was all over.

There were a few questions from some of the other Directors, mainly about why the Road Show had taken so long and what had ruled out the European investors.

"As much as we'd like to bring in new money, we also need to remain astute," he answered. "We have very prolific assets with enormous subsurface potential. Just because it's a low market or we're in an election year doesn't mean we have to accept the kind of gross undervaluation we encountered from some of the parties we met in Europe. If it means delaying some of our planned projects, so be it. We're prepared to wait as long as we need to, to bring in the right kind of money."

As he spoke, as he gesticulated with his hands, I had flashbacks of our time together, flashbacks so vivid, I had to actually shake my head to make them go away. From the look of things, those memories would have to be

archived in an It Was Good While It Lasted box, or maybe just a Fooled Me Twice, Shame On Me one.

As soon as the meeting was over, I hurried out, not waiting to make any further pleasantries, eager to get the hell out of there as quickly as I could.

Back in my office, as I put together and sent to Sotonye the summary of the meeting, and later updated our asset and inventory registers, I couldn't help but hope he would walk into my office any minute. I longed to see him peep through the door or even rush in to steal a quick kiss, anything to ease my worries, to ease my fears that we had returned to our status quo. But he didn't. Every time there was a knock on my door, my hopes would skyrocket, only to come crashing down when it was just another friendly face stopping by to say hello, or to tell me how lovely I looked, or to find out when Sotonye was due back.

“Hey babe, I’m so sorry to have kept you at work so late,” Sotonye apologised when she called via Skype at 5pm, for a quick catch-up. She and Dagogo were still in the Caribbean and the time difference wasn’t in our favour. “First day back, huh? How did it go?”

“Not bad. I sent you the summary of this morning’s meeting-”

“Yeah, I saw that. Looks like Karibi got a real grilling.”

“He handled it,” I answered, keeping my tone even. “I also sent you the draft asset register.”

“I’m looking at that right now. This maintenance budget is never going to make it through. We’re going to have make some cuts.”

We proceeded to go through each item, line by line, and by the time the call was over two hours later, we’d been able to reduce the proposed cost by 30%.

“We’ll still prune it down some more, but in the meantime you need to be on your way home, young lady,” Sotonye said, putting on her sunglasses. “While you wade your way through traffic, I’m going to be here, lying on the beach and sipping on cocktails.”

“Enough enjoyment!” I remarked, grinning at the look of sheer contentment on her face. “You better get plenty of it, because there’s a lot of work

waiting for you here.”

She stuck out her tongue and waved, before disconnecting the line. It was almost 8pm and for the umpteenth time, I contemplated accepting the driver I had been earlier assigned. I’d been so excited when I got the car that I’d declined the offer of a driver, not wanting to share the experience of my new car with anyone. But the thought of driving through rush hour traffic was enough to make me reconsider.

Standing in front of the elevator, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around and stiffened when I saw it was Karibi.

“Hello, Sunshine,” he said, smiling as he approached.

I turned back to the lift, determined to give just as well as I was given. He wasn’t the only one who knew how to play the ignore card. “Good evening.”

“You look good enough to eat,” he said, standing so close behind me, I could feel his breath on my neck. “I could barely concentrate this morning. I almost jumbled up my words, trying not to look at you.”

I turned to him. “Well, you could have fooled me.”

He tilted my chin, lowering his head to mine and stopping mere inches away from my lips. “You won’t be the death of me, Isioma Ilonzeh.”

Maybe it was hearing my name, my full name, maybe it was his smell, maybe it was just his touch, whatever it was, all the anger and frustration I’d been nursing all day, vanished.

“Come home with me,” he said, his nose touching mine. “It’s lonely without you.”

“I don’t have anything to wear tomorrow,” I answered, my voice raspy and my brain already working overtime, wondering if there was a way to recycle my outfit without it being apparent, desperate for another fix of this drug that was Karibi Graham-Hart.

“Mere details,” he said, kissing me. The elevator door opened and, taking my hand, he led me into it. Once in, he put his arm around me and I nestled my head on his chest, content to be back in my happy place. “Your car key,” he requested, as we walked out of the building. I handed it to him and in

one swift motion, he threw it across to Nosa, who was waiting by his car. “Tell Steven to drive this to my house, while you go with any other driver back to Miss Isioma’s place,” he looked at me. “Do you want to ask someone at home to pack you a few things?”

The thought of calling my mother filled me with dread, but instead I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll call someone when we get home.” His home…our home.

He opened the passenger door for me before walking over to the driver’s seat. Stealing a look at him, my first time being driven by him, as he started the ignition and purred the car out of the compound, he’d never looked sexier. With one hand on the steering wheel, he reached for mine with the other, and that was the way he drove the fifteen minute-distance to his apartment.

“Home sweet home,” he declared, as we walked into the penthouse. “Joseph, my steward, resumed today and I’m sure he left something delicious in the oven.”

“Just give me a minute to quickly call my Mom,” I said, walking into the bedroom, the place where we’d spent almost the hundred plus hours of my last visit.

“You’re not coming back tonight?” she repeated, when I told her. “You’re sleeping over at his place?”

Her voice was eerily calm and I almost wished she’d gotten as upset as I’d thought she would.

“Yes,” was my simple answer. I’d toyed with telling her a lie, telling her it was something to do with a late work meeting, but thought against it at the very last minute. I didn't lie to my mother and wasn’t going to start that now.

“I don’t like the sound of this, Isioma. This man of yours will see no need to buy the milk if he already has full access to the cow.”

I rolled my eyes at the analogy. “Everything will be fine, Mom. Could you please just give the driver some of my clothes? Whatever you can lay your hands on.”

“You need more than one outfit?” she exclaimed.

I bit my lip, hating what I was doing to her, but unable to stop myself, especially as the odds were high I wouldn’t be back home for a while. “Yes.”

She sighed deeply. “Nsogbu adịghị. No problem. My regards to your friend.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, long after the call was over, wishing there was a way to merge my two worlds, wishing there was a way for my mother to see just how happy Karibi was making me. Opening my eyes and taking a deep breath, I put my phone away before making my way back to the living room. Patience, that was all. Patience was all we all needed. In good time, everything would iron itself out.

“I told you Joseph would have cooked up something splendid!” he remarked, standing proudly over the dining table, where he’d placed a bowl of steaming hot lasagne alongside a small basket of bread rolls. “I’m ready to dig in if you are.”

“He doesn’t live here?”

“Joseph? He does, but in the boys quarters. He was away visiting family in Cotonou for the holidays.”

I nodded in acknowledgment, just as he proceeded to dish generous portions of food on both our plates. As he did, I looked up and caught sight of the other woman there, Erinkan. After my first encounter with the picture, I hadn’t seen it much as we’d barely spent any time in the living room. But looking at it again, with that half smile that almost now looked like a taunt, it started to grate again. Peeling my eyes off it, I reminded myself that she was Karibi’s past and I, his present. Maybe even his future.

And later that night as we lay in bed together, she was soon the very furthest thing on my mind.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING, RIDING down together in the elevator, I looked at the handsome Adonis of a man next to me, and wondered how I’d gotten so lucky.

“You look good in red,” I said, smiling at him as I adjusted his red pinstriped tie.

Putting his hands around my waist and pulling me closer, he kissed me on the bridge of my nose. “And you look good in any colour.”

The elevator door opened and we walked out, hand-in-hand, parting as we got to where our cars were parked; me turning left to mine and him getting into the back seat of his.

“We’ll give you a five-minute head start,” he said, winking as he shut the door.

I blew him a kiss as I put my car in motion, feeling so happy and content, all I wanted to do was scream out loud. So this was what happiness felt like.

Walking into the office building, my signature smile was a full-on grin and as I greeted everyone around with even more than my usual dose of enthusiasm. I was the happiest I had ever been.

Walking past Karibi in the hallway later that morning, flanked by Wole and Dimeji, it didn’t even bother me that he barely acknowledged my greeting. It no longer mattered to me that he preferred to act like I didn't exist when other people were there. All that did matter was the way he made me blissfully happy when we were alone. And when, at about lunchtime, he walked into my office and, with the door firmly shut, stole a quick kiss, I honestly couldn't have wished for more.

I lingered on after work so we could leave together, with Nosa driving my car behind us. And we went back home for another magical night.

That was our pattern over the next two weeks; parting in the morning, being at best cordial during the work day, and reuniting after hours, every night of passion more intense than the previous. And it wasn't just about sex. There were many nights we would just lie in bed, telling silly stories. He enjoyed my company just as much as I enjoyed his. Everything between us was perfect and Erinkan's portrait no longer even offended me. I learnt how to accept it as a mere relic, a symbol of their relationship. Besides, I liked Erinkan and, even more importantly, she was now happily married. So a picture of her in my boyfriend's apartment had no cause to threaten me at all.

But when Sotonye resumed work, we knew our co-habiting had to stop.

"Sotonye could just show up here at any odd hour of the day or night," Karibi remarked. "It would be hard explaining why you're here at such a time."

I was in complete agreement and had no choice but to move back home. Thankfully, there was no interrogation from my mother. I convinced myself it was because she could see I was happy, but I think she'd decided I was old enough to do what I wanted. At my age, she'd already been married almost a decade.

As for Sotonye, it was great having her back. She looked lean and tan and had the glow of someone who was giving and getting good loving, a glow I also had.

"Isioma, hiring you was the best decision of my life," she said, after we caught up on her first day. "In the past, I'd go away for a few days and come back to mayhem. I've been away for over a month, and you've handled everything. I'm staring at my inbox and my table, and there's no clutter, no chaos."

I beamed at her accolades, happy I'd done her proud. But with her being back, my workload doubled and there was no more time for any stolen kisses with Karibi. I struggled to remain indifferent when he came by the

office to see his sister, offering only a polite smile as he entered and exited. And I soon started having serious withdrawal symptoms.

Shortly after her return, Sotonye was meeting with Leo in her office when Karibi peeped into mine. “Hey, Sunshine.”

My eyes widened and I glanced over at Sotonye’s office, wondering if she’d seen him.

“Hi,” I answered with the briefest of smiles, trying to comport myself lest anyone look in our direction.

“I miss you something awful,” he said. “Can you come over tonight?”

I glanced Sotonye’s way again. “What about-”

“I’ll take my chances.”

I had a few things at the apartment so all I needed to do was make a quick call home.

“Okay,” I answered. “I’ll head there in about an hour and wait for you?”

“Perfect,” he beamed. “I can’t wait.”

And that was exactly what I did, except on the way I made a quick stop at the grocery store and bought enough supplies to cook up a feast. By the time he walked into the apartment at 8:30pm, I had set bowls of jollof rice, stewed chicken, fried plantain and an apple pie on the table.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, a broad smile on his face. “And Joseph let you take over his kitchen like this?”

“He was more than happy to comply,” I beamed, walking over to kiss him before leading him to the dining table.

“I could get used to this,” he remarked as I dished him a plate. I wanted nothing more than that; for him to get used to it…forever.

“It’s your birthday on Saturday,” I remarked, smiling at him. “And it’s the big one.”

He shrugged, not taking his eyes off his plate. “It’s no big deal.”

“Are you kidding? It's your 40th!” I exclaimed. “We should do something special.”

“I’d really rather not.”

I smiled, thinking up all the ways I would spoil him rotten that day. I wished we still weren’t keeping things quiet, as I would have loved to throw him a big surprise party. But I consoled myself that there would be lots of time for that. This year, even if it was just the two of us, I would still find a way to make it special.

It was harder saying goodbye the next morning, especially as we didn't have the usual promise of reuniting again that evening. But with his birthday only two days away, I knew we would more than make up for it.

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I drove into Eko Atlantic a little before noon on Saturday. It had been a hectic morning and I’d been baking since 6am. Getting out of my car, carrying a basket with three cakes; chocolate frosted strawberry, white forest and a lemon cheesecake, I couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he saw, not just the cakes, but the gift I’d gotten him. It had been a struggle deciding what to buy him, a man who had pretty much everything. In the end, I’d settled on a pair of platinum cufflinks, each in the letter K, a gesture that had wiped me financially. But he was worth every penny.

Using the special code to access the penthouse, I rode the elevator up to his apartment. Walking into the living room, I stopped in my tracks when I saw a lady sitting on the sofa, flipping through a magazine. She looked up when she saw me, and I knew I’d seen her face before.

“Oh, hi! You’re Sotonye’s Assistant, right?” she said, walking up to me, her tall, lithe body swaying gracefully beneath flowing chiffon. “Oh my goodness, did she send these?” she squealed at the sight of the basket in my hands.

I stared at her, completely lost for words.

“They look delicious. Sotonye is the best! Karibi is going to love them.”

Just then, Tekena walked into the apartment. “Hey, Isioma. Long time,” he said, giving me a side hug. “I haven’t seen you since the wedding. You look really good. How’ve you been?” then turning to the other woman. “Hi, Farida.”

Farida. So that was her name.

“Wow, did Sotonye send these?” Tekena exclaimed, taking the basket from me. “Karibi is on his way home. The Thanksgiving service ran a little longer than we thought.”

“Way too long. I had to escape,” Farida laughed, revealing immaculately white, perfectly set teeth. “I told him I’d be waiting for him back here.”

I suddenly started to feel faint, like the room was spinning around me real fast, real, real fast.

“I…I have to go,” I said, walking backwards.

“We’ll see you later, right?” Tekena called out. “At the party.”

A party?

“Um, I’m…maybe,” I stuttered, still walking backwards. “It was nice seeing you again,” then turning to Farida, I had to force a smile. “Bye.”

She smiled and waved, and that was when I knew exactly where I’d seen her before.

I was in a daze from the moment I stepped into the elevator and the typically rocket-fast ride stretched for what seemed like eternity. My head was spinning, my mind refusing to understand, to accept what had just played out before me.

Walking to my car, I heard my name.

“Isioma!”

I looked up and saw Karibi walking up to me. He was dressed in a white kaftan, unusual clothing for him, especially for a Saturday morning.

“There was a Thanksgiving service for you?” was the first thing that came out of my mouth. “And you’re having a party this evening?”

“It's no big deal, Isioma. Just family and a handful of friends,”

I stared at him, my mouth agape. “A handful of friends, but not your girlfriend? Or am I even that? Or just a girl you're sleeping with?”

He groaned. “Babe, don’t do this.”

“And then there’s a woman upstairs!”

“Farida is an old friend of mine.”

“She was also your date that night we saw you at Atmosphere.”

He sighed and rubbed his temple. “Okay, we used to date. But I haven’t seen her in months. She just showed up, what was I supposed to do?”

Just then, a car pulled up a few feet away.

“Hey, birthday boy!” a woman called out, getting out of the car, a cake in her hands. “Handsome and gorgeous at forty!”

I turned to look at him and he shut his eyes, clearly having nothing to say in his defence. I reached into my bag and handed him his present. “Happy birthday.”

As I walked to my car, I waited for him to run after me, or at least call out my name, to plead with me not to leave…but he didn’t. Driving out, as I looked, he and the woman were already walking towards the elevator. He looked in my direction at that point but I quickly looked away, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing me break down, to see how tears had already started pouring out of my eyes in torrents.

Rather than make the drive back home, I turned right and headed to Oniru instead, to Ife’s house.

“Oh, my goodness. What’s wrong?” a panicked Ife exclaimed, when she opened the door to see me standing there, bawling my eyes out.

Once inside, she let me cry for as long as I needed to. Sitting there watching me, I could tell her own heart was breaking for me, having never seen me like that. Even I had never seen me like that. I was broken in a way I never could have imagined possible and the tears just refused to stop. Eventually, sleep found me.

I awoke a couple of hours later, but even though the tears had dried, my chest still throbbed from the pain of having my heart shattered.

“What’s going on, babe?” a concerned Ife asked.

And lying on her bed, I told her everything about Karibi and I, starting from our first encounter years before, us rekindling our affair in London, our last

few weeks of intense passion, and what had just transpired in his apartment.

“I’m so sorry, babe,” a sympathetic Ife said. “Even I have heard about his party tonight. From what my friends tell me, it’s going to be a really big one.”

It was the final slap in the face, the final confirmation that everything I’d thought we’d shared had been only in my head; a figment of my own imagination.

The next day, as I prowled through social media, looking at pictures from the swanky party, seeing familiar people in attendance, not just from the office, but even Ara and C.J, I knew I had to face the bitter truth. I didn’t mean anything to him.

I probably never had.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“YOU WEREN’T AT THE party. I thought I’d see you there,” Sotonye said as we rounded up a recap session of that morning’s Executive Meeting, a meeting I’d deliberately missed.

I looked at her, surprised by the detour in our conversation.

“My mom told me you and Karibi got friendly after I left London, and I just took it for granted he would have invited you.”

I shrugged. “We weren’t that friendly,” I hated lying to her but knew it was something I had to do if I wanted to put the whole incident with her brother behind me, if I really wanted to forget anything had ever happened between us. “I also had another engagement that night. But it looks like it was a lot of fun.”

“It was nice. A lot of people showed up for him,” she chuckled. “My brother is officially an old man now.”

I plastered a smile on my face as I rose to my feet, grateful I didn't have to hang around to hear much more.

Back at my desk, I threw myself into my tasks for the day, all my attention focused on my screen, doing everything I could to block out the world around me. And I almost succeeded…until Karibi walked into the office later that morning.

“Good morning, Sir,” I greeted, looking up at him with a straight face, doing my best to keep my eyes from betraying the turmoil I was still battling inside. “Can I help you?”

He shut the door behind him. “Isioma, we need to talk-”

“Sotonye just stepped out for a quick meeting with Leo. She should be back shortly.”

“Isioma…”

“I’ll be sure to let her know you stopped by,” and with that, I returned my attention to my laptop.

“Isioma, about what happened on Saturday…you got it all wrong. It wasn’t-”

“Oh, hello you,” came Sotonye’s voice as she approached the office. “You want to see me? What’s up?”

I looked up as brother and sister walked into her office, looking away when he turned to look at me. When her door was shut, I took a large swig from my water bottle, desperate to calm my racing heart, wanting him out of my vicinity, out of my head…and out of my heart.

He wasn’t with Sotonye for long and thankfully didn't say anything to me as he exited the office. I continued to busy myself with report after report, research after research, eager to keep my mind busy.

And then at lunchtime, a bouquet of red and pink roses was delivered to my desk. There was no card, but it was obvious whom it was from.

“These are gorgeous! Isioma, which man are you confusing like this?” Sotonye remarked, seeing them on my table. “Anyone I know?”

“Nobody important,” I said, lifting the vase off my table and setting it on the floor next to the bin.

“Are you okay? You’ve been tightly wound all day.”

I smiled at her, touched by her concern. “I’m fine, thank you. It was just a really busy weekend.”

“Why don't you take the rest of the day off?” she insisted. “You haven’t been yourself today and I want my happy and cheerful Isioma back by tomorrow.”

I laughed, my first time doing so since Saturday. “She’ll be here tomorrow, I promise.”

Grateful for the chance to leave work early, I decided to head to Ife’s house.

“Yep, I’m here. I just got back from school,” she answered when I called her. “Come on over.”

It was a little past 3pm when I got to her flat, and we were soon seated on her living room floor, eating fried fish and drinking wine.

“You should never have fallen for a guy like Karibi,” Ife said, twirling her glass. “You know, I suspected something was up between you two the night we saw him at Atmosphere. In hindsight, I wish I’d spoken up. Maybe if I had, you’d have had more sense than to fall like a pack of cards when you were in London,” she set her glass down, looking at me pointedly. “A few months ago, you talked some sense into me and I saw the light and walked away from a relationship that was going nowhere. It’s now my turn to return the favour. I know men like Karibi only too well. They don't fall in love easily, lest of all when they have already been hurt and publicly ridiculed the way he has. You better forget about him.”

“I’ve already done that,” I answered, wishing it were completely true. Even though I’d done a good job of shutting him out that day, I didn't know how much longer my resolve would stretch.

“Girl, this is a new year. No time for dulling abeg! You’re beautiful and single. You better loosen up and mingle. Listen, there’s a pool party this weekend, a friend’s bachelor party. You’re going to come with me. It’s time for you to expand your horizon properly, meet other people.”

I heard myself agreeing to it but as I made the drive back home, I wondered what on earth I’d been thinking agreeing to attend some strange person’s party. But realising that could possibly be the fastest route to get Karibi out of my system, I decided it probably wasn't a bad idea after all.

The next day at work, I made more of an effort to be my typical cheerful self, whilst ensuring I kept anything that had to do with Karibi a safe distance away. After trying again on Tuesday to make conversation with me, by Wednesday, he got the message and didn’t bother me again. Walking past him in the hallway on Friday, with neither of us acknowledging the other, was a painful throwback to the old days, and it hurt me a whole lot more than I thought it would.

