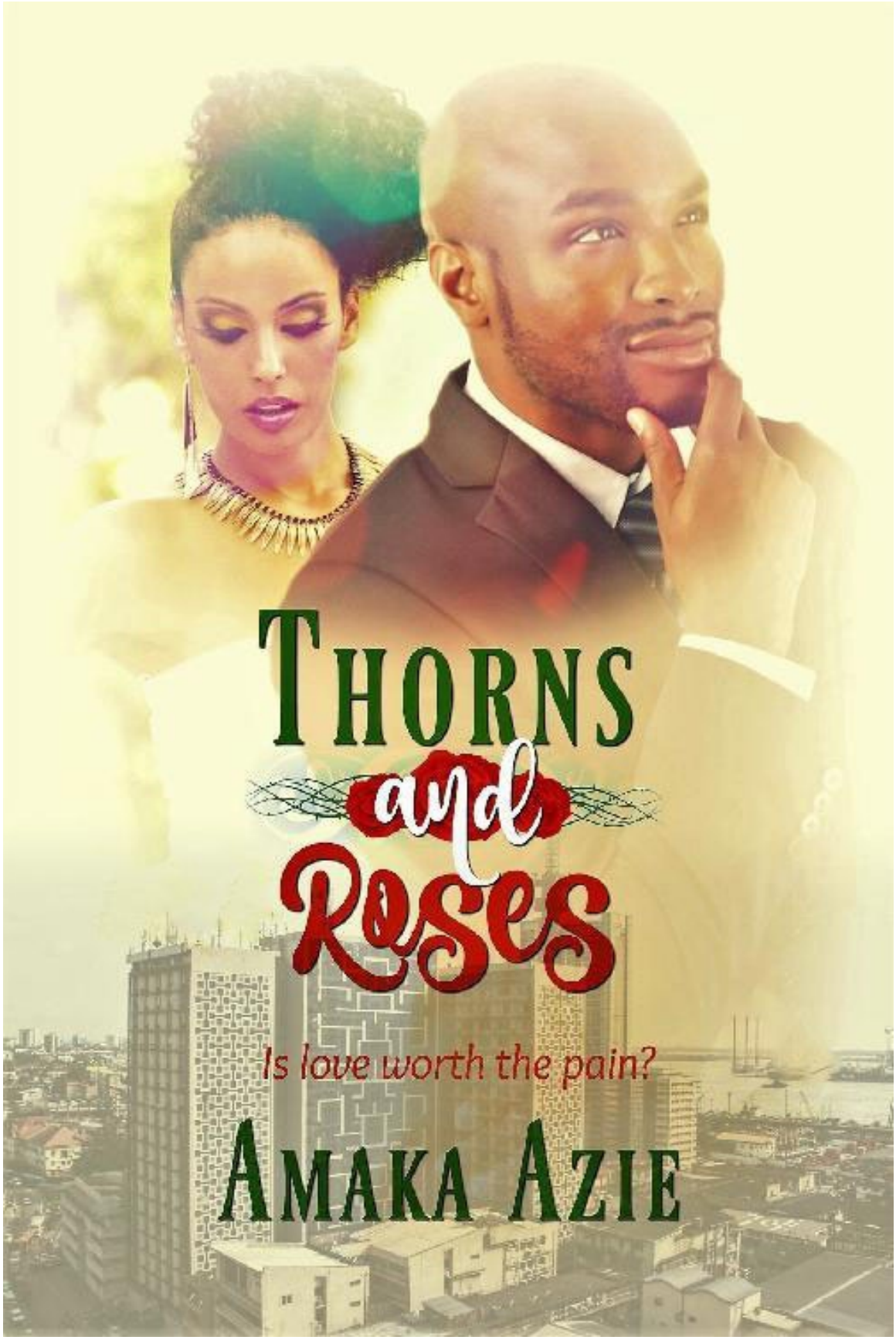
Thorns
and
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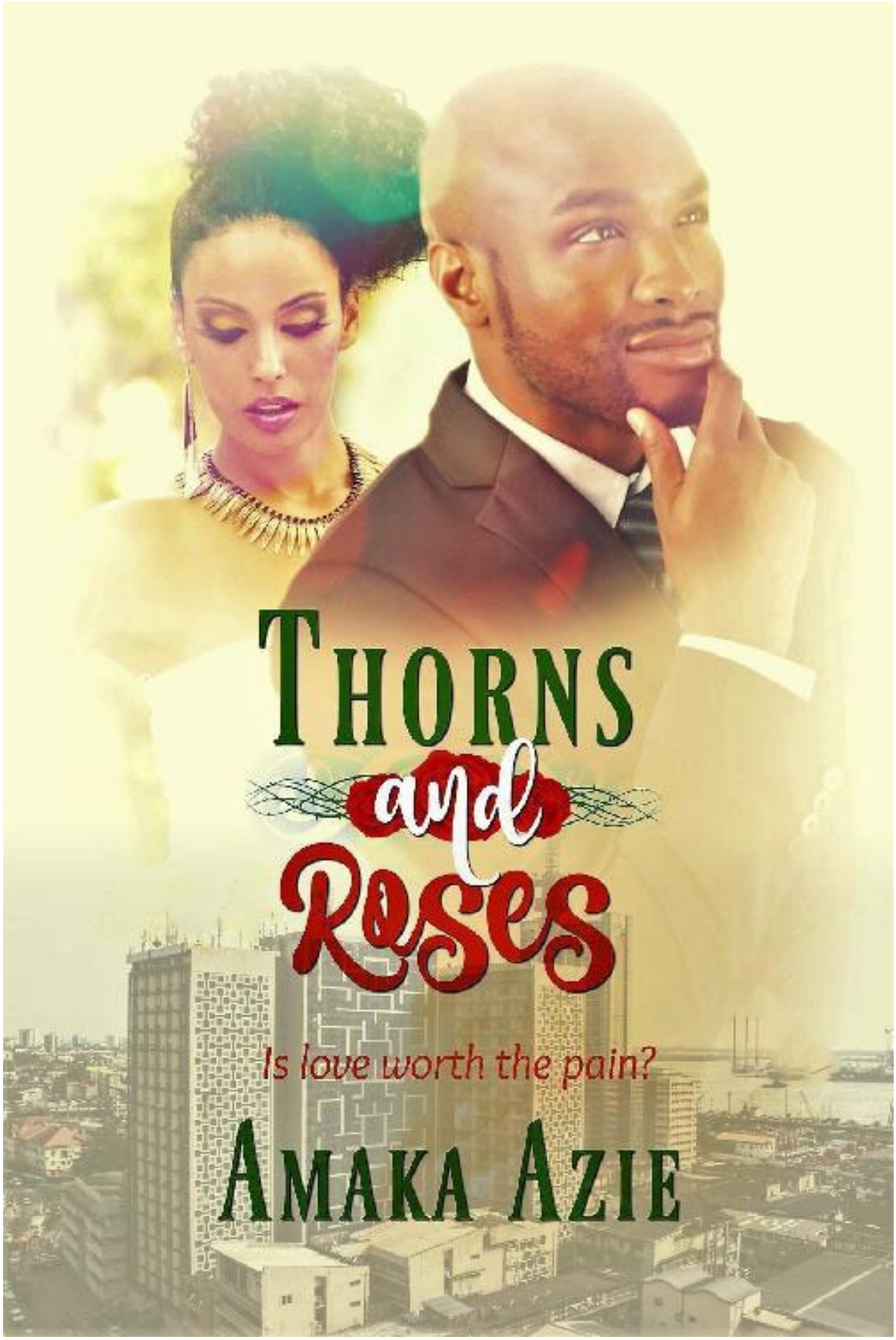
Is love worth the pain?
Amaka Azie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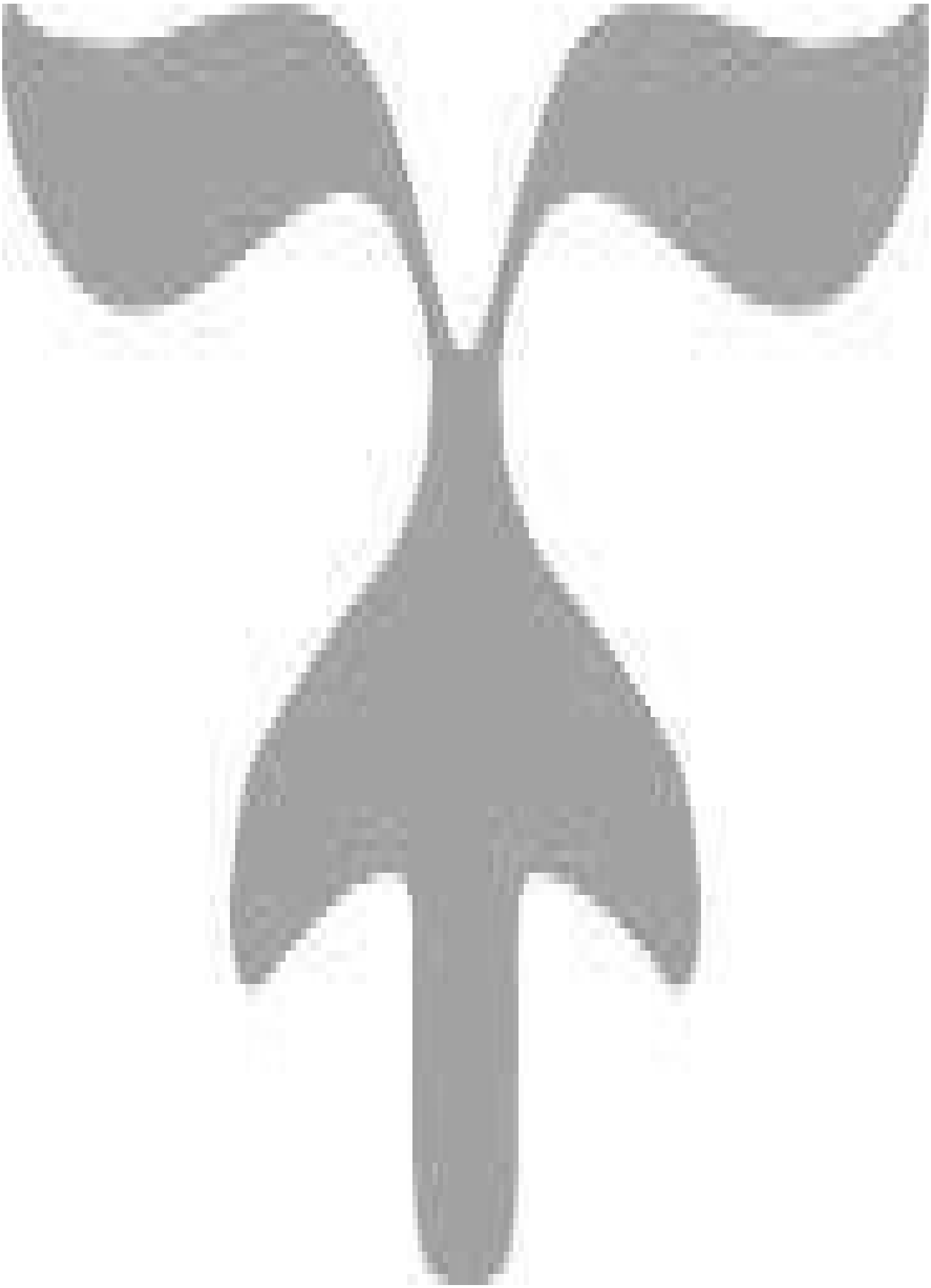
THORNS AND ROSES

