
AMAKA AZIE
Extended epilogue of It started with "I don't"
JUST BEFORE
"I do"
Is it just cold feet?
Or is it more?

JUST BEFORE “I DO”

AMAKA AZIE

Just Before I do

By Amaka Azie

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For Jennifer, Michelle and Nicole.
My 3 amigos

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NOTE TO MY READERS

This story resulted from a quick burst of inspiration I had no control over.

After @bookmaniac_60 messaged me on Instagram suggesting that she wanted to read more about Anuli and Etim's love story from It Started With "I don't", I thought maybe an extended epilogue would be the way to go.

So, I began plotting a novella, showcasing the wedding preparations and all the stress involved for the couple.

You'll get to see Anuli and Etim navigating this journey together, and a glimpse of Iriah and Udoka's marital problems.

Plus, Uncle Dipo makes an appearance.

I hope you enjoy this as much as I loved writing it. Now, back to the manuscript I'm working on!

NB: This contains many spoilers, so if you haven't read It Started with "I don't", I suggest reading that first.

BLURB

As the date of her wedding to Etim approaches, Anuli Eneh’s unease is growing. Her walk down the aisle to marry another man two years ago turned into a complete and utter disaster. Even with the wedding preparations progressing smoothly, an unshakeable sense of impending doom clouds her thoughts.

Will she make it to the altar in one piece, or will she succumb to her overwhelming anxieties?

Etim Ubong senses that there might be something off with his fiancée, Anuli. With each passing day, he becomes more attuned to her mounting nervousness as the wedding draws nearer. He really wants to figure out why she’s so jittery, but he’s not sure how to go about it.

As he notices her demeanour changing, he wonders if she's just getting cold feet. Or is it something more?

1

10 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (WEDNESDAY)



Anuli Eneh didn’t have to visit a doctor to identify the cause of her sudden difficulty in breathing. No, she didn’t require a stethoscope on her chest to let her know that the rapid pounding of her heart and the trapping of her breath in her chest didn’t have a medical aetiology.

As a trained psychologist, she knew it was the irrational fear in her mind causing her throat to feel like a fist curved around it was squeezing the life out of her.

She parted her lips, taking slow breaths in and out as she stared at her reflection in the mirror as if the person looking back at her was a stranger.

The white ball gown she had on fit to perfection. Its bodice top clinched to her narrow waist, accentuating her C-cupped breasts in the most flattering way.

The satiny fabric, embellished with exquisite pearls in a detailed design, elegantly hung down to her ankle, transforming her into a living princess.

Stunning! Exactly like she’d pictured it on herself when she saw it in the bridal magazine she’d pilfered through for months.

She should be thrilled that the dress, which took nearly seven weeks to arrive

from Paris to Abuja, fit her perfectly. She should be over the moon looking at her reflection right now, beaming from molar to molar about the exquisite tailoring of the gown she'd dreamed of wearing for weeks.

Why did she suddenly want to tear it off her and run as far away from the room as possible?

With just 10 days away from her wedding, Anuli reached out to her best friend Iriah and asked her to meet at the bridal boutique where she had ordered her gown. It was important for her to hear Iriah's opinion on how the gown looked on her.

She'd been excited as she put it on in the dressing room, her heart beating wildly with anticipation.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, she spun around, captivated by her own reflection in the mirror, until the memory of her previous time wearing a wedding gown resurfaced.

Now, she was an entire mess, struggling to breathe and feeling a little lightheaded.

"Oh, my goodness, Anuli … you look —"

Iriah stopped dead in her tracks as soon as she properly studied her face. "What's wrong? Don't you like it?" she asked as she moved over to stand by Anuli's side, the skin between her eyes creased with worry.

Anuli's hyperventilating worsened once her friend noticed it, making her break into a cold sweat as she moved away from the mirror, clutching her stomach.

"Unzip me," she muttered, turning her back to Iriah, her face flushed with heat. "Unzip me please!"

Yielding to the demand promptly, Iriah tugged down the zipper buried at the top of the bodice of the wedding gown and unfastened the string tying the back of the dress together.

"There. It's done. It's done now." She turned Anuli around to look at her, worry etched on her face. "What's going on, Anuli? Why do you look so ill?"

Anuli didn't answer immediately. She pulled the top of her gown down her shoulders, exposing the white lace bra underneath, and continued to drag in long

breaths through her nostrils and exhale through her mouth.

Anuli couldn't think now. Neither could she find the words to explain the thoughts rushing through her head like water through a burst pipe.

How could she explain that she'd been freaking out for a fortnight because everything about planning the wedding was going too perfectly?

Was there any rational way to tell her friend that she'd been secretly hoping something bad would happen? That she'd been waiting for something terrible to happen, to shake her out of this fairytale life she'd been living since she fell in love with Etim Ubong?

How could anyone understand that for the past two weeks, she had been secretly going through Etim's phone, meticulously searching his computer and tablet for any signs of a hidden life or evidence of deceit?

"If you're worried about the wedding gown, you shouldn't. It's Gorgeous. Stunning." Iriah's low and reassuring tone showed her ongoing concern, despite her attempt to appear calm.

"The dress is perfect," Anuli breathed when she could finally speak. "It's so beautiful."

Iriah's eyebrow arched in question, confusion clouding her eyes. "So, what's the problem? You don't look happy."

Anuli didn't have an answer. Not a logical one. But she needed to get the load suffocating her off her chest. She needed to confess to someone about the irrational desire she had been experiencing for something to go wrong with her relationship with Etim.

For the past few days, she'd been freaking out about her happiness, scared that she would lose it all in an instant.

Whenever she thought about her harmonious and effortless connection with Etim, a sense of dread overwhelmed her, and she had started wishing for a disastrous event to occur just to jolt her out of the euphoria she had been experiencing.

Of course, she knew it made no sense at all, knew that it was an unconscious self-sabotage, but she couldn't help it. It was now driving her crazy, giving her nightmares and waking her up at night with panic attacks.

She had to pull herself together and snap out of this mess. She was thirty-four, for crying out loud. Not a clueless teenager.

“Everything is going on too smoothly … The wedding planning has gone on without a single hitch. I’ve not had any disagreement with Etim since it all started. Surely, it’s not normal, Iriah. Things can’t be this good…” The more Anuli spoke, the higher the octave of her voice, and the worse her panic became.

Saying it out loud sounded silly in her ears, but the distress surging through every fibre of her being felt real and profound.

Two years ago, she’d walked down the aisle ready to marry her ex-fiancé filled with positivity. She’d been so sure that she would end up as Mrs Chikwendu. But she had been dead wrong.

She not only found herself humiliated at the altar, but she’d also discovered that her relationship of two years had been based on a lie. Her ex-fiancé was already married with two children and had kept her in the dark about his other life.

What if something like that happened to her again? She’d not seen any sign, had no inkling that Jidenna would make a fool of her at the altar, that her mother and friend would extract her from the church in tears.

Right before the disastrous wedding, she had been overjoyed, dressed in a beautiful wedding gown that was just as stunning as the one she was currently wearing.

“Iriah, what if I’m missing something … What if I’m making a huge mistake?” she asked in a shaky voice, her body trembling all over. “I’m so scared … so worried what happened with Jidenna would happen again.”

Iriah smiled, letting out a whoosh of relieved air. “Oh, lord. I thought it was something worse.”

“This is bad, Iriah. I’ve been making myself sick with worry, constantly checking Etim’s phone.” She ran her palm over her face. “Yesterday, I tried to goad him into a fight. Just to spoil the happiness between us. And when he didn’t take the bait, I got upset. Am I crazy?”

“Yes, girl!” Iriah snapped. “What did you do to that poor man?”

A faint smile worked its way across Anuli’s lips as she recalled being snappy

with Etim just because he took his dog out for a walk without her, even though she'd been busy working on her podcast. "I shouted at him because he walked Khaleesi without me, although I really didn't want to go on the walk."

Iriah shook her head and chuckled. "You *sef*. Don't stress that poor man *abeg*. It's clear that he worships the ground you walk on. You should be glad you found love again after almost marrying that dirtbag, Jidenna."

Anuli sighed. Iriah was right. Etim was such a breath of fresh air. He treated her with respect, showed her constantly how much he loved her. She really had no reason to be this apprehensive, but she couldn't help it.

"Listen, Anuli. Don't let your past experience at the altar stop you from enjoying your engagement and upcoming wedding," Iriah said, placing a reassuring palm on Anuli's shoulder. "Etim is a good man. Be thankful you found each other."

Anuli nodded, a knot forming in her throat as emotions squeezed her chest. She'd been lucky to have found Etim.

His brother organised her previous wedding, and following the unfortunate outcome, Etim was the one who approached her to settle the outstanding payment for the family business, Atozee events.

Their relationship had a rocky start until she uncovered his troubled past in a gang, and his firm commitment to personal growth. His kindness, loyalty and humility were amongst the many reasons she'd fallen in love with him.

His striking good looks also played a role. With an Irish mother and a father from Akwa Ibom, he had a unique blend of ethnic backgrounds. His smooth olive complexion, striking grey eyes, and a full head of curly hair that she loved to run her fingers through while they kissed captivated her.

Initially, she'd been unsure about Etim because of his tattoos, his non-conventional job as an event planner and the fact that he had a dark past, but getting to know him had changed all that. She'd fallen deeply in love with him and had no doubt that he loved her, too.

"Besides, my private investigator has dug into Etim's past thoroughly, and I can assure you that since his divorce, he has no other wife or girlfriend lurking elsewhere," Iriah continued, pulling her out of her musings.

Anuli's mouth fell open and her eyes widened. "You looked into him for me?"

Iriah twisted her lips into an amused smirk. "Of course. I can't allow my bestie to fall into the same trap again. Enjoy Etim freely, girl. One of us deserves to be happy, at least."

The noticeable strain in Iriah's voice at her last remark caught Anuli's attention. She stiffened, leaning back to look at her friend quizzically.

"Is everything alright between you and Udoka?" Anuli asked.

They'd had a double date only three days ago and everything seemed okay between the married couple. Iriah and her husband piled on the PDA, which made Anuli and Etim, not big fans of public displays of affection, slightly embarrassed.

Iriah waved off her comment. "Don't mind me, girl. Everything is peachy," she said with a little chuckle. "I'm just being dramatic."

She draped an arm around Anuli's shoulder and turned her back to the mirror. "Now, let's focus on making sure the beautiful bride-to-be has a wonderful wedding."

Anuli looked at her friend in the mirror and smiled, feeling thankful for the day she first met Iriah on a flight from Lagos to Abuja seven years ago. They had been waiting at the airport for long hours because of flight delays and had hit it off over their shared interests in fiction novels.

After exchanging numbers, they'd promised to keep in touch with each other. When Iriah phoned only a day after to invite her to a party, Anuli had been thrilled. They'd soon begun hanging out together regularly.

Being the only girl with two older brothers and Iriah being the only child in her family, their friendship quickly evolved into a sisterly relationship.

Hopefully, the tiny flicker of sadness she'd noticed in Iriah's eyes just before it disappeared didn't mean a thing. Besides, she knew Iriah well enough to know that she wasn't one to be secretive. Iriah would share whatever was troubling her if she thought it was significant.

Anuli drew in a long breath and let it out through pursed lips. "Yes, Iriah. It's going to be a wonderful wedding."

Her friend was right. For now, she needed to focus on conquering her fears of walking down the aisle for the second time in her life. Fingers crossed, there'd be a positive outcome this time.

2

9 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (THURSDAY)



Etim switched off the car engine and drew in a ragged breath. He turned to his fiancée in the passenger seat beside him and stretched his lips into a stiff smile.

She'd been mostly silent throughout this short ride to the church, only speaking and answering him in monosyllables, and it was bugging the hell out of him.

Today marked the conclusion of the mandatory pre-marriage counselling classes, which were required by the officiating reverend.

They'd made it to this church three days a week together for the past four weeks with no hitches until this week.

In the last class, two days ago, Anuli had been pensive and barely contributing, as she usually did. Even the minister who chaired the class of four other couples had noticed.

Something was definitely going on in Anuli's head, something she wasn't sharing with him.

For the past week, he'd begun to notice a slight change in her, a moodiness

that wasn't her typical behaviour.

At first, he thought he was only imagining it, but when she started picking silly fights with him for no reason at all, he knew something was up.

He had made several attempts to find out what was bothering her, but each time she responded with a simple "I'm fine".

Well, he didn't believe it. And her behaviour today was a clear sign he could no longer ignore it. Whatever the issue, they needed to deal with it now.

With their wedding only 9 days away, they couldn't afford to sweep anything under the rug.

"Anuli, what's going on? You're not yourself lately and I'm worried," he said.

She turned to him and shrugged. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not fine," he countered. "You've been detached for the past few days. It's not you at all."

She turned to face him, a flicker of anxiety crossing her eyes. For a brief second, fear gripped him.

Was she hiding something serious? An affair? Financial challenges? His heart missed a beat. Was she considering changing her mind about marrying him?

"I'm sorry, Etim." She swiped her fingers across her forehead in a gesture he now realised showed her frustrations. "I just … It's been so stressful planning this wedding and combining work…"

Suppressing a relieved sigh, he leaned forward and took her hand in his. "I understand. That's why I suggested you leave all the planning to Udo. He'll do a great job. You don't have to keep supervising his every move."

"I know … it's just that …" she trailed off and shook her head. "You're going to think I'm crazy."

"No, I'm not." Etim raked his fingers through his thick, curly hair, wishing he could erase all her concerns.

He understood completely. As an event planner, he had firsthand knowledge of the anxiety that came with planning a wedding.

He'd witnessed numerous arguments and disputes among couples and their

families while striving to create an ideal yet affordable wedding.

He had seen fights, brides crying as they ran out of rooms, grooms questioning their decisions and threatening to cancel the wedding.

There wasn't a single wedding preparation nightmare he hadn't experienced. Including a bride who attempted suicide the day before the wedding because her groom to be wouldn't pick up her calls.

This was the very reason he made a conscious decision to leave everything in the capable hands of Udo, his younger brother, who worked in the family event planning business, Atozee.

He had done everything in his power to rein in his curiosity and desire to monitor Udo's work. His brother was brilliant at his job, and he could trust nobody else to plan his wedding.

Etim only showed up to make decisions regarding the venue, flowers, seating arrangements, and refreshments, leaving the finer details to Udo.

It wasn't easy to let go, but he didn't want the wedding preparations to put a strain on him or his relationship with Anuli.

Regrettably, Anuli found it more challenging to relinquish control and pass the responsibility to another person.

He suspected it was now getting to her. Dealing with the conflicting demands of his mother and her mother, who both had different ideas about the number of people to invite, was becoming increasingly draining for her.

Anuli's mother was adamant about not reducing the number of people from her side of the family, despite Etim's mother's desire for a more balanced representation.

The number of people who showed up didn't matter to him, as long as it became a joyous occasion. He always stayed out of the arguments between their parents and advised Anuli to do the same.

However, he could tell it was now weighing her down, and he didn't like it in the slightest bit. Especially because it had begun to make her act out of character and cause conflict in their relationship. A relationship he valued with every fibre of his being.

From the moment he met Anuli, he knew he wanted her in his life. The first

time she walked into Atozee looking for someone to plan her wedding to her idiotic ex, he'd been smitten at the sight of her.

She'd looked so pretty in her floral summer gown and sneakers that he'd found himself immediately drawn to her. There was something about her optimism, the natural way she relayed her preferences for her wedding, that he found alluring.

The first time she smiled at him, his heart galloped in his chest and his stomach fluttered with profound sensual awareness. He had fallen instantly for her.

After his first encounter with her, he knew he couldn't plan her wedding to another man. It was a conflict of interest, so he had assigned it all to his younger brother, Udo.

When he realised Anuli had called off her wedding at the altar after finding out her ex-fiancé was already married, he'd been thrilled. He'd vowed not to miss his opportunity to interact with her. So, he'd made sure he was the one to reach out to her for the payments owed, his strategy to see her again.

Fate sealed his future when they unexpectedly met again during a vacation in Calabar a few weeks later. He'd fallen helplessly in love with her.

Apart from her stunning face and striking figure, her wit, her drive, her honesty and the way she wore her emotions on a sleeve were amongst the many reasons he fell for her.

With Anuli, there was no guile, no pretence, or second guessing. You always knew where you stood with her. Until recently.

She'd been acting differently. A tad aloof, distracted, and somewhat irritable.

If he didn't know better, he would say it was hormonal. But he knew Anuli too well. She wasn't shy about expressing her changing moods during her period cycle, and she always let him know exactly how she felt. Another reason he loved her.

The muscles of his neck and shoulders tightened with anxiety. Whatever was troubling her had to be major. Enough to make her act strangely.

He squeezed her hand, transmitting all the affection he felt for her through

his touch. He couldn't afford to lose her. She meant the world to him.

"Listen, Anuli, I love you with everything in my heart. If there's something bothering you, I need to know."

