AMINAT SANNI-KAMAL

Finding Love

BOOK THREE IN THE SMITH WOMEN SERIES

Finding Love

The Third Book in the Smith Women Series

By

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First published in 2021 by Aminat Sanni-Kamal
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For all the times you thought you were underserving and unworthy of being loved.

Playlist

Ocean Eyes by Billie Eillish
Dark Paradise by Lana Del Rey
Dusk till Dawn by Zayn Malik ft Sia
Happier by Marshmello ft Bastille
Someone You Loved by Lewis Capaldi
I don't Care by Ed Sheeran ft Justin Bieber
Lolonye by Cina Soul ft Worlasi
Lullabies by Yuna
Honey by Kehlani
Conversations in the Dark by John Legend
A Muse by Dvsn

Disappointing, horrible, abysmal.

There weren't enough words in the dictionary to describe what had just happened.

Mirabelle gave the man sleeping beside her an irritated look. After grunting and heaving on top of her like a wild animal, he'd fallen asleep almost immediately. And what's worse? He had the guts to *snore.* She considered waking him up and calling him a cab but, in all honesty, she had neither the strength nor the desire to deal with him. Resisting the urge to slap the smug look of satisfaction off his face, she slipped out of bed and into her nightdress.

She took out the bottle of champagne that had been sitting in the ice bucket on the bedside drawer and reached for a glass just beside the bucket but decided against it –not like there was anything to celebrate anyway- and drank straight from the bottle instead as she made her way to the balcony.

Stepping out unto the balcony, she leaned against the rails, holding the champagne bottle by its neck, dangling it over the balustrade while enjoying the feel of the night breeze against her sweaty skin. The stars filled the night sky like thousands of little sparkling diamonds. Gazing up at them brought a smile to her face. It was therapeutic - a soothing balm to her wounded emotions.

To the entire world, Mirabelle Olajumoke Smith's life story was a typical grass to grace story and one thing she learned during the journey in between, was that life was easier when she allowed herself to enjoy the simplest and inconspicuous beautiful things – like a sky full of stars.

The thought of beautiful things brought her daughters' faces to mind. Elizabeth and Deborah were the most beautiful works of art that she had ever laid her eyes on; she knew she was biased because she was the artist who had created them but who cared? Her daughters looked so alike they could be mistaken for twins and yet they couldn't be any more different from each other.

Her smile widened as she thought about them. She never would have made it without her girls, and that single thought was enough to wipe the smile off her face.

Would they still love her if they knew all the secrets, if they knew about the other life, she kept from them?

This was one of those rare nights when she thought about what life could have been like if she had made a different choice. She scoffed and took a swig from the bottle. The truth was, she would make the same choice repeatedly if the situation was the same.

It was the one thing she could never lie to herself about. She let out a sigh. There was no use in thinking about the past or what could have been. Instead, she focused on more relaxing thoughts like her wine bar back at home and that inadvertently made her think of Deborah. She was sure that her youngest and most rebellious daughter would have sunk her gluttonous fangs into her collection.

Their love for wine was the only thing they had in common, the only difference was that while she spent money collecting them, her daughter Deborah spent her life consuming them.

Elizabeth and Deborah were both grown-up women, perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, but they sometimes acted like children. Elizabeth was the drama queen and Deborah was the rebel and as much as they brought a smile to her face, she didn't come on this holiday to think about her daughters; she came to relax and ease off all the stress and ugliness of the past year when Elizabeth had almost lost her life; she was glad all the ugliness and drama was now behind her.

She yawned, suddenly overcome by a wave of exhaustion. Thinking about her melancholic past usually had that effect on her or it could just be that the alcohol that she had been gorging on in the past hour was finally working its way into her system. Either way, it was time she went to bed. Having no other choice as her eyes tingled and watered in the aftermath of her yawn, she went back into her suite to lie beside her snoring disappointment.

By the time she opened her eyes the next morning, rays of sunshine were already peeking into through the drapery. Mirabelle couldn't remember the last time she had woken up after sunrise; the past year had been too hectic for her to sleep without the help of sleeping pills.

Suddenly remembering that she hadn't slept alone, she jolted upright but her one-night stand had already left. She took a quick look around to make sure that he hadn't stolen anything, not that it hadn't happened before

but at least then, the thief had had the decency to give her multiple orgasms before carting away her diamond earrings and a limited-edition wristwatch. After that incident, she had always made sure she woke up before her one-night-stands did or better still, made sure they left before she fell asleep. The latter was usually the case.

Finally, allowing herself to relax after making sure that everything was in order, she felt the onslaught of a headache; served her right for drinking too much the previous night. She didn't pay too much mind to it though, because she was one of the lucky ones and her hangovers were easily cured with a cup of coffee or on worse days like this one, a dose of Aspirin was all she needed.

Her headache subsided after taking the painkillers, but just to be completely rid of it, she made herself a cup of coffee, black, strong and Ethiopian. If there was one thing of note about Mirabelle, it would be that she spoke in class and sophistication in every aspect of her life, down to the type of coffee she drank. After the rejuvenating cup of coffee, she decided to get soaked up in the glorious morning sun by the resort's poolside. Taking a quick shower, she slipped into the beautiful dark blue bikini that she had been saving up for her vacation all year. Her daughters would expire on the spot if they ever saw her in it, or more appropriately Elizabeth would faint and Deborah would feign nonchalance. Picturing their individual reactions made her smile.

Standing in front of the mirror in her walk-in closet, she admired how the dark curls of her cropped hair complemented the blue bikini and how the bikini complimented her pretty pecan brown skin.

Sticking to an appropriate diet and working out at least three times a week, gave her a body to die for; which was something her daughters were openly envious of. It wasn't her fault they stuffed themselves full of carbs and were too lazy to even walk to fridge not to mention having a workout routine. Elizabeth had an excuse now that she was pregnant but Deborah… Deborah never needed an excuse; she answered only to herself.

Since her goal was to soak up the sun and not get burned by it, she rubbed an ample amount of sunscreen on the exposed areas of her body and was just about to pick up her sunglasses from the expensive collection she had brought with her when the doorbell rang followed immediately by a not-so-subtle knock on the door.

“Ugh... that must be Tinuke,” Mirabelle muttered. It was easy to forget that her boisterous friend was on vacation with her, if one could call what Tinuke was doing a holiday.

Mirabelle was a solo traveller and loved to go on vacations alone because it was the only time she got to step out of the role of the perfect mother and be who she truly was. The reason Tinuke was on this one with her was because she had been on a charity funding trip for her NGO and could not attend Tinuke’s youngest daughter’s wedding. It didn’t matter that she had bought the ridiculously expensive *Aso Ebi*, the only thing that could pacify Tinuke was if she came with her on her vacation to South Africa. It was a request Mirabelle had found weird but had agreed to, mostly because Tinuke was a master at guilt tripping and emotional blackmail and also because she was a friend Mirabelle could not afford to lose.

It was a decision Mirabelle had been regretting ever since.
Tinuke, who took pride in being an old-school conservative prude, had become a self-appointed morality police. From booking plane tickets to something as mundane as ordering food, Tinuke considered everything wasteful, making herself the latest irritant in Mirabelle’s life because one thing about Mirabelle was that she loved to spend money.

"Tinuke, do you have to be so loud?" She asked as she swung the door open and her buxom friend pushed her way into the room.

"*Ore mi*, the things my two eyes have seen in the few days that we have come here. What is this world turning into? Children of nowadays have no respect for their elders anymore," Tinuke said, ignoring Mirabelle's question as she made her way into Mirabelle's bedroom and flung herself on her bed, Mirabelle rolled her eyes and followed her into the bedroom.

"What is it again? What happened this time?" She asked in an uninterested tone.

"Can you imagine?” Tinuke heaved. “As I was coming here, from my *moderately* expensive room," intentionally emphasising on the phrase 'moderately expensive' since she had taken it upon herself to teach Mirabelle how to spend money. "A young girl who is the same age as my first granddaughter, Tomi, bumped into me. What am I even saying? I’m sure Tomi is even older than her. She said sorry and hurried on her way. She did not even wait to see if I fell down or not. That *pinshini* thing! If this was Nigeria, I would have trashed her badly, I would have given her the home

training that her mother has refused to give her." Tinuke finished with her brows furrowed, huffing and puffing as if telling the story made her angrier than the incident itself.

"You did not fall down, neither were you injured. I hope you did not spank another woman's child because whether or not we are in Nigeria, I don't think any mother would appreciate you beating their child," Mirabelle warned. The last thing she needed was an encounter with the police.

"Hmm," Tinuke scoffed. "In Nigeria, we understand that it takes a whole village to raise a child," she insisted, stubbornly.

"And you think they don't have such a saying here? And even if they did, Tinuke, are you their village? Just be careful, if you abuse a child here and get in trouble with the police, no African or Nigerian doctrine is going to save you and neither will I."

"That's why your children are spoiled," Tinuke muttered under her breath.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing *o*, I did not say anything."

Mirabelle shook her head. Tinuke was getting on her last nerve. That was why going to the pool was a great idea, otherwise she might murder her friend and end up having more than just an encounter with the police.

"Why are you even walking around with bra and pant *abi* you just feel like showing off your body?"

"It's called a bikini and I am going to the pool," Mirabelle answered.

"Dressed like that?"

"Dressed like how? Am I supposed to wear *Iro* and *Buba* to the pool?"

"That's not what I'm saying, but you know you are about to be a grandmother, *sha*," Tinuke replied. Mirabelle heard the hidden message loud and clear. She was basically being told to act her age. She turned to give Tinuke a piece of her mind, but she was already snoring.

"Coward," Mirabelle retorted, "nobody falls asleep that fast," She added, walking to her closet to select a kimono. Irritation overwhelmed her as she covered up her beautiful body. Her age was the very one thing she hated talking about. She didn't even celebrate her birthdays. Not because she dreaded aging; on the contrary, she welcomed it. Thinking about her age brought to mind her past life and a heavy secret she intended to take with her to her grave; a secret that could upturn her perfect world.

Mirabelle hadn’t expected to find a small crowd at the pool. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one who wanted to enjoy the morning sun, but she didn’t mind it. The crowd was a pleasant one and consisted mostly of children giggling and squealing, causing one mischief or the other. She smiled as the more daring of the children, with floaters around their tiny bodies, splashed water about the swimming pool.

“Never grow up,” she directed her words to the children but of course they couldn’t hear her. There were adults around too, but they lacked the unreserved joy and playfulness that the children had.

Allowing the light music playing somewhere in the background to seep into her, she reclined on the lounge-style pool chair and turned her attention to the novel she had brought with her. It was Olaide Bayero’s latest novel. She was one of her favourite authors because no matter the genre, Bayero’s books always seemed to speak directly to her. She usually got lost in the cosmos of Bayero’s beautiful artistry. Which was why Mirabelle didn’t understand why she had been reading one sentence over and over for the past fifteen minutes? No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t concentrate. Deep down, she knew it had nothing to do with the book and more to do with how she couldn’t get Tinuke’s condescending words out of her mind.

With a resigned sigh, she closed the book and placed it on her lap. It was no use trying to force herself to read it, it would only make her resent the book. She decided instead to just enjoy view and tap into the children’s happiness but the first thing she saw when she looked up was a young couple making out with reckless abandon beside her. She smiled and looked away. The first thought coming to her mind was what Tinuke would have said had she been there.

“*Children of these days have no morals,”* was how she would begin. Everyone who was younger than her was a child to her, regardless of their age. *“In the name of civilisation, they have forgotten that we are people of culture. I’m sure they are not even married. I trust my daughters; they*

cannot try such…” and then she would begin a rhapsody of unending praise of her daughters’ morals

Mirabelle scoffed, it would be such a funny sight to watch when Tinuke found out that her first daughter had divorced her husband for almost two years but had kept it a secret from her mother. Maybe she should tell her, just to get back at her for her snide comment about her age. But then again, like Tinuke never failed to mention, she was too old for such pettiness. Besides, she felt bad for the girl, to have a mother who you could not confide in was a terrible thing.

A sudden thought came to her mind. She realised that the first thing she had thought about when she saw the kissing couple was what Tinuke would think. When did she start caring about what other people thought, especially people like Tinuke? Then again, if she was being honest with herself, it wasn’t about who made the comment but more about the comment itself because it triggered terrible memories and poked at a dark secret.

Turning to her side, she noticed that the couple had left the pool, obviously needing their privacy. An unexpected wave of longing engulfed her, and she sighed for what might have been the umpteenth time that morning. She was a kaleidoscope of emotions and the combination of the terrible one-night stand she’d had and her irritant of a friend didn’t help matters. But, if she was being completely honest with herself, it had less to do with sex and more to do with the feeling of being lonely. Elizabeth was married and expecting her first child, Deborah was a free spirit who went wherever the wind blew her. She did whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. She had decided to roam the streets of Lagos looking for a job, refusing any help from her mother. She possessed a streak of independence a mile long, so much so that it sometimes bordered on foolishness, but Mirabelle liked it; it was a sign that she had done her job well in raising her daughters, even though Deborah’s stubbornness was most likely to give her a high blood pressure.

Her daughters had their own lives now and she could no longer continue to live vicariously through their own happiness, she was now left with a void that all the sex and holiday trips around the world could not fill.

Goodness.

Where were all these impossibly exhausting thoughts coming from? Just a couple of months ago the most important thing in her life had been spending money, getting orgasms and seeing her daughters happy, -well, not necessarily in that order- but this thought of loneliness was intrusive and annoying, and this holiday was the exact opposite of relaxing.

She felt his presence before she heard his voice. It was dark, looming, and oddly comforting.

"A penny for your thoughts?" The voice said, perfectly matched with the presence she had originally felt - rich, deep and masculine.

She took off her shades to give a full appraisal of the bare-chested man standing in front of her, and her throat suddenly went dry. The sight in front of her left her breathless.

Fine was an understatement, gorgeous was a more appropriate word. She shook her head, gorgeous didn't quite cover it. His voice didn't do justice to the well-formed, chiselled, ripped, mahogany skinned god in dark grey swim shorts – Sango couldn't compare!

She needed to get a hold of herself but she couldn't quit staring because Dark, handsome men were her undoing and this one – well, he passed all the criteria with distinction. She looked up from his broad chest to his face and the lazy amusement she saw there finally snapped her out of her semi-trance. He knew she found him attractive. She cleared her throat and sat up straighter in a last ditch attempt to save face.

Even his arrogant grin was beautiful. What was this man?

He was probably used to women fawning and falling over themselves for him. Determined not to be a part of that statistic, she feigned annoyance.