By the time Saturday came, I was now more than ready to ‘mingle’. Wearing a tie-dye tee-shirt and a pair of shorts over a black, one-piece swimsuit, I made the drive to Ife’s house. When she saw me, she was less than impressed.

“Isioma, what is this? It’s Tade Odedina’s bachelor’s eve we’re going for. Not Lekki Sunsplash,” she retorted. From what I’d gathered since her invite, the Tade was apparently a big deal on the Lagos social scene. “Girl, I need to get you out of those threads.”

Once in her bedroom, she handed me a white bikini. “Wear this. Don’t worry, it’s brand new.”

Knowing arguing would be futile, I reluctantly changed. The bikini top had a large gold hoop connecting the two cups, revealing a good deal of my cleavage, and the bottom was held together by a thin gold string that blended into my skin, making it look like I was nude, save for a white patch of cloth covering my pubic area. Ife also wore a bikini, a fuchsia pink one which revealed even more than mine did.

“You can wear this over it,” she said, handing me a red crochet cover up. She slipped on a pair of skimpy denim shorts over hers. “It might be a pool party, but we also need to look smoking hot,” she winked and all I could do was laugh nervously, wondering what I had signed up for.

We didn't get to the party until almost midnight, when it was already well underway. Walking in, I held on to my cover up as if my life depended on it, feeling completely naked underneath. People in various states of undress were dancing in and around a large pool, but there was also a good number of people milling around, nursing drinks as they talked. From the moment we walked in, Ife greeted and was greeted by, hugged and was hugged by, waved and was waved at by, almost everyone we walked past. She was clearly very popular in this circle.

Slipping off her shorts, she led me to the bar upstairs, where we were handed two glasses of rum and Coke.

“I never drink any cocktails at these parties,” she said over her drink. “You never know with these people and the nasty stuff they could mix in them.”

She smiled and waved at yet another person, and I felt like a fish out of water, wondering how she had convinced me to come along.

“You should lose the cover up,” she said, over the loud music. “Feel free. Loosen up,” then wrinkling her nose, she shook her head. “But this DJ though. D’banj in this day and age?”

D’banj’s Why Me remix was playing and even though it displeased her, it seemed to please everyone else.

“Folarin!” she called out, waving at a man downstairs, standing on the other end of the pool. Then turning to me, said, “I’ll be right back.”

And just like that, my companion ran off, leaving me alone with my drink. I looked around nervously, surrounded by people trying to get drinks from the bar. I was debating whether or not to join her downstairs…when I saw him.

Karibi was standing a few feet away from the pool, flanked by two women I didn't recognise. They were both in swimwear, one in a one-piece with a neckline so deep and sides so high, she might have as well been naked, and the other in a tiny blue and white polka-dot bikini that left very little to the imagination. And I was incensed. There he was, cavorting away with women like I had never existed. I caught sight of Ife waving at me, beckoning me down, and I decided to go for it.

Slipping off my cover-up just as DNCE’s Cake by the Ocean started playing, I strutted across the room, full of a brazenness I didn't even know I had. In the skimpy bikini, I could feel all eyes in the room on me, emboldening me all the more. Ife beamed with pride as I made my way down the stairs, the cynosure of all eyes. Looking in Karibi’s direction, I got the satisfaction of seeing he had been distracted from his conversation with his companions and was watching me, his expression unreadable. A small smile on my face, I looked away, walking in slow and deliberate long strides towards Ife, swinging my hips in tune to the rhythm of the song, loving the attention I was getting, loving that I was giving him a good look at what he’d thrown away.

“Come though, girl! Come through,” Ife grinned as I approached, looking at me like the proud mother hen she was. “Folarin, this is my very dear friend,

Isioma.”

“Wow, Isioma. What a beautiful name,” he said, his large eyes even larger as he practically undressed me with them, much to Ife’s amusement.

“Hi, Ife. Who’s your friend?” another guy asked, walking up to us, and before she could even answer, he was joined by yet another, all of whom eager to meet me.

“Isioma,” came a familiar voice from behind me. “I told you I’d find you in this Lagos.”

Turning around, I initially struggled to recognise the tall man, as he looked different without his beard. “Seb?”

He grinned. “She remembers my name!”

“Seb, where do you know my friend from?” Ife asked, her eyes twinkling, just as the other men in the group started to break away.

“I met her at a wedding last Christmas,” he answered, eyes still on me. “One look at her, and I was struck by lightning. I haven’t been able to think of anything else ever since.”

Ife rolled her eyes. “Na so,” she said, before turning to me. “I want to go get another drink. Want one?” From her raised brow, I could tell she was non-verbally asking if I would be okay on my own with Seb, and I smiled and nodded. He was harmless.

“My God! If lightning struck me in December, I have been struck by both thunder and lightning tonight. In fact, I’m having a stroke as we speak. Isioma, you are fire itself.”

I smiled, but before I could answer, a strong hand encircled mine. “Hello, Sebastian,” Karibi said, smiling at the taller guy. “Can I borrow her for a moment?”

Without waiting for an answer, he led me away from the pool area.

“What on earth did you do that for?” I exclaimed once we were outside, pulling my hand out of his.

“What is this, Isioma? What on earth are you doing here? And dressed like…dressed like that?” he yelled, thick veins bulging from his neck.

“What do you mean what am I doing here?” I yelled right back. “What are you doing here?”

“So is this the real you? Dressed like…like a…” he grit his teeth, clearly to keep himself from spitting out whatever derogatory term he had in mind. “And with that girl the whole of Lagos knows is a courtesan.”

“Don't you dare talk about my friend like that!” I shouted, wagging my finger. “You with your companions who look like you picked them right off Sanusi Fafunwa.”

We stood there, glaring at each other, before he shook his head, deflated.

“One week, Isioma. One week was all it took for you to become this?”

“It didn't take you long either, from the look of things,” I retorted. “Why don’t you run along back to your friends, Karibi? Quit this act of a disgruntled lover. You’re fooling nobody, lest of all me.”

Walking away from him, I wanted to feel satisfaction. I wanted to feel like I’d scored myself a much yearned for point. But all I felt was empty.

Walking back to the poolside, Ife was standing with Seb and I headed over to join them.

“Where did you go? Seb said Karibi came to take you away.”

I smiled at both of them, accepting the second drink in Ife’s hand. “It was nothing. Just work stuff.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. You work with his sister, don’t you?” Seb remarked.

As the topic of discussion moved on to other things, it was an effort for me to remain attentive, even as we were joined by another of Seb’s friends. I looked across just in time to see Karibi and his two lady friends leave, and the heaviness in my chest was almost enough to choke me. I looked back and saw Ife watching me closely. She shook her head and I smiled, shaking my head back, telling her without words that she had nothing to worry about and that I was fine.

Except I really wasn’t.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN THE TWO WEEKS that followed, it grew increasingly more difficult to ignore him. In every meeting with him in attendance, every time he came by to see his sister, anytime our paths crossed in the hallway, I was more aware of him than ever. It was a struggle not to make eye contact with him, not to stare at him when he spoke in meetings, not to remember how happy he'd made me, not to remember how happy we'd made each other. But just when I found myself start to slip into a dark place, I reminded myself it had all been nothing but a farce, and I'd been nothing but a plaything to him. In his sister's own words, his 'flavour of the month'.

On Valentine's Day, I was happy I had Ara and C.J's wedding as the perfect distraction, grateful I wouldn't have to be at work wondering which of the plethora of women in Karibi's life would show up that day. Standing in front of the mirror in the gold dress friends of Ara had chosen to wear, since she'd refused to have a bridal train, staring at my reflection I mentally reprimanded myself. I couldn't afford to pine over Karibi Graham-Hart forever. It was time to let him go.

It was a small, intimate Mass, with only close friends and family in attendance. Ara was beautiful in an ivory dress with a guipure lace bodice and a finely embroidered lightweight tulle skirt. Simple and beautiful, just like she was. C.J, dapper in a black tuxedo, had tears in his eyes as her father walked her down the aisle. As they exchanged their vows, I had to dab my eyes several times. This was a love beautiful and true, and I wanted that so desperately for myself. Life didn't have to be complicated. Love didn't have to be complicated.

The wedding reception was a sunset ceremony at a private beach, by which time the bride had changed into a lace jumpsuit with an illusion upper bodice with a detachable tulle skirt. With the ocean as a backdrop and the

fairy lights twinkling underneath the golden orange sky, I had my eyes on the happy couple all through, from the moment they arrived without any fanfare, to when they had their first dance to 3 Doors Down's Here Without You, a song that was introduced as one of great significance for them. As wistful as it made me, it also made me hopeful that one day, that too would be me.

"Hei God, answer my call o!" Ozioma remarked from where she sat next to me.

I chuckled, happy for the distraction, as I had been seconds away from bursting into tears.

"Didn't you say you had a boyfriend?" Ife asked, sarcasm dripping from her voice like water from a soaked towel. "Or wait, let me guess, that also didn't work out?"

Ozioma hissed and turned back to the couple, clearly not wanting to spar with her frenemy, much to my relief. With Ginika seated with her husband Dike on another table, I was the only one between Ife and Ozioma, and playing referee was not something I wanted to do.

"Seriously, what happened to the guy?" I asked Ozioma. "Ogbonna, right?"

She sighed deeply and I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Ozioma was ever dramatic, and that was one of the reasons why we all loved her. Well, all of us except Ife.

"Can you imagine that goat has a fiancée in this Lagos?" she said, shaking her head. "If I wasn't the kind of girl to do my homework, that's how one woman would have just baptized this fine face with hot water."

I patted her hand. "Don't worry, God will answer our call soon."

"Amen o!" she exclaimed, before giving me a once-over. "I don't understand why you're still single though. Fine woman like you, you should be swatting away suitors like flies. Abi are you the one selecting?"

I smiled and shrugged. "Shouldn't we all be selective? Even if just a little bit?"

"Why waste time selecting when they're all the same at the end of the day?" Ife retorted, prompting Ozioma and I to exchange a glance.

“Anyways!” Ozioma went on. “I could fix you up with Banji, you know. He hasn't told me, but I know he thinks you’re cute.”

Ife sniggered. “The same Banji you tried to hook up with Ginika and Ara? The guy’s taste must be wide and very varied!”

Wanting to avoid any argument, I turned Ozioma. “How’s Banji anyway? It’s been a while. Is he still juggling investment banking with being a DJ?”

“Add entrepreneur to that list. He and I are thinking of investing in a hotel. A friend of his is looking for partners, and we’re thinking of pooling money together to take up a stake.”

I nodded, impressed. “That’s amazing,” then turning to Ife. “Isn’t it amazing?”

She nodded, not looking up from her phone. “Yeah, impressive.”

Ozioma shrugged. “There’s still a lot to work out, but we hope to wrap things up in a few months. Having multiple streams of income is always a good idea,” then turning to the other person on the table. “Isn’t it, Ife?”

Ife glared at her, and I returned my attention to the couple, fed up of the never-ending bad energy between Ozioma and Ife. I smiled as Ara and C.J cut their cake to King of Leon’s Use Somebody, not expecting any less from the quirky couple’s wedding playlist. I joined the rapturous applause as they kissed and fed each other cake, heart warmed by their love. By the time they returned to the dance floor, Ara had taken off her tulle skirt, ready for a full-on dance off. Guests soon joined them on the dance floor as the DJ started playing more contemporary songs.

“Babe, man won’t find me sitting here. I’m going over there where the action is,” Ozioma said, rising to her feet and smoothening her dress. “You coming?”

I smiled and shook my head, content to just sit and watch. She walked away, just as Ife also stood to answer a call, a call which, if her gesticulations were anything to go by, wasn’t a welcome one. I stared at her as she walked down the beach, wondering who she was talking to and hoping all was well. Returning my attention to the couple dancing, I saw him.

Karibi had just approached the couple, hugging Ara and shaking C.J's hand. Erinkan walked up to him and I watched as the two of them embraced. She was all smiles as they talked and I couldn't help but wonder if she knew her picture was still hanging in his living room. Her husband, Emeka, walked up to them and both men also shook hands. My eyes remained on Karibi's face, wanting to see his reaction to this great love of his life, but there was nothing there apart from a broad smile. He proceeded to exchange pleasantries with her parents, reminding me that, indeed, this was a woman he had come close to marrying.

Bringing out my phone, I decided to go through my social media feed, rather than torture myself watching my ex with his ex. Which is why I didn't see him approach me.

"And you still prefer to sit and watch while other people dance."

I looked up, startled, surprised to see him taking the seat next to mine. "Mind if I join you?"

I shrugged, turning back to my phone, scrolling through images my eyes could no longer focus on.

"How've you been, Isioma?"

"You see me everyday at work," I muttered, not looking up.

"You know what I mean."

At that, I looked up and finally made eye contact with him. "Fine. Thank you for asking."

He looked around before turning back to me. "Can we go for a walk?"

There were a million and one things at the tip of my mouth, a million and one insults I wanted to throw at him, a million and one reasons why going on a walk with him wasn't a good idea. But as he rose and stretched a hand to me, I found myself accepting it, overcome by feelings of déjà vu.

"Lovely reception. Nice and simple," he remarked as we walked down the beach.

"The Church ceremony was also beautiful."

“I’m sure it was,” he said, before chuckling. “Walking down the beach, does this remind you of anything?”

I said nothing in response, remembering only too well the evening everything started, that evening on the beach in Epe that had changed my life.

“Isioma, I’m really sorry about the things I said to you at that pool party. I really had no right.”

“Damned right, you didn't.”

“And for your information, those were my nieces I was with,” he continued. “My older cousin, Ibiye’s daughters. You must have seen them in London. I was only there as their chaperone, nothing more.”

I turned to look at him. “What about Farida? Or the woman with the cake? Or the birthday party I wasn't invited to?”

“Farida just showed up that day, I told you. Tosan, like the many other women I know, showed up that day with a gift. I really couldn't help it if people remembered my birthday, Isioma.”

“Tosan is another ex?”

“As a matter of fact, no. She’s an old friend from school. I promise you that I wasn’t seeing anyone else then, or even now,” he sighed. “And as for the party-”

I stopped walking and he did too. “What about the party, Karibi?”

“I’m just not ready to share you with the world, Isioma. You’re still a secret I want to keep all to myself. Everyone made my last major relationship their business. I just want this to be between the two of us for now.”

I looked away, wanting to still hold on to my anger, to my resolve to walk away from whatever it was we’d had. But when he lifted my hand to his lips, all of it went away.

“I’ve missed you. My world has no colour without you,” he said, kissing my hand again.

A slow smile formed on my face. “Well, you seemed happy to ignore me at work.”

“That’s because I was so mad after seeing you at that party, wearing that-” he caught himself and shook his head. “I wanted to gouge out the eyes of all those men ogling you. Sebastian’s especially.”

I laughed, tickled by his jealousy.

“I’ve missed that laugh. I’ve missed you,” he said, leaning forward to kiss me. “Come home with me.”

I looked at him and wanted nothing more than to do just that, to be reunited with him…to go back to his home, our special place, and be perfectly reunited.

“No,” I somehow found the strength to answer. “Not today.”

“I understand,” he smiled. “Can we do dinner tomorrow? Please say yes.”

“Dinner is fine,” I answered. “But I have to go now. My friends will be looking for me.”

Walking away from him, I could feel his eyes on me and I smiled with satisfaction, my heart and soul singing.

And the next morning when I walked into my office and saw a large bouquet of roses sitting on my desk waiting for me, the singing became an entire orchestra. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

Which is why, when I walked out of my office late that evening and he was lingering by, waiting for me, I accepted his hand and gladly followed him home.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“OZIOMA?” I EXCLAIMED, SURPRISED to be getting a phone call from her. It had been a week since Ara and C.J’s wedding and we hadn’t spoken since then.

“Hi, dear. How you dey? Are you free this afternoon? How about we do lunch?”

I furrowed my brows, even more surprised by the request. “Lunch?” I echoed, stealing a glance at my watch. It was a little past 1pm and too late to be making lunch plans, or so I thought.

“Yes nau. Your office is so close to mine and we’ve never even as much as met up for a cup of coffee. If you’re worried about traffic, we could meet at that that lovely new place along Akin Adesola, the one right by the traffic light.”

“The Flowershop Café,” I said, knowing exactly where she was talking about. It was a stone throw away and getting there wouldn't be too much of a bother. I had no meetings scheduled for that afternoon and Sotonye could probably miss me for an hour or two. Besides, I was curious about what the real reason behind the odd request was. “Sure. I can be there in about half an hour.”

“Perfect!” she exclaimed. “See you then.”

Exactly thirty-eight minutes later, I walked into the café and the colourful blooms that greeted me took my breath away. I’d heard a lot about the place but had never been. It was yet another reminder of the fact Karibi and I never dined out.

I caught sight of Ozioma waving from a table further in and smiled as I walked over. Dressed in a black wrap dress and dainty gold accessories, she

looked so elegant, nobody seeing her would believe she was capable of half the crazy things she did.

“Girl, you look takeaway!” she exclaimed, her loud voice carrying through the small space. “Blue is your colour.”

I smiled again, less from the compliment and more as I remembered being told the very same thing…by a very special person. But I was glad she approved of how I looked. Vain as it was, I loved making an impression, especially on the people who knew me when I had only a handful of simple clothes in rotation, so I was glad I’d opted for the blue silk pinstripe shirt and fitted pants that day.

“Thank you,” I gushed. “You look lovely as well. You should dress like this more often.”

“If by ‘like this’, you mean keeping my girls covered,” she pointed at her breasts, giggling. “Then sorry to disappoint you o. This girl has gat to sell her market!”

This prompted the uncontrollable laughter that I was prone to when I was with her, eliciting curious looks from other patrons. We made small talk about Ara’s wedding as we ordered for our meals; chicken pene pasta for her and a Malay prawn curry for me.

“So…” she said, tucking into her meal when it was served, and I knew we were about to get to the real reason behind the unusual invitation. “You and Karibi looked very cosy at Ara’s wedding, strolling on the beach, holding hands. What’s up?”

I shrugged, keeping my eyes on my plate, all my guards fully up. “Nothing’s up. We’re just friends.”

“Well y’all looked a whole lot cosier that ‘just friends’.”

“We’re just friends, Ozioma,” I repeated, my voice firmer and a decibel higher than I intended.

“Don’t bite off my head o! Just an observation,” Ozioma answered, her voice also higher. “That’s how I heard you followed Ife for an aristo party. I gaghi anu okwu! You won’t hear word. Haven’t I been warning you for over a year now that that girl will pimp you one day?”

“Ozioma, please keep quiet! Keep quiet about what you don’t know about!” I flared, surprising even myself. “Aristo party, where you there? All you do is listen to foolish gossip. Don’t you think you’re too old to be jumping to silly conclusions instead of taking the time to ask questions?”

She stared back, her mouth agape for several seconds. “Isioma, I’m only looking out for you. You can pretend all you want to, but we both know Ife has a reputation-”

“You don’t even know her. Why don't you take the time to get to know her as a person, instead of persisting with these unfounded claims and assertions?”

She nodded. “Fair enough. I don't know her. She and I are not close. I don’t hold her close to my heart like I do you. I’m sorry if I have offended you with anything I’ve said today. Please believe me when I say I mean no harm.”

We ate in silence for a while, but I was soon overcome by remorse.

“I didn’t mean to shout on you, Ozi,” I said, reaching for her hand. “I’m really sorry.”

She squeezed my hand back. “I understand, babe.”

My heart was suddenly burdened, desperate to release a heavy load. “I’m seeing him.”

“Karibi?”

I nodded, unable to make eye contact with her.

“For how long?”

“We had a brief thing a few years ago, shortly after I started working there. But we reconnected after Sotonye’s wedding,” and then I proceeded to tell her how we had fallen for each other in London, how we’d been inseparable when we got back to Lagos, how we’d fallen out on his birthday but had reconnected after Ara’s wedding. She listened intently, not interrupting me, and when I was done talking, she leaned back in her chair and sighed deeply.

“Isioma, you are like a younger sister to me,” she began, and I knew I wouldn't like what she was about to say. “You need to be careful with him. Everyone knows he is still in love with Erinkan.”

“What do you mean ‘in love with Erinkan’? They broke up almost three years ago. She’s married with a kid.”

“Didn’t you see how he was looking at her at the wedding? Or the pained look in his eyes when he asked about her from Ara on the two occasions we saw him out, at Ricardo’s and Atmosphere? He’s been through so many women since their breakup, all of whom he’s clearly been using to fill the hole she created.”