She gazed at him for several moments, the crease between her eyes showing her struggle to put her thoughts into words.

Her shoulders dropped as she let out a sigh. "I love you too, Etim … but I'm … I'm scared that what happened to me last time would happen again," she said in a shaky voice. "I've been having bad dreams about our wedding. In one of them, you left me at the altar. In another, you didn't even show up."

Etim felt the tension seep away from his body. This wasn't a dark secret, or a revelation that would upend their relationship. Just jittery nerves. He'd had a few of his own.

Only last week, he'd panicked about being a terrible husband like his father had been to his wife.

He'd been going through old photos when he visited his mother, looking for pictures of him as a baby to make a wedding scrap book when he'd come across his parents' wedding picture.

The sudden rush of anxiety that swept through him had come out of nowhere.

Seeing his father, tall and handsome with his smooth mahogany skin that contrasted dramatically with his white tuxedo, staring into the grey eyes of his petite Irish wife in her flowy white gown had got to him.

From the love and joy oozing through the picture, one would never have guessed the terrible ending of that marriage.

His father had become a gambling drunk who ran the family into debt. He had died leaving his foreign wife alone in a country miles away from her hometown with no family support.

The worst thing about it was that his old man had kept his wife in the dark about his gambling, and she'd only known about the people whom he owed money after his death.

During that time, Etim lived a life filled with darkness as he witnessed his mother struggling with the grief of losing her husband and the burden of

repaying the debt. Just sixteen at the time, he'd needed to step up and help financially, which led him to a life of crime he still regretted till this very day.

Etim had vowed never to be like his father, never to hurt the people he loved with lies and deception. He'd worked hard on becoming a better version of himself.

His fear had been irrational and short-lived. He was nothing like his father. Hopefully, just like he had, Anuli would overcome whatever doubts she was facing.

Placing a finger on her chin, Etim tilted her jaw up towards him. He lowered his head and pressed a wet kiss on her mouth, savouring the sweet taste of her full lips.

Passion flared inside him as always, filling him with a desire to lean in for more, to kiss her senseless until he chased away her jitters.

However, he drew back and fixed his eyes on Anuli. His fiancée and the love of his life.

They had no issue with their physical chemistry. From their first time together, their sexual pull to each other blazed hot and potent.

Kissing instead of talking wouldn't solve the problem. He needed to allay her fears with words.

"I'll never leave you," he assured her in a deep and raspy voice. "You're my world. My partner in life. I never knew what people meant when they said someone was their other half until I met you. You make me whole, Anuli. I'll never do anything to jeopardise that."

Tears formed in her eyes. "I know … And I feel the same way. With you, I feel truly myself, liberated, like I'm with my person. A man I love and trust completely. A man I know loves me, too. But…" She trailed off.

"But what?"

"But … It happened to me before. I thought Jidenna loved me. But he lied to me. He kept his other life from me…"

Etim brushed his thumb across her jaw affectionately, cutting her off. He knew Anuli's past experience would always be a thorn in their flesh.

They'd started dating shortly after her relationship with her ex-fiancé ended.

He'd feared that he'd been just a rebound for her for so long, and only began to truly relax when she accepted his marriage proposal.

Etim exhaled sharply. "You know I don't have another wife stashed somewhere else, babe," he said. "Plus, I've already been there and done that. You witnessed my divorce from Naomi. So what's this really about?"

He knew Anuli couldn't really be concerned about him hiding a wife from her like her idiot ex did.

His divorce from his ex-wife–if one could really call her that–had been finalised over a year ago.

His first marriage had been coerced when he was eighteen years old. Forced on him by his mob boss's wife to her daughter as a blackmail tactic.

There had been no wedding. Just a simple court appearance and signatures to tie him to her escape plan from her evil husband.

Etim had not wanted the marriage and had never been Naomi's husband in the true sense of the word because she escaped the country with her mother and sister a few days after their forced marriage.

He'd simply carried on as normal, hoping to forget the entire arrangement until he met Anuli.

Spurred on by his flourishing relationship with Anuli, Etim decided to take control and sever ties with his former life in the criminal underworld.

He had searched for Naomi until he found her and filed for a divorce. That was all behind them now. And Anuli knew it.

He had been transparent about the entire thing from the moment he revealed the truth to her. Why did she still have doubts?

"Look at me, Anuli," he said, training his eyes on her, waiting until she fixed her attention on him. "You have every reason to be anxious about our upcoming wedding, given what happened to you the last time you walked down the aisle."

Etim trailed his finger over her cheek and temple. "But you know what we share is special. The connection we have is deep. As long as we remain committed to each other, we'll weather any storm that comes our way. I'm in this for life. Are you?"

A slow smile spread across her face as teardrops rolled down her cheeks. She

leaned closer and pecked him on his lips. “Yes, Etim, I am. I’m in this with you for life. I love you.”

Lifting her hand in his, he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. He cast his gaze at St Peter’s Anglican Church, the place where they would exchange their vows in a couple of days.

The magnificent cathedral with towering spires, ornate-stained glass windows, and a gigantic cross at the centre of the barrel roof stood proud in the centre of Garki, a commercial location of Abuja, the federal capital territory of Nigeria.

In the glow of the setting sun and with its illuminated lights, the beauty of the church was undeniable.

They’d been lucky to secure a date for their wedding in this very converted and busy church after all the hassle of trying to get the vicar to agree.

“Okay, then. We better head to the church before Reverend Onoja cancels our wedding for coming late to the final marriage class before we tie the knot.”

Anuli threw her head back and laughed. “Over my dead body,” she said, jumping out of the jeep. “We better hurry. We’re already three minutes late.”

With a grin that nearly split his face in half, Etim followed suit. He took her hand in his as they ran towards the Church’s entrance giggling like naughty children running away from a teacher.

He was glad to see Anuli snap out of the doubts that plagued her moments ago and get back to her usual cheerful self. Fingers crossed; it would remain that way.

3

8 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (FRIDAY)



"Etim Ikpe Ubong, do you solemnly swear to take Anuli Chiamaka Eneh as your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold until death separates you?" the priest asked, a smile on his face.

Anuli's face lit up with a grin as she looked at her soon-to-be husband, excitement coursing through her. After meeting two years ago and being engaged for only six months, they were finally here to declare their commitment in front of their family and friends in a church.

Etim took her hand in his and nodded. "Yes–"

The doors of the cathedral suddenly swung open, revealing a masked woman who swiftly entered, brandishing a firearm and shooting a single round directly at Etim. "I'll not let you marry another woman when you're mine!" she yelled as she continued to shoot at him.

In horror, Anuli watched her groom crumple to the ground, blood spurting out from his chest like water from a fountain and besmirching her pristine wedding gown with a vibrant red colour.

"Oh! God! Nooo!" she cried out, a loud wail from inside her as she rushed

towards him. “No! No! No!”

She felt a gentle tug on her arm.

“Wake up, Anuli, you’re having a bad dream.” Etim’s soothing voice crashed into her subconscious. “Wake up, babe. It’s just a dream.”

With a jolt, Anuli shot up from her bed, her heart racing and her silk nightgown soaked with sweat. Disoriented by the sudden interruption of her sleep, she turned sideways, squinting to adapt to the darkness of the room.

Etim was on the bed beside her, stroking her shoulder. “Is everything okay? You were trashing around the bed and shouting in your sleep,” he said in a soothing voice.

Anuli gazed at him with a blank expression for a few moments, struggling to regain her composure. Her breathing was fast, her pulse thumping against her neck, and her body drenched in perspiration.

“I… I’m alright,” she said when her respiratory and circulatory functions finally returned to normal. She stretched her lips into a smile. “Sorry I woke you up.”

He rotated his upper body and turned on the lamp beside him. When he faced her again, his grey eyes were filled with concern.

“This is the third time you’re waking up at night after a bad dream,” he said. “What’s going on?”

Anuli sighed. Etim was right. For the past two weeks, she’d been haunted by nightmares of their wedding being disrupted every day.

He’d witnessed only three of them because he’d slept over at her apartment three times since the first time it happened.

He looked so worried that she leaned forward and brushed his clean-shaven jaw with her thumb. “I’m fine. Just dreamt that a woman crashed our wedding and shot you, claiming you belonged to her.”

He released a harsh breath. “This is getting out of hand now, Anuli. I think you need to see a psychologist.”

She shrugged. “I don’t need one. I’m a psychologist, myself, remember? I know I’m having these nightmares because of what happened last time. Nothing else. I’m fine.”

“Clearly, you’re not. You keep having bad dreams and waking up at …” His eyes darted towards the wall clock, then back at her, “… at 2:00 a.m. as if you’ve been in a fierce battle. It’s quite disturbing.”

“If I’m disturbing you, then don’t sleep over anymore,” she snapped.

Anuli knew she sounded bitchy, but she couldn’t seem to help herself. The terrible dreams and constant nervousness were starting to affect her. And for the life of her, she didn’t know how to make them stop.

Etim let out a low grunt, his frustration evident in the husky sound. “You know I didn’t mean that you were disturbing me.” He dragged his fingers through his thick curls and sighed. “I just … I’m just worried about you. That’s all.”

Anuli’s heart melted. Yet again, Etim remained calm and hadn’t reacted angrily to her provocation. Rather than snapping back at her, he stayed composed, leaving her feeling like a heel. She was being nasty for no reason whatsoever. Not like her at all.

“I’m sorry for being an ass, Etim,” she said, leaning closer to him and taking his hands in hers. “I know you’re concerned about me, but don’t be. It was a stupid dream.”

“It’s not stupid if it’s happening over and over again. The wedding planning is clearly causing you a lot of stress and I don’t like it.” He shook his head. “Do you want us to elope? Do a quick wedding instead?”

Anuli thought about his offer for several moments. It seemed like a simple solution.

They already had the marriage licence, had already done the traditional wedding, and the court wedding would be in 7 days. All they needed was to head to any Anglican church with an available date and get it over with. Iriah and Udoka could be their witnesses.

They could always do a reception party later. That would take away all the stress and they’ll be just as married. Whether or not their wedding was simple and intimate, the most important thing was that it went smoothly.

Then she considered all the money they had already invested and the amount of planning they had already dedicated to it.

Letting all that go to waste would mean she'd let her fears win, that she'd let her past traumatise her to the extent that she decided to quit on her future. No way! She wouldn't let it happen. She wouldn't let her previous embarrassment at the altar stop her from experiencing a dream wedding with a man she loved with all her heart.

"No, I'll prefer it if we carried on with our plans as normal," she said, finally.

"Well, it isn't carrying on as normal if you're going through all this stress. We don't have to do all the elaborate things we've planned. It's not necessary at all."

"But we've already gone too far. It'll be a waste of time and money."

"I have absolutely no problem with that. Marrying you will never be a waste of time or money."

"Oh, Etim," she breathed, her heart blooming with all the love she felt for this man.

How did she get so lucky? Etim always knew just what to say to keep her helplessly in love with him. Unlike the men she'd been with in the past, he wasn't stingy with words of affection.

Anuli moved closer to him on the bed and looped her arms around his shoulders, pleased that he'd spent the night with her.

After their premarital counselling session yesterday, he had dropped her off and driven home. However, she called him an hour later, and their conversation had gradually turned into phone sex, prompting him to drive back to finish the job.

They'd been consumed by intense desire, practically tearing each other's clothes off and collapsing onto the bed in a frenzy of passion.

Now, she felt that desperate need for him again, that unquenchable desire to have him hold and kiss her, make love to her wildly like he had last night.

Without giving him another chance to continue their conversation, she leaned in and captured his lips with hers in a hungry kiss.

Etim groaned, a deep throaty sound that reverberated through her body, causing a rush of moist arousal to flow between her thighs.

He gathered her in his arms, pressing her body into his naked chest as he

kissed her back passionately, his mouth taking full possession of hers, his hands roaming over her body, squeezing and groping.

Anuli sighed in pleasure. She could never get enough of him, of his touch. There was always an intense chemistry between them, and their need for one another was all-consuming.

As he tugged her nightgown up and draped her legs around his hips, Anuli revelled in the desire that burned inside her for him. She couldn't afford to lose him, never.

His mouth, wet and ravenous, enclosed her nipple, causing her to whimper, to pull him closer. He knew just what to do to make her a quivering mess on a bed. His attention to her needs drove her wild with lust, made her lose her mind.

By the time he entered her, she was already so aroused that it didn't take long for her to reach the pinnacle.

She cried out his name, her thighs gripping his hips, her fingernails digging into his back as powerful shudders raked her body.

His own release came with a guttural shout that resulted in another wave of tremors coursing through her, stealing her breath away.

Spent, he collapsed onto the bed and pulled her on top of him, clutching her tightly.

They remained like that, breathing hard and fast in silence until their bodies finally settled.

Etim gathered her braids, which had come loose from under her silk bonnet, and tucked them back in. "Promise me you'll talk to one of your colleagues," he said, his tone hoarse.

The concern in his voice filled her chest with warmth. Even though they'd just made love, Etim hadn't forgotten how distressed she'd been when she woke up.

Anuli nodded. "I promise I will," she said.

He pressed his lips to her forehead and pulled the covers over their bodies, seemingly satisfied with her answer.

Anuli stayed nestled in his embrace, relishing the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he returned to sleep.

Right before she fell asleep, she promised herself that she would visit Dr Charles Ibeh, a psychologist who recently relocated to Abuja to open his own practice. She would do whatever it took to chase her jitters away.

Etim was gone by the time she woke up. She smiled when she saw his text message.

> Good morning, my angel. Hope you've said a prayer for forgiveness, because Reverend Onoja would have a heart attack if he found out that we left the church and ended up in bed together fornicating.

GRINNING FROM EAR TO EAR, Anuli typed her response.

> Technically, we didn't sin. We're already married under traditional laws.

SHE THREW BACK her head and guffawed when his response came in seconds later.

> Keep telling yourself that, my fellow sinner. 😊 TTYL. Love you!

> Love you too 😘

WITH A SMILE still plastered on her face, Anuli rose from the bed and strolled over to the shower.

She had a 9:00 a.m. appointment with a new client and needed to be in way before time to prepare for him.

After a quick bath, she put on a red fitted shirt and a black pencil skirt. She slid her feet into her sleek four-inch heeled black pumps and elegantly arranged her braided hair into a tidy bun atop her head.

Using a brush, she expertly blended a light concealer under her eyes and then dusted a layer of powder to her face. To complete her makeup, she applied rouge gloss on her lips and shaped her brows.

Pleased with her appearance, Anuli sauntered to the wardrobe, retrieved her purse, and slung it across her shoulder.

“Time to head out to work,” she muttered to herself as she walked out of her room.

She was in her office in less than twenty minutes, thanks to the shortcut route she’d taken to her workplace.

Settling into her leather executive seat, Anuli smiled at her secretary, who entered the room carrying a steaming cup of coffee.

“Thanks, Nene,” she said as her secretary placed the coffee mug on her desk.

“You’re welcome, ma,” Nene said, flashing her a dimpled smile.

Nene Obi, a full-figured and attractive woman in her late twenties, had been working for Anuli since she started at the firm six years ago. Her commitment to the job and professionalism with clients made working with her effortless.

“Mr Igharo, your 9:00 am client, called to confirm he’ll be here on time.”

“Great, thank you. He’s a new client, so his appointment may take a little longer than usual. Did you block the slot before Mrs Onuorah’s appointment?”

“Yes. For thirty minutes.”

“Thank you, Nene.”

“No wahala. Just holla if you need me,” Nene said, then turned and ambled away.

Anuli leaned back in her seat and powered up her computer. She peeked at her watch and smiled. She had forty minutes before her first client. Enough time to go through her emails and prepare. That was why she preferred arriving at work early. It allowed her to relax and clear her mind before dealing with her clients. The only way she could give them all her attention.

Being the only female and non-medically trained partner at Mind over Matter mental health hospital, she had to put in extra effort to gain the respect of her colleagues, so she always gave her best.

Since the other three partners were doctors and she was a psychologist, she

had concerns about whether they would treat her with respect.

Fortunately, her talent and dedication spoke volumes, establishing her as one of the highly sought-after clinical psychologists in Abuja. This turned her into an indispensable member of the team. Her partners valued her immensely.

Apart from her regular job, she also ventured into hosting a popular weekly podcast called *Dear Kiki*, which currently ranked as the second most listened to podcast in Nigeria. It afforded her extra income, which was increasing as her audience grew. An amazing feat. She was proud of herself.

Once her computer powered on, she quickly logged in and accessed her email inbox. She skimmed through the seven new emails and responded to the only one that warranted one.

After that, she typed a quick email to Dr Charles Ibeh requesting for emergency psychological sessions with him and hit *send*.

She picked up her coffee mug and took a sip, savouring the warmth of the caffeinated drink hitting her throat. Just as she took another sip, her mobile phone began to ring.

She glanced at the screen, a frown crinkling her brows. An unknown number. With a hiss, she ended the ringing and rolled her eyes. These days, there were an overwhelming number of fraudulent callers attempting to manipulate unsuspecting individuals.

