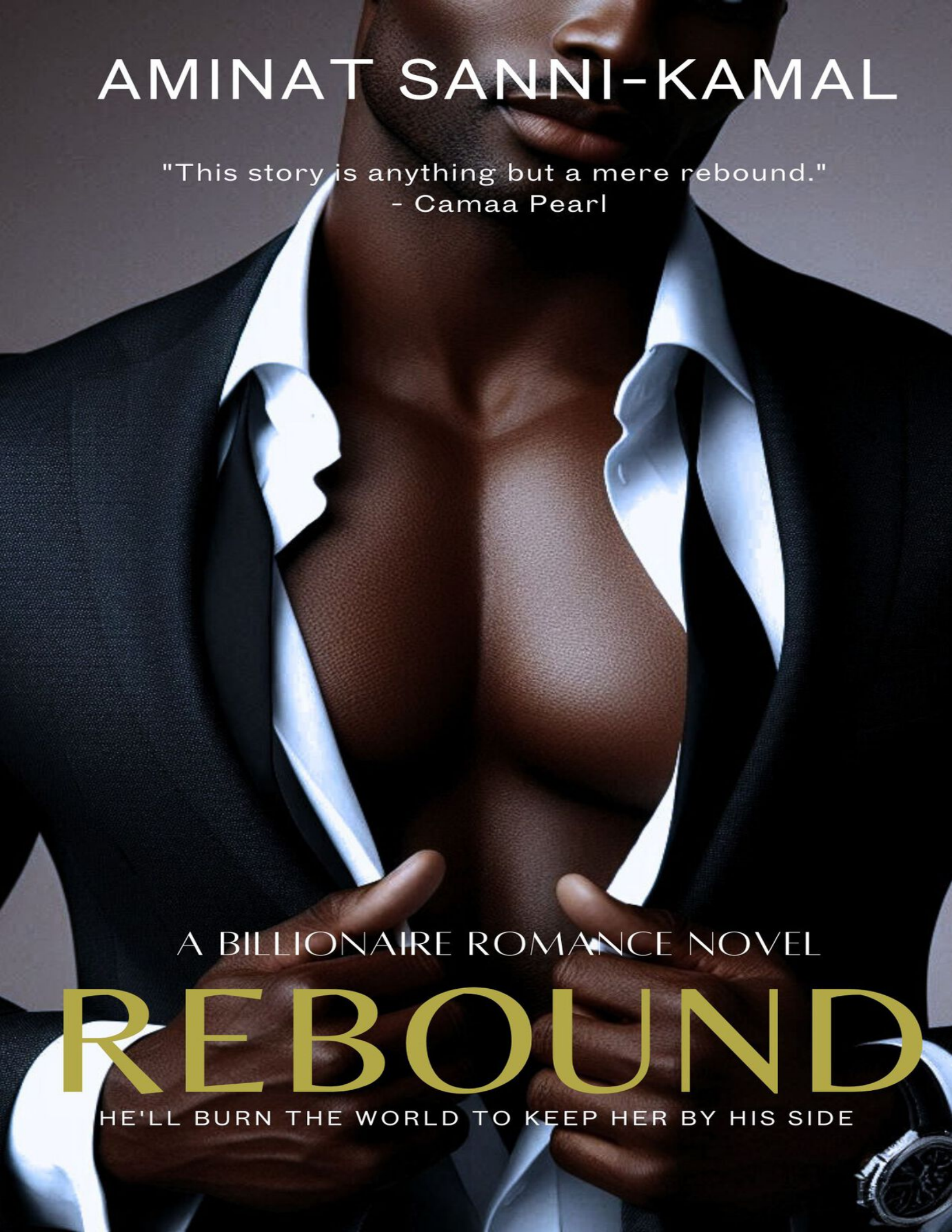

AMINAT SANNI-KAMAL
"This story is anything but a mere rebound."
- Camaa Pearl
A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE NOVEL
REBOUND
HE'LL BURN THE WORLD TO KEEP HER BY HIS SIDE

Aminat Sanni-Kamal

Rebound

A Billionaire Romance Novel

OceanofPDF.com

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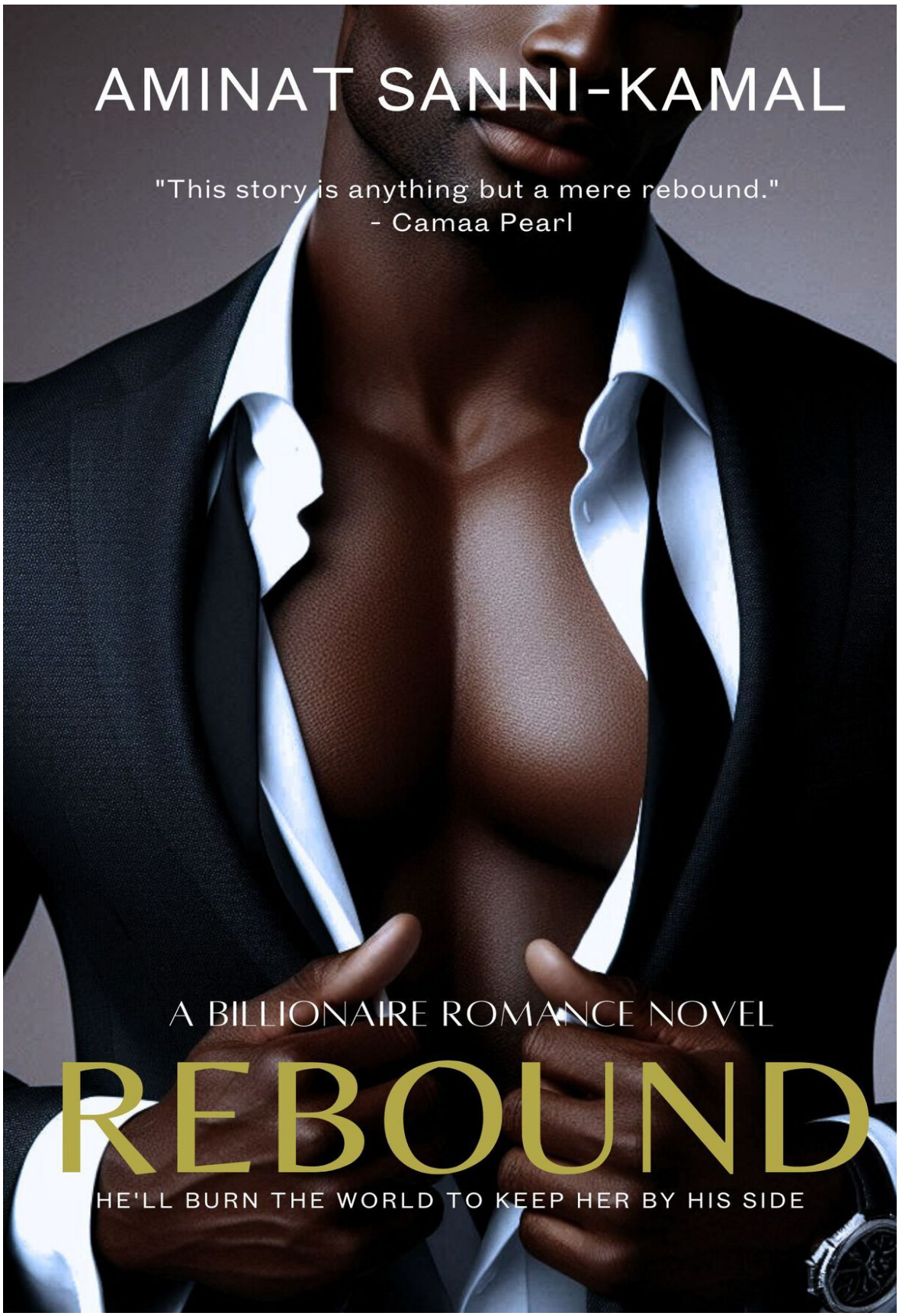
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Title

REBOUND
A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE NOVEL

AMINAT SANNI-KAMAL

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The Beginning

THE BEGINNING

A DATE FOR VALENTINE

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A Date for Valentine

This one is for my women who have been in a bad place for too long. The power is yours; take it.

“Be healthy and take care of yourself, but be happy with the beautiful things that make you, you.”
- Beyoncé Knowles

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RED IS THE COLOUR OF BLOOD

"Valentine is coming, where is—"

I released a long and loud hiss as I locked my phone and slammed it on my table. If I heard that infernal song used in a reel or TikTok one more time, I might commit murder. My co-workers shot me irritating looks from their cubicles. I whispered several quick "sorry" before turning to face my computer.

I just couldn't help myself. Why was everyone so excited about Valentine? It was just another day for the capitalists to thrive, with everything overpriced and overrated. And, God, if I saw that sickening red colour again? I could vomit. Red ribbons, red dresses, red *everything*. Didn't they know red was the colour of blood? Did they want their lives to be bloody?

The other day, it was that actress who got married and that was the only thing that kept popping up all over my TL and FYP. Didn't they know some of us did not want to see all that lovey-dovey romantic nonsense? I had to mute and block everything related to the celebrity wedding. And I just might have to do the same for the word "Valentine." But the annoying thing was, even if I decided not to go on social media until February was over, I could not avoid being reminded of Valentine offline.

Because of that damn *red.*

Just this morning, Najeebah, the only hijabi Muslim girl at our agency, got a huge bouquet of flowers and some other items delivered to her as pre-Valentine gifts. How bloody pretentious!

I stole a glance at her, typing away on her computer, hard at work. What the hell was a pre-Valentine gift? And I thought Muslims didn't do Val. I didn't care that the person who sent her the gifts was her husband.

I cared that I didn't have a husband, or a boyfriend! I cared that I was going to be alone tomorrow, like I had been for the past five years.

Like a lightning bolt to the chest, I realised I had just slammed my phone face down on my desk.

Eii God!

I was still paying for this phone and if anything happened to it, I was finished. With my heart in my mouth, I picked it up. I heaved a sigh of relief after I examined it and found that everything was in good condition. I sighed again and returned my attention to my laptop

If anyone walked into this office without knowing what we did here, they would assume we were customer care agents, seeing how tightly packed our seats and cubicles were in this sorry excuse of a hall/office. But no, we didn't work in customer care. We were writers and editors for The Sparrow, a content writing agency.

I had two problems in my life; working at The Sparrow was one of them. The second was being single. And guess what my two problems had in common? They had both lasted five years. For five years, I had been single and stuck in this company of a Junior Editor, which was just a fancy title for:

You will do all the work of a senior editor while also carrying out your duties as a junior editor. The senior editor position has been vacant for years, but we will not employ another person or promote you to the position, even though you have been here for five years and you are the most senior editor we have now.

The Sparrow was the most toxic place I had ever worked. Actually, the only place I have ever worked. When I first joined the company, I was excited because I had finally found a place where I could put my skills to work and proudly call myself an editor. I met really cool people too, who made coming to work fun. But one after the other, all the people I met here and the ones who met me, the friends I had made, all of them found better places and resigned. Why wouldn't they when they knew their self-worth?

And what did that say about me, since I was still here, huh?

Speaking of toxic—

"Eriife!"

I jumped at the sound of my name and looked up to find Sarah standing at the door of her office, her signature look of disapproval on her face.

"Yes, Sarah," I answered, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice and ease the tightness on my face.

"Come here." She waved me over and went back into her office, which was just a glass wall separating her table from the rows of cubicles the rest of us were crammed into.

As I made the short walk to Sarah's office, I could feel the pitying looks from my co-workers.

Sarah was The Sparrow's managing director and CEO. But she knew nothing about writing and editing or what it meant to be a creative. She was a businesswoman who saw a hole and filled it. It would have been perfect if that was all Sarah was. But she was a spiteful, overbearing, toxic megalomaniac, who was only two years older than me. She was also one of the most beautiful women I knew: flawless skin, smooth like glass and probably softer than silk. Which made it easier to resent her.

"You called me," I said, after I had been standing in Sarah's office for more than five minutes while she ignored me and stared at her computer. If I didn't know her better, I would think she was doing something meaningful on her computer rather than ordering new wigs, shoes, dresses or jewellery.

Oh, I forgot to mention that Sarah was a trust fund baby who had used her money – as soon as she had access to it – to set up this company. She often told us this story at our compulsory yet very unnecessary morning meetings, as if it was the achievement of the century.

"I could have wasted my money like you young people like to do today; soft life or what do you kids call it?" she would say, and every time I would discreetly roll my eyes. I didn't hate that she was a trust fund baby; I just hated that she flaunted it like the rest of us were sinners because we didn't have the privilege she had. And she was not that old, she was just thirty-five.

"Ah yes," Sarah said, looking up at me as if she had forgotten about me, but I knew she had just wanted to make me wait. She casually flipped her bone straight weave and reclined against her chair. She stared at me like I had vomit on my body and heaved a long-suffering sigh.

"What's the meaning of the rubbish you did on Mr Komolafe's project?" she asked.

"I don't understand what you mean?" I said with a stoic expression. I knew the game she was playing.

"The manuscript we sent back to him was full of avoidable errors. I don't pay you this much to just sit in front of the computer and do rubbish!" she snarled at me.

First of all, bitch, you don't pay that much. And secondly—

"I didn't edit Mr Komolafe's book. You did!"

"What do you mean?" She sat up so suddenly, I thought she was about to lunge at me. She should try it first. *Wo*, I will beat nonsense out of her body

and use her stupid bone straight wig as a whip. Then I'll resign. I have *kuku* been looking for an excuse.

"We had a lot of work to handle when Mr Komolafe's project came in. You said you would handle it. It was after all 'just editing,'" I replied with a straight face. But it was getting harder to keep it that way because the look of incredulity on Sarah's face was just too hilarious.

"Anyway," she said, relaxing against her chair again, now trying to look nonchalant, "I have passed on the project to an outside freelancer since you can't do your job well."

What else was new?

"And the Woman's Life Magazine," she continued, "I have decided it isn't a project worth taking on. That's what I called you here for."

"What?" The Woman's Life Magazine project was supposed to be my big break. Woman's Life was doing a documentary on the life of women in the slums, and they had contacted us to work with them. I was supposed to head the project. It was an opportunity to work with an international and reputable organisation, and to add it to my portfolio.

"Why?" I asked, balling my fist to keep my anger in check.

"Not that I have to explain to you, but I don't like the idea that they want to work directly with our writers. We always work behind the scenes, and I'd like to keep it that way." A roundabout way of saying she didn't like that she wouldn't be able to micromanage the project. So, despite the exposure it could give her company, she would not take the offer.

"Wow."

"Do you have anything else to say?" she asked, challenging me to voice my opinion.

"No, I don't," I said through gritted teeth. As I turned to leave her office, she called me back.

"Please, toss that box in the outside dustbin for me." She pointed at a box wrapped in red ribbon. Even someone as despicable as her got a Valentine gift. Why wouldn't she, when she had a fine face and big breasts? That's what all men wanted.

And she was throwing the gift away without opening it. How much more unfair could life get?

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her I was not her servant, but I did not have another job waiting for me if I left this one. I begrudgingly picked up

the box from her desk and headed to the outside bin.

I didn't know why she was so specific about throwing the box outside the office. And I don't know what possessed me to open the box as I stood by the big waste bin, the late afternoon sun still burning hot. But I was curious about the kind of gift she was throwing away, so I carefully unwrapped the red ribbon.

Inside the box were the most beautiful red designer stilettoes. The exact type I had scrolled past on Instagram this morning with deep seated longing and regret that even if I combined my salary for two years, I would still not be able to afford them.

And these were the shoes that Sarah was throwing away. Ah God, this woman was mad o! Under the shoes was a note handwritten in cursive.

I hope these shoes show you my sincerity and bring you close to me. I miss you and I love you. ~ Jay

By the note was a black, square card with the words:

Luxe Haven

8PM

Luxe Haven! As in, the same Luxe Haven I knew? The one only big people in this country could get access to. Sarah had an exclusive invite to Luxe Haven, and she was throwing it away?

Like the whispers of the devil into Eve's ears, the craziest idea creeped into my mind. And instead of throwing the box away, I replaced the cover and ribbon and hid it under the staircase close to the cleaner's station. Then, I walked back into the office, straight-faced.

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HOT PEPPERSOUP

The shoes felt alien on my feet and my insides felt like they had been tied into knots as I stepped out of the cab.

I'd had every opportunity not to go on with this madness. In fact, I'd had a whole 24 hours to rethink the whole thing. Instead, I used the time to make sure I looked the part. I went to work this morning as usual, worked hard as usual, then suddenly pretended to be sick. I shed real tears such that Sarah had no choice but to let me go home earlier. She'd probably take it out of my next salary, because she had zero emotional intelligence and sub-zero empathy.

Anyway, the minute I stepped out of the office, I went and got myself a befitting dress for the occasion. My piggy savings account had borne the brunt of this excessive and reckless spending. I'd have to save up for the next two years to recover what I had spent.

But I reasoned that if Sarah could steal a lifetime opportunity from me, I could also steal her shoes and have a nice time at an exclusive restaurant pretending to be rich.

It was a solo date, though. I had no intention of finding the man who had sent this to Sarah, because, one, I was sure her taste in men was just as sour as her character. And, two, how would I explain to him that I stole the shoes I was supposed to throw away? He would tell Sarah and I would be fired for sure. I was waiting for an excuse to quit my job, but the excuse shouldn't have me labelled a thief; and, with Sarah's influence, I'd never be able to find a job in this industry again. If I wanted to leave, I must get a better offer first.

One thing was certain, I was not spending Valentine's Day alone in my mini apartment cursing my existence and loneliness.

Two ornate marble columns guarded the entrance of Luxe Haven. I stood between them, bathed in the warm light of dim lanterns that hung on each side of the doorway. The evening breeze caressed the parts of my skin not covered by the scandalous dress I was wearing. If my mother ever saw me in this dress, she would go on a seven-day prayer and fasting marathon and send me a year's

worth of anointing oil, to deliver me from the devil that had taken over my heart.

When I bought the dress, I was determined to feel sexy, and this emerald gown with the neckline plunging so daringly low fit the bill. The décolletage, which stopped at my navel and accentuated my side cleavage, was not the only daring thing about the dress. The back dipped into a V, tracing the curve of my spine before coming together in a dramatic flow to the floor, with a thigh-high slit that displayed my flawless ebony legs. The colour and design of the dress complemented my dark skin and drew attention to the shoes as the main character of the night.

I had recently installed curly braids, so I put my hair up in a bun, allowing a few short tendrils to fall to the side of my face. I finished the look with a designer perfume I got from one of my aunties who lived abroad. I had kept the saffron and amber scent for a special occasion, and what was more special than this? I couldn't look expensive and smell cheap, after all.

I not only felt sexy, I knew I looked it too, judging by the way the heavily muscled black dressed bouncer couldn't take his eyes off my chest as he asked for my pass. I brought it out of my clutch—the only inexpensive thing I had on me, but who would notice?—with an elegant grace that surprised me. I was not only acting rich; I was beginning to feel like I was and I hadn't even entered the restaurant yet.

"Welcome, Ma'am," the bouncer said, his voice polite. "We have been expecting you." He returned my pass, then opened the door and stepped aside for me to enter.

"Expecting me *ke*?" I muttered to myself. Wondering what he meant by that, I stepped inside and was immediately enveloped by an alluring semi-darkness. I understood immediately what the bouncer meant. The entire restaurant was empty.

This Jay man, whoever he was, had bought out the entire restaurant for the night to spend it with Sarah. And I had come here stupidly thinking that the restaurant would have other patrons and I would mingle with them or even sit in a corner, eat their overpriced food, watch how rich people spent Valentine, completely avoid any man who remotely looked like his name might be Jay, and then go home.

I swallowed hard, the knot in my stomach tightening. The one time I wanted to do something out of character, I landed in hot peppersoup. How

could I avoid him when he was the only one here?

All I had wanted was a date for Valentine, even if it was a solo date. It was something different, an escape from reality. Now, look at this. Do stupid things, get stupid results. I stood frozen, unable to move my legs.

Then it hit me. It wasn't too late! I had not met him yet. I could turn back now and pretend all this never happened. It would be a total waste of my life's savings but at least, I would still have a job to replenish the money.

But just as my legs finally listened to my brain's command to move, to turn and leave, a man, dressed like a butler, approached me with a wide smile

"Welcome, Ms Sarah Bature. Please come with me."

Wahala!

As he led me up the stairs to the rooftop, I couldn't help the anticipation bubbling within me. I was excited and afraid at the same time.

Unlike the warm air at the entrance, here, the breeze was cool and crisp, and it carried with it the faint scent of jasmine from nearby flower beds and the distant sounds of laughter and music from the streets below. Soft fairy lights twinkled overhead, casting a lovely glow across the rooftop. The city's skyline sparkled in the distance.

Lagos was indeed a beautiful place at night. What I would give to have this view every day. The myriad lights flickered like stars against the dark canvas of the night sky.

In the centre of the rooftop, a small table had been set up for two, adorned with flickering candles and a bouquet of red roses. The candlelight danced across the tablecloth, casting intricate patterns of light and shadow.

Then I saw him, standing with his back to me, watching the night sky. And as if he sensed our presence, even before the manager spoke, he turned to look at us.

He was the most beautiful man I had ever set my eyes on. He was tall and lean, his skin almost as dark as the night. Standing beside Sarah, there would have been a sharp contrast because Sarah was fair-skinned. But beside me, he would have been perfect, as our skin tones matched. I shook my head. What was this nonsense I was thinking when I was in hot soup? But, God, this man with his chiselled jawline had the most beautiful smile, with teeth as white as snow, (not that I had ever seen snow before) and his dentition was going to be my undoing. I had to remind myself to breathe because this man looked like he had fallen right out of a romance novel. His smile was as bright as the morning

sun and it made my stomach tingle and sent vibrations to the space between my thighs.

This was the man Sarah had stood up?

But, like the sound of music abruptly cut off, the smile disappeared from his face when he saw me.

He approached me slowly but with confident strides, his footsteps echoing softly against the rooftop. As he got close and stood before me, I almost lost myself in his deep-set, dark and brooding eyes. I looked away before I did. The manager must have left us at some point because I turned to look at him, I don't know what for, but found that he was gone and I was alone with this man, Jay.

The man whose smile, and now ire, was sending the wrong signal to my brain, and my vagina. But, God, this man could wear a suit, because the one he was wearing fit him so well, almost like he was born with it. His shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, giving a delicious glimpse of his neck with a tiny gold necklace, glistening in the light.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice as deep as I imagined. I imagined that voice murmuring dirty things into my ears while he was buried deep inside me.

Jesus Christ! Where were these thoughts coming from? Was this a result of being single for too long?

"I… I believe I just asked you a question." His brown eyes were now cold like his voice. But even his annoyance didn't stop his gaze from travelling down my body and stopping at my cleavage, and for a brief moment I saw something flicker in his eyes. Lust.

And that gave me some kind of confidence boost even I couldn't explain. Besides, what else could I do? Everything had already gone sideways.

"She threw your gift away," I said, chin up. "She doesn't want you, Jay, but I'm sure you already know that." I dared him to tell me otherwise.

"I… I… see." Again, his eyes trailed down my body. This time, they didn't stop at my chest but at my feet. His eyes darkened and I couldn't read what he was thinking as he looked at my legs.

"I… ca… can see there's a story here."

It wasn't simply annoyance, I realised. He had a stutter.

"Come, tell it to me." He tilted his head towards the table before walking to it and taking a seat.

Even with the stutter, he had a commanding presence. His voice, his aura made my insides clench. I was not going to lie and kid myself. I wanted this man. I wanted him with an intensity that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

This was not normal. I only just met him!

But, with the grace of a queen, I walked the short distance and took my seat.

The minute we sat, a server came out of the shadows. He poured our wine, going on about its history, its production process and the taste we were to expect. But I could swear neither of was listening; we had our eyes locked on each other. My heart was thumping so fast, I was sure it was going to explode, and the area between my thighs? That one was on a frequency of its own.

After the server left, I gave Jay a detailed explanation of what happened. He was quiet while I spoke, listening intently, and for a while after. And then he leaned back, eyes narrowing and a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"You didn't once consider tha… that it might be dangerous, going somewhere you weren't invited?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to explain that I hadn't thought exclusive meant the whole restaurant had been bought for the night.

Instead, what came out of my mouth was, "Are you dangerous?" I didn't even recognise the sound of my own voice. Who was this woman and what had she done to the real me?

"Do you want to find out just how dangerous I can be?" His voice sounded like a deep rumble, or maybe it was just vibrations in my tummy. He didn't stutter when he said it and the intensity in his eyes had me pooling. I hoped I wouldn't leave wet marks when I stood up because I wasn't sure my underwear could hold it all.

Good thing I chose the perfect underwear, right?

Jesus, Eriife, you need to calm the fuck down.

"Why doesn't she want you?" I asked. Maybe his answer would take my mind off this insidious yet delicious thought. I hadn't felt this way in years and I wanted to bask in the euphoria of what I was feeling. But I also needed to tread carefully because though he was looking at me like something he wanted to devour, it didn't mean he would act on it. This was a man who was in love with Sarah. Sarah of all people.

God abeg!

"I have known S…Sarah since we were children. Been in love with her since then, too. We have been on and off for a while. But she'll never truly want me, I understand that now. If… if… If—" He paused and took a breath.

I waited patiently, not saying a word or taking my eyes off him.

"If you hadn't come here, Sarah would have told me she never got the gift, that it was never delivered. And just like always, I would have believed it, like a fool."

I sighed, placed my elbows on the table and leaned forward. As I did, I caught a whiff of his scent, woody and enchanting.

"You are not a fool; you are just in love. And Sarah is just Sarah. You could keep loving her or you can forget about her and move on." I wished I would take my own advice and get the hell out of that agency.

"And how do you suggest I forget about her?" he asked, his eyes roaming and finding its resting place on my chest. I leaned forward slightly to give him a better view.

At first, he watched me, quiet and brooding. Just when I was beginning to feel stupid about throwing myself at him like that, he spoke.

"I like my girls good and obedient. Are you?" His voice had taken on that dark note again, and his stutter was non-existent. God… It sounded delicious to my ears. I could almost taste it.

Instead of running away like any sane girl would, I stared at him. "I could be good and obedient. Depends on what the orders are."

"Prove it," he ordered, his voice low. I watched his eyes turn dark, sexy and hot.

I knew immediately what he was asking. He relaxed against his chair, a small grin playing around his lips, waiting for the show I was about to give him, right there in the open, with the wait staff somewhere, watching.

It didn't deter me. I had set out to do something crazy, and I was determined to enjoy myself to the fullest. It was just for one night, one night to escape reality.

So, I leaned back. My eyes never leaving his, I spread my legs, adjusted my panties and began to pleasure myself.

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TAKING THE POWER BACK

I lay in my bed in my favourite pink pyjamas, unable to get over how surreal last night was. It was 7am, but my mind was still muddled and my body still getting aftershocks.

Who would have thought that I, Eriifeoluwa, daughter of a pastor and a deaconess, who had only been with two men and only after they committed to a relationship, would have a one-night stand?

It was scandalous. And I wanted to do it again. I could still feel him all over me. Touching and bringing myself to what I thought was an earth-shattering orgasm—while looking into his eyes and moaning his name—was nothing compared to what had happened after.

He had smiled like a predator who finally had his prey where he wanted it. He got to his feet and casually walked over to me, his every step exuding power, control and unfettered heat. And then, he bent and kissed me.

It was more than a kiss; it felt like sex. His tongue demanded and took, and as he kissed me, he pushed three fingers inside me, juices from my earlier orgasm making it easy for him to slide in and out. He started slowly then increased the tempo, and just as I felt the waves of another orgasm rising high, about to crash, he slid his fingers out. I moaned my disappointment against his mouth.

He pulled away and brought those fingers to his mouth, licking them slowly, making me crave his tongue on my pussy.

After he was done feasting on his fingers, he straightened and gave me his hand. I took it and he pulled me to my feet. Towering above me, he drew me close to him and whispered into my ears, words that made my breath hitch.

"When I fuck you, I want you bare, with nothing on but those shoes. I want to spread you open and feast on you till you crumble."

We took the party back to his hotel room, where he made good on his promise. Our mouths collided the minute we stepped into the hotel room, biting, licking. It was as if the more we gave, the more we craved. He stripped

me of my dress, and I helped relieve him of his pants and boxers, freeing his hard, veined and throbbing dick. The sight of it made my mouth water and I wanted to taste it but he stopped me with a slight *tsk* and a shake of his head.

"You only take what I give you like a good girl."

Then he tore the condom from its foil and rolled it on. I can't even remember where he brought the condom out from, his pocket or the bedside drawer.

I couldn't take my eyes off the length of him and it sent wetness between my thighs. Then he gripped my legs and thrust into me. I cried out in pleasured shock as my body adjusted to his full length. The feeling was so delightful, it brought tears to my eyes. I wanted more of him and thrust my hips higher, matching his strokes. We locked eyes for a moment as he moved inside me, and in that moment, nothing else existed, just me and him. Then he bent and kissed me, just as I reached my climax and shuddered against him. He came a few moments afterwards.

But that was only the beginning. He finally let me taste his dick and it was just as salty, musky and as delicious as I imagined. I learnt many things about myself that night. But two were the most prominent. One, I was stronger and had more power than I thought. And two, I was a squirter. Who would have thought?

Not once did he stutter when he gave commands in the bedroom and I realised his stutter disappeared when he was in control.

When he finally fell asleep beside me, I watched as his chest rose and fell with every peaceful breath. He had the satisfaction of a sated man. Hell, I had the satisfaction of a sated woman. But underneath it all, there seemed to be something that weighed on him. As I lightly traced the outline of his face while he slept, committing his glorious features to heart and memory, the urge to know him better, to get him to open up to me overwhelmed me, and I knew it was time to leave.

This man, Jay, whose full name I didn't know, was way out of my league. It was fun playing rich but I knew I had to end it here before I used my own hands to complicate things. I gathered my clothes, ordered a cab and snuck out of the hotel room at a few minutes past 12am.

I left the red shoes behind and wore the indoor slippers the hotel provided. The shoes were never mine to begin with; still, leaving them behind and

leaving at midnight made me feel like Cinderella—if Cinderella had misplaced priorities.

I would never forget him and I didn't want him to forget me too.

Now, lying in my room as the day brightened, I was reminded of just how ordinary my life was. And after a night like that, I didn't want to go back to being ordinary and unfulfilled. I couldn't go back to work for Sarah, and continue to be mentally and emotionally abused, especially not after I'd fucked her maybe boyfriend.

If there was one thing last night taught me, it was that I had to take my life into my hands and take charge, if I wanted it to change.

Last night, I had gone out of character and nobody had died. I felt powerful and different. I got out of bed and drew up the resignation letter that had been sitting in my email draft. As I hit send, I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off me and I could finally breathe.

Then I began to draft a pitch to Woman's Life Magazine on why they should hire me as the lead editor for their documentary. I didn't want to get my hopes up but working with them could be the start of my career as a freelance journalist, telling stories that mattered to me, in my own way.

They would most likely not hire me. I knew that because I had a non-existent portfolio. Working at The Sparrow was the only job experience, apart from my NYSC place of primary assignment, on my CV. And my contract with The Sparrow indicated I couldn't put my name on any of the projects I worked on.

I had a small blog called *Through Eriife's Eyes* where I told African stories, but I updated it irregularly because of my workload at The Sparrow. I would take it more seriously now and I was excited about all the things I could accomplish with it now that I had unencumbered myself.

But first, I hoped it would be enough to convince Woman's Life Magazine.

With newfound determination, and nothing else to do since I wasn't going to work, thirty days' notice be damned, I got out of bed and started cleaning

my space. A clean environment equalled a clean mind. But the friction and soreness between my legs reminded me of all the dirty things I did last night.

* * *

Two weeks later

It had been radio silence since I sent the email to Woman's Life. I had even given up on them replying. Sarah had called, threatened, cursed and, at some point, even begged me to come back to work. But miss me with that bullshit. That ship had sailed.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jay. In fact, not to downplay it, Jay occupied my every thought and entire mind. I didn't know his last name or have a picture of him I could search the internet with. And I sure as hell couldn't ask Sarah about him. But the memory of the night we spent together was still vivid in my mind.

I was still dwelling on that as I walked home from the bus stop, casually swinging the nylon of akara balls I just bought, when my phone buzzed. I nearly dropped my dinner on the streets when I saw the notification. It was an email from Woman's Life Magazine. They were willing to discuss my application and had set up a Calendly link to schedule a meeting.

I held in my excitement as I hurried toward my apartment. I needed the privacy of my room to let loose the scream of delight I could barely contain. Rummaging through my purse for my keys, I didn't look up until I was almost at my door.

As soon as I looked up, my hands went numb. The nylon containing my hot, freshly fried akara slipped out of my hand and fell to the ground. I blinked rapidly and shook my head, certain I was dreaming.

Jay stood in front of my apartment door, looking out of place in his white senator attire.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, while I stood, frozen in shock.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you," he spoke as he drew close to me. I noticed he didn't stutter.

"H… h… how… did you find me?" I was the one stuttering.

"For a man like me, finding you is a piece of cake. I just wasn't sure you wanted to be found. And, no, I didn't ask Sarah. I haven't seen or spoken to her

since that night." His voice was laden with emotions that I feared were a replica of my own unspoken thoughts.

"Wait, hold on a minute. What do you mean by a man like you?"

He gave a short laugh. "I should properly introduce myself. I am Jayeola Abayomi-Young. Close friends and family call me Jay."

My eyes widened in utter disbelief. I knew he was way out of my league, but I had not expected how high up the food chain he was. The man I was pining for, the one whose thought occupied the core of my soul, was THE Jayeola Abayomi-Young, sole heir to the Abayomi-Young Group. He was the son of the richest man in Africa and was himself number ten on the list of the wealthiest Africans.

I had had sex and was in love with Jayeola Abayomi-Young. And he was standing in this sorry excuse of a hallway in front of my apartment telling me he missed me and couldn't stop thinking about me.

My jaw dropped and I had to will myself to shut it before I start drooling saliva all over the place.

He lifted his hands, offering me an open box with the red shoes I had left behind. I knew what he was asking. And it was a tempting offer too. But I had only just gotten my power back, and becoming this man's plaything was not on my list, no matter how wealthy, handsome and god-damned sexy he was.

So I shook my head. "Come back to me when you are no longer in love with Sarah and want something more meaningful."

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The Journey

THE JOURNEY

REBOUND

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Dedication

For you, who thinks a kind of love is too big for you to have. It isn't.

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Dedication II

For my Big Mummy, the original Big Mummy T. You are resting peacefully now but your love and warmth remain with me always.

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Part one

Part One

“When trouble sleep, yanga go wake am.”
– Fela Anikulapo Kuti

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Chapter 1

Eriife

"Good morning, ma," Justina greeted me with a cheerful smile as I stepped into the immaculate reception hall of Johnson and Pickles—J&P for short—where I worked as a senior editor on the content team. My heels clicked against the spotless marble tile floor as I walked up to the front desk.

"Good morning, Justina. This one that your face is shining like this on a Monday morning, it means you must have had a nice weekend," I said with equal cheer, stopping in front of her desk.

"I did, ma. That tea you recommended helped me sleep like a baby."

Justina had been having trouble sleeping, so I recommended a blend of jasmine and chamomile tea. Most people ignore junior staff like Justina, but given the turnaround my life had made in the past six months, I have made it a point to be cordial with everyone, no matter their status. A little kindness never hurt anyone, as long as they don't move mad towards me.

"That's good to hear, Justina. And I have told you to stop calling me 'ma,'" I said in a firm but playful tone. "It sounds as if I am older than my age."

Everyone in J&P, including upper management, were on a first name basis. So, it made no sense to me that the receptionists and cleaning staff shouldn't follow the same policy.

"I'm sorry, ma… Eriife, I'll try to adjust," she said, with an uneasy smile that told me she found my request difficult. But she would just have to adjust.

Justina was our front desk receptionist and usually the first person to arrive at work after the cleaning staff. I usually arrived a few minutes after her because I enjoyed the peace and quiet before the office became full. It was a habit I picked up working for half a decade at The Sparrow. Here, I didn't have to come in every day; I was only required to be at work twice a week and three times if there was an important meeting that could only be done in person.

"That's what you always say, then tomorrow, you will do the same thing," I said as I walked away. I was sure she could hear the laughter in my voice, so she knew I wasn't mad at her.

As I stepped into the elevator that would take me to the third floor where the content department was, I couldn't help but think about how similar the old me and Justina were. What I saw in her was my old self, the way she always deferred to others, the way her eyes shifted, never really looking into people's eyes when she spoke to them.

That used to be me. Until I stole my former boss' shoes and slept with her maybe boyfriend. There was no way, no angle to explain what happened that won't make me look like a horrible person. So as the elevator opened, delivering me to my office, I prayed that one day, Justina would find that turning point in her life.

I settled behind my desk in the workspace dedicated to the content team. The walls were painted in white and grey, and the space had an atmosphere that uplifted one's spirit instead of dampening it.

Since I was still the only one in the office, after I turned on my computer, I said a quick prayer, thanking God for journey mercies from home, for my new life—though he may not approve of the catalyst for my new life—and asking Him to make the day a peaceful and productive one. As I said my final "amen", my co-workers started to arrive.

First was Femi, a social media intern. Femi was one of the smartest minds on the content team, but he was also neurodivergent. So, I took no offense as he walked past me and went straight to his desk without greeting me or answering my "good morning".

In no time, the office was a lively and colourful buzz of activity.

The content department at J&P was a huge one with various teams, and though we each had specific duties, we sometimes overlapped and had to collaborate to ensure everything ran smoothly.

As a senior editor, I headed the writing and editing team. My team members made working with them so easy. Khadijah was our copywriter. She was a decade younger than me but I had never had any of the problems most team leads would have had working with someone her age. She was a little talkative and had a way of gesticulating animatedly when she spoke but her creativity and work ethic were top notch.

Then there were the twins, Taiwo and Kehinde, who worked as content writers. What were the odds of having two people from the same family work in the same company, not to mention twins in the same department? The Boys, as they were fondly called, were a little weird. They still wore matching outfits like they were five years old dressed by their mother. Though they were not identical, they finished each other's sentences and behaved as if they shared the same brain cells. But weird as they were, they got the job done and I had no complaints.

The Boys were conventionally normal compared to Sade, our junior editor and the department's goth babe. Always dressed in dark clothes, dark make-up and was very fluent in sarcasm. To be honest, Sade scared me a little, like I would be scared if Wednesday Addams was a real person. But I'll never admit that out loud.

The only thing usually bright about Sade was her hair. Today it was lemon green. J&P was an inclusive and tolerant workplace because imagine working for Sarah Bature, my former boss, and coming to work with green hair. You would explain to her if you thought you were in America to be dressing "anyhow."

Today, being Monday, was a full day at work because everyone had to be present. Speaking of everyone, my work bestie, Lade Bakare, head of the graphic design team, was not yet at work. No surprise there because she was always late. If not that she was very efficient, I'm sure HR would have sent her a memo about it. Or maybe they had and Lade just didn't care. She could be too carefree sometimes.

But the surprising one was that Tobi Adewale, head of the content team, was not yet at work. He always arrived work at 9am on the dot. Maybe he had an emergency or a flat tire. I was a little disappointed because I had been looking forward to seeing his handsome face all weekend.

Half a year ago, I didn't have any friends, not to mention a work bestie. I had been slaving away at The Sparrow, a content writing agency run by Sarah Bature, one of the most beautiful women I knew and yet the most toxic, obnoxious, and overbearing person I knew as well. My life had been stagnant and while everyone I knew was progressing with their lives, I had been too afraid of being unemployed that I remained in one place. Then on Valentine's Day, like someone possessed, I took my boss's place at her date and ended up having a one-night stand with the man.

That last part was totally unplanned. But after the most exciting and sexually fulfilling night of my life, I couldn't go back to being ordinary, working for Sarah. Certainly not after I stole the shoes she asked me to throw away and slept with her maybe boyfriend whom she didn't want either. Not that she knew but it just didn't feel right to me and it became the excuse I used to finally get out of her toxic clutches.

After leaving The Sparrow, I explored my long-term dream of working as a freelance journalist. I started taking my blog, *Through Eriife's Eyes*, more seriously, telling African stories that we have gotten too familiar with to see the beauty and the danger in them. I got my first gig as a freelancer, heading The Woman's Life Magazine project, a documentary on the life of women in the slums. I almost lost this opportunity because it first came to The Sparrow and Sarah turned it down because she wouldn't be able to micromanage it.

Thank God, I sent that email pitch despite my anxieties because working on that project not only helped me to stay financially afloat after leaving my job, but it also opened many other opportunities for me. And one of those opportunities was this job as a senior content editor at J&P Innovations.

J&P was one of the leading fintech companies in Nigeria. They had various digital products and solutions that helped Nigerians streamline their financial processes and help enhance financial security, through their apps. I have never been tech savvy and my finances hadn't been great but what I knew was how to use storytelling to sell and my writing skills are captivating, even if I say so myself.

My job here paid ten times what I ever imagined I could earn in my life. I moved out of my shitty apartment to a more befitting two-bedroom apartment in a better area of Lagos. I had more money than I could ever spend and very few responsibilities.

I was living the life I had always fantasised about, my job paid well, and still gave me enough time to write for my blog and pursue my own stories. My life felt perfect in every sense of the word. But something or rather someone was still missing in it.

Jay.

In the past six months, I had willed myself to forget about him. One, because he was an unplanned one-night stand, and he was supposed to remain that way. Two, because what he wanted from me after that one night was something I could not give. And three, he was Jayeola Abayomi-Young. Sole

heir to the fortune of the Abayomi-Young Group, son of the richest man in Africa, a billionaire himself. Which meant that no matter how much my life had improved since we first met, he was still way above my league.