I shook my head and laughed. Of course she would think so. It was a far more scandalous and juicy thing to believe that Karibi Graham-Hart was still pining over the one woman who had rejected him, than for him to be genuinely moving on with someone else. She hadn’t seen us together, really seen us together. She hadn’t seen the way he looked at me like I was the sun itself. She hadn’t seen the way he could barely keep his hands off me when we were together. So she really didn't know better.

“Isioma?”

“I’ve heard you, Ozi,” I said, smiling at her. There was no need trying to make her understand. In time, she would. The whole world would. “Thanks for looking out.”

But later that night as Karibi and I rode back to his apartment, it was all I could think about. And when we walked into his apartment, the picture I thought I’d grown to live with, assaulted me anew.

“Why is this still here?” I turned to him. “This picture, why is it still here? You and Erinkan have been over for years.”

“What is your obsession with this picture?” he snapped. “It’s just a meaningless piece of art!”

“If it's so meaningless, why don’t you take it down?” I yelled back. “If it means nothing, why do you still feel the need to keep looking at her face, morning and night?”

“I’ve had a long, busy day, Isioma. I’m not going to waste my time arguing about a picture!”

He stormed off and I stood there in the living room, still unable to look away from the portrait of the woman who, by all indication, still had his heart. When I finally did look away, I glared in the direction he’d stalked off in, wondering if his anger was just camouflage for feelings he was still nursing.

Walking over to the couch, I lay there, tears streaming down my face, determined to spend the night there if I had to. I must have fallen asleep because I was awakened by a light kiss on my forehead. Opening my eyes, I saw him kneeling by me.

“You know I hate it when you’re mad at me,” he said, brushing his lips over mine, softly, delicately, like butterfly wings. “I’m sorry for yelling.”

I looked in his eyes and saw an earnestness that appeased me. I decided then and there not to insist about the picture, assuring myself he would take it down in good time.

Rising to his feet, he lifted me off the chair and carried me to the bedroom. As he kissed me, as our bodies melted into one, Erinkan and the whole world faded into oblivion. And lying in his arms in the aftermath, I knew then that my very universe began and ended with him. I could run forever, search forever, but in the end, every path would still lead right back to him.

“I love you,” I said, my voice breaking the night silence.

From his breathing, I could tell he was still awake. But he said nothing in response.

“I love you, Karibi,” I repeated, looking up at him.

“Love is such a heavy word, Isioma,” he answered. “Possibly even overrated.”

It felt like a bucket of ice-cold water had been overturned all over me. I said nothing more but my eyes remained open long after his heavy breathing indicated he’d fallen asleep, mulling over what he’d said, wondering what that implied about whatever he felt for me, wondering if he even felt anything for me.

The smell of fresh pastry awoke me and I sat up with a start as the bright rays of the morning sun hit me in the face. I'd overslept.

"Breakfast feast for m'lady," came his voice as he set a tray by me. "You were sleeping so soundly, I couldn't bear to wake you."

Ignoring the tray, I reached for my watch to check the time. "9:30! Sotonye is going to kill me."

"Why don't you call in sick for a change? Everyone needs a break once in a while."

"Isn't it also late for you, Mr. Graham-Hart? Shouldn't you also be at work by now?"

"Like I said, everyone needs a break," he gestured towards the tray. "And m'lady hasn't even given her breakfast a second look."

"You don't think people will be suspicious? If we're both 'sick' at the same time?"

"I'll stop by later. I already sent Mrs. Fisher a message that I'll be a bit late."

Glancing at the plate of cinnamon buns, muffins, bacon and sunny side-up eggs, I couldn't help but smile. "Did you make these?"

"I wish I could take the credit, but Joseph beat me to it. But I get brownie points for at least bringing the tray, don't I?"

Laughing as I took a bite of a muffin, I wondered how I could even doubt his feelings for me. He might not have verbalized it in words but his actions told me everything I needed to know about the depth of his feelings for me.

He didn't make it to the office eventually, and later that evening, we took a walk down Bar Beach instead. Sitting on the sand and watching the waves approach and recede, I had never felt happier and more content.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IN THE DAYS AND weeks that followed, it grew increasingly difficult to keep up the act at work. It became almost impossible to ignore him or keep a neutral face when we were in the same vicinity, and from the glint in his eye whenever we tried to exchange pleasantries when other people were around, it was hard for him as well. He stopped by my office more times than he had to, lingered at my desk longer than he needed to, looked my way in meetings a whole lot more than was appropriate, so much so that I was worried that people would soon figure out that there was more to ours than just a cordial, formal relationship.

Soon, it was March 22, my 34th birthday. I spent the night before with my family and at midnight as my mother prayed for me, with her usual emphasis on my husband finding me, I had to conceal a smile, thinking, with the way things were progressing between Karibi and I, it was probably already a redundant prayer.

Standing in front of my full length mirror, dressed in an Ankara-print jumpsuit cinched in at the waist with a wide belt, my curly hair unbound and tumbling down my back, and wearing the bold red lipstick I favoured for special occasions, I knew I looked every bit as festive as I felt.

“My beautiful daughter!” my mother exclaimed, when I walked out of my bedroom. Then her smile dimmed. “Are we going to see you later? Should I bother making your favourite coconut rice?”

I hugged her, not having the heart to tell her it was highly unlikely. Even though he hadn’t said anything to me, I suspected Karibi already had plans for us. “We’ll go out for brunch on Sunday, Mom. Immediately after Church, all five of us.”

She shrugged, seemingly appeased. “Your siblings and I will call you later, when they wake up,” then with a smile, added. “And that necklace is beautiful.”

I fingered the chain Hattie had sent for my birthday, a gold string with a heart locket, inside which were two pictures of me as a newborn. “Yes, it is,” then kissing my mother goodbye, I rushed out to try to beat the early morning traffic.

Getting to the office, I was surprised by all the attention I got. It was my third birthday working there and the previous two had gone almost unnoticed, save for the odd person or two who knew it was my birthday from following me on social media. This time, from the moment I walked into the building, I was accosted by birthday wishes, calls and gifts. Walking into my office, my breath was taken away by the cakes and presents already waiting for me. There were at least seven cakes sitting on my table, fridge and even the floor, as well as other gifts; a charm bracelet from Ara, a white gold earring and necklace set from Ife and a Hermès Twilly Eau De Parfum Set from Ozioma. It wasn’t even 9am and I was already overwhelmed.

“Happy birthday to the best thing that happened to me this past year,” Sotonye declared, hugging me as she handed me her own gift.

“Best thing? Wouldn't that be your husband?” I giggled.

“Ssshh. Don’t tell him,” she beamed.

The door opened and an Office Assistant walked in, carrying a large bouquet of red roses and a wrapped gift.

“Na wa o, you’re the one bubbling today,” Sotonye remarked, reaching for the card in the flowers. My heart leaped out of my chest, hoping Karibi hadn’t signed his name on it.

She raised a brow. “Seb?” a sly smile formed on her face. “Interesting!”

“Seb?” I repeated, taking the card from her, wondering how on earth a casual acquaintance, a man I’d seen only twice in my life, knew my birthday.

“There’s also a gift,” Sotonye said, opening it before I could protest. We both gasped at the Cartier rose gold necklace. “This guy means business o! You guys have been seeing each other since the wedding?”

Before I could even open my mouth to refute the assumption, my phone rang.

“Happy birthday, beautiful!”

Sotonye was watching me, a big grin on her face, not making any attempt to give me any privacy.

“Thank you,” I answered self-consciously, recognizing Seb’s voice. “How did you know it was my birthday? And how did you get my number?”

But even before I finished asking, I already knew the answer.

“Ife was kind enough to tell me, when I ran into her a few days ago.”

No surprise there.

“Well, thank you very much. The flowers are beautiful,” I was saying, just as the door opened, letting Karibi in. I returned my attention to the phone call. “And thank you for the lovely gift.”

“You deserve so much more than that,” Seb cooed from the other end of the line. “So, can we do dinner tonight? I’d love to take you somewhere special, if you’d be kind enough to let me.”

“Dinner tonight?” I echoed again and Karibi raised a brow. “Erm, I’m afraid I already have other plans.”

“Understandable. I shouldn't have left it till the last minute. Can we do it some other time? Tomorrow maybe?”

“I’ll let you know,” I answered, eager to get off the phone. “I have another call coming in. Thanks so much once again. It was really thoughtful of you.”

Karibi was reaching for the card in the flowers as I was terminating the call.

“Seb?” he exclaimed. “Your boyfriend?”

My face flushed and I glared at him as he handed the card back to me.

“How is that your business, Karibi?” came Sotonye’s voice, reminding me she was still standing there. “Isioma is a beautiful woman who’s bound to have men falling all over for her.”

“Indeed, she is,” Karibi answered, a smile on his face, his eyes still on me.

Sotonye lingered and when I looked at her, her brows were knotted in a slight frown.

“Let me leave you to your birthday festivities,” she finally said, heading back to her office. “Come over later so we can go over the requisition from Bonny.”

When she was gone, Karibi reached into his pocket and pulled out a small case. “Happy birthday, Sunshine.”

My hand flew to my mouth when I saw the white gold Chopard Happy Diamonds watch inside it. “Oh my goodness. Karibi!”

And then he handed me a very small card. It wasn’t a birthday card, just a small card with an address on it.

“What’s this?” I smiled up at him, loving the attention.

“Just meet me there at 8pm tonight,” he said, walking away.

“Can I come dressed like this?”

“You’re beautiful whatever you wear,” he winked, before leaving the room.

The smile remained on my face as I looked at the card again, wondering what he had in store for me. I closed my eyes as I fantasized about all the possibilities, thinking it was already shaping up to be my best birthday ever.

“You need to guard your heart, Isioma,” came Sotonye’s voice, startling me out of my reverie. I turned to look at her and she was standing by her door, watching me. “Karibi is emotionally unavailable. I don't want to see you get hurt.”

I wanted to act clueless, to deny knowledge of anything she was saying, but instead I remained tongue-tied as our eyes held, unable to say anything in my defense. Even after she’d returned to her office, I was unable to think of anything else, wondering what she meant by ‘emotionally unavailable’. But as more birthday greetings and gifts flooded my office, I soon shook it off.

People, even his family, still believed he wasn’t over Erinkan because they were yet to see how we were together. With Sotonye now aware of our relationship, it was only a matter of time before it became public knowledge…and before everyone realised he had given his heart to someone else.

As evening approached, I toyed with the idea of going back home to change. I even contemplated going over to his apartment, as I had a decent number of clothes hanging in his closet. But I decided against either, choosing to show up exactly the way I was.

Traffic was light and I got to Banana Island a few minutes after 8pm. The street was further down the estate, but driving in, the house was easy to locate. The house, a new one, looked like a cut straight out from Architects Today magazine, with its pitched roof, square windows that took up entire walls, a front porch with cedar beams and raised plant beds with only white blooms. It was a stunning house and I couldn't help but wonder if it was his new place…our new place.

A uniformed man met me at the gate and led me into the compound, which was even more impressive on the inside that outside, with its perfectly manicured lawn and white flowers that looked celestial under the overhead lights. I walked behind him and he stopped when we got to the back of the compound. Looking ahead, standing by a single table near the back fence overlooking the Lagos Lagoon, the Lekki-Ikoyi Link Bridge part of the beautiful backdrop, was Karibi. Classical music was playing from speakers I couldn't see, and rose petals were strewn on the pristine white cloth-covered table, in the middle of which burned a small candle. I smiled as I approached him, noticing he had changed from the casual dress shirt he wore earlier in the day, to a smart black suit.

“What’s all this?” I asked, as he took my hand.

“A romantic dinner for two,” he said, kissing me on my cheek and handing me a single, red rose. “Happy birthday, Sunshine.”

He helped me into my seat, and when he took his opposite me and smiled, my heart soared. Whatever I had imagined his plans for the evening to be, this was already looking to be so much better.

What followed was a four-course meal served by uniformed men, all in white shirts, black pants and matching black waistcoats. From the crab and avocado toast hors d'oeuvres, to the spicy carrot and lentil soup appetizer, to the shrimp stir fry and roast sweet potatoes for the entrée, to the chocolate soufflé for dessert, it was a feast fit for royalty. And I was overjoyed that he'd gone through all that trouble just for me.

"This is a nice place," I remarked, watching the flow of traffic on the bridge, its lights reflecting in the lagoon like tiny diamonds.

"Yeah, it is. It belongs to my brother-in-law."

"Dagogo?"

He smiled. "No, Diekola, my cousin's husband…my late cousin's husband. He was married to my late cousin, Boma."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"It's eight years since she passed, but he's still struggling. He only just recently got this place after finally agreeing to sell their old house," he shook his head and chuckled. "Tekena helped supervise the renovation, but will you believe Diekola, the owner himself, still hasn't seen it? He's been in the States for over a year, but we're expecting him back soon."

"So why did you bring me here?" I just had to ask.

"Because I wanted to give you a fine dining experience outside of the apartment. On your birthday, I wanted to treat you to a meal Joseph didn't cook."

"And you did great," I beamed at him. "I had a lovely time. Thank you."

He smiled, his eyes fixed behind me. "And it's about to get a little better."

Turning around, I clasped my hands over my lips, blown away by the sight of one of the waiters walking up to us with a small cake with two sparklers atop it, flame-coloured sparks illuminating the night sky. As Karibi and the waiters sang to me as I cut the cake, I wished everyone, Sotonye, Ozioma, and indeed everyone who thought he was incapable of letting go of his former love, could see him…see us…now.

As the waiter took the cake away, the classical music gave way to Bruno Mars' Versace on the floor.

"Only because I know you like the song," Karibi said, rising to his feet and holding out his hand. "May I?"

My cheeks ached from smiling as I took his hand. With his arms around my waist, mine around his shoulders and my head nestled on his chest, we swayed to the up-tempo ballad. It was beautiful, it was romantic, it was magical. Even though he hadn't verbalised it to me, even though the whole world seemed to think otherwise, I knew I had his heart.

We drove back to his place, with Nosa driving my car behind. When we got there, I waited for him to walk over to my side of the car to let me out. As our eyes held, I could see in his dilated pupils not only his desire for me, but his affection. This was no emotionally unavailable man.

We held eyes the entire elevator ride up to the penthouse, neither of us saying a word. There was no need for words, not when our hearts were communicating their own language of love.

The doors opened into the apartment and, still holding my hand, he led me to his bedroom. That night, everything was different. As our bodies became one, as our skin moved together like fine silk, we connected with not just our bodies, but our hearts, our souls, loving each other with our eyes. He was my drug, just like I was his. One touch and the intoxication was instant for me…and for him as well. Our stars were aligned and a force greater than we could understand was pulling us together. And I wanted to stay there, in his arms, forever.

The next morning, sitting in the kitchen as he flipped pancakes for us for breakfast, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. I was so blissfully happy, it was almost unreal.

"I hope these taste good. I don't know how you convinced me to give Joseph the day off, or to make you these for that matter!" he chuckled, dishing pancakes that were several shades darker than was ideal. "I'm not sure if you can tell, but I haven't as much as lit a match in years."

"They're perfect," I said, snuggling up behind him. And they were. It didn't matter if they tasted like vomit or were burnt to a crisp. It was his first time

making me breakfast, and that, for me, was a significant milestone in itself.

Carrying the plates to the dining table, the smile on my face faded as my eyes fell on the third person feasting with us.

“You okay?” he asked, sitting down beside me and noticing the abrupt change in my mood.

“I’m really not comfortable with that here,” I pointed at Erinkan’s portrait. “I don’t know why you insist on keeping it.”

He dropped his cutlery. “Oh, for God’s sake! Are we back to talking about this picture? It's just a harmless piece of art.”

“If it’s so harmless, why don't you want to get rid of it? If it means nothing, why do you get defensive every time I mention it?”

“Because I want it there!” he bellowed.

And the truth was finally out.

We sat in silence for a while, neither of us even touching our food. I remembered Ozioma’s and Sotonye’s words and I felt a fear like I’d never known.

“What am I to you, Karibi?” I asked when I found my voice. “Are you just using me to warm your bed?” then making eye contact with him, “Are you still in love with Erinkan?”

He said nothing in response and we sat there in more silence.

“You’re so ashamed of me, you couldn't invite me for your birthday party,” I said, more to myself than to him. “Rather than take me out for a meal on my birthday, you had to take me to some abandoned property.”

“Come off this, Isioma. You know it won’t be a good look for us to be seen together. Not especially with me weeks away from being announced CEO. It won’t be good for either of us if people, especially people at work, find out we’re seeing each other.”

“If that’s the case,” I answered, looking him in the eye. “Should I quit my job then?”

He looked at me incredulously. “What?”

“This thing that we have, is it worth my quitting my job for?” I repeated, not breaking the stare. “Since its the impropriety of being seen with a member of your staff you’re worried about, if I resign right now, that problem will go away. So, is what we have enough for me to quit my job?”

After a lengthy silence, he lowered his eyes. “No.”

Two letters, one word, but it crushed my spirit like a thousand-ton weight. Of all the things I’d envisioned he’d say in response, of all the answers I thought he’d give, that wasn’t any of them. With a sharp intake of breath, I pushed my chair back, rose to my feet and walked away.

Once in the bedroom, I flung open the closet door, throwing everything I had hanging there to the bed, waiting for him to rush into the room to stop me, hoping he would tell me he hadn’t meant what he said, and that he would profess his undying love for me. But none of that happened.

With my bags packed, I walked past where he still sat on the dining table, but still he made no attempt to stop me from leaving. We made eye contact as the elevator doors closed, but he was unable to hold the gaze. My eyes remained on him even as he looked away, and as he disappeared from my view as the lift descended. It felt like I was drowning, like my chest and lungs were filling uncontrollably with water. I couldn't breathe. My goodness, I couldn't breathe.

I could barely see a thing as I made my way to my car, my tears almost completely blinding me.

Yet again, Karibi had broken me.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

“ARE YOU CRAZY? QUIT your job for whom and for what? Isi adịghị gị mma. You must be out of your mind to even contemplate such nonsense!” an irate Ozioma ranted.

Upon leaving Karibi’s apartment, I’d been too broken to make the drive home, and hadn’t wanted to show up in Ife’s house in tears yet again. So I’d driven to Ozioma’s parents’ house in Lekki Phase 1 instead.

“Babes, I’m going to tell you the harsh truth because I think I was too gentle last time,” she continued. “Men like Karibi don't love easily, and when they do, it is a hard flame to extinguish. Him choosing to pine away for another woman for the rest of his life should be his problem and not yours. Nne, you need to move on with your life and forget this guy. Don’t you dare jeopardise your job for him or any man. This same job that we’re still thanking God for? This same job that has changed your family’s life? This same job that’s going to take you to the next level? Mba, mba, don’t you ever try that rubbish. Focus on your yourself and a good guy will come along soon.”

Even though she hadn’t offered the kind of sympathetic ear I’d wanted, her tough love did me a whole world of good, reminding me of what was really important. Yes, my heart was broken…shattered to pieces…but it was better to start the process of healing it, than to hang around someone who clearly wanted someone else.

Seeing him at work on Monday, all the pain and anger I felt was amplified by a factor of at least a trillion. Watching him as he walked into the board meeting, I could taste the loathing in my mouth, hating him for teasing me, for showing me a love I’d never imagined possible, only to take it away. But most of all, I hated him for still making my heart race. Lowering my gaze, I avoided any eye contact for the rest of the meeting. And when

Sotonye and I were walking out when it was over, I found something to distract myself with when she stopped by to chat with him.

“Hi, Isioma,” he said.

“Good morning,” I answered, not even looking up from my files. Thankfully, he hadn’t insisted, and Sotonye and I were soon making our way back to our office. I did everything to remain my smiley and jovial self, not wanting to tip Sotonye off like the last time. But walking back to our office, as I smiled and laughed, as I listened to a story of some funny thing or the other her husband did that weekend, I knew it was going to take everything in me to keep on a happy face, especially when I was dying inside.

Later that morning, he walked into our office.

“Isioma, we need to talk.”

I didn’t even bother with a response, and instead kept my eyes on my computer not looking up at all.

“Isioma.”

My clenched jaw was the only physical indication that I’d heard him, but I still didn't look up. At that point, I didn't even care what anyone would think, seeing me ignore an Executive Director. I just needed to pass on the message that I had nothing to say to him. We were done talking.

Over the next few days, I did everything to avoid him, but he was suddenly everywhere; in meetings he didn’t have to attend and in our office multiple times a day. With the announcement of Leo’s retirement, I knew it had more to do with his impending elevation to the position of CEO, but there was a part of me that still wondered if he really had to attend meetings with small contractors, or sit in on the Minor Tender Board deliberations, discussing contracts even Heads of Department could approve.