Well, her mother didn't raise a fool. Having had numerous similar phone calls, she made it a habit to ignore calls from unknown numbers.

Her phone began ringing again with the same number. Anuli took a sip of her coffee, pondering who was attempting to contact her. Surely, no scammer could be this persistent.

Suppressing a sigh, Anuli swiped to answer and placed the phone against her ear. "Hello?" she said tentatively.

She heard a heavy sigh of relief before, "Hello, Anuli. Thank you for picking up. It's Ifeanyi."

"Who?" She scrunched her forehead in confusion. The static on the line made it difficult to recognise the speaker, although his voice sounded somewhat familiar.

“It’s Ifeanyi … Jidenna Chikwendu.”

“Oh…”

Anuli’s heart crashed forcefully into her chest and blood rushed into her head. Ifeanyi Chikwendu, her ex-fiancé, also known as Jidenna, the fake name he had used to deceive her. He’d also conveniently left out the fact that he was married with two children, and she naively believed him.

Since he left Lyft, the gym where they’d met, she’d not seen or heard from him. Why the hell was he calling now, and what the hell did he want?

After leaving her in tears at the altar two years ago, he had the audacity to contact her now. Was he insane?

“What do you want?” she snorted, making no attempt to suppress her irritation.

He sighed again, but this time, it was a sound heavy with regret. “I returned to Lyft and learned from the gym instructor that you’ll be getting married soon. Congratulations.”

Anuli swallowed hard, not bothering to respond. She still wasn’t sure why he was calling her. She couldn’t care less about what he discovered about her. Why was he wasting her time?

“I … want us to talk, Anuli. To clear the air. I hate all the negative energy between us. We were together for two years, and despite what you think about me, I loved you. I still do, and I think —”

Anuli tightened her grip on her phone, unable to listen to anymore of his bullshit. “I have nothing to say to you, Jidenna. Never call me again.”

She cut off the call abruptly, her heart racing with a sudden surge of panic. With each passing moment, her throat grew tighter, her chest felt increasingly constricted, and the room seemed to grow hotter.

Rushing towards the bay window of her office, Anuli flung it open, letting in a rush of fresh air. She stuck her head out, inhaling and exhaling rapidly, desperately trying to steady her frazzled nerves.

How dare Jidenna call her? How dare the man—the root of all her anxiety—call her? Because of him, she was struggling with nightmares and jitters about walking down the aisle a second time.

Who does he think he is, believing he can have access to me or my precious time ever again? Never!

She should never have answered that call, should have terminated the call as soon as she realised it was him on the other end of the line. Now, here she was feeling destabilised and stressed all over again.

Anuli remained by the window for a few more minutes, focusing on regulating her breathing until she regained a normal respiratory rate. When she felt calm again, she closed the window and strolled back to her desk.

Feeling more composed, she settled back into her seat and brushed off the unpleasant phone call before logging back into the computer.

Her client would be here soon, and she needed to get her mind right before putting her clinical psychologist hat on. She'd be damned if she let Jidenna's call throw her off balance today.

4

7 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (SATURDAY)



Etim smiled as he pulled the sides of his tuxedo together, taking a moment to admire his reflection in the mirror.

With its impeccable fit, courtesy of the talented Kehinde Adeshina, a renowned tailor in Abuja, the custom-made black tuxedo lent him a polished and sophisticated look.

Etim turned towards his groomsmen, who were standing behind him in the dressing room of Corporate Wears Boutique. “What do you think, guys?” he asked with a self-satisfied grin.

Filled with joy and anticipation following a message received yesterday from the tailor about the completion of his wedding attire and that of his groomsmen, Etim scheduled a fitting for them today.

“Outstanding,” Udo quipped, his eyes shining with delight. “Kehinde Adeshina did an excellent job.”

“You really look like a groom now.” Ekpe sucked his teeth, then added with a wry twist of his lips. “If only we could tame that thick Afro of yours…”

Etim flung his head back and guffawed. “Y’all are always trying to get me to

cut my hair, even when my woman says she loves it. Never."

"Guy, maybe it's time to let go of that bush on your head. I mean, who do you think you are? Samson from the bible?" Udoka teased, shaking his head.

Etim let out a chuckle as he shot his friend a snarky look.

Udoka despised putting on suits because he felt they made him appear lankier than he already was. He preferred free flowing kaftans instead. His willingness to wear the suit just to support him as a best man showed his loyalty as a friend.

Etim was grateful for the support he received from Udoka and his brothers, who didn't hesitate to cancel their other Saturday evening commitments to be present today. It meant a great deal to him.

After trying on their own outfits for the wedding, they saved his for last. It was his turn to face the scrutiny of the entire room.

He enjoyed the playful banter they constantly exchanged throughout and didn't mind their teasing remarks about his bushy hair.

Thankfully, the tailor did a great job with all their wedding attires. Apart from Ekpe's suit trouser, which needed a minor adjustment, everyone else's fit just fine.

"Yep, I'm Samson. All my power is in my hair. If I cut this…" Etim clutched a fistful of his soft curls. "…I become powerless. And my woman loves all my power."

"Mtchewww!" Udoka hissed, then chuckled. "Just say you love the edgy look, with your tattoos and wild, untamed hair."

Etim grinned as he turned back to the mirror and studied his reflection again.

He would never cut the massive curls on his head. Never. He not only loved his hair, but he also cherished the moments when Anuli would massage his scalp or run her fingers through his hair while they kissed or made love.

From the moment he was born, he had a head full of hair, and now, at thirty-eight, his curly mane remained his signature look.

So yes, despite his family and friend's protest, this thick 'fro was here to stay.

However, he had contemplated removing the tattoo on his neck before his wedding.

Even though he had a tattoo of eagle wings across his back, it was the inked black snake on his neck that stood out and shocked people when they initially met him.

During his initiation into The Reptiles gang many years ago, they forced him to get the tattoo of the snake inked on the right side of his neck.

For years, he'd left it there to keep reminding himself about how far he'd grown from that dark time of his life. But now that he was beginning a new chapter with Anuli as his wife, he wondered if it would be better to get rid of it.

The hefty price tag of four hundred thousand naira for the laser treatment was always a discouraging factor for him. Considering the upcoming wedding, it didn't seem like a wise decision to spend a large sum of money on tattoo removal. Maybe once they returned from their honeymoon, he would discuss the possibility of getting rid of it with Anuli.

"Guys, remember our plans for the bachelor's party," Udo, his youngest brother, remarked, drawing Etim from his thoughts. "Be on time and be ready to party!"

Laughter and cheering rang out in the room.

"Yes! Amen to lots of juicy strippers!" Ekpe chimed in, shuffling his feet in enthusiasm.

Ekpe, his youngest brother, was tall and heavyset. With his closely cropped hair and full beard, he bore an uncanny resemblance to their late father, the only difference being his fairer skin tone.

"Guys! I thought I told you no strippers!" Etim protested, although he knew his request had fallen on deaf ears.

He overheard his brothers discussing their plans on the phone, and it seemed like they were arranging for strippers to show up at the event.

"What's a bachelor party without strippers? Eh? Lame as fuck!" Udo rolled his eyes.

Among the brothers, Udo was the shortest, standing at just five feet-six inches. He was also light-skinned, with a clean-shaven scalp and a similar full beard as Ekpe.

Udo looked just like their mother, with his long nose, thin lips, and fine

facial features. However, unlike Etim and Ekpe, he didn't inherit her grey eyes.

He slapped Etim on his back. "So, my man, brace up and prepare for some lap dances from strippers. It's your last night to be wild and free."

Etim chuckled and shook his head. "Y'all can never change. I'm trying to be a respectable married man."

"So are we," Udoka and Udo chorused, then looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Etim laughed too. He really didn't mind the strippers coming. He'd discussed it with Anuli, and she was fine with it. She disclosed to him that her friends were planning for male strippers to perform at her bridal shower, too.

He trusted Anuli, so it was also fine with him. As long as none of the strippers touched his woman, they could dance naked around her.

With a wry twist of his lips, Etim unfastened the jacket of his tuxedo. Time to take the outfit he would wear at the altar in a few days to the tailor for dry cleaning.

"Guys, I'm so glad you are all here to share this moment with me," he said, his chest flooding with warmth as he hugged his brothers.

The presence of his family as he faced the most important decision of his life filled him with courage.

His brothers held a special place in his heart. When their father passed away, they had to depend solely on each other to settle the debt owed to the dangerous individuals their father had been gambling with.

The situation had compelled them to stick together, to work as a family until they repaid every naira.

Etim turned to Udoka Adindu. He'd met him through Iriah, Anuli's best friend, who was engaged to him at the time.

Now, Iriah and Udoka were married and had somehow become integrated into his and Anuli's life.

"Sometimes, brothers are flesh and blood, but sometimes they are people you meet and form a bond with," Etim said, his tone hoarse with emotion. "You, my friend, are like a brother to me."

Udoka grinned. "Don't get sappy on us now. Leave that for the wedding

day,” he said with a wink.

They all laughed again, but even in their shared amusement, Etim could see Udoka’s Adam’s Apple bob as he swallowed hard. He could tell that this moment meant as much to Udoka as it meant to him.

After they handed their suits to the tailor for dry cleaning and final touches, they exited the boutique and made their way to their respective vehicles.

“Please, hang on a minute, Udoka, I need to talk to you,” Etim said to his friend, who was about to get into his shiny black Mercedes.

Udoka held onto the car door and turned, curiosity crinkling his forehead. “What about?”

“Let’s talk in your car,” Etim said.

Udoka nodded in agreement and patiently waited for Etim to walk around the car and get comfortable in the passenger seat before he got in.

As he turned on the car, he wasted no time in cranking up the air conditioning, desperate to escape the mid-April Abuja heat that felt like a relentless inferno.

“So, what’s up?” Udoka asked as the cool air filled the car, immediately soothing their skins.

“There’s not much going on… It’s just that I’m worried about Anuli,” Etim admitted, unsure if he was ready to confide in his friend but unable to keep it bottled up any longer.

Waking up to Anuli’s nightmare yesterday still troubled him. Its repeated occurrence meant something more significant than simple stress.

Udoka’s eyebrows angled together in concern. “What are you worried about?”

Etim released a sigh. “She’s been having nightmares about our wedding, terrible ones that wake her up from sleep.” He brushed his palms over his face and shook his head. “At first, I thought it was just simple stress planning the wedding, you know, but I’m worried it’s more.”

Udoka didn’t respond, so Etim continued, unable to stop unburdening himself now that he was on a roll. “It’s beginning to make me scared she wants to call off the wedding.”

“Whoa!” Udoka said, holding both hands up. “Don’t go that far. Everyone has cold feet before a wedding. It’s probably just that.”

Etim shook his head. “The thing is, I don’t think it’s just cold feet. It’s been happening a lot more. She’s now even picking fights with me, as if goading me to react so that she can have an excuse to break things off with me.”

Udoka exhaled sharply. “Have you talked to her about it?”

“Yes. But she’s brushing it all off. It scares me a little.” He turned to the window and kissed his teeth. “I wish she would just let me in, lay it all bare so we can deal with it together.”

“Hmmm.”

“Hmmm what? Has Iriah said anything about Anuli to you?”

Udoka shook his head rapidly. “No. Not at all.” He sighed. “I’m just … sometimes, I wonder if it’s all worth it. Love. Romance. Marriage.”

Etim shot Udoka a curious look. “What the hell, man? You only just got married. And you seem blissfully so. Why did you say that? And what on earth is going on?”

Udoka’s shoulders lifted and fell in a half-shrug. “Things are not always what they seem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say marriage is a lot more complex than simply being with someone you love,” Udoka said, casting a faraway look at the windshield, as if pondering personal issues. “It’s a lot of hard work. Filled with self-doubt, compromise, and moments of regret. And if you have doubts now, it’s better to wait–”

Etim stopped his friend with a harrumph. “I don’t have doubts. I’m absolutely certain I want to marry Anuli.”

“But are you sure she feels the same way?”

This caught Etim off guard. The question frightened him, and he didn’t like it at all. If Anuli was having doubts, what did that mean for them? Would it be a good idea for them to put a stop to things at this point? To wait until her doubts disappeared.

Oh, God! His stomach roiled. What if it wasn’t just temporary doubts? What

if Anuli didn’t want to marry him anymore?

Udoka’s baritone voice crashed through his frantic thoughts. “All I’m saying is, even though I love Iriah with all my heart, there are times I wonder if we made the right decision to get married.” He drew in a ragged breath. “She’s so much different from me, used to a life I never dreamt of. One I certainly can’t provide for her. Did she settle? Can I ever be enough? These concerns plague me every day and have begun causing a rift between us.”

Unable to respond to this, Etim merely listened. Iriah was Anuli’s best friend and because of that, they often went on double dates together and spent a lot of time in each other’s company.

Judging by the way Udoka and Iriah behaved around each other, he couldn’t imagine that they were facing challenges in their relationship. They couldn’t seem to keep their hands off each other.

“Marriage is a very sacred bond, and sometimes, I feel we go into it with only emotions, instead of careful consideration, my friend,” Udoka said, refocusing his attention on him. “Before you walk down the aisle, make sure that both you and Anuli agree about what you want from the future. There must be a clear decision from both of you to commit to each other. It can’t be one-sided.”

Etim nodded. Without a doubt, he knew he wanted Anuli by his side forever as his wife.

He didn’t decide to ask for her hand in marriage based on mere emotions. Sure, he was deeply in love with her. Being with her thrilled him, body and soul, filled his heart with excitement and his stomach with flutters.

However, that wasn’t his only reason for seeing a future with her. Anuli’s kindness, intelligence and diligence drew him to her. She pushed him to be better, supported his dreams, and cared for his extended family. His mother loved her and couldn’t see a better choice for him.

Anuli would be an amazing wife and mother to his future kids. He knew with uttermost certainty that she would make a superb partner for him.

But what if she had doubts about him? After all, he had a dark past as a gang member and his father was a gambling alcoholic who left his family broke and desolate when he died. Not the best background for a husband to a woman with a

pristine past and close-knit family.

Also, he relied on the profits he generated as an event planner to make a living, and these profits were subject to fluctuations according to demand.

Undoubtedly, he had made sound financial decisions over the years and was nearing the end of his home mortgage, but he didn’t meet the standards of the kind of man she was accustomed to.

He knew she’d only dated men with backgrounds like hers and with professional office jobs. Even her ex-fiancé, despite being a cheater, appeared to be an ideal match for her on paper, meeting all her criteria, until she discovered his deceit.

Although Anuli had never given him any reason to doubt her feelings for him, was she reconsidering her choice? Was that the reason for all her nightmares?

“Etim, I know you love Anuli, and that she loves you too, but sometimes, love isn’t enough,” Udoka said, permeating his pensive thoughts. “Marriage is about commitment to put in the work. You both need to be on the same page about that.”

Unintentionally, his friend had just offered him the most valuable advice about marriage.

He and Anuli needed to talk. Regardless of her uncertainties, she had to be open and honest about everything so they could address them as a team.

5

6 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (SUNDAY)



Anuli was grateful that the roofing at the entrance of Sugarland Beauty and Spa shielded her from the scorching Sunday afternoon sun. Otherwise, she would be really pissed off, standing in the sun, waiting for her best friend and mother to show up for their spa date.

The sound of a moving vehicle instantly grabbed her attention, causing her to turn her gaze towards the car park.

Slipping off her sunglasses, Anuli beamed as a bright red Aston Martin slid into one of the parking spots.

She watched as her bestie, Iriah, stepped out of the vehicle dressed in a satin sleeveless floral gown that clung to her like a second skin, accentuating her full figure. The spiky blue Louboutin heels she wore made her even taller, adding inches to her already impressive height of five foot ten.

Iriah’s flawless walnut brown complexion, pretty face, and voluptuous figure made it nearly impossible for heads not to turn when she walked by. She consistently appeared stylish, dressed in luxurious attire and top-quality wigs, all thanks to the financial support of her billionaire parents.

Since she was the sole heir to her parents' fortune, Iriah had the privilege of being exposed to the finer things in life. And she'd developed an expensive taste. Difficult to fault her for that. Right from birth, her parents had showered her with luxury.

Anuli often pondered how Iriah adjusted to being married to a working-class man who couldn't provide the lavish lifestyle she was accustomed to.

Yes, Iriah also earned her income through her work as an architect at a top firm in Abuja. However, Anuli believed that the purpose of that job was merely to keep her occupied and utilise her advanced education from the prestigious Oxford University.

Iriah's extravagant salary was peanuts compared to the wealth she had from her trust fund and the inheritance expected from her parents.

"Hey, babe, *how far?*" Iriah greeted when she got closer, taking off her sunglasses and placing it over her long, bone straight wig.

Leaning in to hug her towering friend, Anuli greeted her with a casual *"I dey o."*

She tilted her head back to assess her friend's appearance. "Look at you dressed like Kim Kardashian just for our spa date. *Na wa o*!"