Look, I'm a delusional girl because the real world is tiring. I read romance books and watch Korean dramas where the rich CEO always falls in love with some poor girl and they make it work. But my delusion ends with the fictional men. Plus, Jay wasn't in love with me. He just wanted a mistress who would help him forget the woman he truly loved, Sarah.

And four, even if all the previous reasons did not exist, this fourth one that I can't bring myself to even think about certainly made me unqualified to be with Jay.

I haven't seen or heard from Jay since I turned down his offer six months ago. And I deliberately avoid news of the Abayomi-Young family, which is hard because their products are everywhere. They own the Nigerian economy.

I still think I did the right thing, even though my heart beats faster every time I am remotely reminded of him. But they say the best way to forget about one man is to get under another, and I have my eyes set on the perfect replacement.

Tobi Adewale.

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Chapter 2

Eriife

"I'm telling you, you have to shoot your shot," Lade said in a not-so-subtle tone, earning us the unwanted attention of other co-workers in the office cafeteria.

"Keep your voice down, for goodness' sake. Somebody cannot tell you something without you louding it, ehn?"

"Oya, oya, sorry," Lade apologised in her usual boisterous manner.

I joined J&P four months ago and Lade and I clicked on the first day. I had gone to the bathroom and found that I was on my period, and I did not have a sanitary pad with me. I had no choice but to sit on the toilet, dripping into the bowl. That was when I heard the sound of shoes on the floor, and I did the best I could in that situation.

"Hello, please, I need a little help here," I called out.

Lade was the one who had walked in and fortunately for me, she had a spare tampon in her purse even though, according to her, her period wasn't close. It was the first time I used a tampon and I haven't gone back to sanitary pads since then. Lade not only saved my life that day, but she also stayed with me to ensure I wasn't cramping or in need of further help. That was how our friendship began and we became work besties.

Even though we couldn't be more different. At twenty-nine, Lade was four years younger than me. Where I preferred to braid my hair or wear wigs, she carried her thick 4b natural hair in a beautiful, bouncy afro that complemented her round face. I can't imagine the amount of care that she puts into her hair to always have it looking healthy like that.

Where my skin was ebony and I was tall and lean with just enough curves for people to know I was a woman, Lade was short with golden brown skin like freshly baked Agege bread, plump and curvy, and she had a confidence and self-assuredness about her.

Though far from where I used to be, I still found it a little difficult to stand up for myself sometimes. Honestly, I felt like a fraud, like I was pretending to be someone I wasn't, even though I love where I am now. I swallowed, pushing down the imposter syndrome, and focused on Lade.

"Why do you always come to work late?" I asked, trying to change the subject from my crush on Tobi as I bit into my chicken sandwich.

"Look at this one." Lade gave me a look that said she knew my game and wasn't falling for it. "You are trying to change the topic."

"Lade—"

"Don't Lade me. See, let me tell you something. I have been working here for the past one year and you are exactly the kind of woman that Tobi likes to date." Lade had now abandoned the rice and beans on her plate for the gist she was giving me.

"So now you are telling me that Tobi has a type?"

"Which man doesn't, ehn?" Lade countered.

Jay doesn't. At least, not physically because if he did, he wouldn't have fucked me when he had someone like Sarah, I wanted to say. Instead I said, "I am not the type to ask a man out, Lade. I don't want to end up the subject of discussion in anybody's WhatsApp group chat."

Lade wasn't buying my excuse. "You are not the type to ask a man out but you are the type to sleep with them on the first night."

"Jesus!" I exclaimed, sending more curious looks our way. "I should not have told you about Jay," I said, lowering my voice.

"It's not like you told me who the mysterious Jay is. But that's beside the point." Lade looked unapologetic.

"I swear to God, you are the worst person to tell a secret. How dare you pull an African mother on me, using my secret to score a cheap point. I should now tell you who Jay is, abi?"

"All that one is your own. My own is that Tobi Adewale likes you. I see the way he looks at you and you like him too. So why don't you just tell him?"

"If Tobi likes me, let him tell me. Like I said, I don't want to become a topic in anybody's group chat, abeg."

"In this century, you want to dull yourself and let another woman take your man."

"Eh, God! Lade, are you not skipping several steps like this? How is he my man? And please reduce your voice, abeg."

"He is not your man yet but he will soon be because I will not let you rest."

I sighed and took the last bite of my sandwich. Lade was still playing with her food and lunch break was almost over.

"Why are you so invested in this, sef? Be like you carry the matter for head more than me," I said. What I did not say was that it almost felt like Lade's life had been boring without me before and now, I was the sole source of entertainment in her life.

But I would never say that aloud because I did not want to hurt her feelings and she was really the only friend I had had in years and I wasn't ready to lose the friendship over something so trivial. I low-key envied women who have friendships that have lasted for decades. I wanted something beautiful and long-lasting like that, too.

"Ah yes o, because can you see how fine Tobi is? He is every woman's dream. He is tall, rich, handsome, soft-spoken and kind. He has his money, and his parents have money too. See ehn, if not that I can tell that he likes you and he doesn't like girls like me, I would have shot my shot way before you even came to work here."

"Haba, Lade!"

This was another thing I loved about her, she was blunt and always truthful and not in a mean way.

"What? I'm only telling you the truth."

"I've heard you. Sha finish your food and let us go back to the office. Time is almost up."

Ah, true o," Lade said and began to rush through her food. One thing Lade will never do is waste food.

* * *

Back at my desk after lunch, I browsed through the new content calendar for the upcoming month. I had a meeting with my team in ten minutes to discuss the creative angle and direction based on the content calendar. Since I would be working from home for the next two days, I wanted to hear all the ideas and give all the instructions I could in person today.

I was working on my notes when I felt his presence. No, I smelt his cologne—A fresh, woody scent with a hint of spice, and the scent put my senses on high alert.

"Eriife," Tobi called my name in that soft, soothing tone of his, just as he got to my desk. The low sound made my insides melt.

"Hi, Tobi. We missed you at the meeting this morning," I said, my voice a little more high-pitched than I had intended.

I heard somebody stifle a cough, and I was sure it was Lade hiding her laughter.

Busy body will kill this girl one day.

I ignored her and looked straight at Tobi, trying my darndest not to be distracted by his gorgeous face. Which was hard to do.

And I only have Jay to blame for this my new obsession with beautiful men. Before I met Jay, I was just a normal girl who wanted normal looking men who didn't draw attention to themselves. But since Jay, normal didn't cut it anymore. Because why have basic when I could have over the top, drop dead gorgeous men who smelt good?

The truth, and I didn't bother lying to myself, was because I didn't think men like Jay could like girls like me. So, I convinced myself that I didn't like men like him.

One reason I liked Tobi was that the only thing he had in common with Jay was that he was handsome and very attractive, but that's where their similarities ended. To be honest, they weren't even attractive in the same way.

Jay's face was more angular, and he had a commanding presence, like, one look at him and you want to do his bidding before he even opens his mouth to ask you. Tobi's handsomeness was more homely; he was like your sweet next-door neighbour with a baby face that could melt a mother's already warm heart. Jay had a tall, lean, and muscled frame, but Tobi was only slightly taller than me, more muscular than Jay. Jay probably spent his time in the gym to keep fit, while for Tobi, going to the gym was a lifestyle.

But the most important difference between them was that though Tobi had rich parents, it was not the sort of generational wealth that Jay had and definitely did not come with any drama.

"Are you still with me, Eriife?" Tobi's voice pulled me out of the rabbit hole of comparison that I had plunged into.

"Oh, I'm sorry, what did you say?" I did my best not to sound flustered.

"I was asking if you have some time after work today. There's something that I need to discuss with you."

"After work today?" I repeated like a *mumu*. My brain had stopped working at "after work". Was Lade right after all?

"Of course." My tone took that nonsense high pitch again. "I hope it's nothing too serious." It was hard to keep the excitement out of my voice. I didn't want to sound too eager.

"Oh, it's nothing serious, just some stuff I want to discuss with you. Thank you, Eriife. I'll leave you to your work," he said, tapping his fingers on my desk. He lingered for a few seconds, as if he had something more to say, before he turned to leave.

Work? What is work? The only thing my brain could think about now was what he wanted to discuss.

I locked eyes with Lade. Her eyes were asking me multiple questions, and mischief was making her eyes shine.

I shook my head at her as I picked up my phone and sent her a text.

Me: He wants to meet after work today. He said he has something to discuss.

Sure enough, she was typing back, and I swear, I could feel her excitement through the *"typing"* on WhatsApp even before her barrage of messages started entering.

Omolade: You seeeeeeeeeee. I told youuuuuuu.

Omolade: I told you he likes you. Because what does he want to discuss after work?

Omolade: He's going to ask you out!

Omolade: I can't believe it's finally happening. Make sure you fix your make-up and spray your sexy perfume.

And she was still typing.

Me: Calm down. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Maybe he needs my help with something.

Omolade: Help for wetin nau?

Omolade: maybe he wants to help you □ □ □

Me: Lade!!!

Omolade: Abegi! As if you don't want him to!

Omolade: Even a blind person can see how bad he has it for you.

Omolade: That man practically undresses you with his eyes.
Omolade: You are the only one who can't see it.
Me: Only God can help you, repent!
Omolade: Better leave God out of this business.

I shook my head one more time and put my phone down. Lade was a fool but I couldn't deny that her excitement had gotten to me. She could be right, and my perpetual singleness was finally coming to an end.

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Chapter 3

Eriife

If a snail started crawling from Ikorodu to Isale Eko at the time Tobi left my desk, it would get there before the day ended. Because why was the day dragging so slowly? You know when you are reading a book and you come across something like "everything happened in a blur"? That was what I needed to happen to me right now, so we could skip to after work where Tobi asks me out on a date.

But no, the meeting with my team to discussing creative angles and SEO keywords took forever and I had to force myself to be mentally present. By the time the meeting wrapped up, I was in robot mode, giving instructions and prepping for the rest of the week.

Finally, 5pm! My colleagues who had been watching the clock, like me, left immediately, almost as if they had already packed their bags and were just waiting for the clock to strike five. But it wasn't until an hour after the official closing hour did the office clear out completely, leaving just me and Tobi behind.

Lade was one of the few stragglers who left last, and it was because she was trying to stay back as long as she could to make sure I didn't chicken out, make up some excuse and leave without seeing Tobi. Seriously, that girl.

I peeked over my desk, and Tobi was still working on his computer. I had gone to the bathroom twice, adjusted my make-up and bob wig, checked my teeth, and did everything to make sure that I looked every bit perfect when he asked me out. But Tobi still hadn't approached me or asked me to come to his desk. And I didn't want to go to him first because that would put my eagerness on full display and make me stink of desperation. But so was waiting for him like this.

This was not the behaviour of a man who wanted to ask a woman out. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. It would not do for the old me to come

to the surface now. He probably had some work to finish up before leaving; he was, after all, the one who had to oversee the entire content department. So, I decided to give him a few more minutes.

I used the waiting period to check my blog. I replied some new comments and opened an email from a photographer who wanted to collaborate. I was still trying to process the context of the collaboration when I smelt Tobi's cologne. I looked up to see him walking towards me.

"You are still here, Eriife?" he asked as he stopped at my desk, bag in hand, looking puzzled.

"I am still here?" I repeated, looking at him as if he had grown two heads. I couldn't have imagined him asking me to wait after work, could I? I definitely didn't because Lade had seen him talking to me.

He stood there staring at me, clueless.

Wow.

"You asked me to wait behind that you had something to tell me?"

His eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened as he remembered. "Oh, I am so sorry, Eriife. I got so carried away with work I forgot something so important."

My lower belly tingled at the word "important." I am important to him, that was all I needed to hear to forgive him for almost forgetting about me.

"It's not a big deal, I guess you had a lot to do," I said with a small smile, trying to contain my emotions. And to be honest, he did look a bit tired.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Eriife." He cleared his throat. "I need you to come in tomorrow. One of the company's biggest clients is coming in for a meeting and the people upstairs want the content team to be a part of it, for some reason. I don't know the details of the meeting yet, but we are both required to be present."

"Oh. Oh, I see," I managed to say, though it was hard to keep the disappointment from my voice. "That's what you wanted to discuss with me after work?"

"I know asking you to come to work on your work from home day could be a bit demoralising and I did not want to spoil your day," he said with his smile that would ordinarily make my head mushy, but right now, it was annoying the shit out of me.

"Of course, I understand. How thoughtful of you," I said instead.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, my head has been full and all over the place," he apologised again but I was not appeased. I was pissed. But I plastered a smile on my face and waved him good night as he left.

I was such a foolish, foolish girl. Why would Tobi Adewale suddenly ask me out when, in all the four months I have been here, he had only spoken to me about work-related stuff?

This was Lade's fault, she and her stupid talk about Tobi Adewale liking me.

So much for him undressing me with his eyes.

* * *

I didn't know who to kill first, Omolade, who raised my hopes, or myself for allowing her to raise it, or Tobi himself, who was so sanctimonious.

I sat at my desk the next morning, trying to focus on my work. I wasn't in the mood to interact with anybody. And by anybody, I meant Lade, who was perched on my desk, one foot dangling above the floor. Her eyes shone in anticipation of the gist from yesterday.

"Lade, the way you are sitting on my desk is not appropriate in the office. Tobi wouldn't like it if he came in and saw you like this," I said. I was not smiling.

"Ahn ahn, just one night and you already know what Tobi doesn't like," Lade said, ignoring my warning.

"Abeg, leave me jare. I almost made a fool of myself yesterday because of the nonsense you put in my head."

"Ah, what happened? And is that why you ignored all my messages and did not pick my calls yesterday?"

I pushed my chair back and got to my feet. Pulling Lade by the wrist, I dragged her to the tea room that I was sure would be empty at this time of the morning. Lade pulled her hand out of mine the minute we stepped into the lemon green painted room.

"Better calm down and tell me what happened, this one that you are swelling like bread soaked inside water," Lade said. The furrows on her brow said that she was not too pleased to be dragged like this, but the way her eyes glistened told me she still wanted to know what happened.

"After all that your grand speech about Tobi liking me, all he wanted to tell me after work was that I had to come into work today because we have a meeting with management."

Lade blinked at me as she tried to process what I had just said. Then she burst into laughter. "Tell me you are joking."

"Omolade, do I look like I am joking?"

Seeing the look on my face, she stopped laughing. "You are serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"Ahn ahn, but what kind of nonsense is that?"

"Oh, you have not even heard the nonsense part. He had also completely forgotten that he asked me to wait, and after about two hours of waiting for him, he was just going to go home."

"Ah! That's weird, very weird because I'm sure Tobi likes you."

"How can you be so sure? Did he tell you that directly?"

Omolade sighed. "No, but—"

"No buts, Omolade. Admit that you were wrong and we are both just hoping on something that isn't there."

"I am so sorry," Lade apologised.

I wasn't having it. "Go away jare."

"Sebi I said I'm sorry," Lade said, making puppy eyes at me.

My heart was melting and my anger was slipping away. But I turned my face away and pretended to wipe non-existent dust from one of the overturned tea mugs sitting in the centre of the ceramic tiled island. I had a point to make.

What point though?

"Ah, Eriife, you can vex o. Oya, I will buy that ice cream that you like."

I turned to her, trying to suppress my smile as I asked, "Which one?"

"The strawberry one, with those crispy toppings," Lade answered.

"Ehen… let them add—"

My playful instructions were interrupted when the door to the tea room opened and Sade's green head popped in.

"Oh, you are here," she said to me. "Tobi's looking for you," she added and, without waiting for my response, popped back out.

"I guess it's time for the meeting," I said with a sigh.

Lade gave me a sympathetic look. "*Pele*."

"Go away, *jor*," I said but I was no longer angry. Not that I had any right to be in the first place. "Just make sure my ice cream is ready by the time I'm done with the meeting," I added as I walked towards the door, Lade following behind.

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Chapter 4

Jay

I sat at the head of the sleek conference table, surrounded by executives from J&P Innovations. My assistant, Adanna, was also sitting in on the meeting, and so was Suleiman Abdulmalik, the Head of Operations at AbayoMart.

It had been only a couple of months since I took over as CEO of AbayoMart. The last person who ran the show, Fakunle Thomas, had been fired by the board for misappropriation of funds, poor management and so many other issues that if I started to name them, it would take a million years and I still wouldn't be done.

To be honest, my father, the one and only Otunba Akinwande Abayomi-Young, chairman of the Abayomi-Young Group, had been ready to pull the plug on the whole operations of AbayoMart. He didn't like to waste time and money on businesses he believed were doomed to fail. The success over decades of the Abayomi-Young Group was proof of how his shrewd business instincts were always right. But I had stuck my head out and convinced him to let me take over the company, personally investing my own money.

My father had shaken his head. "If I had not witnessed how far you have come, I would have called you a fool. But I hope you know what you are doing," he had said before giving his approval.

Unlike my father whose instincts worked like a compass always pointing him in the right direction, I winged it most of the time. While I have been quite successful, I am not without my fuck ups. I have just been lucky. Now, that's one thing a good businessman would never say or depend on. Businesses succeed with proper planning, strategies, consistency, and the ability to take risks. But taking risks still have to do with a bit of luck, now, don't they?

Anyway, it was either I took this big bet on AbayoMart or thousands of employees would lose their source of income and become unemployed. Over the years, AbayoMart had built a strong network for online shoppers. It was

one of the pioneers of ecommerce and logistics in Nigeria, and it had taken only one man to almost destroy everything.

It was in a bid to prevent that from happening and having to deal with multiple lawsuits that I was now sitting in the conference room at J&P Innovations to forge a collaboration that could revolutionise AbayoMart and bring us back to being the number one online marketplace in the country.

"As we all know, the digital marketplace is evolving at a rapid pace and AbayoMart can't afford to keep falling behind," I began. I didn't bother mincing words or sugarcoating anything; every businessperson worth their salt knew that AbayoMart had been sinking until I came in with my investment. And I was here to make sure that my investment would not go into the gutters.

"Our goal with this partnership is to create a seamless payment solution that enhances the shopping experience for our customers at AbayoMart."

This was the biggest problem we had. We didn't have a solid payment system or software for our users; the one we were using was being run by our team. We had hired a company to develop one for us, but somehow, the system kept crashing. Customers complained that after getting debited, their payments wouldn't reflect on the website and with no receipt and proof of payment, they couldn't get the goods they ordered. And it took several calls and visits to the bank to get their money refunded. Vendors also complained about the lack of accountability regarding funds. It was all a huge mess.

And amidst this, Fakunle Thomas' pockets were getting fatter. If I had my way, that bastard would be rotting in jail by now. But he had fled the country, and my father didn't think it was a good idea to announce just how bad it had gotten for AbayoMart.

"The world doesn't need to know all the details. Let them know only what they know. Besides, Fakunle can only run; he cannot hide," my father had said when I brought up the idea of involving the Financial Crimes Agency (FCA).

Bolaji Johnson, the CEO of J&P, nodded. He was clearly excited to be working with the Abayomi-Young Group. I didn't share his excitement though. I wanted results, good results.

"Absolutely, Jay," he said.

I lifted an eyebrow at the familiarity. Only close friends and family called me Jay; it was Jayeola to everyone else. This man must think we are friends because he got invited to an intimate dinner with the family once. But even he

must know that it was all strategically planned for us to get familiar and have a seamless business relationship, not become best friends. I guess he didn't get the memo.

"Our fintech solutions are perfectly suited to address the challenges facing ecommerce businesses like AbayoMart," Bolaji continued. It was a roundabout way of saying that he knew we were trying to avoid sinking further. Talking about *businesses like AbayoMart.*

"From the prototype that we have shared with you, you can see that our team has developed a software that streamlines the payment process and provides a secure, user-friendly experience for your shoppers. And it goes beyond just developing it. Once the software launches, we will constantly be on the lookout to see ways we can improve it according to user experience and interactions. Rest assured that we are on top of this, and every single transaction will be accounted for."

I had to admit, his overfamiliarity aside, Bolaji knew his onions, given how big J&P had grown under his leadership. He discussed various features and functionalities that the software could offer, from integrated payment gateways to real-time transaction tracking.

I nodded in approval. Things seem to be going smoothly regarding the software development, at least for now. I programmed my face to not show that I was pleased with the work they had done so far. I had learnt from one of my many *fuck ups* that showing approval too early could make your partners lazy.

"The key to success in the digital marketplace is adaptability," I remarked, my gaze sweeping across the faces gathered around the table. "By leveraging J&P's fintech solutions, we can stay ahead of the curve and continue to meet the evolving needs of our customers," I continued.

"Yes, yes." Bolaji nodded. "In addition to giving you the world's best software, we would also like to offer you the services of our content team."

"Content team?" Suleiman asked. His tone conveyed the same curiosity that I shared.

"Yes, since you are rebranding and you are trying to show AbayoMart in a brand new light," Bolaji explained.

"But we have our own team," Suleiman countered.

"Yes, and we have been seeing their efforts. And if we are being honest, in the spirit of collaboration, of course, it's not reflecting too well," Bolaji replied.

"I think we should just stick to the terms of our agreement and focus on the business at hand," Suleiman said. The slight rise in his tone indicated that he was offended.

On the other hand, I was intrigued. When it came to content and digital marketing, I was a fish out of water. I didn't even have a social media account.

"Tell me more about this team of yours," I said, overriding Suleiman's opinion.

Bolaji smiled. "Think of it as an extension of our collaboration. You don't need to discard your team but ours can work as consultants of some sort. We might not be a content marketing agency but trust me, we have the best content team in the country."

"So you say." I raised an eyebrow, not yet convinced.

"It's better I let them introduce themselves," Bolaji said. He signalled to a young lady sitting beside my assistant. She walked out of the meeting room and came back a few seconds later with two other people—a man and a woman.

My chest tightened as my eyes fully took in the woman. She hadn't seen me yet, but I recognised her immediately.

Eriife.

The woman who had entered my life so unexpectedly and exited just as suddenly. The woman I had been trying unsuccessfully to forget for the last six months.

"Ah yes," Bolaji said, with a bright smile showing how proud and enthusiastic he was about the whole business. "This is Tobi Adewale, the head of our content team, and Eriife Williams, our senior editor. And," he continued, turning to them, "this is Jayeola Abayomi-Young, the CEO of AbayoMart."

Eriife's eyes had found mine and she stood frozen like a deer in headlights while my heartbeat pounded.

Tobi was saying something, then Bolaji. I guess Suleiman also spoke at some point but I didn't hear anything they said. I only focused on Eriife.

"Sir, are you okay?" Suleiman said as he tapped me gently on my shoulder, nudging me out of my trance-like state.

"Y…ye…yes, I…I…I…am… fi…fine." I answered.

Fuck!

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Chapter 5

Jay

I was quiet all through the ride back to my office at the AbayoMart headquarters. Not that I was much of a talker anyway. But in this instance, I could not trust myself to speak for fear that I would stutter again. Adanna had gotten the memo when I replied with non-committal single words to her questions.

Suleiman had gone to the meeting in his own car, so it was just me, Adanna and the driver. Adanna usually sat in the back seat with me whenever we went out together. Our in-car meetings usually provided me with insights before and after a meeting. But this afternoon, I was not in the mood for it.

Only one thing—one person—took up space in my mind. Eriife.

That girl, that woman, that…

I took a deep breath to steady my mind and bring my thoughts under control. Relaxing against my seat, I closed my eyes.

Many people say falling in love at first sight is a myth, or a thing found only in fiction. And I agree. But Eriife….

The first time I saw her standing in those red shoes that weren't hers, the way her voice shook slightly when she spoke to me and her faux confidence when she said, "She doesn't want you, Jay, but I'm sure you already know that," I knew that this woman had come into my life to stay.

I wouldn't call it love; I didn't know her well enough for that. But she had a hold on my heart because just the thought of her made my rib cage tighten and my heart beat faster, and it is not a thing I have experienced with any other woman. And she hadn't even been bothered by my stutter, had not acknowledged it, not in reaction or in speech. This bloody stutter, the signal of my insecurities.

I opened my eyes again when the car came to a halt. We had arrived at the AbayoMart headquarters.

“Sir?” Adanna’s voice was laced with concern.

I gave her a wry smile before I stepped out of the car. With a brief nod to the doorman—I believe his name was Micheal—I dashed straight to the elevator reserved for the executives to take me straight to my office. Adanna struggled to keep up with my strides.

Finally in my office, I sank into the plush leather seat behind my desk. The meeting at J&P Innovations had been draining, both emotionally and mentally. The meeting had gone well enough, and all would have been right if not for that plot twist towards the end.

I should not have stopped keeping tabs on her. Then I would have known that she now worked at J&P and would have taken my business elsewhere.

Maybe I’m a coward, but I thought the best way to move on from a woman I had a one-night stand with and couldn’t stop thinking about was to pursue something more serious with her. Due to her misunderstanding, she left without giving me a chance to explain. So I stopped keeping tabs on her.

Out of sight, out of mind and out of bloody intel was supposed to work.

I pulled open the bottom drawer of my desk and stared at the red stilettoes sitting or was it standing elegantly, right there where I had abandoned them.

Wouldn’t it have made more sense to have thrown the shoes away since I was trying to forget her? I don’t know why I had not discarded them. Maybe I still had hope deep down in my heart that there was still a chance for this to be real.

Or maybe it was just my usual habit of not letting people go completely when they don’t want me. After all, I am a thirty-five-year-old man still holding on to the ghost of the first woman who had ever walked out on me. My mother.

My mother had an affair when I was seven and eloped with the man she loved. I saw her that stormy night when she was leaving. For some reason, on that night, I could not sleep. I had wandered out of my bedroom looking for her.

Her bedroom was empty. My father had probably been in his study. Then I saw her hurrying out of the house with a small bag. I followed, calling after her, but she didn’t look back. She pretended she couldn’t hear me as the rain poured down heavily.

She put her bag in the back seat, then paused to look at me. “This is your place, you belong here.” Those were her last words before she entered her car,

leaving me bawling, drenched to the bone, the gravel on the ground biting into my tiny, bare feet.

I watched as the lights of her car disappeared into the dark night and I could no longer hear the sound of her engine. Then slowly, I turned back towards the house like a drenched cat, only to look up at the sprawling mansion and see the silhouette of my father watching from the window of his study. He had seen all of it.

After that night, I never cried again, not even at my mother's funeral. Yeah, she never made it to her lover that night because of the storm, and in the darkness, she had driven head first into an oncoming trailer. Neither of them had seen the other until it was too late.

So yes, I have not shed a tear since then but in the place of tears was this insufferable stutter that happened whenever I was not in control of a situation, or I felt vulnerable. No other person besides my father, Big Mummy T, and my therapist knew the reason for my stutter. Most people just thought it was a thing that I had. The heir to the throne couldn't be perfect after all.

Now, as I looked at these shoes, a symbol of my short-lived connection with Eriife and a reminder of what could have been, I traced their delicate curves and wondered if Eriife was also the wrong woman for me.

And oh, there have been women, plenty of them. Sarah was the only constant one because she has been with me since childhood. She understood me the most, yet was the one who played with my feelings the most as well. Sarah was what I thought love was when I was a teenager. Then she became my back-up plan for when all else fails and the dynasty of Abayomi-Young must continue. Sure, Sarah and I used the L-word often but there was no depth to it.

But I hadn't seen or spoken to Sarah since Eriife came into the picture.

And I was yet to determine what was so special about Eriife. She was a one-night stand and more appropriately, a thief. So why couldn't I let go of her and why did seeing her again have such an effect on me, when the most connection we have had was sex, just sex?

I withdrew my hands from the shoes and pushed the drawer shut. I had to find out what it was about her that pushed my vulnerability and insecurity to the fore, that made me want to possess and consume her entire being.

Fate had done its part by bringing us together again and now it was time to do my part to nip this whole thing in the bud or make it explode. And I think I

just might have a plan for that. A small smile creeped across my face as I thought about it. I have not been this excited in a while, not even by the thought of reviving AbayoMart.

Just then, the door to my office creaked open, and Adanna stepped inside.

"Sir, you have a call waiting," she said, her voice soft and respectful as usual but with an undertone of concern. I don't think she had ever heard me stutter before and my withdrawal in the car hadn't helped.

I nodded, grateful for the distraction. "Thank you, Adanna. Please put it through to my desk," I said in a clear voice, and I could almost immediately see the worry slip off her face like a silk scarf in the breeze.

She nodded a little too enthusiastically and left the room, closing the door behind her. Adanna, my stepmother's niece, was the closest thing I had to a younger sister. She was terribly shy but the sweetest human being I know. But despite her shyness and sweetness, she stood her ground where necessary and she had a dogged way of going after what she wanted. It was those qualities that made me offer her employment, much to my stepmother's chagrin.

Temisan, my stepmother, wasn't a bad person. At least, I don't think so, but I had never forgiven her for how fast she moved in after my mother's death and how overly sweet she tried to be towards me.

Temisan always wanted to have the upper hand over everyone. She hadn't wanted Adanna to work with me because according to her, Adanna was coming to spy on her lifestyle for her mother. The way Temisan and her sister, Adanna's mother, related, one wouldn't know that they were sisters. It was understandable though, since they were from a polygamous home, with the same father but different mothers. So, their bickering was typical.

When the call ended, Adanna returned with a cup of coffee and placed it on my desk with a sympathetic smile.

"Is everything okay, Sir?" she asked, her brown eyes filled with concern.

I hesitated. Adanna was as close to me as a sister but some things were better left unsaid. "I'm fine, Adanna," I replied. "I just have a lot on my mind, and please stop with all this sir, sir thing."

Adanna began to laugh. "With the way your mood changed so suddenly, I was not sure how to address you again, Uncle Jay."

"Any way," she continued, "you know you can talk to me about anything. Unlike what Aunt Temisan thinks, you know me and my mother aren't close like that and she's the last person I'd ever talk to about you."

“I know, Adanna, and I’m fine. It just happens sometimes.”

“Okay o, if you say so.”

“Thank you, Adanna. I appreciate it,” I said.

“Any time, Uncle Jay,” she said before leaving the office.

Now that I was alone again, I began to hatch a plan to find out just how much of a wrong woman Eriife was for me.

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Chapter 6

Eriife

Life likes to play wicked, twisted games. Because tell me why, after six months of trying to forget Jay, and just when I thought I might actually be succeeding at doing so, he has to come to my office and I have to work with him. Okay, maybe not directly with him but with the content team at one of his companies. Same difference.

Ah, God, which kain wahala be this?

And the way he looked at me, there was no doubt of his disdain for me. I could feel the hate radiating from his core. I'd hate me too if I were him. I had not only turned down what he was proposing, I had also walked away from him, leaving him standing alone in my hallway. That was crass behaviour, but I was only trying to protect myself.

When it came to Jay, my brain stopped working and I allow my—as my very spiritual mother put it—carnal desires to take over. Even then in the conference room, when our eyes met, I had flashes of our night together and I could feel my vag clenching, reacting to him. If I had closed my eyes, I would have relieved every moment of that night right there.

I had to take short, calming breaths to slow my racing heart. This was the kind of effect merely looking at him had on me.

This man was in love with Sarah, though she wasn't reciprocating the feeling at the time, but there was something there and he had cheated on her with me. Sarah was a goat but no woman deserved that kind of treatment.

No, I'm not trying to pretend like I am innocent in all of this. I encouraged him, my head was in a wrong place. I wanted something different from my ordinary boring life and to be completely honest, I wanted to get back at Sarah too. I had not planned it, but God works in mysterious ways, doesn't he?

But that was all it was supposed to be, one night. Then I started getting all these feelings and ideas, like wanting to know him better, dreaming about him,

fantasising about a relationship with him, a person whose full name I didn't even know at the time. It's what I got for trying to pretend like I was a girl who could have sex without emotional attachment. There was a reason I had been with only two men before Jay and it wasn't for the lack of men.

No matter what, I still believed I made the best decision for myself that evening. Jay was the heir to a fortune that if you combined my ancestors and my future generations to come, they can never smell such fortune. That alone was enough to scare a girl like me away.

What every girl wanted was to relax and be pampered, to go on all expense paid holidays, live the baby girl soft life, but the truth ehn, *e get some kain money wey you go hear, you neva even see am o, you just hear, wey fear go catch you.*

Yes, I was afraid when he introduced himself. That alone was already making my heart work in overdrive. Then he presented those shoes to me, *as what nau?* This is what they say about rich men, he got one night and now he wants to keep me as a side piece. Because we both know that there was no way in hell or even in heaven a man like him would want anything serious with a woman like me.

Believe me, if there was an award for best in staying *delulu,* I would win the award for the most delusional girl in the world. But I'm not a fool and I wasn't born last night. He was going to keep me on the side, while he continued to pine over Sarah. Even the poor girls in the K-dramas see *shege*; the only difference is that this is real life and happy endings are not guaranteed.

And life, as you know, has improved for me since then. I don't regret my decision to walk away, even though hardly a day goes by that I don't think about Jay. But I believed that I was already getting over him. There was Tobi Adewale whom I had a massive crush on, or did I really?

And poof! All the work I had put in in the past six months had gone up in smoke.

Why, for goodness' sake, of all the billionaires and rich people in the world had J&P chosen to partner with AbayoMart? And what was the reason Tobi and I had to be present at the meeting?

Bolaji Johnson was such an overzealous person and everyone in the room could tell he had been trying so desperately hard to please Jay. If Jay opened his ass and asked Bolaji to lick it, that man would get on his knees and slobber the hell all over it.

Mtchew! Foolish man.

Jay knows where I work now and from the look in his eyes, I just know trouble is coming. And it's not just Jay, it's me, it's how my body remembers, it's how I can't stop having flashes of the night we spent together, it's how I want him again with every core of my being.

But I know there is nothing there but heartache and pain. I just hope that the hate I saw in his eyes meant he wouldn't want to touch me with a NEPA pole and not that he would make life unbearable for me. Because he was a man with money and power. And there was nothing a man like him could not do.

The rest of the week after that meeting had been torturous. I kept waiting for something to happen, for HR to call me and tell me I had been fired, or something. But nothing happened, which was even worse. I wanted to believe that I was overreacting. Not that we had uttered a word to each other, we had only locked eyes and after the meeting, I had darted out of the conference room faster than Flash to avoid any personal meeting. But the way my heart was beating and my gut was tightening, something was going to happen. I could feel it in my bones.

Even the weekend offered no solace for me. When Lade told me she was coming over, I was happy. At least, I could use her talkative self as a distraction. But as she lay on my bed, giving me one gist or the other, while I folded my laundry and arranged them in my wardrobe, my thoughts were very much still occupied by Jay.

"You, you cannot even help someone to do any work, you are just lying there, talk talk," I said as I carried a new batch of folded clothes to my wardrobe.

Lade laughed out loud. "I have not finished folding my own clothes in my house, it's your own that I will now come and be folding."

I shook my head at her. "Who will marry you like this?" I joked.

"You that can fold clothes, who has married you?" she retorted.

And I laughed because if getting married was by how well I could do house chores, I would have been married ten times over by now. Not that I wanted a man who was looking for those qualities in a wife, anyway.

"Speaking of which, Eriife," Lade said, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she rose to sit in a yoga pose on my bed, her hair bouncing as she did. "How did the rest of your week go?" she asked. But what I am sure she really wanted to know was any update with Tobi.

I sighed, knowing that there was no hiding from Lade's probing questions. "Let's just say it was… eventful," I replied cryptically, folding a shirt with more force than necessary.

Lade raised an eyebrow, sensing my reluctance to elaborate. "See this one o, you can't leave me hanging like that. What happened?"

I hesitated, unsure of how much to share. But then again, Lade was my closest confidante, the one person I could always count on to truly listen, even though she did not understand. Besides, I had already told her about what went down between me and Jay, I just hadn't told her his name yet.

"So, you know that guy I told you I had a one-night stand with?"

"Yeess?" Lade dragged the word and I could see her eyes glistening in anticipation of whatever I wanted to say.

"So you know the company that J&P is partnering with and we now have to also consult for their content team?"

"Mhmm, AbayoMart," Laded nodded. She was almost vibrating with anticipation. *This girl too like gist.*

"The CEO is who the guy is?"

Lade nearly jumped out of my bed. "As in, Jayeola Abayomi-Young, the CEO of AbayoMart? No, fuck CEO, the heir to the Abayomi-Young empire. Are you crazy?"

I nodded, feeling a knot form in the pit of my stomach. "Yes, him."

"That's whose offer you turned down? Please tell me, Eriife, don't you like good things?"

I hissed and turned to face my wardrobe. Lade's head was always in a different place.

"I shouldn't have told you about him," I said, fighting back the tears that were stinging my eyes and threatening to spill. I didn't even know why the tears were coming.

I heard Lade sigh and get out of my bed and then she walked towards me. She must have heard my voice shake. "You know I was only joking, Besides, so what you met him again on Monday? It doesn't mean anything, nothing has changed," she said softly pulling me into a hug. I let my body relax into hers as she comforted me.

"You know what you need?" Lade began.

"Uh huh," I said as I pulled away from her embrace, afraid of what she was going to suggest.

“A girls’ night out. You need to party, drink and sweat out all these boys palava. Forget Tobi, forget Mr CEO.”

“Ah, Lade, I don’t know about that one. You know I’m not a party or club kind of girl. I am still living with the consequences of the last time I acted out of character.”

“Omo, forget that one. This time, I am here with you,” she said, as she began to ransack the wardrobe I was still trying to arrange.

“Lade!”

“Abeg, let me see what we can wear inside here. I know just the right spot.”

Let me just mention now that I should have followed my gut and stayed my ass right at home and not listened to Lade. And maybe, some of the mess that happened afterwards would not have happened.

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Chapter 7

Eriife

The pulsating beat of the music reverberated through the crowded club, setting the mood for a night of excitement. Which was ironic because my last clubbing experience was horrible.

The first and last time I visited a nightclub was during my third year in the university. One of my hostel roommates, Idera, was performing at an open mic poetry event held at the club and she had begged all of us to attend to give her moral support. If I remember correctly, there was a monetary reward attached to the best performance of the night.

Idera did not win but convinced us to stay for the after party, which was really just normal club partying, so she could "dance away her sorrows".

Oh, I stuck out like a sore thumb. I just wanted to go home and crawl under the sheets on my slim student bed. But Idera's boyfriend was the one who had organised our transportation to the club and who would make sure we all got back home. So, until the entire crew was ready, I couldn't leave.

I was cold, tired and I just couldn't understand why the club was so dark and smoky or why everyone seemed so comfortable grinding against each other in the name of dancing. After pretending to know how to dance for like three minutes and be excited like the rest of the crew, I snuck off to one of the empty lounge chairs in a corner and slept off.

Guess what? Those foolish girls forgot me in the club and left.

Like, they literally left me behind. I was awoken by one of the club staff who wanted to clean up at a few minutes past 6am. I had no money to get back to the hostel and the dress I was wearing—one that I had borrowed from Idera —was not appropriate for daytime walking.

The rubbish guy who had woken me up offered to give me money to go home but he wanted to "tap current" first. I couldn't get out of that building fast enough. How I got back to my hostel unharmed is a testament to my

mother's prayers. When I arrived at my hostel, Idera and the girls were passed out cold from all the alcohol they had consumed.

The next Monday, I requested a change of room from the hostel porters. It took a while for my request to be granted but at least, I was no longer in the same room with girls who couldn't look out for me. Till today, they never knew why I changed rooms.

But this moment did not feel like that. I have known Lade for only half a year but I feel comfortable around her and I know that she will always have my back. And as we made our way through the crowd, I let go of my mental inhibitions. Tonight was about letting loose, forgetting about the worries of the week, and simply having fun.

I had chosen a sleek black dress that hugged my curves in all the right places, paired with a statement necklace and a bold red lip. You see red and black? I could never go wrong with these colours.

Finding what to wear for Lade had been a little tricky. We didn't want to go back to her house, so we went through my wardrobe. We settled on a form-fitting jumpsuit adorned with sequins that shimmered under the club lights. It had been a gift from my aunt, along with the designer perfume I had worn last Valentine. But I had not been able to wear it because it had been too big for me. On Lade, it was bold and daring, just like her.

As we made our way to the dance floor, we let our bodies sway to the beat. With Afrobeats, you will move your body by force. Unlike my first clubbing experience, no one was trying to prove that they were badder than the other, just people having uninhibited fun.

A few minutes later, we headed to the bar to order drinks and chill because try as we might, we didn't have the same energy as people in their early twenties. We would take our fun in bits. We still needed our backs in good condition to sit in front of our desks and work our day jobs, thank you very much.

At the bar, we placed our orders, two something-something cocktails. I never bothered with the names of these things or which ones tasted good; alcohol was all the same to me. Which is why I let Lade handle that part because she was the nightclub expert, even if she was being a little flirty with the hot bartender.

As he mixed our drinks, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I looked back to see Tobi standing behind me with his sexy grin.

"Aha, I thought that was you," Tobi said, his smile widening as he spoke.

"Ahn, ahn, look who we have here. Mr Tobi Adewale." Lade turned from the bartender to us, a sheepish grin on her face.

"Hi Tobi," I said quietly, ignoring the suggestive body language Lade was giving me. Just my luck that I had to meet one of the men I had come out to avoid thinking about.

Tobi looked different. His smile was easy and more relaxed, making him look even more handsome. He was dressed in blue jeans trousers and a black T-shirt that accentuated his buff muscles.

"I saw you two killing it on the dance floor from the VIP section. This your shine shine cloth was hard to miss," Tobi teased Lade but his eyes were on me.

"That's the whole point. You kuku always behave as if you don't see us back at work," Lade replied.

I nudged her with my elbow. To the best of my knowledge, she hadn't had anything to drink yet and she was already being so forward.

Tobi laughed, noticing the exchange between us. "You know beautiful women like you should be in the VIP."