"Really? A penny for your thoughts?" She snapped at him, but his grin only deepened. Like he was mocking her. He moved away and took his seat on the empty sun lounge beside her.

Had the sun always being this bright? Now, she was being ridiculous.

"Seriously? First you sneak up on me and then you take a sit without asking first." Even Mirabelle had to admit that she was reaching at this point.

"First, I did not sneak up on you, I walked right in front of you and just in case you didn't notice, this is a public space and I don't need your permission to sit anywhere, except of course you own the place." He replied with a glint in his eyes. "Do you own this place?"

Goodness, he was annoyingly relentless.

She had temporarily forgotten that men really didn't have any sense in their heads, and she had already messed up by letting him see that she was attracted to him. She rolled her eyes, put her sunglasses back on and got to her feet.

"I hope you are not leaving on my account?" He asked without opening his eyes. He had reclined against the lounge with his arms folded behind his head, lazily enjoying the sun.

"Actually, I am. I don't like to stay around people who have no manners," She said in a voice she used to talk to the naughty children in her school. "Do have a lovely day," she added and stalked off.

She had been so sure that he was going to chase after her. No man had ever let her walk away before. Men bowed at her feet just to get a bit of her attention and this one was ignoring her, teasing her even. She would not stand for it, no matter how much she wanted to sit on his face and make him put his beautiful mouth to good use.

what the hell just happened?

There were two things Adejare was so sure were impossible; three people standing in a group of twos and a woman walking away from Adejare Timothy-Williams. That brought him back to his first question – *what the hell just happened?*

The one thing Adejare was grateful that he had inherited from his worthless father was his good looks and the charisma to go along with it and he'd been so damn sure that she had been into him, he'd seen it in her eyes. Humility wasn't one of his strongest suits, and he wasn't one to pretend he didn't know the effect he had on women.

Of what shall it profit a man to seek humility and end up in the Friendzone?

He pretty sure that was in the bible, somewhere… but really, had he misread the situation or did the woman have some sort of deficiency that made her allergic to gorgeousness?

Nah… he knew what he'd seen, and he also needed to relax. He had bigger problems to worry about than being snubbed by an insanely beautiful woman with the cheekbones of a goddess.

Wait… maybe that was the problem. She was probably a goddess who could not be bothered with an ordinary human like him. That was the only reason he could think of, but even that reason was flawed. He might be human, but there was nothing ordinary about him.

He had to find out more about her. What goddess was she? She had the skin tone of Yemoja, looked fierce enough to be Oya and sensual enough to be Osun. He closed his eyes and sighed at the ridiculousness of his own analogy.

He needed to focus. He was on the verge of losing his company and he was here using the knowledge he had gained in the Yoruba mythology course he'd taken as an elective in the university to sexualise a woman. The deities really should strike him dead.

Besides, walking away from him meant she wasn't interested, and that was it. Any other meaning he read into it made him no different from his father. Speaking of which, he pictured his old man turning in his grave in disgust and disappointment now that the company was on the verge of bankruptcy.

But what right did he have to turn or roll or whatever? It wasn't until after his father's death that he and the rest of the world found out about the

loans and the misappropriated funds, all of which had been lavished on drugs, women and on an extravagant lifestyle. When he'd inherited the company two years ago, he had inherited all its problems with it, and since then, he had been doing the best to keep the company afloat.

So why did he feel like a damn failure?

His phone vibrated in the pocket of his shorts and he brought it out and answered the call without checking who the caller was because only one person would dare to call him after he'd left specific instructions that he was not to be disturbed.

"Oyede, what's up," he answered and then paused, listening to Aboyede on the other end of the line.

"You know where I am, let's discuss this in person," he replied to whatever Aboyede had said and ended the call.

Sighing again, he wondered how things had gone from bad to worse in the last thirty minutes since the meeting had ended. He glanced ahead and saw Aboyede making his way towards him, expertly dodging the overly excited children, looking a little awkward and out of place in his business suit.

"You could have at least changed into something else," he stated as soon as Aboyede reached him and got a raised eyebrow as response.

"What? You just look too serious…"

"I can't even tell whether you are joking or not. This is not the time to be anything but serious." Aboyede snapped and Adejare simply shrugged.

"Except the sky is falling, you are still going to have to sit to discuss whatever the problem is."

Aboyede shook his head and took his seat on the lounge chair Mirabelle had vacated earlier.

"You are incorrigible, you know…" he trailed off as something else caught his attention. He picked up a book that had been lying on the lounge and turned it over in his hands.

"What's that?" Adejare asked, curious to know what had caught his friend's attention.

"*Oga,* you are into Sci-fi novels now?" Aboyede asked.

"Sci-fi *ke*? You know I don't read fiction, I prefer books with real life lessons, like memoirs, philosophy…" He stopped talking when he saw the irritated look Aboyede was giving him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

“You know I don’t read fiction, *yen, yen, yen…”* Aboyede mimicked him. *“All the philosophy wey you dey read, you still no get sense,”* Aboyede added, switching to pidgin.

Adejare opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn’t think of the right retort. So, he kept quiet and then he suddenly thought of the perfect response and just as he opened his mouth, Aboyede held up a finger, silencing him.

“Whatever reply you are going to give is already two seconds late.”

Adejare bit his tongue and eyed his friend in annoyance, “let me even see the book *sef*,” he demanded and Aboyede handed him the novel.

Adejare gave a short laugh, “this is interesting,” he said. “She must have left this behind in her hurry to get away from me.”

“Who did?”

“The woman who occupied the seat before you,” Adejare answered and a mischievous smile spread across Aboyede’s face.

“What’s with the smile? You look scary.”

“A woman ran away from you? It is indeed interesting,” Aboyede answered, his brow furrowed as if he was in a deep thought.

“Who said she ran…”

“You said she was in a hurry to get away from you.”

“Hurry and ran are not the same thing.”

“Semantics. Any way there are only two explanations for that behaviour, it’s either your *jazz* has finally expired, or she’s blind. So, which one is it?”

“It’s definitely the latter,” Adejare replied cockily.

“Hmm… So, what really happened?”

“She was angry that I invaded her space or something along that line, I really don’t know. Anyway, we have our own problems.” Adejare said dismissively. He didn’t want to talk about the woman who had injured his pride by walking away from him.

“You sounded serious on the phone, what’s going on?” Adejare asked, all the playfulness gone from his voice. It was time for business.

"Jare,” Aboyede began, mirroring Adejare’s seriousness. “The board is going to declare a state of bankruptcy, assets are going to be liquidated to repay our loans and the company is going to be dissolved." Aboyede paused, watching how Adejare took in the news.

"It's over," he added solemnly.

"I told them to give me more time, we came to South Africa to find a solution…"

"No, we came to borrow more money, that's not a solution, we are only trying to prolong the inevitable," Aboyede replied.

Jare sighed. Things were going downhill pretty fast, and he was afraid he could not stop it.

"When was this decision made?" He asked.

"Well, officially, the decision hasn't been made yet, the board will meet in a month and that's when they will decide."

"So how do you know this then?"

"I have my ways of getting information," Aboyede replied curtly.

"Yeah, right," Jare snickered. "You mean they trust you enough to tell you what they are planning and not me, even though, I am the CEO."

Aboyede let out a whiff of breath. "You really cannot blame them, can you? Your father did the company dirty, and we barely escaped a series of lawsuits and guy, we can't even afford to pay our staff." He said and reclined against the lounge, trying to relax, but even he knew that was a futile effort. There would be no relaxing for either of them until they resolve the issue.

"You don't even deny it," Adejare replied, but there wasn't a bit of malice in his tone. Aboyede was meticulous in everything he did, it was only natural that the board trusted him.

"I can't let that happen, this company is more than just my father's legacy, it is important to me…"

"I have told you several times, you don't need the company to prove yourself, guy, you don't even need to prove anything."

"Oyede, this is not the time, please."

"Fine," Oyede resigned. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Goodness, Oyede," Adejare sighed. "Sometimes I just want to punch you in the throat. If I knew what I was going to do about it, would I be here?" He said and Oyede laughed. Laughter was the one thing that was constant between them. In the many years they've been friends, no matter the situation, they always made each other laugh.

"I'll be needing that back," An unmistakable feminine voice blurted, and they both jumped because neither of them had seen her coming.

Adejare recovered first, and he realised that she was talking about the book in his hand. He had no idea that he'd being holding on to the book throughout his conversation with Oyede.

"Oh," he said and handed the book to her. She snatched it from his hand and glared at him. But somehow, he had been expecting that reaction. What he however had not expected was what Aboyede did next.

"Ma'am," his friend shot to his feet, "this is such a great honour," Adejare raised an eyebrow at the sudden change in his friend's behaviour. He was a little embarrassed at the sheepish way Oyede was smiling.

What was wrong with his guy?

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I know this face," Mirabelle answered pleasantly like someone who was used to this kind of attention.

"Yeah, you don't actually," Aboyede said a little nervously and Jare raised his brow even higher. Aboyede was never nervous, at least not since he'd known him in this life.

What was going on? Who was this woman that was making his friend all flustered and shy like a new bride in the 15th century?

"I attended one of your seminars in Lagos, you are such a brilliant teacher, I really admire your work," Aboyede sputtered.

"Oh, it's nice to meet you," she replied politely, and then they talked for a bit before she went on her way without sparing Adejare another glance.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?" Jare asked his star-struck friend. "Who is she?"

"What kind of stupid question is that, Mr I-only read-philosophy?"

"What? Not like she is the ruler of Wakanda or something?"

"She might as well be the Queen of Wakanda," Aboyede said, returning to his seat.

"Okay, now I'm interested," Adejare said, sitting up straighter.

"You've been interested all along, you think I didn't see the way you were looking at her? She's not the type of woman you can mess with."

"That's up to me to decide, so tell me who she is."

Aboyede narrowed his eyes at him, as if considering whether or not he should answer his question. Deciding to go with the former, he said:
"That woman is Mirabelle Olajumoke Smith, the founder of D&E Group of Schools and Rosehaven, a foundation dedicated towards the helping victims

of domestic violence, she is an author and her last book, ‘Moving Forward’, a book of positive affirmations for women which sold over five million copies worldwide and has been translated into seven languages." He took a breath and then continued.

"Did I mention that she named her school after her daughters, Elizabeth and Deborah. Elizabeth, her first daughter, married Derek Onimide-Coker -"

"One half of the Onimide-Coker brothers, as in the billionaire brothers?" Adejare asked as disbelief washed all over him.

"Yes and repeating yourself a million times won't change the fact."

"But guy, she doesn't even look old enough to have achieved all these you are saying. Are you sure you are not mistaken?” He really couldn’t believe it; he had basically been in the presence of royalty.

"Ah Jare, don't be so shallow minded.” Aboyede replied just as a thought occurred to Adejare.

“Wait, you know someone as important as her and you could not even introduce me?”

“Just a couple of minutes ago, you wanted to punch me in the throat?” Aboyede replied stoically.

“*Anh, Anh*, don’t be like this…”

“if you want me to introduce you to her, prostrate and say uncle Aboyede, please introduce me to her.”

“Uncle Aboyede, seriously?” Adejare narrowed his eyes at his friend.

“Yeah, you are too disrespectful,” Aboyede replied.

“We are the same age, Oyede.”

“I am two months older than you, you can’t buy those two months in the market, no matter how hard you try.”

Adejare closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, otherwise he might actually end up punching Oyede in the throat.

"How do you know so much about her, anyway?" Adejare asked when he opened his eyes. “Are you one of those crazy-stalker fans?”

"Oh please, I just make it my business to know powerful people and that woman is one hell of a powerful woman with a lot of connections in high places."

“Yeah right,” Adejare rolled his eyes. “The way you talk sometimes, one would think you are an informant for a secret organisation of some

sort," he added and thought for a moment that his friend stiffened but Oyede started talking immediately that Adejare was sure he had been mistaken.

"Back to what were we discussing," Aboyede changed the subject. "We need a plan, no – screw that, only a miracle can save the company now," he added.

"Hmm, a miracle that can provide a shitload of money," Adejare agreed.

"I can't believe Ten million dollars is what we are looking for like this. We have fallen so hard. We should consider…"

"Hmm," Adejare sighed, interrupting Oyede as an idea occurred to him.

"I don't like the look in your eyes, Adejare, what are you thinking?"

"Nothing much," Adejare replied offhandedly. "Just that Mirabelle Smith might actually come in handy." He added and Oyede's eyes widened whether it was in surprise or in fear, or maybe both; Adejare couldn't really tell.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked him. Oyede closed his eyes for a minute and when he opened them Adejare thought he had recovered from whatever had caused his eyes to widen, but when he spoke, his voice was low and somewhat scary.

"Whatever it is you are scheming in your head, put an end to it immediately. Mirabelle Smith is not someone you can mess with."

Adejare cared little for Oyede's tone, but he was going to let it slide because he was used to his mood swings and because his mind currently occupied with ways to make Mirabelle fall hopelessly in love with him.

4

Bad things really came in threes -first a horrible one night-stand, then a condescending comment by her friend, and now she was being ignored by an insanely gorgeous man. Her holiday couldn't get any worse. Mirabelle wasn't so old-fashioned that she'd expected him to make the first move, but

he had clearly seen that she was attracted to him and had mocked her for it. She had to save her pride, but she had also clearly seen it in his eyes he had been attracted to her too. So, why did he have to put up such a show?

She laughed at the irony. She had put up a show too; Intentionally leaving her novel behind and going back for it was her basically telling him, *"hey, mister, I am giving you another chance so don't mess it up."* But he had simply handed her book to her and ignored her completely.

It was even more humiliating that she couldn't stop thinking about what she wanted to do to and with him. It was so intense that she shivered just thinking about it. That was why she decided to head to the gym to work out her frustration. She was sure that after her first two sets of deadlifts she would feel a lot less wound up.

Mirabelle first went back to her suite to change into her workout clothes only to find Tinuke still in her bedroom. She was sitting on the bed looking dishevelled with dark circles around her eyes. For all intents and purposes, she looked like a zombie – a zombie who was shoving ice-cream down her throat. She looked up as Mirabelle entered the bedroom and smiled, but the smile did not quite reach her red and puffy eyes.

If Mirabelle didn't know better, she would have thought Tinuke had been crying, but she knew better that Tinuke had a heart of stone.

"Stop smiling like that, you look possessed," She said to her, as she opened the adjoining door that connected her bedroom to the walk-in-closet.

"*Ore mi*, you are back early, what happened?" Tinuke asked with her mouth full, making Mirabelle shake her head in disgust.