Iriah flung her head back and guffawed. "I always *gats* to look good, girl. Drip is eternal. And thanks to this Alexander McQueen dress, I feel fabulous."

Anuli clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Girl! Your designer craze is hilarious, I swear. Let the poor breathe."

Iriah gave her a once over and spread her lips into a cheeky grin. "*Haba,* Anuli! You don't look poor at all."

Anuli glanced down at her humble attire. Her outfit consisted of distressed denim shorts and a silk blouse with a floral pattern, neither branded. She would have looked like she was going to the open market if it weren't for the trendy yellow pumps she had on.

"Oh, beside you, I do. I look like your PA."

"Don't be silly! You look amazing. Nobody else can pull off the casual stylish look like you do."

Anuli's cheeks flushed. She loved that her friend never made her feel

inadequate. “Thank you, sis.”

Honestly, she didn’t care that her clothes weren’t designer. Being a simple girl at heart, she had little interest in designers and their creations. High end fashion labels would still hold no appeal for her, even if she found herself with a fortune.

“I thought your mum was meeting us here. Where’s she?” Iriah asked, looking around the carpark.

The popular spa in Maitama was usually bustling with people, making it typically difficult to find a parking spot. But today, being a Sunday, the open space was relatively empty, with only a few parked cars.

Anuli peeked at her watch, her shoulders lifting in a shrug. “She’s supposed to be here by now,” she said as she dug her hand into her sling purse. “Let me call her.”

Just as she pulled out her phone, Anuli spotted a blue Toyota Corolla entering the car park.

A smile worked its way across her lips as she shot Iriah a knowing look. “That’s Uncle Dipo’s car. No wonder my mother is late. She’s with her man.”

Iriah chuckled. “I can’t believe your mum and Uncle Dipo are still going strong.”

“Me neither. I mean, at first, I hated seeing them together, and hoped things would turn sour between them. But now …” Anuli trailed off, leaving her comment hanging in the air.

No point finishing her sentence. Iriah already knew the intricate details of how she’d grown to accept her mother’s relationship with Uncle Dipo, her late father’s close friend.

It shocked Anuli when she found out about it two years ago. She was infuriated because her mother had been taking care of her husband with Alzheimer’s while also engaging in a romantic relationship with his close friend.

However, when her father passed, she came to understand the profound loneliness her mother had experienced as the primary caregiver for a man who had no recollection of her for many years, a man whom she deeply cherished.

It was only natural for her mother to seek solace from Uncle Dipo, who was

constantly available to help her take care of her husband.

Occasionally, Anuli's stomach churned at the sight of them being together, as it reminded her of her parents' relationship, but she was gradually dealing with it.

Anuli watched as Uncle Dipo courteously held the car door open for her mother, and she couldn't help but notice the beaming smile that lit up her mother's face as she stepped out.

Holding hands, they strolled towards her and Iriah.

Despite her reluctance to admit it, Anuli knew they looked good together.

Uncle Dipo was tall, with broad shoulders, clean shaven hair and a neatly groomed salt and pepper beard. Today, he wore a plain white kaftan shirt and trousers with silver sandals that reflected rays from the sunlight.

Standing next to him, her mother seemed delicate and small, her slim and petite physique overshadowed by his larger stature. Her colourful Ankara boubou and silver braided hair gave her a youthful appearance, but it was the sheer joy radiating on her face that made her look several years younger than her sixty-two years of age.

"Hi, *nne*. Sorry I'm late," her mother said, slipping her hand out of Uncle Dipo's and leaning in for a hug.

"No wahala. We haven't waited long." Anuli said, hugging her mother back.

She flashed Uncle Dipo a smile and moved over to hug him, too. "Uncle D! How are you?"

He beamed, kissing her right cheek. "I'm fine, thanks. How are you? And wedding preparations?"

Anuli gave him an exasperated look. "Stressful. Remind me never to do this again."

Uncle Dipo laughed. "This will be your last wedding in Jesus' name!" he said, still teetering.

"Amen o. Because … *I nor dey do again*."

Everyone burst into laughter. After exchanging greetings and engaging in small talk, Uncle Dipo bid farewell to the group and left.

In less than fifteen minutes, the three of them were in a private spa room,

partially undressed, and enjoying professional back and neck massages.

“So, Mum, you said you wanted to talk to us about something today,” Anuli said, relishing the gentle pressure of the masseuse’s hands working magic on her back.

“Yes, my dear. That’s why I arranged this spa date. I need you and Iriah’s opinion about something.”

Anuli smacked her lips in jest. “And here I am, thinking you actually wanted me to relax and take a break from all the pre-wedding stress,”

Her mother gave a little laugh. “Yes, that too.”

“So, what is it, Aunty Eby?” said Iriah. “I hope everything is okay.”

“Yes, my dear. It’s just that … Dipo proposed to me last week.”

Anuli’s mouth fell open and Iriah took a sudden, sharp breath.

“Congratulations!” Iriah squealed. “Where’s the ring? Are you wearing it?”

Anuli held her breath, not sure what to make of this. Of course, she was happy that her mother had found love again after her husband, who had Alzheimer’s for over ten years, passed away from a stroke. But there was a part of her that still felt the relationship between her mother and Uncle Dipo to be taboo of some sort. She hadn’t totally accepted it yet. Would he become her stepdad, too?

“No, no ring,” her mother said, an embarrassed glint in her eyes. “I turned him down.”

“Why?” Iriah’s tone sounded incredulous.

“Well, I’m too old to be getting married. Besides, what would people say? ‘Look, that treacherous woman is marrying her late husband’s close friend’ It just feels a little … I don’t know.”

Anuli held her tongue, resisting the temptation to point out that the thought didn’t stop her from having an affair with Uncle Dipo in the first place.

“But you love him, don’t you? He makes you happy, doesn’t he?” Iriah asked.

“Yes. I love him. Very much. And I’ve not been this happy in a long time.”

“So, go for it, Aunty Eby. To hell with what people think. Life is too short to be stuck trying to please people.” Iriah tilted her head sideways. “*Abi*, Anuli,

what do you think?”

Anuli’s stomach flip-flopped, and her abdominal muscles clenched. Her mother tensed up, holding her breath while waiting for her response.

Her opinion? What did she think about her mother marrying her late father’s close friend, whom she also had an affair with?

Conflicting thoughts about the whole situation constantly plagued her. However, the only conclusion she consistently came to remained unwavering. Everyone deserved to fight for their own happiness.

If Uncle Dipo made her mother happy, she would support that relationship as much as she could.

“Mum, I know you worry about me accepting you and Uncle Dipo together, but you don’t have to,” Anuli said, hoping to reassure her mother once and for all. “Don’t let the fear of what people think stop you from fighting for your happiness.”

“Yes, Aunty Eby. If you want to marry Uncle Dipo, just go for it.”

“You don’t think I’m too old to start over?”

“No, Mum. You’re just sixty-two, not dead. It’s never too late to go for what you want. Plus, Uncle Dipo is a fine man *o*. You better stop stalling because there are many desperate young girls ready and willing to snatch him from you.”

Her mother’s mouth parted into a wide O. “Ha!”

Laughter erupted in the room, creating a chill atmosphere between the women once again, before gradually fading into a hushed silence.

“You’ll not believe who called me two days ago,” Anuli said several moments later.

“Who?” Iriah asked.

“Jidenna, a.k.a. Ifeanyi.”

Iriah gasped, turning her head sideways to glance at Anuli. “What did he want?”

“To meet up with me for a talk.”

“No. No. No.” It was her mother this time. “Don’t entertain any conversation with that demon.”

Anuli twisted her lips into a wry smile. The bitterness her mother held

towards her former fiancé had not diminished after so long.

Not so for her. She didn't harbour a great deal of resentment towards him. Actually, she hadn't given him much thought until last week when her nightmares began.

Of course, she had no interest in getting involved with Jidenna. The man deceived her and stole two years of her life by not revealing that he was already married while they were in a relationship.

However, something about the way he sounded made her curious. Plus, she still had never quite understood why he deceived her so cruelly.

The reason he gave about wanting male children didn't match the man she had fallen in love with. Leaving his wife and daughters solely to deceive another woman just because of that didn't seem like something he would do; it just didn't fit his character. He was far too enlightened to be that ridiculous. Or so she thought.

Anuli blew out a soft breath. "To be honest, I'm thinking of meeting up with him."

"Hell no!" Iriah shot up the massage table, keeping the white towel securely in place over her naked chest.

From the corner of her eye, Anuli glimpsed Irah's masseuse clenching her jaw and compressing her lips.

"Don't give that snake room to re-enter your life. What on earth does he have to say to you now? I'm sure he knows you're getting married." She shook her head. "Why do exes like to crop up when people move on?"

"I'm not giving him any room to come back. *Haba*! I'm not stupid. I just …" Anuli's voice faltered as she struggled to find the right words to clarify why she wanted to speak with Jidenna.

She was sure her nightmares were associated with what happened when she walked down the aisle to marry him. Maybe she needed some closure. Maybe getting answers from him would finally rid her of those horrible dreams and panic attacks.

Perhaps she required more than just the apologies he had offered her since that incident to erase the aftermath of her humiliation at the altar.

Her first therapy session with Dr Ibeh had been a little enlightening. Anuli knew deep in her heart that her nightmares were not because she didn't trust Etim. She was confident that Etim wouldn't break her heart.

The bad dreams were more likely a reflection of her inability to move past the disappointment of her previous wedding. She had been avoiding facing the truth about her relationship with Jidenna, that she had committed to a long-term future with him without searching for details of his life.

Was there a part of her that didn't want to know? Did she let it slide because she suspected something was amiss?

She just needed to delve deeper and truly comprehend the series of events that led to that situation.

Perhaps having a conversation with Jidenna might bring her the closure she required to stop the nightmares.

"Listen, my daughter," her mother said in a clipped tone, as though it pained her to have to give any advice about this. "I don't care what Jidenna has to say to you. Don't talk to him or see him. It would bring nothing but trouble."

"Exactly," Iriah affirmed, settling back onto the massage table. "It doesn't matter what Jidenna wants to say. You have moved on with Etim. It's not your problem."

Her mother nodded vigorously. "Etim is a good man. He loves and respects you. Why entertain talking to your ex? Let it go. *Na wahala you dey find so*."

Anuli mulled over her mother's advice, finding solace in the comforting scent of vanilla and lavender that wafted through the air.

Maybe they were right. Was it necessary to meet up with Jidenna for a conversation with him for her pre-wedding anxiety to stop? What could he possibly say to make her feel better about lying to her and embarrassing her at the altar?

"Anuli, promise me you won't see Jidenna." Iriah's voice drew her from her pensive thoughts.

Anuli sighed. Finding Etim, a man who loved her wholeheartedly and without reservation, was a stroke of luck that she cherished. Did it make any sense rocking the boat by meeting up with her ex? Would delving into past

traumas aid in her healing process?

Most likely not. Best to let sleeping dogs lie. She would focus on the four video sessions she had booked with her therapist. Hopefully, they'd be enough to banish her fears for good.

"I promise," she replied.

6

5 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (MONDAY)



The sound of Anuli's phone ringing greeted her as she stepped out of the bathroom. Once she heard the melodic tone of "Fire on the Mountain," by Asa, she instantly recognised the caller.

With a huge grin on her face, she rushed towards the bed where her phone sat, uncaring of the wet footprints she left on the pinewood floor.

"Hi, Etim," she said as soon as she answered the call. "Don't worry, I'm almost ready."

A soft chuckle escaped his lips. "I'll believe that when pigs fly. You're likely still in the shower or just out of it," he scoffed.

Her lips unfurled into a wonky smile. "Damn it! You know me too well. But I'll be quick. I promise I won't be late."

As part of their final wedding preparation plans, they had scheduled to visit the caterer today and choose the menu for their guests.

Feeling hot and sticky after work, Anuli made a detour to her house for a much-needed shower, hoping to join Etim at the address later. A terrible decision. The clock was ticking, and she had just thirty minutes to get ready, and

then cover the six-mile distance to arrive on time.

Damn it! It would have been better if she had driven there from work instead. They couldn't afford to miss the appointment the very busy caterer had given them.

"Change of plans, Anuli. Can you move over to the window and look outside?" Etim said, fracturing her tumultuous thoughts.

"What? Why?" Her heart leapt to her throat.

Did the caterer cancel on them? How could they find another chef for their wedding on such short notice? And even if they could find a substitute, would that person be competent?

Mrs Orazulike was renowned as one of Abuja's top chefs, known for her exceptional culinary skills and utmost professionalism. Finding someone else would be a challenging task.

"*You this woman, sef*. Just look out your window, *joor*," said Etim in a teasing tone.

Snatching the bathrobe hanging on the wardrobe's hook, Anuli quickly slipped it on before rushing to the window to see what was happening.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of Etim standing beside a sleek limo parked inside the compound of her apartment building's complex.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped, her face on fire, her heart pounding in excitement. "What's all this?"

"We're going on a special date together."

Anuli couldn't believe her eyes. When had Etim planned this? "But … but we have to see Mrs Orazulike today to pick the wedding meals. I thought …"

Etim's laughter resonated through the phone's speakers, sending shivers down her spine and causing goosebumps to appear on her skin.

He looked incredibly attractive in his brown t-shirt and jeans, sporting large cornrows, a slight beard on his jaw, and a seductive smile on his full lips.

Even from her distance, looking down at him from the fourth floor of her five-story apartment building, she could feel the magnetic energy of his presence.

The combination of the setting sun and the backdrop of Wuse 2 town created

a romantic ambiance. Like she was Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman.

“Yes, we’re still going to keep the appointment. But we’re doing it in style.”

“Oh, Etim,” she breathed, short of words.

“Yep, babe. I’ll be down here waiting for you to get dressed so we can be on our way.”

Anuli let out a delightful squeal. “See you in a few minutes.”

After hanging up the phone, she dashed away from the window. Wild with enthusiasm, she scurried about the room, getting herself ready to meet the love of her life.

Allowing herself to panic about what happened at her first wedding seemed foolish to her now. Etim was nothing like Jidenna. He was a caring and devoted man who loved her and showed it every day.

His thoughtful plan to take her out for a relaxing evening to ease her pre-wedding stress showed his deep understanding of her emotions.

She would make sure she constantly reminded him every day how much she loved and cherished him.



ETIM’S BREATH hitched as he watched Anuli step out of the house. It didn’t matter how many times he saw her, she still managed to take his breath away.

She looked absolutely gorgeous in a half-sleeve lilac and white wrap dress that flattered her slender figure, gracefully falling just above her knees.

Her purple heeled sandals and stunning white purse added an extra touch of elegance to her already poised demeanour.

As always, her makeup was flawlessly applied, enhancing her doleful eyes and pouty lips.

The way she packed her thick, straightened hair into a severe bun highlighted her striking cheekbones, and he found it incredibly alluring.

What a beauty his Anuli was. He would always bless the day she said *yes* to him. The reason for ensuring he arranged an evening out today. His relationship with her meant so much to him.

He wanted to confirm her desire to marry him. If she wasn't ready, he would wait until she was. He didn't care about a marriage certificate. As long as they were together, he would be okay with whatever decision she made.

"You always look good, babe," he complimented her as she drew closer to him. "So good that I almost want to forget our plans and take you back upstairs to show you how much I dig you."

Her shy smile made his stomach spasm and sent a rush of blood down south, hardening his dick.

Compliments always made Anuli blush. As if she didn't expect them. Did she really not know how utterly irresistible she looked? How much she had him wrapped around her pretty manicured finger?

"Hey, boo. You look fantastic yourself." She leaned in and pecked him on his mouth, careful not to transfer her lipstick. "And oh, you smell good enough to eat. I wouldn't mind if we skip all this and go upstairs, too."

Etim let out a deep groan, his desire for the woman standing before him making his body tense all over. "Don't tempt me, babe," he said in a hoarse voice. "I spent the entire day yesterday planning this evening. It would be a shame to cancel."

She giggled. A girly sound that sent waves of electricity through his entire body.

Whenever he heard this unbridled, merry sound from her, it always made him want to record and store it in a tape he could listen to on repeat.

"So, are we headed to Mrs Orazulike's house as planned first?" Anuli asked.

Etim shook his head. "Nope. It's a surprise outing, so I can't say more."

"But how do we choose our wedding menu if we cancel this appointment with her? Or has she rescheduled it?"

"No more questions, babe. Trust me, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

Etim gestured to the chauffeur, who was waiting by the limo, and the stocky man in a navy-blue uniform dashed forward and opened the doors for them to get in.

It brought him great joy to see the delight on Anuli's face as she settled into

the luxurious vehicle.

“Oh my gosh, Etim… I’m seriously loving this,” she raved, her eyes exploring every corner of the limo.

Etim totally agreed with her. Not only were the white leather seats plush and comfortable, but there was also a mini fridge conveniently positioned nearby. Plus, there was some chill music playing in the background.