Amaka Azie



Thorns and Roses

By Amaka Azie

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A Note to My Readers

Many thanks for sharing this journey with me. In Nigeria, a few friends and relatives of mine often expressed to me, feelings of unhappiness growing up in a home where there was no male child— “An heir”.

Their emotions of discontentment when they spoke of their experiences, often tugged at my heart strings. I feel strongly about this and I’m optimistic that as a community, we can evolve past this.

Girls deserve equal opportunities as boys. Equal education, equal respect and rights. I hope that Ifeoma and her sisters’ experience shed some light to this, and that somewhere, someone reading this is touched and motivated by this story.

Best wishes,

Amaka Azie.

Do I Disappoint You?

A poem by Amaka Azie

Do I disappoint you?

Born on a rainy Monday morning.

Early hours, I screeched my way into existence, eager to see your face.

My eyes were met with mourning.

For born a girl, not what you hoped for, I’m a disillusionment to you, a disgrace.

Do I disappoint you?

You had another one, I’m your fifth sorrow.

Your eyes cloud with regret because what you want is a boy.

I’m never going to carry your name forever, no future for you, no tomorrow.

No matter what I do, I’m never going to bring you joy.

Do I disappoint you?

I grow up wishing I was a boy, I try to gain your trust, your respect.

I can do it dad, I’m a girl, but I can, I’ll make you proud.

Time and time again, my efforts are met with suspect.

I hate myself, I hide myself, wishing I could be buried in the ground.

Do I disappoint you?

After years of shame, I meet a man, he loves me and I love him too.

Yet, deep inside, I feel myself under pressure to produce an heir, a son.

I can’t disappoint him, I need to give him a boy, surely, I do.

The cycle continues for though I have three lovely daughters, I’m despondent, I feel like a con.

PART ONE

LIFE BEFORE LOVE - Running Away from Ghosts

Chapter One

Ifeoma was sitting under the small canopy behind the canteen stirring the large pot of onubgu soup she had settled on top of heated pieces of firewood. It was nearly noon and almost time for workers to begin arriving for lunch. She had already finished pounding yam and making egusi soup. The onubgu soup was the last thing on the menu to prepare before the canteen opened for the day. People were always very surprised when they observed her pounding yam. For someone so slim with not a lot of body mass, she handled the mortar and pestle with surprising strength.

Being the first of four daughters whom her father despised solely because of their gender, Ifeoma had tried desperately to gain his respect and win his approval. She had fought that constant battle of trying to show her father that her gender did not prevent her from doing anything.

It never worked. Her father detested that he had no sons, so he made belittling her and her sisters a daily sport designed to make him feel less responsible for the fact that he had been unable to bear sons. But his personal attacks only shaped Ifeoma into developing quite a strong and independent personality.

Swiping the tip of the ladle over the back of her hand, Ifeoma tasted the soup. Perfect, she thought to herself with a smile. She lifted the heavy pot with ease attained from years of practice and carried it to the serving area.

“Oluchi, have the customers started to arrive?” Ifeoma asked Oluchi, who was staring at her reflection in a compact mirror.

“Yes, three are already seated,” Oluchi replied, nonchalantly.

“So why are you sitting here admiring yourself? Go and take their orders.” Ifeoma shook her head. Loretta, her other waitress, was already taking orders from one of the customers. She could only afford to employ Oluchi and Loretta as waitresses, although sometimes her two youngest sisters also helped in the canteen after school whenever they could.

Ifeoma hated it when women relied on their looks to get ahead in life. Oluchi for instance. She frequently wore heavy makeup and skimpy clothes. She was a pretty and curvy woman in her twenties with honey brown skin, who always bragged about her beauty and how it was bound to attract a rich husband for her.

“Okay, but have you finished cooking everything?” Oluchi asked.

“Yes,” Ifeoma snapped, wiping her hands on her faded apron.

This canteen was a source of pride for Ifeoma. After running away from her hometown, Awka to Lagos, eighteen months ago, she and her sisters had been stranded, with barely enough money to survive. Anytime she thought about what she had to do to get the loan for this small canteen, Ifeoma cringed. Nevertheless, that was all in the past now, and, though she still had a massive debt, she was determined to pay it back.

After securing that loan, she’d found a cheap semi-completed duplex and rented a room on the ground floor. She had worked tirelessly, with the help of her sisters, to renovate the room, which she had then turned into a canteen. Out of necessity for survival, she had even developed skills in carpentry and had made the wooden tables and chairs herself.

Her eyes scanned the canteen from behind the serving counter. Three customers had already started their meal, and they seemed happy with the service and food.

“Mr Frown-face has arrived,” Oluchi announced coming to stand beside Ifeoma behind the serving counter. Ifeoma’s heart rate quickened. She hid further behind the fridge and peered at Mr Frown-face. That’s what they had all named him, for the obvious reason that he never smiled. He always came in for lunch and dinner and sat at the far end corner where he ate silently while working on his laptop. Ifeoma knew just by looking at his expensive suits, shoes, and wristwatches, that he was wealthy. So, why didn’t he just go to one of those luxurious restaurants in the city instead of coming here, to this little canteen where he sat on wooden chairs?