"Am I supposed to sleep there?" She snapped as she sorted out the items in her gym bag.

"Why are you angry? I'm sure it's because you are tired of seeing those *small-small* girls flaunting their nakedness at you. I would be angry too if I had to watch all those toothpick-legged girls all day."

"This woman, what is your obsession with young women, did one of them snatch your husband or something?" She yelled back from the dressing room, which was why she didn't see Tinuke temporarily freeze at the mention of her husband.

"Only God, can help you, Tinuke," She continued as she stepped back into the bedroom, fully kitted for the gym. "Just make sure you are gone by

the time I come back."

Tinuke wasn't gone by the time she came back three hours later. She was still stuffing her face with Ice-cream only that this time; she was sitting on the floor, in the living-room in front the television that wasn't even on.

Mirabelle sighed, "This woman, what's up with this whole ice-cream thing, I didn't take you for a sweet tooth and even then, isn't this too much?" She asked. Wondering, not for the first time, how she had become friends with a woman she could barely stand. But the answer was obvious; her friendship with Tinuke was one of those hypocritical friendships a socialite like her had to keep in Lagos.

Tinuke's husband was a rich business executive; one of those men who didn't let their wives work, he believed Tinuke's place as his wife was to take care of their children and now that the children were all grown up and out of the house, her place was to stay at home and make herself look pretty for him. She therefore had too much money and time on her hands; a lethal combination that allowed her to poke her nose into other people's businesses. Their relationship was quite simple. Tinuke loved to gossip, and she was more often than not likely to unwittingly spill valuable information that Mirabelle could take advantage of because another thing life had thought her was that no information was useless.

Mirabelle had never once considered herself a good person, to make it as far as she had in life, she'd had to use people. And unfortunately, Tinuke was one of those people she used. In exchange, she would have to endure her insufferable presence in her life.

"Why didn't you just turn on the TV since you are already making yourself comfortable?" She asked, plopping down on the couch in exhaustion.

"I don't know how to operate this thing o, it's too *oyinbo* for me," Tinuke replied, pointing at the TV with her spoon. Her voice was piqued with excitement. It definitely was not because she was happy to see Mirabelle, she was probably getting a sugar rush.

Mirabelle rolled her eyes at Tinuke's comment. Anyone who didn't know her would think she lived in abject poverty with the way she sometimes behaved. She picked up the remote from the centre table and switched on the television, giving Tinuke a look that said, "*see, it's that simple*."

In the next instant, Tinuke lurched into a series of questions about the gym. What it looked like? What she did there? What kind of people went there? If she should enrol? It was definitely the sugar rush but Mirabelle couldn't take it anymore – *valuable unwitting informant* or not – Mirabelle was beyond caring.

"When you knew that you were just going to stay inside all day, why did you come here? It seems like you just attached yourself to me to frustrate me like you frustrate your husband." She snapped.

Immediately those words came out of her mouth, she wished she could take them back but it was too late because Tinuke who had at first being stunned by her outburst, had carefully placed the container of the half-eaten ice-cream on the plush carpet, before storming out, slamming the door in her wake.

Mirabelle sighed, and she'd thought her day couldn't get any worse than it already was. She would have to apologise to Tinuke later, but right now, she would rather just enjoy the peace that her absence left in its wake. Although, she was sure Tinuke was already on the phone with her network of gossips spreading rumours about her as revenge.

And as if the mess that she had just got into with Tinuke was not enough, she couldn't get her mind off the man she had met earlier. The rigorous workout at the gym hadn't helped her one bit. At this point, she was convinced that something was wrong with her. She didn't even know his name, and yet she couldn't stop thinking about his deeply set eyes or his firm muscles that she would love to run her tongue all over.

Now, she felt like a fool. She wanted him – she had known that since the first time she laid her eyes on him. If she had just had just the made the first move, she would probably be in his suite now getting nasty. Her insides tingled at the thought. She slid her hand into her pants and gently stroked herself, feeling her climax building.

Goodness, it felt so good, if she could just get to her vibrator. Just then, her phone rang, rudely snapping her out of her erotic trance. It was Elizabeth, and her timing couldn't any more wrong. She took a few seconds to steading her breathing before answering.

"Hey baby," She answered, assuming her role as the clear-headed and morally upright mother.

There was apparently some drama going on back home. One thing had led to another and her girls had got into a fight, which was surprising because the girls hardly ever fought, not even when they were children.

"Listen to me, darling…. No, wait, don't say such nonsense, I'll call her and speak to her now. You are in no position to stress yourself like this, you know how your sister can be. I'll call her and talk to her… I understand… I love you too, darling," she sighed when the call ended.

Whatever had caused the fight, she was glad she hadn't been at home to witness it. She loved her daughters but they could be exhausting with their theatrics and everyone would have looked up to her as the elder to settle it.

Sighing again, she dialled Deborah's number, wondering how it was possible that her children could still drain her blood, even when she was miles away.

5

It was true what they say, God worked in mysterious ways.

He had needed a miracle to save his company, and Mirabelle had been sent to him. Even after he had messed up his first meeting with her, he'd been given another opportunity and he sure as hell wouldn't mess it up again. An obnoxious wealthy Nigerian man living in South Africa with a misguided sense of patriotism was hosting all the Nigerians at the resort to an exclusive party that evening.

Judging by what Aboyede had told him about Mirabelle, she was the definition of crème de la crème so she would definitely be at this party. It

shouldn’t be that hard to get her to fall for him, she was already attracted to him.

So, why did the thought of what he was about to do leave such a bitter taste in his mouth?

“*You want to use her, that’s why.”*

A tiny voice in his head said. Why the voice in his head sounded like Aboyede was a question, he wasn’t willing to explore.

“Desperate times required desperate measures,” he said to himself.

“*Yeah right, keep telling yourself that if it makes you sleep well at night,”* The tiny Aboyede sounding voice replied.

“Get out of my head, you silly man,” he muttered as he checked out his appearance in front of the mirror. Adjusting his *fila* and balancing his *agbada*, he decided that he looked perfect.

“Speaking of whom, he should be here by now,” he said, looking at his wristwatch, and then he laughed. Oyede was never late for anything except parties. He didn’t know anyone more antisocial than Aboyede, he avoided parties and public places like a plague, unless he absolutely needed to attend. Yet, the man was a connoisseur of information, he seriously didn’t know how he did it.

There was a knock on the door and Adejare opened the door to see Aboyede dressed in another business suit.

“You couldn’t even be bothered to dress up,” he said, stepping out to meet his friend in the hallway. There was no need for him to come in since they were heading out, anyway.

“You know I don’t want to attend this thing, I would rather spend the sleeping,” Oyede replied.

“Typical,” Adejare snickered. “Don’t think of it as a party, think of it as a business meeting,” he added.

“So, you are still going ahead with that ridiculous plan? It’s been almost a week since you last saw her, I thought you would have abandoned the silly idea by now.” His friend asked him in all seriousness.

“Hmm,” Adejare said and nodded as a response as they walked down the hallway, towards the elevator.

“I know I’ve said it before, but just in case you didn’t hear me, this is a really stupid idea.”

“Oh please, I will not be taking anything that she won’t be giving willingly. Relax, I know what I am doing," Adejare replied. It was getting harder not to get mad at Aboyede. He was already battling his conscience over the issue, and he didn’t need Oyede’s lecture to worsen the guilt he felt.

“Do you really?” Aboyede continued stubbornly. “What makes you think it’s going to work? Do I need to remind you that this is the 21st century? She has been single for God knows how long, raised two children on her own and you think that you are the one she is suddenly going to fall in love with and spend all her money on and in just one month?” Aboyede blurted out his words all at once, desperately trying to convince Jare to drop the silly idea because not only would it not work, he could also get himself hurt.

“She is wealthy, in her fifties, with daughters who most likely don’t have her time, typical wealthy Lagosian. So, I can bet that she is lonely, needs a young man like me in her life. It won’t take much for her to fall for me and in no time, she would give me everything that I want and…” He stopped talking when he noticed that Aboyede had stopped walking and was staring at him open-mouthed.

“What?” He asked.

“That’s your plan? Are you insane? Where did you get the ridiculous idea that her daughters don’t have her time, those three are as thick as thieves…”

“Don’t tell me you know about her relationship with her daughters, too?” Adejare was beginning to suspect his friend. How did he know so much about Mirabelle, including her family life?

“I have told you, that I…”

“You make it your business to know things,” Adejare finished for him. “Anyway, whether or not you know things, this one is my area of expertise, don’t interfere, I know what I am doing.”

“No, you don’t. You absolutely do not know what you are doing. Leave that woman alone.” Aboyede warned him.

“Why are you being so extra about this? Do you like her?” Adejare asked. That was the only reason he could think was behind Aboyede’s insistence that he stayed away from Mirabelle. It was weird because as far

as he knew, Aboyede was not interested in older women, he didn't even think he was interested in women at all or men for that matter.

Aboyede ignored his question and continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "I know how much this company means to you, but doing things this way will not help matters and you would be no different from…"

"From my father," He interrupted his friend again, giving him a look that said he couldn't believe he had just compared him to his father.

"You know I don't mean it that way besides, if you really want Mirabelle's help why don't you approach her the right way, with a business proposal and let her decide if she wants to invest or not?" Aboyede suggested but got no response from Adejare, who kept walking as if he hadn't heard him.

"You know why you can't answer me?" Aboyede continued when Adejare didn't answer his question. "Because you know deep down that Williams Corporate Realty is dead, the company is done."

"Would you just stop!" Jare threw his hands up, Oyede's nagging was giving him a headache. "Can't you see I am trying my best here?"

"You are not trying your best, you are trying to scam a woman," Aboyede wasn't backing down.

"I am not trying to scam her for goodness' sake, I have said it before, I won't be taking anything she won't be giving willingly."

"Really, let me break down what you intend to do. You want to make her fall in love with you so badly that she'll invest in your dying company and then you will break up with her. How does that not sound like a scam to you?"

"For the umpteenth time, I am not trying to scam her." Frustrated was an understatement, Adejare could not put into words how tired he was of Aboyede's nagging.

"You are no worse than a gigolo, but at least the women they are with know what they are getting into."

"Just shut up and quit nagging me like a woman."

"It will not work anyway," Aboyede said pointedly ignoring the steam coming out of Adejare's ears.

"If you are so sure it's not going to work, why are so bothered about it?" He asked. And it was Aboyede's turn to keep quiet because he could

not tell Adejare what he knew about Mirabelle without revealing who he truly was himself.

"See? You don't even have an answer to that. You don't have to come with me to the party, I can do this all by myself."

"I wasn't planning to anyway," Aboyede retorted.

"Good," Adejare snapped and walked towards the elevator that had just arrived, leaving Aboyede standing alone in the hallway.

6

Mirabelle found parties like this incredibly boring, whether they held it in the overpopulated city of Lagos, or in sophisticated resorts like this one. It was probably because she was used to all the glitz and glamour that usually came with these type parties. She remembered the first time she had attended a party like this, like it happened yesterday.

Back then, she had been fascinated by everything, the skyrocketing *geles* and cropped wigs the women had on their heads, the jewellery, the perfumes, the cigarettes hanging in between painted lips, the high-pitched foreign accents, the highlife music – it had all been overwhelmingly attractive and she wanted to be a part of it.

Being a young single mother with two children to raise, the only way she could attend such a party was as a server, a part-time job she did to supplement her meagre salary as a teacher. Back then, she would stand in front of the standing mirror in the one-bedroom apartment she shared with her daughters and practiced speaking in a British accent the way the women at the parties did.

It had been hard combining her night job and her day job, but she had always looked forward to working at the parties whenever the opportunities came because it afforded her a glimpse into a life she wanted but had thought she could never have. Working at the parties had been both a bad and a good thing – she had met the man who had offered her the chance to live the life she really wanted, but it had come at a price.

Now, so many years later, after attending a plethora of these parties as a distinguished guest as opposed to serving at them, she had grown immensely bored with them. Looking around, she decided that this party wasn't very much different from the very first one – only that the wigs were longer, straighter and more expensive, the *geles* were no longer skyrocketing but now wrapped in layers; the perfumes were more subtle, cigars were more sophisticated. Nevertheless, the feel of both parties was the same.

In her line of work, whether as the owner of a school or the founder of an NGO or as an author, she needed to attend parties like this, to network and create connections that would fund her cause and her various projects. So, no matter how bored she was of them, she would continue to attend and even host many more of these types of parties.

It was also why she kept friends like Tinuke, whom she had eventually apologised to and whom had also refused to come with her to the party, which made Mirabelle wonder again, why Tinuke had insisted on coming along if she was just going to stay indoors throughout?

This disaster of a holiday was done, anyway. She was returning to Nigeria the next day, and this was her last night of unwinding before she returned to the hustle and bustle that was her life. Tired of mingling, she leaned against a wall in a corner, nursing a glass of champagne, letting the cool highlife music coming from the life band seep into her soul. Laughter reached her from one guest at the party, a slender woman in a red dress

standing in a group of three other people. Mirabelle smiled too. Whatever had made the woman laugh, her joy was contagious.

"Why are you always alone every time I see you?" A familiar voice interrupted the moment she was having. She looked up and stared into the eyes of the man she had met at the pool a week earlier. A man whose name she didn't know but whose face she'd been wearing out the batteries of her vibrator to every night since she first met him. She flushed thinking about it, but quickly recovered before he noticed.

"As opposed to walking around with an entourage?" She replied, rolling her eyes.

"You also do that quite a lot, don't you?" He asked, grinning at her, causing the tingling sensation to resume between her thighs.

"Ah, I hope I am not invading your privacy again, this time?" he asked her. His voice was low and sexy. He had an infamous glint in his eyes, he definitely knew what kind of effect he had on women and goodness, he smelled so good.

"Do what?" She asked, drawing closer to him. Ignoring his last question and focusing instead on the former, they were standing so close that she had nowhere else to look but his eyes and in it, she saw the mirrored reflection of her own lust.

He didn't answer; he was studying her, his eyes caressing every inch of her face, he wanted her just as much as she wanted him, there was no denying the attraction between them and she was tired of playing games. Tonight, she was going straight for what she wanted.

Leaning her toes, since she didn't barely reach his shoulders even in her six-inch heels, she whispered her suite number into his ears and smiling seductively at him; she turned and walked away.

There, she'd done it, she'd made the first move. The ball was now in his court.

Back in her room, she freshened up and put on a black negligee that left nothing to the imagination, dabbed a subtle, seductive perfume behind her ears and was just applying a fresh coat of red lipstick when the doorbell sounded. Smiling to herself in the mirror because he was right on time.