"We all know the regular section is where the fun is," Lade countered, though her eyes were already scanning the VIP lounge.

Tobi chuckled. "You ehn, Lade, your shakara is too much." He gestured for us to join him and his friends. "Come on, let me introduce you to the gang."

We took our cocktails off the counter and followed Tobi. Lade had a bounce in her steps as she was excited. As for me, my heart was racing so fast and I did not know why.

As we settled into the plush couches of the VIP lounge, Tobi introduced us to his friends, Kay and Anthony. Kay was wrapped up in conversation with his date, a stunning woman who looked like she had stepped straight out of a fashion magazine, whose name I came to find out was Anita. I also learnt that she was a runway model.

Anthony's dark eyes lingered on Lade with an intensity that made my heart skip a beat. I watched as they exchanged playful banter, their laughter mingling with the music. How did Lade do it? Easily flirt with men and actually gain their attention? Like the way Anthony was looking at her as if he wanted to tear the clothes off her. In fact, the sexual tension between them was so high, I could cut it with a knife.

As the night wore on, the atmosphere in the VIP lounge grew more relaxed, fuelled by copious amounts of alcohol and the energy of the crowd.

Then things started to get weird. First, Anita got a phone call and had to leave immediately so Kay took her home. Then Anthony and Lade started making out, right there in front of me and Tobi. Was it the alcohol or was this Lade's usual behaviour? The ironic part was that the shamelessness of it thrilled me. And reminded me of my night with Jay.

This outing was officially a burst.

I had come out to forget about two men. But one of them was seated next to me and my thoughts were filled with the other.

To make matters worse, Lade and Anthony excused themselves to the bathroom, leaving me alone with Tobi. Talk about awkwardness!

God, this Lade girl just left me alone here because of *dick*. So much for trusting her. But I know deep down that Lade wouldn't actually leave this place without making sure I was alright, and all this was probably part of her grand plan to set me up with Tobi.

Tobi, who was staring at his hands and avoiding eye contact with me. The air was still awkward between us, so I picked up my glass and downed half of the contents.

"Ah, slow down o," Tobi said, finally looking at me.

I laughed, feeling the alcohol sink into my system.

"Is your friend always like that?" he asked, his expression a bit dark and unreadable. He sounded almost angry.

Was he one of those uptight strict guys? Then what was he doing at a nightclub instead of a church vigil?

I shrugged. "I don't know. You have known her longer than me. Besides, Lade likes to have her fun."

"So that's what all this is to her, just fun?"

Which one is all this question and answer like this? I shrugged again. I had no answer for him.

"So, what should we do now?" I asked instead.

Tobi was quiet for a while. With the alcohol in my system, I had almost forgotten that I asked a question.

Then he answered, "Have fun." And he kissed me.

Firstly, I was shocked as his tongue probed my mouth because it was obviously unexpected and secondly, I had seen this film before, and I didn't

like the ending.

But did that stop me from kissing him back? No.

And it did not end as just a drunken kiss.

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Chapter 8

Jay

I wanted to be anywhere but here. But when you were the sole heir to a massive fortune that has been in the family for almost a century, there were certain responsibilities you couldn't avoid. And one of them included being a cheerful guest at the birthday party of a grand aunt who wasn't aware that she was being celebrated because she was in the final stages of Alzheimer's and was sequestered at a care home.

We probably wouldn't see her again until we were informed of her death. Then it would be time to plan an elaborate funeral.

If there was anything you could count on the Abayomi-Young family for, it was that we used the littlest opportunity to party. You could blame it on being stupidly wealthy, being inherently Yoruba, and having a large extended family, but there was a party to attend almost every weekend.

One would think that I would be used to the unnecessary parties, with the doting and expectations from uncles, big mummies, cousins. But the hypocrisy of it all just grated my nerves. Because I knew what I was to these people—a means to an end. You know that saying, that you come to the Father through the Son. Excuse my blasphemy.

For some reason, they believe that I am the way to my father's heart. I have to admit that the fact that they believe that is a testament to how well my father and I kept a tight leash on our differences. Also, my stepmum, Temisan, knew how to keep it together. If it weren't for her, our charade would have fallen apart a long time ago.

Hearing me speak of her, you would think Temisan and I actually get along. But there are two critical details you need to know about Temisan: One, she loved to keep up appearances. Temisan would rather die than let the world think she had a flaw. No, I should rephrase that. If Temisan died and she found out that she died in a less than dignifying way, according to her standards, she

would badger the lord of the underworlds until he sent her back and allowed her to die in the manner and way she wanted.

And the second, Temisan was my mother's best friend. While she was alive, they were thick as thieves. But a couple of weeks after my mother's funeral, Temisan and her daughter from a previous marriage moved into our house and never left. I don't think I will ever forget the shock I felt when I woke one morning and saw Temisan sashaying down the stairs from the master bedroom dressed in one of my mother's nightgowns—one of the many clothes that she had left behind in her haste to leave her husband and her son.

I would never understand the intricacies of it—not that I wanted to, anyway. There were already a good number of things that upset me and I didn't need to add my father's twisted marital life to the list.

The open garden party was boring as usual. Tired of the whole thing, I tried to leave as stealthily as I could. But as I made my way through the crowd of guests and family, I was accosted by Big Mummy T.

"You think you are sleek, ehn, abi?" she said as she came to stand in front of me, a glass of champagne in her perfectly manicured hand.

With the way she was struggling to remain on her feet, I didn't think she should be having any more alcohol. But if there was one way to have peace in a Yoruba family, it was by never telling the elders what they could and couldn't do. Besides, Big Mummy T, also fondly called Big Mummy by us "kids", was one of the few family members I liked. No, that was inaccurate. I loved Big Mummy T; she was my favourite aunt and the closest to a mother that I would ever have.

So the smile on my face when I spoke was genuine. "You know me the best, Big Mummy."

She raised a microbladed eyebrow at me. "Why are you always running off? It's almost as if you don't like being around us."

"You know it's not like that. I just have a lot of work to do."

"And that's all you ever do, just like your father. At least you have the courtesy to attend family gatherings. Your father doesn't even bother to show up, he throws money at everything. Who here doesn't have money, or your father thinks he's the only one who has a good head for business? And why doesn't he ever pick my calls?"

"Big Mummy, I love you but I have to go," I hugged her and gave her a kiss on her cheek, which put a smile on her face. If I stayed an extra second, she

would drag me down the rabbit hole where she housed all the reasons for her discontent with my father.

"I love you too, but you are not going anywhere, at least not yet. Ahn ahn, stop running away from us, *ebi e la je*."

I gave a resigned sigh. Big Mummy was my father's eldest sister, and I knew from the moment she saw me that I would not be able to leave as easily as I wanted to. I stood there for a few minutes having what you could describe as a stare-down with her, laughter and conversation happening around us. I was pretty sure someone's fate and status in the family were being decided by the aunties as we spoke.

Finally, I lost and looked up to the calm night sky and Big Mummy laughed. And even I had to laugh. This was something we had being doing since I was a child. Whenever she wanted me to do something and I didn't want to do it, we would have a stare-down. The first person to look away, lost. And she had never lost, not once.

Big Mummy T, the one person who was in my corner after my mother died and my speech impediment began. She had moved into the mansion, leaving her own children with her husband when my father had strongly refused to let me live with her. The trauma had been a lot more bearable because she was there. Even me seeing a child psychologist had been her idea. She had only moved out after Temisan moved in. And I don't have to spell it out that Big Mummy and Temisan did not see eye-to-eye.

"Have I had too much to drink or is that witch walking towards us?"

I didn't have to turn around to know she was referring to Temisan. The bitterness in her voice told me that much. She was the only person Big Mummy showed open and unabashed hatred for. I turned around and subtly placed myself between my approaching stepmother and my fuming aunt.

Temisan approached with practised grace, her smile as dazzling as the diamonds that adorned her neck.

"Temisan, did I not tell you to always go right when you see me coming from the left, and left when you see me on your right? Or you think I won't beat you up because we are at a party?" Big Mummy threw the first verbal punch, laying to waste the effort I put into standing between them.

Temisan gave an exaggerated sigh as she dramatically curtseyed before my aunt. "Mummy T, I don't know whatever it is I must have done to upset you so

this evening but whatever it was, *e da ri ji mi,* please forgive me," she said. Her heavily stoned lace gown reflected the lights around us.

Big Mummy huffed and hissed. "Jayeola, don't leave before seeing me. I have something important to discuss with you," she said and walked away, most likely to her table where her friends and other family members she got along with were sat.

"I don't know what I did to your aunty to make her hate me so," Temisan said as she rose from her curtsey. Her face was a picture of innocence but I knew that was a façade and she was happy to have triumphed over my aunt in public.

It was common knowledge that Big Mummy and my late mother had been close and she had never been a fan of Temisan in my mother's lifetime, and even less so after her death.

"Aunt Temisan," I said with a tight smile because I knew she had not approached Big Mummy. It was me she had come for, with her matchmaking schemes.

"Stop it. You should make some effort to call me mother, at least when we are in public," she said. Someone passed by us, and she nodded in greeting.

"You know that won't happen in this life or the next, so you stop it," I answered.

She gave a long-suffering sigh. "I try my very best for you, you know that," she began, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes because Temisan never learns that her emotional blackmail never worked on me. It didn't even work on her daughter, my stepsister, Tomilola.

"You don't talk to me, you don't respect me or listen to me. You don't even know how your sister is doing, faraway in London," she continued, wiping mock tears with the back of her manicured hands.

I was tired. Too tired for Temisan's antics, and even more tired of the scent of her heavy perfume assaulting my nose. "What do you want?" I asked stiffly.

"There's someone I want you to meet," she answered immediately, abandoning her theatrics. Maybe she could see that my patience was fast running out.

"And I have told you several times that I am not interested in any your friend's daughters." It was taking a lot of effort not to snap at her.

"But you have to get married and continue the family name. You are almost forty, Jayeola; you can't keep…"

"I am still not interested."

"You know, if I didn't know of your many dalliances with women, I would have been convinced you were gay, or are those mere coverups? You know you can speak to me," she said in a pitch far from subtle, earning me stares from the aunties at the closest table to us.

"Are you being serious right now?" I asked.

Temisan smiled and dusted invisible dirt off the shoulders of my senator attire. That smile, I knew it and I did not like it.

"Don't worry, the person I want you to meet is not one of my friend's daughters, she's an old friend of yours and…" she paused, looking over my shoulders. I didn't think it was possible for her face to get any brighter than it already was but Temisan was a woman full of surprises, wasn't she?

"What now?"

I just wanted to go home and get some sleep. I see why my father hated these events, but if he wouldn't attend, I had to and if he attended, I didn't. It was rare, very rare, to see both of us in the same place at once.

I turned in the direction of what had caught her attention and my sigh deepened. Just the woman I deliberately had not spoken to in a while.

"There she is, come come." Temisan pulled the hem of my shirt as she dragged me towards the guest. I had no choice than to follow her. My chance to leave unnoticed just evaporated into thin air.

Well, to be fair, it evaporated when I ran into Mummy T, but Mummy T's badgering and Temisan's scheming were nothing compared to the antics of the woman who stood before me, bright smile dripping poison.

"Sarah," I said, none too pleased.

"Jay, meeting a ghost would have been easier than it has been to see you," she said.

"I see you had help." My gaze slid to Temisan, who smiled self-satisfactorily.

"I'll leave you two to discuss," Temisan said, walking away with pride as if she was responsible for the sun rising every morning.

"So, you won't even deny that you have been avoiding me?" Sarah accused, casually flipping her hair.

She looked gorgeous as always. No, gorgeous wasn't the word; she looked perfect. Straight hair, a nicely made-up face, bright complexion, false lashes,

false nails, nice perfume, and a green dress cut perfectly to hug her body and accentuate her curves.

Sarah stepped forward and hugged me, engulfing me in her feminine and spicy scent. My brain knew the right thing but my dick didn't and Sarah had come prepared.

I sighed. It was going to be a long night.

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Chapter 9

Eriife

I woke up with a pounding headache. I don't know how heavy drinkers do it, but waking up every morning with a hangover and a headache from hell was not something I could ever deal with. My eyes fluttered open to the dim light filtering through unfamiliar curtains. Disorientation clouded my senses as I struggled to make sense of my surroundings.

Where was I? And, more importantly, how had I ended up here?

Eii, God, have I been kidnapped? My heart skipped multiple beats as I rose suddenly to a sitting position, which was a bad idea because it made my headache worse. The veins in my temples were pulsing wildly.

How do I always end up in foolish situations like this? *God abeg.* I swear, I will finally kill this nonsense Lade girl. She promised never to leave my side.

Okay, wait… maybe the situation wasn't so bad. I remembered going to the club with Lade, let me trace it from there.

I took several deep breaths to calm down and allow my eyes adjust to the muted sunlight. Fragments of my memory began to surface, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle slowly falling into place. Lade and I at the nightclub, Lade followed man and left me and Tobi…

Eii, God, Tobi…

Lade has killed me, alcohol has finished me.

I looked down at the state of my body under the sheets. I was still in my underwear. Okay, let me be factual, I was wearing only my panties; my bra was nowhere to be found. I looked around and found it somewhere close to the door. Not too far from it was my black dress and one of my shoes.

Shit…Why do I always do this?

I didn't even act out like this when I was a teenager or in my twenties. But I had no recollection of what had happened after Tobi kissed me.

Yes, I'm practically naked, but my panties were still on me. I know that didn't make any difference, it could easily be shifted, but as I touched myself, it didn't feel like anything had happened, at least not down there.

But could I really be sure?

This was so embarrassing.

I slowly got out of bed, the weight of my hangover pressing down on me like a leaden blanket. And my mouth tasted like I imagined gutter water would taste. I breathed into my palm and inhaled it; it smelt like one, too.

Eriifeoluwa, shey you know you are a very foolish, foolish girl?

I took in the minimalist décor of the room. The scent of Tobi's cologne, from what I remembered from yesterday, lingered in the room. It had been a pleasant mix of blackcurrant and vanilla but right now, the scent nauseated me slightly, thanks to this damn hangover.

Or was it morning sickness? Did we have sex, and I was already pregnant?

Calm down, Eriife. You, of all people, know that's not how it works. Take deep breaths and get dressed first, one step at a time.

My heart pounded in my chest as I glanced down at the rumpled sheets, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment at the thought of what might have happened. I wanted Tobi but I hadn't just wanted to jump and have sex with him like I did with Jay.

I sighed, as I hurriedly picked up my clothes from the floor. Jay had somehow made his way into my mind again. But it was the truth. I had wanted something different, very different from what had transpired between Jay and me, but from the looks of it, I am not capable of making good decisions where handsome men were involved.

As I put my dress on, I made a mental note to get a morning after pill from the pharmacy close to my house. I had never used it before because I had heard of how it could mess up one's hormones. But I did not have a choice at this point, I could not have a repeat of what had happened the last time.

Yes, I might have omitted one important, tiny detail. Two weeks after I turned Jay's ludicrous offer down, I found out I was pregnant. We had used protection but I just had to find myself in the 2% of people who got pregnant despite using a condom.

I did what I had to do. It's not the proudest decision I have ever made and I don't like to think or talk about it. It was what it was. Life, right?

Anyway, putting my feet into my heels, my purse in hand, I took in a deep breath. I wasn't going to take any chances; I would also get tested for STIs just for good measure.

But shit, this was a shitty position to be in. I hated the uncertainty and I hated myself right now.

As I left the room, I was greeted by the warm smell of coffee, and oh, God, it smelled like heaven.

Tobi was standing in the kitchen—he had one of those apartments that was now becoming popular in Lagos, where the kitchen opened into the living room—a warm smile playing at the corners of his lips. The last thing I wanted to see now was a smiling Tobi. I couldn't let myself be disarmed.

But what right did he have to look so good early in the morning? He looked relaxed and sated…maybe.

No, don't think about that. But he must have taken a shower; he was wearing a clean, dark brown shirt, and he had on a white apron with a red inscription, "Kiss the chef", on it.

How cliché.

"Morning," he said, his voice soft and inviting. "I hope you slept well."

I tried to find any hidden meaning in the words. When he said "slept well", did he mean sleep, or did he mean *sleep*?

This overthinking was not good for my headache. I should just put myself out of my misery and ask him if anything happened between us last night. But how would I ask him that question without looking like the fool that I already felt like?

Tobi's smile deepened when I didn't answer. He poured me a cup of coffee.

"Take this," he said as he walked towards me. My eyes went to his legs, those thick thighs he flaunted in the shorts and the stupid short apron that he was wearing. I swallowed hard. Maybe I deserved all the things happening to me.

"You'll feel better," he assured me as I tentatively took the mug from him.

"Thanks," I said and immediately regretted it. But if he smelt my rancid morning breath, his face didn't show it and his smile didn't waver.

I quickly took a sip from the mug, and then another and another, all the more to douse my mouth odour with the smell of coffee.

"Slow down," he said, his eyes taking me in for the first time.

“So you were just going to leave without seeing me? Just like that?” But there was no malice in his voice; if anything, he sounded amused.

“Please, there’s no way I could have missed you in this gigantic space you have here.”

If he was playing it cool, I could play it cool too.

“Ah right,” he said with a laugh. “I knew you would try to pull a stunt like that, so I got up early to make breakfast.” He beckoned me to the table that he had already set.

As I walked to the table, I used the opportunity to take in his space. I had been too paranoid to take a good look at the bedroom, but I had to admit that I was impressed by how neat his apartment was.

And he was a content creator through and through; it showed in the décor of his home, with the walls being satin white. And there was a tripod in one corner of the living area. The lights that lined the POP ceiling were blue and gave the house a comely feel. There were two large paintings, one in the living room, the other in the dining area. The one in the dining area drew more attention, just facing the table that you could not miss it.

It was an obscene painting of a woman, and the obscenity was more than her nakedness. It was in the look on her face. There was something wrong about her eyes, they were open but they didn’t look like she was awake. The painting made me feel uncomfortable.

I looked away to find Tobi looking at me. He was no longer smiling, and the expression on his face was unreadable.

I smiled to ease the awkwardness. “Oh, you have made quite a feast,” I said.

His smile returned and he pulled out the dining chair for me to sit.

“Oh, ever the gentleman,” I said.

“You have no idea how much of a gentleman I can be,” he replied as he started to dish the food. He had prepared boiled yam and fried eggs with baked beans and sausages.

“Wow,” I said, setting down the mug of coffee on the table. He cleared it and replaced it with a glass of juice.

“It’s fresh orange juice, I made it myself,” he beamed with pride.

“You made it yourself?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I like my things fresh. There are a lot of contaminated products out there that aren’t fit for consumption,” he answered as he took his own seat and served his food.

“There are several layers to Tobi Adewale,” I said, pleasantly surprised. My unease about whether we had sex the previous night was temporarily forgotten.

“Funny you should say that,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I paused, forkful of yam and eggs midway to my mouth.

He sighed. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said. “But…”

“If you feel like I’ll take it the wrong way, then please don’t say it.” I didn’t need to hear anything that would make me more upset than I already was.

“Okay,” he said, putting his hands up. The curious look on his face had returned.

Something was off about Tobi. I had not really noticed it at work since our conversations were mostly about work. Then there was my silly crush on him that would not have allowed me to notice anything else about him. But there was something off and I couldn’t place it. To be honest, I didn’t even think I wanted to know.

Maybe that was what God wanted me to come and find out with this whole mess. I didn’t want any baggage.

I bit into the eggs and the burst of flavours immediately made me question my resolve. Maybe I should date him so he could cook for me.

“This is so good,” I said as I swallowed.

“You have my mother to thank for me being a good cook.”

I burst out laughing, forgetting my manners. “Don’t people usually say something like, ‘even if I do say so myself’ when they compliment themselves?”

“That’s for humble people, I am not one of them.”

“I thought you said you were a gentleman,” I countered.

“I didn’t say I was a humble gentleman.”

“Oh please,” I laughed.

That was how the rest of the morning went, with light banter and delicious breakfast, and some of the tension in my body eased. I avoided looking at the painting on the wall just above me, and I knew he watched me avoid the painting but he didn’t comment on it and neither did I.

But the artwork was burned into my memory, and long after I returned to my house, it still made me feel very uncomfortable. Even the fact that I couldn’t remember what had happened after our kiss was a giant, waving red

flag because in all the times I had been drunk, I had never had a record of memory loss.

I couldn't accuse Tobi of anything because I couldn't remember anything, and he had made me breakfast in the morning. It could be because of guilt or he was being a gentleman. But whatever it was, I was sure I would not be drinking with him again, and I most definitely won't ever be stepping foot into his house again.

And just like I did with all the unpleasant things in my life, I buried the whole encounter in the deepest part of my mind, to be forgotten forever. Even though the whole thing left a bitter taste in my mouth and settled badly in my stomach.

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Chapter 10

Jay

Eriife was about to kill me. Maybe not in her actions, but her eyes definitely spoke murder.

"Why are you doing this?" Eriife asked. She had refused to sit since she walked into my office. I had expected that she would be angry, but I had not expected her to walk into my office with cold, calm, and collected fury.

And even that turned me on. I was glad to be sitting behind my desk because if I could not control my thoughts, I could at least hide the bulge straining against my trousers.

"You should already know the answer to that question," I answered, keeping my demeanour as cool as possible.

"No, I do not know the answer to the question and I would like you to kindly explain to me why I got to work this morning, a Monday morning that's supposed to be as ordinary as Monday mornings come, and I was summoned to Bolaji's office to be told that I now work here and I'm to report directly to you."

With all the words she had just spoken, her voice did not go any higher. If Adanna walked in now, she would assume we were having a normal conversation and Eriife wasn't on the verge of putting a bullet in my head—if she had a gun.

But I could tell from her cold stare and the way her chest heaved, ever so slightly, that she was doing her best to restrain her anger. It was interesting to learn that she wasn't a person who was loud when angry. What more interesting things would I learn about her before all this was over?

"It is exactly as Bolaji said," I answered.

"I now work for you?" she said the words slowly, almost as if repeating made them more believable.

"Yes, you do," I answered again with casual nonchalance.

"As what now?"

There it was, the slight rise in her voice. What would it take to make her lose the hold she had on her temper?

"As the head of my PR team."

"Did I ask you to give me a job? Do I look like I'm starving? What right do you think you have to just come into my life and turn everything I have worked so hard to get upside down like this and all for what?"

She was almost shaking now.

I got to my feet and walked around my desk towards her. "You started this game of upending lives, or have you forgotten?"

She took a step back. "What, because I said no to being your side piece, that's how I scattered your life? Are you being serious?"

She had no idea.

I folded my arms, and we watched each other for a while. She was dressed in a beige long sleeved chiffon shirt tucked into a black pencil skirt, with black pointy heels almost the same height as the red shoes that sat in my drawer. Her hair was braided into a similar style as the night we first met, but this time, instead of letting some strands fall to the side, she packed the brown coloured braids into a bun.

Unlike that night too, her face was void of makeup, and I could properly observe it. She had really nice skin. I didn't know if that was due to good genes or a good dermatologist, but I was willing to bet that it was the former. Her lips were her most prominent facial feature, full and wide, with a strong jawline that tapered to a pointy chin, and her eyes… Those large almond-shaped eyes now staring at me, full of contempt, were striking and expressive.

That night, I knew what she wanted before she suggested it, and the day she turned me down, I knew she was going to before she spoke. Her eyes said a million words before her mouth could speak one.

I knew her body, knew the shape of her breasts, what she tasted like and how warm she felt, how rightly her body fit with mine, but what I did not know was her, who she was beyond the physical attraction. And why I reacted so strongly to her.

I hadn't stuttered in months before the first time I met her, but I did that night, and I had to fight to put myself together, and then again at the office. What was it about her that made me feel vulnerable and yet somehow at

peace? I had fallen asleep right beside her that night, and it was the first time in a long time I had slept without using sleeping pills.

I had accepted myself for who I was, a person who would never truly be complete, and I would have married Sarah Bature to continue the family dynasty. I once played with the idea of love with Sarah, but we both knew it wasn't the real thing.

But then Eriife came into my life one night and never left. She has lived rent free in my head for the past six months. So, yes, Eriife was the one who had turned my life upside down and I wanted to know why.

"Are you just going to keep staring at me like that?" she asked.

"I'm thinking of ways to convince you to work for me," I answered.

This time, she laughed at my response, a laugh that didn't reach her eyes. "I know you rich people like to do things differently from others but don't you think that is what you should have done first before getting me fired from my job, a job I love?"

"Bolaji fired you?" My left eyebrow lifted of its own volition because I was genuinely surprised.

"Are you being serious, Jay?" she asked. It was the first time she spoken my name and I loved the way it sounded from her lips.

"Okay, look, I didn't ask him to fire you, but we both know that Bolaji can be a bit overzealous."

She scoffed at that.

"I had only asked him to loan you to me for three months, and I just asked him yesterday when we met at the gym—"

"You asked him to loan me to you, am I an object? Am I something that you people think you can just pass around? Besides, do labour laws not mean anything to the two of you?"

She said that last bit and we stared at each other for a moment before we laughed because we both knew that the possibility of the law getting involved was almost non-existent. But the laughter soon died and she resumed glaring at me.

"At this point, I have a feeling that there's nothing I can say that will not get you angry. But what if I told you that I'll be paying you five times your annual salary, just to work with me for three months?"

"You want to pay me thirty million naira just to work with you for three months?" She didn't sound impressed.

"You don't like money?" I found myself asking against reason.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to pay me to work for you when you could just leave me alone and we could pretend that we have never met before?"

"Because you interest me and there is something I am trying to figure out about you and myself?" That was about as honest as I could be with her for now.

She scoffed. "Is that a roundabout way of telling me that you want to sleep with me again?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Eriife," I said, leaning against my desk, but her suggestion made the bulge I had struggled to keep down in my pants swell again. Thank God she was looking at my face; otherwise, she'd think I was a pervert.

The truth was that if I had my way, I would have spread her on my desk, her skirt pushed all the way up to her waist with one leg resting on my shoulder while I feasted on her. I still remembered how delicious her nectar tasted.

I fought the urge to lick my lips at the memory but damn, it was so vivid I could almost taste it. I had to remind myself that this was not the point of this whole business. Or maybe it was the whole damn point. Why do I keep wanting her after just one night and her blatant refusal of me?

"What, don't tell me you are disappointed," I said, laughing. "Do you want me to fuck you again, Eriife? Is that what you want?"

God, what am I doing? Why am I trying to make my situation worse than it already is?

This time, she rolled her eyes. "If you would stop being crude, Jay, I would appreciate it."

"Ah, so now you want to be modest—"

"Seriously, what is this all about? What do you want from me?"

"I just told you and you don't believe me."

"You didn't tell me anything Jay, nothing that I can work with," she said, letting out a whoosh of breath. She sounded frustrated.

I liked watching her, the way her emotions changed, how she struggled to keep everything under control. I enjoyed watching the story that her eyes were showing me.

"And if I refuse, Jay, what then?"

"Then I'll have you arrested for theft," I said point blank.

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"You see, not only did you steal shoes not meant for you, which cost thousands of dollars, you also stole a very expensive invite to an exclusive restaurant. Now, you might not be able to use your 'labour laws' against me but I can certainly use the law to my advantage."

"I did not take you for a man who was so cheap."

"Eriife," I replied, rising to my full height, "I can be whatever kind of man I want to be as long as it gets me what I want."

"Do we have a deal?" I asked when she said nothing and continued to glare at me.

"Do I have a choice?" she said through clenched teeth.

Though I suspected she had not asked the question expecting an answer, I answered anyway. "No, you don't. I expect you to resume work fully, tomorrow. I'll give you the day off, and I'll have your job contract sent to your email."

She scoffed again. "Oh, how magnanimous of you, Your Eminence, to give me a day off."

Her sarcasm made me laugh.

"But since we are going to do this and you are not giving me a chance to say no, then I want ten times my annual salary, not five."

"I thought I just made it clear that you are not in a position to negotiate."

"And you have also made it clear, that you really really really want me to work with you. You want something from me, I don't know what it is but it is sure as hell not something I can give you if I am imprisoned." Now, it was her turn to be direct.

Shit. She was a good negotiator.

"Eight, then, not ten. And I won't go any higher than that."

"Good. We have a deal."

"So, you do like money, after all."

"Good day, Mr Abayomi-Young. I'll expect my work contract as you have said." She turned on her heels and left the room, leaving behind her soft jasmine scent.

Getting to know what Eriife means to me had come at a higher cost than I had imagined. She had seen my desperation and used it to her advantage. A

smart woman.

But I had learnt two things from my brief encounter with her this morning; one, that I enjoyed watching her face. Her eyes captivated me, almost as if she pulled me into her being by looking at me. When I first met her, I had thought she had beautiful eyes. I still think her brown eyes are beautiful, but striking would be the most appropriate word to describe them.

And two, she was direct. With Eriife, there was no pretence, no coyness. I didn't know what to make of it but it was something new, different from what I was used to. If I continued with this, how many more different things would I find out? Or was I playing with fire by keeping her close?

One thing was sure, I wasn't backing out of this little experiment that I had started.

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Chapter 11

Eriife

"How did everything go wrong within the space of one week?" I muttered to myself as I walked out of Bolaji Johnson's office that Monday morning.

I had been carefully putting my life together, and I was proud of how far I had come these past six months. Now, it seemed like everything I had worked so hard to build was about to fall apart like a house of cards.

Bolaji had told me I was required to resume at the AbayoMart Headquarters, and when I refused, he fired me, straight up, without hesitation. I had stood in his office in shock for a couple of seconds before salvaging what was left of my pride and walking out.

The weekend that was supposed to ease my frustrations had turned out to be a weird one. Lade had left me, knowing how anxious I was about a one-night stand. I hadn't even totally minded that, to be honest. I was the one who had stupidly gotten drunk and gone home with Tobi. I was the one who could not remember what had happened or not happened between Tobi and me.

But Lade had not called once or even texted to know if I got home okay. I called her, even sent several text messages because I was beginning to panic. After all, she was the one who had gone to the bathroom with a man we didn't know.

After I got home on Sunday, I ran my phone down trying to reach her. I had played different scenarios in my head, so many what ifs. I would have gone to her house to check if she was okay and her phone had broken or something. But it hit me unpleasantly that while she knew my house, I didn't know hers.

In fact, I didn't know anything about her, other than her name, where she worked—obviously—and her phone number.

With little else to do, I had finally gone to bed. But my sleep was fitful to say the least. I kept turning around. Finally, at 2am, I woke up and tried calling her again. No response.

I couldn't sleep and I sure as well couldn't even work. So I continued a Korean drama I had been watching on Netflix until my alarm rang at 5am. I got up, eyes swollen from lack of sleep, to prepare for work.

Tell me why I got to work this morning and I was greeted by several surprises, the first one being that Lade was at work before me. She was sitting at her desk and her face lit up when she saw me.

She was the only one in the office space and I marched up to her.

"Is your phone broken?" I asked her, ignoring her smile and the cheerful way she sang my name.

"No, why?" Her tone carried curiosity, as if she found my question strange. She picked up her phone and waved it.

"So your phone is not broken, and you are not dead and abandoned in a ditch somewhere?"

"Ahn ahn, Eriife! What kind of question is that?"

"Good to know," I said and walked back to my desk.

Lade followed me. "Eriife, talk to me, did I do something wrong?"

I paused in the middle of settling down for the day and took several breaths, trying to rein in my anger before I spoke again.

"Lade, you are asking me if you did something wrong. Did you not see my calls and texts?"

Lade's face visibly relaxed. "Is that why you are angry?

"Is that why I am so angry?" I repeated, almost as if I was trying to convince myself that those were the words Lade had just spoken.

"Eriife—" Lade began but I raised a finger, cutting her off.

"Let me explain to you how wrong what you did was because you don't seem to get it. First, you dragged me to that club, saying I needed to let out some steam and you will be with me so I can forget about all my man troubles. Then you left me and followed a man. For a full day, you didn't even text me to let me know you were safe or to check if I was safe and then I texted you and called you and you didn't pick up or reply my messages and you stand here asking me if that's why I was so angry? Do you realise how dangerous on multiple grounds what you did was?"

Lade gave a sigh as if she was exasperated. "Eriife, you know you are overreacting. You always do. Yes, I went with Anthony. After the whole bathroom stuff, we wanted more of each other and we decided to take it to his place. So as not to be distracted, we turned off notifications on our phones. We

spent the whole weekend together. Can't you see how my face is glowing, ehn? Instead of you to be happy for me and ask me for gist, you are here getting angry. Besides, you were with Tobi. What could have gone wrong?"

"Eii, Jesus! Are you listening to yourself? You followed a man you didn't know home and you turned off notifications on your phone. Are you not a Nigerian? Don't you know how bad and dangerous things are, especially for women?"

Lade sighed again. "Fine, I'm sorry I didn't return your calls or reply your text."

"No, you are not sorry. You don't even think what you did was wrong!"

In that moment, I began to consider how well I truly knew Omolade. Was she always this reckless? Was this the kind of friendship I'd have to endure with her? This whole thing negated the person I knew Omolade to be and I didn't know how to handle it.

Lade laughed. "To be honest, I'm not. I had such an amazing time last weekend and I left you with Tobi. I was expecting to hear the same thing or did Tobi not make a move?"

I opened my mouth to say something but Sade walked into the office. She was followed by another staff member, and I knew that for that morning, our conversation was over. Lade knew it too, as she tapped me lightly on my shoulder and turned back towards her desk.

And now, it was my turn to sigh. I had spent the part of my morning I normally used to pray and prepare mentally for the day to argue with Lade, if you could call that an argument, and the whole thing left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Lade was off, something was off about her, or maybe it was just me reading meaning into things because I was angry. Or maybe this was who Lade really was and I was just seeing it.

Whatever the reason, I didn't like how it made me feel. There was still the remnants of my feelings about what happened with Tobi over the weekend. I was trying to bury it but it didn't want to stay buried.

I pushed those thoughts aside and tried to focus on work. I found it a good thing that Tobi had taken the day off for some reason. At least, I didn't have to see him.

I was just wrapping up the morning's meeting when I got a call from the CEO's office that he wanted to see me.

And that's how another surprise was dumped on my laps.

Damn Jay and his stupid multi-million-dollar family empire for trying to ruin my life.

"Why does your face look like this?" Lade, who had been waiting outside Bolaji's office, asked me. I didn't remember Lade following me upstairs. Maybe she had her own business to attend to. But Lade was the last person I wanted to see. Not after what had happened that morning

"Lade, please get out of my way, I don't have time for you this morning." Of course, Lade did not get out of my way. Instead she followed me out of the reception area, all the way to the elevator.

"Are you still angry about what happened this morning?" she asked me as I pressed the elevator's button.

When I didn't answer, she continued, "I heard Bolaji called you to his office. You know I can't resist good gist, that's why I came upstairs."

At that, I turned to Lade. "You followed me upstairs, left your work just for gist?"

The elevator door opened and we stepped in. "Oh, I love a good story but it's not sweet if it's not real," Lade said, laughing.

I didn't find that funny at all; in fact, I found it weird. I enjoyed good gossip (aka gist); what girl didn't? But Lade's own was bothering on obsession. Why hadn't I noticed it before now?

"You know, you still haven't told me if anything went down between you and Tobi," she said, as I pressed the button for the fourth floor and then the ground floor.

"Ground floor?" Lade looked at me. "Where are you going?"

"AbayoMart Headquarters," I answered without thinking and the way Lade's eyes widened with excitement, I wished I hadn't told her.

"Why?" she asked.

"To deal with Trouble," I answered.

To my relief, the elevator stopped and opened on the fourth floor, meaning Lade had to get out before she could ask any more questions.

I was going to deal with Trouble bigger than Lade's obsession with gossip, or so I thought.

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Part Two

You make space in my mind, see
Always thinking of you
- Dwin, The Stoic and Rhaffy, "Without Your Love"

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Chapter 12

Eriife

The first time I visited AbayoMart headquarters, I had been too pissed to take in the building and its surroundings. It was located in Victoria Island, two streets away from J&P, which was why I was able to storm all the way there yesterday without thinking twice.

I hadn't even considered what would have happened if I had been turned away at the gate, because who walked into a company's headquarters and demanded to see the CEO without an appointment if they weren't mad?

Well, anger was a form of madness. And I sure as hell hadn't been in the right state of mind when I left J&P.

When one of the security officers at the gate asked if I had an appointment, I lied. I can still picture the dubious look he gave me before putting a call through to the CEO's office.

"One Ms Eriife Williams for the CEO," he said into the receiver, still eyeing me like I was a broad daylight thief. Those few minutes I waited while he listened were with bated breath. By then, the madness in my head was already calming down and I was now rethinking my life's choices.

Why did I take those damned shoes?

Okay, let me not lie, let me not steal, I don't regret stealing those damned red shoes one bit. If I hadn't, I would still be working for that rubbish Sarah. Eh, God forbid!

And I sure as hell did not regret that one night with Jay, not with all the multiple orgasms he had given me, orgasms I still dream about. God forgive me.

I knew what I was mad about; it was the lack of control over my life. Who the hell did Jay think he was to call the shots over me like that?

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the security guard put down the telephone and permitted me to enter the compound.

All that had been yesterday.

Now, I had slept and my brain had calmed down, after seeing the contract that Jay had had sent to my email, of course. I had read the document over and over. There had been nothing out of place in it; it looked like an ordinary work contract, except for the giant compensation contained in it.

That he had agreed to the amount I requested for had scared me. He wanted something from me because why else would he pay me sixteen million naira monthly for the three months I was to work with him? If I was a yahoo girl, a fraudster, I don't think I would make that much. From five hundred thousand naira to sixteen million?

Abi, does he want to use me for money rituals? Because all these billionaires always have one skeleton in their cupboard; at least, that's what all the Nollywood movies I watched growing up taught me. Was I going to become a typical example of why greed was bad? Would I end up in a wardrobe in a secret room in his house, with a calabash on my head, vomiting money from my mouth?

Calm down, Eriife.

If he wanted to use me for money rituals, he'd had the perfect opportunity to do so six months ago, when he was a stranger to me and I had followed him to a hotel and had the best night of my life.

This had nothing to do with money ritual, or at least, I hoped not. He wanted something from me, he had admitted that much. I didn't think it was anything sex related, judging by the cold way he had looked at me in his office the previous day. He had been all business.

Whatever it was, I hoped it was something I could give, and I certainly hoped it didn't involve me vomiting money from my mouth because damn… If I had this money, I would be set for life. I would not have to work for anybody again in my life, and I'd finally be able to settle down and write only the stories that matter to me.

It was with all these thoughts in my head that I appended my signature electronically and sent back the contract.

Capitalism was truly a bastard. Because I had been fuming when I left J&P yesterday, prepared to tell Jay to go to hell, despite the risk of becoming unemployed. I had even upped the amount he had offered just to throw him off.

But here I was, stepping out of the cab that brought me to the front of AbayoMart headquarters, ready to work my butt off for that forty-eight million naira.

Maybe this was destiny. And who was I to go against destiny?

Yeah, right, Eriife, anything to make yourself ignore the giant waving red flag that all this is.

* * *

I wish I could say that my first day at AbayoMart was uneventful and I didn't even see Jay because he was busy with some CEO work or something.

It had started that way. Pretty normal. After I was allowed in without much ceremony unlike the previous day, I went straight to the HR's office which wasn't hard to find, thanks to the helpful front desk receptionist, Lydia.

Taiwo, the HR personnel I met, had been cheerful and bubbly. Despite how professionally she was dressed in a black suit, her stripped white and navy blue shirt neatly tucked into the pants, and pointy heels that clicked against the tiled floor like mine, a smile brightened her face. With dark skin that shone like glass, low cut curly dark hair and bright lipstick, she looked the opposite of what I thought the head of HR at a place like AbayoMart would look like.

And I know that looks can be deceiving but this woman, who was probably in her forties and had a bounce to her steps as she showed me around the building, didn't look intimidating. She could probably fire me without batting an eyelid if the need arose. But my first impression of her was warm and welcoming and I liked that.

"So Ms Eriife Williams, can I call you Eriife?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, returning her smile. "And I can call you Taiwo?"

"Absolutely," she answered. "Come, come, let me show you around the office. You'll meet the team you'll be heading and then we can get through the rest of the onboarding process." She motioned for me to follow her out of her office.

I thought J&P was an improvement on the cubicle that my former boss, Sarah, called an office building. But AbayoMart HQ dwarfed J&P.

The architecture from the outside alone rose gracefully against the city skyline, tall and proud like an emperor looking down at his subjects. The

reception area was grand like it was that of a hotel and not an ecommerce headquarters.

Taiwo showed me the meeting rooms, the board room, there was even a wellness centre complete with a gym, a yoga studio and relaxation rooms. One thing about life was that you had to step out of your comfortable circle where life had planted you, whether by circumstance or by choice, to truly see the world. A different reality existed outside the one you knew, that was a fact.

I had to struggle not to follow Taiwo around slack-jawed and tongue hanging out like a dog at how different and modern the AbayoMart HQ was. It sure as hell did not look like a company that was about to go under.

Finally, we got to the workspace of the PR team. Like the one I had occupied at J&P, it had an open-plan layout. Desks were arranged in clusters, with glass partitions that allowed natural light into the entire floor, creating a bright and airy atmosphere.

"Hello Team!" Taiwo sharp voice, followed by the clap of her hands, startled me out of my mesmerism, gaining my attention and that of the other people in the office.

"This is Ms Eriife Willams, the temporary head of the PR team," she said, introducing me to both the PR team members and the content team members.

Unlike Taiwo, their welcome was ice cold. They didn't hide their disdain for my presence at the office. The position was probably meant to pass to someone among them but their CEO had brought in an outsider.

As I scanned their impassive faces, I did a double take when my eyes met Tobi's and he winked at me. My heart skipped multiple beats and it was not for the reasons it used to when I saw him before. This time, it was fear.