Although booking this ride hurt his pocket a little, the sheer joy on her face made it completely worthwhile.

He couldn’t wait until she saw what else he had planned for her today. Hopefully, by the day’s end, she would be completely relaxed and confident in his love for her.

Their drive to the venue was short and fun. They chatted incessantly, savouring champagne, and grooving to old school music.

As soon as they stepped out of the limousine, Etim reached for her hand, intertwining their fingers. He dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a silk scarf to show her.

“Can I cover your eyes with this?”

Her eyebrow shot skyward. “Why?”

“Well, I don’t want you to see where we’re going until we get there.”

She hesitated, eyeing the scarf he was holding curiously. “Hmm … what on earth have you planned tonight?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked instead of answering her question.

“Of course,” she said without hesitation.

“Then do this. You’ll not regret it. Okay?”

With a soft sigh, Anuli nodded. She turned her back to him and allowed him to cover her eyes with the scarf.

When he finished tying the ends of the scarf into a knot at the back of her head, he grabbed her hand and led her, taking smaller steps so she could keep up in her heels.

Etim’s heart was bursting with excitement as they walked past Aqua restaurant and made their way to the garden by Jabi Lake.

When they finally reached their destination, a beam of happiness spread

across his face, filling him with a sense of pride. The place looked phenomenal. He hoped Anuli would love it.

“We’re here,” he said, grinning from molar to molar. “Can I untie the scarf now?”

Giving a nod of consent, Anuli allowed him to untie the knot of the silky material that he used to blindfold her. She released a startled gasp when he slipped the scarf off her face.

“Oh, my Gosh! This is beautiful!” she squealed, her gaze roaming her surroundings. “When … How … Oh, Etim.”

Etim beamed, pleased with himself. He had reserved the restaurant’s garden gazebo for a private dinner with Anuli and had asked his brother Udo to decorate it.

The circular table, positioned between two cushioned chairs, was elegantly draped with pristine white satin. On it was a stunning floral centrepiece and a champagne bottle chilling in an ice bucket with glasses next to it.

Festive decorations of flowers and balloons covered the gazebo, while a live band played instrumental music in the corner.

With the picturesque lakeside view, the soothing rustle of palm trees, and the mesmerising starry skies, the ambience was nothing short of magical. He hoped the enchanting atmosphere captivated Anuli as it did him.

Turning to her with a nervous smile, he tried to hide his excitement. “It’s an intimate dinner, reserved exclusively for the two of us. Do you like it?”

“Like it? … no! I love it!” Anuli exclaimed as she flung her arms around him and pulled him in for a passionate kiss, which went on and on.

Filled with satisfaction at the successful outcome of his efforts, Etim clung to her, kissing her back with fervour, savouring the sweet taste of her—the woman who held his heart in the palm of her hands.

He crushed her lips with his, twirling his tongue in a delicious dance with hers.

It was pure bliss. Sharing a passionate kiss with Anuli in a magical setting, aware that she was just as entranced by the moment as he was.

The sound of someone clearing their throat shattered their passionate haze.

“Alright…alright…enough of that,” a female voice came from behind them.

Anuli broke away from him and whirled around. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Mrs Orazulike!” she cried out, clapping her hands in delight. “I was so worried we’d miss out on you doing the catering for our wedding if we didn’t show up for the appointment you scheduled.”

Mrs Orazulike chuckled as she made her way towards them, accompanied by two waitresses.

“Your man wanted to accomplish two things at once today, so he went out of his way to make it a memorable experience for you,” she said, gesturing towards the set table. “You get to have a private dinner and still pick which food you want served at your wedding. A win-win situation, don’t you think?”

Anuli draped her arms around Etim’s midriff and pulled him closer. “Oh, I know. I’m so lucky to be getting married to the most thoughtful man ever,” she said, then kissed his cheek.

Etim blushed furiously, thankful that his plan had gone without a hitch. “I’m the lucky one,” he said.

Hand in hand, they strolled over to the table and plopped down in seats across from one another.

Shortly after, the waitresses served them an entrée comprising several meal samples paired with various drinks for them to choose from.

They had a variety of dishes on the table –fried rice, jollof rice, turkey, chicken, beef, egusi, oha and vegetable soup. There were also options for both red and white wines.

“This all looks so yummy. It will be hard making a choice,” Anuli said, taking a deep breath as she picked up her fork.

Etim grinned. “I know, right? We’ll just have to use a scoring system as we taste the food to see which ones we’ll go with.”

“Brilliant idea, Etim. We should do just that.”

They took nearly an hour to decide, enjoying pleasant conversation, sampling the food, and savouring the ambiance of the background music and the view.

The menu for their wedding would include jollof rice, fried chicken, fried

rice with beef, moi moi, plantains, and oha soup with eba. In addition, they selected two delicious red wines and one white wine.

Content with their choice, they nursed their champagne, and settled in to enjoy the rest of the evening.

With his mind finally at ease, Etim leaned forward and gently grasped Anuli's hand, ready to discuss the issue that had been troubling him.

"Anuli," he called in a hesitant tone, apprehensive about broaching the subject. "Are you still okay with us getting married? I mean, is that something you still want?"

Her eyebrows drew together, forming a deep crease of confusion on her forehead. "Of course. Why would you even ask that?"

Relief washed over him like a warm embrace, easing the tension that twisted his gut moments ago. "I just wanted to talk to you about any doubts you may have, to make sure that you want to do this as much as I want to."

Anuli squeezed his hand and gazed into his eyes, a film of tears glistening in hers.

"Look at me, Etim, because I need you to see my face as you hear me say this," she said in a lilt husky with emotion. "I have absolutely no doubt that I want you as my husband. Being your wife would be an absolute honour."

She lifted his hand and kissed his knuckles. "All my pre-wedding anxieties have nothing to do with you. They were just all in my head. And now, I'm sure they would completely disappear. I love you with all my heart, my husband to be."

Etim leaned forward, his lips meeting hers in a soft kiss, his heart overflowing with happiness.

"I love you too. Forever. My soon to be wife," he said.

"Mrs Eneh-Ubong. Mrs Anuli Eneh-Ubong. I love the sound of that."

His eyes widened. "You've changed your mind? Are you also taking my name?"

She nodded. "Yep, Mr Ubong. I've given it more thought, and if we're blessed with children, I would like them to have both our last names."

"Sounds absolutely perfect to me." He raised his glass to her. "Oh … I can

already picture us with two daughters. Pretty like their mother and dare devils like their father."

"Me too. I hope we have daughters too. I've spent my life around brothers, and I wish I had a sister."

"Oh, same here!" He laughed. "I have two annoying brothers, and trust me, as a child, I prayed so hard for a sister."

She beamed. "Well, whatever we have, sons or daughters, I pray they are healthy and happy."

Taking her hand, he placed it on his chest, allowing her to feel the steady pulsation of his heart. "I promise to devote my life to you and the future we'll create together."

She smiled at him, tears in her eyes. "Me too, Etim. Me too."

Etim held on to her hand for a little while longer, relishing the touch of the woman who would soon be his wife.

7

4 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (TUESDAY)



“Etim Imeh Ugong, do you solemnly vow to take Anuli, Chiamaka Eneh as your lawfully wedded wife, forsaking all others, to love and cherish her in sickness and in health, for better or worse, until death separates you?”

A wave of emotions surged through Anuli’s chest as she stared at her handsome husband. Her love for him was out of this world.

Etim nodded. “I d–”

With a loud crash, the cathedral door swung open and a masked man entered, striding purposefully towards the altar where they were standing.

As he came to a halt in front of them, he pointed a weapon at Etim and shot him directly in the chest.

Anuli let out a loud wail as Etim fell to the floor. “God!” she cried, rushing towards him and scooping his bleeding, lifeless body in her arms.

She turned to the man who had fired the weapon. “Why? Why did you do this?”

With a swift motion, the man took off his mask, exposing his face and leaving her stunned.

Anuli’s breath caught in her throat, and a blood-curdling scream escaped from her lips. “Jidenna! You killed my husband! You killed my husband!”

She jerked awake, her screams still echoing in the room, her throat raw and her heart pounding in her chest.

Disoriented, Anuli scanned the bedroom. Her vision blurred, she was unable to fully comprehend her surroundings.

It took several moments for her nerves to calm down and her heart rate to settle.

Releasing a long sigh, she ran her palm down her face and rubbed at her tired eyes.

She’d just had another nightmare. This time so vivid and terrifying that she woke up in a cold sweat, trembling from head to toe.

She grabbed her phone from the nightstand and quickly checked the time. 3:12 am.

With the curtains closed and the lights off, the room was shrouded in darkness, save for the faint glow emitting from her phone screen.

Anuli swung her leg around the bed and planted her feet on the ground. With a slight twist of her torso, she reached over and turned on the table lamp, blinking as she adjusted to the sudden light.

Rising to her feet, she made her way to the sitting room in her three-bedroom apartment.

There wasn’t any point trying to go back to sleep. It would be hard to switch off after such a horrible dream.

What on earth was happening to her? Why couldn’t she fully relax and prepare for her wedding coming up in just five days?

She shook her head, grabbed her laptop from the tea table, and settled into the nearby couch facing the hallway.

Only yesterday evening, she’d spent the most amazing time with Etim, talking about their future until eleven p.m. After their lovely outdoor intimate dinner, he’d dropped her off at home, kissed her passionately at her door and headed back to his place.

It was as enchanting as their first date, and she’d gone to bed with a wide

smile and a heart full of joy. While drifting off to sleep, her mind lingered on Etim and the certainty she had in embracing a future with him.

How could she have a dream about her ex-fiancé shooting her current fiancé just a few hours later? What kind of crazy shit was that?

In her previous dreams, it had been a masked woman shooting at Etim. For the first time, the identity of the armed person had changed to Jidenna. What did it all mean?

Powering on her laptop, she rested her back against the couch. It was time to seek answers from her Dear Kiki audience.

When she started the online advice forum to let off steam about her ex-fiancé's deceit, she had no clue it would go viral or bring her any money.

Much to her surprise, Dear Kiki gained widespread recognition, resulting in a successful podcast that generated a monthly income of over N400,000 for her.

Most times, she answered questions posed online by people seeking advice about their personal lives, jobs, and families, but sometimes, she posed questions herself for discourse.

Today, she was curious to discover people's opinions about her bad dreams. Would anyone lay significance to her nightmares? Or should she simply shrug them off?

Drawing in a deep breath, she clicked open her Dear Kiki twitter profile and began to pour out her heart, tapping rapidly on the laptop's keyboard.

Therapy was helping a little, but she might as well ask strangers on the internet for guidance.



AFTER SEEING HER LAST CLIENT, Anuli could feel the fatigue seeping into her bones. She pushed open the door to her office and immediately sank into the plush leather seat, exhaling dramatically.

"At least, tomorrow is your last day before you go off for three weeks on break for your wedding and honeymoon," Nene, her secretary, said, placing a stack of files on her desk. "Once you're done tomorrow, you can kiss us

miserable people goodbye and head off into paradise to relax."

Anuli chuckled. "I'm so looking forward to the break. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love my clients and all, but sometimes, being a psychologist can be draining."

"I can only imagine."

"People think it's such a breeze to just sit and listen, but it's way trickier to untangle a client's thoughts without getting sidetracked by your own."

Nene released a sigh filled with longing. "*Biko,* forget about work and imagine yourself in Seychelles, lounging on the beach with your gorgeous husband. It's only a week away."

Anuli blushed. She loved hearing her colleagues and friends gush about Etim's looks. "Can't wait," she said with a grin so wide her cheeks hurt.

"Enjoy. Don't forget us *o*."

"Yeah, right, like you guys in this firm would ever let me. I bet I'll still get work emails on my honeymoon."

"Most certainly!" Nene snickered with a teasing wink that made Anuli giggle. "Forwarded by my *bad belle,* hating self."

With that, she turned around and sashayed out of the office, the sound of her laughter lingering in the air.

Alone now, Anuli turned on her desktop. It would be nice to have all her paperwork finalised before lunchtime. That would make it easier for her to leave right at closing time without having to hang back to do anything.

By the time she finished inputting her client's notes, nearly an hour had passed. Anuli yawned and glanced at the clock. 12:38 p.m. Still a few minutes until lunch. Having nothing else to do, she opened her Dear Kiki twitter page.

Her jaw dropped. Over five thousand retweets and two thousand comments in only a few hours. Wow! She had better get started reading them.

The first response to her tweet immediately grabbed her attention. It was from @Prince Ajola, one of her many followers.

If you're still dreaming about your ex, you shouldn't be getting married.

It means you still have unresolved issues o. Maybe you're still in love with your ex or want to f*ck him. Who knows?
Whatever the reason, resolve that shit before roping someone's son into your rubbish. These hoes ain't loyal. 😒

ANULI FROWNED. How totally rude. Although she'd used a bogus identity for the Dear Kiki post, she couldn't help but feel directly slighted.

She didn't have any unresolved issues with Jidenna. She couldn't care less about him. He had manipulated her in the cruellest way and deserved to rot in hell as far as she was concerned.

Just because he appeared in her nightmare didn't mean she wanted anything to do with him. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

He had taken a shot at Etim in her dream. Maybe he was the one still obsessed with her. It could be a sign that she had to make it crystal clear to him that he should make no further attempts to contact her.

Seething from the twitter response, she continued to scroll through the thread and noticed multiple comments expressing the same sentiment, which only fuelled her annoyance.

Irritated beyond measure, she grabbed her phone from her desk and scrolled through her blocked contacts.

Acting sole on impulse, she unblocked Jidenna's number and dialled it.

He answered the phone immediately, leaving her no time to reconsider her impulsive actions.

"Hello, Anuli, how are you doing?" he said, his tone saturated with surprise.

Anuli's heart began racing. Now that she had him on the other end of the line, she had no clue what to say or even what she hoped to achieve by contacting him.

"Hi, Jidenna. I'm good. And you?" she said, her voice sounding shaky even to her own ears.

"This is a pleasant surprise. I must confess, I'm shocked to hear from you

after the last time we spoke. I —”

“I’m ready to have the talk you wanted,” she said in a clipped tone, cutting him off.

She had to keep things formal with him so he wouldn’t read any meaning into the call. This wasn’t a social call. She simply wanted to listen to what he had to say and close that chapter of her life for good. If a conversation with him would achieve that, then so be it.

“Are you available to meet me at Chicken Republic in Wuse 2 tomorrow…” She peeped the time on her smartwatch. “… At about 12 noon?”

He didn’t respond for several beats, making her stomach churn with a mixture of anxiety and embarrassment.

Oh, Lord. Why on earth did I call sef?

His voice finally came through the phone speakers. “Of course. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.”

She broke off the call and released a sharp breath. God. What was she doing? What had prompted her to ask for a meeting with Jidenna? What could he possibly have to tell her that would make her nightmares go away?

Unlocking her phone again, she hesitated before pressing her thumb against his contact, contemplating whether to redial and cancel the plan.

Whatever the reason, resolve that shit before roping someone’s son into your rubbish.

SHE SHOOK her head vigorously as she tossed her phone back onto her desk.

There was a reason behind her nightmares. Even without using her psych degree to psychoanalyse herself, it was obvious that what happened the first time she walked down the aisle to marry Jidenna had come back to haunt her.

Before she could make it down the altar again, she had to resolve the underlying trauma that incident caused her.

8

3 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (WEDNESDAY)



She saw Jidenna seated at the table as soon as she walked in. Likely on a work lunch break himself, he was clad in a sleek business suit that looked as if it was made specially for him.

How could he already be here?

Anuli took a quick peek at her watch. She was fifteen minutes late because she'd needed to get fuel at a petrol station first.

Jidenna's face lit up with a bright smile as soon as he spotted her. He rose to his feet as she approached him.

She used to find him attractive, with his impressive over six-foot height, smooth mahogany skin tone, and handsome face, but now she just couldn't appreciate his looks.

After what he did to her, he might as well be Shrek smiling at her.

"Sorry I'm late," Anuli said as she made it to his table at the corner of the eatery.

He leaned forward to hug her, but she stopped him, stretching her hand out between them for a handshake instead.

Not fazed by that, he shook her hand. “Not a problem at all,” he said cheerfully. “I cancelled all my day’s plans to see you.”

Her heart sank at the comment, but she plastered a smile on her face to hide her displeasure.

Was Jidenna misreading her intentions for wanting to meet up with him? She certainly hoped not.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Jidenna. It’s not that deep,” she said, deliberately keeping her tone casual.

She wanted no ambiguity about her reasons for wanting to speak with him. This had nothing to do with trying to rekindle a romantic relationship, and she hoped to drive the message home once and for all.

He harrumphed. “*Haba*, Anuli, don’t be like that,” he said in a jovial tone, clearly not allowing her curtness to dampen his mood. “And please, call me Ifeanyi. I would like you to use my proper name.”

Shaking her head, Anuli pulled out her chair and sat on it. “Nope. You’ll always be Jidenna to me. Calling you Jidenna will always remind me how you fooled me with that fake name.”