But trivial or not, he attended these meetings, and even though I did everything not to make any eye contact with him, I felt his eyes on me the whole time, each time. I didn't know if he was deliberately trying to disarm me, because it clearly had nothing to do with any feelings he had for me. He’d already made that quite clear.

When representatives of one of our Asian contractors visited, a few members of the Facilities team took them out for lunch. Sotonye hadn't been able to come, so I'd represented her, along with Odiri, Tor, James and a young Supervisor, Uloma. We were already seated at the highbrow The Avenue restaurant when the Chinese team walked in…accompanied by Karibi. I looked on in shock as he chatted with them in Mandarin, and as he shook hands with everyone waiting. I could see my shock mirrored in the rest of our team's eyes. Not one of our major contractors, this wasn't the kind of luncheon our future CEO was expected to grace. I was certain Mrs. Fisher had no idea he was even there.

For the entire duration of lunch, I fussed with my food, unable to eat anything. As conversation flowed freely on the table, I looked up and saw him watching me. I deliberately held his eyes, daring him to look away, but he didn't. But as I started to feel the gravitational pull of those eyes, dark eyes drawing me in with their intensity, I had to look away. I was no match for him.

After lunch was over, I lingered back to settle the bill, just as the rest of the party made their way downstairs. Walking into the elevator, I was startled when he walked right in with me, pressing the doors shut so nobody else could join us.

"Isioma, please talk to me."

I glared at him, a million things on the tip of my tongue to say to him.

"Every time I pick up the phone to call you, I lose my nerve," he said. "But we have a lot to talk about, Isioma."

I turned away, looking ahead, biting my lip to keep from yelling at him…or bursting into tears.

"How've you been?" he asked, reaching for me.

I pulled away like I'd been burned by fire. "Fine, thank you."

Just then, we hit the ground floor and the lift doors were barely open before I walked out, my heart beating so hard, I thought it would stop any minute. I walked right past my colleagues and the contractors who were chatting in

the lobby, not stopping until I was safe in Sotonye's car that had brought me, grateful I hadn't driven myself there.

My phone buzzed with a message. Can we see tonight? We need to talk?

I read the message over and over again, my hands shaking, overwhelmed by the urge to dial his number and tell him yes. It had been almost three weeks since I'd walked away from him that Saturday morning and, despite my best efforts, he was still in my heart. But I couldn't let him stay there forever, so I deleted the message.

Back in my office, I shut my eyes, inhaling and exhaling several times, trying to compose myself after the afternoon's incident, trying to will myself to remain strong, lest I fall for his charms again. Just as I was about to return to work, my phone started ringing. I picked it up with a racing heart, determined not to answer it if he was the one calling. But it was Ife.

"Hey babe. I called you earlier but your phone rang off?"

I smiled, happy to hear her voice. "Hey you. I'm so sorry, I didn't even hear it. We took some contractors out for lunch."

"Anyways," she cut in. "Seb just called me. He says you've been blowing him off. Why nau?"

I sighed deeply. Ever since breaking up with Karibi, I hadn't been in the mood to entertain any advances from other guys, especially not the sly and flirtatious Seb. "I've been very busy, Ife."

"Busy doing what? Pining over you-know-who?" she retorted. "Babe, Seb is someone you can use to entertain yourself with for now, someone who can help you take your mind off Karibi. Nobody is asking you to marry him. Just allow him spoil you a little. Some no-strings-attached dalliance is exactly what you need now."

Long after she was off the phone, I mulled over it, thinking she was perhaps on to something. Maybe giving someone else a listening ear would be what my heart needed to shut Karibi out…permanently.

Which is why, as I walked into my bedroom after work that evening, and my phone rang, I finally answered his call.

“Wait, what? Is it Christmas or something?” Seb exclaimed. “You actually answered your phone?”

“Hello, Seb,” I said, amused by the excitement I heard in his voice.

“Well, God be praised! I was starting to think you were sending me a ‘buzz off’ message, young lady.”

I shrugged, not wanting to say anything in the affirmative or negative.

“You still owe me. You promised I could take you out the day after your birthday.”

“I didn't promise you anything, Sebastian,” I retorted. “I didn't commit to anything.”

“Oh, I love the way you say my name. It sounds like an opus! A symphony! Your voice is so sonorous.”

I rolled my eyes, hating how cliché he sounded. I quickly chided myself for not giving him a chance. I hardly knew him and couldn't tell how things could progress if I got to know him better.

“Can we do lunch tomorrow?” he asked.

The next day was a Saturday, and there was really no excuse to decline.

“Tomorrow is fine,” I answered, forcing a smile more for my benefit than his.

“Fantastic!” he exclaimed. “Send me your address so I can come pick you up.”

Once off the phone, I sat on my bed, staring into nothingness, contemplating this step, the first proper step towards moving on. As much as I tried to convince myself it was for the best, there still lingered a sadness in the hollow of my stomach.

–

“Why don’t you wear one of those lovely dresses you got from Paris?” my mother asked, standing behind me as I examined myself in the mirror, feeling and looking lackluster in a frilly, floral blouse over a pair of jeans.

“This is fine, Mom,” I said, sliding on my red lipstick. At least, I was making the effort with my lipstick. “It’s just lunch.”

“Isioma, biko,” she pleaded. “Don’t go there already having a closed mind. Yes, it’s only lunch but make an effort. You can do better than this.”

Reluctantly, I changed into a black cold-shoulder shirtdress, cinched in with a black and white belt. Walking out of my room, standing a few inches taller in red sling-backs, my mother smiled with satisfaction. “That’s more like it!”

She had more reason to smile a few minutes later, when the knock on the door signaled Seb’s arrival.

“This one didn’t send a driver!” she beamed as she adjusted herself, eager to meet her daughter’s suitor.

And when the door opened, Sebastian didn’t disappoint. My mother practically swooned at the sight of him in his 6 foot 5 frame, the pink Ralph Lauren shirt and Dockers chinos sitting on him as perfectly as if he were a mannequin.

“Nne, kedu,” he greeted my mother with a small bow, prompting something that sounded part giggle and part squeal from her.

“Welcome. Biko nọdụ. Let’s get you something to drink. Ifeyinwa, get some juice for Isioma’s friend.”

“Mommy, don’t worry please,” he laughed. “Achọghị m ijuju afọ m tupu anyị agaa. I don’t want to fill up my stomach before we go.”

I stood back as he and my mother chatted like old pals, trying to squelch the rising irritation I felt.

“Who’s this one?” Ify whispered in my ear, my irritation mirrored on her face. “Why is he forming familiar?”

“He’s just friendly, Madam Sharp Mouth,” I answered, shoving her good-naturedly so as not to encourage her, or allow the negative feelings I was nursing fester.

“Shall we?” I asked, stepping forward, clutching my little purse.

Seb’s eyes lit up, as if remembering the real reason he was there. “Don’t worry, Mommy. I’ll bring her back safe and sound.

ị chọrọ anything? Can we bring you some takeaway?”

My sister rolled her eyes, mouthing ‘Mommy?’ and I had to stifle my own laughter. Even my teenage sister could see right through him.

“Oh, my darling!” my mother tittered like a teenager. “Don't worry about me. You two go and have a lovely time!”

Once downstairs, he led me to a waiting Range Rover Autobiography and I lowered my eyes as I got in, not wanting to make eye contact with any of my neighbours, wondering what impression they now had of me, getting in and out of different luxury vehicles.

“Your mom is really lovely,” Seb remarked as he drove. “So, I take it your dad is the one who’s white.”

I shook my head. “Nope. He was from Anambra State. He’s late.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But I don’t understand. If both your parents are Nigerian-”

“It's a long story,” I cut in, not in any mood to share that part of my life with him.

“So where in Anambra?” he asked, grinning.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Where in Anambra are you from?” he repeated, his grin even wider. “My parents are going to go nuts when I introduce you to them. Beautiful, exotic woman who isn’t just Igbo but from my state too? You do know I’m marrying you, right?”

I turned to look out of the window, my irritation rising. I couldn't understand why his excitement was rankling me. The last person I was with hadn’t even felt confident enough to introduce me to his neighbours, and here was a man already talking about introducing me to his parents. I should have been excited, not irritated.

He took me to a restaurant in one of the large hotels, and I was glad my mother had convinced me to wear something more appropriate. But that

was the only positive of the afternoon. For almost the entire time we were there, he kept gushing about how beautiful I was, how he was going to marry me that year and how good-looking our kids would be. But whenever I tried to steer the chat to more generic topics, our conversation stalled.

“What I do for a living?” he repeated, before shrugging. “I’m a businessman.”

“What kind of business?” I prodded.

Again that grin. “Enough business to take care of you, my dear.”

I decided to try another discussion angle. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“Sleep!” he chuckled. “I work so hard that any free time I get, I crash.”

I pursed my lips and nodded, just as conversation returned to the beautiful children we would have and how his family was coming to pay my bride price. By the time we finally left the place, I was mentally drained.

“I live not too far from here,” he said, his hand on the small of my back. “Would you like to come for a quick cup of coffee?”

I smiled to myself, knowing this was the point where gullible women were slayed. “Maybe some other time.”

He looked disappointed, but to his credit, he remained nice and upbeat through the entire drive back to Yaba, still filling my ears with his plans for us to marry and live happily ever after.

“A friend of mine turns forty tomorrow,” he said, as we pulled up in front of my house. “Would you like to be my date?”

The thought of spending another afternoon like the one I’d just endured made me almost break out in hives.

“I’ll have to get back to you,” I said, smiling politely, not wanting to hurt his feelings…well at least not right there in the car. “Thank you for lunch.”

“Nwunye’m. My wife. Very soon, I will be giving you breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

Getting out of his car and walking to the house, I shuddered. As much as I wanted to forget Karibi, I never wanted to subject myself through that

again.

A few hours later, on the phone with Ife, I was telling her all about the experience and she was also amused by the whole thing. “Don’t get carried away by any marriage talk. Seb is a sweet talker. I know many women he has deceived that way. But as for that fortieth birthday party tomorrow, girl you need to be there. Omubo Henshaw always throws nice parties, and his birthday bash is going to epic!”

I hesitated, not wanting a repeat of what happened the last time I partied with her. “I don’t know…”

“Babes, you need to get out there and meet people. Don't worry, it’s not a pool party so you won’t have to wear a bikini or anything. You and I can go together. Just tell Seb you’ll meet him there.”

And just like that, I was roped in for a party.

Getting dressed for the party the next day, I imagined what Ozioma would say if…when…she heard. The truth was I now knew too well that her suspicions about Ife were not unfounded. In fact, they were downright credible. But, especially after the disastrous date with Seb, my eagerness to put myself out there to meet other people outweighed any reservations I might have had about her lifestyle. Besides, I knew she wouldn't do anything to put me in harm’s way.

But when Ife and I got to the Victoria Island venue of the party the next evening, deep in my heart, I knew the real reason I’d agreed to come.

Walking into the large hall, it no longer surprised me for people to stare. One thing the last few months had taught me was to believe in myself, something I hadn’t done much of before. And it wasn’t because there were now a few more zeroes in my pay cheque. For years, I’d convinced myself I wasn’t as good as other people. Underneath my smiles and cheerful façade had lain a deep, almost crippling, insecurity. But now, I knew I had within me everything I needed to stand toe-to-toe with anybody.

I allowed Ife lead me around the room, smiling politely at the people she introduced me to, a number of whom recognised me from the pool party. Even with the simple outfit of a fitted white jacket over a sequined slip dress, the men there were still devouring me with their eyes. But through all

the pleasantries, I found myself scanning the room, looking out for someone I couldn't even admit to myself I was.

“Ah, there’s Seb,” Ife said, waving at the tall man who had just walked in.

His typical grin spread across his face as he walked over to us. Without any warning, he lifted me and planted a kiss on my cheek, causing me to yelp. “My woman! I’ve missed you these last twenty-four hours. Remind me never to separate myself from you ever again.”

“Seb! You will never change,” Ife giggled, much to my chagrin.

“Have you met my fiancée? This is my fiancée, Isioma,” he said to anyone who cared to listen, beaming proudly, a possessive hand around my waist. “Yeah, I know I’m a lucky guy.”

With his arm firmly around me, we made the rounds as he introduced me to everyone in the party, clearly wanting to show off his new conquest. I smiled as I acknowledged the appreciative looks and responses from his friends, some of whom even asked when they were accompanying him to meet my parents. He was parading me as this angel he had just met, the one who was to save him from the bachelor life. Maybe if I was fresh out of my teens, I would have been deceived by all the attention, but at the grand old age of thirty-four, I knew better. It was just a ruse to get into my pants. They were all the same.

We were chatting with the groom-to-be, Omubo, and a woman he introduced as the one who got away, Marie, when I finally saw him.

Karibi.

As our eyes met, my heart lurched at the sight of the one I’d secretly hoped to see, but from his downturned lips and the icy stare that met mine, the feeling wasn’t mutual. Seb had his arm around my shoulder as he talked animatedly with Omubo and Marie, and I used his distraction as an excuse to slip away.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, smiling at my companions as I turned to walk away. Even though I’d fantasized about seeing him there, one look at Karibi and my head had already started to spin. I needed to get out of the room… and fast.

But I wasn’t fast enough.

“Are you with him now?” came Karibi’s voice, as his hand encircled my wrist. “Are you seeing him?”

I pulled my hand out of his grip. “Should that be news to you? You heard us talk on my birthday.”

He glared at me, his neck cords visible. “Is that why you didn't even as much as respond to my text message?”

“I didn't respond because I have nothing to say to you,” I sneered. “The last time we spoke, you made it very clear where I stand with you, so let’s stop this whole song and dance.”

“Isioma, you don't even have the slightest clue what-”

“What’s going on here?” came Seb’s voice as he approached us, his eyes narrowed and head cocked to one side. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“We’re having a conversation, Sebastian,” Karibi answered, not taking his eyes off me.

“Hey, man. This ain’t Eldabra,” Seb retorted, reaching for my hand. “It’s a Sunday evening, and she’s on her own time. You can have your ‘conversation’ when she’s back to wearing your name tag round her neck.”

Karibi remained standing there, his eyes searching mine, non-verbally asking me to dismiss Seb. But instead, I looked away, slipping my hand into Seb’s. There was a visible clench of his jaw, after which he turned around and walked away.

And straight through a glass door.

There was a collective gasp as he fell to the floor, a few people rushing to his aid.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” he insisted, pushing himself to his feet. Without even a glance back, he stormed off.

“Karibi,” I called out at the sight of blood staining his shirt, slipping out of Seb’s hold and chasing after him. “Karibi!”

Hearing my voice made him walk even faster, and I quickened my own pace.

“Karibi, wait,” I shouted, frantic by this time as I noticed his entire collar was now crimson red. “You’re bleeding.”

He didn't stop until he got to his car, by which time the loss of blood had already started to weaken him. He swayed as he opened his car door and I screamed as he slumped in my arms. I removed my jacket and used that as a compress over the deep gash in his neck, just as other concerned people from the party ran up to us. I continued to scream and cry for help, as I watched my white jacket soak with his blood.

What had I just done?

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CHAPTER TWENTY

SITTING IN THE WAITING room, I knew I looked a frightful sight. One of Karibi's friends had driven us to a nearby hospital and he'd immediately been rushed to the Emergency Room. Thankfully, the cut on his neck hadn't been as deep as I'd feared.

"Hi babe," Ife said, walking in and taking the seat next to mine. "How is he?"

"He's getting some stitches," I answered, my voice barely audible. My hands were still quivering and I had chewed my lower lip raw, still shaken from the incident.

"Thank God, he's okay," she said, placing her hand over mine to calm it. "He's okay, Isioma."

I nodded and wiped tears from my eyes. We all knew it could have been a whole lot worse. An inch deeper or wider, and it would have been a different story.

"Seb was really mad that you left with Karibi to the hospital," Ife chuckled. "He was still ranting when I left the party."

I hissed under my breath, not at all bothered by what Seb, or anyone, thought. There was no way I would have left him alone in that condition.

"So, what do you want to do now? Have you called his relatives? If he's out of the woods, you know you can leave now."

I shook my head. "I want to stay."

She nodded and I was grateful there was no judgment from her, grateful that she understood.

"You left this. I checked and everything seems to be in intact," she said, handing me my purse. "Your car is still at my place, so call me when you're

ready to leave, okay?" She leaned to hug me and we were in that position for a long time. "Everything will be fine, babes."

When she left, I felt even more lost than I did before she came, equal parts anxious for an update and wondering what I was even doing there.

"He's asking for you," a nurse said, startling me, as I hadn't seen her approach.

My hands suddenly felt clammy. "Should I let his family know he's here?"

"You could if you want. He'll be able to go home in the morning."

A glance at the wall clock showed it was already 3am.

I walked behind her to the recovery room he'd been taken to and I took a seat beside his sleeping form. Or at least I thought it was. As soon as the door shut behind the nurse, he reached for my hand and I raised it to my lips, kissing it, relieved beyond words that he was okay. We remained like that, silently holding hands, until the weight of his hand indicated he'd fallen asleep. I watched him as he slept, his jaw already shadowed by the beginning of a beard. A thick bandage wrapped his neck, the reminder of how narrowly he had avoided something more sinister. Unable to stop myself, I stroked his head, my heart glowing and aching at the same time, the intensity of the feelings I had for him so strong I could taste it. And I was tired of running. I knew that by loving him, I was giving him the power to hurt me even more, but interlacing my fingers with his, protecting my heart was the very last on my mind.

I remained awake as night gave way to morning. His friend had given me Karibi's car keys before he left, so I called Nosa, asking him to come to the hospital. He'd gone on to retrieve the car from the venue of the party before returning for us. At a little after 10am, the doctor cleared Karibi to leave. When we got to his place, his gait was still unsteady from being heavily sedated, but I managed to lead him up to the penthouse, declining any assistance from Nosa.

Settling him in bed, he fell asleep almost immediately and I decided it was only right to let his sister know what had happened. It was a Monday morning, and I'd already sent her a text message to let her know I wouldn't be in.

“Hi, Sotonye,” I said the minute the line connected.

“Isioma. I was just about to call you. I got your text this morning. Are you okay?”

“I am,” then inhaling deeply. “It’s actually Karibi.”

I told her everything that happened the previous night and how he’d ended up in hospital.

“He got a few stitches, and he’s sleeping it off now.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” she said, before the line disconnected.

I was nervous about Sotonye meeting me there, with me still clad in the sequined slip dress, my blood-stained jacket long discarded. I toyed with the idea of changing into one of his t-shirts and sweatpants, but decided that would be way too intimate and a lot more difficult to explain.

As I passed by the dining area on my way to kitchen, I stopped in my tracks when I saw the blank space on the wall where Erinkan’s picture used to be. I stood there, not knowing whether to be happy he’d finally taken it down, or upset that he’d waited for us to be over before doing that.

I was midway through baking a cake when the doorbell rang.

“How is he? Still asleep?” Sotonye asked, as I let her in.

I nodded, walking behind her to his room. “The doctors said to expect him to be drowsy for the better part of the day.”

She shook her head as she stood over him. “His neck though? If it had been his jugular-”

“The doctor said he was very lucky.”

She sighed before turning around, surprising me with a hug. “Take care of him. I’ll come back later in the day, but please take care of him.”

When she was gone, I brought the cinnamon loaf out of the oven and made a pot of pepper soup with some frozen chicken I found in the freezer. From all indication, Joseph hadn’t done any cooking in a while. Returning to the bedroom where he was still sleeping, I lay beside him and was also soon fast asleep.

It was dark outside when I opened my eyes and I looked beside me to find Karibi watching me.

“Sleeping beauty!”

“How long have I been asleep?”

He chuckled. “Well, I’ve eaten, watched some TV, and just saw off Sotonye and Tekena, so I’d say quite a while.”

I sat up, feeling suddenly self-aware. “I have to go. I’ll call an Uber to take me to Ife’s place.”

“Please don’t,” he said, reaching for my hand. “Please don’t go.”

I looked at him and saw an earnestness, a longing I hadn’t seen before.

“Why?” I asked, my insecurities rushing right back. “Why do you want me to stay?”

“Because I’ve been miserable without you. Because I’m in love with you,” he said, tilting my head up. “Because I am totally, completely and perfectly in love with you.”

It felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Looking at him, I was suddenly unable to breathe.

“For too long, my heart was so fixated on one person, I didn't even realise when it found its way to someone else. The vacuum in my heart these weeks without you has been unlike anything I have ever known. I love you, Isioma…and I never want to be separated from you ever again.”