Fear for what, I didn't know. But after that weekend with Tobi, that awkward breakfast with the horrible painting hanging over us, something had changed in my feelings towards him. I had completely forgotten that we were supposed to be consulting for the AbayoMart content team if I was still at J&P.

Jesus! So much had happened in the space of one week. I still hadn't cleared out my desk at J&P. I could ask Lade to do it for me. Damn, there was still my unfinished conversation with her.

I hadn't had the chance to recover from my surprise, when the petite lady Taiwo had introduced as Nnenna, who was a member of my team, exclaimed.

"Oh shit!"

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Oh shit!” she exclaimed again, looking at her phone. “Make it stop!”

“What’s going on?” I found myself asking the question that was in the eyes and on the lips of everyone.

She looked up at me, just as Timilehin, the lanky social media manager, said, “AbayoMart is trending.” He was also looking at his phone and his tone implied that it was not for a good reason.

“What is happening?” I asked again as I opened the X app on my phone, which I rarely used because that place was just full of toxic trolls hiding behind a keypad. Sure enough, AbayoMart was number one on the trend list.

TechBoss had released a shocking story saying that AbayoMart had suffered a massive data breach, exposing millions of customers’ personal and payment information. And it was alleging that we—I can’t believe I was already thinking in “we”—leaked this data to third party marketers without users’ consent.

“Talk about a fucking welcome party,” I swore before I could help myself.

“Pardon me,” I apologised but the faces looking at me didn’t care about my language. They were looking to their new PR lead to take charge of the situation.

Lucky me, I suppose.

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Chapter 13

Jay

"You've got to be kidding me," I said to no one in particular. The entire PR team sat across from me in my office. My pulse was hammering in my temples as I stared hard at the solemn faces, who were definitely not kidding.

With AbayoMart, there was always one problem or the other. We were finally resolving the whole payment gateway issue with J&P's help, and now this. Each pair of eyes avoided contact with mine, except Eriife. Her eyes seemed to be accusing me, and for a moment, I almost felt guilty for bringing her into this mess. But for the amount of money I was paying her, she didn't have the right to complain.

Don't lie to yourself. You know why you are really paying her, and it sure as hell isn't to clean up your company's messes.

That was the problem. I had doubts that Eriife would be able to handle a problem of this magnitude.

Fuck you, Fakunle Thomas.

Though it wasn't confirmed yet, my gut told me he was behind this. I knew it like I knew the sun would always rise from the east. The man had always been a snake, and this was his final act of sabotage before he had slithered away. If my father had allowed me to go after him like I wanted to, we would at least have someone to present to the public, someone to take the blame for this mess.

We had to act fast and quickly, or that person would be me, and all the work I had put into reviving AbayoMart would go to waste. The exposed information wasn't just a minor slip-up; it was an intentional act and a catastrophe that could ruin AbayoMart's reputation, or whatever was left of it. And God in heaven knew I was tired of cleaning up Fakunle's messes.

But the biggest problem now was that it spelt doom for our impending collaboration with Glow. If our collaboration with J&P would make our

customers and vendors trust us again with their money, Glow would bring in an influx of new customers in the beauty industry. According to our market researchers, Korean skincare was the new rave, and Glow was one of the leading companies in that industry.

They were yet to break into the African market; we were trying to get them to sell exclusively through us, at least for the first year in Nigeria. Now, this blatant breach of trust and bold-faced crime was happening. Koreans are super sensitive about public opinion. So, getting Glow on board had just gotten ten times harder.

Perfect.

"We need a plan, sir," Taiwo, the head of HR, said, her voice breaking through my chaotic thoughts. She had apparently been in the content department introducing the new head of PR when the disaster broke out.

"Thank you very much for stating the obvious, Taiwo." I didn't mean for my words to come out as cold and biting as they did but the situation certainly didn't allow for niceties and calmness now, did it?

And there was also the fact that even in this situation, I was distracted by Eriife, who was still looking at me like she was going to kill me. Those big eyes —God, those eyes—held a fire that was hard to ignore and it made another part of me hard.

I spent one Valentine night with the woman I wasn't supposed to and I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Now, I was on a mission to find out what she truly meant to me beyond the sex and wild night and why the hell she reminded me of my mother, when the only similarity between them was that they both left me standing alone. The former in the rain and the latter in the hallway of a sorry excuse of an apartment building that should have been demolished years ago.

Did Eriife still live there? I doubt she did.

I needed to focus, yet in the middle of a disaster that could wreck my company and probably send me to prison, I was thinking about just how perfect her mouth had been around my cock and how warm and wet it had felt.

Her shirt had two open buttons, and I was fighting hard to keep my eyes off her cleavage. The teardrop pendant on the thin silver necklace she was wearing sat pretty in the middle of—

For God's sake, I had to stop thinking like a pervert.

"Eriife, you heard Taiwo, we need a plan," I snapped, my voice harsher than I intended again. And again, I justified the need for the cruelty on the data breach. Though, at this point I was angrier with myself than anyone else.

But Eriife, unlike Taiwo, didn't flinch. Instead, she met my gaze head-on.

"Jay—" she began, then paused to take a breath before correcting herself. But the informal use of my name already earned her curious looks from the others which, if she noticed, she did not acknowledge.

"Sir, we are still investigating the specifics, but—"

"Investigating? We don't have time to investigate. Our customers' data is out there, exposed. We need immediate damage control."

"We are aware of the urgency," she all but shot back. "The article by TechBoss has already gained and continues to gain traction. And right now, we should be working on putting out a statement, but we are meeting with you."

This time, Emeka, the media relations specialist, looked at her like she had grown two heads. Emeka was supposed to take Eriife's position if I hadn't brought her in after the previous PR lead resigned. I'm sure he harboured some animosity towards her, but he would have to bear with it for three months.

"Are you saying I am keeping you from doing your jobs?"

Eriife didn't answer, not with her mouth, she didn't but her eyes, oh, they said a lot.

"I don't need a reminder of what must be done," I retorted, looking away from her to Emeka, to Timilehin, the social media manager, to Nnenna, the content writer, to Taiwo and finally back to Eriife. "What I need are solutions."

My eyes lingered on her eyes for a minute—a minute too long.

"We need to regain our customers' trust," Emeka said cautiously. "A public apology, a compensation package—something to show we're taking this seriously."

"Of course, we need that," I said, exasperated. "But how do we ensure this never happens again? How do we make sure our reputation doesn't take a fatal hit?"

Eriife's voice cut through the rising tension. "First things first."

Everyone turned to look at her as she stood up. Whatever she wanted to say, she probably felt she would get through to us if she addressed us like she was doing a presentation. She leaned slightly towards me, and not only did I

get a good view of her cleavage, but her soft jasmine scent also overpowered me. Before I could stop myself, I closed my eyes and inhaled.

I was lucky and damn grateful that the others had their attention focused on her, and no one noticed what I had done, or that would have been awkward as hell.

"First, immediate public reassurance," she said as she turned to face us. "From what I have observed, since I'm new here, there seems to be no doubt that the data leak happened. And it seems that you might even know who is responsible for it." On that last part, her eyes lingered on mine.

She paused a bit and when no one countered her, she continued, "We need to address this head-on and regain customer trust. Second, and this goes without saying, we need to tighten our internal data security measures and ensure this never happens again."

"And how do you propose we regain customer trust?" I asked, intrigued despite my frustration. She hadn't said anything of import yet, but the way she commanded everyone's presence with her tone, she was definitely going somewhere.

"By telling the truth," she answered.

"That would be suicide; we would be sinking AbayoMart with our own hands," Emeka countered.

"So what are you proposing, a statement denying the truth? You of all people know bad news spreads faster than good because people would rather see you fall. If we deny the truth, we would only be giving them more ammunition to use against us and when the public turns against you, they won't let you go until they have finished you."

"Oh, please. People will forget this as soon as one celebrity wedding or scandal happens, and these days, we have those happening every week," Emeka countered.

"And your customers, both local and international, will they forget?" Eriife asked. Her face was an image of calm, but in her eyes, I could see the storm brewing. She was irritated by Emeka's interruptions; I was too.

"Let her get to her point," I said firmly, ending Emeka's argument.

"We start with a heartfelt public apology. We admit the breach, assure our customers we are taking serious measures to protect their data and offer them a compensation package. Maybe a month of free delivery on any product they

buy on our platform or offer heavily discounted sales. We may need to discuss that probability with the sales and marketing team."

"And for internal measures?" I pressed.

"We bring in a third-party security firm to conduct a thorough audit of our systems," she explained. "This will help us identify vulnerabilities and show our customers that we are taking significant steps to safeguard their data. You already have a contract with J&P; this is one of the solutions they provide. We could extend the details of the contract or create a new one."

The only thing keeping me from smiling and yelling, "That's my girl!" was because it would be terribly inappropriate, and she wasn't mine.

Yet.

I was impressed. How had Sarah kept Eriife hidden in that little company of hers that she had started because she was bored for so long?

"But we still need more." Eriife's voice cut through my thoughts before I could answer that question.

"More?" Emeka asked in a disbelieving tone.

"We need a fall guy if we are going to admit the truth. Someone must take the blame for doing it; otherwise, it will amount to nothing, only make matters worse for us, like Emeka here pointed out," she said, and I swear Emeka's head seemed to double in size.

Eriife ignored Emeka's smugness and continued, "And we need some positive news that not only reinforces customer trust in us but also makes a statement that we are here to stay—something rave-worthy."

If I hadn't known Eriife, I would have thought she worked in PR before. I almost forgave her for being disingenuous earlier.

Just as Eriife finished talking, the phone on my table rang. It was Kunle from IT. "Sir, we have identified the source of the breach," he said, his voice tense. "It was an internal leak, as we suspected—someone with access to our systems."

"Fakunle Thomas," I said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, sir," Kunle said, confirming what I already knew. It didn't make me feel any less angry than I already was.

Putting the phone down, I looked up at Eriife. "Put your plan in motion. We already have our fall guy."

I didn't need to repeat the name; they all heard me when I mentioned it. Only Eriife might not know him as she was new but I was sure her team would

bring her up to speed. I could see newfound admiration in their eyes for her, except for Emeka.

I didn't care where in the world Fakunle was holed up. I was going to find him, and when I did, he would be sorry for ever being born.

And as for the positive news, I had just the thing in mind.

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Chapter 14

Eriife

After the meeting, Emeka brushed my shoulder roughly as he stalked off. The anger coming from him was almost solid enough to touch, but that was not an excuse for his straight-out rudeness.

Be like say this one dey crase.

I stilled my tongue and watched the back of his retreating oblong head. If I followed him and swiped at the back of his head now, they would say I'm wicked and probably fire me. Even Jay would not have a justifiable reason to keep me in this company if I did that. I couldn't let my intrusive thoughts win.

Taiwo must have seen the look on my face because she gave me a weak but encouraging smile before she also walked away. The rest of the team lingered, falling into step with me as we walked towards the elevator that would take us back to our own workspace.

Less than twenty-four hours and I was already thinking ours, not theirs or his. If there was ever an award for best in adapting, I would win it.

"You know, I won't lie, when we were told that a new person would be brought in from outside to head our department after Hannah left, I didn't like it. Emeka may be prideful but he has been in this department for a long time, long before any of us, and so we all assumed it would be him," Nnenna said. There was a nod of agreement from Timilehin as he stared at his feet.

"And when you walked in looking all elegant and prissy, I just assumed nepotism was at work and you were probably the CEO's cousin or friend of a cousin or something and you were just here to while away time till you got bored and moved on to something else," she continued.

"But?" I asked, sensing there was one somewhere. And I was still trying to decide whether to take her last statement as a compliment or an insult. I decided on the former—I looked elegant enough to be considered an acquaintance of the Abayomi-Young family.

Who would have thought? Interesting.

Nnenna laughed. “But the way you handled the situation in there, I’m impressed. But I did sense some familiarity between you and our oga, though?” she said, looking at me with wide expectant eyes.

Timilehin cleared his throat loudly and faked a cough. “Please excuse Nnenna, she can be a little forward,” he said with an apologetic look as he nudged Nnenna with his elbow.

“What… what did I say?”

“Shh…” Timilehin raised a finger to his mouth but Nnenna wasn’t taking the hint.

A short laugh escaped my mouth, I couldn’t help it. They looked like a cute, chaotic couple.

Just as the elevator opened to the floor where our office was, my phone vibrated in my hand. A message had come in from an unknown number.

“Dinner at 7pm. Wait for me after work.”

I knew who it was, and I rolled my eyes. And the irony of our situation wasn’t lost on me. With everything that had happened and was happening between us—whatever this was—I realised I didn’t know anything about this man, Jay.

I ignored the message and got straight to work. The first thing I did was to have a meeting with the IT department to know the extent of the damage and data leaked and then the legal department to understand the implications of the statement we wanted to put out.

After several meetings that lasted hours, I learnt a lot about AbayoMart in just one day. I had to admit that I was impressed with what Jay was attempting to do with the company. If not for him, it would be dead and gone. That thought created a new wave of anger in me towards this Fakunle fellow and for some weird reason, I was determined to make sure this whole mess was cleaned up nicely.

When I had finally gotten enough information, the process of writing the statement began. In the meantime, Timilehin and the graphic designer worked to put out a temporary statement across social media, telling our customers that we were investigating the situation.

Of course, that didn’t do much, but we couldn’t just remain silent. Emeka had been on the phone all day, organising meetings with different media

houses. I had lost count of how many times he had left the office to meet one person or the other and returned.

After several rewrites, Nnenna and I finally had a proper and acceptable statement to share with the public. It was not just an apology, but it also detailed the extent of the data that had been leaked, who was responsible for it and the steps the company was taking to ensure that it did not happen again.

Jay had also worked fast. He and J&P had come up with an IT security contract, extending the partnership they already had in place. That was also included in the statement. By the time the official statement was ready and uploaded on our website and social media accounts, it was past 6pm and we had already lost over a thousand customers and vendors.

But on the bright side, Emeka had set up an interview on Sunshine TV with Jay for Thursday on their Economic Breakfast Show. Hopefully, boldly naming Fakunle Thomas would shift some of the public's ire away from us and maybe even gain us some pity. We were, after all, the victim of a vindictive attack by the former CEO who was fired for misappropriation of company funds, amongst many other activities against the company.

It was quarter to seven when the office finally cleared out, leaving just me. I was happy to finally get off work. What a tedious day it had been. I was shutting down my computer when my stomach rumbled.

I had forgotten to eat all day. Apart from the occasional sips of water I took from my water flask, I hadn't put anything else in my mouth. Now that some of the tension had eased, my body could finally process that it needed food. I picked up my phone to order something I could take home with me when I remembered I was supposed to meet Jay for dinner at 7pm. I had not seen or heard from him since he sent me that text, and now I was beginning to doubt if he was the one who had sent it.

Could it have been Tobi? I had completely forgotten about him too, since hell broke loose in the morning. But I had Tobi's number and there didn't seem to be any need for him to text me with an unknown number.

I could feel the onset of a headache. I was too stressed to even try to start overthinking this. I hoped that whoever sent the text had forgotten about it. I wanted to go home, shower, have dinner and fall asleep watching a Korean drama on Netflix. I just wanted to leave tomorrow's troubles for tomorrow.

But I had no such luck. Just as I thought about it, my phone rang. It was the same number that had texted me.

"I'm waiting for you in the car park," Jay said when I picked up.

I sighed and I couldn't tell if it was from relief that it was indeed Jay or annoyance that he had remembered.

Still, I made my way down to the parking space. I didn't have to search for him. He was leaning against a black Rolls Royce Cullinan, looking at his phone. My heart skipped a beat seeing him standing there, looking all refreshed and relaxed as if his company wasn't on fire. Well, one of his companies.

Where had he found the time to change from the tailored grey suit he had been wearing in the morning? Now he was wearing a black bomber jacket over a fitted white shirt, black slim-fit chinos and black leather loafers, and dark shades perched on the tip of his nose. He looked effortlessly sexy doing nothing.

And God, the effect this man had on me. I could feel tingling sensations between my thighs.

Shey I have not put myself in trouble by working for this man like this?

I knew how my body reacted to him. I also knew all the reasons I couldn't let myself fall for him.

Yet, I was suddenly conscious of how I looked in my usual office wear. I had come to the office without make-up as I usually did. *Who had time to do make-up in the morning?* I should have at least made some effort. I wondered if I could quickly hide behind a car to apply powder and use a lip balm before— Too late. He looked up from his phone and made eye contact with me. His face lit up as he smiled.

Damn him and his perfect dentition that's making my insides tingle.

"Hey," he said, putting his phone into his jacket's pocket.

"Hey," I replied, walking towards him. I couldn't tell if the uncertainty I felt showed in my steps but I held my head high as I came to stand before him.

"You look tired." His voice was gentle compared to the bossy CEO vibe he had going on this morning.

"Well, we can't all be CEOs who have people do all the work for us, now can we?" I replied. The minute the words left my mouth, I bit on my lower lip. I hadn't meant for my words to come out that sharp.

His laughter, rich and warm, filled my ears. "Eriife, I am not fighting you."

"I'm sorry, I am just tired, that's all."

"Hmm, I can see that. Get in," he said. He walked to the passenger side and opened the door for me.

What's this one now? Why was he opening the door and being all chivalrous?

He must have noticed my hesitation because he laughed again as he said, "Don't overthink it, Eriife; just get into the car."

I side-eyed him as I got in. "Who said I was overthinking?"

"Your eyes say a lot more than your mouth does," he said as he closed the door. I wondered what he meant by that as he got in beside me, filling the car with the scent of his cologne. I remembered it, it was the same one he had worn the first night we met. Combined with the smell of leather in the car, it was intoxicating in an alluring way.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see," was all the answer he gave me.

As we drove out of the parking lot, I remembered the last time I got into his car—not this car though, a different one—where we went and what we did there. And everything that had happened after that, especially that one thing that I still felt guilty about. I also remembered that the last time I followed a man home, I lost my memory and couldn't recollect what happened.

Whether it was from dread or excitement, I couldn't tell, but my heart suddenly began to beat faster. I was about to have a panic attack inside his car. I tried to breathe, but I couldn't. The air conditioning was on, but I felt hot; I could feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead.

The car stopped, and I felt his hand cover mine on my lap.

"Look at me," he said. He said it at least three times before my mind registered his words and I turned my head slowly to look at him, but I wasn't seeing him.

"Look at me," he said again. His tone was commanding but soft and I had no choice but to do as he said.

"Good girl. Now breathe, slowly." His voice soothed my soul. I took in air through my nose and let it out through my mouth, over and over, until I felt my heartbeat start to come back to normal.

All the while, I didn't stop looking at him. How could I, when his eyes held mine captive?

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Chapter 15

Tobi

One thing about beautiful women was that they were always clueless. And Eriife was no exception.

To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. When I first met her, I thought she would be different from the rest. She had seemed goal-oriented and focused on her career and I thought, *finally, I had found her, the woman of my dreams*. Then she became friends with Lade, that loud-mouthed public toilet.

And I knew she wasn't so different after all. But still, I gave her the benefit of doubt. And she disappointed me, again.

I should probably take you back to the beginning, so you can understand exactly how I feel and then you will agree with me that Eriife needed to be taught a lesson.

The day I met Eriife was what you would call a normal day at work and by normal, I meant it was total chaos. You see, one of the things that has made the world the way it is is the liberty people now have to do whatever they like. This wokeness or inclusivity or whatever it is called. It makes people go against the natural order of things. Everyone now goes against authority in the name of being woke. Women go against male authority and call it feminism. And in the workplace, all sorts of nonsense are now tolerated to avoid being labelled toxic.

That was why one person can come to work with purple hair today, green hair tomorrow and another will come to work and refuse to communicate properly and everyone will let it go because they were autistic or neurodivergent or whatever fancy word they've come up with to excuse bad behaviour. I won't even demean myself by talking about the twins who dress like they are five years old and in a circus, finishing each other's sentences like they share one brain.

I don't believe in any of that woke bullshit. It all just points to a lack of proper home training and how lazy parents have become in raising their children. If everyone had parents like mine, parents who knew well how to use the rod, there would still be decorum and order in the world.

So, yes, it had been a chaotic day at work as usual, when HR came into the office to introduce the new senior editor. When Eriife walked in, it was like a cool breeze fell upon my face and I inhaled a breath of fresh air.

She was different. She was proper.

Dressed the way one should dress when going to work, in a skirt and shirt. Not trousers like Lade always wore. Eriife was clean, hair neatly done, face devoid of makeup. And when she spoke, her voice was soft and when she was complimented on her looks, she smiled shyly.

That was how a properly raised woman behaved. I bet her parents did not spare the rod on her either. They had beaten the madness out of her and raised a good woman. I knew just by looking at her, that when she got married, she would make her family her priority, the home would be her place and her intelligence would be used to raise her children.

My children. Our children.

I couldn't take my eyes off her, not even for one minute. Her soft jasmine scent engulfed me every time she was around. I couldn't wait for the days she came to work just so I could smell her perfume. That was another thing that annoyed me about the modern workplace—remote and hybrid work. People were honestly just lazy.

But I didn't hold that against Eriife. She was hardworking, always delivered on her work, managed her team well and never gave any excuses. Her managerial skills showed that she would be a good home maker and when I married her, she would only wear her perfume for me.

Everything about Eriife was perfect, except her friendship with Lade. But I convinced myself that it would end when Eriife became my woman. She wouldn't keep corrupt leeches like Lade around. And, between being my wife and raising our children, she wouldn't have the time for friendship. Lade wasn't a problem, or so I thought.

Lade. That girl disgusted me. With her eyes always watching. I had caught her staring at me more than once and each time, I had been looking at Eriife. Because she was always watching, she knew how I felt about Eriife and I hoped it made her sick with jealousy. I hoped she choked on that jealousy and died.

Oh, I knew Lade was jealous; she stank of it. She wanted me, gave me all the green lights, almost even shoved her breasts in my face under the guise of showing me a new design she was working on. But I ignored her and pretended like I didn't know what she was doing until she finally took the hint and stopped. I knew how it must be eating her up inside that I wanted a woman who was good for raising a family and not her.

Over the months, I noticed the feeling was mutual between Eriife and me. I had caught her staring at me several times. She would quickly look away and pretend to be working on something else whenever I did. To test her, I decided to wait, to see if she would throw herself at me, like her friend had done.

But Eriife did no such thing. She carried herself with grace as every woman should and waited for me to make the first move. But still I wanted to be sure, so I decided to test how submissive and obedient she was.

I told her I had something to tell her after work. It was something I could have easily told her during work hours without asking her to wait. Then I proceeded to ignore her after work and even pretended that I had forgotten I asked her to wait. She waited and did not get angry that I had asked her to wait for something so trivial. If anything, she had seemed disappointed. It was then that it occurred to me that she had been expecting me to ask her out on a date.

That was what sealed the deal for me and I said to myself, "Tobiloba, you have found a wife."

Besides the fact that I had been watching her, she always went straight home from work and when she was not at work, she hardly left her house. She had most things delivered. I have lost count of the number of times she stepped out to receive a package from a dispatch rider, be it food or something else. That was another habit she would have to stop when she became mine. A good wife was a wise spender who managed her husband's finances with caution and care.

I had even let my imagination run wild in other directions. It was a long shot but I considered that Eriife could be a virgin. From what I had seen so far, it didn't seem like she had a boyfriend. That was good. A woman so composed and reserved surely didn't let men run through her anyhow. The thought of being the first man to breach that barrier, to hear her wince in pain and have her blood stain my sheets had turned me on so badly that I'd had to rub it out.

I had planned to ask her out the next day but that was when everything started to go downhill.

The blasted meeting with Jayeola Abayomi-Young.

When I saw the two of them lock eyes and saw Jayeola lose composure and the fear on Eriife's face, I just knew there was history between them. The look on Jayeola's face was the kind a man only had for a woman he had fucked.

The thing about rich and privileged bastards like him was that they never seriously dated women like Eriife, women who didn't come from money like them. No, they only messed with them. I could only draw one conclusion from what I had seen: Eriife had once been Jayeola's plaything.

Eriife was just like other women, money-hungry and loose.

Still, a part of me did not want to believe what I had seen. This soft-spoken, shy woman could not be like that. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. After all, what other evidence did I have apart from how they had looked at each other?

I desperately wanted Eriife not to be like the rest of them. I wanted her to be different, but I wasn't so sure anymore. I couldn't risk putting my life and the future of my unborn children in the hands of an immoral woman.

So, instead of asking her out like I had intended, I decided to watch her some more. Then, she confirmed my suspicions when I saw her at the club, dancing like a street prostitute with that wanton Lade.

Now, before you judge me and ask what I was doing at the club when I had all these reservations, let me explain. One of my guys, Anthony, had just gotten a promotion at work and he wanted us to celebrate. A nightclub would not have been my first choice of place to celebrate because of the new life I was building—but whatever the boys wanted, they got.

But my discomfort at being in a club was soon replaced with surprise at seeing the woman who was supposed to be my wife dancing like she spread her legs for a living. My surprise turned into anger and I knew I just had to get her off the floor, so I invited them to the VIP lounge where we were. Of course, Lade was overly enthused about it.

Soon enough, Lade, true to her ways, was already locking lips with Anthony and they excused themselves to do whatever, and I was alone with Eriife. It was awkward at first, as we really didn't have anything to discuss. And deep down, I still wanted to believe that she was the good girl that I thought she was.

So, I kissed her. I expected her to draw back and hit me and then walk out, like a proper woman would. But in a second, she got over the surprise and

kissed me back. We made out for a while on the couch in the lounge and then she pulled back, as if coming to her senses and said she wanted to go home.

But it was too late. She had already proven that she was a slut who would kiss a man she barely knew, apart from the fact that he was her manager at work. And she had to be punished for leading me on, for making me think she was the one and then breaking my heart in the worst way possible.

So, when she bent down to pick her purse that had fallen to the floor while we were kissing, I spiked her drink.

"I don't think your friend is coming back," I said when she sat back up.

She sighed, looking uncomfortable as she checked her phone, most likely trying to contact Lade.

"Why don't you finish your drink while we wait for her and if she doesn't show up, I'll drive you home," I offered.

Nodding cluelessly, she picked up her glass and downed the rest of her drink and the rest, as they say, is history.

But I should have been satisfied after punishing her like I had been with other women like her who deceived me. But I wasn't and that was when I shamelessly realised that even after everything she had done to me, I still loved her. I still wanted her.

If I still felt so strongly about her, then it meant she could still be saved. I just had to cleanse her and make her mine alone.

I gripped the stirring wheel of my car hard as I watched her get into Jayeola's car. The irritating way he smiled at her grated on my nerves, and the way he touched the small of her back as he guided her into the car, what right did he have to do that?

I was sure he hadn't been in her life in the past four months that I had known Eriife. I had watched her every move and Jayeola had not been in the picture. Meaning, whatever was between them had happened in the past.

So why was he here now and why did he have her transferred to his company, taking her out of my reach? Where was he taking her to, a hotel? Was she going to become his slut now?

Eriife needed my help. This was not the woman she was, this was not the woman God created her to be and I had to open her eyes so that she could see it. I wanted to follow them, to know where they were going and what they wanted to do.

But I knew that to truly cleanse Eriife, I had to remove the filth in her life that she called a friend. That was the person corrupting her.

I had to get rid of Lade first.

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Chapter 16

Jay

I didn't start driving until I was sure that Eriife's breathing had returned to normal. Her head was now relaxed against the car seat. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other still enveloping her hand, I drove out of the street and onto the expressway.

"Do you want me to stop so you can get some air?" I asked.

She shook her head, and without opening her eyes, she answered, "No, I'm just very hungry."

"Okay, give me your home address, then," I asked. Her eyes flew open, confirming my suspicions that the near panic attack that she just had was because of me or something related.

"Relax." The word came out as a command, though I had not meant for it to. I didn't want to scare her into another panic attack—if it was possible to have two within minutes. So, I ensured my voice was soft when I added, "I just want you to be somewhere you are most comfortable."

"I thought we were going to eat," she asked, letting her head fall against the backrest again.

"Oh, we will," I answered and returned my attention to the road.

I put her address into the navigator and plunged into the madness that was the Lagos rush hour traffic. I occasionally stole side glances at her and found that she was fast asleep. This was not how I had planned the first day I spent with her. I hadn't anticipated the chaos that ensued at work.

As a way to compensate her for the sudden work burden, I had made a dinner reservation. In retrospect, I probably should not have done that. Our first date had been a dinner date that ended up being something else.

Did she regret that night? Was that it?

From what I had gathered about her before I stopped keeping tabs on her, she was the typical good girl, didn't party, didn't have that many friends, an

introvert. So, it made sense that she probably regretted what happened that night and was probably why she had turned me down. Because that person I had met that first time had not been her, at least not the real her.

The realisation hit me like a slap on the face. That had been it, and I had been self-absorbed and made it all about me. But then, it begged the question: Who was the woman I had met that first day, and who was this woman sleeping beside me?

As traffic continued to move slowly, I allowed the soft music playing from the radio to ease my mind. I was glad that the traffic was moving and wasn't one of those that stood still for hours, though those usually only happened when there had been an accident, or people were randomly fighting on the road. In Lagos, there was no predicting what you could encounter on the road.

Eriife started, and I turned to look as she opened her eyes and sat up straight. The way she averted her gaze told him she was embarrassed to have fallen asleep.

"Sorry," she said.

"What are you apologising for?" I asked her with half a smile. "I already know how tired you are."

"Hmm, but they say that it is rude to fall asleep while another person is driving," she countered as she brushed down invisible wrinkles on her skirt.

"There are so many unnecessary rules in this world. So, if one is tired, one shouldn't sleep?" I asked, and she laughed. It was a short laugh but the sound was like music to my ears. I liked it. These days, I had to admit I liked many things about her, the way she moved her eyes, expressing more than words could say, the smell of her perfume, it was different from the one she had worn the night we first met—that was another scent that I could never forget. This one, which seemed to be her signature everyday scent, was soft. It was what I imagined silk would smell like if it was a scent.

I liked her body—that was a given. I had loved her baby-smooth skin since day one, and now I was adding her laugh to the list of things that I liked.

"So," I began, wanting to change the topic before the silence between us could become awkward. "This is what you deal with every day? This horrible traffic."

She shook her head. "When I worked at The Sparrow, yes. That period was even worse than this. You know, The Sparrow is in Lekki, and I lived in Surulere then. I was literally fighting for my life every day."

I remembered the rundown apartment she had been living in and shuddered. I had been right, though; she had gotten an upgrade to her living situation because the new address she had given me was in Magodo.

"And when you worked at J&P?" I asked.

She sighed. "I can't believe it's only been a day since I left J&P. It feels like a lifetime ago. It was the best working arrangement I ever had. I only had to be physically present at work for two days and it paid well."

"Oh, really?" I said, feigning surprise. "So, why did you leave?"

She shot me a look that asked if I was being serious but must have seen the playfulness in my eyes even if she hadn't heard it in my tone and decided to play along.

"Well, I don't know… some guy with more money than he could spend offered me a ridiculous amount of money to come work for him."

"Oh, so you know the amount was ridiculous, yet you still negotiated for a higher amount?" I laughed. I couldn't believe I had been played by this innocent-looking woman. Even though everything we had done that led us to this moment was far from innocent.

"You had a lot of money to spare, and you wanted something from me; it's called business, sir. But I'm sure you are more than familiar with that word," she said as I navigated the car around a slow-moving truck.

We were quiet for a bit as Elton John's "Your Song" played from the speakers.

She broke the silence. "This your playlist sef. And you think someone will not fall asleep?"

I raised an eyebrow. "What, you don't like my playlist?" I teased.

"It's not bad, but these are the songs you play when you are at home alone, at night, and you want to sleep or you are going through a heartbreak, not the songs that get you through traffic."

"Heartbreak, huh?" I cut her a glance and she looked away. "So, what kind of songs would you play to get you through traffic?"

"Afrobeats, of course," she answered without missing a beat. And I found that I liked that too, that she was getting comfortable with being alone with me in the car and no longer avoiding my eyes.

"Oh…"

"Oh, what? Did I offend your billionaire sensibilities?"

"My what?" I laughed.

"You know how you people can be. Anything African is never good enough for you."

"So, you are saying I don't like Afrobeats because I'm a billionaire?"

"You probably like soul music, blues, rock, you know, all those things," she answered.

"That's a very wild accusation. I have a wide range of taste in music. Now, you on the other hand, I'm not sure—"

"Oh please, I'm an Afrobeats girl through and through, but I also like indie folk, R&B, pop, rap, K-pop—"

"K-pop?" I rolled my eyes. "Don't tell me you enjoy K-dramas too?"

"I looooove them. And if I weren't in traffic with you, I would be catching up on one of my dramas now."

"So you like Lee mino?" I said.

She burst into laughter. "First of all, it's Lee Min Ho. And secondly, you are so cliché. You men think all K-drama actors are Lee Min Ho. No disrespect to him, he's one of the OG oppas for many K-drama girls but he's not the only one."

"I'd like to stand corrected but I don't understand a word you just said," I said. She rolled her eyes and laughed. "I didn't take you for a K-pop/K-drama girl. My assistant, Adanna, is obsessed with those pretty-faced boys, BTS."

"You are that close to your assistant?" she asked.

"Ah," I smiled. "Adanna is family. She's Temisan's niece."

"And Temisan is who?"

"My stepmother," I answered.

"You call your stepmother by her first name?"

"Let's just say we aren't exactly that close." I spared her a glance, and I saw her looking at me with wide, curious eyes.

"And you are not going to say more?" she asked.

"I am not going to say more," I said. She heaved a disappointed sigh and turned to face her front.

Not yet. I added in my mind. There were so many things I wanted to tell her, to talk to her about but I didn't think she was ready to know of all the baggage I carried. And I couldn't go that deep until I knew for certain what she meant to me and what I meant to her.

My abrupt response to her question dented the bond we were already forming. So, to make up for that, I changed the playlist.

She turned to me with a wide smile as Burna's Boy's "City Boy" started to boom through the speakers.

"Oooooh, you truly are a man of culture," she said as she sang along. Her smile was infectious and I found myself smiling too, releasing the tension that had formed in my body when we mentioned my family.

I sang along, too, and just like that, we were vibing to song after song like we were old friends, and this was something we did all the time. I was more relaxed and comfortable than I had been in years. This was when I should have known, when I should have recognised that Eriifeoluwa was my home.

After that, time flew, and before I knew it, we arrived at our destination.

"Thank you," Eriife said as I killed the engine opposite her house. "You didn't have to drive me home, but you did. And thank you for helping me through that tiny episode I had in your car."

"There is no such thing as a tiny episode. Whatever it was that triggered it, I hope you will be able to talk to me about it someday."

Eriife smiled and tapped the back of my hand lightly. "This is me. I have to go now."

"Wait," I said before she opened the car. She looked at me, her hand resting on the door handle.

"I promised you dinner," I began. I had to choose my next words carefully because I didn't want her to take it the wrong way.

"Well, that you did. But I guess it's too late for that now."

"But you still need to eat something," I said. Part of me was doing this because I wanted to make do on my dinner promise to her. The other part was because I wanted to prolong the time I had to spend with her.

"So what are you proposing? I am too tired to go back out," she said.

"I know that, which is why I want to cook for you, if you'll allow me."

"Cook for me?" It took her a few seconds to process what I meant. Her eyes widened as understanding dawned on her.

"You want me to invite you in?"

"Yes," I answered simply. And she looked at me as if I had just asked her to get me the head of a white elephant.

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Chapter 17

Eriife

"You want me to invite you into my house?" I asked, as if I had not heard him the first time.

"Ah, don't look at me like that," he said in a relaxed tone, but the way he looked at me made me realise that he was dead serious.

"How am I looking at you?" I threw my hands up as the disbelief made my tone rise higher.

"Very suspiciously," he said. "As we have already established, you are tired from all the work I put you through on your first day. Would you have preferred to sit down stiffly at some high-end restaurant, or would you prefer what I'm offering now?"

"Which is?" I eyed him with the suspicion he had accused me of.

"To shower while I cook for you and you eat, relaxed and comfortable in your home."

I opened my mouth to counter him, but before I could speak, he quickly added, "And I promise I am not going to do anything you do not want. Eriife, you are safe with me. You'll always be."

I could see in his eyes that he was telling the truth. He also had that same look when he had offered or, more like, strong-armed me into taking this job. He wanted me to accept this, but he wanted it to be my decision.

At that moment, I thought he could be an expert manipulator, getting me to do what he wanted by making it seem like my decision. I banished the thought immediately because, with Jayeola, I had never had to do anything I didn't want to, not on the first night we met when I had practically thrown myself at him and certainly not when he had offered me the job at his company as the new head of PR. I had done all those things because I wanted to and because as much as I had tried to avoid him for all the obvious reasons, I still wanted to be close to him.

It was why I had panicked the minute I entered his car. I didn't trust myself or my thoughts around him.

Even now, his offer was tempting, and in one last attempt to dissuade him, I said, "Bold of you to assume that I even have foodstuff in my house."

At that, he laughed. The deep sound reverberated in my ears and made parts of me tingle, parts of me that had no business reacting to such a simple action as laughter. Common sense told me this was exactly why I should avoid him.

"Even if you have only dust and water in your house, I can make the most delicious meal out of it," he boasted.

I laughed. "*Eiish*, men will know how to cook only noodles and suddenly start feeling like 5-star Michelin chefs."

"I don't know what kind of men you have been with, but this guy will surprise you," he said, pointing to himself. The corner of his eyes crinkled with laughter.

That statement reminded me of the last time a man cooked for me, and that was not a feeling I wanted to remember. This moment felt different and safe, and I didn't want to taint it with the memory of what might have happened with Tobi.

What I was so sure must have happened with Tobi.

"So, is that a yes?" he asked me with expectant eyes.

I watched him for a few seconds. I could say no, and that would be that; he wouldn't press the issue. But I didn't want to say no.

"Fine," I said finally and released a sigh. "But your cooking skills better be as you have hyped it, or we will have problems."

"I'm going to ruin your taste palate for other people's cooking," he said as I opened the door and exited his car.

As you have ruined my body for other men, I thought, and quickly shook my head to dispel it. I shouldn't think of things like that, especially when I would be alone with him for the next few hours.

As he came over to my side, I was suddenly aware of how different my environment was from when we first met. I wouldn't have even allowed him to drive me home if I was still living in that place, not to mention letting him stay for more than five minutes. Here, he could park in the street without the fear of someone stealing parts from his car.

I needed to stop overthinking. He was here now, and I had invited him in. That was that. I knocked on the gate to the building of four flats, one of which was mine, and a few minutes later, Audu, the gatekeeper, let us in.

In my apartment, one of the two on the ground floor, I felt self-conscious again. It was a two-bedroom flat with one bathroom. Though it was a huge improvement over the one bedroom I used to live in, I'm sure, compared to the homes Jay usually visited or the ones he owned, it was below humble.

"This is me," I said as we stepped inside. I turned on the light to reveal my minimalist living room. I had chosen a white and black interior because almost every other colour went with white and black.

"It's cozy," he said with a smile.

"Is that your way of saying it's small?" I said and immediately regretted it. Sometimes, I let my insecurity jump out of me like that.

"Big doesn't always mean comfortable," he answered, and I couldn't help but wonder if that was some cryptic insight into his life.

"Anyway," I began cheerfully before things could get awkward. "Are you ready for the grand tour? By that, I mean I want to show you the kitchen where you will test your grand cooking skills."

"Oh, you mean the place with only dust and water," he teased, and I rolled my eyes.

I took him to the kitchen and showed him everything I had. Everything was labelled and easy for him to find, not that there was much anyway. I was supposed to go to the market last weekend, but I hadn't had the time with everything that had happened since then.

He took off his jacket and handed it to me, exposing me not only to his muscled and veiny arms but also his perfume. It engulfed me as I took his jacket, and I almost swooned, my brain sending the wrong signals to my pussy. I dropped the jacket like it was a hot pot.

He looked at me like I had just slapped him in the face.

"I'm sorry," I said as I quickly picked up the jacket. "I'm so tired my fingers are numb." I don't know whether he believed the lie, but his gaze softened.

"I'll just put this in the living room," I said quietly. This could not get anymore awkward. What was wrong with me for Christ's sake?

His soft chuckle trailed behind me as I hurried out of the kitchen. What the hell had I been thinking allowing him into my personal space, knowing

how I still felt about him? I was the queen of making stupid decisions and regretting them later.

As I didn't have any coat hanger or whatever it was they hung expensive jackets like this on, I folded it neatly and placed it of the sofa's back, then dashed into my bathroom.

I wish I could turn the clock back to five minutes ago when he had offered to cook for me. I would have said no and saved myself from that embarrassingly awkward situation.

It was only when I entered my room that I remembered that my bathroom, the one I had been using for the last three months, wasn't ensuite and I had to walk back across the living room to get to it.

That meant I couldn't just leave my room with a towel tied around my chest or even naked like I usually did. Not that it was anything he hadn't seen before but please, let's not go down that road.

With a sigh, I started to pack all the things I would need after my shower, so that I could come out of the bathroom fully clothed.

Satan really had it in for me tonight.

* * *

I finished showering and stepped out to the heavenly aroma of food. Jay had turned the centre table in my living room into a makeshift dining table. I could smell crayfish and stock. My stomach grumbled and tightened, reminding me again that I hadn't eaten all day.

If Jay heard the sound my stomach made, he didn't say anything. Instead, he was beaming at me like a child who had gotten the highest scores in a test and was waiting for his parents to acknowledge him.

As I looked from the hot and steaming heap of white rice to the stew that had been served separately in a less-than-humble bowl, I couldn't help but tease, "Well, sorry, I do not have fine china, Mr Jayeola Abayomi-Young."