He twisted his lips, settling in the seat opposite her. “Fair enough. I deserve that.”

She hung her purse on the chair and looked at him pointedly. “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Jidenna released a heavy breath. “Why don’t we order first?”

“Nope. I’m not here to socialise, Jidenna. I just want to hear what you have to say to me.”

“We can talk as we eat, can’t we?”

Anuli hesitated, then glanced around. The fast-food joint buzzed with people today, as chatter and the aroma of food filled the air.

Although she enjoyed the fried chicken here, she’d chosen this eatery because of its informal setting. A subtle message to Jidenna that this wasn’t a romantic date.

All she wanted was to hear whatever he needed to tell her and be done with it, so she could enjoy a peaceful lunch alone before returning to work.

“Okay,” she acquiesced. “Let’s eat.”

He nodded. “Cool. Let’s go order first.”

They both stood and began walking towards the counter, and she found herself unable to resist the mouthwatering smell of fried food that permeated the air.

For her meal, Anuli selected fried chicken strips paired with a fresh salad and a diet coke. Jidenna opted for a chicken burger and a piping hot cup of coffee.

Balancing their trays of food, they made their way back to the table and settled down to eat.

“So, now, let’s talk,” Anuli said as soon as she sat in her chair.

Jidenna chuckled. “Straight to the point, I see.”

“Absolutely. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

He sighed. “Okay, first of all, I’d like to congratulate you on your wedding coming up soon. I’m happy for you.”

Anuli snickered. “Yep, thanks. I found a wonderful man who hid nothing about his life from me. It’s hard to find honest and kind men these days. I’m so lucky.”

“Ouch.”

She shrugged. “Well… If the shoe fits…”

“Okay, Anuli, I get it. I finally get it. I contacted you because I wanted to apologise for lying to you.”

“You’ve apologised before. That’s not what I need from this conversation.”

“What do you need? I’m owning up to what I did. I was wrong for deceiving you. It was selfish of me to do that, and I’m terribly sorry.”

“I don’t need you to own up to what you did. I want to know why? Why me?” Anuli shook her head, the taste of the succulent chicken suddenly bitter in her mouth. “Was I too desperate? Too needy? Do you know what it did to me? All the self-doubting and self-loathing I went through after finding out that I had no idea that the man I dated for two years was already married?”

Anuli could hear the bitterness in her voice as she spoke. Which surprised her. She believed she had moved on from it, thinking it was all in the past. Apparently not.

For the past two weeks, as her wedding to Etim approached, she couldn't shake off the unsettling waves of doubt that resurfaced. It felt like reopening an already healed wound.

Her mind was a labyrinth of tangled and perplexing thoughts, a never-ending maze she couldn't escape.

If she had been that naïve, that foolish, to be in a two-year relationship with a man who kept such a significant secret from her, would her relationship with Etim also backfire the same way?

What did it say about her if she had been in a relationship with Jidenna for such a significant period without realising he was married?

"Anuli," Jidenna called in a gentle tone that irked her.

She didn't want him to be apologetic or nice to her. Instead, she wanted him to feel the repercussions of causing her to doubt herself.

His thoughtless actions caused her jitters, her nightmares, and interfered with her joy as she planned her wedding to a man she loved dearly, a man whom she knew adored her unconditionally.

"Honestly, it was never really about you," Jidenna said, breaking into her thoughts.

Anuli let out a disbelieving hiss. "Not about me? How? I'm the idiot who didn't know a man I dated for two years was already married."

"You're far from being an idiot," he reassured her. "I went to great lengths to deceive you, Anuli. The first time we met wasn't really the first time I saw you."

Anuli's jaw dropped. "What?"

A look of shame crossed Jidenna's eyes as he nodded. "Yes, Anuli. I'd noticed you weeks earlier at the gym and watched you for several days." His tone was heavy with remorse. "My feelings for you had already developed long before I pretended to meet you for the first time."

Startled by this information, Anuli couldn't move a muscle. Her fingers tightly gripped the crispy chicken strip, as if she had been electrocuted.

"I knew I couldn't be upfront with you about being married because it would scare you away, so I contorted a new identity," he continued, averting his gaze. "If I had introduced myself as Ifeanyi Chikwendu, you would have easily found

out my true identity through social media. So I created new Facebook, Instagram and Twitter profiles, and pleaded with my family to go along with it."

Goodness! He had planned out his lies from the outset. It wasn't just about leaving out details of his life to deceive her, but a carefully planned act of deception.

"Anuli, what I'm saying is, I conned you. And I have myself solely to blame for it. I did it in a way that it would have been hard for you to find out the truth."

"B–but why? Why me?" Anuli still didn't get it. Why was she the target of his orchestrated deception?

He pinned her with a thoughtful gaze. "It really is as simple as the reason I gave you before about wanting to marry a second wife." He lifted his shoulders in a resigned shrug. "I'm the only son of my parents, and I want a male child. I wanted you too. So marrying you was the perfect solution."

"Oh, God!" Anuli plopped her chicken strip on her plate, her appetite completely gone.

The man sitting across from her was a total stranger whom she had never really known. She spent two years in a relationship with him, opening up her life, dreams, and even her body to him, only to discover that he was a conman.

"It has taken me these two years of reflection to understand that I need to not only apologise to you, but to admit everything I did." His tone was low and remorseful. "I'm truly sorry for deceiving you, and even though it's asking a lot to hope for your forgiveness, I'm asking for it, anyway."

With his admission of targeting her and his efforts to conceal his true identity, she felt a slight easing of the burden of self-disparagement she had been bearing.

She was, in every sense of the word, a victim. Jidenna had stalked her, created a false identity, and used his charm to con her. If she had the energy to take legal action, she could actually sue him for emotional damages.

However, she didn't and wouldn't. Realising now that she wasn't just a naïve woman who fell for a deceitful man eased her pain.

"I'm now a born again Christian, Anuli. And for me to expect true forgiveness from God, I need to be honest about what I did." He leaned forward

and placed his hand on hers. “I’m sorry for lying to you. Will you forgive me?”

Anuli’s gaze shifted downward to his large hand covering hers. She felt an overwhelming urge to snatch hers away, dump the rest of her soft drink on his face, and storm out in a fury.

Instead, she slipped her hand away from under his and reached for her glass of diet coke.

After a quick sip, she set it back on the table. “Jidenna … Ifeanyi … whatever … congratulations on your new religious journey,” she said in a calm voice, one she was proud of considering the tumultuous emotions exploding inside her chest. “I forgive you, not to make you feel better about conning me, but to release myself from the cage I’ve been in since you deceived me.”

She picked up her handbag and rose to her feet. “Thank you for being honest with me today. I truly appreciate it and wish you the very best in life. Please don’t contact me again.”

With her head held high, she turned and walked away, leaving behind a sense of empowerment. She was glad that she met up with him today.

None of her nightmares or restlessness held any significance. Her relationship with Jidenna never even counted at all. He’d planned to con her, making her a victim of a targeted crime.

From now on, she would erase that part of her life and embrace the future with Etim with complete confidence. He had been transparent with her from the onset, telling her everything about his past in the underworld, even when it would have been easier to keep it from her.

She was deeply in love with Etim Ubong and couldn’t wait to marry him in just three days.

Anuli suddenly stopped in her tracks as she arrived at the main entrance. Etim stood in that spot; his eyes filled with disbelief.



UNABLE TO BELIEVE what he was seeing, Etim simply stared at her. So, it was true. Anuli was really here for lunch with her ex.

When his brother Udo called to tell him he'd seen Anuli at Chicken Republic's order counter standing next to her ex-fiancé, he dismissed it with a laugh.

Impossible. He couldn't picture Anuli having anything to do with the man who lied to her and embarrassed her at the altar years ago. His brother must have been mistaken.

But when he reached her voicemail after dialling her number, he immediately called her secretary, who told him Anuli was currently away for lunch.

That was when he decided to leave his team at the venue they'd been decorating for a birthday party and rush over to confirm with his own eyes.

He'd been here for the past ten minutes, watching Anuli and her ex engage in deep conversation.

Though he couldn't hear a word, he could tell from Anuli's attentive posture and nodding that whatever Jidenna was saying captivated her.

Paralysed with disbelief, he remained standing at the entrance, watching as the fool grasped her hand in his. How audacious of him to touch her after what he did to her. How could Anuli even allow him anywhere near her?

"What are you doing here with that man?" he asked Anuli in a low voice, suppressing the strong desire to yell.

She looked like a deer caught in headlights, her trembling fingers tightly gripping her purse. "Etim … I … This isn't what it looks like … I —"

"So what does it look like, Anuli? I have been here for ten minutes watching you have a heart to heart with your ex-fiancé over lunch."

"Yes, but … we were just talking —"

"About what?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowing in bewilderment. "What is so important for you to discuss? So important that you switched off your phone, left your office to meet up for lunch with your ex without telling me?"

Anuli seemed on the verge of responding, but then thought better of it and closed her mouth without saying a word.

Etim shook his head, his heart blazing with aching sorrow. "Are you having an affair with him? Is that why you've been having nightmares, anxious about us getting married?"

“No,” she said firmly, shaking her head. “I’d never do anything like —”

The sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted her.

“Look, man, nothing is going on between us. We only came here to talk.”

Anuli and Etim darted their attention sideways. Beside them stood Jidenna, his hands casually tucked into his pockets, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

“Stay the fuck out of this!” Etim seethed; his jaw clenched tightly. He broadened his stance, fully prepared to throw a punch. *Who the hell does he think he is?* “You had your chance with her and blew it. Don’t come crawling back to her now that she’s getting married to me.”

Jidenna shrugged. “I’m not crawling back. I just wanted to talk to —”

Etim took a step towards Jidenna, a low, rumbling growl resonating from his throat, his left hand curving into a tight fist. “Say one more word and I’ll —”

Anuli swiftly positioned herself between the two men, a panicked gasp escaping from her. “Jidenna, please just go!” she said, her grip tightening on Etim’s arms as she pleaded with him through her eyes.

Jidenna hesitated, his breaths laboured and his stance widening, signalling his readiness to engage in a fight.

The tension in the air became palpable as the two men locked eyes, their gaze unyielding, each passing moment only adding fuel to Etim’s growing fury.

Suddenly, Jidenna let out a sharp exhale, breaking the intense stare-down. “Okay, Anuli. Thanks for meeting me for a talk. Take care of yourself,” he said, then strolled out.

Etim exhaled with relief when the nuisance left. The last time he engaged in a physical altercation was back in his primary school days. And it had been self-defence when Nelson kicked him on his shin over some silly board game.

Violence was something he vehemently opposed, and he went to great lengths to ensure he never engaged in fights. However, something about seeing Anuli being cosy with her ex triggered a visceral reaction within him, igniting a savage instinct to protect his territory.

If the fool hadn’t walked away, he would have thrown a punch without hesitation, and he would have felt no regrets about it.

Etim drew in a calming breath, trying to tamp down the adrenaline spiking in

his blood.

When he finally got his emotions under control, he stared directly at Anuli, meeting her eyes. “What’s going on? Why were you here to have lunch with your ex?”

Anuli pointed outside. “Please, let’s go somewhere quiet and talk. People are looking at us.”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Etim spat out. “I want answers. Now.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “Please.”

The sight of her on the verge of tears, and hearing the desperation in her voice, was like being doused with a bucket of icy water. He calmed down immediately.

Giving her a nod, he stepped back out into the afternoon sunshine, aware of Anuli’s apprehensive steps beside him.

They walked in silence until they reached the corner of the building. There, they found respite under a towering tree, its branches providing much-needed shade.

Anuli reached for his arm, but he jerked away, needing some distance from her to think clearly.

His head was spinning all over the place with confused emotions. The jealousy he felt seeing her with her ex still troubled him, yet he knew Anuli wasn’t the type of woman to cheat and lie. Had he misjudged her?

“Etim, please, I want to explain what I’m doing here with Jidenna.”

Just the mention of that name was enough to make Etim flinch involuntarily. He hated hearing her call her ex’s name. Anuli had come so close to marrying that man. Did she secretly yearn for him, even after all this time?

“I’m listening,” he said.

“Jidenna rang me a few days ago. He said he wanted to talk.”

“A few days ago?” Etim’s eyes bulged. “And you didn’t think you should tell me that your ex contacted you?”

“I didn’t think it was important because I told him to get lost. I had no interest in talking to him.”

“So what changed? Why were you on a lunch date with him?”

Anuli released a heavy breath. “I had another nightmare yesterday. In the dream, Jidenna interrupted our wedding and fired a weapon at you. It felt so real, so terrifying that I … I panicked.”

Etim dragged his palm down his face wearily. “And so you rang him up to meet him here? What for? To ask him not to shoot me? To rekindle your relationship?”

“No, Etim. I called him because I know my dreams are because of unresolved issues I had from what happened at the altar with him. As a psychologist —”

“Don’t give me that psychologist crap now. As a psychologist, you should know that meeting up with him without telling me is a deliberate attempt to keep me in the dark.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“So why didn’t you tell me he contacted you? Why did you sneak out to see him?”

“I … I didn’t want you to talk me out of it. I needed to hear what he had to say,” Anuli admitted, her shoulder slouched in resignation. “Lately, I’ve been feeling overwhelmed with anxiety about our wedding day. It’s been giving me nightmares. I just needed to talk to him … get some closure.”

“Closure. Closure? What does it say about our relationship if you still need to get ‘closure’ from your ex before you feel relaxed enough to marry me? Do you even want to?”

“Of course!” She looked affronted by his question. “I’ve been so happy, so excited about marrying you.”

“Clearly not excited enough!” He shook his head. “Well, I hope you got the closure you needed. Because now I need some of my own.”

Her face fell, the skin between her eyes creasing. “Etim, what are you saying?”

He didn’t respond at first, not entirely sure what he meant by his comment. Right now, all he could think about was how he felt entering Chicken Republic and seeing Anuli sitting cosily with her ex.

His insecurities jumped to the surface when he saw how good they looked

together—Jidenna looking sharp in his impeccably tailored business suit, perfectly styled hair, and well-maintained beard, and Anuli exuding elegance in her skirt suit and heels.

They looked like a power couple that belonged together. The exact opposite of how he looked standing beside Anuli, with the snake tattoo on his neck, his untamed bushy hair, and his casual clothes of jeans and a t-shirt.

Maybe her nightmares were because she didn't think he was good enough for her. Maybe she now longed to be with Jidenna.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips. Perhaps the kindest thing he could do was to set her free, so she could find a man truly compatible with her. No matter how much it broke his heart.

"I need some space of my own to think … get my closure, too," he said, feeling the weight of the world resting on his head.

"Etim…"

"No, Anuli. I don't want to force you to marry me. If you need to talk to your ex before you're ready, it means you were never ready in the first place."

"No … no … I'm ready."

He shook his head. "I need to leave now. Please give me time to think about us."

"There's nothing to think about, Etim. I want to marry you. I just…" She reached for him again, but he backed away.

"We need some space right now …"

"Space? How long? We're getting married in three days!"

He dragged his fingers through his hair roughly. "I don't know how long, Anuli. I don't know anything. I just … will let you know when I'm ready to talk."

With nothing left to say to her, he turned and walked away. Moving sluggishly and with a heavy heart, he ignored her panicked cries for him.

Determined not to look back, he trotted to his car, his throat tightening with a surge of emotions as he fought against the longing to turn around, hurry back to Anuli, and pull her into his arms.

He needed to allow her some space, at least for now. Marriage was a serious

commitment, and if she had doubts, maybe it was time to reconsider their plans.

As his friend Udoka said, they both needed to be on the same page about it.

9

2 DAYS TO THE WEDDING (THURSDAY)



As she dialled Etim's number once again, the sound of her own exasperated sigh filled the room when the call went straight to voicemail, leaving her feeling even more frustrated.

Anuli sank into the soft cushions of the brown leather sofa, her body trembling as she broke into uncontrollable sobs.

"He's not picking up, Iriah," she wailed, swiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "This is so unlike Etim. I'm sure he is going to cancel the wedding."

"Don't say that," Iriah cooed, stroking her shoulders. "He just needs some space, that's all."

Anuli shook her head vehemently. "Space for what? I know it's over. I ruined the best thing that ever happened to me. What the hell is wrong with me?" Anuli covered her face with her palms as she bawled.

"I'm sure he'll come around," Udoka chimed in.

Anuli turned her attention to her best friend's husband, who was perched on a leather sofa across from them in the sitting room. She desperately wanted to

believe him, especially since he was Etim's close friend. But she couldn't escape the consuming doubts that were clouding her mind.

Distraught after Etim left her yesterday at Chicken Republic, Anuli had rushed over to his four-bedroom bungalow at Prince and Princess estate in Durumi.

Etim wasn't there, and all her attempts to reach him by phone were met with radio silence.

She called his two brothers, and they told her they did not know where Etim was, but promised to let her know when they did.