“Go take his order then, and stop standing here,” she said to Oluchi, nudging her forward.

“You should serve him sometimes, Ify, he gives great tips.” Oluchi rubbed her thumb against the tip of her fingers to emphasise her point.

“No, I’m okay right here, thanks.” Ifeoma watched Oluchi as she walked away towards the customer to take his order.

That man scared her. There was something about him that made her feel weak and she hated feeling weak. Mr Frown-face was almost six feet tall with broad shoulders made prominent by his well-fitting suits. Today, he was wearing a navy-blue suit and a red tie that emphasised his muscular athletic build. His toned physique suggested that he worked out religiously. His head was shaved bald, and thin sideburns framed his oblong face. A faint moustache and beard stubble covered his jaw and surrounded his mouth. His face was handsome in a rugged way that reminded Ifeoma of the Nigerian actor Desmond Elliot. He had dark large piercing eyes that were evenly spaced and sitting below thick eyebrows and right above a broad long nose. There was an aura about him that attracted attention and he looked like a man always in control. The type of man that made her wary.

She continued to watch him from her well-hidden safe corner as he talked to Oluchi. She watched his mouth move and could not help but notice how full and luscious his lips were. Unexpectedly pink lips for someone with dark brown skin. Yes, he definitely terrified her. She would never be bold enough to wait his table herself. If he affected her as much as he did from afar, she did not want to go anywhere near him.

“What kind of man orders soup without pounded yam or even garri?” Oluchi asked Ifeoma after letting her know what Mr Frown-face had ordered.

“Only rich men,” Ifeoma answered with a chuckle. She spooned out rich egusi soup into a bowl and searched the pot with the spoon for beef, which she then added to the soup.

“You are giving him all the huge pieces of meat,” Oluchi said.

“Of course, so that he will keep coming back. We need his business.”

“Are you sure that it’s not because you want to keep staring at him?”

“I don’t stare at him.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Oluchi glanced quickly at Mr Frown-face before turning back to Ifeoma. “I wish he would look up from his computer and notice

me," she added with a sigh. An uneasy sensation settled in Ifeoma's tummy. For some strange reason, she did not want Mr Frown-face noticing Oluchi.

"I know what to do with him, I'll show him what this does," Oluchi continued, grabbing her own ass.

"The way you have shown many men abi?"

"Don't hate, appreciate," Oluchi said, taking the tray of food and swaying her hips as she made her way towards his table.

Ifeoma watched Mr Frown-face eat, as she had done often for the past four months since he had started patronising her canteen. She was drawn to him like metal to a magnet. He had even intruded on her dreams. Much to her irritation, she had woken up in the middle of the night a few times sweating after having erotic dreams of him. Sometimes, in those dreams, she was running away from him and he was chasing her with a chain intending to tie her to him. Never would she allow herself to be tied to any man, Never! She never wanted to be under any man's control. She despised men. And weak women like her mother who gave up their entire lives for men.

She was twenty-five years old and lived life on her own terms. She had never been in a relationship and never wanted to be in one. Although, sometimes, she did wish that she had the courage to have flings with men without any strings attached. After a failed attempt at that during her first year in University, she decided to steer clear of the opposite sex for good, they could not be trusted. Her main focus had always been to look after her younger siblings. She wanted to ensure that they finished their education. And she worked very hard to do so, paying their university fees and rent for the one-bedroom apartment that the three of them shared. After monthly expenses, there was barely any money left at the end of each month with which to pay off her own loan, the one she had acquired to get the canteen up and running. And it worried her that soon, her creditor would come visiting her with his ugly potbelly. She shuddered with disgust at the memory of the ordeal she went through when she didn't have enough money to pay him four months ago. Ifeoma vowed it would never happen again.

Her creditor's actions made her hate men even more. She hated her father, she hated all the men she had ever dealt with and would rather die than let any man

treat her the way her father had treated her, her sisters, and her mother, his own wife.

Chapter Two

Awka, Anambra State,

Nigeria, West Africa.

April- June 2007

“Useless woman! You are not worth the bride price I paid,” Papa Ify shouted, shoving his wife out of his way.

“Nna anyi, please don’t go out like this, you are drunk,” his wife cried, falling on her knees and pleading with him.

“Shut up, foolish woman! How dare you tell me what to do? eh?” He staggered towards the front door. Mama Ify stood and made her way towards him, holding on to his arm.

“Biko, my husband, I don’t want you to fall into the gutter again,” she pleaded, tears streaming down her face. “You almost died last time.”

“I said, shut up! Stupid woman! You can never do anything right!” Papa Ify swung his hand and struck Mama Ify across the face. She staggered, falling backwards from the force of the slap. Ifeoma ran out from her hiding place and helped her mother up.

“Let him go out drunk,” Ifeoma cried, holding her mother. “Better that than he beats you, mummy.”

Her sisters were curled up in a corner, observing the scene that was playing out before them; they did not dare to make a sound.

“Shut up too! Useless girl!” Papa Ify shouted, glancing around, his gaze unfocused. “You are all useless!” he added, waving his hand around.

“God cursed me by giving me a useless wife who could only produce useless girls!” He shook his head. “I am wasting money paying your university fees!”

“You don’t even pay my school fees,” Ifeoma retorted. “Uncle Emeka does.” Even though she knew it was pointless arguing with her drunken father, she could not help herself. He always boasted that he paid her university fees, but it was actually her mother’s brother who sent money for that. Her father never brought out money to support them. He believed any money spent on his daughters was a waste. He believed that only sons deserved to complete their education. So, he squandered whatever meagre salary he received from working in a shoe factory, on alcohol and snuffing tobacco.

The rest of the family barely got by on their mother’s earnings from working as a seamstress and from the money that she got from selling their home-grown vegetables and eggs gathered from rearing poultry.

“Your mother is a prostitute; she is sleeping with her brother,” Papa Ify barked. Then he turned towards Ifeoma and yelled, “you are not my child.” Some saliva emitted from his mouth as he spoke and landed on Ifeoma’s face. Repulsed, she wiped it off with the back of her hand.

“You are all not mine. My sperm is strong and produces boys, not useless girls like you!”

“I wish I were not your daughter,” Ifeoma spat out, causing her father to raise his hand to strike her, but the look in Ifeoma’s eyes made him pause. Her father had never struck her; he was too afraid of her. He called her a devil child because she never cowered before him.

Her father dropped his hand and clumsily made his way to the front door. This time, no one stopped him. Ifeoma held her mother’s trembling body and sighed. Another night, another episode of drama. She sometimes wished that her father would fall into a ditch and die. But it was the thought of knowing just how devastating his death would be to her mother that stopped her wishful thinking.

Lying in bed later that night, Ifeoma found it hard to sleep. Uncle Emeka who sent money to them regularly had suffered a stroke the week before. The stroke had left him unable to work, which meant that he could no longer help them financially.

Uncle Emeka was her mother's only sibling. He worked as a carpenter producing furniture for small-scale businesses. Although he did not make much, he was generous with his money and sent a small amount to them each month. Now, partially paralyzed from the stroke and unable to work, Uncle Emeka had informed them that he could no longer continue to support them.

Ifeoma was in her final year at the University of Awka studying business administration. She was lucky. As the first born, she had the advantage of being the one to go to university. Her younger sister, the one who came directly after her, had completed secondary school and was waiting for financial support to go on to university. But the family plan was that Ifeoma would help her sister with her university fees when she herself finished her education and got a job. That was the custom in many poor families in their neighbourhood. The first child got the benefit of being taken care of, in the hopes that they would themselves graduate, get a job, and help the ones who were next in line.

Ifeoma did not want to get a job; she wanted to own a restaurant. She loved to cook. She was known to make delicious meals out of limited ingredients. However, it seemed that now she would have to find a job. She intended to visit her uncle the next day and ask for his help in securing one. Ifeoma resolved to do her best to support her younger sister's education. Fortunately for her, her two other sisters were still attending a secondary school that was being funded by the government.

"I wish we could run away," Ifeoma's youngest sister, Chioma, whispered. The four of them shared one room, and Chioma slept in the same bed with Ifeoma most nights. Her other sisters shared the other bed.

"No such talk, we will survive this," Ifeoma responded, rubbing Chioma's back gently. She was six years older than Chioma and was very protective of her. Their mother had given birth virtually every two years, hoping to produce a male child for their father. The only reason she had stopped trying was because she had needed to have a hysterectomy to save her life during Chioma's birth. This had angered their father. He particularly blamed Chioma for denying him the chance to have had a male child. As a result, he tended to ignore her completely.