Jay chuckled, sniffing the air dramatically. "Fine china or not, this smells incredible, and the taste will send you to heaven."

"Heaven ke? Are you trying to kill me?" I asked in faux suspicion as I walked towards him. "Plus, you must really like sniffing things. You think I didn't notice you inhaling my perfume this morning."

I must have shocked him because he opened his mouth, but no words came out for a few seconds. "Ah, you caught me," he finally said, smiling with his eyes.

I rolled my eyes. "You couldn't be more obvious, Anthony Bridgerton." I giggled and sat down on the floor, folding my legs yoga style as I prepared to dish the food into smaller plates.

"Anthony who?" Jay's brows furrowed as he joined me on the floor.

I sighed, shaking my head. "You don't know K-dramas, you don't know Anthony Bridgerton, what do you know? He's a character from this popular series, Bridgerton. But I can't explain the reference to you. If you don't get it, you don't get it."

Jay laughed. "So, I'm being compared to a character from a show I've never seen. Great." He feigned annoyance, then said, "I can't remember the last time I sat down to watch a show or a movie."

"I can only imagine you are too busy running the Abayomi-Young empire to watch movies. Those kinds of indulgences are for mere mortals like me," I said before I put a spoon of rice and the crayfish and egg sauce in my mouth. I closed my eyes on reflex as the flavours exploded in my mouth. He was right. It tasted heavenly.

"The man you are looking for is my father. I am just the assistant showrunner, so to speak," he said something along those lines just before I involuntarily let out a moan.

"It's that good, huh?" he asked, returning me to the present.

I opened my eyes to find him watching me, a soft smile tugging at the corner of his lips. I cleared my throat and sat up straighter. "It's barely edible; I'll give you a 5 out of 10 for effort."

"You are such a liar," he laughed.

"Fine, you caught me," I laughed with him. "This is so good. How were you able to make this from the little ingredients in my kitchen? I haven't had the time to go to the market."

"I am not telling you my secret," he said and I rolled my eyes at him.

"So about this Brigdeton?"

"Bridgerton, not Brigdeton. And it's a compliment, really." I said, smiling as I took another spoon. I swallowed before speaking again. "The reference I made was from the show, but you should read the books. Except you are one

of those people who frown at romance and read motivational books like *Dog Eat Dog*," I said.

Jay burst out laughing. "What book is *Dog Eat Dog*?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, those books always have weird titles like that."

"Please." He held his stomach and laughed again, throwing his head back.

"What is funny that's making you laugh like this? Abeg you are eating pepper o," I cautioned because I could already imagine the headlines if anything bad happened to him while he was in my house.

When he finally stopped laughing, he said, "While I'm sure there's most likely a book somewhere titled *Dog Eat Dog*, I'm guessing the book you are referring to is *Shoe Dog* by Phil Knight, Nike's co-founder, and it's not a motivational book. It's a memoir, a business memoir. Well, it could motivate you, so to speak."

"See what I'm saying. It will never cross my mind to know who the co-founders of Nike are, not to mention that they have written books," I answered.

"So you like Korean dramas, you like K-pop, and you like romance books," he said, looking at me intensely, like a painter studying his canvas.

"Oh, you have no idea how much I love romance books and African literary fiction. They are like two sides of a coin: one keeps me dreaming, and the other keeps me grounded. I also like a good murder mystery. I like fantasy, too, but I'm not really into it," I spoke animatedly. When it came to books, I lost my composure.

"Come," I said, getting to my feet. "Let me show you my collection."

Jay looked fascinated as he stood up, and I led him to the other room in my flat, the one that doubled as my home office and library.

"This is my little sanctuary." I beamed with pride.

Jay's eyes widened as he took in the shelves lined with books. "Wow, you weren't kidding. This is impressive."

"Thanks," I said. "This is also what is taking all my money."

"Your addiction could be drugs," he said.

I laughed. "Well, let's thank God it isn't drugs."

"Maybe one day, I'll get to return the favour," he said. "One day, I'll show you my own collection, too," he clarified. He must have noticed the confusion on my face.

"Your collection of very serious books," I teased.

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” he said. “Though, I have to admit that you’d hardly find romance in there.”

“Of course,” I laughed.

“Any recommendations?”

“Do you even have the time?”

“For the things that interest you and make your eyes sparkle like this, I have all the time in the world,” he answered.

I looked up at him and into his eyes—deep brown eyes that were pulling me in—trying to process how what he just said made me feel when the doorbell rang.

“Were you expecting someone?” he asked.

I shook my head and walked back to the living room, just as I heard Lade’s voice calling me from outside.

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Chapter 18

Eriife

"Eriife!" Lade's voice called from outside, tinged with urgency. Startled, I glanced at the clock. Why was Lade outside at my house after 9pm and without letting me know that she was coming over? Had something happened to her?

Jay cocked his head slightly as if to caution me, but I was already moving toward the door, a mix of concern and curiosity propelling me forward. I couldn't fight the thought that something had to be wrong for her to be at my house at this hour, even though I knew that Lade could be impulsive.

I hurriedly unlocked the door, my heart pounding in my chest. Lade stood there, her usually perfect hair dishevelled as if she or someone had been pulling at it. Her eyes and nose were swollen, as if she had been crying for hours. Without a word, she threw her arms around me, clinging tightly. I was taller than her, so she was able to rest her head on my chest as she sniffled.

"Oh my God, Lade," I whispered. I hugged her trembling body and tried to pass as much warmth as I could from my body to hers. My mind raced through so many reasons she could be in this state and none were good. I could only hold her as she sobbed against me, occasionally patting her back while she let it all out.

Jay, bless him, was ever so perceptive. He picked up his jacket from the back of the couch and approached us. "I should get going." His voice was soft as his gaze shifted between me and Lade.

"Thank you for tonight, Jay," I managed.

Jay nodded, concern in his eyes. With a small smile, he said, "Goodnight, Eriife." He turned to leave but not before Lade, despite herself, cast him a curious look through her tears. Jay gave her a gentle nod and then slipped out the door, closing it quietly behind him.

I led Lade to the couch, my mind still reeling at her appearance. *"Ki lo sele?"* I asked her what happened in Yoruba, trying to keep my voice calm and soothing. She had come to me for comfort; I couldn't let my own anxieties overshadow that.

It took her a while but finally, she took in a shaky breath and looked up at me. Her eyes were so red and she had lost some strands of her false lashes. But the most jarring was the pain I could see in her eyes. I had never seen Lade like this, I had only always seen the laughter and the loudness.

"I'm sorry to just show up like this. You were probably in the middle of something," she said, looking at the unfinished plates of food on the centre table. "But I had nowhere else to go," she continued. Her voice sounded hoarse, like she had been screaming for hours on end.

"Nonsense, Lade. What are you apologising for? I am here for you anytime," I said, patting her back. "Now, tell me what happened. Who am I gathering boys to go and beat up for making you cry like this?" I added. That brought a smile to her face, even though it was fleeting.

After what felt like hours, Lade was finally calm enough to speak. She pulled away from me and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"It's Anthony," she began, her voice barely audible.

"Anthony?" I repeated, trying to picture who that was.

Lade gave a short hiss. "That bobo I met at the club last weekend nau. Tobi's friend that I spent the entire weekend with."

"Oh, yeah." He was the one she had spent the whole of Sunday with and ignored all my calls and texts just to stay with him. But this had been between three to four days ago. What could he possibly have done in that amount of time to make Lade like this?

"So, after Sunday, I noticed he was ignoring my calls and text messages," Lade continued.

I wanted to say, "Just like you did mine," but this was not the time to be salty.

"I thought he was just busy; you know he's an architect and works for this big construction company—"

I didn't know that because I only met him for a few minutes before you started sucking face with him and decided to leave with him.

Again, I didn't voice my thoughts, I let her continue talking. I had a growing fear that she might have experienced something similar to what I had

with Tobi and I hoped to God that it was not the case.

"After ghosting me all day on Monday, I decided to go to his house this evening. Can you believe that this guy is married?"

"What?" My eyes widened. "Wait… what?"

"And she is heavily pregnant?" Lade added as tears began to fill her eyes again. "I saw him taking a stroll with her on their street, and before you say anything, he was wearing a wedding ring today. He didn't have it on, on Saturday when we met."

"Of course, he didn't. That bastard. What was a married man like him doing at a nightclub in the first place? And Tobi knew this?" I was seething. "Why are men like this?"

"You know that's not even the worst part. He made eye contact with me and whispered something into her ear. She smiled at him and went inside the house and this guy had the audacity to come and meet me where I was jejely sitting inside my car. Ah, God, Eriife, I have suffered in this life."

"What did he say?"

"After berating me and calling me all sorts of names, asking me if I did not have common sense and I could not read between the lines when he didn't pick my calls or reply my texts, he made it clear that he was married, and his wife had been at her mother's place for the weekend and only came back home on Monday. And that even if he wasn't married, did I think I was the kind of woman he could take home to his mother? He now added insult to my injury by calling me a temporary release."

"And all this happened on the street?" I felt a surge of anger on her behalf.

"My dear, on the street o. He knocked on my window and I wound down to hear him speak rubbish to me."

"Eiii, Jesus! That man is mad o. So, he has a wife who is pregnant and he's busy getting in between the legs of other women but he had the guts to question your morality? We should find some boys to beat him up and treat his fuck up, what kind of nonsense is that?" I was fuming, you would think I was the one this Anthony guy had insulted.

"It's not his fault now. If the man I really liked had liked me back, would I be pursuing all these stupid fuck boys up and down?"

This was new to me. Lade had never really talked about a guy she liked in all the months of our friendship. We only ever talked about Tobi. I have been such a horrible friend to her. I didn't even know where she lived.

To be completely honest, I didn't think she was looking for anything serious, especially not with Anthony. I had thought it was just a one-night thing that had escalated into a one-weekend thing. She never really talked about herself in that light.

"Oh, Lade, I'm so sorry," I said, pulling her into another hug. "You don't deserve to be treated like that. Anthony is a goat."

The thought crossed my mind briefly to ask Jay to help treat Anthony's fuck up. In the movies, rich people always had people who did those types of jobs for them, didn't they? Had Jay ever had the cause to beat somebody up? I dismissed the thought immediately; it was just too stupid and cruel.

But I was so, so mad.

Lade sniffled and leaned back, looking defeated. "I'm just unlovable, Eriife. Everyone leaves me in the end. What's wrong with me?"

Hearing her say that made my heart break for her even more. I had always seen Lade as this confident, untouchable woman. But now, I realised how lonely she truly was beneath that exterior. It made me want to protect her, to be her safe space.

Yet, a part of me hesitated. Could I be the friend she needed? I had my own fears and doubts, my own insecurities. What if I wasn't enough for her? What if I let her down?

These thoughts swirled in my head, but I pushed them aside. For now, Lade needed me, and I would do my best to be there for her, fears and all.

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Chapter 19

Jay

Eriife, with her expressive eyes and sharp tongue, made me smile. I thought of the time I had spent with her; I hadn't laughed so hard in a long time. But damn, the traffic she would have to face daily as she continued to work with me was not child's play. And to do that using public transport or having to call a cab every time, with the high rates of kidnapping and missing people cases in the country, did not sit well with me.

Those were my thoughts as I drove into my compound. My headlights illuminated a figure leaning against a car blocking my driveway.

"Sarah," I muttered to myself as I turned off the engine. I was familiar with that body and the scowl on her face. Besides, who else would be at my house at almost midnight with a long, flowing wig, except Sarah?

I let out a sigh. It had been a busy day and the last person I wanted to deal with now was Sarah and whatever was making her angry. From my car, I could see the fury in her stance. I had given clear instructions to my security team not to let Sarah in if I wasn't around. This was after the family party where I had seen her again for the first time in six months and I truly realised that whatever I felt or didn't feel for her was dead.

And I was done letting her play with me. I sighed again and stepped out of the car. This was going to be a long night.

"Jay!" she called out, her voice sharp and demanding. "Do you know how long I've been waiting here?"

"Well, hello to you too. I have had a stressful day and all I want to do is rest. Thank you for asking," I said, hoping the stiffness in my tone conveyed my sarcasm and displeasure.

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest, flaunting her beautiful, pedicured nails and expensive purse. "What is wrong with you Jay?

Why have you been acting strange towards me lately? That's how you snubbed me at the party too."

"Can we not do this tonight, Sarah? In case you didn't hear me the first time, I have had a stressful day."

"Is this about last Valentine?" Sarah continued stubbornly.

I let out a frustrated groan. I knew Sarah was not going to let this go until she got it out of her system. So, I relaxed against my car. "You tell me, what happened last Valentine?"

"You see," she said as a smile broke on her flawless face. Even without the heavy makeup she had on, Sarah had beautiful skin like glass. "We needed to spice things up. We have been going on and off. And I just wanted you to work harder for it, you know what I mean?" She walked closer and tried to touch the collar of my jacket, but I held her hand and her gaze. And I hoped that she saw in my eyes that her trick wasn't going to work.

She did and snatched her hand back. A scowl replaced her smile, which was all the same because the smile was saccharine anyway.

"So, ghosting me was your way of spicing things up?" I asked.

"You are the one who didn't call me anymore after Valentine. You stopped picking my calls, and every time I came to your house, you were never around. It's like once you hear I'm at yours, you decide to stay away from home," she spat her accusations at me.

She was right. After Valentine, I couldn't continue with the farce. I avoided Sarah. Once Tinuke, my housekeeper, informed me that Sarah was around, I'd sleep in a hotel for days until she got the message and left. It was a coward's approach, I agree. But if she could ghost me, I could ghost her too. But the truth was, even then, I was still holding on to Sarah as my back up plan. If all else failed and I had to marry to continue the family name, then Sarah was it.

However, with Eriife in the picture now, I couldn't do that anymore. I wanted to give myself a chance at finding something real. To see if it was even possible for a man like me to have something like that.

"I'm tired, Sarah. I don't want to do this with you anymore. Let's just end it here." There, I said it. This was the most honest thing that had come out of my mouth to her in a long time.

Sarah scoffed. "End what? Better stop joking. You know what ehn, let's go inside and talk about this," she said, tossing her hair back. "Can you believe that your housekeeper did not let me in? She had the audacity to keep me

waiting out here like some common stranger. Tinuke has grown wings and it's because you indulge her."

I bit back my irritation. "Sarah, you showed up unannounced. She was just doing her job."

Her eyes narrowed. "I showed up unannounced. Me, Sarah. So, I have to write letters or seek appointment before I see my boyfriend again, abi?"

Now it was my turn to scoff. "Boyfriend, since when? Sarah, you need to leave now. You brought your car, so you will be safe going home by yourself." I made to pass by her, but she pushed me back with one hand and I let her until I was leaning against my car again.

And then she started laughing. "Jay, it's like you are serious with this breakup thing o," she said once she stopped laughing. "We've known each other since we were kids, Jay! I'm not someone you can just toss aside like a used rag!"

"And that's exactly the problem, Sarah," I said, taking a deep breath. "This game we've been playing, this back and forth, it's over. I'm not doing this dance with you anymore. And what do you mean, 'like a used rag'? We have both been using each other and it ends here. I am not speaking French and even if I were, you speak the language fluently, so you understand me."

I had finally snapped. Sarah had a way of making one exasperated.

She recoiled slightly, her eyes searching mine. "You are serious."

"This… This…what… what… whatever it is, it needs to stop. It's to…to… toxic. We're not children anymore, and I can't keep pretending like this is normal." Ah, great! Now I was stuttering.

Her expression hardened, and she took another step closer. "You are seeing someone else, abi? That's what this is all about. She makes your blood boil, and you think she might be the one. Baby boy, we have been down this road before. You always come back to me, so let's just skip the bullshit."

That stung because it was the truth. But this time, it was different. I wasn't dating Eriife, I wasn't rushing into any relationship with her until I knew for sure what I wanted. Eriife deserved that much respect from me.

I closed my eyes and took in a breath. She really doesn't give up. "That's none of your business, and you need to leave."

A sinister smile spread across her face. "Whoever she is, you better get her out of your system because it's out of your hands now. We're getting married. Your mother and my mother are already having the discussion."

"Ne…ne…never call Temisan my mother ag-again," I said, my voice shaking with restrained fury. I hated that Sarah was making me feel this way. This was so low of her; my mother was a sensitive topic for me. "There is no way I'm marrying you, Sarah. I don't care about our families' plans. This is my life, and only I will decide who I'll spend it with."

Her eyes filled with a mix of rage and hurt. "You can't just dismiss me like this, Jay. We've been through too much."

"Exactly," I said softly. "We've been through too much, and it's time we both moved on. You need to find someone who truly appreciates you, and I need to do the same."

She stared at me, tears welling up in her eyes. For a moment, I almost felt guilty but knowing Sarah as well as I did, her tears were not real. She never shed tears unless she needed to use them as a weapon. And if I wanted Sarah out of my life, I had to be selfish, I couldn't let her draw me in with those tears. Besides, she wasn't also innocent in this. It's not like I have been the only man in her life all these years; we have both messed around a lot.

With a huff and without another word, she turned and walked away, her heels clicking on the pavement. I knew Sarah; she wasn't going to let go easily. But if there was one thing I wouldn't let her do, it was to use my family to get what she wants. I needed to put Temisan in her place as soon as possible.

But for now, I was relieved to see Sarah go. This confrontation had been exhausting to say the least but it was necessary.

I took a deep breath and headed inside, needing to clear my head. The house was quiet. Tinuke had probably gone to bed, leaving Sarah outside. Not that I was complaining, I welcomed the silence. I walked into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. I leaned against the kitchen counter as I downed it and poured myself another.

My thoughts drifted to Eriife. Her smile, her laugh, the way she made me feel at ease. Whatever happened between me and Sarah and my meddling family, I didn't want her getting hurt. Apart from stealing those red shoes, she was innocent in all these.

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Chapter 20

Eriife

The dark clouds were beginning to make way for the morning sun to shine. Though the early morning rain had been light, there was still a chill in the air. So I wore a navy blue button-up cardigan over a white silk blouse and a charcoal grey pencil skirt.

To keep my legs warm and also because I loved how the matte finish gave me a sleek and professional look, I wore black opaque tights. They were breathable and light in case the weather changed and I could also easily take off the cardigan and still look stylish.

I stifled a curse as I stepped into a small puddle of water just outside my gate. The rain hadn't been heavy, but it was still enough to make puddles of water in the potholes on the road and in front of my gate.

Since I moved into this apartment, I had lost count of how many times I had complained about the pothole in front of the gate. Lagos landlords and their anyhowness. I hissed and stamped my feet against the ground. Thank God for my waterproof ankle boots. That's how they would have ruined my outfit this morning.

It was quarter past seven and I was running late. I didn't have time to call the landlord this morning and complain again. The last time I did, he asked me if I had a car, and when I said I didn't, he said, "Even people with cars are not complaining. If the hole is disturbing you, just step around it."

Typical Nigerian answer, we step around all our problems in this country instead of fixing them. Except I picked up a shovel or whatever tool was used and did the work myself, that pothole wasn't getting fixed anytime soon. But I didn't have time to dwell on it.

I had bigger fish to fry—like how I would get to work. All the rides I ordered kept cancelling. I was going to be late on my second day of work.

If only I hadn't spent the time I was supposed to use to prepare for work making breakfast for Lade, I wouldn't be this late. But she had slept over at my place and taken the day off, and the least I could do was make her breakfast since I couldn't stay at home with her.

I stood in front of my gate, absentmindedly tapping my foot against the concrete coverlet as I contemplated what to do. Since the drivers were cancelling my bookings, I had no choice but to take public transport. But to do that, I had to get to the bus stop first. Okadas were not allowed inside the estate where I lived, so I had a long walk ahead of me. Thank God my boots were low-heeled.

The day was not starting well for me at all, and I had no idea what kind of bombshell was waiting to be dropped the moment I arrived at work, seeing how my first day at work went.

I heaved a sigh and tucked my handbag under my arm like a street preacher. I was about to begin my trek when a man dressed in an impeccable and crisp black suit stepped out of a car parked opposite my house, in the same spot Jay had parked yesterday.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said. I wouldn't have answered him if he hadn't been looking directly at me. Because the way he addressed me was usually how top business madams were addressed.

"Are you talking to me?" I asked, and even to my ears, the question sounded stupid, seeing as he was looking at me. But if he thought the question was stupid, he did not show it. Instead, he offered me a warm, gentle smile.

"You are Ms Eriife Williams, are you not?" he asked.

I took an involuntary step back. This was Lagos and I would not let a strange man in a suit scam me. The next thing he would say now was that he was sent by a random uncle of mine to deliver a package or something along that line and try to get me to pay for the package.

"Who are you?" I couldn't hide the irritation in my voice. I was already late for work and I did not have time to deal with nonsense like this.

So much for his warm and gentle smile.

I don't know which one he saw, the suspicion in my eyes or the irritation on my face, but he said quickly, "Mr Abayomi-Young asked me to take you to work."

"Abayomi-Young…" I began, my brows furrowed in confusion. "Jay?"

"Yes ma'am, Mr Jayeola Abayomi-Young," the man answered. "My name is Felix and I am your assigned driver."

"Um, Mr… um… Mr Felix," I stuttered in a daze. "There has to be some mistake. Jay did not tell me this."

"I am very certain this was not a mistake, ma'am," Felix said with practised patience.

My heart skipped a beat. Jay? Why would he do this? I quickly pulled out my phone and dialled his number. He picked up on the second ring. I turned away from Felix; I didn't want him seeing my expressions.

"Good morning, Eriife," his rich, smooth, and warm voice filled my ear.

"Jay, there's a car here—a very expensive car—waiting to take me to work. What's going on?"

"It's your official car," he replied. "Well, one of mine actually. But it's yours until we get you a car that suits your taste."

"Official car?" I repeated as if I didn't hear him the first time. "Jay, do your employees usually get cars this expensive?"

He chuckled. "No, they don't."

I stared at the Aston Martin, my mind racing. "Jay, are you crazy? What kind of wahala are you trying to put me in? People will talk, they'll think I'm your mistress or —"

"Let people talk," he cut in.

See me see trouble.

"You might be comfortable with people talking about you behind your back but I'm not."

"I'm not. But that won't stop people from talking."

"Jay…I can't—"

"Eriife, stop being stubborn and get in the car. I have checked, and you will not get a cab from your house to work now."

"You checked?" I asked. I couldn't help the smile that formed on my face.

Jay checked the traffic situation and sent a car for me. Why had he done that?

"Are you still there, Eriife?" Jay's voice brought me out of my feelings.

"Yes, I'm still here. But still, this… this…"

"You don't like the car, abi? I should have sent the Range Rover. Please come to work for now and we can discuss what kind of car you prefer when you get here."

"Jesus! That's not what I'm saying, Range Rover ke? Fine, fine, I'll go with Felix," I answered, all flustered.

"Good. Because poor Felix is under strict orders not to leave without you."

"Good God, do you have to be so—"

"So what?"

"Intense," I said.

"I'm surprised you'd ask that when you have experienced just how intense I can be," he answered.

"You did not just say that." I almost rolled my eyes, and then I remembered that he couldn't see me.

"I'll see you at work, Eriife. You are terribly late, though," he said before hanging up.

I turned to Felix with a stiff smile on my face. I wasn't sure of how much of our conversation he heard but I was embarrassed by it all the same.

"This way, Ms Willams," he said leading the way to the car.

"Just Eriife is fine," I whispered. Why I whispered, I did not know.

* * *

When I walked into the office, my colleagues were already at their desks, typing away and making phone calls, doing whatever they had to do. This was only my second day here, and I could already tell just how different the atmosphere was from J&P. J&P had a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere, while at AbayoMart, everybody was laser focused and didn't seem to have time for relaxing. I couldn't blame them, the survival of the company depended on how well everyone did their jobs.

I headed straight to my desk, where a stack of reports and my computer waited for me. I dove into the task at hand: reviewing the effects of the article we had released yesterday.

The article had garnered mixed reviews. Some people believed it was just damage control, a weak attempt to cover up the leaked data scandal. Others, however, were starting to show sympathy towards the company, acknowledging our efforts to rectify the situation.

I noted the different responses, trying to gauge the public sentiment. This information would be crucial for our next steps.

As I worked, my mind occasionally wandered to Lade. But the day was hectic, and I could only check in on her a few times. Each time I called, she reassured me that she was fine and told me to focus on my work. Her voice sounded steadier, which gave me some relief. I hope she will forget about that deadbeat Anthony soon. I needed my bubbly friend back, not the morose one that was at my house.

I had a lot of things to say about how quickly she had gotten attached to Anthony, but who was I to talk? When I had a one-night stand with another woman's man—even though, in my defence, she didn't want him—got attached to him, and tried to rebound with my boss to forget about him, which led me into another mess. And I am now currently working for the same man I was trying so desperately to forget. I am the last person to be giving boy advice, as I was in a much bigger mess than Lade was.

By midday, I had a meeting with the sales and marketing department. We gathered in the conference room, a large space with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city below. AbayoMart had been in crisis mode since the data breach, and we were brainstorming ways to win back our customers' trust.

"As you know, the article has received mixed reviews. Some people think it's just damage control, but we have many supporters who appreciate our efforts to make things right," I addressed the room, many of whose names I had already forgotten.

"We need to focus on turning that sympathy into action," one of the sales managers said. "We need something tangible that shows we're serious about making amends."

"I agree," I said, nodding. "That's why I propose we implement a sales discount as an incentive. A significant discount can serve as a goodwill gesture, encouraging our customers to forgive, if not forget, the breach."

The room buzzed with murmurs of agreement and some scepticism. One of the marketing executives spoke up. "It's a good idea, but we will incur more losses if we do that. Because we can't ask our vendors to offer discounts to clean up our mess, we will have to subsidise to get that discount, and I don't know how much of that we can accommodate."

"Not to mention that this is just a temporary fix. We need a long-term strategy to rebuild trust," another said.

And like that, we spent the next hour hashing out the details—how much of a discount to offer, how to communicate it to our customers, and how to

track its effectiveness. It was intense but productive. By the end of the meeting, we had a solid plan.

As the day wore on, the office remained a whirlwind of activity. I continued to monitor the article's impact, fielded calls from concerned customers, and coordinated with different departments to ensure our message was consistent and clear. Despite the chaos, I felt a sense of purpose. We were making progress, slowly but surely.

I was exhausted, and more than a few times, I wondered what I was doing exactly. I was a girl who only wanted to write, and now, though temporary, I was heading a PR team. However, I could not deny that I enjoyed the rush the work gave me. It made me feel important, wanted, and needed. And that was something I had always wanted to feel.

Taking a deep breath, I turned back to my work. There was still much to be done, but I felt hopeful for the first time since yesterday, both for my friend and for the company.

As I prepared to brief my team on the meeting with sales, my phone rang. It was Jay's office. Adanna, his assistant, was on the line.

"Eriife, the CEO would like you to come to his office to discuss a strategy for his interview tomorrow with Sunshine TV," she said.

"Of course," I replied. "I'll be there shortly."

For some reason, my heart thumped wildly. I hadn't seen Jay all day. Except for my phone call with him in the morning, I hadn't had any other interactions with him. Of course, this was normal; I couldn't expect to speak with the CEO at any time I wished or that he would just be walking about the office.

* * *

Jay's spacious and elegantly decorated office was just as I remembered it. His taste was impeccable, combining modern design with warmth.

Emeka was already in the office. I hadn't seen him all morning either. He was probably making sure all was set for the interview tomorrow. He looked up and scowled at me. I don't think he'll be getting over the fact that I had taken over the job he wanted anytime soon.

My heart skipped multiple beats as I made eye contact with Jay.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Ignoring him, I took a seat. "Let's get started, we have a lot to cover."

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Chapter 21

Jay

At the last minute, I decided to move the meeting to a conference room because while my office was spacious enough, the conference room allowed more room for pacing. Though I would never admit this to any of my employees, I was a bit nervous about the upcoming interview.

I generally avoided interview requests and kept my life off social media or any form of media; the less people knew about me, the better. But this was one interview that I couldn't let anybody else handle because the Abayomi-Young reputation was at stake. Though my father hadn't called me to ask about the situation, I was sure that he was watching and waiting to see how I would handle it.

I sat at the head of the conference table, the surface littered with notes, laptops, and coffee cups Adanna had graciously provided for us. The room was bright, with large windows letting in plenty of natural light. That was another reason I moved the meeting here. The open windows made the whole business feel less suffocating.

"Alright, let's get started," Emeka said, his tone professional and focused. "The questions from Sunshine TV have been sent over, and I've compiled them for us to review. We'll practise together, and Eriife will take on the role of the interviewer."

I nodded, leaning back slightly. I searched Eriife's face, but it seemed like she was avoiding eye contact. It seemed like she was deliberately scrolling through her phone to avoid looking at me.

Was I pushing her too hard? First, I had thrust her into a job she wasn't well equipped for, though she had proved herself in that area. Then insisted on cooking for her, in her apartment no less, and the whole business with the car.

Was I doing too much? Was that why she was avoiding me?

"Sir?" Emeka prodded.

"Yeah, sounds good. Let's see what we're dealing with."

Emeka handed each of us a printed sheet. "As we know, the focus will be on the data leak and how we are managing the scandal. The goal is to assure customers and vendors that their data is safe and that something like this won't happen again."

Eriife glanced at the questions, then finally looked up at me. But for the first time, I couldn't read what she was thinking. "Ready?"

"Ready," I replied, straightening in my chair. "Let's do this."

She cleared her throat, adopting a serious expression. "Good evening, Mr Abayomi-Young. Thank you for joining us today on Sunshine TV. Let's get right to it. The recent data leak at AbayoMart has caused quite a stir. Can you tell us what exactly happened?"

Her tone was clipped, and her pronunciation was perfect. It was almost like she had been working as a journalist all her life, like she had been born to be in the media or an actress.

I took a deep breath, meeting her gaze. "Thank you for having me. The data leak at AbayoMart was a deplorable incident. We identified a vulnerability in our system that malicious actors exploited. As soon as we became aware of the breach, we immediately secured our systems and mitigated the damage."

Emeka raised a hand, signalling me to pause. "Good start, Sir, but let's emphasise the speed and effectiveness of our response more. We want to convey that we were on top of the situation from the very beginning."

I nodded. "Got it."

Eriife continued, "Many of your customers are concerned about their personal information. What steps has AbayoMart taken to ensure that their data is now secure?"

"We've implemented advanced security measures to protect our customers' data. This includes upgrading our encryption protocols, conducting thorough security audits, and working with top cybersecurity firms to enhance our defences. We are also continuously monitoring our systems to detect and respond to potential threats."

Emeka interjected again, "That was good. Maybe add a bit more about the continuous monitoring and our commitment to transparency with our customers."

“Continuous monitoring and transparency. Understood.” A lump formed in my throat. It was a simple interview rehearsal. If this was making me nervous, what would happen at the actual interview that would be broadcast live?

If Eriife noticed I was struggling, she didn’t acknowledge it. And why should she? What business of hers were my struggles?

Eriife looked at the next question. “How do you address the criticism that the statement you released was merely damage control and that AbayoMart isn’t taking real steps to solve the underlying issues?”

I leaned forward slightly. “I understand the concerns, but I assure you this is not just about damage control. We are fully committed to addressing the underlying issues. This incident has prompted us to re-evaluate our entire security framework. We are investing heavily in technology and training to ensure our team is equipped to handle future challenges. Our priority is to restore and maintain the trust of our customers.”

Emeka nodded approvingly. “That’s good, Sir. Just make sure to maintain that sincere tone. It’s crucial that we come across as genuine and dedicated.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” Emeka answered. “The interview itself should not take more than ten to fifteen minutes. Their breakfast show runs for an hour, and they invite several guests,” he explained further.

But I was looking at Eriife. She was packing up her notes and laptop, not sparing me a glance. “Thank you, Emeka. I have taken note of your suggestions, and I’ll use them when I go over the questions again,” I said.

Emeka left the conference room before us. I noticed that Eriife had finished packing up but was still lingering, so I didn’t get up from my seat.

“You are nervous,” she said.

“You noticed.”

“Of course, I noticed. Emeka is more concerned about correctly answering the questions, but I’m concerned about how you sound when you answer them.”

“How I sound?” I reclined against the chair again, studying her face but reading nothing.

“So usually, you sound relaxed, like nothing bothers you. It comes naturally like you own the world. It’s one of the first things I liked about you when we met.”

"When we met, Eriife, I was a stuttering idiot."

She gave a short laugh. "Are you anxious that you'll stutter during the interview?"

I was quiet. We had never broached this topic before. And I guessed that while I was studying her face during the rehearsal, she was studying me too, but with her ears, not with her eyes.

"I can't mess this up, Eriife. My family's name is on the line, and I have over one thousand employees to think about. This company cannot fail. I have several businesses, but AbayoMart is special to me."

"You are not going to fail." She got to her feet and wrapped her arms across her chest with her laptop in-between. "You need to remember that you are telling the truth and not lying to the public. So answer the questions as naturally as you would if someone asked your name."

"Got it," I answered with a smile, standing up too.

And we were suddenly standing too close.

"And for the record, you were not a stuttering idiot the night we met. You were terribly intimidating and I was scared," she said, holding my gaze.

I moved closer still. "Your actions that night were not of someone scared."

"I was acting out of character."

"And what about now?" My eyes went to her lips, her full, moisturised and inviting lips.

"Now?" she asked. Her voice was low and came in short breaths.

"Are you acting out of character?"

"Jay…" she breathed, biting her lower lip.

"Don't do that, it makes me want to—" I was close now, so close that all I had to do was lean a little forward, and I would claim her lips with mine.

But the conference room's door suddenly opened, and we jerked apart.

"Yes, Emeka, what is it?" Why did I sound and feel like I had just been caught stealing meat from the cook's pot?

Emeka swiped his gaze from me to Eriife and back to me before saying, "Sir, you may need to come out for this."

I was still trying to process what he was saying when Sarah brushed by Emeka and barged into the conference room.

I heard Eriife gasp beside me but I didn't take my eyes off Sarah.

"What are you doing here?" The words spilled out of my mouth.

"What, so I can't visit my fiancé at his workplace again? Why are you acting brand new? I used to come here often," Sarah said as she walked up to me, her usual plastic smile on her face.

"I swear, this is not what it sounds like. You know how Sarah can be?" I turned to Eriife to explain.

Shit. That sounded exactly like what a cheating man would say. Wait. Cheating? From where to where? I had no reason to explain myself to Eriife, if only I weren't about to kiss her a few seconds ago.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Eriife said with a curt smile. "I'll be in my office."

Eriife made to leave but Sarah's voice stopped her. "Ah ahn! Wait *o*, is this not Eriife? Wonders shall never end. I almost did not recognise you. You look like a human being now."

"Sarah," I cautioned, but she ignored me.

"I was wondering what hole you crawled into, but you are… Wait a minute." Her gaze slide back to Jay. "Is she why you are trying to call off our engagement?"

"Sarah, there's no engagement, and you know. Who let you into the conference room in the first place?"

If only Sarah wasn't a childhood friend who, for old times' sake, deserved my respect, I would have had her physically thrown out by now.

"Okay, I'm just going to leave." Eriife made to move again but Sarah pushed her back.

"Wait, so you won't even deny it?" she asked me.

"Look, whatever is going on between you and Jay, I am not involved. I have work to do, and I'm returning to my office."

"Jay? She calls you Jay?" Sarah was almost screaming now. "How long has this been going on, ehn? So it's because of this dirty thing who can't trace her family history that you want to break up with me?"

"Sarah, that's enough," I bellowed. "You need to leave now, or I will throw away all courtesy as you have done and have security throw you out. Don't play with me."

"Oh, you want to throw me out? I'll give you something to make your decision easy."

Sarah was so fast that I heard what she did before my eyes processed it. I turned to see Eriife holding her cheek where the imprint of Sarah's fingers was

already forming.

"Sarah!"

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Chapter 22

Eriife

That *bitch* slapped me, and I just stood there and took it like a fool.

At least when I was her employee, the assaults had only been verbal. Never in her wildest dreams would she have laid hands on me when I was the best staff she had.

I can't believe I just collected free slap because of man. A man I wasn't even dating. Whatever happened between me and Jay had happened six months ago. But that hadn't been my fault *nau.*

Sarah had clearly not wanted him. She had ordered me to throw his gift away.

Shit. I dumped myself on my bed, still in my work clothes and shoes. Even I knew that was just a stupid excuse. The cold, hard truth that stung more than the slap Sarah had given me was that I had willingly aided Jay in cheating on Sarah.

For God's sake, they were getting married. Married! As in, a whole marriage. God, please. And the whole time, I had been reminiscing on a bloody one-night stand and swooning because he had cooked for me, given me a car and was offering me an insane amount of money just to work for him.

I should have known. No man does all those things without ulterior motives.

So what does that make me? The mistress?

But just like everything that has ever gone wrong in my life, there was nothing I could do about it.

When I worked for Sarah, I took her abuse in silence and with clenched teeth. When I found out I was pregnant, I had quietly gotten an abortion because who would I have told and what would I have said? And then there was Tobi—I didn't even want to think about that.

I was such a loser. I thought I had grown, evolved, but I was still letting other people play me like a pawn on a chess board.

I was grateful that Lade had gone back to her home before I got back from work because I did not have the energy to explain to her why my face was swollen or why I was in such a sour mood. What exactly had I been trying to achieve with Jay? I should have known something was off, but I was greedy, stupid, and too enamoured with the fact that he was still interested in me that I had forgotten that he belonged to another woman. And it was one of the reasons I had turned him down in the first place.

What was I thinking?

Even Jay *sef*, what was he thinking? What was he doing with me? What was all this about? He was a billionaire and the son of a billionaire. And if he wanted to be a dog, he had access to countless women and didn't need to spend an insane amount of money to keep them with him.

I had no idea how long I lay on my bed, still dressed in my work clothes and shoes. I hadn't even turned on the lights. I moved from moaning about my life and soaking my pillowcase with tears to doom scrolling through social media on my phone. I probably would have slept off in that position had my doorbell not rung.

Maybe if I froze and didn't breathe, the person at my door would take the hint and leave. But I had no such luck. The doorbell rang again. I got up from my bed with a hiss.

I would be so pissed if it was the tenants' representative at my door to ask for this month's electricity and water bill payment. I have never defaulted, but the man was always at my door within the first week of the month to ask for payments, usually at odd hours, just like now. In my annoyance, I opened the door without asking who was there.

"Daddy Femi, please check your record. I have paid for this month already. You know I don't—"

I cut myself off as I beheld the man in front of me, leaning against my door frame.

"Hey."

My insides tightened at the sound of his soft, deep voice, and the spot between my legs hardened. This was the kind of thought that got me into trouble in the first place.

"What do you want?" I sounded cold even to my own ears.

He stood up straight. Only then did I notice the shopping bag in his hand. I looked from the shopping bag to his face.

"You…you…you just left," he began. Hearing him stutter made my heart beat faster, and I almost felt sorry for him. But I had to remind myself that I was the victim here. I was the one being played by Jay.

"Mhm, mhm, I won't leave. I'll stay after your fiancée turned my face into a bata drum."

Jay sighed. He was still in the clothes he had been wearing in the morning, though he had taken off his suit jacket, and his shirt was loose at the collar, with his sleeves rolled up to reveal his toned arms. He looked tired and sexy at the same time, if such a thing was possible.

"I'm sorry, Eriife. I can explain everything and I promise you everything is not as it seems."

"That is exactly what a man cheating on his fiancée will say," I snapped.

"I know h-o…how all th…th…this looks, but I am not ch…ch…cheating. I have witnessed firsthand the damage it can do."

"Hmm. Story." I folded my arms across my chest. I was not buying it. "Wait sef, Jay, what is the meaning of all this? Why am I here? What do you really want? Is this really about sex? Is that what you want from me? You're getting married, Jay—"

Jay looked around as if to say we couldn't really have this conversation with him standing outside my flat.

I sighed because he was right. "Come in," I said, and his face lit up with a smile before he stepped into my living room. I shut the door and turned to look at him.

"I'm sorry," he apologised again. This time he raised the small bag in his hand. "I was passing by this store and saw this. It looked like it would suit you. So—"

I was too irate to let him finish his sentence. "See, see, see, Jay, until I know exactly what all this is about, until I can understand why I deserved to be slapped by my former boss, you can keep all your gifts."

That was a little harsh. But if I wanted to have some sort of control over the situation, I had to stand my ground. And I certainly needed to stop receiving gifts from him.

"Fine," he answered. His hands fell to his side. "I'll tell you everything. Maybe I'll be able to make sense of it myself."

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Chapter 23

Jay

If looks could kill, my body would be on the way to the morgue by now with the way Eriife was looking at me. But I guess I deserved that.

Things had sort of gone haywire after Sarah slapped Eriife. I had had to physically restrain Sarah just so Eriife could escape to her office. The only thing was that instead of going to her office, Eriife had gone straight home. She had not even called for the chauffeur I had assigned to her that morning to take her home.

Security had been called in to escort Sarah out. And as for Emeka, well, I had threatened the poor man that if word of what had happened spread about the office, he could kiss his job goodbye.

I sat on the long couch in Eriife's living room. She sat on a single couch, her legs crossed, as were her arms across her chest. Her eyes were cold, and the skin around them was swollen and puffy.

Making this woman cry was the complete opposite of what I had in mind. And that was reason enough for me to get out of her life. This whole thing was my mess, and I had to clear it up. But I felt like if I let go of her, I would drown and never come up to the surface again.

As improbable as it might sound, since that night six months ago, Eriife had been the lifeline I had been holding on to. My life had revolved around hating her for walking out on me, then wilfully trying to forget about her, and finally to keeping her with me. The latter was just to understand what she might mean to me beyond what my body felt for her. And I had come to the conclusion that if I wanted to keep her by my side and earn her respect, I had to tell her the truth.