She opened the door to a sexy smile and a bottle of wine. "I didn't want to come empty-handed," he said as he stepped into the suite. He had ditched the *agbada* and *fila* and still looked incredibly sexy in his *buba*.

“Thank you,” she took the bottle from him, although she doubted they would have the time to drink as she placed it on the centre table in the living room. Turning back to face him, he immediately pulled her in for a kiss, which she responded to passionately. Their tongues danced in the searing kiss until neither of them could either breathe or stand properly.

It turned her on that he wasn’t wasting time on unnecessary preambles. He knew what he came for and he was going straight for the kill.

“That was exactly what I needed,” she whispered into his ears breathlessly and then led him into the bedroom where she casually slipped out of her negligee letting the thin fabric pool at her feet.

She watched him hold his breath as he caressed her once more with his eyes that had already darkened with lust. Her nipple tightened and her pussy tingled almost painfully. It was crazy that he could make her feel this way just with his eyes, what would happen when he eventually touched her.

“You are so beautiful,” his voice was quiet, husky and powerful in every sense of the word. Mirabelle felt wetness pool down below.

Giving him a sexy lopsided grin, she said, “your turn.” In an instant, he was out of his clothes and it was Mirabelle’s turn to be transfixed by his beauty. He lifted her off her feet and gently laid her on her back on the bed. She ran her fingers over his hard-lean muscles and he lost whatever control or restraint that he had been holding on to and kissed her hungrily.

Breaking the kiss only to begin nibbling his way down the nape of her neck all the way to her breasts. His hard and throbbing cock grazed her inner thigh, but he wasn’t ready to oblige her entrance yet.

Taking one nipple into his mouth, he suckled gently, yet hungrily, and then gave the same attention to the other nipple.

Mirabelle’s toes curled and uncurled, feeling her climax building, and he wasn’t anyway close to her pussy yet.

“Oh… oh… I think I’m going to come.”

The words spilled out of her in a breathless rush.

“Not yet darling, not yet,” he smiled wickedly at her and resumed his kisses down her stomach and all the way to her dripping wet pussy.

He’d barely put his tongue on her clit and when she exploded with a powerful force into his mouth. He paused and waited for her spasms to stop before easing into her; she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her

legs around hips, riding up to meet each of his powerful thrusts, kissing him hungrily as they rode each other into oblivion.

7

“wait, you are saying she left, just like that?” Aboyede asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep a straight face as Jare told his story. They were at the airport, waiting for their flight to be announced. He looked so despondent describing the aftermath of his night with Mirabelle which made it all more the difficult for Aboyede not to laugh.

“Saying she left is downplaying the situation, that would mean she actually deemed me worthy of a goodbye. By the time, I woke up the next morning, she was gone, man. Like, her wardrobe had been cleared out and do you know what’s worse?”

“What?” Aboyede asked, covering his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing

“The cleaner came in to clean up the room, while I was halfway picking up my clothes from the floor. Apparently, Mirabelle had checked out while I was still sleeping in the room. That was the most embarrassing thing…”

Aboyede’s outburst of laughter interrupted him. He shot him a deathly look.

“I honestly don’t know what’s funny in this entire story, your best friend was humiliated and you are laughing.” Jare couldn’t hide his irritation.

“Sorry… Sorry…” Aboyede offered a mock apology and then pulled his lips tightly together to keep from laughing, making his eyes water from the effort.

Adejare sucked his teeth and shook his head at his friend “I don’t even know how we became friends?” he muttered under his breath.

“But seriously, what were you expecting? Breakfast in bed?” Aboyede just couldn’t help it. If looks could kill, Aboyede would have died from the look Adejare gave him.

“Seriously, Oyede.”

“Yes, seriously. Do you think you are so special that she would fall for you after one night together? Do you know how many of such nights she’s probably had in her life?”

“Just shut up and stop saying nonsense,” Adejare snapped. The thought of Mirabelle being with other men suddenly made him angry.

“Guy, better calm down and don’t give yourself high blood pressure, she’s had her fun, and she’s done with you. I told you, your silly plan would not work.”

For some reason, he wasn’t upset that his plan to make her fall in love with him had failed but because she had left and he may never see her again, which was weird because the whole point of seeing her again was because of the plan.

“Or maybe you are not as good as all those women you’ve been with made you think you are,” Aboyede interrupted his thoughts.

“You are really getting a kick out of this, aren’t you?”

“I am,” His friend admitted shamelessly, “because I told you so.” he added afterwards.

“You really are the worst friend in the world's history, aren’t you supposed to be on my side? What happened to bro code?”

“Bro code is bullshit,” Aboyede replied frankly and Adejare couldn’t argue with that.

“But honestly, what do you think I did wrong? This is the second time she’s walked away from me, I don’t understand it,” he said as Aboyede brought out a packet of chips from his suit pocket and opened it.

“What kind of question is that? How am I supposed to know what you did wrong; did I get in bed with the two of you? Besides, stop crying and whining like a bush baby missing its ma. Have you forgotten that we have bigger problems?” he asked, picking out a plantain chip from the pack and throwing it in his mouth. Deep down, he was grateful how things had panned out between Adejare and Mirabelle. Mirabelle was still the woman he’d known her to be, but it was still too early to relax because Adejare was the man he’d grown up with, he would not let her go just like that, if not for anything but to heal his bruised ego.

He sighed, Adejare will certainly complicate issues.

“I’m the one who got dumped, but you are the one sighing. Why?”

“Dumped? Guy, you weren’t in a relationship.” Aboyede corrected him. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen whine over a woman as much as you have been doing over Mirabelle. Are you sure this is still about the plan because if this about sex, you have probably had about as many women as she’s had probably had men? So, what’s the problem here?”

“That ratio isn’t accurate,” Adejare said pointedly.

“What?”

“She’s older, so the probability that she’s had more men should be higher.”

“No, I’m pretty sure the ratio is accurate because you are a slut.” Aboyede retorted, and Adejare rolled his eyes in annoyance, Mirabelle’s habit was rubbing off on him.

But what really was the problem? Why he so upset, he knew very well that it wasn’t because of the failed plan, so what was it?

Oyede was right about one thing though, he was being pathetic. He couldn’t keep whining about it. He needed a distraction, something to take his mind of Mirabelle at least temporarily, but unfortunately, the buzzing of the crowd at the busy airport was more of background music to the melodramatic movie playing in his head than a distraction.

He thought about the company and how he couldn’t give up just yet, there had to be a way to save it. There had to be something he could do.

Time – he needed more time.

He turned to look at Aboyede, who was munching greedily on his chips but with a rather vacant look in his eyes.

“Oye,” he called, but Aboyede didn’t answer, just like he had expected. He was used to that vacant expression in his friend’s eyes, like something was dead inside him. He’d been like that since they were kids, and if Adejare’s suspicion was right, he knew just why Aboyede was like that.

“Oye,” He called again, this time a bit louder.

“What?” Aboyede snapped. “I heard you the first time,” he added. Adejare wasn’t the least bit offended because he was also used to the mood swings that followed the vacant expression.

When the time was right, Aboyede would confide in him and tell him the truth, but until then, he ignored the outburst like he always did.

“Do you think you could actually use your friendship or influence or whatever to convince the board to give me more time?” He asked as if nothing had happened.

“I knew when you called me Oye, that you wanted something,” Aboyede answered, back to his normal self.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. So?”

“No,” Aboyede answered curtly.

“No, you can’t or no, you won’t?”

“No, I won’t,” Another curt reply.

Adejare sighed. “Why won’t you do it?” he asked.

“Because despite being *dumped* by her – your words not mine, you still want to find her and go ahead with your ridiculous plan and I will not give you more time to carry it out.”

“How do you know me so well?” Adejare muttered.

“I have over twenty years of experience where you are concerned.” Aboyede answered almost fondly.

“hmm,” Jare snickered and got to his feet. His legs were falling asleep from sitting for so long.

Why the hell was their flight being delayed, anyway?

“You’ve had your fun with Mirabelle now, it’s better you stay away from her,” Aboyede warned the seriousness was back on his face and in his voice.

Adejare ignored him. Nonetheless, he also knew that when Aboyede took that tone, there was no convincing him, he would just have to make do

with the time frame that he had and during that time, he hoped he would figure out what it was about Mirabelle that he couldn't get out of his mind.

8

Mirabelle had never felt so relieved to be back to the polluted and congested city of Lagos, which was ironic because the minute she stepped out of the plane, it was like breathing a breath of fresh air.

For first time, the atmosphere felt… well, warm and welcoming; which was another irony because neither of daughters was there to welcome her at the airport. Deborah was off somewhere doing God knows what, and Elizabeth, who was heavily pregnant, was working on expanding her business and was in a meeting with some investors. It was all good because she was not in the best of moods and she did not want to have to explain the reason behind her moodiness to her daughters.

She had returned from her holiday more stressed out than she had been before she left. Having to deal with Tinuke breathing down her neck throughout their stay was more than what she could bear, but funny enough that wasn't why she was upset.

Adejare was why she was upset. Something had snapped inside her that night with Adejare – something that made her excited, happy, confused

and a bit weird. She had never felt that way before, and it scared her shitless. It was why she had left before he'd woken up.

She'd run away like a coward.

Suddenly jolted forward, she took a moment to steady herself. Her driver, Amos, had apparently driven into a porthole.

Take it easy, Amos," She cautioned. The terrible road was the one thing that she didn't miss about Lagos.

"I'm sorry, madam. These roads are…"

"You are not a stranger on these roads, so please be careful," she interrupted him and then for some reason, he felt that he had to take his eyes off the road and explain himself to her.

"Amos, eyes on the road!" she yelled, and he quickly turned back to the road and swerved just in time to avoid colliding into an upcoming vehicle.

"Are you insane, Amos? Have you started drinking again?"

"I'm sorry madam… No, madam… I'm sorry madam," Amos apologised, sweating profusely.

She should have fired him the first time he had driven her while he was drunk but he was a father of three teenage children with only this job as his source of income, so she'd let unnecessary sentiment cloud her judgement, the same way she was being unnecessarily sentimental about Jare; it had been just sex and nothing more.

"Park the car," she commanded.

"Madam?"

"I'm sure you are not deaf, park the car and get out," she repeated and when he begrudgingly followed her order, she got out too, snatched the car keys from his hands and drove herself home, leaving him alone on the highway

That was the woman she was – a woman who made active decisions about her life without sentiments, and that was exactly what she should do about her unexplainable feelings for Jare.

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A lot of things had changed in the few weeks that she had been on holiday, but the most surprising of all the changes was Deborah had got herself a boyfriend and even more surprising was that the boyfriend was

Godwin, Derek's younger brother. There been in a spark between them since they were children, but they had both been too stubborn to acknowledge the attraction between them for so long that she had given up of anything ever happening between them. However, Deborah's new relationship status was only one half of the surprise, she had also decided on a career path and was now working as an administrator in D&E group of schools, a job she had repeatedly turned down. In addition, she was setting up an organisation to help troubled teenagers.

Mirabelle was pleasantly surprised about these changes because Deborah was the last person she'd expected to follow in her footsteps. Although, it meant that she would see less and less of her youngest daughter in the coming days.

Deborah taking charge of her life did not however, extend to her tidiness. The house was no better than a pigsty when Mirabelle arrived. So, the first thing she did was contact a cleaning agency to scrub the house clean and return it to its pristine state and also hire a new housekeeper named, Adunni.

But even after the agency had cleaned, she still wasn't satisfied – there were some things the agency could not fix, like the disarranged wine bottles in the bar.

She was so going to kill Deborah when she eventually had the decency to show her face.

As much as it annoyed her to admit, she still needed a distraction. No matter how hard she tried, she could not stop thinking about Jare. She had no one to talk to about how she felt, her daughters were totally out of the question and so was Tinuke.

I really should try going into therapy, she thought as she plugged in her headphones and set to work, carefully polishing and arranging her wine bottles. After all, there was nothing good music and a little physical labour couldn't fix.

How wrong she was.

After sorting her wine collection, cleaning the entire house all over again, only allowing the new housekeeper to pitch in mildly, Jare still occupied every one of her thoughts. The lyrics of the songs that played into her ears reminded her of him. Even the tinge of lemon from the surface

cleaning liquid she wiped the top of the kitchen counter with, smelled like his cologne.

It was ridiculous, almost like something out of a Bollywood movie.

Deciding that staying indoors wasn't helping her situation, she decided to go out for a walk. The sun had set, and the weather seemed nice enough for a cool evening walk.

"I'm going out," she announced to Adunni, who came out of the kitchen, wiping her wet hands on the skirts of her apron. That was terribly unhygienic, but she wasn't in the mood to make any comment on it.

"You are already making dinner?"

"Yes ma," Adunni answered, curtseying slightly. She did that every time she spoke to Mirabelle. Mirabelle had told her it wasn't necessary, but it was obviously a habit she couldn't let go of easily.

"Okay fine, I doubt I'll be able to eat anything when I get back, so just keep the leftovers in the fridge and don't wait up for me," she ordered and Adunni curtseyed again before returning to the kitchen.

Mirabelle shook her head slightly and then she checked her sling purse to make sure she had the essentials – her phone, cash, in case she needed to get something at a store that didn't accept credit cards. Pulling her hood over her head, headphones plugged in and her hands in her pocket, she looked like any random teenager walking down the street.

Bobbing her head slightly to the music, she walked past a woman pushing a baby stroller. She smiled fondly at the toddler and then suddenly remembered that Elizabeth's baby shower was coming up soon.

She couldn't believe she had forgotten all about it, she hadn't even gotten her a gift yet and she had no idea what to get her. Her assistant usually bought those kinds of gifts and sent them to their recipients on her behalf, but she couldn't treat her daughter as impersonally as she treated other people.

She sighed, because it meant that she would have to call Tinuke for pointers. The woman had so many grandchildren, she would know the ideal gift. The gag was that she had hoped that she wouldn't have to deal with Tinuke for at least the next thousand years.

But what choice did she really have at this point?

While contemplating whether or not to call Tinuke, she collided into an early evening runner and they both went tumbling to the ground.

9

Anyone who knew the back story would have thought Adejare had planned the collision on the street, but to his own credit, this wasn't one of his machinations. He hadn't been able to get Mirabelle off his mind, so he had decided to take a run to blow off some steam and clear his mind. It was just pure coincidence that he had taken that route that evening.

Adejare let out a whiff of breath. Goodness, they were entangled in a way that he hadn't ever thought was humanly possible. The more the girl on top of him struggled to get to her feet, the more entangled they became.