"Seriously, Ify, I have been dreaming about running away."

"Don't say that, please. I will work something out."

“I hate him! I wish he was dead.”

“Don’t say that, Chioma, he is our father.”

“I wish he wasn’t.” Chioma’s voice cracked and Ifeoma embraced her.

“Sleep, my sister. Tomorrow I will start searching for a job and begin saving money. I will take care of all my sisters or die trying to.”

The next week, Ifeoma convinced her uncle to allow her to work for him. She became an apprentice in his furniture shop. To begin, Uncle Emeka did not pay her while she learnt carpentry. However, Ifeoma was a fast learner and began to work independently after a few weeks, so Uncle Emeka put her on his payroll. The money, although insufficient, was better than nothing. She saved every Naira, hiding it under her mattress so that her father could not get to it. Many times, when he was broke, he had tried to extort money from their mother to buy more alcohol.

One evening, Ifeoma returned home from University to find her sisters crying.

“What is it?” she asked, her stomach twisting with apprehension. “Has something happened to mummy?”

“No, daddy says he wants me to marry Mr Chibundu,” Chioma said, her voice shaky from tears.

“What?” Ifeoma felt sudden rage heating up her blood. Mr Chibundu was one of her father’s drinking friends. An old lecherous man who liked to leer at young girls. Whenever he came to visit, his eyes would continuously follow her sisters, making them all uncomfortable.

“He has already come to pay my bride price,” Chioma cried.

“I can’t believe this. Where is daddy?” Ifeoma snarled. “Where?”

Chioma pointed towards the wooden front door to their two-bedroom bungalow. “He has gone out to the beer parlour,” she replied, quivering. “He told me the traditional marriage is this weekend.”

“What did mummy say about this?” Ifeoma questioned her sisters, dropping her

bag on the small stool in front of her.

“She is in her room, sewing the traditional wedding dress I am to wear—”

Before she could finish talking, Ifeoma marched to their mother’s room and swung the door open.

“Mummy, why? How can you let daddy do this?”

“Ify, biko, we need the money, he paid a huge sum for her—”

“I don’t care! She is only sixteen!”

Ifeoma shook. Never would she allow this to happen. Her sister was only a child for goodness’ sake. She knew her mother was too weak to stop this, so she would have to put an end to this madness herself. Whatever it took.

Shaking her head with disgust at her mother, Ifeoma walked out of the room slamming the door.

“Don’t worry, Chioma,” she said with an oddly calm voice. “I will never let it happen. I give you my word.”

“You can’t stop it…. he has already paid my bride price, Ify, Chai!” Chioma wailed loudly. Ifeoma took her in her arms.

“I promise you, Chioma, I will not let it happen.”

Ifeoma led her three sisters into the small kitchen. There, she prepared egusi soup and garri for them. After dinner, she stayed with them in their little room until they fell asleep, but she stayed awake so that she could confront their father when he returned from his night out.

Sitting on a stool facing the front door, Ifeoma waited. As soon as she heard her father stagger in, she stood up.

“Daddy, biko, stop this nonsense about Chioma getting married, biko,” Ifeoma pleaded, rubbing her palms together.

“Shut your mouth. Foolish girl. At least she is now worth something!” he roared,

his speech slightly slurred from being drunk.

“How much did Mr Chibundu pay? I will give you that exact amount. Please, daddy.”

“Do you have ten thousand Naira with you?” Ifeoma flinched. She had not yet saved that much.

“No, but I promise, if you stop this, I will give you ten thousand Naira.”

“If you don’t have it now, get out of my way.”

“Daddy, please….” Ifeoma’s tone was desperate. She got on her knees, a sign of humility she had never shown towards her father. “Let Mr Chibundu marry me instead…. biko.”

Papa Ify broke into a drunken fit of laughter. “Get up, stupid girl,” he spat. “Do you think he wants a skinny girl like you?” He seemed very amused by this. Ifeoma had to wait for his laughter to die down.

“Nobody wants a girl as thin as you. You are completely useless. You can’t even fetch me bride price.” He paused, clearing his throat. “At least Chioma has shown some use in this house.”

Tears escaped Ifeoma’s eyes. She knew it was futile talking her father out of this. He had already seen the money and his greed was worse than his laziness. “Get out of my way. Useless girl,” he muttered as he staggered towards his bedroom, knocking his knee against the edge of a stool on his way.

Ifeoma remained kneeling on the floor and crying. She knew that her mother was pretending to be asleep and had heard the entire conversation. Wiping her tears angrily because she considered tears a sign of weakness, Ifeoma pondered what to do next. She would have to visit Mr Chibundu tomorrow and plead with him. The only way Chioma married that disgusting pig would be over my dead body.

Ifeoma had a fitful sleep that night. She woke up before everyone in the house. A glimpse at the clock told her it was six in the morning. She had a quick bath and dressed hurriedly. Lifting the mattress, careful not to wake Chioma, Ifeoma pulled out an envelope containing six thousand Naira. Her entire savings for the two months she had been working for Uncle Emeka. She took the first bus to Mr

Chibundu's house. She knew where he lived because on a few occasions, they had needed to carry their drunken father out of his home. Mr Chibundu was a widower with no children, who spent most of his time drinking and smoking.

Standing by the front door of his unpainted bungalow, Ifeoma waited for Mr Chibundu to open the door. She was about to walk around the side of the house to check and see if he was home through the open window when the wooden door swung open.

"My future in-law," he said, grinning. Ifeoma recoiled. His grin exposed tobacco-stained teeth. He was a short, wide, balding man in his late fifties, who reminded Ifeoma of a turtle. "How can I help?"

"Please, can I come in?" she asked him with a forced smile.

"Of course, my dear, we will soon be related."

Resisting the impulse to say, "over my dead body," Ifeoma followed him inside the house.

He offered her a seat which she accepted.

"Mr Chibundu, I know you have come to marry my sister, but I have a better offer for you," Ifeoma said as soon as she had settled on the wooden chair in his sitting room. There was no need for pleasantries.

"What offer could be better?" he snickered, looking at Ifeoma as if she was crazy.

"You marry me instead," Ifeoma said calmly.

"Mba nu. You are too thin," he said, shaking his head vehemently. "I need a woman with meat on her bones." His eyes shone as he spoke. You would have thought he won a prize.

"But Chioma is still a child, I am a woman—"

"She may be young, but she looks more of a woman than you."

"What if you marry me, and I give you six thousand Naira back from the bride

price?" Ifeoma persuaded, watching him closely for a response. Mr Chibundu contemplated the offer for a moment then shook his head. "Mba," he declined. "I still don't want a stick for a wife."

Standing up with determination in her eyes, Ifeoma gradually took off her clothes and the strapping she tied over her chest every day. Mr Chibundu's eyes widened with shock as her breasts sprang free from their confinement. Although Ifeoma was slim, with long legs, she had beautiful large breasts. They were round and firm, and very perky. Her dark nipples, also large, were surrounded by a paler areola. But because she hated the negative attention that came with being female, she had done everything in her power to hide her femininity. Consequently, nobody ever took notice of her, including men. Ifeoma's main disappointment, however, was that her breasts continued to grow. She wore a size D cup, and she detested it, so she had resorted to repeatedly strapping down her chest with a heavy bandage ever since she turned sixteen.

Mr Chibundu had begun to sweat by this time and was licking his lips. Ifeoma smirked. All men are predictable and disgusting, she thought to herself.

"So, what do you have to say about my offer?" she asked him.

"Eh…. eh... And do I also get the six thousand back?" His voice was unsteady, his eyes fixated on her breasts.

"Yes, but only if you call off the wedding with my sister."

"And you will marry me also?" His pupils were dilated with lust. Ifeoma nodded in agreement.

"Okay, then, it is settled," he agreed, rubbing his left hand over his round belly. The way he stared lustfully at her made her feel nauseated. She could taste the bile that had risen from her throat at his obscene perusal.

Turning her head to the side so that he would not see the tears that clouded her eyes, she speedily got dressed. Then just as quickly as she had come, she was gone.

Once she was sure there was a safe distance between her and Mr Chibundu, she threw up in the gutter. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and turned to look at the house. And there, staring at her through the window with a wicked

glint in his eyes and his hand on his groin was Mr Chibundu. Dread traveled down her spine as she turned and walked away.