Doubtful about their claims, she visited the houses of Etim's brothers, only to learn that Udo and Ekpe had been telling the truth. He was nowhere to be found.

Etim had sent a group message to his family, informing them he would be unreachable for a few days, but assuring them he was fine.

Nobody knew where he was. Not even his mother. Seeing Khalessi, Etim's dog in Udo's house, made her heart sink. Etim loved Khaleesi like a father loved his child. He would never leave his dog with anyone unless absolutely necessary.

Sleep evaded Anuli throughout the night, and as soon as the first light of dawn appeared, she rushed to his house, desperate to see if he had returned. He wasn't there, and neither was his Jeep.

Fear coursing through her veins, she drove frantically to Iriah's house in Asokoro, keen to talk to Udoka and inquire about Etim's whereabouts.

He admitted also being in the dark, but mentioned Etim had sent him a text message with a picture to assure him of his safety.

"He didn't show up for his bachelor party, Udoka. That means he doesn't want to marry me anymore." Anuli sniffled, wiping the snort from her nose with a tissue sheet, her body trembling. "Oh, God! Why didn't I tell him about meeting Jidenna? Why did I even need to meet up with him at all?"

"Stop beating yourself up," Iriah said. "You needed to do it for yourself. It's not as if you cheated or did something wrong. I'm sure Etim won't call off the wedding just because of that."

Udoka cleared his throat, making Anuli snap her head up again.

"Did Etim say anything to you?" she asked him anxiously. She knew that

Etim and Udoka often confided in each other. Had they talked about what happened? Did he know more than he was letting on?

“No. Etim hasn’t said anything to me, Anuli,” he said. “But I understand his feelings about this.”

Anuli wiped the tears from her eyes but said nothing as she waited for Udoka to continue, eager to hear his thoughts on the matter.

“I know Etim has always felt a little … like he was your second choice,” he went on.

Anuli’s jaw dropped. “What? No. Never.”

Udoka nodded, leaning forward. “Well, we all know you love him, and I’m sure he does, too. But it doesn’t change the fact that he also knows that he’s not the typical man you usually go for.”

Anuli had no response to this. It was true. She would never have looked twice at Etim if Udoka hadn’t broken her heart.

However, opening up her heart to a man like Etim had changed her perspective in life.

She now understood that it was unfair to dismiss people just based on their past, appearance, or occupation, as these factors do not fully encompass who they are.

It didn’t matter anymore, all the outward restrictions she had imposed on the kind of relationship she wanted. The way Etim treated her was what truly mattered, always making her feel valued and loved.

“He knows that you only started dating him because you didn’t marry Jidenna,” Udoka continued in a reflective tone. “So, try to understand how seeing you out on a date with Jidenna would make him feel.”

“I wasn’t on a date with Jidenna. We were just there to talk.”

Udoka looked at his wife pointedly. “It doesn’t matter if you were just talking, Anuli. It still brings about the same emotions of inadequacy, of fear … of jealousy.”

Iriah kissed her teeth and shook her head. “If you’re talking about Andrew, he’s just a friend. I’ve told you that many times. We’ve been friends since primary school.”

“But both your families wanted you guys to get married. He’s your family’s preferred choice for you.”

“I didn’t marry him, did I?”

“No. You settled for me instead.”

“Settled?” Iriah shook her head. “I didn’t settle. I was the one who ignored your bigoted family’s opposition to marry you. They were the ones who made me feel like an outsider because I’m not Igbo.”

“My mother has apologised many times for what she said. What else do you want from her?” He shot Iriah an exasperated look. “You weren’t even supposed to hear it. It was for my ears only.”

“Well, I *did* hear it. And she pointedly said that Bini women don’t make good wives.” Iriah’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “And now, I’m beginning to think you agree with her.”

Darting her gaze between her best friend and her husband as they exchanged bitter words, Anuli felt her heart grow heavy with sorrow.

She did not know that they were going through a rough patch in their marriage. They always seemed to have a great time together, always showing off their love in public.

What went wrong? Why were they giving each other those looks like they’d rather be anywhere else but in this room together? Just after only a year of marriage?

Iriah sighed and looped her arm around Anuli’s shoulders. “We’re here to talk about my friend and Etim, Udoka. Don’t bring our issues into this.”

Anuli swallowed hard. “Are you guys okay? Do you need me to leave so you can talk?”

“Absolutely not,” Iriah said. “We’re fine.”

“We’re fine,” Udoka echoed, but Anuli could see from his countenance that he wasn’t.

Although she wanted to give them space to straighten out their issues, she also didn’t want to be alone.

“Listen, Anuli, I know without a doubt that Etim loves you,” Udoka said in a reassuring voice.

He turned back to look at his wife. “When a man loves a woman that much, he’ll do anything to fight for that love.”

Rising to his feet, he walked over and took Iriah’s hand in his, squeezing it gently. His gaze shifted to Anuli, a look of commiseration crossing his eyes.

“Give Etim time, and I’m sure he’ll come around. Everything will be alright. Don’t worry. Okay?”

Anuli nodded. “I hope so.”

She really hoped that Etim would forgive her for keeping him in the dark about having lunch with Jidenna. She had not done it with malicious intent at all.

If only she could find him and let him know he was never her second choice, that she didn’t know what her choice was until she met him.

“I know so, Anuli,” said Udoka, patting her shoulder gently. “I’m Etim’s friend and I know he won’t give up on his love for you, so don’t give up either.”

Iriah sniffled, her eyes bright with tears. “Listen to my husband, Anuli,” she said as she pulled him towards them for a group hug. “He’s so smart and always knows what he’s talking about.”

Udoka’s chuckle and Iriah’s giggle filled Anuli with hope. Although she could still sense unresolved issues between the couple, she knew that they’d pull through because they loved and respected each other.

Hopefully, it would be the same for her and Etim.



SWIPING his thumb across the phone screen, Etim answered the video call. He waited patiently until his mother’s image appeared on the screen.

“Hey, Mum. What’s up?” he said as soon as the line connected.

“I’m fine, Etim. And you? You’ve got us all worried about you.”

“I’m okay, really. Just needed some time to myself, that’s all.”

The lines around his mother’s mouth deepened as she stared at him with worry in her grey eyes.

From Galway, Ireland, his mother was a petite woman with long blond hair and a smattering of freckles on her fair skin. The unforgiving African sun had

taken its toll on her, leaving behind an intricate network of wrinkles on her once smooth skin. However, her exquisite facial bone structure still shone through, a testament to her beauty in her younger years.

“So, you’re really not going to tell us where you are?” she asked him. “Your fiancée has been here twice looking for you. She’s sick with worry, too.”

Etim drew in a long breath. He knew it wasn’t fair the way he’d shut Anuli out for the past few hours, refusing to pick up her calls, but he feared hearing her voice.

Speaking to her would weaken his resolve and he needed some space, some time alone to reflect before making a momentous decision about getting married.

He knew that staying in his house would be pointless because Anuli would only come looking for him.

A strong-willed woman—a character trait of hers he admired—she wouldn’t take *no* for an answer until he let her in.

Although he missed her terribly and hated that they left on uncertain terms, he wasn’t ready to see her yet. Not until he carefully sifted through the myriad of emotions swirling in his mind.

So, he packed a few of his belongings and embarked on a long drive to Jos.

When he arrived hours later, he found a hotel near the place where he had been initiated into a gang during his teenage years and checked in.

Anytime he hit a milestone in his life, he liked to come here and take a tour of the forest at Jarawa in Fursum district, the Eastern part of Plateau State.

It was in this place that he’d begun a journey that could have destroyed his life for good.

Returning here was his way of reminding himself how easily he could have ended up either dead or incarcerated if he hadn’t turned his life around.

It only seemed befitting to come here to think about his future with Anuli. He loved her without a doubt and would do anything for her. But was her certainty about being with him as strong as his certainty about being with her? Did she choose to marry him only because Jidenna had hurt her? Would she readily go back to Jidenna if given the chance?

Etim didn’t doubt Anuli’s love for him. Her actions spoke volumes about her

deep affection for him.

But was he really her first choice, or was she merely settling because the man she truly wanted was already taken?

He wasn't confident about the answer, and didn't want to end up like an option years after the novelty of marriage wore off, stuck in a loveless and uninspiring relationship.

"Son, tell me what you're thinking? What happened between you and Anuli?" his mother asked.

"Nothing," he said firmly, unwilling to involve his family in his personal matters.

The presence of third parties in a relationship always spelled trouble. The only person who knew about this was Udo. And only because he'd been the one to alert him about Anuli having lunch with Jidenna.

He'd bound his younger brother to secrecy, making him promise not to breathe a word to anyone. Nobody else needed to know how insecure he'd felt about seeing his fiancée having lunch with her ex.

"It's clearly something. Otherwise, you won't be hiding days before your wedding." His mother blew out a ragged breath. "Or are you calling it off entirely?"

Etim stomach roiled. He hated that question. For hours on end, he had been grappling with that question, unable to provide himself with a definitive answer.

He had no doubts about wanting Anuli as his wife. Yet, he worried that her jitters and nightmares meant something significant, something he couldn't ignore.

Seeing her with Jidenna and then hearing her heartfelt admission about needing closure pierced him deeply.

If her doubts were significant enough for her to seek her ex out, shouldn't he also take it seriously?

"Mum, tell me how you knew dad was the man for you?" he asked his mother, pointedly shying away from answering her question.

His mother's lips spread into a slow smile. He knew she loved talking about her late husband. It didn't matter how horribly things had ended between them,

that he'd gambled away the family's money and left them in debt, his mother still had only good things to say about him.

"Well, the first time he walked into our home to lodge as a tenant, my parents wouldn't allow him to use the front door because … you know, because of the colour of his skin," she said, a faraway look in her eyes as if transporting herself mentally to that time. "So, he used the back door all the time. The garden I loved tending to was in the backyard and he always passed by me when going to his room in the basement."

Her eyes filled with a wistful glow, as if she were reliving a cherished moment. "You know, it didn't matter how horribly my parents treated him, even though they gladly accepted his money for rent. Your father always greeted me with a warm smile, his eyes always shining with kindness."

"One day, a rodent damaged my garden and left me in tears," his mother continued. "Your father saw me crying, and instead of teasing me like everyone else, he helped me replant my flowers."

She let out a sigh filled with longing. "The moment he stooped down in the dirt to help the daughter of the most racist individuals in restoring her garden, I knew he would become my husband."

Etim had heard this story before. The memories of his father's tales about his wife flooded back after all these years. He openly admitted that he fell in love after seeing her crying over her garden.

"A woman who is so dedicated to plants like that must possess a heart filled with love," his father had remarked the first time he'd shared that story. "At that moment, I realised I wanted to be the object of that affection."

Growing up, he'd witnessed the strong bond between his parents, despite the antagonism from her racist parents who cut her off when she agreed to marry the black tenant they didn't deem good enough for their daughter.

He'd seen how his mother thrived in Nigeria, several miles away from her own country, with no friends or family, except the ones she made after marriage.

Undeniably, his parents had a strong and genuine love for each other. How did things end up the way they did?

What led his father down the path of becoming a gambling alcoholic who

neglected his wife's love?

"Do you regret marrying him? Leaving your family behind in Ireland for him?" Etim asked his mother.

She shook her head. "Your father changed when the economy became tougher in Nigeria," she said. "He gambled, determined to provide the life he believed I deserved. And the more he lost, the more he drank. It wasn't because he wanted to hurt me, Etim. I know he loved me."

"But how can you say that? How can you defend him after what he put you through? Put this family through?"

His mother didn't respond immediately. She absentmindedly twirled a strand of her hair around her finger, lost in thought.

"Because love is best shown through actions, not just empty words," his mother finally replied. "I saw it through his actions. How he was there for me whenever I needed him. How he defended me, protected me, provided for me. When I was ill after complications from my fibroid operation, he showed up, cared for me, bathed me because I couldn't do it for myself."

She paused, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I know he messed up. Yes, I'm aware of that. He wasn't perfect. And neither am I. But I am absolutely certain that he did not deliberately do anything to hurt me. He showed me constantly how much he loved me. And that is why I can say it with confidence."

Etim swallowed hard. He'd never understood why his mother grieved his father after what he did. His sudden death from a drunken fall left her with the responsibility of paying off all his gambling debts. Yet, she cried, mourned him for months, even years.

Although he knew his mother dated casually, she had always been adamant about not wanting to get married again, and now he understood why. She could never replace the love of her life.

Anuli was the love of his life. Was he the same for her?

"Listen, Etim, take all the time you need," his mother said, her gentle voice breaking through his reverie. "Getting married is not a decision to be taken lightly. But also remember, people will always make mistakes. Think about their intent first before deciding to cut them off."

His grip on his phone tightened as he pondered his mother’s advice. Was he being too hasty thinking about calling off the wedding? Had he let his insecurities interfere with his reasoning?

His parents had been completely certain about each other when they married, against all odds. Yet, his father ended up disappointing his family.

With Anuli’s nightmares and jitters, they were already going into this on shaky ground. Did they even have a shot?

He blew out a long and weary breath. Funny how it was Anuli who first had doubts. Now, he, too, was feeling uncertain about everything.

10

A DAY BEFORE THE WEDDING (FRIDAY)



"I told you it was a bad idea to meet up with Jidenna, didn't I?" her mother said, securing her seatbelt into the lock forcefully. "But you never listen to me, Anuli. You people of this generation think you're wiser than your parents."

Anuli compressed her lips to keep from responding. Her mother's criticism couldn't match the harsh words she had already hurled at herself.

She regretted not informing Etim as soon as Jidenna contacted her. Having lunch with him without telling Etim was even worse. She knew she messed up. Badly.

However, she didn't regret seeing Jidenna. She found exactly what she was searching for, and it provided the closure she desperately needed to move on and completely forget that chapter of her life.

She'd not had any more nightmares since then. Granted, she'd not also slept much since then either, but she no longer felt a single iota of doubt about the wedding day.

Her pre-wedding jitters had transformed into a deep-seated fear that Etim might call off the wedding, and that she'd miss out on marrying the most

amazing man she'd ever met.

Two days had passed with no word from him. She'd cancelled her bridal shower yesterday because she wasn't sure if the wedding would still hold.

With the looming court wedding scheduled for today at 4:30 pm and the church wedding planned for tomorrow, her anxiety was through the roof.

Her mother's call to check if she had everything ready for their appearance at the Federal Marriage Registry had prompted her to break down and reveal everything going on.

Taken aback by that information, her mother had instructed her to come pick her up and take her to see Ruthie, Etim's mother, for some definitive answers.

Etim still wasn't picking up her calls and Anuli could no longer wait or give him space. With each passing second, the countdown to the wedding accelerated, dwindling to mere hours now.

Anuli switched on the car's engine and pulled out of the compound. Time to get down to business and find her man.

"Are you aware that it's a bad omen to cancel a wedding twice?" her mother said in a voice heavy with criticism. "We need to take you to the church for deliverance. There must be an evil spirit following you."

"Mum! Please. Etim hasn't cancelled the wedding yet," Anuli snapped, annoyed that her mother was already giving up.

"So why has he run off? And why didn't you tell me this earlier? I would have visited Ruthie and tried to find him sooner. The wedding is tomorrow." There was panic in her voice. "Our relatives are coming from all over the world. Your brother Chude is already here from London and Ekene will be here from Lagos today. Too much is at stake. This can't happen a second time."

Anuli caught a sideways glance at her mother, who couldn't sit still, constantly shifting in her seat, with a deep, worried frown etching her face.

This increased her own anxiety. Apart from the fear of losing Etim, she'd not really considered the ramifications of another cancelled wedding.

If that happened, she would have to disappoint guests who had travelled far and wide for the occasion, apologising for the cancellation of her wedding. For a second time.

Just over two years ago, relatives from all corners of the globe gathered to celebrate her wedding to Jidenna, which eventually didn't hold.

Her Father's younger brother, Uncle Sam, made the long journey from Norway with his wife.

Her mother's sisters, Aunty Nnenna and Aunty Chioma, both travelled with their families from America.

All of them were already in Abuja for her wedding tomorrow. Anuli shuddered. The mere thought of explaining to them once again that she wouldn't be getting married this time filled her with an overwhelming sense of dread.

"Oh, God!" she exclaimed, her voice filled with desperation. If Etim called off the wedding, not only would she lose the love of her life, but she would also face immense humiliation.

"Let's just pray we find him today and get him to decide immediately," her mother's voice echoed in the vehicle, drowning out her thoughts. "It's better for him to call off the wedding before everyone gathers in the church like last time. That would be so much worse."

Anuli's heart sank. For her, nothing could compare to the devastation of not marrying Etim, not even the humiliation of a second embarrassing incident at the altar.

"If his mother informs us about his location and he tells us he no longer wants to marry you, we can contact our guests and let them know that there's no need to come to the church tomorrow."

"Mum, please stop! I don't care about the guests or another embarrassment," Anuli snapped, unable to tolerate her mother's rants any longer. "Why are you more concerned about appearances than how I feel about this? I love Etim with all my heart. It'll crush me if he doesn't want to marry me anymore."