And she smelled so much like Mirabelle, that he was convinced he was running out of his mind. He needed to get the teen off him before passers-by got the wrong idea of what was happening.

"Relax," he said. "The more you struggle, the harder it's going to be for either of us to get up from here," he added and the girl froze.

He'd said relax, not freeze. What was wrong with her?

"Err… You can get up now," The longer it took her to unfreeze or whatever, the more impatient he became. Nevertheless, it had been his fault they were in this situation in the first place, if he had been looking in front of him, instead of thinking about where Mirabelle might be or what she might she be doing…

"Oh right," The girl said, and she didn't sound like a girl at all, she sounded like… like… Mirabelle.

“Mirabelle?” He couldn’t believe it.

This wasn’t some teenager; this was the woman who had occupied his mind all day and night since he’d returned to Nigeria. He realised in utter surprise.

She got to her feet slowly. Her hood had slipped off her head and he could now see her face clearly. The streets were poorly lit, but it was bright enough to see her unmistakable features.

He got to his feet as quickly as he could, his eyes fixated on her face, and he couldn’t be bothered to dust off his clothes.

“Mirabelle,” he called her name again but this time it was with more certainty. She looked away for a minute, obviously embarrassed, but when she looked back at him, her eyes were full of suspicion.

“Are you stalking me?” She asked, but it sounded more like an accusation.

“Wait… what?”

“How come you are here just at the same time as me?” she asked, and Adejare resisted the urge to snicker. She was doing it again.

“Mirabelle, I live a few streets away and like you always seem to forget this is another public space,” he replied and got an incredulous stare down from her as response.

Jare sighed, “Why would I stalk you?” He asked when she wouldn’t stop glaring at him.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, “Why do you men do what you do?” she added as she checked the condition of her headphones. They had apparently been broken when they collided into each other. He wanted to make a comment about her using headphones when she could use airpods, but he had a more important question to ask, like why she had left him back at the resort without so much as a goodbye?

“I should be the one who’s angry here and not you,” he blurted out.

“Why? You ran into me…”

“You left me at the resort, why did you do that?”

“I had an early flight, and you were still sleeping?” She answered pointedly. Her facial expressions were unreadable.

“You could have woken me up, or at least told me the night before,” he insisted.

“I didn’t see the need,” she replied bluntly.

“You didn’t see the need?” He asked, his voice going up an octave . “Like our night together meant nothing to you?” He sounded like a heartbroken teenager, but he was too angry to care.

“It wasn’t supposed to mean anything, that’s why it’s called a one-night stand?” she replied, emphasising the word, ‘one.’

He knew what it was and what it meant but to hear her say it saddened him and somehow also strengthened his resolve that he shouldn’t give her up easily.

“Go out with me,” he blurted out, and it was Mirabelle’s turn to stare at him, flabbergasted.

“What?” she asked when she recovered. “Why do you want to go out with me?”

“Because I want us to mean more than just a night-stand,” he replied and shocked himself by how much he truly meant that statement.

This wasn’t about going ahead with the plan anymore. He had to admit that much to himself, at least.

She scoffed, “You are not being serious,” she said and simple walked away from him.

He had blurted out his feelings, and she’d just walked away. In the history of clowning, he was the biggest clown.

“Aren’t you coming along?” She called. He turned to look at her. She was standing just a few feet away from him, smiling as she waved him over.

“Walk with me?” She said.

He narrowed his eyes sceptically at her as he walked over to where she was standing.

What was she planning?

“Walk with me and I’ll consider this our first date,” she said, and her smile deepened.

“Why did you change your mind?” He narrowed, trying to figure out what she was playing at when she’d turned him down blatantly just a few minutes ago.

“Er… let’s see,” She began and then paused, pretending to think deeply about the answer to his question. “Maybe because I want us to mean more than just a one- night-stand,” she replied and laughed.

He loved the sound of her laughter; it was every bit genuine.

“So, what did you do that for?” He laughed.

“I wanted to do small *shakara*…You should have seen the look on your face.” She laughed at him.

“Yeah, yeah… at least I got what I wanted,” he said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his elation when she took his hand and pulled him into a hug. He hadn’t expected that, but he certainly loved the warmth that came with her embrace. This night was full of pleasant surprises.

They spent two hours walking back to Mirabelle’s house, which ordinarily would have taken fifteen minutes, but they had taken their time strolling, enjoying each other’s company.

“We are here,” Mirabelle announced.

“Oh,” Adejare couldn’t hide the sadness in his voice.

Mirabelle smiled up at him, “You are so cute…”

“What the hell?” she cursed as something or rather someone standing in front of her gate caught her eye.

“Is there a problem?”

“I’ll call you,” she replied almost absentmindedly as she walked to the front of her gate. He stood for a few minutes, watching her speak to the person standing in front of her gate. She didn’t seem to be in any danger, so he jogged back the way they’d come with butterflies in his stomach.

“what is going on? What are you doing here?” Mirabelle asked, sounding just as confused as she felt and just a little harsher that she’s intended. However, Tinuke could hardly expect her to be friendly when they weren’t particularly on good terms.

“I have nowhere else to go,” Tinuke answered. Her voice was coarse, as if she had been crying or yelling or both. “He kicked me out of the house,” she added.

Mirabelle’s eyes went to the huge travelling bag beside Tinuke and her mouth fell open; more out of surprise than pity because Tinuke being kicked out of her home by husband was the last thing she had expected to hear.

For now, she would not ask questions, she would simply give Tinuke what nobody had given her when she had been in her shoes – a place to feel safe. Knowing Tinuke, she hoped she wouldn’t regret letting her into her home.

She cleared her throat to hide her surprise; she didn’t want to cause her friend further embarrassment, Tinuke was a proud woman and coming to her house to seek shelter must have taken a lot from her than she could imagine.

“Why didn’t you wait for me inside? Or even called me?” She asked.

“Your gateman wouldn’t let me in, he said you didn’t tell him I was coming, and I also tried calling you but it wasn’t going through, you know this stupid network people.”

Mirabelle shook her head in annoyance.

“Why would he do that? Are you stranger or is he just seeing you here?” She asked rhetorically and then banged on the gate in annoyance, too irritated to use the bell.

After a few minutes of banging and failing to get a response, she brought out her phone from her purse and dialled Adunni who answered on the second ring.

“Come out and open the gate for me, please,” she ordered and hung up.

“I honestly don’t know what to do with my domestic staff, Amos almost killed me on the way from the airport and now this idiot who calls himself my security guard… I’m sure he’s already asleep,” She said to Tinuke and got a “hmm,” as a response as Tinuke was far gone in her thoughts.

She never thought she would see the day when Tinuke had nothing to say.

The gate groaned in protest as Adunni came out with the gateman, who was sleepy-eyed. She must have him woken up.

“I’m sorry madam, I fell asleep,” the gateman apologised.

“You fell asleep at this time? It’s not even 10 pm yet,” Mirabelle said in disgust. “You have just one job, just one.”

“I’m sorry, Madam,” he apologised again.

“You are always sorry. But I don’t have your time this night. Carry this bag inside for me.” She ordered and then turned to Tinuke.

“Tinu, let’s go inside.” She said and gently led her friend inside. In the few minutes they had been standing outside, tinuke seemed to have been getting drained and looked like she might collapse at any minute.

They would deal with whatever had caused her husband to kick her out of the house later. Tonight, she was still reeling in the excitement of how her night had turned out with Jare and Tinuke was obviously not in the mood to talk. It would be a better plan if they both went to bed and postponed the talking till the following day.

***

It was a quarter past ten in the morning before Mirabelle opened her eyes the next day. When she’d gone out for a walk the previous evening, she had clearly not thought she would run into Adejare or even end up walking around the neighbourhood with him.

The events of the past nights floated up to the fore of her mind. The entire episode, from being embarrassed when she’d heard his voice call her name as she was struggling to get off him, to him asking her to go out with him and her actually accepting, had all been like a dream.

She had agreed to his dating proposal because in all honesty, turning him down or running away from him would not stop him from invading her thoughts. Besides, it wouldn’t hurt to try something different with him. It

was weird, the childish way she felt around him, but she loved it. And when she'd gone to bed to bed that night, those had been the only thoughts on her mind – that was before Tinuke started wailing.

As if someone had just died.

Everything about her was dramatic. Mirabelle had sat up for hours wondering what had possessed her to let Tinuke spend the night. For a moment, she'd considered going to comfort her in the guest room but quickly decided against it because if she did that, it would only increase Tinuke's wailing by several decibels and they would be there till daybreak.

Between Tinuke's excessive wailing and the excitement in her stomach, she didn't fall asleep until three a.m. and now because of that she had woken up with dark circles around her eyes, looking like a zombie with a nagging headache.

If zombies got headaches.

She threw off the covers and got out of bed, yawning and stretching lazily. She wasn't in the mood for breakfast, a cup of coffee was all she needed.

She smelled the rain before she looked outside her window and saw dark clouds gathering in the sky. It was a good day to get back under the covers and cosy up to a book, but then she had an insufferable guest that she had to attend to.

Maybe it wasn't rain, maybe winter had come.

She entered her living room, half-expecting Tinuke to have dominated her house, but then she remembered that Tinuke had bigger problems than exerting her presence as the super-homemaker of the century.

The only person in the living room was Adunni, who was carefully dusting one of the figurines that decorated the room.

"Good morning, Adunni," she said, and Adunni nearly jumped out of her skin, startled, dropping the rag in her hand.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Where's my friend?"

"G… ood morning ma," Adunni stammered. Bending down to pick up the rag that h ad fallen.

Mirabelle because of her nature was slightly suspicious of how startled Adunni had been. She was sure hadn't been that quiet walking into the living room.

“I’ll take it that Tinuke is still in her room,” she said, turning towards the guest room. Another thing her old life had thought her was that she should never ignore red flags and Adunni still jittering minutes after she’d apologised for startling her was waving a big red flag in her face.

She intentionally spun to face Adunni, and the housekeeper gasped.

Yeah, she was right – big red flag.

“I’d like a cup of coffee; you know how I like it. Please bring it to the guest room,” She said, but even as the words fell out of her mouth, she knew there was no ways she would eat or drink anything made by Adunni until she was sure whether or not her suspicions were right.

The old her would have run a background check on Adunni before hiring her but, she had trusted the agency completely. She’d got sloppy since she retired.

Giving Adunni a stiff smile, she turned and went into the guest room, to find Tinuke up in bed and still crying and whimpering. After all the crying she had done overnight, any normal human being would have been exhausted by now, but Tinuke was anything but normal.

“You are going to get a headache,” she said softly. Surprised by own gentle tone as she sat on the bed and put her arms around her friend, who accepted the hug and sobbed into her nightdress.

“I know you all think I’m pathetic, you and all our other friends,” Tinuke said when she finally stopped crying.

Mirabelle leaned backwards slightly, a bit confused at the accusation.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Oh please, Mirabelle,” Tinuke snivelled. “I knew about the affair my husband was having with his secretary and I know the whole of Lagos knew too, they weren’t particularly subtle about it. I just didn’t think that he would kick me out for that girl with her toothpick legs.”

Mirabelle finally understood the obsession Tinuke had with younger women; she’d known her husband was having an affair with a younger woman. Why hadn’t she thought about it? If she knew about the affair, then Tinuke had probably known too – she was the queen of gossip, after all.

“Oh dear,” Mirabelle said and pulled Tinuke in for another hug. She was dishing out a lot of hugs these days. Was that what happened when one was in love?

In love? Where the hell did that thought come from?

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” Adunni said. Fear was clear in her voice and on her face, she had thought her mission was simple enough, she hadn’t countenanced how she would feel in the presence of someone as legendary as Mirabelle. She was supposed to be watching her, but it felt like it was the other way around and she was the one being watched. And it didn’t help that she was always a ball of nerves every time she was around Mirabelle.

“Why?” Aboyede’s response was short and curt.

“I feel like she’s watching me… like she knows,” Adunni replied. Looking straight ahead, she couldn’t dare look Aboyede in the eyes, not only because she was failing horribly at her first mission as a member of the house but also because she couldn’t dare look an Agent 4 directly in the eyes.

“Then, you are not doing your job well,” Aboyede said after a brief silence.

“You know what this means, right?” He asked and Adunni nodded. It meant she would have to be retrained. She wasn’t yet good enough to be a full-fledged member of the House. It sounded simple, but it wasn’t. It was like she was being sent back in disgrace. Her hands shook just thinking about the horrors she would have to go through all over again.

When you become a member of the House, there was no getting out. Unless you become legendary enough to successfully complete all missions assigned to you in the first fifteen years of being a member, then you could be considered for retirement. But even then, the House never truly let you go. They were always watching; one misstep and you got taken out, retired member or not.

She wasn’t privy to why she had to watch Mirabelle, that information was classified but whatever it was, one thing was for sure -it wouldn’t be long before the House puts a price on Mirabelle’s head.

“Fine, but you can’t just leave like that. It would make her more suspicious. Stay for a few more weeks, be on your best behaviour and then make up an excuse to leave,” Aboyede ordered.

“I’m sure you can do that much?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Good, then we are done here.”

Adunni nodded and got out of the car. Since she started working in Mirabelle’s house, she’d met Aboyede in different locations to give her report. This time it had been in his car, which he’d parked a few streets away from Mirabelle’s house.

Blending in with the dark night, Adunni hurried away from the car. She looked like a petty thief trying not to look suspicious, which made her look even more suspicious.

Watching her disappear through the side mirror, Aboyede shook his head and sighed. Of all the agents he could have chosen for this, he’d chosen the worst one. Unfortunately, she was the only option he’d had; seasoned members of the House would have questioned why he was doing a surveillance using none of the recommended equipment. To his credit, when he’d seen her in training, she had looked smart and competent enough.

Apparently, he’d been wrong. Now, Mirabelle was suspicious and judging from what he knew about her, she wouldn’t let this go until she got to the bottom of it, which meant Adunni’s life was in danger and so was his.

Adunni’s life was forfeit anyway because retraining was a myth, no member ever returned from retraining, but only Agent 4s were privy to that information. But what about his life and Adejare’s, he was after all the reason he was keeping an eye on Mirabelle?

Did this mean he would have to kill for Adejare? Again?

***

Mirabelle watched as her housekeeper snuck back into the compound, trying to walk and look normal but looking every bit suspicious.

She had been right to follow her out that night; it had confirmed the suspicions she had about her. The question now was, who was she working for?