Chapter Three

The sound of heavy rain and thunder muffled the sound of glass shattering on the floor.

“How dare you tell me it is over,” Chuma heard the woman he’d been seeing for three months, scream, as she held on to another tumbler ready to throw it on the ground.

“Tonia, calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” She smashed the contents in her hand against the terrazzo floor. Chuma jumped backwards, attempting to dodge the pieces of glass that flew across the floor. How he had ever found Tonia attractive, he couldn’t understand. Okay, he could, she had a big fat ass and large breasts. But that was all she had.

“Tonia, listen; we don’t want the same things—”

“Oh, Chuma, trust me, we do. I want you, you want me. We’ll make it work.” She picked up the third tumbler, and that was when he lunged forward and grabbed her wrist.

“Drop it now, or I’ll have you arrested.” His voice was a low growl, but it was the look in Chuma’s eyes that made her pause. With shaky hands, Tonia put the glass down on the kitchen table.

“Please, Chuma, I love you.”

“No, you don’t,” he replied, shaking his head. Looking at the glass shattered all over the floor, he realised what a terrible idea it had been to break up with Tonia in his house. There was always some damage done, but he never seemed to learn his lesson. His ex-girlfriend had stolen two Rolex watches of his, and he had never gotten them back.

“I do baby, I do,” Tonia said, unbuttoning her blouse. “I’ll show you how much.”

Chuma stopped her.

“Listen, I will put money into your account—”

“I’m not a prostitute,” she cried with indignation. “That’s your answer to everything, money.” Her chest heaved as she spoke, the top of her breasts visible through the gap left by the undone buttons of her blouse.

“What do you want me to say, Tonia? I am being honest with you here. I want out,” Chuma said, his voice calm even though the mess on the floor was getting to him.

Borderline OCD, he liked his life organised and hated seeing things out of place. He also hated weakness or any show of it and now as he looked at the tears in Tonia’s eyes, he became even more confident about his decision. She wanted more from him than he could offer her.

When he came back from work and found her in his apartment, he was livid. He had never given her a key. And to find out that she had stolen his and made a copy was even more infuriating. But that was not the main reason why he wanted out, although, it had been the igniting factor.

After three months of wild sex and nothing else in common, he knew it was time to end things because she’d wanted more out of the relationship. Chuma knew he was a cad, but he’d never led her or anyone else on. Right from the time they met at a political party, he’d told Tonia that he was not interested in a commitment. And she had accepted his terms, until recently.

“I want you to love me, Chuma … I love you.” He was getting tired of hearing that. He had never believed any woman who told him that they loved him. After all, all they saw was his money and the expensive things he could buy them.

“Well, I’m sorry, Tonia, I don’t love you.”

“Asshole.”

“Won’t argue with you there. But I told you from the start that I am an asshole, remember?”

“I hope you die a lonely man.”

“I probably will,” he replied. Chuma knew Karma would get to him at some point. Similar ugly break-up scenes had played in his life many times already.

“Fuck you, I hate you.”

He almost laughed at that statement, and fought back the words, make up your mind, woman. After a few seconds of deliberation, Tonia turned to pick up her purse from the kitchen table.

“Okay, send the money to my account,” she said, giving him an acid look. “Nothing less than two hundred thousand or I’ll mess you up.”

He laughed. Now, this was the Tonia he knew. All that talk about love was just so insincere.

“I will do that, Tonia, but not because of your threats. I am a man of my word.”

“Just tell me this before I leave, is it another woman?”

“No, Tonia, I just want out, and I’m choosing to be honest about it. You deserve that.”

“Don’t tell me what I deserve, asshole! I hope someone breaks your heart.”

And with those words left hanging in the air, she stormed out. Chuma sighed. He hoped that was the last time he ever saw her.

Glancing at the pieces of broken glass all over the kitchen floor, he scratched his clean-shaven head. Why do women have to be so dramatic? He sometimes wished he were more like his twin brother Nnamdi, who hated confrontation.

Nnamdi always played games to make women angry with him so that they would break up with him first. He told Chuma that using reverse psychology was the most efficient way of breaking up with women. But Chuma did not have a scheming bone in his body. He was painfully direct and honest even if it meant an unpleasant scene like the one he had just experienced.

Stepping carefully around the shattered pieces of glass, he picked up a broom and gathered the glass pieces into a dustpan. As he bent down to do this, he vowed to be a little more discriminating in his choices when it came to picking

his next sexual partner. Never again would he date a woman just for the size of her ass or breasts. He would have to pick someone who was on the same page with him. Someone who wanted nothing from him but a good time, and someone he could break up with, without causing a scene. At thirty-three, his focus was on building an empire. He did not want to be under his father's shadow. He wanted to make a name for himself.

Chuma's father, Chief Obi, accumulated his wealth by importing and exporting cars. A few years ago, he had expanded the business to include transportation. He owned a fleet of luxurious buses that connected major cities in Nigeria. Chuma and his brother, Nnamdi, having both attained master's degrees in business administration and finance, had further expanded their brand to now include an investment firm and mortgage banking. Chuma headed the investment firm while Nnamdi managed the mortgage bank. Their younger sister and last-born of the family, Adaora, had recently started working with them in the investment firm and was pulling her own weight. So, yes, he and his siblings were on their way to expanding their family fortune and to Chuma, no woman was worth the distraction.

Satisfied that his kitchen was back in order, he searched the fridge for something to eat. He found a bowl of leftover chicken salad hidden in the last layer of the fridge. Picking it up and opening the bowl, he sniffed it and twitched his nose from the putrid smell. Spoilt, he thought, throwing it into the bin. He was hungry and wanted a proper meal. He thought about his favourite canteen, Eastern Delight, and decided to go and eat there. From the first day he had tasted the food from that restaurant, he was hooked. The food there was so authentically delicious that it reminded him of his late mother's cooking. His mother Angelina Obi had died when he was only ten years old. They had been very close, and he remembered sitting in the kitchen many times while she cooked. Though many years had passed since her death, those memories were still very special to him.

Chuma showered and changed into a pair of jeans and a black and blue jersey. He usually stopped at the restaurant on his way home from work, but today for some reason, he had driven straight home. And he was glad he had, because seeing Tonia in his home uninvited had been the perfect excuse he needed to break things off with her. Whistling, he grabbed his car keys and left his three-bedroom penthouse suite.

He enjoyed the evening breeze and the sultry sound of Sade's smooth operator as

he drove to Eastern Delight. He parked his imported jeep Cherokee under a tree hoping that it wouldn’t be vandalised or broken into. The canteen was in the slums of Ikoyi and he always worried that he would be robbed or attacked whilst there. So far, nothing untoward had happened.

He settled in his usual seat at the back of the room and pulled out his laptop from the carrier bag. He wanted to go over the financial plan he had worked on earlier during the day, once again. His need for perfection meant that he revised his work repeatedly, sometimes to the annoyance of his secretary, Sandra, who was left to retype each report many times. Subconsciously bobbing his head to the soft traditional music playing in the background, Chuma waited patiently for a waiter to attend to him.

With a quick sweep of his gaze, he noticed three other customers in the canteen. They were ordinarily dressed, as opposed to his suaveness. He knew that he looked out of place here. He was also aware that this was not the type of place where people expected to see someone of his stature dining, but he loved this place. There was just something about the food and the atmosphere that reminded him of his mother and his younger years. He felt calm and relaxed here. Nnamdi, his twin brother, had once joked that his food had been laced with juju, which bound him spiritually to the canteen. It sure felt like it, even though Chuma did not believe in juju or mystical paraphernalia.

Feeling slightly irritated that a waiter hadn’t shown up yet, Chuma rose from his seat intending to find out why. However, before he could take a step forward, a slender light-skinned lady he’d never seen there before, rushed out from behind the partitioned serving counter.

“I'm sorry for keeping you waiting, sir,” she muttered. “We are short staffed today.” She appeared nervous and fidgety. Chuma sat back down.

“What can I get you?” she asked, rubbing her hands on her apron. He couldn't see her face clearly because of the way she had positioned her body while she talked to him. She appeared to be avoiding eye contact with him.

“Oha soup, please,” Chuma replied and then added, “some garri as well.”