It had been three weeks of running, but looking at him, I knew that what I felt for him had no bound nor length nor depth. It was absolute.

For the rest of the night, we lay in each other’s arms, me nestled in his chest and listening to the rhythmic beat of his heart, and him with his nose nuzzled in my hair. There was no sex, but it was the most tender, most passionate, most beautiful night we’d ever spent together. My heart was so full, it felt like it was going to burst. I was happy. I was content. Everything was perfect.

The next morning, he was still asleep when I had Nosa give me a ride to Ife’s house. Borrowing one of her dresses, I drove myself to the office, to

sort out some things I'd left pending.

Sotonye had left for a meeting in Port Harcourt that morning, so I ended up staying for much longer than I intended. By the time I left there and made a few stops to buy groceries, I didn't return to the apartment till well past 7pm.

The elevator doors opened, and I gasped at the sight that greeted me. Tea light candles were lit all the way into the living room, scores of them on the floor, tables and other surfaces, and Kenny Lattimore's For You was playing.

"Welcome," Karibi said, taking my hand. "I was just about to come get you from the office myself."

"What is this?" I exclaimed, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. Just like on my birthday, there were rose petals and a burning candle on the dining table. Except it wasn't my birthday.

"A romantic dinner for two," he declared, leading me to sit. "I had to call Joseph in to rustle up a little something."

"But why?"

"Just to say I'm sorry," he kissed my hand. "To say thank you," he kissed it again. "To say I love you."

I shook my head and smiled, deliriously happy. If this was his way of making up for the past, he'd done that in leaps and bounds.

We made small talk as we ate Joseph's signature coconut rice and goat meat stew, and just when I thought the evening couldn't get any better, he stood and reached for my hand.

I allowed him lead me to the open area of the room, where we danced to the beautiful love song, which was still playing in a loop.

"…For you I share the cup of love that overflows. And anyone who knows us knows. That I would change all faults I have for you. There is no low or high or in between of my heart that you haven't seen. 'Cause I share all I have and am. Nothing I've said is hard to understand. All I feel, I feel deeper still. And always will, all this love is for you," he sang against my ear as we danced, and it felt like I was in heaven, like we were waltzing

before God Himself. I thought about how guarded he had been in the past, how closed in and, using his sister's words, emotionally unavailable he'd been, and all I could think was this had been worth every bit of the wait.

"For you I'd make a promise of fidelity. Now and for eternity. No one could replace this vow. For you I'd take your hand and heart and everything. And add to them a…" he faltered at the last word. "I wish I could add to them a wedding ring, just like the song goes."

I looked at him, confused. "Why can't you?"

"Baby, let's just enjoy the moment," he said, pulling me in closer.

But the guards I'd only just relaxed came flying right up. I stopped dancing. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not asking for a proposal or anything, but I'm wondering why that line is a problem for you. One minute, you're saying you love me, and the next, you're almost biting off your tongue over the mere insinuation of spending a lifetime together."

"No, Isioma. I do want to spend a lifetime with you," he countered. "I love you and I want to spend every day of my life looking into those big brown eyes of yours, doing all I can to make you happy," he hesitated before continuing. "But marriage is going to spoil everything. It will spoil this beautiful thing we have."

I pulled away. "So how else do you intend to spend every day of your life with me?"

"We don't have to be married to be together. We can still be happy in each other's company…in each other's love."

"While you'll be married to another?"

He pursed his lips. "I have no plans of getting married to anyone."

"Yet. No plans yet," I cried. "So you want me to be your mistress…your concubine forever?"

"Isioma, come on now. Let's be realistic here," he answered, equally exasperated. "Since when has love been enough? I know too many couples who were as…"

He stopped short of finishing his statement, but he didn't have to. “As different as we are. Is that what you were going to say?”

He threw up his hands. “Fine then, as different as we are. I’ve seen how quickly love has turned to hate, and I don't want that to happen for us. I love you too much for that.”

“Erinkan and Emeka are happy,” I said, knowing it was a low blow, but also wanting to drive home my point.

“Well, let’s see how long they last!” he scoffed.

I took a few steps back and reached for a chair, my legs no longer able to carry me, marveling over how quickly being in paradise had become a fast moving train right back to hell.

He squatted in front of me. “Baby, this is our reality. It won’t be fair of me to put you in a position you aren’t equipped for.”

I looked at him with sad eyes. “Equipped?”

“But we can make it work. Instead of getting into an argument now, why don’t we figure out how to make it work. We don’t have to be conventional to be happy. We don’t even have to think about it now. Why don’t we just go with the flow? We’re in love and we’re happy, why don’t we just flow with that?”

He was still talking, but I was no longer listening, my heart broken by the realization that I would never be good enough for him.

“Do you understand, babes?” he asked, imploring eyes looking back at me.

“Totally,” I answered with a forced smile. “I totally agree,” then glancing at my watch. “I left a few things at Ife’s place. Let me quickly go pick them up before it gets too late.”

His brows furrowed. “Tonight?”

I stood. “Yeah, my purse is there and I have some important things in it. She might want this dress back as well.”

“Okay, but hurry back,” he said, leaning in for a kiss. “I know you’re the queen of bakes, but Joseph made a luscious looking cheesecake for dessert.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said, rising to my feet, knowing I wouldn't.

As the elevator door closed, he blew me a kiss but by then, my smile had started to wane. It was the worst kind of pain, to get my hopes up only for them to come crashing right back to the ground. But I knew I couldn't put myself through that ringer again.

It was past 9pm and traffic to the mainland had started to ease. Making the drive home, I didn’t even shed a single tear. I was emotionally drained. Yes, I was hurting and yes, it felt like my insides were being torn into a million little pieces, but no, I couldn't continue with the roller-coaster that was this relationship with Karibi.

Back at home, I was happy for the distraction from my mother as she hounded me for more details about the incident at the party. All I’d told her was that a friend of mine had been hurt, but she’d been able to figure out who it was.

“Is he okay now?” she asked, clearly concerned.

I nodded, hit by a wave of pain so strong, it almost prompted the tears I was trying to avoid. But I grit my teeth and willed them away. “He’s fine, Mom. He only suffered a small scratch.” Not like the wound I had from the dagger he’d just plunged in my heart.

As my mother and I talked, and as she told me how she too had seen through Seb’s pretense, I could feel the vibration of my phone in my bag. I didn't have to look to know it was Karibi calling. I’d been gone almost two hours and he was clearly wondering why I hadn’t returned.

Even though it was nothing in comparison with what he’d done to me, I found a way to get some satisfaction from the fact he would wait in vain that night.

–

Getting to work early the next day, I quickly immersed myself in my tasks for the day.

“So…” Sotonye prodded, as we wrapped up a catch-up meeting. She’d returned from her quick trip and was eager to talk about her brother. “I

noticed Erinkan’s picture is no longer in the apartment. That’s a good sign. A big step in the right direction.”

Not wanting to go into any details, I just offered a polite smile in response. Talking about him was the very last thing I wanted to do.

For the rest of the day, I had my eye on the door, scared he would burst in any moment, demanding why I hadn’t returned the night before. But he didn't come. By 4pm, the high level of dopamine I’d come to work with had long depleted, and I found myself beginning to sink into a bad place. So I made the unusual decision to leave early.

Making my way out of the building, I was saying my goodbyes to the Front Office Personnel, when I heard someone bellow my name.

“Isioma!”

I pretended not to hear and instead quickened my steps, hurrying to my car.

“Isioma!” Karibi called out, louder this time, as he emerged from the building. “Isioma, wait!”

Reluctantly, I turned around.

“What happened yesterday?” he asked, prominent lines between his eyes showing his confusion. “Why didn't you come back? And why didn't you answer any of my calls? I was worried out of my mind.”

I cast a nervous look around. “People can hear you, Karibi.”

“Screw them!” he exclaimed. “You left without coming back and you don't think I have good reason to be mad.”

He looked so genuinely upset that I was tempted to throw my arms around him, to apologise for not returning, to follow him back home to pick up where we left off. But I couldn't do it to myself. Not any longer.

“Karibi, my mother left me as a small child. Yes, I was blessed with a wonderful stepmother, but the truth is I’ve lived with a broken heart for almost all my life,” I said, looking up at him. “I only just pieced it together. I’m not about to have it broken all over again.”

“What do you mean broken all over again?” he cried, exasperated. “Didn’t you hear anything I said last night, Isioma? I love you. I’m in love with

you.”

“But love isn’t enough, you said so yourself.”

“Isioma, please don't do this to us again! Please!”

“I need so much more, Karibi. Much more than you can give me,” I sighed deeply. “Please, just let me go.”

He had an unfocused gaze as he took a step back, clearly struggling to understand what I was saying, what was happening. Turning around, I got into my car and as I drove away, as I saw him standing in the same spot staring after the car, my eyes clouded over and my hand flew to my mouth to stop the guttural scream that wanted to let loose at the realisation we were truly over. But this time, for good.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AND JUST LIKE I asked him to…he let me go.

In the days and weeks that followed, whatever there had ever been between Karibi and I became nothing but a distant memory, and we reverted to the strangers we had been before our very parallel worlds collided. We were back to the averted gazes, the polite greetings, the monosyllabic responses to unavoidable questions asked. But while it seemed to get easier for him as time went by, it got progressively worse for me, the ache in my heart intensifying instead of diminishing. My head knew being apart was the best thing for us, but my heart still missed him. No matter how cheerful I forced myself to be, all it took was one glimpse of him from afar, or to hear his voice down the hallway, or even the lingering smell of his perfume, and a cloud of despair would descend on me, reminding of what I'd lost. With every day that went by, my heart, soul and mind plummeted downward into less and less light, to darkness beyond measure, to pain that seemed limitless, into an abyss without any branch of hope, with nothing to catch or hold onto.

Sotonye had figured out something was not quite right pretty early. "What's going on with you and Karibi?" she'd asked. "I thought you two were giving things a go."

"It didn't work out," had been the curt answer I'd offered, and she hadn't pushed any further.

As I withdrew further and further into myself, I saw the concern in her eyes. As cheerful and enthusiastic as I tried to be around her, I could see in her eyes that she wasn't fooled. But she didn't try to prod me. From the way she also avoided discussing Karibi and now opted to go to his office instead of summoning him over like she would have before, I could see she was doing what she could to help me keep my distance.

And she wasn’t the only one who was worried about me. Almost three months later, and I hadn’t discussed it with anyone, not even Ife. But she didn’t relent in hounding me about the change in my behaviour.

“Your Mom called me again. She’s worried about you, Isioma.”

I rolled my eyes as I held the phone, having lost count of the number of times we’d had this same conversation.

“Worried about what, for crying out loud? I’m fine!” I insisted, upset that, despite all I was doing to live life as normal, it clearly wasn’t enough for the people closest to me. I made sure to always get home early enough to help out with dinner and a few house chores, watch TV with my mother and siblings and make small talk before retiring for bed. I made sure not to wear any long faces or hide away in my room, even though that was what I desperately wanted to do. But it clearly wasn’t fooling anyone, lest of all my mother. “Why does she keep on calling you? Why doesn’t she just believe me when I tell her that I’m fine?”

Why couldn't they all just leave me alone?

The one area of my life that didn't suffer, but instead thrived, was my work. In my desperation to forget about the never-shifting weight in my heart, I threw myself into my tasks like my life depended on it…because it actually did. I might not have been the ball of sunshine Sotonye hired, but I sure as heck was determined to give her the very best of everything she asked for, to be the very best technical and administrative support she could ever have hoped for.

I thought I was doing better, until I heard the words that took me right back to square one. Rotimi, the Personal Assistant of the outgoing CEO, Leo, was in Sotonye’s office, talking about the retirement party that was being planned for him, and as we went through the guest list, she snapped her fingers.

“Let’s not forget Mr. Graham-Hart’s plus one. Mrs. Fisher called to remind me about his plus one this morning,” she said, picking up her pen. “Do you know her name, so I can put it down?”

Sotonye stole a look at me, but I kept my eyes focused on Rotimi, doing everything I could not to appear ruffled by what I’d just heard.

“Ummm,” she began, clearly uncomfortable. “That would be Farida. Farida Bello.”

As Rotimi scribbled, as I busied myself with something on my laptop, trying to look distracted, I felt like I’d been immersed in water that was scalding hot and freezing cold at the same time. He’d gone back to her.

Back in my office, for the first time, I hated the glass panels and wished I had the walls that had given Ande some privacy. I wanted to throw off my façade, I wanted to have a good cry, I wanted to scream myself hoarse. But I could do none of that. The only thing I could do was suck it all up and move on. It had been three months, what was I expecting anyway? Him to be pining for me, waiting for me, beg me to return just like he’d done on Ara’s wedding day, declare his love for me like he had after getting back from hospital? He had clearly moved on.

“You okay?” Sotonye asked, on her way home, and I knew it was less about me working late.

I gave her my brightest smile. “I’m great. I just want to finish the draft contract so I can send it to Legal tonight. Remember it has go to Tyco before the end of the week.”

“It can wait till tomorrow, or even next week,” she said, concern all over her face. “Go home, Isioma. You can even take a few days off if you need to, or apply for your annual leave. It’s been almost a year since we started working together, and you haven’t gone on holiday.”

“Holiday? With everything that’s going on now?” I chuckled. “I’m fine, honest.”

She shrugged, not convinced. “Just don’t work too late.”

The smile wiped off my face the moment she was out the door, my pain, my familiar friend, returning to its seat in the middle of my chest. Staring at my computer, with the words on the contract I’d been trying to review somersaulting over each other, I wondered how long I could continue that way.

It took two hours, but I was finally able to send the document to our Legal team to review. It was 8pm and it had been a while I’d closed that late.

Walking out of my office, I had my head bent as I sent a text to my mother to let her know I'd be home late. Which is why I didn't see them until it was too late.

"Oh, hi there!" called out the sonorous voice. "Sotonye's Assistant, right?"

Looking up, I saw Karibi and Farida standing by the elevator. She smiled and waved, and all I wanted to do was run back to my office. But I didn't want to give him that satisfaction. Instead, I straightened and waved back, walking their way with my head held high. As I approached, for the first time in months, Karibi and I made, and held, eye contact. His brows were slightly furrowed, but other than that, his face was expressionless.

"Good evening," I said to him.

"Hi," was his own scant reply.

"Those cakes on Karibi's birthday, I asked Sotonye and she said you're the one who baked them," Farida gushed, still smiling. "You're so modest, you didn't even say. They were delicious. That lemon cheesecake! The best I've ever had!"

I smiled back, hating that she looked even more beautiful than I remembered, her caramel coloured skin, smooth and shiny. With her oval face and high cheekbones, her facial bone structure was textbook-perfect, and her tall frame and slender body were like of a Victoria Secret model's. But what struck me most were her eyes. Her large, child-like eyes did not have the caginess or hardness I had come to expect from women who looked like her. Instead, they looked kind, sincere, and almost gullible. Beautiful inside and out, no wonder he'd gone back to her.

"How've you been?" Karibi asked, making me turn back to him. His face wasn't quite as expressionless and as our eyes held again, he looked deep into mine, like he was trying to pry out something from them.

"Very well, thank you," I answered, just as the lift doors finally opened.

I quickly stepped inside, moving far into the cubicle to give the couple all the room they needed. As we made our way down, I watched as she interlocked her arm with his and as she brushed something off his jacket. I

swallowed hard, remembering when that person with him had been me, when I'd been the one holding him the way she was holding him now.

When the doors opened, I lingered back to spare everyone the torture of forced goodbyes. When I eventually made my way out of the building, it was in time to see him helping her into his BMW, the same BMW that he had driven me in. He walked over to the other side of the car and once he was in, Nosa drove off, with their Police Escort in tow. I didn't even know tears were streaming my face until I got into my car and checked my rear view mirror. In the safety of my car, I knew I could finally let my guard down. Resting my head on the steering wheel, I tortured myself with vivid images of him taking her back to the apartment, of him holding her in his arms and doing to her everything he'd done to me. What if he married her? What if he decided she was better 'equipped' to be his wife and married her? What if I would have to see them together for as long as I worked there? With a hollowness in my stomach, I realised I didn't know how much longer I could take it.

After the tedious traffic, by the time I got home, I was completely drained. The house was quiet so I retreated to my bedroom, grateful I didn't have to force on a happy face for my family's benefit. But after a shower, my mother walked into my room as I slipped into a nightgown.

"Oh, hi Mom," I said, looking away so she wouldn't see my red eyes. "I thought you'd all gone to bed."

"Isioma, biko hapu ebe ahu," she said, and from the quiver in her voice, I knew I hadn't been the only one crying that night. "Please, leave that place, I beg you. Leave that office if what is eating you is there."

I turned to look at her and when she saw my face, she burst into fresh tears, using her wrapper to wipe her face.

"My daughter, I know. I know you were dating your boss. I know that's the reason you have become a shadow of yourself these past few months. But I would rather starve than watch you fade away before my eyes. This job is not worth my losing you. A better one will come. I beg you. I'm using your late father to beg you. Please, leave that place!"

I put my arms around her and forced on a smile. “Mom, don’t be ridiculous. I’m fine, trust me,” I chuckled. “Mommy, you’re funny o! Don’t let Ify hear you say I should quit my job, this same job that is supposed to send her to school abroad. She will fight you o!” then kissing her on her cheek, I nestled my face against hers. “I know I’ve been off-colour for a while, but it’s nothing I won’t get over. I’ll be fine, I promise,” then feigning a scowl. “As for that Radio Nigeria called Ife, I’m going to pull that long mouth of hers.”

I smiled and feigned indignation as my mother defended Ife for telling her about Karibi, joking about how I was going to lock up her mouth and throw away the key. I joked enough to relax her and by the time she left my room, she was in a much better state than she came in.

But as I lay awake that night, replaying images of Karibi and Farida in my head, I couldn't help but think about what my mother had said. If only she’d known how correct she’d been! What was eating me truly did lie there in that 20-storey edifice. The question was if I would be able to escape from it, or be completely devoured by it.

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A few weeks later, standing with Uloma and Odiri in one of the ballrooms of the Intercontinental Hotel, where Leo’s retirement party was happening, I watched as Karibi walked in, with Farida on his arm. She was wearing a plunging pleated satin dress, in the same shade of amethyst purple as his tie, and they were a picture-perfect couple. Hours later, as Karibi was announced the new CEO of the company, I watched her applaud him as he took to the podium to make a speech, and I finally understood what he’d been trying to tell me the night of our breakup. I realised that was the kind of woman he needed; a well-bred aristocrat like himself, a woman with a background similar to his, a background I clearly didn’t have.

When he was done with his speech, I watched him return to his seat beside her, acknowledging greetings from well-wishers, and I knew without a shadow of doubt that very soon, he would marry her…or someone like her. As bad as I felt now, I knew I was standing on the precipice of something a whole lot worse.

Not wanting to subject myself to anymore, I slipped out of the room quietly. And as I made the drive home, I wanted to cry, I wanted the release tears would give me. But the tears didn't come. What did come was a deep sadness, an empty unhappiness more intense than any of what had preceded it.

Getting home, I entered the flat through the kitchen door. Even though it was late, from the sound of TV in the living room, I knew my mother was probably waiting for me, and I wasn't ready to face her, or any of them for that matter. Taking a pot of leftover jollof rice off the cooker, I reached for a spoon before sinking to the floor and shoving its contents into my mouth, my spirit completely broken.

The door opened and my mother walked in. Her face fell at the sight of me, sitting on the floor in the green Badgley Mischka dress Ife had convinced me to get for the occasion, scoffing rice into my mouth. She sat on the floor beside me, and just as I was steeling myself to be strong, the door opened right behind her.

And in walked Hattie.

“You left me no choice,” my mother said, crying as she shrugged. “I had to tell her.”

“Oh, my poor girl,” Hattie said, her lower lip quivering as she lowered herself to the floor beside me.

And the tears finally came.

There, sandwiched between the two women who loved me the most, I cried.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I AGREE WITH EBELE. You need to leave,” Hattie said. “It’s not good for you to have to see him every single day. It’s not going to help you heal.”

We were sitting in the living room and I’d told them, my two mothers, the story right from the beginning, from our first night at the beach chalet, to him telling me we didn't have a real future together, to me having to watch as he moved on with someone else.

“I can’t leave my job,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ve waited a lifetime for an opportunity like this.”

“And another one will come,” my mother cut in. “But please, enough is enough. You have been wasting away before my eyes and it simply can’t go on any longer. Whatever it is you’re worried about, we’ll be fine. The shop is doing well, anyị ga-esi ebe ahụ. We will eat from there.”

I contemplated her words for a moment, briefly seduced by the idea of dropping everything and running away from it all, but the enormity of the suggestion overwhelmed me. “No, I can’t do that. You’ve only had the shop for a few months.”