"So, are you just going to sit there and not say anything?" Eriife spat. "And don't tell me that you are sorry. You have already said that multiple times today. I just want an explanation."

I sighed and wiped my hands over my face. This was going to be a lot harder than I thought. “First,” I started. “I have ensured that what happened today doesn’t spread around the office, so you have no problems there.”

Eriife scoffed. “If you think I’m going to come back to work with you after everything that has happened, you better think again.”

“I understand and totally respect that. But before you make your decision, hear me out first.”

Eriife rolled her eyes and looked away from me. “I really don’t understand what is there to even discuss. You, Jay, have been in a relationship with Sarah for God knows how long. Whatever happened between you two around Valentine’s Day must have been a normal lover’s spat. Or maybe she caught you cheating on her. That’s why she threw your gifts away. Who knows? But I stupidly put myself in the middle and let you fuck me different ways to Sunday. All this is my fault. I wouldn’t be facing all these if I had stayed in my lane and maintained my self-respect.”

The words flew out of her mouth rapid-fire. The more she spoke, the faster she breathed, and her eyes welled up with tears.

“I need you,” I blurted without thinking. The weight of my words stopped her, and she looked at me with wide, moist eyes.

“I need you,” I repeated, softly this time. “Not for the reasons you think. Okay, that was a lie. I am insanely attracted to you, but you already know that. I don’t think of you as a whore or a slut or any of that. God, no. To me, Eriife, you are my lifeline. That may be hard to believe, considering how long we have known each other.

“You deserve the truth, and the truth is what I am going to tell you. But please, don’t ever speak about yourself in such a self-deprecating manner. That’s unfair. Don’t be unfair to yourself. If this is about the one-night stand, you can’t take full responsibility for that. I was a willing participant. I wanted you just as badly as you wanted me, and I don’t regret it. But Eriife, if you have any regrets about that night, I’ll leave now.

“I’ll end the contract between us, and I’ll compensate you for your time and work so far, and get out of your life for good. Because, Eriife, our story began that night, and if you regret it, I’ll sever the ties between us, because it makes no sense. So tell me, do you regret what happened between us that night?”

Eriife continued to stare at me with moistened eyes after I had spoken, stretching the silence between us. Then she heaved a sigh and turned away

from me.

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach. Her looking away from me could mean only one thing. I got slowly to my feet. My legs were heavy, but I would drag them if it came to that and get out of her life since it was what she wanted. I had just taken the first step towards the door when I heard her voice. It was faint, but I heard her clearly.

"I don't regret it."

But just to be sure I had heard her correctly, I asked, "What did you say?"

She paused, then said a little louder, "I don't regret it."

I sat back down so fast that my ass must have made an ungraceful sound as it hit the couch. "Jesus, did you have to take so long to answer?"

"Did you also have to be dramatic and get up to leave like that?" she retorted.

For a few seconds, we stared at each other, and despite the situation we were in, we burst into laughter. It didn't last long, though, because we still had a serious matter to address.

Damn, did it feel good to know that she didn't regret what happened between us.

"So what's the deal with Sarah? Not that it's my business, but if your fiancée is going to be coming around the office and throwing hands…"

She let the rest of her words hang in the air, and the pangs of guilt made my chest tighten.

"Sarah is not my fiancée. She and I used to be on and off. We've known each other since we were children, and when we started dating when we were seventeen, Sarah would occasionally step out on me. At first, I would get mad, but one day she said to me, 'We're going to end up married. We can't spend every moment of our life together before that happens.' At the time, I agreed with her because it made sense.

"We were young, we were not exactly in love, so I started seeing other people too. As we grew older, I got tired of that lifestyle, but Sarah didn't. And she resorted to playing games, like the one she did with the gifts. And let's just say, Valentine's Day was the last straw."

"Because of me?"

I heard the scepticism loud and clear in her voice. I gave her half a smile. "Now, don't take this the wrong way, but when you showed up that night, I was mad. Because Sarah was up to her usual games. Again. But hell, was I

attracted to you. And I thought, well, one night won't make a difference because this was what we did.

"Except this time, it did make a difference. I never fall asleep with the women I take to bed. It had never happened before. Until you. I felt so at peace and comfortable with you that I fell asleep. And the next morning, when I woke up, you were gone.

"For two weeks, I agonised over whether to reach out to you—finding you wasn't hard. I needed to understand why I felt at peace with you and why you reminded me so much of her. And then you turned me away and walked away from me, reminding me of her even more. So I spent the last six months trying to forget about you. Until I saw you again at J&P."

"You keep saying I remind you of her. Remind you of who?" Eriife asked.

This time, I was the one who paused, contemplating how best to say it. But there was no better way than to come clean.

"My mother, Eriife. You remind me so much of my mother."

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Chapter 24

Eriife

"You remind me so much of my mother, Eriife."

Jay had said so many things last night, including how messed up his relationship with Sarah was and how Sarah was refusing to end it. But this was what kept replaying in my head.

I, Eriifeoluwa, reminded him of his mother who died on the night she had abandoned him to elope with her lover. Yes, he had even told me that much. I had so many questions but I didn't get the chance to ask them because his phone rang and he had to leave due to some family emergency.

I sat at my desk, watching Jay's interview with Sunshine TV on my computer, barely registering what he was saying. However, I could tell by his composure that the interview was going well. Other than that, I couldn't focus on anything else.

My head was still reeling from everything that happened yesterday, plus I had woken up this morning with a familiar pain on the right side of my abdomen. This was a pain I attributed to stress but I hadn't had it in a while—since I stopped working for Sarah. Was it not bloody ironical that the pain returned this morning with full force after my encounter with Sarah?

I'd had to literally drag myself out of bed to get to work, even though I could barely stand upright. Jay had assured me that the gist of what happened yesterday would not spread throughout the office but given all that had happened, how could I trust that?

I'm not sure if he was predisposed to gossip but Emeka had boldly displayed his dislike of me. So who was to say he wouldn't use this opportunity to spread gossip around the office that I was Jay's mistress?

Are you Jay's mistress?

Whatever. Despite what I told Jay, I would rather go to work to gauge the situation than sit down in my house and tear my hair out about what people

might be saying about me.

And thank God I didn't have to worry about how to get to work. Mr Felix had shown up at my gate again this morning to pick me up. If he was offended that I left the office yesterday without informing him, he did not show it.

And so far so good, it didn't seem like anyone knew what happened yesterday. It was business as usual. Emeka had gone with Jay to the interview so I hadn't gotten the chance to see him this morning.

The pain in my stomach was getting more difficult to ignore and hide. It had to be the stress of this new job. The stupid data leak, the thing I still couldn't tell Jay, my conflicting feelings for Jay, Sarah. It was all just too much.

But I went about my day despite the pain, until it was early afternoon, after lunch—which I could barely eat. It was time for my team and the sales team to meet with Jay to discuss the next steps after the interview with Sunshine TV.

I shifted in my chair, trying to find a position that would alleviate the pain, but to no avail. The air conditioner was on full blast but I felt hot from inside and I was sweating profusely.

My vision blurred and I made a meek attempt to dab the cold sweat on my forehead. The room started to spin, and I felt the edges of my consciousness begin to slip away. The voices around me faded, their words a distant hum.

But still, I clenched my lips and balled my fists on my laps. I couldn't make a spectacle of myself in front of all these people. I would get through the day and then go to the hospital.

The door to the conference room swung open, and Jay walked in, his presence commanding as always. I tried to focus on him, to sit up straight and pretend like I wasn't on the verge of collapsing, but it was no use. The pain intensified, spreading through my abdomen like wildfire, and I couldn't suppress the bloodcurdling scream that escaped my mouth.

Jay's gaze immediately snapped to me. "Eriife?" he asked, his deep voice laced with concern.

But I couldn't answer him. The pain was so overwhelming that I couldn't even nod my head. Unable to help myself, I screamed again and doubled over in my chair, one hand pushing against the conference table and the other clutching my stomach. I gasped for air as the room erupted into chaos.

Voices were shouting, someone was calling my name, but it all felt far away. My stomach was threatening to erupt and that was all I could focus on.

I suddenly felt strong arms scoop me up from the chair. The world stopped spinning for a moment as my cheek pressed against a broad, solid chest.

I felt him before I open my eyes. His familiar scent—clean, masculine, with a hint of something woodsy—enveloped me. The pain receded just enough for me to register the shock of what was happening.

Was Jay carrying me in front of all these people?

"I can walk," I said. Even to my ears, my voice sounded too weak to be convincing.

"Be quiet and hang on, Eriife," Jay's voice rumbled above me.

There was a steely determination in his tone, a strength that I wanted to cling to. But it was too much. The pain, the dizziness, the embarrassment of being carried out of the conference room in front of everyone—it was all too much.

And just to get away from the embarrassment, I held on to Jay and buried my face in his chest, like a rabbit burrowing into a hole. The last thing I heard before sinking into oblivion was the steady rhythm of Jay's heartbeat against my ear.

* * *

When I came to consciousness, the first thing I noticed was the nauseating scent of antiseptic. Ugh… I hated hospitals.

My eyelids were heavy as they fluttered open. The soft beeping of machines, the IVs hooked to my veins and the dull ache in my abdomen brought my reality into focus.

I blinked twice, clearing my vision. Only then did I register Jay sitting by my side. His hand, warm and secure, was wrapped around mine. There was a tightness around his eyes that wasn't there the last time I saw him.

"You're awake," he said, his voice gruff, but the relief in it was palpable.

I tried to speak, but my throat was dry and scratchy. All I could manage was a weak nod. Jay reached for a glass of water on the bedside table, his movements careful and deliberate, as if he were afraid I might break if he wasn't gentle enough.

"Here, drink this," he said softly, lifting the glass to my lips. I sipped the water gratefully, the cool liquid soothing my parched throat.

"Wh-what happened?" I croaked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"You had appendicitis," Jay replied, his expression darkening. "It was bad, Eriife. You were in a lot of pain, and they had to perform an emergency surgery."

"Surgery *ke*? Appendicitis?"

From where to where?

I was still trying to process all that when Jay's voice snatched my attention.

"Why didn't you tell anyone you were in pain?" he demanded, his voice tinged with anger. "You could have died if we hadn't gotten you to the hospital in time."

His eyes were even colder than his tone. It reminded me of the first night we met.

"I didn't think it was that serious," I mumbled. "I just thought it was stress —"

"Stress?" Jay's voice was incredulous. "Eriife, this wasn't something you could just push through. You need to take care of yourself better than this. What if something worse had happened?"

I couldn't meet his gaze. The intensity of his concern was overwhelming, and I didn't know how to handle it.

"Why are you shouting at me? It's not as if I intentionally made myself sick," I snapped as much as my strength would allow me too.

Jay sighed, running a hand over his head. For a moment, he looked almost vulnerable, a side of him I had never seen before. "I'm not angry at you, Eriife," he said quietly. "I'm just…scared. Scared of what could have happened. Scared of losing you."

The weight of the words hung in the air in between us. The silence that followed them was heavy.

I could see it in his eyes—the fear, the worry, and something else that made my heart skip a beat. But before I could dwell on it, Jay stood up, his expression hardening as if he had said too much.

"You need to rest, Eriife. I'll just step out for a moment." And without another word, he walked out.

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Chapter 25

Jay

During Eriife's Surgery

I sat on the stiff hospital chair, staring blankly at the clock on the wall. Each tick was a relentless reminder of how slowly time was passing.

Eriife had gone into surgery an hour ago. And despite knowing that an appendectomy was a common surgery, the tightness in my chest didn't ease. I clenched and unclenched my hands in my lap.

She'll be fine. She'll be fine.

I kept telling myself that over and over, out loud and in my head.

This was one of the best hospitals in Lagos. The doctors knew what they were doing. But even with all these reassurances I kept giving myself, the knot in my gut refused to loosen.

How did Eriife allow her condition to get so bad? And how had I not noticed any sign that she might be unwell? I have had her with me for four days. Four whole days and I didn't suspect anything?

I tried telling myself that four days was not enough time to know everything about a person, but that only made me feel more guilty.

Too anxious to continue sitting, I leapt to my feet and began to pace the waiting room.

It wasn't just Eriife's surgery, I realised. It was everything.

Just last night, my whole world had turned upside down. One minute I had been sitting in Eriife's living room, trying to explain my somewhat unexplainable feelings. The next minute, I was speeding on the express to this very same hospital—though, another section.

Big Mummy was hospitalised here. She had been diagnosed with late-stage cervical cancer. And she had kept the news from me.

Worse, everyone in my family already knew and I didn't.

Big Mummy was dying. I still couldn't believe it. Big Mummy whom I had seen at the party last weekend. So full of life, so joyous. And she had been battling cancer for months and I didn't know it?

If the excuse I had in Eriife's case was that we hadn't been together for so long, what was my excuse with Big Mummy, a woman who was practically a mother to me? What kind of son did that make me and why had no one told me anything?

She had been hiding it for months, maybe even longer, suffering in silence while I was too busy with work to notice. The boisterous, larger-than-life woman, the only one to match and put in check Temisan's pretentiousness, was slipping away, the disease already in its final stage.

There was nothing all the money I had could do to prevent it.

Last night, after getting the news—Damilare, her third child and last born had called me—I had rushed down here, created a fuss, threatened the doctors. I even started making preparations to fly her out of the country.

I had gone through all the different stages of grief at once.

I only calmed down when Dojutiwan put a firm hand on my shoulder and said, "We tried everything. Now, she just wants to leave peacefully."

I looked at the three Ds, as they were fondly called. Big Mummy's boys: Dojutiwan, her eldest (who was my age mate, though we weren't close. I think he still held some resentment towards me for taking his mother away for a while when I was young), Dimeji, her second son, and Damilare.

The grim looks on their faces told me that my grief couldn't be compared to theirs. She was their mother. I was just her nephew.

I had barely been able to process the news, hadn't even had time to let it sink in properly, before I had to pull myself together for that damned breakfast interview this morning.

I almost didn't go. The last thing I wanted to do was put on a smile and play the role of the confident, unshakable CEO who had everything under control, when in fact, everything was falling apart.

But duty called, and I answered like I always did, shoving my emotions aside and forcing myself to function. Only for me to come back to the office to see Eriife collapse in pain right in front of me.

I didn't think; I just acted, my instincts taking over as I scooped her up in my arms. The fear I felt when I saw her fall was primal and overwhelming. The

thought that I could lose her had been too powerful and immediate, that it made it impossible for me to breathe.

Too tired to keep pacing, I sat down again.

I could keep deceiving myself and telling myself that I only wanted Eriife by my side to understand what she meant to me. But the truth was right there in my face and it had always been. I was just too cowardly to accept it.

Because I told myself that I didn't believe in love at first meet. Why should I when I have met so many women and not fallen in love with any of them? What made Eriife so special that I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her?

These were the questions I kept asking myself to dissuade me from the truth that was right under my nose.

I had fallen in love with Eriife from the moment my heart skipped a beat when I first saw her. That feeling was what I had mistaken for anger, for irritation that another woman had shown up instead of Sarah.

That night when she came up to the rooftop with all her false confidence and the slight tremble in her voice when she spoke, betraying her brave front. I think all of it endeared me to her because in that moment I had thought, "This is a woman imperfect like me, a woman I can be myself with and not pretend to be anything I'm not."

I had stuttered but I wasn't ashamed of it.

That had been the moment that she had planted herself in my heart and mind and refused to leave.

But did I recognise it for what it was? No; instead, I went around in circles, complicating matters when they did not need to be complicated. I had gone to her and presented those shoes without saying anything. Of course, she would walk away. Despite how our story had begun, Eriife had her pride.

I hadn't admitted it to myself until today, hadn't allowed myself to fully acknowledge the depth of my feelings. But seeing her in pain, the very real possibility of something happening to her, had ripped away whatever walls I had built up around my heart. There was no denying it now.

"I am in love with her."

Saying it out loud made it feel real, made it more than just a thought in my head. More than just a feeling that had nowhere to go.

But did it really have a place to go? Eriife certainly did not feel the same way about me. To her, the night that started all this was probably just one of wild,

fun sex and nothing more, and I was the only one still hung up on it. But she had admitted that she had not regretted it. So that was a good sign at least.

I had made such a royal mess of things and now I was going to rectify it. I would show Eriife that she deserved to be loved the way she wanted to be loved, if she would allow me.

The door to the waiting room creaked open, and I shot to my feet, my heart pounding. The surgeon stepped in, her expression calm and professional, but I couldn't breathe until she spoke.

"Mr. Abayomi-Young," she began. "The surgery was a success. We were able to remove the appendix without complications, and she's stable. She'll need some time to recover, but she's going to be fine."

The relief that flooded through me was almost overwhelming. I closed my eyes, exhaling loudly.

"Thank you," I murmured, my voice hoarse with emotion. "Thank you so much."

"She's in recovery now," the surgeon continued. "It'll be a few hours before she wakes up, but you can see her once she's back in her room."

I nodded, barely hearing the rest of what she said. The only thing that mattered was that Eriife was going to be okay. I sank back into the chair, the tension in my body slowly easing, replaced by an exhaustion that seeped into my bones.

Losing Eriife in any kind of way was something I couldn't bear.

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Chapter 26

Eriife

It had been twenty-four hours since my emergency appendectomy. I lay on my hospital bed, reflecting on everything that had happened since I got here, especially Lade's visit.

Apparently, while I was in surgery, Lade had been calling me repeatedly, unaware of what was going on. Jay picked up my phone and informed her that I was at the hospital. She rushed over as soon as she could but only managed to arrive after the surgery.

To be honest, seeing Lade was a relief as I was tired of Jay's hovering. Jay meant well, I knew that. He was just trying to take care of me, to make sure I was okay. But his care had become overbearing, suffocating even. I probably sound ungrateful, but I just needed a break from his relentless attention. Yet, that wasn't what was really bothering me.

Before Lade left, she mentioned something odd—Tobi had made a pass at her. Actually, it was more than just a pass; he asked her out on a date. I couldn't help but feel uneasy about it, given the history between Tobi and me.

I was worried for Lade. Tobi was not someone to trust, but I didn't have anything in my memory to back up my claim. And I was glad that Lade had not seemed the least bit interested in him. If anything, from the way she talked, she had been disgusted. Because all the while, she had thought Tobi was interested in me and she found it suspicious that he had suddenly shifted that interest to her.

And God, was I grateful for that suspicion.

I knew I had to tell her what I suspected must have happened between me and Tobi and what was going on with Jay. I knew she wanted to ask but for some reason, she was holding back. She wasn't as free and in my business as she used to be.

I felt like I had neglected her. Lade was the only friend I'd had in ages who truly cared about me and I had taken out my trauma from failed friendships on her after that nightclub incident.

I needed to fix my relationship with her. If I had a dollar for everything I needed to fix, I'd be richer than Jay.

But what puzzled me more was why Tobi was doing this now. Lade had been working at J&P long before I joined, and according to her, Tobi had never shown any interest in her before. Why now?

As I lay there, trying to make sense of it all, I took in my surroundings. I had to admit, Jay had spared no expense in ensuring I was well taken care of. The room was something out of a Korean drama, a private suite reserved for VIPs, complete with every comfort imaginable. Yet, I just wanted to go home. To my own bed.

No matter how comfortable a hospital room was, it was still a hospital room and I hated hospitals. I had come to hate them since that day that I walked into the hospital pregnant and left unburdened by the prospect of being a mother but laden with guilt over what I had done.

I still stand on the fact that I made the right decision for myself, but it was the opposite of the way I had been brought up and I can't help but feel guilty about it.

And there was Jay. He already has so many things troubling him, including some unresolved family trauma. How would he feel if he heard that I robbed him of the chance to become a father? I know, of course, that it was my body, my life, my choice, yet I couldn't help but wonder how he would feel.

Would he thank me for it or hate me?

I decided to take a walk to clear my head. The spacious hospital room that once felt luxurious now felt claustrophobic. Grabbing the IV pole, I carefully got out of bed. I still couldn't eat, and they wouldn't discharge me until I had passed gas.

The thought of staying in this hospital even a minute longer was unbearable. But just as I was about to step out, Jay walked in. The moment he saw me, his face twisted in concern.

"What are you doing out of bed? You need to rest, Eriife," he exclaimed.

I sighed, already feeling the familiar wave of frustration. "Jay, I'm fine. I just need to stretch my legs. You need to stop hovering over me like a mother hen. I'm tired of it."

Jay's eyes narrowed. "You need to let your body heal. Pushing yourself isn't going to help."

I snapped. "Pushing myself? Jay, you're suffocating me!" I regretted the words the minute they came out of my mouth. But it was too late. I knew that it wasn't really him I was angry at. It was myself. I was the one who stole those shoes in the first place and put myself in a situation that I shouldn't have. I was the one allowing myself to feel things for him that I should not feel, I was the one allowing myself to enjoy the things he gave me, the luxury I had no right to enjoy.

"I can't breathe with you constantly telling me what to do!" I continued. Knowing why I was angry didn't help me process my feelings; instead, it fanned the fire.

He opened his mouth to argue, and I opened my mouth to stop him. But the abomination that happened didn't come out of my mouth. It came from my ass.

That. Did. Not. Just. Happen.

If I catch the angel in charge of my fate, blood will flow. Because why did I just fart in front of this man? I had all the opportunity in the world to do it before he came in.

To say I was embarrassed would be a monumental understatement. My stomach tightened, and for a few agonising seconds that seemed like hours, I couldn't even bring myself to open my eyes. The one silver lining was that, as far as I could tell, it didn't stink, or maybe my senses had completely shut down from sheer mortification that I couldn't smell it.

I stood there, frozen, for what felt like five hours. And I wished the ground would just open up and swallow me.

I forced my eyes open, and Jay was still standing there with a smirk that deepened my wish for the ground to open up. I just wanted to disappear.

He opened his mouth, clearly about to say something, but I lifted a finger before he could utter a single syllable. "Not a word," I said firmly. I couldn't bear to hear whatever he was about to say, witty or otherwise.

Naturally, the urge to stretch my legs had vanished. I turned around and, with what little dignity I had left, shuffled back to the bed and curled up into a ball. Suddenly, all the insurmountable problems I had been thinking about didn't seem as bad as this one.

My guardian angel must really be asleep.

Of all the people to witness this, it had to be Jay. Of all the moments, it had to be this one.

I heard Jay chuckle—maybe it was more of a laugh—before he slipped out of the room, leaving me alone with my embarrassment.

Even the bright side that it meant I could finally be discharged from the hospital couldn't snuff out my misery.

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Chapter 27

Eriife

The sunlight streaming through the curtains was the first thing I noticed when I woke up. It was warm, golden, and comforting, a stark contrast to the cool, sterile light of the hospital. I stretched cautiously, mindful of the surgery site on my abdomen. It still hurt, but the pain was manageable, and the fact that I was waking up in my own bed instead of a hospital room made it easier to bear.

Jay had insisted on driving me home from the hospital, despite my protests that I could manage on my own. When we pulled up outside my apartment, he refused to just drop me off, instead following me into the compound with the bags of provisions and gifts he had insisted on buying.

What he didn't understand was the more he did these things, the more guilty I felt.

"Jay, you don't need to—"

"I'm not leaving until I know you're settled," he interrupted, his tone leaving no room for argument. This was the Jay that I knew—stern, determined, and unyielding—but there was a gentleness in his actions that softened the edges.

Once inside, I had to admit it was nice having someone there to help. Jay moved around my apartment with an unsurprising ease, unpacking the bags and making sure I had everything I needed. The man who commanded boardrooms and handled multi-million-dollar deals was now fluffing my pillows and stocking up my kitchen.

"Thank you," I said, feeling a bit awkward. This is what I should have done before. Instead of yelling at him for fussing over me, I should have thanked him because I didn't deserve any of this care.

"For all of this. You really didn't have to go out of your way."

He turned to look at me, his eyes warm. “I wanted to,” he said. There was something in his voice that made my heart skip a beat, and I think that was when I knew.

Though he had not spoken the words out loud, a familiar fear gripped me. My mouth went dry and my heart hammered against my rib cage.

Jay wasn’t playing games with me. He wanted something that I could not give. And that scared the shit out of me. The secret I was keeping from him was one thing, but I didn’t fit into his world. I couldn’t even stand my own against Sarah.

I reminded him of his mother. He wanted me to fill the space that his mother had left.

That was too much. Too dangerous.

A heavy silence settled between us, thick with unspoken words. I could see the exhaustion in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders.

He’d been pushing himself too hard, trying to be there for me while also dealing with whatever personal issues had been weighing on him. And as much as I appreciated everything he had done, I couldn’t give him what he wanted.

So, I decided to do what I knew how to do best. I would run. I would hide and I would bury everything and pretend it never happened.

“Jay,” I began. “I need to tell you something.”

He straightened, giving me his full attention. “What is it?”

I took a deep breath as I searched for the right words. “I think I should resign.”

I saw his body stiffen. “Wh…why?”

“You know why, Jay.” I said. “All of these isn’t right at all. You are paying me a ridiculous amount of money to work for you, there’s—”

“Te… te… tell me your re…re… real reason.”

I sighed and walked up to him.

“I can’t give you what you want. We’re too different, and I don’t think this…whatever it is between us…can work.”

His expression didn’t change, but I saw the brief flicker of pain in his eyes. He gave me a sad smile, one that tugged at my heartstrings in a way I wasn’t prepared for. “You’re turning me down again before I even ask.”

“Jay—” I breathed but he put a finger to my lips, shutting me up.

And then he took my hands in his and, holding me captive with his eyes.

"It's my fault, you know. I have gone about this the wrong way and you are within your rights to want to get away from it. But give me a chance, one month with me, to show you what I truly want and you can decide then."

His words hung in the air, and I opened my mouth to respond, but he quickly cut in, his tone shifting to something more businesslike. "Do you have a valid passport?"

I blinked in confusion. "What?"

"A passport," he repeated, smiling, knowing his question had caught me off guard. "Do you have one?"

I nodded slowly, still trying to process the sudden change in topic. "Yes, I do, but—"

"Good," he said, cutting me off again. "You're going to need it. You're coming with me to South Korea on a business trip."

My mouth dropped open, and I stared at him. "South Korea? Why?"

Jay's eyes held a glint of determination as he leaned closer, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. "You wanted something positive to counter our company's scandal, right? This could be it. A new business partnership and the perfect distraction."

"Jay, are you trying to bribe me into accepting your one-month offer?"

He grinned at me. "Is it working?"

I couldn't help it—the sheer audacity of Jayeola Abayomi-Young, the suddenness of it all—it made me laugh. A joyous, surprised squeal escaped my lips, one that I quickly tried to stifle with my hand. But the sound had already slipped out, filling the room and making Jay smile wider in response.

His laughter joined mine, rich and warm, and for a brief moment, the weight of everything—the surgery, the tension, the uncertainty—lifted, leaving us in this strange, wonderful bubble of shared amusement.

As our laughter faded, I looked up at him, my heart still racing from the sudden burst of joy. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Dead serious," he confirmed, his smile lingering as he gazed at me. "I'll make the arrangements and let you know when we are leaving. So, get some rest and start packing."

I shook my head in disbelief, still trying to wrap my mind around the idea. A business trip to South Korea with Jay? A country on the list of the countries that I'd want to visit before I die. A country I thought I could only visit in my dreams.

It literally sounded like the plot of one of those cheesy romance novels or a Korean drama.

For the moment, my worries were forgotten.

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Chapter 28

Eriife

Three weeks later

Despite the luxury surrounding me, my nerves were on edge. I had never flown before—not locally, not internationally—so the thought of being thousands of feet above the ground in a metal tube was enough to make my stomach churn. And this wasn't just any flight; this was a trip to South Korea. With Jay. On his private jet.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself as I stared out the window at the clear blue sky. The jet's interior was the epitome of opulence—plush leather seats, polished wood accents, and a fully stocked bar.

Ọmọ, there's money in this life o.

It was a far cry from the economy class I'd always imagined myself flying in.

But as much as I wanted to enjoy the experience, my mind kept drifting to Lade. I had been trying to reach her since last night, but she hadn't picked up any of my calls. It wasn't unusual of her to go offline, especially if she was with a new guy, but something about her silence this time felt different. It gnawed at me somehow, especially since she spoke to me about Tobi asking her on a date.

After Jay told me about the trip to South Korea, I had immediately called Lade and squealed my excitement about it to her. She had come to my house almost immediately and for the two weeks leading to the trip, that was all we talked about. What to pack, places to visit. I had to remind myself that it was a business trip and we would be there for only a week. And I was going there as the head of Jay's PR team; it was not a vacation. But still we couldn't help ourselves.

We had barely talked about Tobi. The only thing she mentioned was that he had been giving her the cold shoulder since she turned him down. She didn't ask about my relationship with Jay. She was waiting for me to tell her

first and I wanted to. But what would I say? How would I explain the complicated nature of our relationship? How would I explain that I had been looking over my shoulder since the day Sarah attacked me at the office?

I told myself she was probably fine—just busy, wrapped up in some whirlwind romance. But deep down, I couldn't ignore the unease that lingered. Tobi made me feel uneasy.

"You okay?" Jay's voice broke through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present.

I glanced over at him, finding those familiar piercing brown eyes studying me with concern. He was dressed casually for once—no tailored suit, just a simple button-down shirt and slacks—but he still exuded that effortless, commanding presence that made my heart.

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing a smile. "Just…nervous, I guess."

He nodded, as if he understood exactly what I was feeling. "Flying can be intimidating the first time," he said, his voice calm and reassuring. "But I promise, you're safe with me."

The way he said it, so certain and protective, made my chest tighten. I wanted to believe him, to let his words soothe the panic building inside me, not just about flying but about everything that I had told him about.

As if sensing my hesitation, Jay leaned closer, his gaze never leaving mine. "Eriife, if you're uncomfortable with this—any of it—we can turn back. We don't have to go."

His offer caught me off guard, and for a moment, I considered taking it. We could go back, I could return to my normal life, and all the complicated feelings swirling between us would be left behind, unresolved but safe. But I reminded myself again that this was not a vacation. It was a business trip to secure one of the biggest Korean skincare brands as a partner. This was bigger than my emotions. I would sort those out in my own time.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I want to go. I'm just…processing everything."

Jay's expression softened, and he reached out to take my hand, his touch warm. "For what it's worth, Eriife, we are here together."

The way he said "together" made my heart flutter in a way I wasn't prepared for. I met his gaze, and for a moment, everything else faded away—the worry about Lade, the fear of flying, the secret I was hiding. All I could

think about was the closeness between us, the way his hand felt in mine, the way his eyes seemed to see right through me.

The jet's engines roared to life, and the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing that we were about to take off. My anxiety surged again.

I must have looked terrified because Jay's grip on my hand tightened. "Look at me," he said softly. "You're doing great."

I forced myself to meet his gaze. The sincerity in his voice, the way he looked at me like I was the only person in the world who mattered, made my heart swell. Despite the fear clawing at my insides, I felt a strange sense of comfort in his presence—a reassurance that everything would be okay, as long as he was there.

The turbulence I had been dreading didn't come. Instead, we were gliding smoothly through the sky, the city below us shrinking into a patchwork of tiny lights. I let out my breath slowly and felt my body finally beginning to relax.

"There you go," Jay said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Not so bad, is it?"

I couldn't help but smile back, the tension in my chest easing. "I guess not," I admitted, feeling a bit silly for how terrified I'd been.

His thumb brushed over my knuckles again, sending another jolt of electricity through me.

The close proximity between us, the warmth of his hand in mine, the way his voice wrapped around me like a protective bubble—it all turned my insides to jelly. I could feel my resolve weakening, the walls I had built so carefully starting to crumble.

But then, just as quickly, the reality of our situation crashed back in.

I gently pulled my hand away, my heart aching at the loss of contact. "Thank you," I said softly, not trusting myself to say more.

Jay's expression flickered with something I couldn't quite read—disappointment, maybe, or understanding. But he didn't push, just nodded and leaned back in his seat, giving me the space I needed.

The rest of the flight passed in a blur of small talk and quiet moments. But I could sense the undercurrent of tension between us, an unspoken awareness that this trip was about more than just business.

And when we returned, we would not be the same people we were before the trip.

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Chapter 29

Tobi

The night air was dense, almost suffocating, as I stood alone in front of Lade's home. The shadows stretched long and twisted, merging with the darkness around me. I looked down at Lade's unconscious body on the cold concrete and felt a gnawing emptiness that seemed to echo through the night.

It was good luck that Lade lived alone in a house that she inherited from her late parents. It was even better luck that the house was in a remote area, with no other houses for miles.

Because all that had happened had not been planned. I came all the way to ask her a question. A simple question that required a simple answer but she had given me a stupid attitude instead of answering.

Now look at where that led us. Look at what we have become.

The stone I had hit her head with lay nearby, stained with blood. The sight of it made my stomach churn, but the rage and frustration that had driven me to this point were still raw, still burning inside me.

Like I said, I had not planned any of this. But I guess it was time for Lade's re-education and training into the proper woman she should have been. It's sad that I have to do the work her mother should have done.

It was her fault that Eriife had slipped through my fingers. That she hadn't come begging and pleading to know what had happened to her, that she hadn't cared what I might have done to her.

If Lade hadn't corrupted Eriife and then turned me down when I only wanted to use her to get to Eriife, we wouldn't be at this point. But everything happened for a reason and I guess this was God's plan. I would re-educate Lade and get Eriife at the same time.

I dragged Lade's limp body into the boot of my car. I didn't bother to clean up the scene. Lade had no living relatives who would look for her. Eriife didn't know where she lived because in all the time I had watched Eriife, she had

never once visited Lade. And the rain that was about to fall would wash away any evidence that I might have left behind.

Lade's phone rang on the passenger seat where I had flung it. As I stared at Eriife's name flashing on the screen, I couldn't help but think of how alone Lade was in the world. Just like me.

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Part Three

And our love's the only war worth fighting for

- Bruno Mars and Lady Gaga, "Die with a Smile"

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Chapter 30

Jay

I had been to South Korea two times before this trip, and every time I touched down in the country, it always felt like stepping into another world. The skies were a clear blue and though the sun was beginning to set, it still shone gloriously down on us. August was supposed to be one of the warmest months in South Korea but considering the country I lived in and was coming from, the weather was bearable.

Eriife was quiet beside me, her usually sharp eyes softened by what seemed to be exhaustion. The almost twenty-four-hour flight had worn her out, plus the flying anxiety that she'd had, but she still had an air of elegance about her. That's the thing about Eriife—no matter what, she always looked put together, always on point.

"Ready for South Korea?" I asked, glancing in her direction as we made our way toward the exit.

Her lips curved slightly in a tired smile. "As ready as I'll ever be."

We had gone over the reason for the trip on the flight here. Glow, a Korean skincare giant, was an opportunity that could catapult AbayoMart into a new sphere of influence—global markets, new partnerships, endless growth. It was everything I'd been working toward for years. Partnering with Glow was definitely going to help redeem our integrity as a company, but there was also a personal sentiment involved. A sentiment that I was not ready to acknowledge to anyone, most especially myself.

The car waiting for us outside was a sleek, black sedan. The driver, a soft-spoken man in a crisp suit, helped us with our bags and ushered us inside. As soon as we settled on the leather seats, I let out a long breath. No matter how many times I had done it, travelling always left me on edge—too many moving parts, too much left to chance. But for some reason, the familiarity of Eriife sitting next to me kept that restlessness at bay. It was funny how this woman,

who had rejected me twice and whom I hadn't even known for long, had a way of keeping me grounded.

The ride to the hotel was quiet, save for the occasional hum of the car engine and the soft murmur of traffic outside. Seoul unfolded before us, a blend of modernity and tradition. High-rises of glass and steel reflected the orange hues of the setting sun, while ancient temples peeked out from narrow alleys, a testament to the preservation of not only the city's but also the country's rich history.

I turned to find Eriife looking through the window with awe. Of course, given her fascination with Korean dramas and K-pop, she was immediately in love with the city. We had only been here for a few minutes but I felt my head swell with pride.

If I died right now, I'd probably die the happiest man on earth looking at the expression on Eriife's face. This had been my plan all along, because truth be told, I did not really need Eriife with me on this trip. But I knew she loved this country and seeing her smile had recently become one of my life's most important missions. I wanted to reach out to her and hold her hand, but I didn't want to interrupt the moment she was having.

If just the streets of Seoul made her light up this much, just how happy would she be when she learnt of all the things I had planned for her on this trip? My stomach tightened in excitement at the thought of it.

As we neared the hotel, the skyline grew even more impressive. The hotel itself, a towering structure of elegant architecture, loomed in the distance. I had chosen it carefully because I wanted only the best for this trip, for Eriife.

We pulled up to the entrance, where we were greeted by uniformed staff. I led Eriife inside, past glass doors that slid open soundlessly to reveal a marble lobby bathed in golden light. The lobby was breathtaking, an expansive, high-ceilinged space filled with modern art installations. Its colours were beige and cream, and touches of deep walnut. Soft jazz music played in the background, mingling with the low murmur of guests talking and the occasional clinking of glasses. The air smelled faintly of jasmine and sandalwood, an intoxicating mix that instantly made you feel as though you'd stepped into an oasis of calm.

"Ohhh, this place is niceee," Eriife whispered, her big eyes widening as she took it all in.

My feeling of self-satisfaction increased, and I swear, my head doubled its size with pride.

We approached the front desk, and I gave the young woman behind the counter my name. She typed it into the computer, her fingers moving with practiced precision, before smiling up at me.

"Mr Abayomi-Young, welcome to The Castle Hotel." Her Korean accent was heavy on the pronunciation of my name. "We have your suite ready for you," she said, handing me a keycard. I waited for her to give Eriife her own keycard.

"Err, I made another reservation under the name Eriife Williams," I said when she just continued to smile at me.

"Oh, just a moment please," she said as she typed the name into her computer.

A few minutes later, she looked up at me. Her smile faltered as her eyes darted between me and Eriife. "I don't seem to have a reservation under that name."

"That's not right. Maybe it was a spelling issue. I'll spell out the name so you can check again."

Still, there was no result for Eriife. That was weird.

"There should be a reservation for her as well," I said, gesturing towards Eriife, who raised a brow in question but remained silent. I didn't want her thinking that I had done this with bad intentions. My thoughts may be a little dirty but I wouldn't make such moves except Eriife wanted me to.

The receptionist clicked her mouse a few more times, then shook her head apologetically. "I'm very sorry, but we don't have a second reservation. And unfortunately, we're fully booked tonight."

Fully booked? In one of the largest hotels in Seoul? Was she kidding me? A sharp spike of irritation flared in my chest. "Let me make a call."

I stepped aside, pulling out my phone. I dialled Adanna's number, the sharp tones of the ringing line piercing through my thinning patience. She was never this sloppy with her job and I was sure I had given her very clear instructions. And she should have picked up by now. Seoul was eight hours ahead so it should be morning in Lagos.

She picked up on the second ring. "Uncle Jay! How's Seoul?"

I didn't waste time with pleasantries. "Why isn't there a reservation for Eriife?"

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line, then Adanna's voice softened with confusion. "I didn't realise she was going with you. I only made a

reservation for one."

My jaw clenched. "How could you not know? She's been involved in the planning for this trip for weeks."

"I'm so sorry, Jay. I had no idea you wouldn't be traveling alone. You said you didn't need me to go with you so I assumed you were going alone. I thought—"

I cut her off, not wanting to hear any more. "Fix it."

Another pause, longer this time and I heard the clicking of her fingers on her keyboard. "There's no availability at the hotel, but I can find another one nearby."

I glanced at Eriife, who had been listening to my part of the conversation. I could tell she had figured out what was going on, and I wasn't about to let this slip-up become a bigger issue than it already was.

I sighed. "I'll get back to you." I hung up before Adanna could say another word.

I turned to Eriife, whose arms were folded across her chest. She seemed calm but there was a hint of nervousness in her eyes. I'd be damned if I made Eriife uncomfortable on her first trip outside Nigeria.

"They don't have a room for you. And the hotel is fully booked for tonight," I said solemnly.

"Hmm, I heard. And it seems Adanna made the mistake?"

"I'm sorry about this. We can find another hotel." Then I shook my head. "No, that's too much of a hassle. We've just landed, we're both exhausted, and it's late."

"It's just one week, Jay," she said, her voice soft but firm. "We can share the suite. There's no need to complicate things."

The idea of us sharing a suite wasn't the issue. I had no problem with that —hell, it was far from a problem. But the thought of us being in such close quarters, for an entire week, under these circumstances… I wasn't sure how to handle it. I wasn't sure if sharing a suite would make things simpler or infinitely more complicated.

"What, are you afraid that I'll jump you?" she teased, though the corner of her lips twitched. I knew she was just trying to hide her anxiety.

I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. Still, there was no other option. Besides, I wasn't a teenager. I could certainly control my hormones.

"Alright," I said finally, trying to keep my tone neutral. "We'll share."

The receptionist arranged for our bags to be taken up to the suite. As we rode the elevator in silence, I kept sneaking glances at Eriife. She seemed unfazed, but there was a quiet tension in the air, one neither of us dared to acknowledge. I didn't want to push the boundaries of whatever this…thing between us was, but it seemed that fate—through Adanna—had other plans.

The suite was impressive, to say the least. As soon as we walked in, the floor-to-ceiling windows caught my eye, offering a panoramic view of the city below. The lights of Seoul sparkled like diamonds against the darkening sky, the Han River cutting a silver ribbon through the heart of the city.

The interior of the suite was modern and luxurious, with polished lines and muted tones of grey and white. A plush, king-sized bed dominated the room, with linens that looked soft and inviting. There was a sitting area with deep leather armchairs, a flat-screen TV on the wall, and a marble-topped desk tucked into one corner. To the side, a sliding door led to the bathroom, where I could see a deep soaking tub and a walk-in rain shower.

It was the kind of space designed to make you forget about the world outside.