The deafening silence that followed her outburst seemed to amplify the chaos of the busy Abuja roads as Anuli skilfully navigated through the traffic.

At noon on a Friday, people rushing towards the mosque for prayers caused heavy traffic crowding the streets.

She should have mustered up the determination to find Etim much earlier, but her overwhelming distress had rendered her incapable of taking any action.

If her mother hadn't fired her up, she would still be at home, feeling defeated and sobbing uncontrollably.

The woman had snapped her out of her sorrowful inertness and put a plan in motion.

"Sorry for shouting at you, Mum," Anuli said, remorseful for her rudeness.

"No. I'm the one who should apologise," her mother said, her tone sombre. "We sometimes get too caught up in wedding planning that we lose sight of why we're having the ceremony. To celebrate love."

Anuli swallowed hard, trying to suppress the lump that seemed wedged in her throat. Her mother was right. The constant worry of another wedding catastrophe consumed her thoughts to the point where she forgot to relax and smell the roses.

The wonderful man she was marrying loved her and would never hurt her. She should have kept her focus on that instead of looking for answers elsewhere. Tomorrow should be about celebrating their love and nothing else. And she loved him dearly.

Hopefully, Etim's mother would know where he was, so she could track him down and wrap her arms around him, delivering that message with a tight hug.

To her dismay, Ruthie did not know where Etim was, and Anuli had a gut feeling that she wasn't lying.

Seated in the living room beside Etim's mother, tears flowing freely from her eyes, she repeatedly questioned Ruthie about Etim's whereabout despite already hearing the answer.

Ruthie was adamant about not knowing, even appearing sympathetic.

"We spoke yesterday. He's okay. Says he went somewhere to clear his head," Ruthie said, sipping from her coffee mug. "If I knew, I'd tell you, Anuli. I like you a lot. And I'm glad my son found a woman like you."

Anuli saw her mother nodding vigorously. While Ruthie and her mother had clashed over a few specific details of the wedding planning, they always managed to find a middle ground that satisfied both of them.

"I feel the same way about Etim. He's a wonderful young man, and I'd be proud to have him as my son-in-law," her mother said. "Did he tell you anything

about his plans for the wedding tomorrow?”

Ruthie shook her head. “No. When we spoke yesterday, he said he needed to go back to where it all started for him to decide what to do.”

At that remark, Anuli snapped her head up, her eyes wide as a sudden realisation dawned on her. “I know where he is,” she said, jumping to her feet.

Her mother and Ruthie turned to her, looking at her with curiosity.

“Where?” her mother asked.

Anuli smiled, feeling a sense of purpose for the first time in two days. “Where it all started,” she said, snatching her purse and rushing to the door. “Mum, please take a taxi home. I’m going to get my man,” she tossed over her shoulders as she darted out of the room.



ETIM THREW a stone into the lake and watched the ripples forming in the crystal-clear water as the stone sank out of sight.

He’d spent two days thinking about his pending nuptials and he had come to one conclusion. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with Anuli.

There wasn’t even a slither of doubt in his mind about that now. Not even after all that had transpired in the past few days.

After his mother’s call, he decided to go to the one place that would bring back memories of why he asked Anuli to marry him. The place where they got engaged.

On the day he proposed, he rented the garden by the Jabi lake, with its breathtaking beauty, to celebrate her completion of the marathon for Alzheimer’s, marking the one-year anniversary of her father’s passing.

Seeing the radiant smile on her face as he asked for her hand in marriage in front of their loved ones filled him with an indescribable sense of bliss.

She later revealed to him that her best friend had unintentionally let slip the secret beforehand, and that she had anticipated the proposal. But he’d had no inkling whatsoever.

Her reaction had been visceral, genuine, and he’d felt her joy in every fibre

of his being.

A smile spread across his lips as he reclined on the bench facing the water. Even now, he could still recall how wonderful the day had been, how happy they were.

His love for Anuli consumed him completely. It was as plain as the clear blue skies above the lake. There was no longer any point in hiding from the truth. No matter where he ran to, or how many days passed, it made no difference. He would always come back to her.

Drawing a breath in and exhaling sharply, he slid his phone out of his pocket and switched it on.

His face split into a wide grin. 46 missed calls. All from Anuli. Several text messages, too.

Damn! His woman was persistent.

He scrolled through her messages, chuckling. He would read and savour them later. Right now, he just wanted to hear her voice.

Still grinning from ear to ear, he dialled her number, resting his phone against his ear.

From behind him, the air carried the enchanting melody of Asa's rendition of "Fire on the Mountain."

With a sudden jerk, Etim flipped his head back, feeling a slight spasm in his neck. His heart leapt to his throat and began beating erratically.

There she was, Anuli Eneh, the only woman he'd ever loved, the only one he would ever love.

She looked effortlessly stylish in a floral summer gown that grazed her knees, paired with simple white sneakers. With her hair styled in an intricate updo and her face subtly made up, she looked incredibly sweet and pretty,

They locked eyes in silence while her phone continued to ring. And then, as if spurred into action by the sudden flip of a switch, they charged towards each other, their bodies colliding in a heartfelt embrace.

"Oh, God, Etim, I'm sorry–"

"No… no … please don't apologise. I'm the one who should–"

She pulled back, cutting him off, tears pouring down her face. "No. You have

nothing to be sorry for."

"I do. I should never have cut you off and not picked up your calls." His tone was hoarse. "That's one thing I need to work on, Anuli. Communicating through difficult times instead of withdrawing and running away."

She smiled through her tears. "I'll teach you how to do that. That's one thing I'm good at. Maybe even to a fault. I communicate too bloody much."

He swiped a teardrop from her left cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Please never stop being like that, Anuli. It's one of the many reasons I love you. I love everything about you."

"I love you, too, Etim. Always have. Always will."

He beamed, thrilled to hear those words from her. "I want to marry you. If you'll still have me."

"Of course, I will. It has always been you." She kissed him firmly on the lips, then pinned him with an intense look. "I need you to know that you've never been a second choice for me. I don't want you to ever worry about that. Everything I've been through in my life led me to you."

His heart expanded with joy. To hear her say that she would have chosen him, regardless, flooded his senses with relief.

"About my meeting up with Jidenna—" she began.

Etim cut her off with a kiss on her full lips. "You don't have to explain."

"Yes, I do. I want you to know that I'm sorry. I should have told you he contacted me, that I was meeting up with him."

He swallowed hard. "No worries. Doesn't matter anymore."

"I just want to let you know that I'm glad I spoke to him. Because it made me realise how much I've grown from the woman I was." She caressed the snake tattoo on his neck. "I now understand what true love means, that it has nothing to do with what's outside, all the external noise…" Pressing her palm against the left side of his chest, she blew out a soft breath. "Love comes from right here. From inside out. And I learnt that because of you."

"Oh, Anuli …" He lowered his head and captured her mouth with his for a deep and wet kiss, showing her all his love for her through the meshing of their lips and tongues.

He grinned when he finally raised his head to look at her. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he murmured.

Suddenly, a thought popped into his head like a lightbulb turning on.

“How did you know I would be here?” he asked, his eyebrows knitting in confusion. He’d not told anyone about his whereabouts. Not even his family.

“Your mother said you told her you wanted to go back to the beginning so you could think.” Glancing around, she took in the breathtaking view of the lake, with its sparkling clear waters and lush green surroundings. “This was the place where you got down on one knee and asked me to spend the rest of my life with you. Our beginning.”

“Oh…” A wave of joy cascaded through his body. “I can’t wait to say I do to you.”

She grinned. “Then we better hurry. Our court wedding is in two hours.”

Etim gasped as he glanced at his watch. “Oh, my God! I completely forgot about that.”

She whacked him playfully on his shoulder. “Hey! Not something your bride wants to hear!”

He pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to her temple. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, my future Mrs.”

Her soft giggle soothed him like a warm blanket on a chilly day. He couldn’t wait to spend forever with the love of his life, listening to that delightful sound for as long as he lived.

11

THE WEDDING DAY (SATURDAY)



“Are you ready?” Ekene whispered into her ear.

Anuli glanced up at her older brother and a bright smile lit her face. Was she ready to walk down the aisle again? To commit herself and her future to Etim Ubong? Absolutely.

Having tied the knot in a court wedding yesterday, they spent the rest of the day leisurely cruising on a boat, engaged in deep conversations about their hopes and dreams.

It was a perfect evening. Magical. She couldn’t wait to explore the future with Etim.

“Without a single doubt,” she whispered to her brother.

Nodding, he looped his arm around hers and began leading her down the stunningly decorated aisle of St Peter’s Cathedral.

Her heart thudded wildly inside her chest, and her stomach fluttered in excitement.

As she glided down the aisle dressed in a breathtaking flowy white wedding gown complete with a long trail and a veil gracefully attached to her head, she

felt all eyes on her.

Her grin was so wide, her cheeks hurt. She knew she looked fabulous. Just before she stepped out of the hotel room earlier, she'd looked at the mirror and couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. Her nearly two hours of hair and makeup had paid off. Seeing the awe-struck reactions of others gave her a confidence boost.

However, it was Etim's reaction that made her feel as if she had just stepped into a fairytale as the princess of a massive castle.

He clutched his chest, his eyes widening and his mouth falling open in pure awe.

As she fixed her gaze on Etim, she noticed his eyes becoming watery, their glossy appearance revealing his emotions.

With each deliberate step towards the man who would soon be her husband, she beamed at him, a radiant smile lighting up her face.

Etim looked exquisitely handsome in a custom designed black tuxedo. His glorious afro, a majestic crown of curls, stood proud and tall. His smooth, clean-shaven face accentuated the striking contours of his cheekbones and highlighted the charming dimple on his chin.

Beside him stood his brothers as groomsmen and Udoka as his best man, all sharply dressed in well-fitting suits. And by his feet, chained to a railing near the pulpit, Khaleesi, his beloved dog, stood eagerly, his tail wagging in excitement. The beautiful golden retriever had slowly wormed his way into her heart with his endless energy and mischievous antics.

When her brother released her arm, Anuli gracefully walked towards her groom, her eyes locked on him, and her heart overflowing with love.

As she stood there, a sense of rightness washed over her. It seemed destined to be. Written in the stars. It felt like a culmination of all her life experiences led her to be here at the altar with Etim.

"You look absolutely divine," Etim murmured, taking her hand in his.

Anuli beamed. "Thank you," she whispered. "And so do you."

As the organist's soft and melodic tune tapered off, the atmosphere grew still, signalling the commencement of the ceremony.

Dressed in his full priestly regalia, Reverend Onoja stepped onto the podium in front of them, commanding attention. Everyone in attendance took their seats.

“Dearly beloved,” the reverend began, his voice filled with solemnity, “we are gathered here today for the joyous union of Anuli Chiamaka Eneh and Etim Ikpe Ubong. On this day, we come together to celebrate the union of these two, as they exchange vows in the presence of God and their loved ones.”

Anuli took a deep breath, listening to the reverend speak, eager to recite the vows she had written for Etim.

Instead of the traditional vow exchange, she and Etim had agreed to write their own vows yesterday.

Once they received Reverend Onoja’s approval, they returned home to work on their vows.

The reverend’s call to the church, asking if anyone had an opposition to their union, made Anuli’s breath catch in her throat and her stomach twist in knots. In some of her nightmares, this part always led to someone bursting through the door, claiming they knew why the wedding shouldn’t hold.

When the moment passed without incident, Anuli’s shoulders dropped, and she allowed herself to relax, feeling the weight of the previous worry lift from her chest.

“Our couple have decided to read their vows to each other. Not something we often see in this church,” Reverend Onoja said, eliciting laughter throughout the auditorium. “However, I believe that it’s better to speak from your heart and make the promises to each other, rather than just agree to whatever the priest says.”

The reverend held out the microphone to her. “So, Anuli, go first,” he said.

Anuli took the microphone from Reverend Onoja, her pulse pounding against her neck. While Iriah, her chief bridesmaid, handed her the ring, her eyes met Etim’s in an intense gaze.

There was no need to read from a paper. She’d memorised every word she’d written by heart.

“Etim Ubong, from the moment I met you, I knew you were different. You came to me when I was at my lowest, devastated and heartbroken. But you

offered to not only pay off my debts, but also to become a shoulder for me to cry on." Her throat choked up, and she swallowed hard so that she could continue speaking. "You have the sweetest heart and the warmest soul. You're a man who tirelessly seeks the inner light in others, always striving to make it shine even brighter."

She stopped to swallow past the lump of emotion wedged in her throat. God. This was harder than she imagined.

Exhaling sharply, she continued. "Being with you makes me feel invincible, like we're a perfect team destined to tackle whatever life has in store for us. I'm excited to take on this adventure with you as my best friend and lifelong partner. I cannot wait for our journey together as husband and wife."

She slipped the ring onto his finger slowly. "Etim, I promise to be always there for you. To have you and to hold. In sickness and in health. For better, for worse. For rich or poor. Until death."

As silence descended upon the hall, Anuli's eyes locked onto the tear that slowly made its way down Etim's face. She could also feel the wetness of her tears on her cheeks.

"Wow, that was wonderful," said Reverend Onoja, breaking the silence. "Maybe we should do this more often."

The sound of laughter filled the cathedral, bouncing off the high ceilings and stone walls.

"Once you're done crying, Etim," the reverend said with a teasing half-smile. "You can grab the microphone from Anuli and let's see if you can top those amazing vows."

A cacophony of cheering and shouts of encouragement erupted in the room as Etim took the microphone from her.

As he carefully placed the ring on her left ring finger, his eyes shimmered with a mixture of joy and purpose. "Anuli, today I feel like the luckiest person in the world," he said, his tone hoarse with emotion.

"I have not only found a long-life companion, but also a soulmate who connects with me on a deep, spiritual level. You saw past my sketchy past and constantly inspire me to be a better version of myself."

His eyes stayed steadfast on hers, unwaveringly, even as tears blurred her vision.

“Choosing to commit the rest of my life to you is the easiest thing I will ever do. You’re my best friend and you inspire me so much.” He slid the ring down her finger. “Anuli, I promise to love you, to cherish you, to forsake all others and cling to only you. Whether in sickness, health, wealth, lack, or through anything that comes our way. I’ll be by your side until we are old and grey and return to dust. I love you.”

The audience responded to his vow with resounding applause, punctuated by several oohs and aahs.

Anuli couldn’t keep the tears from pouring down her eyes like water from a faulty tap.

“That was beautiful,” she murmured.

“I know,” said Reverend Onoja with a wink. “I’m even crying myself.”

Amidst the ensuing laughter that echoed through the church, Anuli’s heart was brimming with pure joy.

“With the power invested in me by God and The Anglican diocese of Nigeria, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

As Etim pulled her in for a kiss, Anuli wrapped her arms around him, savouring the taste of his sweet lips and the warmth of his tight embrace.

“Ladies and gentlemen, with great joy, allow me to present to you Mr and Mrs Eneh-Ubong,” the reverend proudly declared.

Thundering applause followed, flooding her chest with warmth. “We’re married!” she cried out in excitement as she looped her arm around Etim’s. “We did it!”

“Yes, babe. We most certainly did,” said Etim with a wide smile. “And I can’t wait to build a future full of love and adventures with you.”

“Neither can I. Looking forward to life with you as your wife.”

Anuli meant every word. She loved Etim with all her heart and knew he felt the same way about her.

As long as they remained committed to that love, they would overcome whatever came their way.

The end

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Her books showcase bold and exciting female and male main characters with compelling storylines.

She was named one of the most influential authors under Forty by the Nigerian Writers Awards (NWA) for the years 2017 and 2018.

Apart from getting lost in creating fascinating fictional characters, Amaka enjoys reading, painting and travelling with her family.

She lives in the United Kingdom with her husband and daughters where she also practices as a part-time family doctor.

You can interact with Amaka Azie on the following platforms:

Blog: https://amakaazieauthor.com/

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/15820434.Amaka_Azie
Facebook: http://bit.ly/AmakaAzieFacebook
Twitter: https://twitter.com/AmakaAzie
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/amaka.azie/
Tick-tock: www.tiktok.com/@amakaazie
Mailing list:
https://amakaazie.ck.page/6c51fd79c4?

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Obi siblings Trilogy

Melodies of Love

Thorns and Roses

Starting over Again

Abuja friends

The Senator’s Daughter

The Governor’s Wife

The Judge’s Secret

Cupidess Mismatch Series

My Sister’s Bestie

My Boss’s Son

Holiday Romance

Christmas at The Villa

A Family for Christmas

A Christmas Miracle

Lagos plastic surgeons:

Before the Storm

Through the Fire
After the Rain

With publisher, Love Africa Press
Love At First Sound
Be My Valentine anthology vol 1

From Black Female Authors
Roses are not red anthology

Self-discovery Series
It started with “I don’t”

Watch out for It started with “I do”- Iriah and Udoka