“No, Isioma,” Hattie said, her voice firmer than I’d ever heard it. “You’ve been taking care of your family for so long. It's time for you to have a break. I'll support Ebele with whatever she needs, but it's time for you to rest,” she looked at my mother and I could tell they had already discussed this. “I want you to come back to London with me.”

I looked from one mother to the other and I felt the fight slowly seep out of my body. “What happens to Ify? What happens to our plans for her?”

“Ebele and I have already discussed, and your sister will come over as soon as travel arrangements can be made for her,” Hattie said, reaching for my

mother’s hand. “Ebele took care of my daughter. It would be my joy to be able to do the same for her.”

The two women embraced and the lump that reformed in my throat had less to do with my broken heart but more with how surreal it was to see the two most important women in my life so bonded.

As we talked into the night, making plans, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Yes, I was going to miss my job, but being around Karibi was eating me alive, killing me slowly. And I couldn't do it anymore.

–

The next day was a Friday, and I sent Sotonye a text message, asking to meet her outside the office for lunch. As I sat in the quiet restaurant I’d chosen, I was overcome with nerves and anxiety, dreading what I was about to do to the woman who had given me the opportunity of a lifetime.

She walked in a few minutes after I was seated, the frown on her face evidence she knew this was no ordinary meeting.

“What’s going on, Isioma?” she asked as she sat, not bothering with pleasantries. “Why didn’t you come to work today? And why summon me here for a meeting?”

Swallowing hard, I decided it was best to cut right to the chase and handed her the envelope with my resignation letter. “Words will never be able to contain my gratitude, Sotonye. You changed my life and I will be eternally grateful. I’m giving the required three-month notice and I’ll be happy to help select and train my replacement-”

She shook her head several times as she read the letter, before tossing it back on the table. “I’m not accepting this, Isioma. I’m not accepting your resignation.”

Without any warning, my eyes pooled with tears. “I beg you, Sotonye. I have to leave.”

There was a visible clench to her jaw and she shook her head. “I should have put an end to this thing with Karibi from the moment I saw you two making poppy eyes at each other in London, from the moment I heard you

two spent Christmas together," she sighed deeply and sat back in her seat, rubbing her temple.

"I'm sorry," was all I could say.

She sighed again. "You have nothing to apologise for. Yes, as your boss, I'm mad as hell," then looking at me, she reached for my hand. "But as a woman, I understand. I actually thought you'd been able to crack him, to reach a place he's kept guarded since his last major relationship, but I guess I was wrong. But don't give up your job, Isioma. Take time off instead. Take as much time as you want. Take a whole year off, if that's what you'll need."

"Sotonye, I don't think-"

"If in six months you still feel the same way, then I'll accept this," she insisted. "If by the end of the year, you still want to resign, then I'll have no choice but to let you go. But all I'm asking, pleading with you to do is just take some time off to regroup. You don't even have to wait three months. I'm happy to let you go right away. Take some time to get yourself together, breathe some fresh air away from all this madness, and I can bet you'll feel better in no time."

I smiled, grateful that she understood and was putting her concern for me as a person over her needs for me as her employee. As our meals were served, I told her about Hattie's offer to take me back with her to London.

"When does she leave?" she asked.

"On Monday."

"I think it's perfect. Apart from giving you a much-needed change of scene, it will give you two a chance to really get to know each other. I'll bet you haven't spoken much since Christmas." I'd told her about our reconciliation when I was in London.

"But what's going to happen with you? Me leaving without getting you a replacement?"

She smiled. "I can manage, don't worry. I'm glad to wait, as long as I can look forward to having the old Isioma back, the happy girl with the twinkle in her eye that I employed."

I smiled in return. I too was looking forward to having the old Isioma back.

–

That weekend, I got a good deal on a ticket and on Monday, I left Lagos with Hattie. I was initially worried about the awkwardness of having to spend so much time with a woman I barely knew, worried she would want to chat non-stop. But instead, she gave me the space I craved for, talking only when I wanted to. But even in the silence, from her radiated a warmth and assurance that told me that she was there for me anytime I needed her.

It was different being in London in the summer. As the taxi ferried us from the airport to her home in East London, memories from Christmas assaulted me. Driving past the underground station near her house, I saw us, Karibi and I, walking with arms interlinked back to that station, and my head on his shoulders in the train ride back to Westminster Station. The memories were so clear, so vivid, I could still smell his cologne, still feel the plushness of his cashmere sweater. I realised then that being continents apart wouldn't be enough to make me heal, and that it would be a long, slow road to recovery.

Getting to the house, we were greeted by a bubbly young woman with platinum blond hair and naturally blushed cheeks dotted with freckles. She embraced me like she'd known me all her life.

"You're even more beautiful than your pictures," my sister, Karen, raved. "I'm so happy you're here. I've looked forward to this day for so long."

She led me up a narrow stairway to a small room, which, from the Arsenal jersey pinned to the wall, I could tell had once been Keith's. Before I even had a chance to drop my bags, she'd connected him on her phone, and I was soon waving back at a very tan and handsome blonde man.

"Wow, you're gorgeous," he called out.

"She's proper fit, isn't she?" Karen echoed.

"This is really monumental and I wish I was there to welcome you home. Mom has been praying for this for a very long time."

"Are you still in Lisbon?" I asked the only thing I knew about this person who was as good as a stranger.

He chuckled. “No, that was Christmas with my now ex-partner. I live in Bethnal Green, just a bus ride away from Mom’s. But I’m in Zurich at the moment, on a short teaching exchange program. I’ll be back before Ifeyinwa gets here in September.”

I had to smile at the effort he put into pronouncing her name, knowing he and Karen had probably been coached by Hattie about how not to murder our names. Their eagerness and enthusiasm were heart warming and I found myself soon feeling less awkward and more at home.

“He’s the brains in the family,” Karen said with a eye-roll when he was off the phone, but I could still see the pride she had for him. “He can’t seem to get enough of the academia while I couldn’t even make it past my A-levels.

As I unpacked, she went on to tell me how her partner of several years had ‘run off with some slag he met at work’, leaving her with a fresh mortgage on a house they’d only just bought. In the end, she’d sold the house and moved back home to her mother’s, after spending time with her great-grandmother in York.

“You really should go there. The peace and quiet will do you a world of good,” she said, beaming. “And she’ll be well made up to see you again. She’s never stopped talking about you. When she met Ifeanyi last summer, she cried so much, I actually thought she was going to pass out.”

We continued to talk late into the night, and I ended up telling her all about Karibi.

“Sod him! It’s his loss if he let a beautiful woman like him go,” she retorted, when I was done. “I know how broken up you must feel about it, but I tell you what, you’ll be fine. After Simon and I split, I realised the best way to move on was cold turkey. I moved away from our neighborhood and cut off all communication with him and anyone who reminded me of him. The less reminders I had of him, the less I thought of him. By moving here, you’re already on the right track,” and then with a wink, added. “I’ll make sure you forget about him, don’t you worry.”

I laughed, wanting to remind her I was a good six years older than she was, but soon found myself warming to the idea.

–

Over the next week, thankfully Karen didn't get up to anything crazy in her quest to ‘make me forget about him’. Instead, she and Hattie integrated me into their lives. In the mornings, before leaving for work, Hattie would leave breakfast for me in the oven. Karen left for her job in the West End a bit later, but would make sure I had everything I needed to be comfortable; a fully stocked fridge and more than enough to watch on TV. Both would call me several times during the day on the new line I’d gotten shortly after my arrival and, when they got back from work, we would tuck into some sort of takeaway; Chinese, Indian, or just classic fish and chips, while watching their favorite soap operas on TV. It was a simple life, but exactly what I needed to forget what I was running away from. It also made feel so comfortable in their company that I soon never second-guessed myself when I was with them. They soon started feeling very much like family.

The following week, I was surprised by the arrival of my older brother, Ifeanyi. I actually burst into tears when he walked into the living room with Hattie. It had been years since his last visit to Nigeria and as we embraced, I was overjoyed by how different he looked, clean and sober. Gone was the glazed hardness in his eyes, and a face so thin and drawn, it looked skeletal. Instead, standing before me was a handsome man with the same twinkling eyes and chubby cheeks he’d had as a young boy. It was the best surprise I could have asked for.

The weekend after he arrived, we all left for York to visit Hattie’s famous ‘Nan. As we disembarked from the taxi in front of the small cottage which sat on acres of well-tended greenery, I was surprised to see a smiling woman approach us; tall, slim and walking straight, her short grey hair neat in a perfect bob, like it had been styled with old fashioned rollers. For a woman who was almost ninety, this hadn’t been what I’d expected. She made for me first, hugging me with a strength that surprised me. Whatever I’d expected Hattie’s ‘Nan, my great grandmother, to be like, this wasn’t it.

As we had a delicious dinner of steak and kidney pie, ‘Nan talked non-stop about my birth and how Hattie had been minutes away from giving birth to me on the bus, if she hadn’t been rescued by a kind West Indian nurse. From the way Hattie and Karen completed her sentences, it was obviously a story they’d heard several times before. Even Ifeanyi was nodding and

smiling like he already knew it. But there I was, the subject of the tale, hearing it for the very first time. Then she brought out a box full of old pictures, and I marveled at pictures of Hattie and my young father. I stared at them, amazed. Yes, I'd heard that he'd been quite taken by his bride, but seeing the way he looked at her, the way they looked at each other, showed just how deep their love had been.

"Damdi was a good lad," 'Nan said, and I smiled at the way she mispronounced his name. "He didn't have much, but he worked to the bone to take care of his family. He was a good lad."

A tear rolled down my face as I nodded in agreement, looking at the young, brown skinned man with the broad nose and eager eyes. He was a good lad indeed.

Waking up the next morning, I could see why Karen loved it so much there. Looking out of my window at the expanse of green with more hues than I could ever have imagined possible, with the only noise coming from the quiet song of the birds and the susurration of the leaves of nearby trees, I felt completely at peace.

"Her second husband left it to her," Ifeanyi said, as we sat on the patio after a hearty breakfast of bread, eggs, bacon and hash browns. Karen had left for London immediately after, and Hattie and 'Nan had gone to do some grocery shopping. "She met him after Hattie left for Nigeria, and Jackie, her other granddaughter had also moved out of home."

"So she moved here with him?"

He nodded. "And he left her the place after he died. You need to have a look at the grounds. It's spectacular. No wonder she isn't aging. Just the air alone is enough to rejuvenate one."

I smiled at my brother, still so happy to see him the way I preferred to remember him. "You can't imagine how happy I am to see you like this."

He nodded, knowing exactly what I meant. We sat quietly for a while, silently acknowledging the lost years his waywardness and drug addiction had cost us.

"So, Mom told me about…your boss," he said, a small smile on his face.

I shrugged, the tranquility I felt disrupted by the reference to Karibi. He continued looking at me, pressing me for more information with his eyes, and I found myself baring my heart to him, telling him how I'd fallen in love with, and been heartbroken by, Karibi Graham-Hart.

"Isioma, were you really trying to pry a proposal out of the guy?" Ifeanyi asked, his eyes boring into mine.

I recoiled, not believing what he'd just thrown at me. "Did you hear anything I said at all? About him saying I wasn't equipped to be his wife, and instead asking me to be his mistress?"

"What I heard was you boxing him into a corner and trying to change his whole paradigm of life after one dance. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. You said so yourself that he'd only just told you he loved you for the first time. And then you were already expecting him to get down on one knee and propose?"

I hissed, feeling indignant, enraged at my brother for taking Karibi's side.

"A lot of men would have lied to you, told you whatever it was you wanted to hear, just to get what they wanted. It sounds to me that, harsh as it may have sounded, this guy has always been honest with you. He's probably suffering just as badly as you are right now."

An image of Karibi and Farida standing arm-in-arm flashed in my head and I grunted. "I doubt that."

"Just keep an open mind, Isioma. You never know."

I was grateful to hear 'Nan's old Vauxhall Vectra pull into the driveway, grateful I didn't have to hear anymore of my brother waxing philosophical. As much as I loved him, I wasn't about to subject myself to any parallel world rationalisation of Karibi's actions, when the truth was there for all to see.

For the rest of the week with 'Nan, no more was said about Karibi. Instead, Ifeanyi and I spent most of the time hearing stories about how we'd been as young children, and as 'Nan and Hattie told funny story after funny story, I couldn't help but wonder how life would have turned out if our dad hadn't made the decision to return to Nigeria with his young family.

“Seeing you, my heart is now whole,” ‘Nan said, both her hands on my face, as she bade us goodbye. “My joy is now complete!”

I kissed both her weathered cheeks, and knew it wouldn't be long before I returned to the perfect little cottage in the perfect little town, to see her again.

From York we headed to Manchester to visit Hattie’s younger sister, my aunt, Jackie. Almost identical with her sister, she was slightly heavier set and her skin darkened by what was clearly a fake tan. Her blonde hair was a rich champagne shade that fell in loose waves to her shoulders, and her expertly applied make-up and well manicured nails gave away that she took personal grooming seriously. As a nurse, I hadn’t expected her to be quite as glamorous. But glamorous or not, she’d been very emotional seeing me, having already met Ifeanyi the previous summer.

Ifeanyi had only been able to stay a few days, as he had to return to Johannesburg where he was set to start a new job as an IT Project Manager, his first job after graduating University. Saying goodbye had been hard for me, especially considering the length of time that passed between our last goodbye and the next time we did see each other.

“I promise to come home this Christmas,” he said as we stood by the taxi that was taking him back to London, from where he was to catch his flight. “I also want to see the shop we were able to get for mother dearest.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I said, hugging him again. “I’m so proud of you. Dad would be so proud of you.”

“Yeah, for starting my first job at the age of thirty-six,” he chuckled in self-deprecation.

“It’s not how soon, but how well,” I said, giving him a playful punch.

“Try to remember that as well,” he answered, all traces of humor gone.

At the risk of getting upset by what he was insinuating, I gave him one last hug, before allowing Hattie and Jackie say their goodbyes as well. Watching the car as it made its way down the road, it struck me that I couldn't remain in that state of nothingness forever. Sooner than later, I was going to have to decide what I wanted to do with my life.

The opportunity to decide presented itself later that night, as Hattie, Jackie and I sat in the backyard, drinking lemonade and enjoying the summer evening.

“So, what are your plans, luv?” Jackie asked. “Are you going to return to Nigeria or will you be staying back in London?”

“I’ll stay,” I answered, even though I hadn’t thought about it prior to that moment. “After settling Ify in school, I’ll work on getting myself a place in school as well. I have some savings, so I guess we’ll see how far that takes me.”

As Hattie and Jackie nodded in approval, I was filled with a conviction that it was exactly what I needed to do; say goodbye to my old life.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AS MANCHESTER DIDN'T HOLD any of the painful memories from London, I felt free enough to explore the city on my own, spending hours on end in The Trafford Centre and Barton Arcade, buying things I really didn't need, loving the release the retail therapy gave me.

On one of those trips to town, as I made my way home, I caught sight of a popular hair salon and found myself walking in, asking for a haircut. My hair had been almost waist-length for the longest time and I was suddenly eager for a change.

By the time the hairdresser was done with me, I stared at my reflection with satisfaction, happy with the shoulder-length layered style and the sunflower blonde highlights. Taking a picture, I was tempted to send it to my dear friends, Ife and Ozioma. I hated that I hadn’t gotten in touch with them before leaving the country, or in the weeks that I’d been away, but it was all part of my recovery process. I’d barely even spoken to my own mother and siblings. I just needed a few weeks away from every aspect of my old life; friends and family included. It was only for a short time and by the time I returned to Nigeria for Ify, I’d be ready to reach out to them again. So instead, I sent the picture to Karen and threw my phone back in my bag before heading out of the salon.

Walking back home, my phone vibrated and I smiled as I reached for it, expecting to see Karen’s response of approval.

Except the message wasn’t from Karen.

Where are you?

My eyes widened when I saw that I hadn’t sent the picture to Karen after all…but to Karibi.

I miss you.

My hand quivered as the last message dropped, my heart catapulted months back. No, no this couldn't be happening. Before he had the chance to send another message, I quickly blocked and deleted his number, before deleting the chat. I was still shaking like a leaf when I got home, distraught that so many weeks away had still not exorcised me of my obsession with a man who hurt me every chance he got.

I lay awake in bed that night, unable to sleep, furious with Karibi for disturbing my peace from so far away. When I was done fighting sleep, I wandered downstairs to see if I could make myself a cup of cocoa. I was pandering in the kitchen when Jackie walked in.

“I’m so sorry. I hope I didn't wake you.”

“Not at all,” she answered, beaming as she poured herself a glass of whisky. “After a long day at work, this is how I unwind…with a glass of happy juice. Do you want some? It could do more for you than whatever it is you have in that mug.”

Smiling, I set down my mug as she poured me a glass of whisky.

“So,” she said, as we sat on the kitchen table, nursing our drinks. “Your mom says you’re here trying to get over a fella. Someone you really loved?”

I shrugged, not trusting myself to speak. The encounter with Karibi that evening had left me so raw, I feared I would burst into tears if I as much as said a word.

She nodded in understanding. “That’s rough. Having your heart broken is real tough.”

“How come you never married?” I asked, wanting an answer to a question that had been niggling in my heart since we arrived. Even at her age, she was still beautiful and I couldn't understand why she’d chosen to live a solitary life.

“What I like to tell people that is that only plonkers and tossers ever came my way,” she answered, a sad smile on her face. “But the truth is, I think I spent my life trying to find a man who would love me the way your dad

loved my sister. I kept on waiting for the man who would look at me like the sun shone right out of my lady parts."

I leaned forward, intrigued, wanting to hear more.

"She was a mess from the moment she got back to London. From the very minute I opened the door to find her there, she was a right mess. She knew she'd made a horrible mistake leaving, but there was no way to change it. 'Nan had already moved to York, and I was working four jobs just to put myself through school. She wrote him letters every week, but when they came back unopened, I could understand why. She'd broken his heart as well."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both of us deep in thought as we sipped our drinks.

"When she finally made it back to Nigeria and heard he'd married someone else," she shook her head at the memory. "She was shattered…devastated! I don't think she ever really recovered from it. I think she went into her next marriage still in love with him. I believe she loves him till this day," then shrugging added. "I guess there are truly some loves that last a lifetime."

Long after we'd retired to bed, for the first time, my own heartbreak wasn't at the forefront of my mind. For the first time, I thought about the young Hattie, heartbroken from her own devices, and I was filled with nothing but compassion for her.

We spent another week with Jackie before leaving. Holding me tight as we said goodbye, I promised my aunt I'd be back soon, and I meant it. I'd quite fallen in love with her city and was already contemplating applying to a few schools in its vicinity.

"I had a wonderful time," I said to Hattie, as our train pulled out of Manchester Piccadilly station. It had been almost four glorious weeks that had given me a better insight about my mother and her side of the family… and a better understanding of who I was as a person. While it hadn't done much to dull the ache I still felt in my heart, it had opened my eyes to the beauty and love that surrounded my coming into the world. "Thank you… Mom."

Tears pooled in her eyes as she squeezed my hand tight. As we embraced, even as I contemplated the complexities of addressing two women with the same title, my heart was full to overflowing, a thirty-two year old wound healed.

Two hours later, our train pulled into Euston Square Station in London, and a few train rides and a bus ride later, we were back home. As we disembarked the bus a few doors from the house, I noticed someone sitting on the front porch. As we approached, the person rose to his feet and I stopped walking, paralysed to the spot when I saw who it was.

It was Karibi.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I STOOD, ROOTED TO the spot, wondering if it was some sort of mirage.

“Hello, luv,” Hattie said to him, taking my bag from my hand and walking past me. Karen was standing by the open door, watching us with dancing eyes.

That was when I realised I was the only one surprised by his being there.

“Isioma,” he said, walking towards me, but I retreated, taking several steps back.

“What do you want?” I demanded. “How did you find me?”

“Your Mother told me you were here. I went to your house back in Lagos and she told me.”

“You went to my house or you sent Nosa to my house?” I retorted, my anger rising at everyone who had been complicit in the arrangement.

“Isioma, please listen to me,” he said, trying to close the gap between us, but I took just as many steps back. “Can we go inside and talk?”

“We’ve already said everything that needs to be said.”

“For the love of God, please listen!” he exclaimed. “Why are you doing everything you can to sabotage us? Why have you been pushing me away? These last few months have been hell for me. I miss you so much, it’s killing me.”

“You looked anything but dead when you were with Farida,” I retorted.

He looked momentarily confused. “There’s nothing going on between Farida and I.”