Eriife walked over to the windows, gazing out at the city.

For a moment, I let myself imagine what this week could be like. What it might mean for us. Then I shook the thought away. I wanted Eriife, but I wanted her to come to me, no pressure.

But as I watched her standing there, hands pressed to the glass, I knew I was only kidding myself. Waiting for Eriife to come to me would be the hardest thing I had ever done in my life.

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Chapter 31

Eriife

The moment we stepped off the plane, I was hit with a surge of excitement and nerves that I hadn't anticipated. Just being at the airport, I could already feel in my core that Seoul would be everything I had imagined and more. There were signs in Korean and English around us. The air was warm but not overwhelmingly so compared to Nigeria, plus I had researched Korean weather and packed appropriate clothing for the trip.

Jay's expression was a mix of determination and the calm confidence that I had come to associate with him—the one he showed to the world. But I have seen almost every one of his expressions—angry, vulnerable, passionate, aroused, sated. That last thought made my cheeks burn and my stomach tighten. Oh, what I would give to see his sated expression again.

I bit on my lip and lowered my lashes as if my thoughts were loud enough for the world to hear. It was no use telling myself that line of thought was dangerous—my body wanted what it wanted regardless of what my brain said.

Apart from a brief look of reassurance that Jay gave me, we didn't interact or speak as we walked towards the chauffeur-driven car that had been waiting for us. As we slid into the back seat, I tried to focus on the city sprawled out before us.

Seoul was breathtaking. Skyscrapers towered above us, their glass walls reflecting the setting sun. The streets were alive with people. Some hurriedly crossed intersections while others strolled leisurely, their faces lit by the bright signs at the storefronts. It was just as I had seen in Korean dramas but even more dreamy and surreal.

And that's when it hit me—the full realisation of where I was, and it indeed felt like a dream. I was in South Korea. Me, Eriife. I still couldn't believe it. I pinched the inside of my palm hard to see if the pain would wake me up from this pleasant dream. But nope. Instead of jerking awake and finding myself in

my bed, I was still sat in this expensive car looking out into the streets of Seoul.

I reminded myself that this was a business trip, not a leisure trip. Still, Jay had brought me here because he knew how much I love this country. I didn't have to be here; he could have come here with Adanna. This would not have been possible without Jay.

Even without turning to look at him, I could feel him next to me, so close yet distant in a way that made my heart race. It had to be this way between us —unspoken tension, lingering glances, and the feelings that we were not permitted to have for each other.

I lied when I said there was nothing I regretted from the night we spent together. There was something I did regret, and it was this thing between us that we could never have, this thing that was born that night. Maybe if I had not stolen those shoes, then I wouldn't have fallen in love with a man I could not have. Maybe I wouldn't have given him hope that this could be more than what it was.

And very well wouldn't have been slapped by Sarah. I was still so damn hurt by that. But as usual, I had kept my mouth shut and endured it like all the verbal abuse from her while I was at The Sparrow. I shook my head to dispel the thoughts. Being in Seoul was too beautiful for me to allow the unpleasantness of Sarah to taint it.

The hotel came into view, and my breath caught in my throat. The building was massive! It was elegant and shiny. As we stepped in, I was immediately enveloped by the luxurious atmosphere. The lobby was spacious, with high ceilings, soft golden lighting, and plush seating areas that were calling my name to just sit and relax. Everything about this place screamed elegance.

Ah! People are enjoying life in this world o. I have only been here for how many minutes and I already don't want to leave anymore. Ahn ahn, see life. I brought out my phone to take pictures but quickly thought better of it. I had to remain composed so Jay would not think he brought a bush girl to a sophisticated place. Let me not disgrace my ancestors.

Lade would really love this place. She had made me promise over a million times to take thousands of pictures for her. I can just imagine her face lighting up when she sees this place… Omo! The thought of Lade made my heart skip a beat. She had been completely unreachable before we took off. I hoped she was fine, and it was that she had taken off with a random man again, because with

that girl, I just can't tell. Still, I made a mental note to call her again, once I was settled into my hotel room.

Jay handled the check-in while I continued to take in my surroundings. I was sounding like a broken record even in my own thoughts but I just couldn't believe I was in Seoul, staying in a place like this, with him. Little did I know that the receptionist was about to pour sand in my garri. Or more accurately, Adanna had already diluted my garri before we even left Nigeria.

Everything that happened from that point on felt like someone had dumped a bucket of soapy water on the fire of my excitement and replaced it with anxiety. There was only one room reservation; Adanna, his secretary, had made a mistake. When Jay suggested we look for another hotel, I thought of how stressful that would be and told him I didn't mind sharing a room with him.

But who was I kidding? Sharing a room with the man who fires up every part of my body and makes me want to be a bad girl? Hell, yeah, I did mind. So why was I putting up the act and making stupid jokes like "do you think I'll jump you?" I really should just bite my tongue or better still, the ground should just open and swallow me. I just keep embarrassing myself in front of this man. God abeg!

The elevator ride was silent, the tension between us growing with each passing floor. When we reached the suite, I was too nervous to fully appreciate how stunning it was. The room was enormous, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of Seoul's skyline. The décor was modern, with rich textures and colours that exuded luxury. But my eyes were fixed on the centrepiece of the room: the bed. The one, singular, king-sized bed.

And it wasn't just my eyes. My mind was running several miles per second into an imaginary scenario where Jay has me on the bed, my hands pinned over my head by one of his large hands, while his other hand works its way down my open thighs, his thumb finding and rubbing my sweet spot, while his index and middle fingers slide in and out of me. And just when he can feel the tension peaking, my vag clenching around his fingers and swollen clit pulsing, he covers my mouth with his, the sound of my orgasm muffled by our kiss.

I caught myself and quickly looked away from the bed. Jay was busy with something near our suitcases. So thankfully, he hadn't seen me staring wistfully at the bed. I went to stand by the window, but even the beautiful

night sky could not take away the effect of my wild thoughts on my body. The evidence of it was in the moisture seeping into my panties.

"The view's incredible," Jay said softly.

I looked back to see him standing by the bed, staring at me with a clouded expression. His eyes seemed a little dark. I knew that look; I knew what it meant. It was the same he had on the first night when I pleasured myself for him. God, this man wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

"Yes, yes, it is. I can't believe that I am finally here," I said. My voice came out a lot gruffier than I had ever sounded. Which was no surprise, given that I was suddenly so thirsty, literally and figuratively.

Just being in the same room with him for a few minutes and I was already like this. The energies between us was supercharged, such that if anyone walked in between us now, the person was sure to be electrocuted instantly. How were we going to spend an entire week together in this room? Fuck one week, how were we going to survive the night?

Sleeping in the same bed with Jay? It felt like crossing a line we'd been tiptoeing around for weeks. Crossing this line one time was enough. If we did this again, I would never be able to let go and there was surely only pain and heartache waiting at the end of it.

I moved toward the large marble bathroom, pretending to be interested in the amenities. The bathtub was massive, the kind you'd find in luxury spas, and the rain shower looked tempting after our long travel. I needed something, anything, to distract me from my racing thoughts.

"Eriife." Jay's voice pulled me back to reality. He was still standing near the bed, his expression unreadable. "Look, I know this wasn't part of the plan. If it makes you uncomfortable, we can figure something else out."

"No, it's fine," I said quickly, my voice now a little too high-pitched. I took a deep breath and tried again. "It's just for one week and we are adults. We'll be fine."

Liar. I felt like a teenager with raging hormones, just learning about the changes in her body.

He nodded, though the tension in the room didn't dissipate.

I changed into my pyjamas in the bathroom, grateful for the momentary reprieve. When I came out, Jay was already lying on one side of the bed, phone in hand, scrolling through emails or news reports or whatever billionaires read

before bed. I hesitated for a moment, then slid into the other side, keeping as much distance between us as possible.

The bed was huge, but the room suddenly felt too small. I could feel the warmth of Jay's body, even though we weren't touching. My heart raced, and I silently cursed the awkwardness of it all.

We lay there in silence for what felt like an eternity. The city lights outside flickered against the curtains, casting soft shadows across the room. I could hear Jay's steady breathing, and I wondered if he was as tense as I was.

"Good night," he murmured, his voice low and rough.

"Good night," I whispered back, closing my eyes and hoping sleep would come soon.

But sleep didn't come. Instead, I lay there, hyper-aware of every inch of space between us, of every unspoken word hanging in the air. Sharing a bed with Jay was just as hard as I had imagined it would be, not just because of the physical proximity, but because of the emotions I was trying so hard to ignore.

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Chapter 32

Eriife

Morning could not come fast enough. Jetlagged as I was, I had hardly slept. When I finally slept, I was plagued by lucid dreams.

We both woke up early, neither of us acknowledging the awkwardness of the night before. It was as though we had silently agreed to focus on the reason we were here: the business meeting with Glow executives.

In the car on the way to the meeting, Jay sat beside me, scrolling on his tablet through the presentation slides we had prepared. I watched the city pass by outside, trying to steady my nerves. I had been at AbayoMart for a few weeks, and I should have been used to this by now—the high-stakes meetings, the polished professionalism—but this one felt different. It wasn't just the potential for an international deal that was making me anxious. It was everything, to be honest, plus my lack of proper sleep was telling on me. I felt slow and tired, and there was a dull ache in my temples.

"Are you ready?" Jay asked, his voice breaking the silence.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I replied, giving him a small smile. He nodded, his eyes lingering on mine, like he had something more to say, but he turned back to his tablet before the silence grew uncomfortable.

Glow's headquarters was a jaw-dropping building, all sleek lines and polished glass that reflected the busy city around it. The moment we stepped inside, we were greeted by impeccably dressed staff who guided us to a boardroom on one of the top floors. The view from the floor-to-ceiling windows was of Seoul stretching out beneath us. I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe, even as the nerves kicked in. This was the moment we had been preparing for. Weeks of strategising, countless emails, and late-night revisions had all led to this. If we secured this deal, the data leak scandal would be a thing of the past.

Glow's CEO, Mr Kang, entered the room with his team. He was a tall, middle-aged, sharply dressed man with an air of authority. Though he was quite handsome, he was a far cry from the dreamy-eyed young CEOs in Korean dramas.

Mr Kang greeted Jay warmly, and I could see the mutual respect between them. That was a good sign. After the introductions, we got straight into the presentation. Jay, as always, was confident and commanding, presenting the vision of how AbayoMart could help Glow successfully penetrate the Nigerian market. There was not a single trace of nervousness or stuttering. Jay was born for this and that thought alone made my head and heart swell with pride as if he were my man.

I was captivated by his poise. His voice was steady, his arguments persuasive, and the way he handled the questions from Mr Kang and his team showed just how deeply he had thought about this deal. But what struck me the most was how he found ways to bring me into the conversation. Whenever there was a point about the PR strategy or the brand's image, he deferred to me.

I felt the weight of his trust in me, and it gave me the confidence I needed to speak clearly and assertively. I outlined the plans we had for integrating Glow's products into the Nigerian market, focusing on digital campaigns and influencer partnerships. I explained how we would navigate cultural nuances and leverage the growing beauty and skincare community in Nigeria to make their brand stand out.

As I spoke, I noticed the way Mr Kang and his team leaned forward, clearly impressed. Their nods of approval and thoughtful questions showed that they were considering our proposal seriously. Jay glanced at me, and for a brief second, our eyes met. There was a flicker of pride in his eyes.

The meeting wrapped up with smiles and handshakes, and when Mr Kang expressed his eagerness to move forward with the partnership, I felt a rush of exhilaration. We had done it. All the work, all the planning—it had paid off.

I immediately felt relived. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest and I could finally breathe properly. Even though a formal contract had not yet been signed, this meeting had all the positive vibes, and we would be signing the contract soon.

On a personal level, it was a huge accomplishment and triumph because the data breach that had happened on my first day on the job had proven not

to be a stumbling block for this partnership. It went to show how well I did my job in handling it. I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

I looked up to see Jay smiling broadly at me.

* * *

As we left the building, Jay's hand brushed against mine. The touch was brief but enough to send a spark through me. I didn't pull away, but I didn't acknowledge it either. The electricity between us was getting stronger with each passing minute. My body, my heart, my soul wanted Jay since that first night, but my head knew that I couldn't have him.

I was not meant for him. We were from two different worlds. I was just a girl from Ogun State and he was Jayeola Abayomi-Young. We were polar opposites—family background, educational background, wealth and exposure. We had absolutely nothing in common, except this spark between us. And just how far would that take us? If we acted on what was going on between us, it would only end in disaster, and we would grow further apart. And Jay would most likely hate me if he knew what I had done to his baby.

It just couldn't happen. I knew that, yet I kept wishing, kept asking myself what if, kept hoping.

The car ride back to the hotel was quiet but not awkward. It was a comfortable silence, the kind that comes after a shared victory. I leaned my head against the window, watching the city pass by, trying to ignore the way my pulse quickened every time I thought about how close he was.

"I know we haven't signed the contract yet, but we are almost there. In fact, I'm confident before the week is over, our partnership would be sealed," Jay said as we got back into our hotel suite.

"Yes," I said, almost bouncing off my feet in excitement. "Did you see how excited Mr Kang was? I'm sure that if he could, he would have had us sign the contract there and then. Did you have a personal relationship with him before this whole partnership business?" I couldn't keep the joy out of my voice.

"You could say so," Jay answered.

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to tell me more.

"His brother, Kang Ji Uk and I were friends at Havard Business School, so I had met him a couple of times before this business. Though I assure you, my decision to partner with Glow was not based on the personal relationship we

had. But Glow was the company we were most compatible with, and knowing Ji Uk made it a lot easier to get the connection."

"Of course, Havard," I said, turning on my heels towards the living area.

"What does that mean?" I heard the laughter in Jay's question as he followed me.

"Nothing, really." I shrugged. "It just shows how far apart our worlds are."

That put a damper on the excitement and for a brief moment, there was an awkward silence.

"Well, we haven't signed the contract yet, but we should still celebrate," Jay said. Though he had made a statement, it felt like a question, like he was unsure I would want to celebrate this moment with him.

"Of course," I nodded.

I was indeed in the mood to celebrate. It was probably the adrenaline of not only attending my first international meeting but also the positive outcome. However, for some reason, I didn't want to share the moment with outsiders. This was a personal victory for both of us.

"Let's order some food," I suggested.

"You don't want to go out?" Jay seemed surprised. "I would have thought you would want to explore the city a bit."

"We could do that later. I'm still a bit too tired to truly appreciate it," I said, instead of the truth that I wanted to celebrate with only him. Well, half-truth because I was still jetlagged, considering that I had barely slept the night before.

After our meal, we sat on the plush sofa, sipping wine.

"To success," Jay said, raising his glass.

I smiled and clinked my glass against his. "To success," I echoed, though I wasn't sure if I meant the business deal or something personal.

The conversation flowed easily. It revolved mostly around the company, what this deal could bring to us. Jay even mentioned in passing that securing this partnership was a bit personal for him. But we moved on to another topic before I could ask him what he meant. We talked about everything except the elephant in the room.

We continued to refill our glasses and laugh at things that probably wouldn't have been so funny if we didn't have alcohol in our system. And at some point, the space between us shrank. One minute, we were talking, and

the next, Jay's hand was on mine, his fingers tracing circles on the back of my hand. I froze, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Eriife."

I looked at him, and in that moment, it was like the world narrowed down to just the two of us. The weight of the weeks we had spent dancing around our feelings crashed over me. My wineglass was still in my hand as he leaned in, slowly, as if giving me the chance to pull away. And I almost didn't. I wanted so badly to give in to my desires, but it would only lead to disaster, I told myself as I pushed him away.

"I can't do this." My voice was barely above a whisper. He furrowed his brows but backed up.

I cleared my throat as I sat up straighter and placed my glass on the centre table. "I just can't do this. It won't end well," I said, getting to my feet. I felt a little lightheaded. I had to sober up real fast and I knew just the best way to do that.

Without another word to Jay, I left the living room and made my way to the bathroom. I stepped into the bathroom, still fully clothed, and turned on the rain shower, allowing the cold water to pour directly on my head.

I would most definitely regret it later when I had to hand dry my almost waist length braids, but for the moment, the cold water all over me was just what I needed to clear my head and stay sober. And it was working until I heard his voice behind me.

"W… wh… why d…d…do…do you keep pushing me away?"

I froze for a few seconds, then I slowly turned to look at him. "Jay! What are you doing in here? I could have been naked!" I said. But I wasn't even in the least offended that he was in the bathroom with me. If anything, it made my clit tighten with excitement.

"B…bu…butttt… y…you are not," he said. "Answer the question, Eriife. Why do you keep pushing me away? What do you mean by it won't end well?"

And from the way his jaw tightened and the stubborn set of his eyes, I knew he wouldn't move an inch, neither towards me nor away from me until he got the answers he wanted.

And the truth? I was tired. Tired of suppressing my feelings, tired of invalidating them, tired of the pull and push and all that nonsense. It was time to tell him the truth and end all this once and for all.

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Chapter 33

Eriife

I sighed, the shower still raining over me. Which was good because it would help hide the tears I was about to shed.

"You want to know the truth, Jay?" I asked. I could barely even hear my own voice.

"Yes, I do," he said, his eyes holding mine captive.

"Jay." My voice shook as I began. "You are a good man, you are kind, funny, handsome, wealthy, attentive, everything a woman wants in man. No, scratch that. You are everything I want in a man but you are not just the one for me." I poured the words out at once. I could feel my heartbeat racing faster and it was hard to keep my voice steady.

"Why is that, Eriife?" His voice was calm and steady. No hint of his earlier stutter.

"Two reasons, Jay. The first one is so very obvious, you know it, you can see it, but you keep denying the truth that's right in front of you. We are way too different. Unless all you want from me is to be your mistress, then we both know this is not going anywhere. And I am not going to be a man's mistress, no matter what. I want a love where my man will be proud of me, will flaunt me and carry my matter on his head like Gala. It was why I turned you away six months ago because I assumed that's all you wanted from me and even now, I still don't know what you want." I paused, waiting for him to digest what I had just told him.

Jay did not break eye contact with me when he said, "I want you. I am in love with you. I want you not as my mistress but as the woman who will be by my side every waking moment and every time I go to sleep."

I had expected that he would say something as dreamy as that but still, hearing those words from his mouth with so much sincerity, I almost believed them. But only people with privilege like him would think something like that

would work. I had to make him see reason and come to his senses, even if that meant I had to be mean.

"Look at me! Look at the woman standing in front of you! Truly see me and tell me if I am the kind of woman you will take home to your family. You know Sarah is right. What would you introduce me as, Eriife Williams, daughter of who? What prestigious academic backgrounds do I have? What can I offer you?" By the time I was done talking, I was breathing heavily and tears were flowing down my eyes like someone had opened a dam.

"Is that what you think of me? No, actually, is that how you see yourself? Is your worth attached to the material things that you don't have? Because if that's the kind of woman you are, then I must have thoroughly misjudged you." Jay's voice was still calm as he spoke but I could feel his heart in those words.

And the questions he asked, they stung, like someone had poked me with multiple needles. I opened my mouth to speak and but he held up a finger.

"You asked me to look at the woman in front of me and tell you who I see. I see a woman who is not only beautiful but smart. A woman who can sometimes be shy but knows what she wants and goes for it. A woman who told me boldly that she wanted me the very first day she saw me. I see a woman who is authentic, who wants and deserves to be loved in the most authentic way possible. I see a woman who doesn't know her self-worth and thinks degrading and berating herself in front of me will make me stay away. I don't blame her though because she doesn't know that when I love, I love hard. And I love so hard—figuratively and literally."

He chuckled at that last part and I looked down at his trousers, at the evidence of his desire, and despite everything, I felt the tightness between my legs responding to his arousal.

"Sarah doesn't know shit," he continued, bringing my attention back to his face. "We both know how pretentious Sarah is. Her evaluation or that of others of your life shouldn't matter. If you don't want me or you don't think there's a possibility that you might love me, then just say so. Don't ever berate yourself in front of me; don't ever do that again." His voice was thick with emotion and my eyes continued to pour tears.

He took a step towards me and I took a step back. Then he spoke again. "Eriife, ever since that first night when I fell asleep so peacefully beside you and up to this moment as I stand before you, I have thought about it so many times, asked myself why I feel what I feel for you. What makes you different

from the other women? Why do I love you the way that I do? And I couldn't find a single reason, which is just as well because having a reason to love you is also having a reason to stop loving you. I want you in my life, Eriife. I want your laughter, I want your happiness, I want to be your rock and the shoulder you lean on. I want to be your best friend, I want to be your lover—God, I want to be your lover so badly. I want those ever expressive eyes of yours to light up every time I step into the room. I want to be the source of your peace, your joy and your happiness and your love. But it's a two-way street, Eriife; I want you to want me too. What I feel for you is meaningless if you don't feel it back. I'm going to—"

I pulled him close to me, stood on my toes and covered his mouth with mine. I just couldn't bear to see him be so vulnerable with me. But more importantly, I couldn't suppress my feelings anymore, not when the man I wanted was professing heaven and earth to me. We would discuss our differences later. Right now, I just wanted to show him how much I wanted—I've always wanted him.

He was surprised at first, but he soon got over it and kissed me back. The rain shower now poured down on him too, but neither of us minded the cold.

"I want you, Jayeola. I have always wanted you. But—" I said breathlessly in between our kisses.

"Christ, Eriife, no more buts," Jay said.

I chuckled against his mouth and he bent to kiss me again. This time, I allowed myself to savour the kiss without inhibitions. He tasted of wine. He pulled me closer to him, pressing my body against his. I could feel the full length of his arousal against my thigh as his hands explored my body, my breasts through my wet shirt, my waist, my back, my thighs, sending shivers all over my body.

I don't know how long we kissed; time seemed to blur. The only things I could feel were his hands all over my body, the warmth of his body so tightly pressed to mine, and the delicious taste of his mouth. It was far more intoxicating than the wine, it was overwhelming, it was beautiful.

In that moment, nothing mattered, not the second reason I didn't get the chance to tell him. Nothing mattered except me and him and I didn't want this moment to end. But Jay suddenly stopped and pulled away.

"What are you—" The heavy disappointment in my voice couldn't let me finish my question.

Jay gave a small smile as he turned off the shower. “You are going to catch a cold. You have been standing under this blasted cold water for an awfully long time.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face because it was genuine and a reflection of how much Jay warmed my heart. Even in the throes of passion, he was still concerned about me.

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Chapter 34

Eriife

That night, Jay and I fell asleep spooning, Jay naturally the big spoon. Even though I still hadn't told him about the abortion and the thought of it weighed heavily on my mind, it was still the best and most peaceful sleep that I have ever had.

After our moment in the bathroom, we spent the next couple of hours in comfortable silence, which was just fine because my mind was still reeling from the kiss. I couldn't even call that just a kiss. In hindsight, I would say it was the moment that I finally gave myself to Jayeola. If only things could remain as beautiful as that moment. If only.

After turning off the shower, Jayeola proceeded to towel dry me from head to toe. When I tried to take the towel from him, he shook his head slightly and gave me a look that said, "Stand still." So, I stayed put and let him take care of me.

After patting me dry, Jay stood in front of me, placed a finger under my chin and lifted my face. He held my gaze and though he had said a lot of things, in his eyes, I could still see so many unspoken words. This was the woman I was to him, the woman he could truly be himself with, the woman he could be this vulnerable with.

He didn't take his eyes off mine as he traced my lips with his thumb. "You drive me so so crazy, Eriifeoluwa," he said and bent to kiss me again, nibbling on my lower lip. The act caused my brain to send thrilling signals to my pussy. It craved the same attention that Jay was giving to my mouth. But when I leaned in for more, my hand pressing against his wet shirt to feel the hard muscles underneath, Jay pulled away again.

"Not yet, Eriife, we've got all the time in the world. There's no need to rush. Now, I need to get you warm."

“I know just the thing to get me warm,” I said. I let my hands fall to the bulge in front of his trousers and he laughed.

“This is the Eriife I know. Always going for what she wants.” Still, he pulled away and went to my side of the wardrobe where he pulled out a set of dry pyjamas. I could only let out a frustrated groan when he placed them in my hands.

He had gotten my body fired up only to leave me hanging, but I understood. The first time we had sex, it was with no strings attached, just two people angry at the same person and wanting to relieve our frustrations, or so we thought. But this time, it was different. Deeper emotions were involved. Jay was right; we needed to take a time out.

Jay left me in the bathroom to change into the dry clothes. By the time I came out of the bathroom in the pyjamas, he had also changed into a plain white, soft cotton t-shirt and grey slacks and was working on something on his laptop on his side of the bed.

We had only spent one night together in this hotel room and I was already thinking “his side of the bed” as if we were an old married couple. I smiled at the thought of marrying Jayeola and growing old with him. Somehow, the thought did not seem as absurd or scary as I thought it would be.

I spread a dry towel over my shoulders, the way they did in a salon when they wanted to wash your hair. I was about to begin the herculean task of drying my hair. I had not packed a hair dryer because I had not thought that I would need to dry my newly braided hair in one week. But there was one in our room, thanks to luxury hotels and the lengths they go to make sure guests are comfortable.

I sat at the vanity table and divided my braids into sections. That alone made my arms hurt. Then I turned on the wireless dryer, set it to the heat level that I wanted and started drying my hair section by section, from roots to tips. I hadn’t even spent up to two minutes and it already felt like torture. How did women who made their own hair do it?

“Here, let me help with that.”

I looked up at the vanity mirror and saw Jay standing behind me. He took the dryer from me and I immediately felt my shoulders relax as I put my hands down.

“Thank you,” I said and showed him how to go about it. I felt giddy in my stomach. This warm and fuzzy feeling—was this what being in love felt like?

Being taken care of and pampered? I didn't want this to end and yet, I knew, deep down, that it was not a kind of love meant for me. But for the time being, I would allow myself to be loved by Jay and I would love him in return. Even though it was not meant to last, I would bask in every moment of it. So that when it did end, I would have no regrets.

It was with this resolve that I went to bed, allowing Jay to cuddle me through the best sleep I had ever had.

* * *

The next day felt like a dream. Like last night had not happened. But it had. The way Jay and I were pressed against each other was evidence that it had happened. I tried not to dwell too much on it but it was all I could think about when I opened my eyes.

As carefully and quietly as I could, I turned to watch Jay, who was still sleeping. His features were relaxed and I traced the lines of his face gently with my fingers. But I guess I wasn't gentle enough because no sooner had my fingers touched his skin than he opened his eyes.

Normally, being caught doing something like this would have made me want to disappear from the world. But the smile Jayeola gave me as he opened his eyes was the most beautiful thing after sunset to me. I smiled right back at him.

"Can't get enough of me?" he teased, his voice gruff.

"Isn't that what you've always wanted—to make me always hungry for you?"

"I am not complaining," he said, pulling me closer to him. My palm rested on his chest and I could feel the gentle thump of his heartbeat. He was looking at me with such curiosity and there was a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

I said, an unsure smile formed on my lips. "What?"

"You," he answered.

"Me what?"

"You and your shakara, that's what. You built a mansion in my heart and you don't want to live in it. No, you made me beg you to live in it," he said.

"What does that even mean?" I laughed. "Jayeola, I didn't take you for a mushy poetic lover."

"Oh, you have not seen anything yet. I will finish you with mushy cringy love, your Korean fictional boyfriends wouldn't be able to compare."

"Goodness, Jayeola, what is wrong with you?" I laughed against his chest. "How do you know I have fictional Korean boyfriends?"

"Well, according to Adanna, every K-drama and K-pop fangirl has one or several," he answered.

I mean, he wasn't wrong but hearing it from him was funny and cute at the same time. I didn't know what to say so I focused on making circles on his chest with my index finger.

"By the way, I finally met your Anthony Bridgerton."

I looked up at him in surprise. "You met Jonathan Bailey?"

His brows creased in confusion. "Who is Jonathan Bailey?"

"The actor who plays Anthony Bridgerton," I answered.

"Oh. Now, why would I meet the actor? I watched the series."

"Why do you sound like it's an absurd thing for you to meet a Hollywood actor? You certainly walk in big… Wait." I pulled back and looked at him, finally processing what he just said. "You watched the Bridgerton series?"

"Yes, I watched the first two seasons. I wanted to read the books too, but I didn't have the time. So, I watched the series instead. You know, I started watching it as background noise while I did some work. Next thing I know, I'm lying in bed at night binge watching the series."

"You are lying!" I still couldn't believe it. "I didn't take you as a guy who watched romance."

"I didn't take myself as that, either. I watched it because I wanted to understand your reference, then I found myself hooked. Who would have thought that Penelope was Lady Whistledown?"

"You watched Bridgerton because of me?"

"Why do you look surprised? I am interested in everything you are interested in. I want to understand and love everything about you, including your quirks and hobbies."

"Jay—"

"Hmm hmm… Don't call me that. Call me Jayeola. I like the sound of my full name on your lips, Eriifeoluwa."

He pulled me back to him. "Now, I have plans for you today," he said with a boyish grin as if he hadn't surprised me enough this morning.

"What's going on?"

“I thought after all the work you’ve put in and the potential success of the deal with Glow, you deserved something special.” His tone was casual, but I could see the excitement in his eyes.

“Something special, okay o. I’m all ears,” I said, my curiosity piqued to the high heavens.

“It’s a surprise, so get up and get ready,” he said.

“Jay, but—”

“No buts, Eriife. Go and get dressed, except you would rather we do something else in bed. The little guy down there is ready for that.”

I laughed because I had been feeling his erection pressed against me since he woke up. While my body had been ready for him since forever, I was more curious about the surprise.

“Naughty boy,” I said as I gave him a quick pat on the chest before getting out of bed, my belly tingling with excitement.

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Chapter 35

Eriife

I don't think I had ever gotten dressed as fast as I did after I got out of bed. I brushed my mouth and showered in record time. When I came out of the bathroom, Jay was in the sitting area, relaxed on one of the soft sofas and looking at something on his phone. Knowing him, he was most likely attending to a work matter.

The thought that a busy man like him had taken the time to watch not one but two seasons of Bridgerton just because it was something I liked warmed my heart. To some, it might look like the bare minimum or inconsequential, but it made me feel important, made me feel loved.

I stood for a few seconds admiring how handsome he looked relaxed against the sofa. Casually doing whatever he was doing on his phone. And I can't even lie, my heart fluttered. This man wanted me, this man was mine for now and for however long this thing we had started would last.

Jay looked up and caught me staring at him. He smiled, and even though I wasn't doing anything wrong, I cleared my throat to cover my embarrassment.

"I'm done in the bathroom," I said but he was already on his feet walking towards me. He pulled me to him and engulfed me in a warm, tight embrace. I let myself melt into the hug.

"Okayyy, mister. What is this for?" I asked, still holding on to him.

"You have no idea how badly I wanted to come into the bathroom while you were in there and take a shower with you," he said. His warm breath tingled my nape and the sensation went all the way to the space between my legs, causing micro spasms down there.

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"Because if I did, we would never make it out of this room and I already made the reservations." He pulled away from me and gave me a wistful smile.

As much as I wanted to explore Seoul—it was my dream city after all—I was so tempted to take him up on his offer. But he planted a quick, soft kiss on my forehead and went to the bathroom.

I sighed after him and gave a lingering look at the bathroom door through which he had disappeared. It was ironic how I was the one who had been avoiding having anything to do with him, yet I was the one who couldn't wait to have him between my thighs.

I sighed again and went about the business of getting dressed. I opted for a simple, no makeup look, and since I had no idea where Jay was taking me, I had to select an outfit that could pass for both casual and fancy. I settled on a navy blue midi wrap dress that flattered my body and only lightly accentuated my curves. I didn't want something too tight or too free. I paired it with black strappy sandals. Putting on the shoes reminded me of the red gorgeous shoes that had brought me to Jay. I wanted to ask him what happened to the red shoes but decided against it. They weren't mine to begin with.

For accessories, I went with a small crossbody bag and simple gold stud earrings. I packed my braids that Jayeola had so carefully dried for me into a top bun. I was just putting on perfume when Jay stepped out of the bathroom with a white towel wrapped around his waist so low that I could see the outline of his pelvic bone and soft tufts of genital hair peeking out.

Good, gracious God! Not that I had ever forgotten or could ever forget how well built and hot Jay was, but seeing his bare chest again stopped time for me.

Did we really need to go out into the city?

"Like what you see?" he asked and gave me a wink that made me pool in my pants. God, this man was going to be the death of me.

Unable to say anything because speaking would betray my thoughts, I swallowed hard and turned to go and wait for him in the sitting room. His soft teasing laughter taunted me as I left.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, we stepped out of the hotel room with Jayeola dressed in a well-fitted grey polo shirt. I was beginning to learn it might be his favourite colour; he had a lot of clothes in that colour. He paired the shirt with slightly cropped beige pants and black loafers. He was simply dressed but his

accessories, his wristwatch and minimalist belt spoke of wealth and class, and his cologne—I couldn't quite place the scent but it smelled like money.

Again, that sense of pride as I walked beside him. We looked good together, even if I said so myself.

I let him lead the way without asking too many questions. We got into the car, and I found myself relaxing. The sexual tension in my body had faded into something more comfortable, something warm.

As we drove through the streets of Seoul, I noticed that we were heading toward some of the more iconic and popular areas in K-dramas, places I had always wished I could visit. My heart beat faster when we pulled up in front of a café I immediately recognised.

"No way," I whispered, turning to Jay. "Is this…?"

He smiled knowingly. "I told you I was going to surprise you and I'm glad it's already working."

"How did you even know about this place?" I laughed.

"I asked Adanna a few questions which she unwittingly answered" was the nonchalant response he gave me but I could see in his eyes that he was anything but nonchalant; he was just forming hard guy.

My heart was going kumkum! This was real! This place had been featured in one of my favourite dramas, and being here felt surreal.

Inside, the café was cozy, with soft lighting, wooden furnishings, and framed pictures from the famous drama. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, and I couldn't stop the smile spreading across my face. Jay watched me with a quiet satisfaction, like he was happy just to see me happy.

We ordered drinks and sat by the window, looking out at the bustling street. It was a moment of pure serenity, the kind I hadn't experienced in a long time. Jay didn't say much, like he wanted me to enjoy the moment without being disturbed, but his presence beside me was enough. It felt… natural.

After drinks at the café, he led me through the city, taking me to other filming locations, K-pop stores, and even a traditional Korean restaurant for lunch. We had to wait on a queue as the restaurant couldn't take more than two couples at once, but the food more than made up for the delay.

Our meal began with samgyeopsal, thick, juicy slices of pork belly grilled right at the table. I wrapped the perfectly charred meat in crisp lettuce leaves, adding a touch of ssamjang, garlic, and chili peppers for an explosion of

flavours. A variety of banchan (side dishes)—from tangy kimchi to savoury jeon—also added delicious textures and depth. A comforting bowl of doenjang-jjigae (soybean paste stew) completed the meal, paired with steaming rice and a refreshing bottle of soju. The combination of smoky, spicy, and earthy flavours made it a perfect introduction to Korean cuisine.

By the time we left the restaurant, I was stuffed. I had probably never eaten that much food at once before, but the food was just as delicious as I had imagined it would be.

"That was fun, yeah?" Jay said as we stood on the sidewalk.

"Fun? That was heavenly!" I squealed and hugged him, not caring that people were watching us.

"Well, it was more fun for me because I enjoyed watching you eat," he said, as we took a stroll around the street. We took pictures at a popular filming spot, a street stairway. I felt like the main female lead in a romance K-drama. It was all so dreamy and sweet. But just like it happened in every romance, it was only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped. I decided not to think about that now, to allow myself to enjoy the moment.

After taking pictures on the stairway, we went to an amusement park where we rode the Ferris wheel, ate ice cream, and got matching bunny headbands. We even took cute photos together in a photo booth. When we got the polaroid pictures, we laughed hard at the silly faces we made with our pink headbands. Jayeola immediately put one of the four pictures we took in his wallet.

"This is my favourite one. You can keep the rest," he said. It was a picture of him planting a peck on my cheek while I was laughing at some joke he had made. I was all teeth and joy in the picture.

I had so much fun in a typical K-drama date style. As we strolled hand-in-hand around the park, I felt very happy and content with my life.

The thoughtfulness behind each destination took my breath away. Jay had planned the day around the things I loved and the experiences I had always dreamed of having but never thought I would. This day would forever be etched into my memory as one of the happiest moments with the most joyous laughter of my life. And Jayeola, the love of my life, made it happen.

When I looked up at him as we walked, I knew I was a goner. I knew when the time finally came to let him go, as I was sure it would, I would be shattered.

We ended the night at a high-end fancy restaurant, the kind where the food was too small for the price. But I wasn't too hungry, at least not for the kind of food they were serving. I watched as Jay sipped his wine, his long, beautiful fingers resting casually on the wineglass. He looked more delicious than food, which was just as well because he was the meal I wanted to eat.

I felt that sensation again, the same one I had felt that night six months ago, to do something daring and out of character.

He caught me staring at him. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Nothing." I smiled coyly. "Just need to use the bathroom," I said, grabbing my purse as I got to my feet.

When I got into the women's bathroom, I was glad to find that all four stalls were empty. There weren't a lot of guests at the restaurant so it suited my purpose. I sent Jay a quick text. Just four words.

"I need your help."

Then I waited and sent a quick prayer to the heavens that no one except Jay would come in. Sure enough, within the next minute, there was a knock on the door followed by Jay's voice.

"Eriife, is everything okay in there?" He sounded frantic. Poor Jay.

I opened the door, pulled him in and locked it before he could ask any questions.

"What are you doing, Eriife? This is the women's bathroom. I don't want to be labelled a pervert."

I giggled. "If we are quick, no one will catch us."

"Are you suggesting that…in here?" Jay looked around. Before he could say more, I pushed him against the wall and kissed him. He kissed me back, and I was happy that he was going along.

Then he pushed me away again. "We need to be cautious. We can't—"

"Why can't we? We have done this in a more public and open space, remember? Do you know how long I have wanted this? How long I have told myself it isn't the right thing to do? Mister, you leave me hungry, just the"—I leaned forward and inhaled his perfume—"the mere scent of you ignites my cravings. I want your cock in my mouth and deep down in my throat. I want you to fill me up with your babies."

Jayeola was silent for a while and I thought he might still say no. Then he smiled, and his brown eyes darkened with desire as he pressed me against the

wall and started kissing me passionately. Our tongues danced as our hands explored each other's bodies. I could feel his hard cock pressing against my thigh and I knew I wanted him inside me.

"You want to have my cock in your mouth?" he said in between kisses. I nodded as I heaved.

"Hmm, my darling." He stroked my lower lip with his thumb like he had done the day before. "But I want to feast on you first," he said, and I didn't know whether to be disappointed or excited.

I didn't have time to choose because Jayeola dropped to his knees and pulled down my panties, revealing my already wet pussy. He placed one of my legs on his shoulder, stretching my underwear like a resistance band. He used one hand to pull me closer to him and support my hips at the same time, while my upper back rested on the bathroom wall.

He started licking me gently at first, teasing my clit with his tongue. I moaned as he started to go faster. I could feel myself getting closer and closer to orgasm, but Jayeola wasn't done.

"You want us to be fast, I'll show you fast," he said and I forgot to breathe. He got to his feet and pulled down his pants, revealing his erect cock, ready and begging for my attention. This was what I was hungry for, this was what I wanted.

But Jay wouldn't indulge me yet. He pulled out a condom from his wallet before taking his pants all the way off. The condom brought back memories but I shook them away. I was not going to let that ruin the moment for me. Besides, I had gone to the hospital and gotten the shot. I had nothing to worry about.

I watched as he slipped the rubber covering on his beefy and veiny cock, my heart racing with anticipation. Then without further warning or talking, Jayeola turned me around and bent me over, pulling my panties down to my ankles. He entered me from behind, his cock filling me up completely. I gasped with pleasure as he started to fuck me harder and harder, our bodies slapping against each other.

He reached around and started playing with my clit, his fingers working in rhythm with his thrusts. I could feel myself on the brink of orgasm again, and this time, I let go.

"That's it, baby. Come for me. Let it go," he whispered into my ears as I came hard, my pussy clenching around his cock. But he didn't stop fucking me,

his thrusts becoming more urgent as he reached his own orgasm.

When he stopped trembling, he pulled out and removed the condom. But I wasn't going to let him go, not when I hadn't feasted yet. I went on my knees and stroked his cock with my hands, feeling it grow hard again.

"Oh, Eriife," he groaned. I teased him by licking the tip of his cock and he shuddered.

That's right, baby, I have you right where I want you, I thought as I took his cock in my mouth. I could taste myself on him, and I wanted more. I sucked and licked his cock, taking him deeper and deeper into my mouth. When he was close, he tried to pull out of me but I held him in place until he came in my mouth. I swallowed every drop, savouring the taste of him.

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Chapter 36

Jay

The atmosphere in the boardroom was electric as I penned the final strokes of my signature on the contract with Glow. I sat at the polished table, my heart racing, my palms slightly damp. I had done it. This was huge, but not just for AbayoMart.

It was ironic that despite my hatred for my mother, I had been pursuing a dream of hers. My mother had started the Abayomi-Young empire with my father and had been the second largest shareholder after him. When she died, according to her will, her shares were held in trust by Big Mummy T and signed over to me when I turned twenty-one.

"Mummy's going to create products that make people beautiful," she had said to me one day while she was doing her makeup. Of course, I hadn't understood what she meant back then. It wasn't until I became an adult that I got the records of the skincare line she had planned to start as a separate business under her own name and in partnership with her best friend, Temisan.

According to the stories, my father had disapproved. He didn't want my mother to start something that would not be under the family business and he wasn't particularly interested in the beauty industry because he felt it didn't suit his or the family's image. But my mother had stubbornly pressed ahead. And she might have been successful at it too, if she had been alive to see it through.