She turned her face towards him abruptly as if his order had surprised her. A series of rapid emotions registered in her expressive eyes. First, surprise, then panic, and finally fear. She was afraid of him. He caught his breath, caught off

guard by her reaction. He was sure that he had never met her before, so why was she frightened of him? Did she think he was upset about the delay in attending to him?

His need to assure her of his state of mind was immediate and unexplainable. He reached for her hand.

“I’m not upset—” he began, but she snatched her hand away swiftly. The dim lighting in the room made it difficult for him to see her facial features distinctively, but she looked young. A colourful scarf covered her hair, and baggy clothes and a faded blue apron enveloped her slim frame.

“I'm sorry for the delay again, I’ll get your food now, sir,” she replied, scurrying away.

Chuma shook his head swiftly to clear his mind of that strange encounter, although he did wonder about that expression of fear that he had seen in her eyes. He searched the inner recesses of his memory trying to recollect if there was any possibility that he had met her before today, but he kept coming up empty. No, he had certainly not met her before. Maybe she thought I was someone else, he concluded within himself.

But soon, wondering led to intrigue, and he waited with anticipation for her to return with his meal. For some odd reason, he wanted to talk with her some more, to see the colour of her eyes, to find out what frightened her about him. He felt a flutter in his tummy. He could not remember being this excited about the prospect of discovering more about anyone in a long time.

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Ifeoma’s heart was beating at a manic pace when she retreated into the serving area of the canteen. Damn Oluchi and Loretta for disappointing me by calling in sick today, she thought as she picked up a glass bowl to serve Mr Frown-face. Just when she had begun to relax because he had not shown up at his usual time, Ifeoma had seen his tall frame walking through the door. She’d frozen on the spot and waited there as if transfixed. She’d been spurred into action only when

she noticed him standing up with a curious expression and a scowl. Realising he intended to walk towards the serving counter, she had rushed out to his table.

Standing near him had rained all kinds of havoc on her body, and when he had touched her, her heart had almost exploded in her chest. She was used to only having feelings of repulsion and hatred towards men, so she did not know what to do with the strange feelings this man evoked within her.

Ifeoma took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and exhaled to calm her nerves. She could do this; serve him and walk away. She was a big girl who had overcome years of emotional abuse from her father. Facing this man was nothing compared to what she'd been through.

Ifeoma strolled out towards Mr Frown-face, trying to balance the tray of food in her shaky hands.

"Here is your food, sir," she said, as she set the tray down before him.

"Chuma," he said, his face breaking into a bright smile.

"What?" Ifeoma was startled by the brilliance of his grin, which revealed beautiful white teeth that the dim lighting of the canteen could not conceal. Mr Frown-face's first smile. And it was a gorgeous one. Wow, this ought to be immortalised in a frame.

"My name is Chuma."

"Oh, okay, I hope you enjoy your food … Chuma."

Chuma sensed that she was going to slip away from him, and for some peculiar reason that he did not want to analyse yet, he panicked.

"You haven't told me your name," he said quickly, before she could hurry away again.

"It's Ifeoma, sir … I mean Chuma," He liked her name immediately. In the Igbo language, it meant "good thing". Chuma noticed her discomfort as she stood at the side of his table. This was not the reaction he usually got from women. Why was she so uncomfortable around him? Feeling baffled, he asked, "I have not seen you before, are you newly employed here?"

“No, I own the canteen, my waitresses are off sick today, so—”

“Madam, I want to pay o,” a customer who had finished his meal, announced from the other side of the room. Chuma noted the look of relief that came over Ifeoma.

“I’ll be with you shortly,” she said to the customer, and then to Chuma, “I have to go. And once again, sorry about the delay.” With that, she left to attend to the other customer.

Chuma felt his insides twisting as he watched her walk away. He’d really wanted to continue the conversation and find out more about this mystery girl-woman. She looked like a teenager, but he sensed that she was much older. Maybe in her early twenties. And she owned her own restaurant. Impressive. Chuma wondered if she was also the chef. Her flawless grammar suggested to him that she was educated, and her slight accent hinted that she grew up in Eastern Nigeria.

He shoved a forkful of garri into his mouth after swirling it around in the soup. Delicious, he thought. If she cooked this, she deserves a successful restaurant in the most prominent area in Lagos. And just as easily as that thought crossed his mind, Chuma resolved to find out more about her and possibly help her expand this restaurant, then he settled down to enjoy his meal.

Butterflies fluttered in Ifeoma’s tummy as she watched Chuma eat. She was safely hidden in her usual hiding spot. He was no longer Mr Frown-face to her because she had witnessed his dazzling smile. He was the last one left in the canteen and for the thousandth time this evening, she silently cursed her waitresses for abandoning her. Ifeoma did not worry about being in any physical danger; she had the strength of a horse and could defend herself in any fight. Years of trying to prove to her father that as a female child, she was not worthless, had made her learn how to fight.

Her eyes lowered to his mouth as he chewed beef from the soup that he had saved for last. Because she loved cooking, she enjoyed watching people eat. She believed the way people ate revealed a lot about their character. Chuma ate slowly but decisively, and from that, she deduced that he was meticulous, yet, bold. From weeks of observing him, she also noticed that he could carve away most of the meat from the bone with his fork and knife. A skill, which she believed, spoke about his patience because she always needed to use her hands

to enjoy meat.

Ifeoma moved towards him when she saw he had finished his meal, packed up his laptop and pulled out his wallet from his pocket.

“I hope you enjoyed your food?” she asked him with a nervous smile.

“I did as always, Ifeoma.” The way her name sounded on his lips made her heart lurch in her chest. The cost of the meal was written down on the menu. Ifeoma knew she did not have to show him the bill; she simply stood there and waited for him to open his wallet.

With another dazzling smile, Chuma handed Ifeoma a thousand Naira note. Two smiles in one night? She couldn’t wait to tell Oluchi and Loretta tomorrow.

“Let me get your change—”

“No, you don’t have to—”

“I’m sorry I can’t accept that. The food only costs three hundred—”

“I know, but that’s what I always give your waitresses.”

Ifeoma couldn’t help the startled gasp that escaped her lips. When Oluchi and Loretta told her that he was a great tipper, she’d never asked them how much he gave.

“It’s still too much,” she protested, shaking her head.

“Did you cook this meal?” he asked her. And even though she felt it was an odd question to ask, Ifeoma nodded her head.

“It is the best soup I have tasted.” His voice was deep, his tone candid. Ifeoma felt heat flood her face at the compliment.

“If I went to a posh restaurant, I would have paid almost three thousand Naira for soup not as delicious.” His words made her heart soar.

“Thanks very much, sir ... I mean Chuma.” She accepted the money. After all, she needed it to pay off her loan.

Chuma watched her put the money in a purse tucked into the pocket of her apron. He knew it was time for him to stand up and leave, but he did not move.

“Are you expecting any more customers?” he asked, wanting to spend more time with her. Looking at her in the dim light, he couldn’t comprehend his intense interest in her. She was physically not his type; he liked curvy women. And she was way too young. He liked his women mature—preferably over thirty, and experienced. Yet he felt inexplicably protective of her ever since he had noticed the fear in her eyes.

“No, I am about to lock up and head back home.” He glanced at his wristwatch. It was ten o’clock. Way too late for a young woman to be by herself in a restaurant with a strange man.

“How are you getting home?”

“I take the bus like everyone else,” she answered, sounding irritated.

Sighing, Chuma scratched his head at his blunder. Sometimes he forgot that not everyone owned a car.

“It’s not safe for you—” Her sudden laughter interrupted him.

“Now, you know what is safe for me?” she said, shaking her head. “You give me money and suddenly you know what’s best for me?” Reaching into her apron pocket, she pulled out the thousand Naira note and shoved it towards him.

“I don’t need your money, and I don’t need any man telling me what is safe for me.”

Astonished by her vehemence and unexpected response, Chuma was speechless. She held her hand towards him for a few more seconds.

“I’m sorry,” Chuma apologised, rising from his seat and placing his hand over hers. “It’s not my place to tell you what’s safe for you.” His apology surprised him because he rarely apologised to anyone. But then again, in the few minutes of meeting this strange lady standing before him, he’d done things he rarely did. Touching her now, a jolt of awareness passed through his skin from hers. This was not him; he did not believe in mushy feelings. Needing to clear his head, he exhaled before saying, “Keep the money, Ifeoma.” He paused briefly. “Be

careful when going home, okay?”

Immobilised by his touch, Ifeoma could only nod her head in response.