“Please spare me these lies, Karibi,” I cut in, incensed he had the nerve to deny something I’d seen with my own eyes. “I asked you to let me go. I

even left Lagos for you. What more do you want from me?”

“How can I let you go when I’m in love with you?” he asked, his voice a mere whisper.

“You can and you will. I’m not ‘equipped’ to be with you, remember? Why don’t you go find the woman who will be ‘equipped’ to be your wife?”

He shut his eyes and rubbed his temples. “That was a wrong choice of words. I didn't mean it that way.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore,” I maintained. “It doesn’t matter because I no longer love you. I’ve had four months to work through whatever it was I thought I felt for you and it’s over now.”

“I know you don't mean that.”

“Oh yes, I do. Yes, I do,” was my defiant answer. “I’m not that bubblehead who let you walk all over her, that fool that practically had to beg for the crumbs you threw, that idiot who allowed herself be content with being your secret lover.”

“Isioma, I’m so sorry-”

“There’s no need to apologise. It’s all water under the bridge. But so are my feelings for you,” then steeling myself, I looked him in the eye. “I don't love you anymore, Karibi. You need to leave. There’s nothing for you here.”

He deflated, and I had to look away, before the raw pain in his face prompted tears of my own. We remained standing there in the street, me with my eyes averted, and him, with his shoulders slumped.

“I’ve had a long day. It was a long trip,” I finally said, breaking the silence. “I really need to go inside.”

He nodded. “Sure. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

“It’s fine. Bye,” I said, brushing past him and walking to the house, right past Hattie as she stood by the open door.

“Couldn't you at least listen to what he had to say?” she asked. “He came all this way-”

“Stay out of it. You have no idea what this is all about.”

“What would it have taken to just hear what he had to say?” Hattie snapped. “You’re just as unforgiving as your father!”

I turned to face her, so incensed, I was seeing red. “How dare you! How dare you compare this with what you did to my father!”

“It’s exactly the same thing. I made a mistake, your fella made a mistake, people make mistakes!”

I glared at her, biting down the awful words that were colliding in my mouth, words I would never be able to take back. I walked past her up the stairs, straight to the room I now called mine. Once there, I sat on the bed, not daring to look out the window to see if Karibi was still there. My heart was still racing a mile a minute, and it was taking everything in me not to rush back to him, to tell him I meant nothing of what I said. But as I replayed in my head images of him and Farida, my resolve returned.

“Knock, knock,” came Karen’s voice from the door. “Can I come in?”

I turned to look at her, angry I’d forgotten to lock myself in. I shrugged and turned away, hoping she’d get the message and leave.

“I’m so sorry, babes. I’m the one who told him when you’d be back,” she said, sitting beside me on the bed. “He showed up here about a week ago and looked so heartbroken, I couldn't help myself.”

There was undeniable remorse in her voice, and when she reached to hug me, there was no way I could stay angry with her.

Later that night, as I tossed and turned in my bed, I knew that Karibi was only half the reason why. Getting out of bed and opening my door, I saw that the light in Hattie’s room was still on and her door ajar.

“You can’t sleep either?” I said, peering in.

She looked up from the pictures she’d been going through, smiling when she saw me. “No. It happens when I’ve been away from my bed for too long.”

But we both knew that wasn’t the reason why.

“What are you looking at?” I asked, sitting beside her. “Some of the pictures we got from ‘Nan?”

She nodded and chuckled, handing me a picture of a young Nnamdi awkwardly trying to feed his infant son. “The way he held the bottle, I was scared he was going to choke the poor boy.”

I smiled as I looked at the picture. As clueless as my father looked with the child in his arms, his eyes still shone with the excitement of a man who had found perfect bliss.

“I’m sorry about how I spoke to you earlier,” I said, placing my hand over hers.

“I’m sorry for accusing you of being as unforgiving as your dad,” she said, squeezing it. “I just felt so bad for your…for that gentleman,” she looked at me. “Don’t close your heart, Isioma. We're all human beings who make mistakes.”

I grunted. “He knew exactly what he was saying when he told me I wasn’t equipped to be his wife.”

“Like I said, we all make mistakes.”

I opted not to argue, as it was understandably a sore subject for her. After looking at several more pictures, I spent the night in her bedroom. But sleep refused to find me, even as she lay asleep. I replayed not only the events of that evening, but from that evening several months prior.

‘We don't have to be married to be together. We can still be happy in each other’s company…in each other’s love…Since when has love been enough…Baby, this is our reality. It won’t be fair of me to put you in a position you aren’t equipped for.’

And it infuriated me anew, making me all the more determined to keep him firmly in my past, despite the fact that in my head and heart, he remained a dogged part of my present.

–

I returned to Lagos alone at the start of September. Ify had gotten her student visa and Keith, who returned from Zurich shortly before I left, had been able to secure her a place in a nearby college to write her A-levels. The plan was to return with her by mid-September, following which Hattie would start processing my own permanent papers.

“Na wa o, Isioma! Two good months! Is that how life is?” Ife lamented when I called her. “I couldn't believe it when your Mom told me you’d travelled. That you could do that kind of thing without even letting me know.”

“I’m so sorry, babes. It all happened quite fast.”

“Even your ‘best friend’, Ozioma, called me, all worried about not being able to reach you. I had to tell her that we were in the same boat o, that I too had no idea where you were.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologised again. “But you know I was in bad way before I left.”

“That you were,” she answered. “So how do you feel now? Do I have my old friend back?”

I smiled, wishing I could tell her I’d totally been able to forget about what it was that had chased me away in the first place. “I’m much better. I really needed the time away. I had a really wonderful time with Hattie, my aunt, my great grandmother…it was an experience of a lifetime.”

And it truly was.

We made plans to meet up for lunch before my return and I continued catching up with my mother and siblings, happy to hear how well her shop was doing and that my younger brother, Ike, had returned to Abuja to start a new job with an engineering company. Ifechi was expecting to start his National Youth Service with the November batch, and we talked about the possibility of him joining Ify and I in London afterwards, for his postgraduate studies. Life was good, even without the job I’d thought was our lifeline.

Several times, I made a mental note to call Sotonye, to tell her that I’d decided not to return, and apologise for being unable to even see through the requisite notice period. I knew she wouldn't be pleased, especially after the concession she’d made allowing me to leave in the first place. I hated that I would be paying her back that way, and prayed I would find a way to make it up to her. She’d been nothing but kind to me.

–

“So you quit that job true, true,” Ozioma remarked, as we talked on the phone the next day.

I was seated on a stool in front of my mother’s shop in Balogun Maket, watching the busy flow of shoppers on the hunt for bargain buys and traders selling their wares.

“When we see, we’ll talk more,” I answered. “A lot happened. When I tell you, you’ll understand.”

“My dear, what matters is that you’re happy. Yes, it was a great job, but if it was affecting your mental and emotional wellbeing, then it wasn't worth it.”

Her voice trailed off as something, or someone, caught my eye in the crowd. Craning my neck, I saw a man making his way through the throng of shoppers. I shook my head, deciding it couldn't be who I thought it was, especially as he navigated his way with the deftness of someone who’d been there before. But as he advanced, my mouth went dry when I saw that it was indeed Karibi, right there in Balogun market, approaching my mother’s shop. It was the peak of afternoon and the sun was at its most unforgiving, but apart from the beads of sweat on his forehead, he seemed unbothered by the people shoving towards and past him.

“Let me call you back,” I said to Ozioma, disconnecting the call and rising to my feet.

“Oh, Karibi,” my mother called out from where she stood. “Welcome.”

I turned to look at her, not sure which shocked me more; him being there, the familiar way she addressed him or that she was addressing him at all.

He bowed in greeting to my mother before turning to look at me. “Hi, Isioma.”

“Hi,” I answered almost breathlessly, still not sure if I was dreaming.

“Nweta ya oche! Get him a chair!” my mother instructed one of her Shop Assistants, before turning to us, smiling. “Why don't you come inside? It’s much cooler.”

“I’m fine here, thanks,” I answered, not wanting to prolong whatever it was that had brought Karibi there.

She cast an apologetic glance his way before shutting the glass door of the air-conditioned shop.

Taking the seat he'd been offered, he pulled it closer to where I sat. "Welcome home."

I shrugged. "Thank you." I had several questions, including how he had become so familiar with my mother and why he was there at all, but decided not to give him the satisfaction of asking either.

"Your Mom is really lovely," he said. "When I went to your house asking for you, I had no idea how she'd receive me."

I looked at him, unable to contain myself. "So going to the mainland didn't turn you into a pillar of salt after all."

He smiled. "I deserve that."

I looked away. "So how have you been? How's the CEO life treating you?"

"It's rough. It's a lot of work, a whole lot more than I thought it would be. It's not helping that I'm still leading our fundraising efforts, so I have a very full plate."

"Yet, you can find the time to come to Balogun Market smack in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon," I retorted. "And with no Police Escort in sight."

He was quiet for a few minutes. "Isioma, I've been myopic my whole life, some would even call it bigoted," he finally said. "But it took losing you to open my eyes. With Erinkan, I think what I was in love with was the idea of her. I'd written the traits of my dream woman on paper, and there she was, this woman that ticked every box. But with you," he turned to me. "With you, my heart opened, really opened, and I understood love for the very first time. I finally understood that we don't lead love, we're led by it."

I shook my head and smiled. "Don't beat yourself up, Karibi. You weren't being bigoted or myopic, just realistic. You were absolutely right, we would never have worked out. Just look how out of place you look here. I spotted you miles away because you were sticking out like a sore thumb. You don't belong here, but on the contrary, this is my world."

"Isioma-"

“And I know I kept on hampering on the word, but you were right about me not being equipped to be in your world, or the wife of the CEO of one of the biggest companies in the country,” I chuckled. “I don’t even know the first thing about hosting any of those your fancy dinner parties. I can’t even pronounce the name of half the things you like to eat. We would never have worked out,” then looking him in the eye. “We’re like oil and water, Karibi. I think it’s best for you to go back to your world and leave me in mine.”

“Isioma, I know I hurt you. But I’m begging you to please give us another chance.”

I smiled and patted his hand. “Seriously, Karibi, there are no hard feelings…not anymore. You’ll always be dear to me, but let’s just leave what we had in the past.”

He said nothing and we sat there in silence for a while, despite the noise and chaos around us. After almost an hour, he looked at me and I for the first time noticed how he seemed to have aged several more years since the last time I saw him.

“I guess I should head back to the office,” he said.

I nodded. “I guess you should.”

He paused a bit longer, before rising to his feet and walking away. As I watched him leave, I tried to swallow back the lump in my throat, hating how everything in me still yearned for him. But I hadn’t come this far just to come this far. After everything he’d put me through in the past, I wasn't going to offer myself to him to hurt me some more.

“You are really Nnamdi’s daughter!” my mother retorted from the door of her shop.

I turned to glare at her. “You have a whole lot of explaining to do. How did we go from you demanding I quit my job to being a member of his fan club?”

“About a month ago, he came over to the house and introduced himself,” she answered, taking the seat Karibi had vacated. “That first time he came, we talked for hours-”

“First time he came? Meaning he came more than once?”

“We talked for hours,” she repeated, giving me a firm look. “And I finally understood. I was the one who told him you were in London, and after speaking with Hattie, we agreed it would be better for him to see you instead of talk on the phone,” she shook her head. “Well, I heard that didn’t go so well.”

“And he reported as such to you, I’ll bet.”

“He came here to meet with me after his return, and I told him to give you a bit more time because I know how hurt you were before you left. When you got back yesterday, I’m the one who told him to come and meet you here today.”

I hissed under my breath, never having felt more betrayed by the person I least expected to.

“If your father hadn’t shunned Hattie like he did…”

“If he hadn’t shunned her, he wouldn't have married you.”

She pursed her lips. “If he hadn’t shunned Hattie like he did, you and Ifeanyi wouldn't have spent so many years without her in your life. So think about that, as you’ve decided to harden your heart the way he did,” she rose to her feet. “You can stay out here and torture yourself if you want to. I’m going back inside. My body is no longer built for this heat. I also don’t want to give you the opportunity to insult me. Azụghị m gị ka isi kparịa ndị mmadụ. God knows I didn’t raise you to be rude.”

I crossed my arms defiantly, not caring if I was turning several shades darker under the hot September sun. The wounded look in Karibi’s eyes haunted me and I had to regurgitate images of him and Farida to feel justified about my stance. I remembered standing behind them in the elevator, her arm interlinked with his, them walking into Leo’s retirement party looking like Barack and Michelle Obama, her cheering him on as he was announced CEO, and that fed my resolve anew. I wasn't going to let him hurt me again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I BLAME MYSELF FOR not stopping this when I had the chance. I blame myself for thinking what you had would run its course. God knows I’d have stopped it if I knew you both would end up so broken,” Sotonye said as we met up for lunch, yet again. I’d finally called to let her know I was back in town and had made the decision to leave for good.

Sitting in front of her, all I could do was look down at my plate of untouched food. “I’m really sorry.”

She shook her head and sighed. “It’s just a mess. Karibi has hardly been himself since you left,” she looked at me. “Not to mention that I miss you something awful. I just wish I’d nipped this in the bud earlier.”

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I said, looking at her and hoping she could see the sincerity in my eyes. “You took a chance on me when you really didn't need to. You changed my story -”

“No, God changed your story, Isioma,” she answered, smiling at me. “Your intelligence, hard work and beautiful nature changed your story. I’m sad to see you go, but be rest assured you’ll get a glowing reference from me anytime you need it.”

Overwhelmed with relief and sadness from the finality of our goodbye, I reached over to hug her, almost knocking down both our drinks in the process. As we embraced, even though we would no longer have a working relationship, I knew I’d found a lifelong friend in her.

Over the course of lunch, I told her about meeting new family members and my plans to return to school later on.

“Going back to school is a great idea,” she nodded in approval. “The sky is your limit, Isioma. Never let anyone make you feel any less than who you are.”

I knew she was referring to the likes of Dobra and Salewa, but as I nodded, I was thinking about her brother, and the number he too had played on my self-esteem.

“I didn't know you’d be back in town, or else I would have sent this to you earlier,” she said, reaching into her bag for an envelope. “My mother turns seventy on Sunday, and there’s quite a celebration planned for her,” she chuckled. “You know she likes a good party!”

I smiled tersely as I accepted the card, thinking there was absolutely nothing in the world that would drag me there. Apart from not wanting to see a certain someone, it was the day before Ify and I were scheduled to leave for London.

“Mom took quite a liking to you last Christmas and she’s never stopped asking after you,” she said, looking at me closely. “She’d really love for you to be there. And so would I. As a matter of fact, consider it the last thing you do for me before you leave.”

I nodded and smiled. As much as I wanted to make things up to her, I didn't know if attending the party, and being in such close proximity with everything I was running away from, was what I could handle.

–

The moment I walked into the gaily decorated compound that Sunday, I felt like turning around and running for the hills, wondering why I’d come. Despite my earlier reservations, I’d looked at the invitation card that morning and remembered not only how sweet and kind the Graham-Hart matriarch had been to me, but also that I really did owe Sotonye one, after all she’d done for me. So I’d made the last minute decision to go.

In a simple black off-the shoulder dress, my hair in a loose, low bun, and with very light of makeup, I set off in the 2016 Honda Accord Ifeanyi had just gifted our mother. Even though Sotonye had insisted I keep it, I’d sent back my official car, along with my company laptop and identity card, determined not to take advantage of her kindness any further. Now, standing in the beautiful garden, decorated with string lights and parasols, and with Frank Sinatra belting Fly me to the moon from the speakers, it wasn’t anything like the owambe party I’d thought it would be.

“Isioma! Is this your face?” Dobra called out, walking up to give me air kisses. Seeing us, nobody would believe we’d not only started off on the wrong foot, but on no foot at all. “You look radiant! Your time off really did you well,” she sighed. “We’re sad to see you go though,” and she actually sounded like she meant it. “You proved me wrong, Isioma. It’s going to be difficult replacing you.”

“Thank you, Dobra. This really means a lot.”

Before we could say any more, Odiri and his wife walked up to us and I was soon exchanging pleasantries with them and several of my now former colleagues.

“I’m so glad you came!” Sotonye said when she saw me, before taking my hand. “Come. Mom will be so happy to see you.”

I followed her like a sheep to slaughter as we walked across the garden to where the celebrant sat with her husband and friends. Her eyes lit up at the sight of me. “Isioma! What a sight for sore eyes you are!”

“Happy birthday, Ma,” I greeted, and was accompanying that with a courtesy when the septuagenarian enveloped me in an embrace.

“Thank you, my dear girl. And thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful.”

I’d ordered a bouquet of flowers to be delivered that morning, when I wasn't sure I’d be able to attend.

Thankfully, her attention was called away and realising Sotonye was also distracted, I slipped away to a table on the far end of the garden, away even from my old colleagues, wanting to be as anonymous as I could for the little time I’d be there.

I didn't see Karibi until it was time for his mother to cut her cake. As she stood before the three-tier confection, flanked by her husband and children, my eyes were on him the whole time. In a navy blue blazer over jeans and a light pink shirt, he looked every bit as dapper and handsome as he always did. I smiled at the protective way he held his mother’s hand through the process, and the tender kiss he placed on her cheek when it was over.

Seeing him so caring and attentive took me back in time, reminding me of how things had once been between us. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

I was toying with the strawberry-lemon crumble bar that I'd been served for dessert, when someone took the seat next to mine. Looking up, my heart skipped a beat when I saw him.

"Hi," he said, smiling. "I'm glad you made it."

I smiled back. "I'm glad I did too. Your mom looks wonderful."

"She does, doesn't she?" he beamed. "Thank you for the flowers, by the way. I was here when they were delivered. She loves them."

"I'm glad."

"When Sotonye told me she'd invited you, I didn't think you'd come. I thought you'd have returned to London with your sister."

I nodded. "We leave tomorrow morning."

He smiled. "So, perfect timing, I guess."

I smiled back politely. "I guess."

Michael Buble's cover of The way you look tonight started playing and he rose to his feet, extending his hand. "How about a farewell dance?"

I looked at him and then around at the teeming crowd in the garden. "Really?"

"Yes, really," he chuckled.

For old time's sake, I placed my hand in his and allowed him lead me to the centre of the garden, where other couples were dancing. With his hands resting lightly on either side of my waist, and mine perched on his shoulders, we danced to the evergreen melody. I kept my gaze fixed on a spot behind him, determined not to make any eye contact. That was the only defence I had left, as all my other senses were singing with joy over being held by him again.

"You look beautiful," he said, forcing me to return my eyes to him. "Stunning."

I lowered my head without responding, becoming progressively overwhelmed by his touch, his smell, his voice, his entire being.

“…Yes you're lovely, never, ever change. Keep that breathless charm. Won't you please arrange it? 'Cause I love you. Just the way you look tonight,” he sang in my ear. “Losing you is, without a doubt, the biggest mistake I ever made.”

I looked up again and as our eyes held, everything and everyone faded into oblivion. Once again, I was breathless, once again, I could feel myself losing all control. And I couldn't let that happen.

“People are watching,” I said, trying not to sound as winded as I was. “Using your own words, it’s not a good look for the CEO to look this intimate with someone who, until only recently, was under his employ.”

“They don’t matter,” he answered, his eyes still holding mine. “None of that matters.”

“But it does,” I countered, before pulling away from him. “I have to go. It’s already late.”

He stopped dancing, and even though his downcast eyes communicated his regret, he nodded in understanding. “Let me walk you out. Did you drive?”

I nodded, turning around to walk towards the gate, not bothering to keep in step with him. But he quickened his own pace, catching up with me. A quick glance showed his mother laughing heartily with some of her guests, and I was glad I didn't have to subject myself to any more farewells than were necessary.

“This is me,” I said, when I got to my mother’s car. “It was a lovely party. I had a great time.”

He nodded before shrugging. “So, you’re off tomorrow. Are you excited?”

“I actually am. I’m also nervous though, nervous about starting life again in a new country. It’s pretty daunting.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said with a reassuring smile. “I also have a big day tomorrow. We have a make or break meeting with a group of investors from Abu Dhabi. If all goes well, we might be able to sign a term sheet.”

“Oh wow!” I exclaimed, genuinely happy for him. It had been a long time coming. “I pray it all works out for you.”

“Yeah, me too,” his smile dimmed. “If I say telling you goodbye isn’t killing me right now, I’d be lying.”

“Well, look on the bright side. It’s a good thing I’m leaving because I reckon tongues will be wagging right now, after that public display,” I joked, but it elicited no laughter from him. Leaning forward, I kissed his cheek. “Goodbye, Karibi. Thank you for everything.”