Of my many business fuck ups, the biggest one was starting the skincare company that my mother had wanted to do, against my father's advice, of course, and it had failed woefully.

So, entering into this partnership with Glow, a skincare company with ethical values and quality products, was the closest I could come to keeping her dream alive. And I had been pursuing this before I knew the truth of what

happened to her, a truth Big Mummy T had finally told me when I went to visit her again at the hospital before my trip to Korea.

A truth I was unsure of how to confront my father about. It was a betrayal that cut so deep into my bones that I had not allowed myself to process it. My childhood, my trauma, the cause of it had been a lie. So, instead of thinking about it, I decided to escape, at least for the time being, by doing the one thing that genuinely made me happy, and that was making Eriife happy.

Speaking of Eriife, to say I was glad to finally have her by my side and fully committed to building something genuine would be an understatement. I knew she still had her reservations, and she was still holding back a bit. But I would give her time and we would take it slowly until we got to the point where we no longer had doubts. It had become my personal mission to finish her with love.

Mr Kang leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile, flanked by his executives. "Congratulations, Jay, Eriife," he said, his voice resonating with warmth. "We believe that AbayoMart is the right partner for us in Nigeria. Your vision and market strategy impressed us."

I glanced at Eriife and couldn't help but smile. This was a moment we had both worked tirelessly for. She had made some significant changes to our proposal from the angle of a woman who uses Korean skincare products, and I had no doubts that her contribution had been what had impressed Mr Kang to finally go ahead with it. Her key points had been cost effectiveness and quality. We had to merge both because the biggest issue for many people who used Korean skincare products in Nigeria was the price. The cheaper ones were usually of bad quality. So, we came up with the idea to make customised products in smaller potions to be exclusively available along with regular-sized ones on the AbayoMart e-platform.

"Thank you. We are excited to bring Glow to Nigeria," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady despite the excitement bubbling inside me.

Mr Kang extended his hand, and I accepted it firmly. "We have plans to leverage digital marketing strategies that will showcase your products effectively," I added, feeling confident.

As the executives began to discuss logistics, I could see Eriife's mind drifting to the road ahead. I knew the challenges we faced. The skincare market in Nigeria was competitive, but with Glow's high-quality products and AbayoMart's established distribution network, we had a winning combination.

"This calls for celebration," I proposed.

The executives nodded in agreement, and soon, the boardroom was filled with laughter and clinking glasses. I held my flute of champagne, feeling an overwhelming sense of pride as I spoke about our future.

After the meeting wrapped up, we left the boardroom. I leaned towards Eriife and whispered, "Let's go back and celebrate in our own way."

"That's exactly my kind of celebration," Eriife replied and winked at me. How much luckier could I have gotten to bag a woman with compassion, beauty, a fantastic sense of humour, an intelligent, witty woman who heard me and still matched me sexually?

Where had God been hiding her all my life? There was no way in heaven or hell that I would ever let Eriife go. She's mine for as long as she continues to want me and I hoped to God that that would be forever.

Back at our hotel, we started making out on the elevator ride to our suite. The minute we got into the hotel room, we began peeling our clothes off each other, eager for our bare skins to touch.

Eriife looked stunning in her lingerie, a sheer black number that left little to the imagination. She pushed me to the bed and straddled me, her pussy wet and ready for me. I pulled down the cups of her bra to reveal her full and firm breasts. I reached up and pinched her erect, dark nipples, eliciting a moan from her lips that nearly drove me to the edge. But I couldn't, not yet, not when we were just starting.

Eriife leaned down and whispered in my ear, "I want you to make me squirt."

I stared at her in surprise. Not that I hadn't seen her in action before but Eriife with her innocent face and big brown eyes. Who would have thought?

"Do you always take what you want?" I teased.

She gave me a shy grin. "No," she said into my ears. "But, don't you know you make me want to be a bad girl? I want you to push the limits of my pleasure. It can only be you."

Her sultry voice was going to be my undoing but I was more than happy to oblige. I lifted her off me and placed her on her back on the bed. Then I spread her legs wide and started licking her pussy, my tongue exploring every inch. She tasted sweet and musky, a combination that drove me wild. I fucked her with my tongue while stroking her clit with my index finger.

I didn't stop, not even as her breathing and panting became heavier. I could feel her getting closer and closer to climax, her moans getting louder and louder. Suddenly, she screamed and squirted all over my face, her body trembling with pleasure.

"That's my girl. Give everything to me," I encouraged her as I lapped her juices up.

She looked down at me and smiled. "That was amazing." She was breathless and her voice was shaky from the vibrations that had just gone through her body.

I carried her to the shower, where we continued to explore each other's bodies. We washed each other, and I could feel her getting wet again as her pussy pressed against my thigh.

I lifted her, made sure she was balanced with her legs wrapped around my hips and impaled her on my cock, our bodies slamming against each other in the shower. Our moans echoed off the tiles and I could feel myself getting close to an orgasm. That was when I realised that I was inside her without a condom. It was the first time we were doing it without protection.

The thought made me freeze. I was clean and I was pretty sure she was too, but that was not what I was worried about. I didn't yet know what her menstrual cycle was like and I didn't want to put her in a situation we had not yet discussed.

Eriife seemed to notice my distress as I contemplated whether to pull out or continue. She looked into my eyes and whispered, "It's okay, you can come inside me."

I didn't need to be told twice as I couldn't hold back any longer. I exploded inside her, my cock throbbing with pleasure. We both collapsed in the shower, spent and satisfied. We stayed there for what felt like hours, our bodies entwined in a loving embrace.

"That was one hell of a celebration," Eriife said as I carried her to the bed. She was still feeling little aftershocks of passion and she sounded sleepy. No sooner had I tucked her into bed than her breathing became even and she fell asleep.

As I placed a kiss on her forehead, I made a promise to always keep her satisfied and happy because she was the owner of my heart.

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Chapter 37

Eriife

"I am such a horrible, horrible person," I said. I shook my legs anxiously as Jayeola navigated the car in the driver's seat beside me.

"You have got to stop saying that. You are not a horrible person," Jay said without taking his eyes off the road.

He wasn't used to driving on rough roads such as this. But I had no other choice than to ask for his help when I found out how far Lade's house was.

"You keep saying that. How do you explain not speaking to someone I consider my best friend for the whole week we were in Seoul? How do you explain that, ehn?"

"I know it's a bad idea to tell you to calm down when you are worked up like this. But according to what you told me, you tried to call her before we took off—"

"And I didn't remember to call her the minute we checked into the hotel room, not even once. And you are telling me I'm not a horrible person. A full week, Jayeola!"

"In your defence, things kinda got crazy from the reception, so—"

"So that gives me an excuse to forget about my friend. A friend who was just as excited about this trip as I was. And the Lade I know would have sent me series of messages wanting to know every single thing about my time there. But there was nothing, radio silence, and I didn't even once think to call her."

"What can I say to make you feel better?" Jay asked.

I shook my head. He didn't understand. Deep in my core, I knew something was wrong. At least, the last time she did this thing, she had been with a guy and that had lasted only a weekend. What if she had done the same thing again with another random but far more dangerous stranger?

"What if she is lying in a ditch somewhere? What if she has been kidnapped? What if she fell in her bathroom and hit her head and there was no one to—"

"Eriife, breathe. Relax, we are on our way to her house. We'll find out what happened soon enough," Jay said. He squeezed my hand to reassure me before returning his hand to the steering.

"You know, that's another thing that confirms how much of a bad person I am. In all these months, I didn't know where Lade lived. I only knew that she lived alone in a house that she had inherited from her parents. I had to go to J&P to find out and guess who told me? Justina the receptionist knew where Lade lived and I didn't. It's just crazy."

I had gotten used to the convenience of Lade always coming over to my place, so used to the convenience of our friendship that I had not made any extra effort. And now Lade was missing. She hadn't been to work or attended to any work remotely in the past week, according to what I had gotten from Sade. What was even more weird was that Tobi had resigned without the stipulated prior notice and chosen to forgo his severance as penalty.

I just couldn't help but think that Tobi was connected to the incident somehow. It had been nagging at me terribly and I couldn't let go of the thought.

"I think Tobi Adewale has something to do with Lade's disappearance."

"Tobi? Your former manager?" Jayeola asked.

I nodded, though Jayeola wasn't looking at me. His eyes were fixed on the bumpy and dusty road. It was not the kind of road you took your eyes off of, not even for a moment, and I wondered whether it was a good idea to tell him what I was about to say while he was driving. But Jayeola was level-headed, and if there was one person who could help me make sense of everything happening, it was him.

"Okay, so for starters, Lade has been missing for over a week. She had been unreachable before we took off and basically for the amount of time we were in Seoul and now. I heard Tobi Adewale also resigned from J&P around the time we were in Seoul."

"Okay. I still don't see the connection between the two. It could have been a coincidence but I don't think it is, except Lade and Tobi had a special relationship outside their office relationship," Jayeola said. His logic would have made sense if only things hadn't gotten so complicated.

"True, as far as I know, Lade and Tobi did not have any type of relationship but I did have a crush on Tobi once," I said.

"Okay… I still don't see the connection." His voice was still calm, but I could see a tightness in the set of his shoulders that wasn't there before.

"I swear it was before I even thought you and I could be anything more than just a one-night stand. But that's not even the point. Something happened," I said, and proceeded to tell him everything that went down between me and Tobi. How I woke not remembering how I passed out and couldn't tell what had happened between us.

I also told Jay about how I had breakfast with Tobi because I wasn't sure what had happened and I didn't want to aggravate him. I told Jay about the nude painting and how the woman's eyes looked dazed, like she had been drugged.

By the time I finished telling the story, Jayeola was gripping the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles were turning white. For someone of his complexion, that must have taken some effort. His jaw was clenched so tight, I could see the outline.

"Jayeola," I called softly.

He didn't answer. Instead, he swerved off the road and slammed on the brakes, causing the both of us to lurch forward.

"*Oga, olori buruku ni yin o*," one of several motorists cursed at us for our bad driving as they drove past us.

Neither of us acknowledged the swearing drivers. My eyes were solely on Jayeola who was breathing so hard, I could see the veins on his temples and neck straining against his skin. I had seen Jay angry before but it had always been controlled.

The first time I had seen him angry was the first night we met, when I showed up instead of Sarah. The second had been when the data leak had happened and each time, one could barely notice his anger. But this one, this angry Jayeola scared me.

We sat in silence for a long time before Jay turned to look at me. I could see the hurt in his eyes.

"I…I'm sorry." I tore my gaze from his and looked down at my thighs.

"What are you apologising for?" he asked. I looked up to see him frowning at me. "Why are you apologising for what that bastard did to you? What are

you sorry for, for being drugged and abused? Are you apologising to me for that?"

I could feel his anger rising again. But more than that, hearing exactly what had happened spelled out so plainly to me when I had been avoiding naming it made me burst into tears.

Jayeola unfastened his seatbelt, turned off the engine and pulled me into a hug as I sobbed loudly against his shoulder.

I had been drugged and abused. That was what that bastard Tobi had done to me. I sobbed bitterly into Jay's chest, crying it out, knowing that it was something that I should not have tried to bury so deep down like that.

I cried for a long time. I could not tell how long. When I eventually stopped crying, I decided it was time to tell Jayeola the final secret that I had been keeping from him.

I would never find the right time to tell him because there would never be a right time but most importantly, I was tired. After the huge realisation that I just had, I didn't have it in me to hold any more secrets.

For me, the moment of truth had finally come, and I had to face it.

"I'll kill that bastard for what he did to you and if he had anything to do with whatever has happened to Lade, I'll kill him. But trust me, he's going to pay."

I looked up at him and smiled weakly. "I had an abortion," I blurted before I lost my nerve.

Confusion chased anger on his face. "What? He got you pregnant?"

"No, it was yours." I looked out the car window and continued. "I found out shortly after I turned down your offer in my hallway. I won't lie to you or to myself and say it wasn't an easy decision. Even though I feel guilty about it, I wasn't ready for a baby and I couldn't very well walk up to you and tell you I was pregnant without you thinking I was a gold digger or something. So I did what I had to do."

There was silence. Only silence. Perhaps, the silence before the storm? Surely, he would hate me for taking out his child before it had a chance to live. But Jayeola didn't say anything for the longest time. I turned to find him watching me with an unreadable expression.

"Say something," I whispered.

He relaxed against his seat and it killed me that I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Was I too much woman for him? Too much with too much baggage. I

told him he would regret this, that I was not the woman for him, but he wouldn't listen.

I knew the end would come but I didn't think it would come this fast. Just when I was about to make the decision he was hesitant to make, just as my hand grazed the car handle, he spoke.

"Eriife, I can't bear to look at you right now," he began and my heart skipped multiple beats. He was going to end it, to end us. I was not ready.

"But I need you to listen to what I have to say carefully. I am so ashamed right now that I can't look at you. I am sorry you had to go through that alone. It hurts me that you had to make such an important decision all by yourself. I am sorry I put you in such a situation in the first place. It must have been quite a painful process and you had to endure it alone because I wasn't someone you could trust then. But I am promising you now, that I am never going to let go of your hand ever again. I promise to be with you through everything life throws at you, the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful."

By the time he finished talking, fresh tears were streaming down my face. My ancestors must have done something so good in their lifetime and God decided to reward them by sending me a man like Jayeola. Because for the life of me, I could not imagine what I had done to deserve a man like him. And in so many ways, he still felt too good to be true.

I found myself saying the words I only ever acknowledged in my thoughts to him.

"I love you. I love you, Jayeola. I love you with all of me."

Only then did he turn to look at me and I realised that he had been crying too. I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. He kissed me back and it felt different than any kiss we had ever shared. I tasted the salt of our tears. It felt like we were sealing the oath of our everlasting commitment to each other. I unleashed everything I had ever felt but held back into the dance of our tongues.

"I'm in love with you, Eriife," Jayeola said when we broke the kiss. "And even if you ever try to push me away, I won't go. I'm never letting you go. Prepare to be sick of me." His voice was a little shaky and I smiled as he planted a kiss on the tip of my nose.

I laughed. "You are the one who should be prepared."

"Now, let's go find your friend," Jayeola said. He fastened his seatbelt and started the engine.

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Chapter 38

Jay

It had been two weeks since our visit to Lade's house, which had turned out to be a dead end like Eriife had feared. I had hoped against reason that Lade would be at home chilling, trying to hide away from the world for a while. But the open gates, empty compound and unlocked doors of her home had proven Eriife right.

Eriife had been devastated ever since. She was a shadow of herself and nothing I did seemed to make her happy. I had the money from our "business transaction" transferred to her account even after she had said she didn't need it anymore since we were now in a relationship, and she didn't need me paying her to be in a relationship with me.

My response to that had been simple:

"To the rest of the world, be Ms I-can-make-my-own-money, but with me, spend my money, chop my money, lavish it. I can't think of anyone better deserving of it anyway."

She had laughed and rolled her eyes at me because she knew there was nothing she could do than to accept me the way I was. I was in the process of signing twenty percent of the shares I held in the Abayomi-Young business to her, but I couldn't do that unless we were legally married.

But the last thing Eriife needed right now was a marriage proposal, no matter how well intentioned, when the only thing on her mind was finding her friend. And that was turning out to be harder than finding Fakunle Thomas. Finding that one had been a piece of cake. All I had to do was spend money and call in some favours with a few people and the bastard was snuffed out of his hiding hole in Barcelona and delivered right to my doorstep where police officers were waiting to arrest him.

Finding Lade was hard because all we had was her name, no known living relatives, and the possibility that Tobi Adewale could be connected with her

disappearance. The police had been useless in finding any clues and the private investigator I had hired had made no progress either.

But he had found some truly disturbing information about Tobi. Everything about Tobi was a lie, from his family background to his educational qualifications. Even his identity was stolen from a man who had died about seven years ago.

When the PI had visited his family, they had been surprised that their dead and buried son had been working for years at a prestigious company. They were devastated to find that his identity had been stolen.

But even more disgusting were the things we had found at his house. Tobi had a lot of pictures of naked women in different stages of abuse, and all the pictures looked like they had been taken without consent. I lost it when I found Eriife's pictures among them. There had been videos too, all of them labelled "punishment", followed by whatever he had punished the women for. In Eriife's case, he had labelled her folder, "punishment – betrayal."

When I talked to Eriife about it, she didn't understand what it meant. The whole thing caused her so much distress that she did not come out of her home for days. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I asked her to move in with me. She would feel safer there until we sorted out the whole mess.

Luckily for me, she agreed without any argument. I was more than happy to have her in my home.

At the point we were now, Tobi Adewale was a John Doe and he had disappeared into thin air, taking Lade with him. But we still didn't understand the connection to Lade. Had he really kidnapped her? Why? Her pictures and videos had not been part of the ones we had found in his house.

But most importantly, why had he disappeared in a hurry leaving all these evidence behind? What had he been running from that he had not been able to clean up after himself?

We were at a stalemate and if what my PI was telling me was anything to go by, the possibilities were that neither Tobi nor Lade was in Nigeria or someone had taken them both out and disposed of their bodies.

I couldn't tell Eriife that her friend could be dead and further increase the guilt she already felt. So, to take her mind off things, I planned to officially introduce her to my family tonight. Though it was going to be more of a battle than an introduction, it was something that needed to be done. Afterwards, we were going to Seychelles to enjoy what was left of the summer.

Hopefully by the time we returned, my PI would have positive news for us. I had told him to extend his search and use all his connections and spare no expense because money was not a problem.

As the gates to the Abayomi-Young family estate, my childhood home, groaned open, I felt the familiar weight of dread settle in my chest. This place stopped being a home for me since the night my mother left.

The mansion rose ahead, all stately and cold, a reminder of the life I'd spent years trying to distance myself from. I glanced over at Eriife. Her face was calm, but I could tell she was nervous. I couldn't blame her. With everything that was going on, meeting my somewhat intimidating family could be scary.

But hell would have to freeze over first before I tolerated anybody trying nonsense with Eriife. Not even my family. And I had given Temisan a stern warning to that effect. Not that my stepmother was someone who listened at all.

Tonight wasn't just about introducing Eriife to my family. It was also about staking my claim, standing my ground, and making it clear that the decisions about my life were mine to make. That included Eriife—especially her.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, trying to break the tense silence that had settled between us.

She turned to me, offering a small, tight smile. "Nervous, but fine."

I could sense she was still preoccupied with Lade's disappearance, her mind miles away. Even though I wanted to focus on us tonight, I knew she couldn't. Her best friend had been missing for days, and with no leads, it was hard to think about anything else. But here we were, about to face another kind of storm.

I reached for her hand, squeezing it gently. "If it gets to be too much, we can leave."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No, it's important. For you, baby. We are going to do this."

Her words hit me harder than they should have. Eriife had no idea the extent of what she was about to face. But I couldn't back out now.

We pulled up in front of the house, the lights inside casting a warm glow across the front lawn. I killed the engine, my stomach knotting. Eriife adjusted her dress and we got out of the car.

Inside, the house was exactly as I remembered it—too large, too polished, too perfect. The dining table was already set. My father sat at the head of the table, imposing as always, his silence more of a statement than any greeting could be. Temisan, my stepmother, was wearing her perfect smile, though the gleam in her eyes warned me there was something more behind it. She had planned something—I could feel it.

And then I saw her.

Sarah.

Shit.

Despite my warning, Temisan had gone ahead and invited Sarah.

My breath caught in my throat. She stood near the table, smiling that same practised, disarming smile she'd always worn. Of course, she was here. I should have known. Temisan never did anything without reason, and inviting my ex was her way of stirring the pot. If only Temisan knew what was coming her way.

I felt Eriife stiffen beside me and I instinctively reached out and held her hand in mine.

"Come, come," Temisan said, her voice irritatingly high pitched. She got to her feet with a bright sugary smile, brighter than the sequin beads on the gold brocade bubu she was wearing. "We have been waiting for you."

Temisan had her eyes focused on only me. She didn't even spare Eriife a glance, almost as if she was not even standing there.

"Good evening, ma," Eriife greeted her with her warmest smile. Taking her hand out of mine, she presented the bottle of wine we had brought along because she hadn't wanted to come empty handed.

But Temisan ignored her as if she hadn't spoken. Eriife cast a quick glance at me. I took the wine bottle from her and shoved it into Temisan's hands.

"It's rude to ignore your guests," I said as I walked past her to the table, pulling Eriife along with me.

My father, Otunba Abayomi-Young, who was just a couple of years above sixty, was whom you could describe as a silver fox. He kept his head cleanly shaven and hardly kept his beard. But now, he had a chin with a neatly trimmed, greying beard. Physically, I was the striking image of my father. If ever my paternity was in question, no DNA test was needed.

He sat at the head of the table in a simple white thobe, with brown embroidery at the collar and wrists, watching me and Eriife as we approached

the table.

"You sure took your time getting here. We were just about to start without you," he said, waving away our greetings. His eyes cut from me to Eriife and appraised her from to head to toe with his eyes, while Eriife, shy as ever lowered, hers.

"And who is the young lady?" he asked. The inflection of his tone made my stomach tighten in annoyance. This man, my father, had no right to feel so uppity, not after what he did to my mother and to me.

"This is Eriife Williams, and she is my girlfriend," I said simply.

"Good evening, Sir. I am pleased to meet you," Eriife greeted again. She was met with only a grunt from my father.

"I wish we could say the same," Temisan said as she took her seat by my father's right side on the table. Sarah, who was sat next to her, was watching me and Eriife with smug superiority.

"Let us eat. We have already waited long enough," Otunba said without another glance at me or Eriife. I pulled a chair out for her and she sat beside me, while I took the closest seat to my father on the left. I steeled myself because the night was about to get bloody.

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Chapter 39

Jay

One of the housekeepers served our food and retreated, standing just a short distance from the table in case she was needed again. I had never cared for having someone at my beck and call but this was my father's house, not mine. So, he could do what he pleased. I had a bigger battle to fight tonight, one that I intended to win if I played my cards right.

"So, what's Sarah doing here?" I asked midway into the very quiet dinner.

Eriife had barely touched her food. I could tell by her stiff posture that she was very uncomfortable here and I couldn't blame her. It was better to make my move now, so we could get this whole situation over and done with.

"What else would she be doing here? She is your fiancée and you requested for a family dinner," Temisan said. Sarah's smug smile widened but otherwise, she remained quiet and only sipped from her wineglass.

"No, she's not. We are not in a relationship. We broke up and I am here to introduce you to the love of my life. Her name is Eriife Williams and she is right here beside me."

My father dropped his fork and looked at me. "I'm only going to say this once. Have your fun with the young lady, whatever her name is, and get it out of your system. You are marrying Sarah; both families have already discussed it. Sarah Bature comes from a long line of seasoned politicians. Her father was the governor of Ekiti State for two terms and if all goes well, could become the next petroleum minister. You already know this. I'm only repeating it for the sake of your lady friend here. Empires are built on solid connections, not love."

"The same way you married my mother because of the connections you could forge with her family who were powerful allies of the military government and then discarded her when she was of no use to you by cheating on her with her best friend Temisan—"

"Don't call your mother by her name!" my father bellowed.

"Temisan is not my mother!" I yelled back and Eriife jumped. I gave her hand a quick reassuring squeeze under the table, silently begging her to trust me.

"Where on earth did you hear that nonsense?" Temisan said as her eyes widened in mock disbelief.

I brought out a stack of letters from my jacket's pocket and slammed them on the table. "These are just a few of the letters that went back and forth between you two when my mother was alive. Now, you choose, do you want Sarah Bature here for the next part or do you want family matters to stay within the family?"

"Otunba!" Temisan looked at my father. Her earlier look of triumph was now replaced with fear and her hand trembled. She struggled to sip from her glass and gave up when she couldn't make it all the way to her mouth. She placed the wineglass clumsily on the table, spilling its content.

My father, on the other hand, stared at the old envelopes, his face cold and expressionless. I waited with bated breath for his decision.

"Get out."

I thought he was talking to me. But he looked at Sarah and repeated his words much louder, "Get out!"

Sarah jumped. She looked from me to Temisan, confused. Then her cold stare landed on Eriife before she picked up her purse, pushed back her chair, got to her feet and stormed out of the dining area. The housekeeper escorted her to make sure she made it all the way out of the building but I suspect the poor lady just wanted to be out of the war zone.

"Explain yourself," my father commanded as soon as Sarah was gone.

"Explain myself? You are the one who has got all the explaining to do. Explain to me why you just couldn't divorce my mother quietly and marry her whore of a best friend, but you had to frame her as the unfaithful wife when you were the unfaithful one. As if that was not enough, when she found out about your affair and threatened to leave you, you had her brakes tampered with and when she died, you spread the rumour that she had been on her way to meet her lover after abandoning you and her only child. A lover that never existed. So, tell me, why did you do it?"

I had thought I would not be able to bring myself to say the words when the time came to confront my father and the woman he had married. But to my own surprise, I did not stutter at all, though I was out of breath and my

heart was hammering against my ribcage. I guess with the bitter knowledge of what had happened to my mother came the closure and healing I needed.

It was only after I had finished speaking that I realised that Eriife had been holding my hand under the table like I did hers before. I wanted to turn to look at her but this was my moment. I had my father and his wife right where I wanted them.

I wanted him to deny it. Even with the evidence of their correspondence, their illicit affair, how they planned her murder, I still wanted him to deny it. When Big Mummy T had told me the truth and given me the letters in the hospital, saying she had to get it off her mind to die in peace, I didn't want to believe it. Even as I read the letters and bawled my eyes out like a child in her hospital room, deep down, I still did not want to believe it.

But instead of denying it, my father said, "I thought these letters had been lost in the car with her. But Toyin had these letters? It makes sense. She couldn't have read these letters detailing her death and still drive the car that was meant to kill her. It was my snooping sister who had them all this while. Interesting."

"What?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing, plus the cold indifference with which he spoke about it. It was taking all I had in me not to lunge at him and strangle him. I couldn't even take credit for that; it was all Eriife holding me back with just her hand in mine.

Temisan, at least, had the common sense to be quiet.

"What do you want?" my father asked. "In exchange for these letters, what do you want?"

"What do I want? That's all you have to say to me, all you have to ask me?" I couldn't believe this man was my father.

He scoffed. "Oh, come on. You had these letters and did nothing about them, have not given them to the press and you want to tell me that you don't want anything? I don't regret what I did and I know it's not an apology you want, so out with it. We are both businessmen here."

I knew my father was ruthless but I had not thought he was heartless too. He was right, though; I did want something. My father had done a horrible thing to be with the woman he truly loved even though she was a "nobody", and I was about to do the same. And I hope my mother forgives me for it because for Eriife, I will burn the world if that was what it takes to have her by my side. To me, she's everything.

I relaxed against the chair. “What I want is simple. I’ll give you what you have always wanted. These letters never see the light of day and you stay out of my life.”

My father stared at me, then laughed. “That’s it? I thought I taught you better than—”

“Oh, I’m not done. I said I was going to give you the very thing you have always wanted. Step down as the Chairman of the AbayoMart Group, leave this country with the love of your life whom you murdered my mother for and have your happily ever after.”

Temisan gasped. My father bellowed, “You must be out of your mind, I would never give my company over to you. You—”

“Would rather give it over to your bastard child, the one you had with Temisan but can’t acknowledge because then, everyone will know of your infidelity and crimes. So, she will forever be known as the child from Temisan’s other non-existent marriage, will she not?” I said. I returned Temisan’s earlier smugness with my own triumphant look.

“You would do this to your own father?” she screamed.

“Why not? Compared to what he did to my mother, this is nothing.” I shrugged and turned to my father. “I know you, you are already thinking of how you can win this. But there’s no way out. You see, the worst of the letters are not what you see on the table before you. Those ones, I have kept with people who will release them to the world if anything happens to me or Eriife. And once those letters are made public, you will not only fall but the Abayomi-Young empire will fall with you and everything you have ever worked for will disintegrate before your eyes. Let’s see if you can still have the love of your life then.”

I got to my feet and Eriife rose with me. “I trust you understand me.” I looked from Temisan to my father who was staring holes into my head.

“You are a bastard, Jayeola. You are not a true child of mine,” he yelled.

“On the contrary, I am my father’s son. Ruthless and heartless in the protection of my love.”

With that, I took Eriife’s hand and walked out and hoped to God never to have a reason to see either of them again.

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Chapter 40

Eriife

When Jayeola told me he was going to introduce me to his family, I knew I would meet with some resistance, and I have made up my mind to kill them with love. Nothing could have prepared me for how the night was turning out.

What in the hottest of hells?

Jayeola's father and stepmother had had his mother killed so that they could get married without anyone knowing of their affair. This was something that I could never have imagined could happen in real life. This was some good soap opera material, what the fuck?

All this while, Jayeola had thought his mother had abandoned him but…

"Jayeola," I called as we stepped out of the building.

He stopped walking but did not turn to look at me. "Jayeola," I called again.

When he still wouldn't look at me, I walked up to stand in front of him. He turned his head away from me. I turned his face back to mine and saw that he was crying. He was hiding it from me like he had done in the car on the way to Lade's house.

"Why do you hide your pain from me?" I asked him in the gentlest of tones. "You have seen me at my most vulnerable, you have seen me in pain, seen me in the middle of a panic attack, right now you are seeing me in the middle of my grief for a friend that I wasn't there for. And yet, you still hide yourself from me?"

He closed his eyes and opened them again. "You must think I am some kind of monster. I just bargained the life of my mother with her murderers, and I don't regret it because I can't lose you. I can't let those hypocrites who couldn't stand for what they want, who they loved, to take you away from me. They have no right to tell me I can't have you, or I can't love you."

I wiped a tear off his cheek. "Of course, they have no right. I don't think you are a monster, and I never met or knew your mother but I don't think any

mother would want her child to live in misery for her sake. Maybe you just don't realise it, but what you did in there wasn't selfish at all; it was justice. Being alive and not being able to control things is worse than death or even prison sentence for your father. And for Temisan, that woman who runs the social scene in Lagos, you are practically asking her to die by exiling her from Nigeria. Yes, they are being punished for they did and no, you are not a monster, not by a long shot, because those two don't deserve you."

"Thank you," Jayeola said, meeting my gaze this time and holding it. "I would not have made it through without you by my side."

"That's funny because with all that has happened and is still happening, I would not be standing here if I didn't have you. I love you and I am grateful for you. So please, don't hide from me anymore. Let me carry your pain like you carry mine. It will be much less of a burden that way."

"I am grateful for you too and I am absolutely, absolutely, wholly in love with you. My pain, my tears, my joys, my love and my life are yours," Jayeola said, smiling as he put his hand around my waist and drew me closer, bending towards me. His lips had barely grazed mine when we were interrupted.

"Oh, so this is the part where you two kiss after swearing your undying love for each other?" Sarah said in her irritating voice as she came out from behind her car. She swatted away flies that liked to play under the light bulbs at night.

I pulled away from Jayeola and turned to face her. "You are still here, ehn? I thought they asked you to leave?" It was my turn to taunt her.

"You think you have won? I don't know whatever it is you discussed inside but if you think this man will stay with you, then you're a fool. You are not the first; when he is tired of you, he'll come back to me. He always does," Sarah said, flipping her flawless bone weave to the back.

"Sarah, now is not the—"

"No, baby, let me handle this," I said, cutting Jay off.

I smiled at Sarah. "Since he'll soon get tired of me and come back to you, why are you running about like a headless chicken? Why can't you allow your mind to touch ground? Go home nau, go and wait for him to get tired of me and come back to you. Stop stressing yourself." I was surprised at how calmly I was finally speaking up for myself.

"Just look at how she speaks. What does allow my mind to touch ground even mean? Jay, is this the razz, local slut, you are leaving me for? You have

better taste than this. I have seen the women you date, I mean look at me and look at her, she's—"

I landed a hot one on her face, cutting off the rest of her words. Surprise, surprise.

"Did you just hit me?" she screeched, holding her hand to her cheek.

"That was for calling me a slut just now," I said and before she could even process it, I gave her another one. She staggered backwards, her eyes widening in pain or disbelief or both.

"That one was for all the years of abuse I endured while I was working for you," I said.

"Jay, are you just going to stand there while this bitch assaults me?" Whatever Jay would have said, I would never know because I landed two more slaps on Sarah's face in quick succession.

"One for the slap you gave me at the office the other day and the other one is for calling me a bitch just now," I said as I advanced on her.

She opened her mouth to speak but I raised my hand as if I wanted to hit her again. She quickly raised her hand to protect her face and cowered.

"Keep talking and keep getting slapped. Go ahead, insult me again," I said as I stood over her. She kept her head lowered and I swore I heard her whimpering.

"Exactly, that's what I thought."

I turned to look at Jay and he had his arms crossed, watching me with a mixture of surprise and admiration. "What?"

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," he teased as he walked over to me without sparing Sarah a glance. Longtime friend, my foot.

"She had it coming a long time ago," I replied. I wrapped my hands around his waist and leaned on him as we walked towards our car.

Sarah was like every other bully—a coward. One that I had allowed to have power over me for far too long. She tried it with me today and she got it, finally. My palms stung from the slaps but it was the most exhilarating feeling ever.

As we got into our car, my mind went to the red shoes again, the ones that had begun our journey. This time, instead of pushing the question aside, I asked Jay about it.

"Whatever happened to those red shoes?" I didn't need to explain which ones.

“They are in a drawer in my office. Do you want them?” His question carried doubt that I would want them back. This man knew me too well.

“God forbid. Please gift them, burn them, bury them. Do whatever. Those shoes were never mine; they belonged to Sarah and Sarah is a thing of the past.” I looked out the car window as he drove out of the estate. “Get me my own gift,” I added.

“Hmmm, something like a diamond ring?”

I heard the smile in his voice even before I turned from the window to see his face. I knew what he was asking and I was ready for it. “Yes, something like that.” I smiled back.

This new chapter of my life that I am starting with Jay fills me with so much warmth, peace, confidence and happiness. And I am channelling some of this positivity towards finding Lade.

I had a lot of regrets in my life and chief of them was that I never told anyone, not even Lade, what Tobi had done to me. If I had spoken about it, maybe I would have been able to protect Lade. Maybe she would have been more wary of him. The police and the PI Jayeola hired say they can’t find a connection between Lade and Tobi’s disappearances and it could all be a coincidence. But I know deep in my heart that it wasn’t.

Lade would be safe if I had spoken up, and that’s a guilt I can’t erase. I am a better woman now and I know keeping quiet only protects the abuser. Just as I have learnt to speak up for myself, I am not giving up hope on finding Lade either.

Omolade will be found alive, healthy and in one piece. This is what I chose to believe.

Until then, I’ll live in the now with the love I have found in the man who will burn bridges and cut off family ties for my sake. The man for whom I’ll always be number one, for as long as he lives.

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Lade

I couldn't tell if I woke to the headache, or if I was awake because of the headache. All I knew was that my head fucking hurt.

That bastard!

I still couldn't understand why he hit me. He came to my house, asked me stupid questions, then knocked me unconscious. That man was a madman, but I have shown him shege. He will never be able to use that his stupid manhood to father a child; he'll have to take a piss like a woman for the rest of his life. I made sure of that.

I opened my eyes slowly because even that little effort caused my head to ache like crazy, especially the back of my head where the bastard had hit me. I raised my hand to touch the spot only to find out that it had been bandaged.

Only then did I begin to take in where I was. This place was completely different from where I had first woken up. That place had been dark, poorly ventilated and stank heavily of piss. Then I had woken up to a bucket of cold water splashed on my face by that retard. I tried to picture his face but the memory kept zooming in and out of focus and thinking too hard made my head hurt.

"You know, I thought you were dead since you wouldn't wake up. I'm going to enjoy punishing you," he had said, laughing over me like a manic. "All you had to do was tell me where – is but you refused. Now look at this."

Where who was? Who had he been asking me about? The name was on the tip of my tongue but I just couldn't remember it. The bastard's name, the one who had done this, what was it? It's… it's…it was just right there but I couldn't catch it.

I closed my eyes, as thinking about everything that happened after I woke up the first time was too much for my head. When I opened my eyes again, I decided to focus on where I was.

The florescent lights above me were not too bright but I couldn't look directly at them without my head aching. I was in what looked like a hospital

room. It seemed old and abandoned, and the white paint on the walls was peeling off. I sat up further to examine the space, despite how much it hurt my head to do so.

Which kain wahala be this?

I was in a hospital gown, on a slim hospital bed with an IV drip being passed into my body. I touched the back of my head again and realised that the part of my head that had the bandage had been shaved off.

My beautiful hair had been butchered! I tried to remember how my hair had looked, but I couldn't and the effort only made my head hurt more. So I stopped trying and continued to look around.

The floor of the room was tiled white but there was so much dirt between each tile that it was hard to believe that this room used to be pristine. In short, the whole place looked like a scene from a horror movie shot in an abandoned hospital and I was one of the lunatics who roamed the hospital.

I was still trying to figure out what was going on, why I was here and where the man who had injured me was when the door to the room opened. A man in a doctor's overcoat came in, along with another man dressed in a black suit.

Where the doctor was a stocky and balding man who seemed middle-aged, the other man who looked like he was in his thirties was lean, tall and all cheekbones, with a full head of silky black hair that fell a few inches past his shoulders. And he had the most piercing blue eyes I had ever seen. There was also something about him, something that smelled like danger, like the kind of man your mother would warn you to steer clear of.

But neither of these men seemed like the man who had injured me. I could not remember his face now and I didn't want to try because trying made my head hurt, but these men felt different.

For starters, they looked like Italians or Indians. They were speaking in a language that I did not understand.

I turned away from the tall man's gaze. His eyes were too intense for me, and he was a little scary.

"I see you are awake," the doctor finally spoke to me in English. His accent was thick and heavy and I could not place it.

"Aside from stating the obvious, can you tell me where I am?" I asked.

The doctor snorted and turned to Tall Man. "She's feisty, this one," he said in English.

Tall Man said nothing. He stared at me with his lips pressed into a thin line and his face expressionless.

The doctor turned back to me, "What is your name?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to answer him and realised I didn't know what it was. Just like the name and face of the man who had attacked me and the name of the person he had asked me about, it felt like it was on the tip of my tongue, like I knew it, but I just couldn't say it.

"I…I…don't know," I answered and instantly felt shame under Tall Man's scrutiny.

"Hmm, interesting," the doctor said. "We shall have to give you a name then."

The doctor put his hands thoughtfully to his chin as if he was thinking about something world changing. He then clapped his hands in glee as he said, "How about Fucosa, since you have quite the mouth?"

"What kind of name is that?" I hissed at the irritating doctor.

"It means fiery but I think I'll just call you Fire," Tall Man spoke for the first time. His English was a lot smoother than the doctor's but he still had an accent that I could not place. His voice sounded like warm honey poured over velvet, rich and soothing.

Ahn, ahn, you too like man. In this situation, it's his voice that's sweeting you, ehn!

I jerked at the voice in my head. It was feminine but it certainly wasn't mine. But it was a voice that sparked warmth in my heart. I knew that voice. I knew who it belonged to. I just couldn't remember her face or her name. And my head began to hurt again at the effort.

"Fire does have a nice ring to it," the doctor agreed. He looked like Tall Man could tell him to eat shit and he would do it gladly.

"Mtchew," I hissed again. There were plenty rubbish people in this world. "God forbid, my name is not Fire. What kind of name is that?"

"Then what is your name?" Tall Man asked, still with his grim, stoic expression.

"I told you I don't know," I found myself snapping at him even though I knew it was a terrible idea to do so. I was at the mercy of these men, and I didn't know what my name was or who I was.

"Well then, your name is Fire until you remember what your name is, or I say otherwise," Tall Man stated and turned to leave the room.

“And who the hell do you think you are?”

“Who I am is of no consequence. What matters is that you belong to me now,” he answered. Then he exited the room, leaving me stunned and alone with the bald doctor.

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From the Author

Dear Reader,

Once again, you have made me happy by purchasing and reading one of my books. If this is your first book by me, welcome to the world I create. I hope you never leave… LOL!

You have just finished *Rebound* and you probably have some questions. I'm hoping I did a good job and the following explanations won't be necessary. Also, I know that readers are entitled to their opinions and thoughts about a published book. Regardless, below are my explanations to some questions I presume you may have:

First, why isn't there a back story to Eriife's life? I didn't give Eriife a back story other than what you previously read in the short story because for once, I didn't want a heroine with a background of trauma. Eriife's childhood was a normal one, at least typical for a Nigerian child. Her parents live in her hometown and she lives in Lagos where she works. She used to be timid because, well, she was raised in a strict Christian home by her pastor father and her deaconess mother.

Secondly, on Tobi, the villain in this story, there's more to come about him. We will learn about his whys and his past in the next book. Be assured that he won't be getting a redemption arc, but we will get closure on his character. Think of his presence here as a foreboding of the things he will do in Lade's story.

Finally, regarding Lade's story, the next book, I truly hope that the last chapter, which is from her POV, makes you curious to read her story. I'm dipping my toes in foreign territories with her book. I'll be exploring sex trafficking and organised crime themes and it will be a dark romance novel. We will also get to learn more about Lade and why she is the way she is. If all goes well, it will be a thicker book than this one, so I'll definitely be taking my time with it.

Most importantly, I'd like to thank you for inspiring the *Rebound* Duology. *A Date for Valentine* was supposed to be a free short story, a gift from me to my readers, but because of the love you showed it, it has grown to become something more. Something I am excited to give you.

If you have more questions, feel free to ask me on social media

Thank you for all the love and support. I wish you everything good.

Aminat

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About the Author

Aminat Sanni-Kamal writes contemporary and fantasy romance stories, ranging from clean to sweet to spicy. As an introvert, she finds joy in the quieter moments. When she's not writing, she can be found reading, crocheting, watching dramas, occasionally baking, or taking a nap. Aminat also enjoys savouring delicious meals.

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