“See you tomorrow, and please cook your lovely egusi soup,” he added with a small smile as he withdrew his hand from hers.

Ifeoma watched him leave the canteen, her hands trembling and her heart racing. Three smiles from Mr Frown-face in one night? Overwhelmed by the warm emotions flooding her body and mind, she sat down in the seat he had just vacated. The woodsy scent of his cologne still lingered in the air. She inhaled deeply and sighed.

What had just happened, what was that all about? Why had he even bothered to chat with her, why was he kind to her? He was rich and good-looking, so it couldn’t be that he found her attractive. No, it can’t be, she decided. She was not as conceited as Oluchi to believe that a man as sophisticated as he would notice her. Ifeoma knew she had a pretty face, but she also knew that she lacked the curves many men desired. Plus, with her baggy clothes and her chest strapped, no one had ever looked at her twice. What’s the end game here, Mr Frown-face Chuma? she mused, puzzled by the entire evening. With a deep sigh, Ifeoma stood and got ready to close the canteen.

Chapter Four

“Chuma, you can’t just fire people like that, he is a friend’s son.” Chuma swallowed the angry retort that sprang to his throat because he didn’t want to disrespect his father.

“Dad, I can fire whomever I want, especially if that person is not doing a good job!” He tried to keep an even tone but some of his irritation was expressed in his voice.

“You never give people room to make mistakes and that’s not fair,” his father came again.

Chuma sighed, holding the phone away from his ears. He glanced idly through the ceiling-to-floor window of his office, located at the third floor of a four-storey building, into the busy Lagos streets. The traffic was still thick despite it being almost noon. Sucking his teeth, he brought the phone back to his ear.

“If that mistake cost me a million Naira, No.”

“Life is not only about money—”

“Which world do you live in, dad?”

“You need a woman—”

“Like you have Mama Uzo?” Mama Uzo was a widow and mother of five who was a close friend of Chief Obi’s. Everyone in the family knew they were more than friends and wondered why their father wouldn’t just admit it.

“Why bring her into this?”

Chuma sighed again. He had crossed that line into being disrespectful, but he hated his father telling him that he needed a woman. Chuma remembered vividly how his mother’s death had nearly destroyed his father who spent the next few years after that, having a drinking problem. Does he not remember what loving a woman had done to him?

“I apologise,” Chuma said, toying with his beard. “Dad, I needed to fire him because he was not good at his job.”

“I know, Chuma. But sometimes, patience and second chances are also okay, too,” Chief Obi’s voice was solemn over the phone. A brief pause ensued before he added, “I’m not saying you should re-hire him, I’m just saying burning bridges is not always what’s best.”

“Thanks, dad, I’ve heard what you’ve said.”

“Oh, Chuma, you are as stubborn as a mule. Just like your mother.” His father sounded amused. “I swear, sometimes when I hear you talk, it’s as if she never left us.” Chuma’s heart expanded at those words. He loved hearing stories about his mother.

“Okay, dad, I know you are retired but I’m not, and more money needs to be made,” he said, and heard his father laugh in response.

“Some things will never change,” Chief Obi replied. “All right son, enjoy the rest of your day.”

After hanging up, Chuma thought about his father’s words. He knew that his penchant for expecting perfection made him unforgiving and he had often fired people without giving them a second chance. Was that so bad? To expect people to put forward their best? To expect excellence? His mind drifted to Ifeoma, the slim canteen owner. His mind had been wandering to thoughts of her since the night before. He respected her excellence. With the limited funds that she had, she still managed to make her food taste exceptional. This morning, following his restless sleep, he had admitted to himself that apart from an odd feeling of protectiveness, he had also developed an admiration for her.

After leaving her restaurant last night, he had waited in his car for her to close the canteen, and then he had followed her discreetly to the bus stop where he parked and waited till she got on the bus. Never having trailed anyone in his life, he did not want to analyse his decision to do so last night. What he knew was that he could not leave her to walk to the bus stop alone at night. Her poise and independence struck a chord in him. The way she carried herself reminded him of a peacock. Head held high and determined. A crooked smile twisted the corner of his lips as he recalled the way she had thrust his money back at him. It was a first for him—a woman rejecting his money. Excitement bubbled up

within him at the thought of seeing her again during lunchtime.

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Glancing at the mirror as she dragged a brush through her soft curls, Ifeoma's eyes connected with her sister's in the mirror.

"When last did you speak to Nene?" Chioma asked her.

"I don't condone what she is doing," Ifeoma replied.

"But she is still your sister." Chioma shook her head.

"So what? Is having an affair with a married man something to be proud of?" Ifeoma turned towards Chioma. "I won't support it."

"I'm not saying that you should support what she is doing. All I am saying is you should be there for her."

"She knows where to find me when she wants to," Ifeoma said, turning back to the mirror.

"Not everyone can be like you, Ify; strong and independent—"

"Is that what you think this is? Wanting her to be like me?"

Ifeoma hated talking about Nene. She missed her, but she was also disappointed in her. She did not respect the fact that after leaving the control of their father, after watching what it did to their mother, Nene had only transferred that control to another man. A married politician who used her like a prostitute. He was in control of her life, never allowed her to have friends or work for herself. He had made Nene a modern-day sex slave.

"I am devastated that rather than work hard like we all do to break out of poverty, she would rather subject herself to…" Ifeoma's voice broke.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up, Ify … It's just that I miss her."

“You and Ngozi can always go and visit her if you want to, I just don’t want you to ever consider her lifestyle acceptable.” Ifeoma packed her thick hair into a bun. “I want you and Ngozi to complete your university education. I am working hard to make sure that you do. I never got a chance to.” Chioma nodded, tears glistening in her eyes.

Ifeoma put on an oversized red T-shirt over her baggy jeans. Satisfied that her chest looked as flat as she wanted it to be, she put some Vaseline on her lips. “Education is the key to open doors of opportunity,” Ifeoma continued, sitting down to put on her sneakers. “With it, you can make your own decisions and no man can dictate to you how to live your life.”

She was alone at home with Chioma. Ngozi their other sister had left early for a morning lecture because she took three buses to get to the university every day. It was already nine o’clock and Ifeoma needed to get to the canteen to prepare food so she could be ready for the lunch hour.

Chioma did not have any lectures until noon, so she decided to sit and chat with Ifeoma while she got ready.

“I admire you, Ify,” she said with a shaky voice. “You are always so strong.”

“Not always, Chioma,” Ifeoma muttered, as she pushed back images of the horrifying incident she had hidden deep in her mind. Sometimes, that memory tried to resurface and drag her into a pit of despair, but months of practice had made her able to fight it back. She walked towards Chioma and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“I admire you too, Chioma. We all went through a lot and survived,” Ifeoma said, picking up her handbag. “We all grew up in that terrible home and survived.

Chapter Five

Awka, Anambra State,

Nigeria, West Africa.

August 2007.

“I don’t know how you managed to convince Mr Chibundu to marry you instead of Chioma,” Ifeoma’s father muttered, nursing a bottle of beer. It was mid-afternoon on a Saturday, and he had already started with his drinking. Ifeoma ignored him. She was in the kitchen chopping the vegetables she’d fetched from the garden. She was getting ready to cook dinner. Her father perched on a wooden stool close by.

“What did you say to him that made him pick you over a real woman—”

“Chioma is not a woman, she’s still a child!” Ifeoma spat, annoyed with herself for still allowing her father to get to her.

“She looks like a woman. You, on the other hand, are just a stick.”

Ifeoma sighed. Why did he insist on talking to her with the intent of taunting her? She could never understand that.

“Did you give him money? That’s the only reason any man would want you,” he continued, taking another gulp from the bottle of beer. Ifeoma continued to chop the vegetables, determined not to respond.

“I’ve asked him, but he refused to tell me why he has agreed to marry you instead.” Her father seemed lost in his thoughts for a few seconds, and then his lips twisted. “I really don’t care which one of you he marries.” He stopped to take another swig from his bottle. “Now that someone has finally agreed to marry you, I have three more bride prices awaiting me.”

“Daddy, please stop with this bride price issue; we don’t only exist to get married,” Ifeoma said, her tone low.

She thought offering to marry Mr Chibundu in place of her sister would end this madness. But knowing her father, he was already looking for other suitors for her sisters. There would never be an end to this. Bitterness rose from her stomach to her chest, making her chop the vegetables with more force. There was no escape from this life, from her father’s greed and abuse. They were all stuck.