Mirabelle considered the whole situation annoying, to say the very least. She’d worked hard to gain her freedom from the House and put all that darkness behind her, but what was this now? The only reason the

House could be after her was if they felt that she was putting their existence in danger, but that wasn't even possible. She was one of the few members to successfully retire from the House; her data had been wiped off their database minute she did.

One of the ways the House protected itself was that they made sure members didn't know each other's true identity, much less that of retired members. So that if by some misfortune a member was caught alive and tortured, whatever information they gave would be wrong and misleading.

It was the same of all members except Agent 4s, but there were very few of them. An agent 4 was the link between the foot soldiers and the masters, they knew everything about everyone. Agent 4s had a deadly chip inserted into their left forearm, a chip only the masters could detonate. It was a fail-safe measure put in place to ensure that Agent 4s' excesses could always be checked.

It was basically walking around with a ticking bomb living inside you.

The House was a place of horror, where desperate souls were manipulated to the will and desire of the masters whom no one had ever seen, but the House had also given her all she had today, a place to call a home and a better life for her daughters. If only it hadn't come at the price of the damnation of her soul.

The House was a secret she would take with her to her grave; the House knew this. So why were they after her?

Except Adunni was not from the House.

Thinking about it, it didn't add up. Adunni was far too inexperienced to be from the House. Furthermore, the House didn't carry out surveillance for this long; they took members out simply on suspicion of betrayal. They were known to neutralize the threat first and ask questions later.

No matter what the case was, Adunni's presence in her house was enough to make the House think she was compromised because they were always watching, which meant it was only a matter of time before they got involved.

Except, of course, she was able to take care of the situation herself before they got involved.

This was where it got annoying; she'd stopped murdering people a long time ago and would hate to start doing it all over again.

“Good Lord, you are in love with her,” Aboyede declared with an amused grin on his face.

“Oh, please, that’s ridiculous,” Adejare replied without taking his eyes off the screen. They were both in the living room of his apartment playing video games, which Oyede totally sucked at.

“Yeah, I’ve only had to listen to you talk about her for the past two hours. You even lost to me once in this stupid game thing. That just shows how far in your head is.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, man. We are just getting to know each other. You don’t just fall in love just like that, you would know if you’ve ever had a girlfriend.” Adejare retorted.

“Okay, I’ll just assume the glitter in your eyes every time you talk about her or the constant checking of your phone every minute are signs of paranoia or a new strain of aging disease and not love.” Aboyede continued to poke him.

“Para… what? You are weird, man.” Adejare rolled his eyes.

Aboyede paused the game and laughed out loud.

“What’s funny?”

“To think that just a few weeks ago, you were whining not being able to scam her and now you are all googly eyed and loved up…”

“I’m not googly eyed.” Adejare protested.

“It’s a relief really, I don’t have to worry anymore,” Adejare continued as if his friend had not interrupted him.

“Why were you worried in the first place?” Adejare shook his head. Sometimes Aboyede was the exact definition of a drama queen. He had no idea the lengths Aboyede would go to protect him. “And I’m not in love with her… yet,” he added.

“Yeah, right, keep telling yourself that, I’m sure one day you’ll believe it.”

Adejare opened his mouth to protest again, but Aboyede held up a finger, silencing him.

“The more you deny that you are in love with her, the more I want to strangle you. Although more accurately, the urge to kill you is more intense when you talk about how amazing she is.” Aboyede said and made a face that looked like he was about to throw up.

“Seriously guy, whether I am in love with her not, shouldn’t I come to that realisation by myself. Why are you shoving it down my throat?”

“Because I know you, Jare, your ego is as big as a disco ball and as a fragile as an egg. You don’t admit the truth easily.”

Adejare dropped the console and folded his arms, narrowing his eyes at his friend. “First, you make the weirdest analogies and second, why do I feel that this isn’t about Mirabelle?”

“You are right; this is not just about Mirabelle. You need to decide about the company, but you are not ready for this conversation.” Aboyede replied and opened another packed of chips and began munching nonchalantly.

Two seconds later, he was choking and coughing as the chips went through the wrong channel. Within moments, his eyes were red and watery.

Adejare sighed and got to his feet, “I really should let you choke to death but I love you too much for that,” he said shaking his head as he turned towards his kitchen to get him a glass of water.

He was still conflicted about giving up on the company after all the things it had taken from him; the company had always been the most important thing in the Timothy-Williams family, when he’d needed his family the most, the company had come first. When his father had run it to the ground and then died, he had been the one to keep it afloat; it was his life, just like it had been his parents’.

So, how could he just let it go?

He had no money to pay the company’s debts, and in the spirit of being truthful to himself, he could not bring himself to take any money from Mirabelle. That idea had sunk the minute he’d fallen in love with her.

Damn Aboyede to pieces for being right all the time.

Speaking of which, he had a date with Mirabelle later that evening. Smiling, he shoved down thoughts about his dying company. He would deal with that later.

***

A friend of Mirabelle's was opening a new restaurant on Lagos Island. She had originally intended to attend the opening with Tinuke, but her friend was in no mood to attend any social gathering. So, she went with Jare instead.

Inside, the restaurant was like being thrown into pre-colonial Africa. They served dishes from different countries all over the continent. They divided the restaurant into sections depending on the African country you wanted to eat in. Most sections, like the one Mirabelle and Adejare sat in, had no tables. They sat on raffia mats and ate out of calabashes with their hands instead of cutlery. The torches hanging in their brackets on the walls and the African music playing the background made the restaurant's ambience cosy enough for romantic dates.

They placed their orders and while they waited for their food to arrive; they played a game of *Ayo,* a Yoruba traditional game that required great mathematical skills.

"How are you so good at this?" Adejare asked, finally giving up after mirabelle had beaten him for the third time.

"Oh," Mirabelle smiled. "I've playing this since I was a child. I was the village champion before…"

"Village champion?" He found that hard to believe.

"You don't know that I am a village girl? Don't let this accent fool you *o*," Mirabelle replied, switching her British accent for a Nigerian one.

"Wh..at?" Adejare laughed. "I don't believe it."

"You better," Mirabelle replied, switching back to her British accent, smiling at him.

"Why, though?" He had to ask because he didn't think a woman like Mirabelle could have a complex that foreign was better.

Although he wouldn't be surprised if she did, nothing really surprised him.

She smiled at him quietly for a few seconds and he thought for a moment that she might not answer his question, but she did and it hadn't been the answer he had been expecting.

"A woman like me who grew from nothing would do just about anything to survive, to be accepted. I was married off, or more appropriately, my parents sold me to my husband when I was fifteen. I became a mother when I was sixteen, escaped the hell that was my marriage when I was twenty-

five. I had to change everything about myself to become who I am today. I wasn't born Mirabelle, I became Mirabelle."
"One of the biggest ironies was that when I moved to Lagos with my children, I had to falsify my age, to make me look older, so I could be seen as a young window rather a slut who got pregnant as a teenager because the same society who sold me off into an early marriage would also be the one to judge me wrongly. To become who I am, I had to change and trust me, the way I speak, is the least thing about me I had to change," She finished, just as their food arrived.

She had surprised herself by how much she had opened up to him. It was the first time she had ever discussed this with anyone. Even her daughters didn't know how old she truly was. But she hadn't even scratched the surface of her life's story yet. If he could not handle this little detail about her, he could never handle the rest of her, not that she was ever going to tell him, anyway.
But then he surprised when he spoke, after the server who had served them their meal left.
"I think of all people, I understand what it means to become something to survive," he said, looking directly into her eyes. His expression was dark, as if he was accessing a memory he would rather not broach.
"I was sexually abused when I was fourteen. Well, actually it began when I was ten and she finally went all the way when I was fourteen." He said.
"She?"
"Yeah, she was our housekeeper," he answered. "When I told my parents, my mother cursed me out, said I was going to turn into a womaniser like my father and warned me not to tell anyone about it because she was hosting a business party for my father's company later that evening and I wasn't allowed to ruin it. And my father?" He paused for a bit and then scoffed.
"What about him?" Mirabelle asked.
"He told me to suck it up, that I had finally become a man and went out for a business meeting. Only Oyede listened to me. He was the only one who understood how I felt, how much I hated Rachel, the housekeeper and wanted to kill her. Surprisingly, she turned up dead not too long after. I guess karma does truly exist."
"You and Aboyede have been friends for a long time?" she asked.

“Only since we were kids. His father was a director in my father’s company, just like Aboyede is now.”
“Hmm… that’s interesting,” Mirabelle muttered absentmindedly, but Adejare heard her.
“What is interesting?” He asked.
“Never mind,” she shook her head and smiled. “I’m sorry all of that happened to you.” She added, sincerely.

“Don’t be; Agnes is the one who should be sorry, but she can’t be because she’s dead. I told you about that part of me just so you know that I understand what it means to want to become someone else to escape who you really are.” He said and they both stared at each other smiling and understanding because in that moment between them, words were no longer needed.

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So, this is how’s going to be? I’ll keep dropping you off like we are teenagers with a curfew hanging over our heads.” He said as he pulled up outside her gate, pouting his lips in a mock sulk.
Mirabelle laughed. “I already told you I have a guest,” she said.
“When is she leaving? If I didn’t know better, I would think you are keeping me at arm’s length. But we are way past that, aren’t…”
He didn’t get to finish the question as Mirabelle leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. Surprised for only just a second, he kissed her back.
“Do we really have to go inside?” she asked. Flashing him her sexiest smile and before he could react to what she had just said, she straddled him in the driver’s seat. His hands automatically slid down her waist.
“How’s this for arm’s length?” She whispered against his mouth just as she began to grind against him ever so slowly.

Mirabelle was still in such a haze, that she neither noticed nor acknowledged Adunni who met her at the door, greeted her and even took her bag. She was still revelling in the aftermath of what she and Adejare had just done in his car, just outside the house. It had taken her a couple of minutes afterwards to calm down before she'd stepped out of the car – it was a miracle she'd been able to walk into her house on her own two legs.

"Why are you smiling sheepishly like this?" Tinuke asked suddenly, making her jump out of her skin.

"Jesus! Do you want to kill me? Why are you sitting in darkness being creepy?"

"*Ore mi*, which darkness? With all these lights on and the noise this your television is making. Creepy *ke*?" Tinuke said, eyeing her suspiciously.

"If you were not so dreamy eyed, you would have seen me," Tinuke added, raising an eyebrow for effect.

"Whatever," Mirabelle hissed, annoyed that her thoughts had been intruded upon. She turned and was about to march into her room like a spoiled teenager when she said Tinuke's voice stopped her.

"So, when are you going to introduce me to him?" Mirabelle froze.

"Who's him?" She turned back, feigning ignorance.

"The man you have been going out with, the one you keep talking to on the phone for long hours in the night, laughing *ke ke ke*, throughout the night, you will not allow someone to sleep - *that him*," Tinuke answered giving Mirabelle a side-eye.

"I had no idea I was being so obvious," Mirabelle answered, Tinuke had caught her, there was no need to deny it anymore.

"Who wouldn't be obvious with such a *fine bobo* like that?" Tinuke teased, and then she became sad.

"I can't blame you for hiding your relationship from me. With the way I have been my whole life, nobody in their right senses would want to me to know anything about lives." She said looking down at her feet.

"Are you about to start to guilt-tripping me again?" Mirabelle asked.

"Is it working?" Tinuke asked with one eye-open.

“Nope, not working at all,” Mirabelle said, and for the first time, she smiled genuinely at Tinuke.

“But on a serious note, Mirabelle. Look at my life. I worshipped that man my whole life, and even after I found out he was cheating on me, I stood firmly in the belief that the woman who has children owned the husband. *Ore mi,* I was deceiving myself. I thought if I did everything the way they said it should be done, that I would be safe.”

“I envy you all the time, for the type of relationship you have with your daughters. I was so hard on my daughters and now that the husband I worshiped instead has discarded me like a used rag without a penny to my name, shame will not let me go to my daughters.” Tinuke paused. Mirabelle thought she had finished talking and opened her mouth to speak, but Tinuke began again.

“Do you know that my first daughter divorced her husband, and she didn’t even tell me? I only found out when I ran into her mother-in-law the other day. But I can’t blame them because this is what I get for choosing to be a good wife over being a good mother,” she finally stopped talking, tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Mirabelle sighed, “I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but right there is the problem,” she said bluntly.

“Where… where is the problem?” Tinuke asked, looking to her side as if the problem was standing physically standing beside her.

Mirabelle scoffed and flung her purse on the couch.

“Sit down, Tinuke. I’ll be right back.” She announced.

“Where are you going?” Tinuke asked as she sat back down on the couch she’d been sitting on before Mirabelle had come in.

“We are going to need something strong for this conversation,” Mirabelle replied and went to her bar, returning a few minutes later with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses already containing the liquor.

“*Ore mi,* this one is not wine *o,*”

“Like I said, we need something stronger.” Mirabelle smiled as placed the bottle of whiskey on the centre-table before taking her seat.

“You brought the whole bottle?”

“Just in case.” Mirabelle answered, and they both laughed.

“You were saying something about a problem…” she trailed off, waiting for Mirabelle to explain what she had meant earlier.

“Oh, yeah, that,” Mirabelle began. “It’s just how we women are always expected to be something, good daughters, good wives, good mothers, good mothers-in-law… I mean it’s exhausting. Can’t we just simply be?”

“Be what?” Tinuke asked, after taking several gulps from her glass.

“*Ore*, slow down, the drink is not going anywhere… Be anything we want,” Mirabelle answered and then added as an afterthought “without having to worry whether we are good or whether we fit in because the truth is that no matter how hard we try, when things go wrong, we always end up taking the blame.” She paused and took a sip out of her glass.

“When my ex-husband was beating me like a *bata* drum, it was my fault for not giving him male children. We just have to be who we are, because we can never be good enough for them.”

“It’s a hard life,” Tinuke agreed.

“Whatever happened to your former husband? Does he not even a care a single bit about his daughters; does he not want to see them? He wasn’t even present at Elizabeth’s wedding, he should at least…”

“He’s dead,” Mirabelle interrupted abruptly. “I killed him,” she added, her face devoid of any emotions.

Tinuke stared at her wide eyed and open-mouthed, and then Mirabelle burst out laughing. It took a few seconds before Tinuke could join in the laughter.

“Goodness Tinuke, you should have seen your face, you actually believed me.” Mirabelle laughed even harder. It was funny because she had been telling the truth. Killing her husband was the first assignment she had carried out when she became a full-fledged member of the House and the only assignment that she had truly enjoyed.

“No, you should have seen your face. You looked so scary!” Tinuke laughed, finally relaxing and letting the whiskey take over her senses.