He stepped back as I got into my car and as I drove away, I was glad for the cover of night, which gave me the liberty to release myself to my pent up tears, my heart broken by the finality of the goodbye, the bitter realisation that I would never see him again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WE WERE UP AS early as 4am the next day, every member of my family, every one of us excited about what lay ahead for Ify as she began a new chapter of her life. I didn't have a lot to pack, so I sat back and watched as my mother fussed over her youngest child's belongings, throwing in unnecessary item after unnecessary item into the already overloaded suitcase, filled with enough food items to feed a small army. I knew that even she was aware the poor girl would throw away more than half of the noodles, chin-chin, plantain chips and Gala sausage rolls that had been forced on her, but I chose to allow her go through the motions, doing whatever she could to make saying goodbye to her baby a bit easier.

And to be totally honest, I was grateful for the distraction.

I was still shaken from the previous evening. Dancing with Karibi again had taken me back several steps, shaking the already weak walls I had built around my heart, taking me right back to square one. Being so close to him had intoxicated me all over again, and I was relieved that, in a matter of hours, it would all be over. After what happened the last time he came to look for me at Hattie's place, I knew neither she nor Karen would be quick to make that mistake of giving him access to me again. Besides, there was a high likelihood I'd leave London for Manchester after Ify was settled in school. The sooner permanent distance was put between Karibi and I, the better.

After going through the motions, I finally had a shower at about 6:30am, and was soon dressed and ready to leave. But from the look of things, it was going to take considerably longer for my family to be.

I was scrolling through my phone an hour later, fighting off my impatience, when my phone started to ring. Reaching for it, my eyes widened when I saw Karibi's name on the caller ID. I stared at it as it rang, hating that I

couldn't shut it out, even though I so badly wanted to. I put the phone on my dressing table, trying to ignore it, but the ringing persisted. In the end, I caved.

“Hello?”

“I can’t let you go, Isioma. Please don't go, I’m begging you,” he pleaded.

I groaned inwardly, hating him for being so relentless, hating myself for the effect he still had on me. “You can’t call me minutes before I leave for the airport, asking me not to go. This isn’t some cheesy romcom!” I retorted. “It’s too late for that, Karibi. Way too late.”

“Well, I’m not going to let you go. I’m downstairs, right in front of your house, and I won’t let you.”

I gasped and dashed to my window, and truly, as dawn broke on a Monday morning, there he was, Karibi, standing on my street, wearing dress pants and what looked to be an undershirt. Still with his phone in his hand, he dropped to his knees when he saw me.

“I’m not going to let you blow me off this time,” he called out. “I’m not leaving here without you!”

A honk from a car cut in, and I was horrified to see that Karibi’s precariously parked BMW was disrupting the flow of traffic on my already narrow street. But he remained on his knees, determined not to move. As frustrated motorists and pedestrians started to yell at him to get out of the way, I knew I had to put an end to it once and for all.

Rushing past my now curious mother and siblings, I ran all the way downstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Upon seeing me walk out of the building, he rose to his feet. Taking his hand, I pulled him off the road.

“What are you doing?” I exclaimed. “What is this madness?”

And it was sheer madness. Up close, I saw that, indeed, he was wearing his undershirt. His hair was also uncombed and it looked liked he’d literally rolled out of bed before showing up there.

“I was up all night thinking about you…about us,” he answered, holding my hands. “I didn’t sleep at all. I couldn't even prepare for my meeting. All I could think about was you.”

I gaped at him. The investor meeting! A quick glance at my watch showed it was 7:50am, not only almost time for our taxi to arrive but too late for him not to be on the island if he had an early morning meeting.

“Karibi, please you have to go,” I implored. “You can’t miss your meeting. You’ve worked so hard to get to this point -”

“I don’t care about the meeting. All I care about is you. All I want is you,” he said, dropping to his knees again. “All of it means nothing without you, Isioma.”

I could hear the vibration of the phone in his hand and saw him terminate the incoming calls without even as much as a glance. “Karibi, please,” I said, crouching to be eye-to-eye with him. “You have to go.”

“I’m not leaving here without you. I can’t go back to life without you!”

Our eyes held and I too wanted to throw my hands up in the air and give everything up. I too wanted to run off with him and pretend like the past hadn’t happened.

Except it had.

“Oko Ashewo!” some schoolboys laughed and taunted as they walked past. “Woman wrapper!”

That was all I needed to snap myself out of my reverie. Rising to my feet, I tried to pull him up to his. “Karibi, please you have to go. Our taxi will be here any minute.”

But he didn’t even budge, his only movement being the incessant push of the button on his phone, terminating the calls that continued coming. And then my own phone rang.

“Isioma, is Karibi with you? Everyone has been trying to reach him,” came Sotonye’s frantic voice. “Nosa said he got into his car early this morning and drove off. He said he wasn’t even dressed.”

I looked at the man still on his knees in front of me and was hit with a turmoil of emotions; happiness, guilt…and anger.

“Are you there, Isioma?” she was even more frantic now. “He has an important meeting starting in less than five minutes. Everyone is waiting for

him.”

“He’s here,” I answered, angry with him for missing such a critical meeting, and angry with myself for still not being able to walk away.

“Damn it!” Sotonye exclaimed. “There’s already a car on the way as Nosa was adamant that was where he’d gone. I just hoped he was wrong. It’ll take a miracle for him to get here on time,” she sighed. “For what it’s worth, I’ll see what I can do to stall the investors.”

“That was Sotonye,” I said, when she was off the phone. “Why would you do something so reckless? You’ve been working towards this for so long.”

“Forget the investors, Isioma,” he said, rising to his feet, a desperate glint in his eyes. “Nothing is more important than being with you. Not investors from Abu-Dhabi, Hong Kong, Timbuktu or even the moon! I love you and this time, I’m not going to let you go without a fight.”

The van we’d hired to take us to the airport pulled up in front of the house, and turning to look at Karibi as he desperately held my hands, I was suddenly enraged, angered that he was making this kind of grand, public gesture now, when he’d had other opportunities to do just that. Memories flooded my head, memories of him refusing to spend those extra days with me in London, of him shutting me out on his birthday, his stubborn stance about Erinkan’s picture, him rushing off to Farida shortly after our breakup…him dumping me the day after giving myself to him for the first time. Withdrawing my hands from his, I stepped back. “Our car is here. If we don’t leave now, we’ll miss our flight.”

“Isioma…”

Without another backward glance, I turned around and made my way back upstairs. Walking into the apartment and seeing my family crammed on the balcony, watching what had been unfolding downstairs, further infuriated me. “Can’t you see the taxi is here?” I yelled. “Aren’t you aware of the crazy traffic on a Monday morning?”

“My daughter,” my mother appealed, her eyes heavy with concern. “Are you going to leave him there like that?”

Ify and Ifechi stood there, also awaiting my answer.

“If you like, stay here and be watching drama,” I retorted, looking at my sister. “As for me, I’m going to the airport.”

This jolted her right back to reality and she rushed into her room to grab her boxes. My mother stood by, arms folded, as Ifechi helped gather mine and as we made our way downstairs with all the luggage. I ignored Karibi as we loaded everything into the van, and saw that my mother and siblings, clearly afraid of what my reaction would be, did the same.

“Isioma, please,” Karibi called out as I got into the van, his voice breaking. “Please, don’t go.”

“What are you waiting for?” I yelled at the driver. “What are you looking at? Move this car!”

“Madam, the road don block,” the hapless driver replied.

And truly it was. The slow flow of traffic had come to a halt. Traffic had come to a standstill, as uniformed men cleared a path. I could hear the sound of a siren which started off in the far distance, growing louder and louder as it approached, a convoy of three SUVs. I watched as some of the uniformed men rushed up to Karibi and as they led him into one of the SUVs, while one of them went to get his BMW.

As traffic started to move, and as our vehicles intersected, I saw one of the orderlies help him into a shirt. Our eyes held as both cars pulled away in opposite directions, but then he looked away as a tie was handed to him.

Once out of the street and on the way to the airport, from the frowns on the faces of my family members, I knew they didn't approve of what I’d done. What they didn't know was that, as hard and painful as it had been for Karibi, it had been a whole lot harder for me. However much they thought he was hurting, I was hurting exponentially more.

But it was time to move forward…without ever looking back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BUT THE MOMENT THE plane took off, I knew exactly how Hattie must have felt when she left. What had seemed like a good idea now left me with a hollow feeling in my stomach. As the city of Lagos retreated farther and farther away, I felt a constriction in my chest that had nothing to do with the change in air pressure. I was haunted by the look on Karibi's face as he knelt before me, pleading with me to stay, haunted by the fact that he'd sacrificed something he'd been chasing for over a year just to be with me, haunted that after hating him for so long for not choosing me, I hadn't even recognised it when he had.

Because choose me had, the night we met him waiting for me on Hattie's front porch, when he'd come looking for me in Balogun Market in the middle of a busy work day, dancing with me at his mother's birthday party, and that morning, when he'd put pride and dignity aside to declare his love for me.

I winced, wishing I could turn back the hands of time, replaying the events of that morning, remembering how I'd left him standing there, alone and humiliated, and knew there was no coming back from that, especially if it had also cost him a multi-million dollar investment.

Standing in the small airplane toilet, I realised the instigator of the pain I was running away from wasn't back home in Lagos…but looking back at me from the mirror on the wall. By punishing Karibi for what he'd done to me, I had only succeeded in punishing myself.

I was relieved Hattie and Keith were at the airport to receive us, as I didn't even have it in me to feign enthusiasm for Ify's sake. Instead, I lagged behind as they guided the excited teen out of the airport, and was quiet throughout the taxi ride home, saying nothing as the three of them chatted

about the great weather London was still enjoying in late September, and other banal things, the weight of my regret sitting heavy in my soul.

Later that night, as Karen settled Ify into the room they were to share, and after Keith had left for his flat, I sat alone with Hattie in the kitchen. “Did you ever get over the pain?” I asked. “When you found out it was too late to go back to him, did you ever get over it?”

The sadness in her smile was my answer. She reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I learnt how to find happiness in other things.”

“But the pain never went away.”

She shook her head. “It didn't. I just learnt how to live with it.”

At that point, I knew that was what I was going to have to learn to do.

Live with the pain.

–

In the months that followed, life went on. Ify quickly adjusted to her new life and was soon excelling not only academically, but socially as well, if the throng of friends that followed her everywhere was anything to go by. Hattie had sent in an application for my British passport, so I was unable to work. Instead, I got a volunteer job with a children’s literacy charity and when I wasn't doing that, I was in the library near the house, reading whatever I could. Living off my savings without any income was quite a humbling experience, and I was hopeful that my passport would be issued in good enough time for me to find a reasonable job so I too could start planning for school the next academic year.

But as Christmas approached, as the trees went from shedding brown leaves to going completely stark, as the town once again became the place where I’d discovered a love unimaginable, the dull ache I’d tried my best to subdue returned with a vengeance. As Karen decorated the porch with elaborate lights and mounted the dancing Santa, I remembered approaching the house for the first time, in the company of a man I would soon fall in love with, and it hurt all over again.

Against my better judgement, there were a few times when I would look him up in the news, searching for any gossip about his love life in the blogs.

But I never found anything. The only thing I did read about was the big-ticket investment into Eldabra's portfolio of assets by a Middle Eastern fund, and I was relieved that the deal had been successful in the end, happy that things were falling into the right places for him.

On December 23, I woke up with the realisation it was Sotonye's first wedding anniversary and had to fight off the urge to call her. Since leaving Nigeria, I'd kept all reminders about Karibi at bay, and sadly that included my dear friend as well. I said a prayer for her, while struggling with the vivid memories of that magical day. If only I'd known that one year later, I still wouldn't have found my own forever love.

That evening, Karen and I were contemplating a trip to York, to see 'Nan and also ring in the New Year, when my phone rang. I squealed with glee when I heard Sotonye's voice.

"Will you believe I've been thinking about you all day?" I exclaimed, ecstatic. "Happy anniversary!"

"Thanks, hun. I too thought about you this morning, remembering how wonderful you were this time last year," she answered. "But I'm not happy with you, Isioma. You promised to keep in touch, yet there hasn't even been an email from you, talk less of a phone call."

"I'm so sorry. It's just been very busy over here, getting my sister settled and all that."

We both knew being busy wasn't the reason I'd kept my distance.

"So, are you in town?" I asked, having noticed she'd called with a local number, and also desperate to change the topic.

"Yes, 'Gogo and I are spending Christmas here," I could hear the smile in her voice. "I've actually borrowed from Doreen's playbook and will be taking the rest of the year off."

I squealed as the implication of what she'd said registered. She was pregnant.

"There have been quite a few scares and our doctors feel, especially at my age, that I should be taking things extra easy. Odiri is now Director of Facilities."

“So you’re going to be here the whole time?” I asked, excited.

“Actually, no,” she answered. “We leave on Boxing Day. I’ll spend the rest of my pregnancy in Somerset, where Dagogo’s family has a house,” she paused for a moment. “It would be wonderful seeing you before we go. Are you free tomorrow? Can you come over to the house?” Everything in my head screamed what a bad idea it was, and when she sensed my hesitation, she chuckled. “Don’t worry, it’s just me.”

Hearing that appeased and disappointed me at the same time.

The next morning, Christmas Eve, I set off for Knightsbridge at 11am. On the train ride from Mile End to Holborn, I had a nostalgic smile as I remembered how, at that exact time a year before, Karibi and I were already headed to Westminster. If only we’d seen what the year held in store for us. I wondered if he would have still continued with the relationship, knowing the kind of roller coaster that lay ahead, and I was surprised that, despite all the pain, angst and emotional turmoil, given a chance, I would do it all over again.

Holding the small hamper of belly butter, bath salts, aromatherapy oils, compression socks, a pregnancy journal and a sonogram frame I’d put together, Mr. Bankole ushered me in at a little past noon.

“It’s so good to see you again, Miss Isioma,” the elderly butler exclaimed, looking genuinely pleased.

“You’re not going to spend the holiday with your family?” I asked, remembering he hadn’t been there the previous year.

“I leave at exactly 4pm!” he beamed, with a wink. “I’ll let Mr. Karibi know you’re here.”

I froze to the spot. Karibi?

“No, I’m here to see Sotonye,” I bleated. “She’s expecting me.”

“Oh,” Mr. Bankole replied, clearly confused. “Mrs. Sotonye and her husband left for Somerset yesterday evening. Mr. Karibi is the only one here.”

Despite the frigid cold, a bead of sweat rolled down my back. After what happened the morning I left Lagos, I was definitely the last person he would

want to see.

“Please give this to Sotonye when she gets back,” I said, shoving the basket in his hands in my desperation to get the hell out of there. “Merry Christmas.”

But I wasn't quick enough.

“Isioma.”

Looking in the direction of the voice that called my name, my eyes locked with the one who still had my heart.

“I…I came to see Sotonye,” I stammered. “She asked me to come.”

His brows furrowed. “She asked you to come today? But she and Dagogo…”

“I know, they left yesterday,” I cut in, looking away. “Mr. Bankole just told me.”

At the mention of his name, the elderly gentleman slipped away with what looked to be the hint of a smile on his face.

“I didn't know you were here,” I found the need to add.

“I arrived yesterday,” he answered. “Sotonye got here about a week ago and never planned to spend Christmas in London.”

“I must have misunderstood,” I said, but still remained rooted to the spot, unable to peel myself away from his presence. In a black cashmere sweater over blue jeans, he looked just like he did the last winter we’d spent there. Unable to control myself, my eyes strayed to the spot in the same hallway where he had discarded clothes like this, as he’d discovered every part of my body…

“How have you been?” he asked, jolting me. “I hope you two have settled in well, you and your sister.”

I smiled and nodded. “She’s blended in perfectly. She’s Little Miss Popular.”

“And you?” he prodded. “Have you also blended in nicely?”

I shrugged. “I guess you could say that,” then realising I was doing myself no good standing in his intoxicating presence added, “I better go. It was nice seeing you again. Merry Christmas.”

“Can I walk you?” he called out. “To the station or somewhere?”

I turned around, surprised he would make that offer after our last encounter. But whatever his reason was, I decided to take advantage and enjoy his company, even if it was very likely the last time.

“That would be nice.”

He walked up to open the door for me and I walked out on to the street, not even feeling the cold winter breeze.

“What station? Knightsbridge or South Kensington?” he asked.

“Knightsbridge,” then suddenly overwhelmed by the fear of being separated after the short walk to the station, turned to him. “Are you busy? Would you like a coffee or something,” then, with a nervous smile, added, “Don’t worry, my treat.”

He looked at me for a clear moment, before answering. “Sounds good. The one down the road?”

“How about we go back to that café near London Bridge?” I asked, continuing to push my luck. “I really liked their cappuccinos.”

His brows furrowed as he looked at me again. “Sure, I don't see why not,” he finally shrugged.

We walked in silence to the train station, taking the Piccadilly line train to South Kensington, and then a District line one to Westminster station. As we emerged from the station, I was hit by a feeling of déjà vu so strong, it felt like we’d been teleported back in time.

He must have felt it as well. “This time last year, we were probably at this very spot at this very time.”

“No, I think we were still at Palace of Westminster by this time,” I smiled, happy to be referring to the Houses of Parliament by its correct name.

“What a difference a year makes!” he remarked, and I couldn't tell from his tone if it was made wistfully…or with regret.

“So, are you here just for the holidays?” I asked, curious to know if anything, or anyone, had brought him back to London.

“I had a meeting with our new partners,” he answered. “I pretty much went there straight from the airport yesterday.”

“I thought they’re Middle Eastern.”

“They are. It’s a Middle Eastern fund, but managed out of London.”

“I’m glad it worked out,” I said. “I was worried because…”

My voice trailed and he smiled. “Because I was this close to missing that meeting? Well, I did miss it. It had to be rescheduled to later that week. But yes, I’m also glad it all worked out in the end,” he turned to me. “How about you? How’ve you been these past few months?”

By now, we were approaching London Bridge and the nostalgia got stronger with every step I took.

“Fine,” I answered.

“Just fine?”

I shrugged. “Just fine,” I looked up at him. “And you? How’ve you been?”

He shrugged. “Not great.”

“Not great?” I echoed. “After securing a half-billion dollar investment for your company and, from what I’ve read, being on the cusp of signing an even larger one. ‘Not great’ is the last thing I’d expect you to say.”

He shrugged again. “Sometimes, the things we think are important, we realise aren’t that important after all.” He stopped walking and leaned on the bridge, looking across at the Thames.

“I’m really sorry about that morning,” I said, finally addressing the elephant that had been strolling between us since we left his house. “I’m ashamed about the way I behaved. You didn't deserve that kind of treatment from me.”

He turned to look at me. “On the contrary, I think I deserved everything you said and did, Isioma. If I’d done and said the right things at the right time…” he shrugged. “I pushed you to it, and for the rest of my life, I’ll

have to live with the fact that I messed up the very best thing that ever happened to me."

We stood facing each other on that bridge, a behemoth of emotions between us, emotions that were still as alive as the moment they were first ignited on that very bridge.

"You made me think I wasn't enough," I finally said. "You made me think I wasn't enough for you."

He shook his head as if confused. "Not enough for me? Isioma, I love you. You're all that I want. All that I will ever need."

"You're all I've wanted since that first night at the beach," I said, my eyes pooling with tears as I released everything I'd been bottling inside for months. "I've loved you for so long and I don't want to fight it anymore. I'm tired of fighting it, Karibi."

I don't know who took the first step forward, but soon the gap between us closed as I melted into his arms, as his lips claimed mine in a kiss that transcended any spoken words, a kiss that encapsulated everything we'd gone through in twelve months, condensing it into a single moment, a reunion that was just as emotional and spiritual as it was physical.

It was a homecoming.

The End

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PREVIEW: GINIKA'S BRIDESMAIDS BOOK THREE: IFE

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 me 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 idly 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 41st birthday. Looking at the picture for what had to be 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, when I answered. "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 will be glad to."

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 found myself feeling 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, were 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’d 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 mood had been considerably cheered by my Year 3 class 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 level 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 May’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 that 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, was infinitesimal in comparison to 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 islands 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 on 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.

–

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 intrigued 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. “Isn’t it 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 for being on the island in the first place.

Healing.

To be continued.

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THE 5-PART GINIKA'S BRIDESMAIDS SERIES

Book 1 – Ara

Book 2 – Isioma

Book 3 – Ife

Book 4 – Ozioma

Book 5 – Ginika

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INVESTMENT BANKER BY DAY, romance writer by night. Adesuwa O’man Nwokedi began writing by accident and what started as a few scribbles for friends has led to 15 titles...and counting.

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