They were quiet for a while; both of them lost in their own thoughts, before Tinuke broke the silence.

“You are right, you know? We can never be good enough for them, so why do we keep loving them, fucking them, caring for them, why are we so intertwined with them?”

Mirabelle shrugged. “Only the almighty can actually answer that question.” She answered and then added a few seconds later, “the only thing

we can do for our daughters is to be a safe space for them, a place where they can return when the world becomes unwelcoming."

"That's a lot of grammar in one sentence. I don't understand." Tinuke said, waving both hands and shaking her head for effect.

Mirabelle laughed, "You are drunk," she said and laughed again, clearly intoxicated. "All I'm saying is that you need to call your daughter."

"Hmmm," Tinuke nodded vigorously, and she suddenly stopped and smiled mischievously.

"Call *fine bobo*, I want to hear his voice," she said.

"What? Noooo wayyyy," Mirabelle protested weakly.

"Why not?" Tinuke asked, pouting her lips and making doggy-eyes at Mirabelle. Mirabelle thought about it, but her intoxicated mind couldn't find any reason not to call Adejare. So, she brought out her phone and dialled his number, putting the phone on speaker.

"Babe," he answered on the second ring and Tinuke snatched the phone and screamed into it:

"*Fineeee boboooooo!"*

For the rest of the night, neither woman would be able to tell how far they went with their drunken childishness because it felt good to forget all of their problems even if it was just for one night.

14

Tinuke had been true to her drunken words and had called her daughter, who had apparently been waiting all this while for her mother to call her. Mother and daughter had both decided that it would be best if Tinuke moved in with her daughter.

To Mirabelle's surprise, she'd been sort of sad to see Tinuke go because in the past few days, they had actually become real friends.

Nonetheless, Tinuke leaving was a good thing because she could now carry out what she had been planning all along.

Which was why Adunni and Aboyede were now tied up in her living room.

Getting Adunni had been the easier path. All she'd had to do was point a gun at her and she'd sung like a canary. Unfortunately, she knew very little; just that she'd been assigned to watch Mirabelle by an Agent 4. But even that much confirmed Mirabelle's suspicions about the House being involved.

Why? That was the only question running through her mind. She had broken none of the rules. If she truly had, the house would have taken her out without any ceremony. That was when she'd ordered Adunni to call the agent who had assigned her to this mission.

"Tell him, you've been compromised," she had said, and the girl had frozen.

Telling your agent you have been compromised was like telling them to come and kill you. But just like Mirabelle had suspected, whatever it was, the House wasn't directly involved. This was some unofficial mission by someone with a personal vendetta against her.

When Aboyede had burst into her living room frantically, she hadn't been surprised at all. She'd had her suspicions when Adejare had told her the story of how the housekeeper who had turned up dead.

It had not been easy subduing him; he had his youth, but she had experience. It had been a tough fight, but she had knocked him out and bound his ankles and wrists with cable ties. That was what she could make do with given the situation.

"What the hell is this about?" She asked him, when he regained consciousness, a couple hours later.

Defeated, he had told her an almost unbelievable story.

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Adejare wondered what could be so urgent that Mirabelle had called him over at this hour of the night. It was the first time he was getting invited over to her house after her friend left. He smiled fondly at the memory of the both of them drunk calling him the other day. He loved that Mirabelle was showing him a different side to her every day.

He had no idea that he was about to see another side of Mirabelle – a scarier and darker version of her.

It was quarter past midnight and his imagination was running wild. Although, she had sounded calm on the phone, in the couple of months he had known her, it could rain fire, there could be an earthquake and Mirabelle would still look and sound calm.

That was exactly why he couldn't keep calm.

Was her house being robbed? God knew her security guard was practically useless. Should he call the police? If it was a matter for the police to handle, Mirabelle would definitely have called them first before calling him.

Maybe he was just overreacting. She probably missed him, and since he lived close by, she could call him over as she wished.

Who was he kidding?

"Come over to my house, it's urgent."

Those words were simple, and yet chilling, and most definitely didn't sound like a booty call.

He sighed; he had no idea how tightly he was gripping the steering wheel.

He wouldn't know what was really happening until he got to house, so it was a moot point to worry himself to the ground but that resolve didn't make him feel any less anxious. He shouldn't be driving in this condition, besides he lived only a few streets away, which was a walkable distance, but the urgency in Mirabelle's calm tone made him drive down to her house.

The first thing that confirmed his fears was the gate was unlocked and unmanned. The security guard was nowhere to be found, and he entered her compound unchallenged with his heart in his mouth.

He'd been about to knock on the door when Mirabelle swung the door open as if she had known he would stand there in that exact moment. She was wearing shorts and a tank top and looked perfectly normal.

That was before he saw the gun she was pointing at his face.

"Welcome to the party," She said in the same chilling tone she had used on the phone, but this time, he could see the coldness reflecting in her eyes.

“Wh… Why do you have a gun?” he stammered, unable to move his feet off the ground.

“Come on,” she said, nudging her head slightly towards the house, her eyes never quiet leaving his.

Obey now, ask questions later.

Slowly, he moved his heavy feet one after the other, towards the living room.

Why the hell was she trying to kill him? Was she some sort of psychopath? Was this what Aboyede had meant when he said she was a dangerous woman. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. It was all so confusing and scary.

Everything looked normal inside her sitting room. That was until he noticed Aboyede and some other woman tied up like a ram for slaughter.

He swallowed; his throat was had become ridiculously dry.

“Oyede,” he called, but his friend wouldn’t meet his eyes.

What the hell was going on?

“Sit, Adejare,” Mirabelle commanded, but he couldn’t get his legs to move again.

“Sit down. I don’t want to have to tie you up as well.” She said a little impatiently.

He sighed and again forced his legs to move towards the closest sofa and sat tentatively on the edge.

“Good, now that we are all comfortable. I need you to repeat everything you just told me,” She said. Looking towards Aboyede, who glared back at her.

That glare sent a shiver running down Adejare’s spine. He had seen that look on his friend once a long time ago, and the recipient of that look had been found dead, her body floating in a canal. He had thought nothing of it at the time, relegating the whole episode to a mere coincidence but now he wasn’t so sure.

Whatever was going on was bigger than him, but he was somehow also at the centre of it, that much he was sure about.

Mirabelle was exhausted, but she couldn’t waver.

She had to get to the bottom of whatever this was all about. Aboyede had said he had asked Adunni to watch her because he was trying to protect his friend. That was absurd, he was a top member of the House and he knew that if the House got a wind of this mission, it could be misinterpreted that she was compromised and then they would take her out. Worse, depending on their mood, they could get rid of her family as well.

She didn’t want to be believe that Aboyede had risked his identity being exposed or worse yet his life being cut short, -he literally had a ticking bomb in his body- and not just his life but hers and that of her family on something so ridiculous.

She didn’t want to believe it.

“Somebody needs to explain what is going on here?” Adejare spoke, ringlets of sweat covered his handsome face.

Mirabelle hated what she was doing to him, but until she was completely sure what was going on, she couldn’t waver. She sighed and took her seat but still had a steady grip on her gun. she prayed she wouldn’t have to use it but if it came down to risking wrath of the House or the protecting her family and what she had built over the years, she would not hesitate to take out every single person in the room and that thought scared her shitless.

“Wait,” Adejare spoke again, this time facing Mirabelle.

“Is this about the plan? Did you find out about the plan, is that why you are doing this?”

“Shut up, Adejare,” Aboyede yelled, speaking for the first time since Adejare had entered.

Aboyede's outburst caught her attention. They were getting somewhere.

"What plan?' she asked.

Adejare, ignoring his friend, explained the silly plan he had hatched on the first day. It was a story that sounded like something out of a grade C Nollywood movie script. By the time he was done, she could stare at him blankly unable to decide what hurt her more; that both Adejare and his friend had thought that she had been stupid enough to fall for such a ridiculous plan or that what she had thought she'd had with Adejare hadn't been real.

She turned away from him and faced Aboyede with the same blank expression.

"So you thought I was going to kill him over something as ridiculous as this? You risked all of our lives for this?"

"You didn't have a problem murdering your ex-husband when he crossed you?" Aboyede shot back.

"You have no idea what that man took from me?" Mirabelle yelled, showing emotion for the first time all evening. "You are a member of the House yourself; you have no right to judge me, we've all done terrible things." She added and then closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, her blank expression had returned.

"How do you intend to take responsibility for this when the House finds out that you used their resources for an unauthorised mission?"

"They will not find out, I didn't use any of their resources…"

"But you used one of their agents, an inexperienced one at that?" She gestured at Adunni, who had been awfully quiet since, probably contemplating her own fate.

"I'll fix this," Aboyede replied. It had all panned out wrongly. He should have let Adunni go when she'd wanted to.

"Wait, you guys. What do you mean by she killed her ex-husband? And what is The house or this house…"

"The House of Obliteration." Adunni said, speaking for the first time.

"The House of… that's a myth, scary stories told to children to make…" But he didn't finish the sentence as all three of them burst out laughing. Of course, the House of Obliteration was a myth to the rest of the

world, but still it was funny to hear the horrors they have all gone through in their lives reduced to nothing but a myth.

The laughter died down abruptly and Adejare stared at them, horrified.

"So, you are saying that you are all assassins, hit men?"

"Well, she's retired but both Adunni and I are." Aboyede explained.

"More accurately, he's an Agent 4 and I am still a novice which is why we are in this situation?" Adunni spoke again, sounding like she wanted the ordeal to be over as soon as possible.

"What's an Agent 4?" Adejare asked, his tone was a mix of curiosity and disbelief. In this situation it was probably best he kept his mouth shut, but in the short while Mirabelle had known him, she knew he wasn't the type to let go of his curiosity no matter the situation and so she answered his questions.

"Agent 4s are elders in the house, they like connoisseurs of information and the only ones who had direct access to agents of the House, they give assignments and monitor agents. But there's only a few of them left because…"

"Mirabelle," Aboyede cautioned, but she ignored him and continued.

"There are only a few of them left because they have a chip in their forearms that could be detonated only by the masters whenever they become a threat or useless." She finished.

"You are saying, Oyede has a bomb in his body?"

"Precisely," she answered and then turned to look at Aboyede, who gave a sigh of resignation.

"You said you can fix this mess?" She asked him and simply nodded in response.

"Good, Adejare untie them both." She commanded.

"Mirabelle," Adejare began, but she shot him a look that immediately shut him up.

"Untie them and get out of my house, and I hope to never set my eyes on anyone of you again." She said with a chill to her tone that none of them dared argue with.

It was until after all three of them had left her house with their tail between their legs that she allowed herself to breathe again. She placed the

gun on the centre table. She wouldn't feel the soreness in her shoulders and the rest of her body until much later.

This was why she should never have gotten deeply involved with a man. Not only had she put everything she had worked for at the risk of jeopardy, she had ended up with a broken heart.

She suddenly felt the urge to scream her rage into the night, and she did.

16

"Do you think I'm weird?" Adejare asked.

He and Aboyede were on the roof of his apartment building, they lay on their backs gazing at the almost starless night.

"Well, you have always been weird," Aboyede answered and laughed.

"I'm being serious."

"Why are you asking?"

"Think about it, I just found out that my best friend and the woman I love are both members of dreadful secret organisation that I used to think was a myth and I'm not the least afraid of even bothered about it." He answered.

Aboyede gave another abrupt laugh. "You looked pretty scared in her living room, though; sweating like a Christmas goat."

"This is not the time to joke about stuff," Adejare said seriously.

"I never thought I'd live long enough to hear you say that."

"I can still hear her scream. Do you remember that night after we left her house?" Adejare turned on his side and faced his friend.

"Who could ever forget such a thing?" His friend answered, sounding serious for the first time that evening.

"I messed up badly, I shouldn't have interfered with things. I should have believed that your feelings for her were genuine, but I just got scared. As a fellow member of the House, I shouldn't have brought up her ex-husband, that wasn't fair. Unfortunately, when it comes to you, I lose all sense of reasoning."

"Are you in love with me something?" Adejare asked in mock seriousness when Aboyede finished.

“Yes, and I’ve been looking for a way to tell you about my feelings all these years. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” Aboyede replied, marching his Adejare’s seriousness, before they both burst out laughing.

“Goodness, guy, you are so cliché.” Aboyede laughed.

“As much as it annoys me to admit, I think I can understand why you interfered. You’ve always protected me, even when my parents wouldn’t. You even took take care of Agnes for me back then…”

“You know about Agnes?” Aboyede sat up, his eyes widened in surprise.

“I’ve always suspected it. I only confirmed it that night at Mirabelle’s house. You looked at her the same way you had looked at Agnes before her body was found in the canal a few weeks later. Back there, I didn’t know who I was more afraid of between you and Mirabelle.”

“Logically, you should have been more afraid of Mirabelle. She was the one with the gun.”

“Ah, you just can’t help yourself, can you?” Adejare laughed and turned back towards the sky.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew about Agnes?”

Adejare scoffed. “Like I said, it was only a suspicion at first. Besides, was I supposed to walk up to you and ask, *hey man, did you kill the housekeeper who had molested me?*”

There was a bout of silence between them. The sounds of cars speeding and blasting their horns in the typical Lagos fashion on the streets below barely intruded on their individual thoughts.

“Was Agnes before or after you joined the House?” Adejare asked. He assumed Aboyede would not answer when he remained silent for a while, but then he finally said:

“Agnes was the reason I became a member of the House.”

Adejare wasn’t sure if that was the answer to his question or not, but that would have to suffice for now.

“Why don’t you ask what you really want to ask?” Aboyede said, staring at him pointedly.

Adejare sighed, “I don’t know how to ask?” he admitted.

“The answer is no,” Aboyede said.

“I don’t murder people anymore, I became an Agent 4 so I could stop murdering people but I give out assignments to other agents so, I really

don’t know if that makes any difference.”

“Wow, this is a lot… and you have that chip, or that bomb inside your body?” Adejare knew could never walk a mile in Aboyede’s shoes; never have had the guts to do the things he had done. He felt awash in guilt. It was because of him that Aboyede had to live such a hard life. All those years, he had ignored Aboyede’s mood swings, blank expression, random disappearances. There was a lot he wanted to know and a lot he would never know.

He sat up, looking at his friend, and suddenly embraced him. For all those years he had misunderstood him, for all those years that his friend had protected him and he had done nothing than weigh him down with his stupid antics.

“You are being really cheesy right now, you know that?”

“Shut up, Aboyede, and enjoy it while it lasts. It’s a once in a lifetime offer.” He said, fighting back tears.

“Super Cheesy, bro,” Aboyede insisted, but Jare only hugged him tighter.

“What are you going to do now?” Oyede asked when he finally let him go.

“About what?” There were so many things he needed to do something about no idea what exactly to do.

“About the company? About Mirabelle?”

“The company is done,” He admitted painfully.

“And Mirabelle… I am just an unnecessary complication in her life. She doesn’t need a man like me in her life.”

“So, you are not in love with her anymore?”

“When did I say that?”

“Then I don’t think you should give up.” Aboyede said, and Adejare could only sigh.

He really didn’t want to give up on Mirabelle, but a woman like her wouldn’t want to have anything to do with a man whose life had been so easy that he was clueless of the cruel world that the people he loved had to live in because of him.

"Tell me you are joking? So, *fine bobo* was trying to scam you? I wish I was there I would have slapped some senses into his head." Tinuke hissed on the other end of the line and Mirabelle laughed.

"Shame on him. Shame!" She added, and Mirabelle laughed even harder. She was sure that had Tinuke had been there when everything had unfolded, she would have fainted. When she narrated the story to her friend, she had intentionally left out the part that had to do with the House.

In fact, she had created a story about how she had caught Jare in his lie.

"It's all so confusing. He was so sweet. He knew all the right words to say to make me laugh, to make me feel loved, he did just about everything right…"

"That's how they all are; they make you feel loved just before they show you their true colours. At least you got to feel loved. I don't even know why I married my husband; he wasn't even good husband material."

"Tinuke, please don't kill me with laughter this afternoon, I beg you." Mirabelle couldn't stop laughing. She couldn't believe that in her life she had once hated the way Tinuke talked.

"But what did he really have to say for himself?"

"I don't know, some dramatic tale about how he was no longer going to through with it because he had fallen in love with me. I kicked him out of myself; I couldn't listen to anymore of his manipulative lies," She said emphatically. "To think that I was going to introduce him to my daughters… It's not his fault, I am the fool for thinking that I could actually find actual love at my age."

"Hmmm," Tinuke sighed at the other end of the line.

"Hmm, what? Don't even start."

"*Ore mi,* I am not starting anything."

"Then why did you sigh like that, I know you Tinuke, there something you want to say." Mirabelle insisted.

“Well, it’s just the way you sounded just now…”

“What does that even mean?”

“Thinking that you don’t deserve love because of your age is exactly something I would have said. Besides, it also sounds like you really didn’t give the guy a chance to explain himself.”

“Explain what again? I will not be his plaything to be used and discarded whenever he pleases.” Mirabelle argued. She would not let Tinuke guilt-trip her this time. She had done the right thing kicking all three of them out of her house.

Tinuke wouldn’t be speaking like this if she knew the true story.

“I won’t say I understand how you feel, but let’s look at it from this angle, he told you the truth when most men even with a gun to their heads wouldn’t admit the truth; they would stick to their own mostly twisted version of the truth, no matter what.”

There had literally been a gun to his head, but Tinuke would never know that.

“What I am trying to say is that good things can sometimes come out of ill intentions, and ill intentions can sometimes become good intentions.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my friend?” Mirabelle said when Tinuke finished talking. That last bit did not sound like her at all. “When did you become a philosopher?”

“Please, it’s something my therapist told me. I don’t even know what it means. It sounded like the right thing to say, in this situation.”

Mirabelle rolled her eyes and shook her head. It was still the same typical Tinuke.

“When did you start therapy?” she asked, changing the subject from Adejare.

“A couple of days ago, my daughter insisted, the woman says a lot of jargons, but I’ll keep going just to please my daughter.” She replied.

Mirabelle wanted to mention that, that was a wrong reason to go into therapy but decided against it. At least she was going and it would benefit her one way or the other even if she did not know it.

“Don’t change the subject, Mirabelle. Talk to him because that’s when you can decide if you still like him.”

Deep down Mirabelle knew Tinuke was right, but what she could not admit to herself was that she was afraid. During that moment, back in her

living room, she had been ready to kill him to protect herself. Could she really do that to the man she loved? Or could she really let all she had worked hard for, crumble for the sake of love?

She was really afraid of the choice that she would have to make should the situation arise.

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Adejare rolled out of bed a lot later than usual that Saturday morning. His nights, like most nights since Mirabelle had broken up with him, had been restless, filled only with thoughts of how to get her back.

He'd found himself in front of her house so many times, but he been too cowardly to knock. He had also tried texting so many times but only ended up deleting the text messages just as soon as he finished typing them. To prevent himself from calling or texting her, he blocked her number several times, only to unblock it and start the process all over again.

What was he going to say to her? She had specifically told him never to show up in front of her again. But what was he to do when he could not stop thinking about her and how things could have been different if he Aboyede had not interfered? But he had no right to be mad at his friend either, if he hadn't shown himself to be so weak and stupid, Aboyede would never have felt inclined to step in.

Which brought him back to the major reason he couldn't reach out to Mirabelle. Why would she want anything to do with a man who couldn't even keep his own company – the only responsibility he had; a man who couldn't understand the pain his best friend had been going through all these years?

How could he love her when he was too clueless?

He hadn't been able to reach Aboyede since the last time they were together on the rooftop. He had mentioned something about going to sort out the mess he had made. Ordinarily, he would not have paid that statement any mind, but knowing what he knew now… he didn't even want to think about it.

He was going to trust Aboyede and believe that he was going to come back alive, which was why he was putting a hold on the plans to start up a new company until Aboyede returned.

Deciding to do something positive that Saturday; something that could help ease the numbness he felt in his soul, he cleaned out his apartment, which was a little better than a pigsty since he could no longer afford the luxury of hiring a cleaning agency.

He was in the middle of vacuuming his living room when his doorbell rang. Turning off the vacuum cleaner, he paused and listened to be sure the doorbell had sounded in his apartment because he wasn't expecting anybody, unless Aboyede was back.

With that thought, he rushed to the door and the swung it open without looking through the peephole first to see who it was. To his utmost surprise, the woman he'd been longing for, for the past few weeks was the one standing outside the door.

He stood frozen for a few seconds and when he opened his mouth, the most horrendous words possible, came out of them.

"Are you here to kill me?" He blurted out and immediately regretted it.

He was so utterly stupid.

"I… I… didn't mean…" He tried to lamely to explain himself, but Mirabelle just shook her head.

"No, it's okay. I shouldn't have come here, anyway." She said and turned to leave but Adejare grabbed her arm.

"No, please don't leave; you came all the way already. Come inside." He said, his voice was gentle and pleading.

She really should kill him, if not for anything else but his lack of tact.

She smiled weakly at him and stepped into his apartment. He shut the door and followed her inside.

"I'm sorry about the mess, I was in the middle of cleaning up," He apologised, wiping his hands on his jeans nervously.

She looked around, seeming almost as nervous as he was.

"Your place's nice," She said as she looked around. "It suits you." She added and Adejare couldn't tell if it was a compliment or an insult, giving the chaotic state of his home.

"I'm here against my better judgement because I have a friend who's good at emotional blackmailing." He could tell she was conflicted by the way her eyes darted about, not settling on one thing or one place.

"I'm guessing, that friend's Tinuke," he said, and she smiled.

“You know this.”

“Pardon my manners, please sit,” he offered.

“Are you afraid of me?” She blurted out. The question took him by surprise and he was tongue-tied for a few minutes.

Misunderstanding his silence and the stunned look on his face, she nodded slowly, accepting what he wasn’t saying.

“Well, you are a bit scary,” he admitted, and she looked down at her toes. “But no, I am not afraid of you. I can’t be afraid of the woman I’m in love with.” He answered sincerely.

“Why?” She asked, looking back up at him. This time her gaze was a bit more focused and determined.

“Why do you love me?” she clarified her question when he stared at her blankly.

“Er…” It was difficult putting in feelings into words when she kept coming at him like that.

Shaking her head, she said, “I thought as much. It was pointless coming here.” She half-walked, half-ran out of his apartment.

Adejare sighed, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Was he really going to let her go like that again?

Since the first day they’d met at the resort, she had been walking out on him. He would spend the rest of his life regretting it if he let her go this time because she wouldn’t be coming back.

without giving it another thought, he bolted out of his apartment and chased after her, but she had already gotten into the elevator, he

had no other choice as he took the emergency stairs, taking two steps at a time while cursing the agent who had sold him the apartment on the fifth floor.

He caught up to Mirabelle just as she exited the building.

"Wait," he gasped, and then took a few seconds to steady his breathing.

"Did you run down the stairs from the fi…"

"You are being so unfair," he accused, still gasping for breath. "You show up at my apartment after all these days, bombard me with questions and come to conclusions without giving me a chance to even answer any of the questions. That's unfair to the both of us."

"What are you talking about?" She asked, taken aback by his outburst.

"You came all the way to talk, so let's talk," he said.

He took her hand and led to the community park that was beside his apartment building. He was glad that she followed him without protest because it meant there was still a chance for him to plead his case.

The park wasn't one of the commercialised ones in Lagos; it was a small space managed by the community. So, it wasn't swarming with bloggers or social media influencers and their cameras. For the time being, it afforded them the privacy they needed to talk.

They sat on one of the whitewashed benches in the park and after a brief silence that seemed to ease the awkwardness between them, Adejare spoke first.

"I don't need a reason to love you," he began. "Because if I did, I would also have a reason not to love you." He added.

Mirabelle stared sceptically at him; she obviously wasn't convinced yet. "You can only say that because you don't know who I really am and the things I have done. Adejare, the other night in my house, I seriously considered killing everyone in my living room." She said and then stared down at her hands, unable to look at him after making that confession. "Even, I am afraid of myself. Adejare, you can't romanticise my past, neither can we pretend it never happened."

“You are saying that because you think I am such a good person. You are the one ignoring the fact that I hadn’t approached you with the purest intentions…”

“Adejare, this is different,” She insisted, looking back up at him. Her eyes were glassy as if she was trying to fight back tears.

“I know this is different, but do you think if someone had put a gun in my hand back then and tied Agnes to a post, that I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger? Do you think my mind is perfect and impenetrable that they cannot manipulate me? Besides, If I were in your shoes and some clowns tried to shake up a world I slaved to build, I would seriously consider killing them too.”

“So, you are saying it does not bother you?”

Adejare leaned against the backrest of the bench. “I am more curious than bothered, to be honest. An organisation like the Hou… an organisation like that…” he cautioned himself when he saw the look on Mirabelle’s face. One didn’t throw around the name of the organisation like that. Anyone could be listening. “…Shouldn’t exist,” he completed his sentence.

“True,” Mirabelle nodded in agreement. “They prey on your deepest and darkest desires. My deepest desire was a life of luxury for myself and my daughters, and my darkest desire was to put a bullet through my ex-husband’s heart.” She shook her head dispassionately. “A lot of members never came out of the House alive, and the few who did were so mentally damaged that they could no longer live normal lives. I couldn’t afford to give up on myself, I was determined to get out of there alive and well, and seeing that I succeeded says a lot about my conscience,” she finished and looked into Adejare’s eyes but whatever reaction she had been expecting to find, he wasn’t giving it to her. He simply watched her quietly.

Feeling the need to fill up the silence, she continued talking.

“Do you know they recruited me at a party where I was serving? Apparently, the Agent 4 assigned to recruit me, had been watching me since the day I got married. He knew how much I hated my husband, he knew how much I was desperate to survive, and he knew just the right words to say to me. No offence, but to become an Agent 4 means to sell your soul to the devil. You had to be soulless to be…”

She couldn’t quite bring herself to finish the sentence. It was the first time that she was talking about that aspect of her life to someone else. She could never tell the full story, but it lifted a burden off her chest to talk about it.

This was a secret she would keep from her daughters until the day she died, but at least now she knew that she could talk to Adejare about it whenever she was up to it. She realised now that she trusted him that much.

Adejare, on his part, had not only gotten a little closer to Mirabelle than he had been since they started dating, but he had also gotten an insight into the life Aboyede lived. He understood now why his friend had no romantic relationships; he was a ticking time bomb doing the devil’s work. Thinking about it from Aboyede’s perspective, it would be unfair to love anyone when he could die at any moment.

This little knowledge about their dark lives made him want to protect them both; they were the two most important people in his life.

Holding Mirabelle’s hand, he looked into her eyes and asked with every bit of sincerity and determination.

“Do you think we can start all over?”

“I want us to, I want to be with you but I am afraid…”

He silenced the rest of her words with a kiss. A kiss so different from any one they’d ever shared. It carried with it with so much passion, understanding and acceptance. In that moment, nothing else mattered, no one else existed, just the two of them.

“You are afraid that love might not be enough,” Adejare said when they finally broke kiss. Mirabelle nodded. The tears she had been fighting back finally broke free and flowed freely down her face.

“Do you love me?” He asked, and she nodded again, unable to bring herself to speak, but the sincerity he saw in her eyes was enough for him.

“Then, we are going to make our love for each other our starting point. We are going to make this work by relying on the love we both share. Do you think you can do this for us?” He asked.

“Yes,” She answered, her voice was a mere whisper. “I can do it.” She reiterated and this time her voice carried with it a strong conviction.

He took her hand in his and caressed it lightly with his thumb. He was humbled by the thought that they had both almost let their love slip through their fingers because of fear. Luckily for him he now held his love in his hands and he was never letting go.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Aributtercup, I think I have told you this so many times before but it wouldn’t hurt to mention it again – You are the best. Thank you for looking through this story, editing it, coming up with an idea for a perfect ending and also designing the book covers of all the three books in the series. Thank you for being you, for telling it as it is and for always going the extra mile. You have no idea how much you mean to me.

Ohotu, for your kindness, your subtle yet frequent words of encouragements and for offering to beta-read for me despite your busy schedule. You are one

of the kindest people I know. Thank you for being so beautiful inside and out, words cannot describe how much I appreciate and value you.
Kiru Taye, for writing so many beautiful books that inspired me to write my first romance novella – Remembering Love, the first book in this series. For being supportive in the little ways that matter. Thank you so very much. Your honest thoughts and opinions helped mould this book into it's beautiful shape.
And lastly, my readers for sticking with me since the beginning of this series till now, for being patient and waiting three years since the release of the second book, Accepting Love. Thank you for always being there.

I explained in detail on my blog www.aminatsannik.wordpress.com why I switched up Mirabelle's character.
As usual, I look forward to your feedbacks and thoughts on this book. You can reach on Instagram and twitter: @aminatsannik or you can send me an email: aminatawastories@gmail.com
Thank you once again and I hope you enjoyed reading Finding Love.

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