“Shut up, stupid girl. Women have no other purpose in this life other than to get married and bear sons.” Her father’s aggressive tone made Ifeoma realise that his alcohol had started to kick in. There was no longer any point in this discussion. Resolving to ignore him as he continued to rant about how their mother had failed him as a woman by not producing a son, Ifeoma let her mind drift off to a place where she heard nothing.

In an almost fugue state, Ifeoma allowed herself to go through the motions of preparing for her traditional wedding to Mr Chibundu. The wedding was scheduled to take place that weekend. Her mother was excited and had sewn her a dress to match the outfit Mr Chibundu would wear. Every time she thought about her wedding in a few days, Ifeoma felt nauseated. However, she tried to put on a brave facade so that her sisters wouldn’t suspect her anguish.

“Ify, I feel very bad that you are taking my place... It’s all my fault…” Chioma broke down sobbing as they lay in bed three days before the wedding.

“Don’t ever say that, it’s not your fault. I agreed to marry him,” she murmured, holding on to her sister.

“It’s my fault!” she disagreed vehemently. “I wish I would die.”

“My sister, never say that again.” Ifeoma took Chioma’s face in her hands and forced a smile.

“I am excited about marrying Mr Chibundu,” she lied. “At least I will finally have a husband. No one has ever even looked at me twice.” Chioma looked sceptical, but Ifeoma was not deterred. She wanted no feelings of responsibility to linger in Chioma’s mind about the situation.

“I’m too skinny for any other man anyway, at least, now, I will have a husband,” she joked and forced herself to laugh at her own dry humor. Chioma also laughed.

“You are not skinny, Ify, I love your breasts, they are perfect.” Ifeoma’s mouth fell open from shock. She always hid from her sisters when getting undressed because she never wanted them to know what she did to hide her breasts.

“That’s right, Ify, I have seen them,” Chioma continued, curving her hands over her chest to reinforce her point. “They are big and round like watermelons.” They soon both began to giggle uncontrollably trying to stifle the sound, so they didn’t wake their sisters.

The evening before the wedding, Ifeoma was alone at home because everyone else had gone to the market. They were buying foodstuffs for the ceremony. Although the bride price given to her father was ten thousand Naira, he had only offered them five hundred Naira to shop with for the ceremony. Ifeoma’s mother had supplemented with her own money to provide what was needed to cook a decent meal for intended guests. Left with the duty of cleaning up the small front yard planned as the venue, Ifeoma picked up a broom and began her task.

After using the broom to sweep the fallen leaves together, she strolled into the house in search of a dustpan. A sudden sound inside the sitting room startled her.

“Who is there?” she called as she made her way towards the source of the noise. Ifeoma exhaled with relief. It was only Mr Chibundu.

“My father is not here, he went to the market,” she said.

“I haven’t come to see him but my future bride,” he said, rising to his feet. There was a strange look in his eyes as he walked towards her. She backed away slowly.

“What is it, Mr Chibundu?” she asked, but her gut already knew what he wanted. She saw it in the darkening of his eyes and the way he licked his lips.

“I have come to taste my bride,” he murmured as he continued to advance towards her. Ifeoma took a step back again.

“We will be married tomorrow, there is no need for—”

“I can’t wait. There is no difference between today and tomorrow, is there?” He licked his lips again. “I can’t stop thinking about you. Your breasts. I want you now.”

Nausea churned Ifeoma’s stomach. “Mr Chibundu biko, tomorrow you can have me, let me have this last night—”

Before she could continue, he grabbed her and tried to force his mouth on hers. Ifeoma turned her head away. He was much shorter than her and he kept trying to pull her head down. Pushing him away, she made a dash for the door. He followed her swiftly and grabbed her by the waist.

“You don’t have to do this,” Ifeoma pleaded. But Mr Chibundu was not listening; his eyes shinned with determination as he dragged her to the centre of the sitting room. He tried to kiss her again and Ifeoma evaded his mouth.

Grunting with rage he slapped her hard across the face. “I have already paid the bride price, do as you are told!” he barked, grabbing the edge of her blouse and ripping it apart. He raised his hands to strike Ifeoma again and that was when her self-preservation kicked in. With all the force she could muster, she blocked his raised hand with her own and kneed him right in the centre of his groin.

“Ahhhhh!” he groaned loudly, falling to the ground. “I will kill you! You hear me, I will kill you!” He continued to hold onto his groin groaning with pain. He made a move to get up again but Ifeoma kicked him on his side.

“You will pay for this!” he wailed as he fell to the ground. High on adrenalin, Ifeoma raced out of the house as fast as her legs could carry her.

“It is all my fault,” she cried as she ran. “I showed him my body and now, it is all my fault.”

When her legs finally gave way from exhaustion, she crumbled to the floor wailing. “It is all my fault! If I didn’t show him my body, he wouldn’t have tried to rape me.”

She remained sprawled on the ground at the sidewalk of an unknown deserted road till dark. The chirping sounds of crickets and the distant rumble of faraway chatter from pedestrians at the far end of the road kept Ifeoma company. A plan began to form in her head as she lay in the dirt, holding her torn blouse together

with her hands and tears streaming down her face. There was no way in the world she could be married to that devil. There was no way she would allow her sisters to carry on with this life. She would run away with her sisters tonight. There had to be a better life for them somewhere.

Chapter Six

Sitting in the back corner of Eastern Delight, Chuma glanced eagerly at the serving counter. This corner was his favourite spot in the restaurant because it was hidden and far away from the door. From there he could work quietly while enjoying his lunch or dinner. Another reason why he liked that particular spot was thanks to the ceiling fan swirling directly above him. Fortunately for him, nobody else seemed interested in that seat because it was never occupied when he came in. Today, he'd not even bothered to bring his laptop. The way his heart was beating now, he knew that working would have been almost impossible.

Chuma's gut tightened in anticipation as he peered through the slightly opened door of the partition separating the serving counter from the rest of the canteen. He couldn't see anything. Groaning inwardly, he twisted his lips. He hated that damned partition. Where was Ifeoma? Although he had just arrived five minutes ago, he was eager to see her. Five other customers were already seated and enjoying their meals. A waitress was attending to a sixth customer who came in seconds before him. Disappointment washed over Chuma when he saw the other waitress strolling towards him. He always ignored the way she sashayed towards him and bent forward thrusting her breasts in his face when she served him.

"What can I get you, sir? There is egusi, Oha, and onubgu. Also, jollof rice, beef, fish and chicken," she said with a practiced smile. Chuma could not help the irritated look he threw at her. I can read the damned menu, he thought, irked. Where the hell is Ifeoma?

"Ifeoma!" he snapped. "Tell Ifeoma to come out and attend to me," he added, noting the surprised expression on the waitress's face. She did not move.

"Sir, I don't understand—"

"It's simple. I know Ifeoma is in there, so tell her to come out."

"Oh…oh, okay, sir." She scurried away.

Settling back in his seat, his heartbeat not bothering to slow down, Chuma

waited a few more seconds before he saw Ifeoma emerge from the serving counter and his heart stopped.

Last night he had not seen her clearly. Now he could see her in all her beautiful angelic perfection. Her face was the prettiest face he'd ever seen. She looked almost angelic. Ifeoma's complexion was very fair and reminded Chuma of smooth creamy butter. Engulfed in baggy clothes and an ugly apron with no makeup on, she looked like a teenager. Yet the beautiful brown fierce glare that was directed at him was not that of a teen but of an annoyed woman. He suddenly felt his chest tighten and his throat go dry. He took a sip of his bottled water to soothe his throat as she approached his table.

"Can I take your order, sir?" she asked, her tone low, her eyes flashing. He spotted an irritated red flush creep up her face. Chuma knew he'd infuriated her. Gazing into her soft brown eyes, which had an angry spark to it, he smiled.

"Chuma," he said. She ignored him and continued to glare at him, waiting for him to order. He took that opportunity to study her small oval-shaped face.

Thick perfectly arched eyebrows sat above her large expressive eyes. She had a small cute nose and full succulent lips. Her hair was partly covered with a scarf but Chuma could see from the tendrils hanging out that it was full and curly.

"How old are you?" he blurted out before he could stop himself.

"What?" Her eyes widened at his audacity.

"How old are you, Ifeoma?" he asked again because he could not seem to prevent his inexplicable curiosity about the woman standing in front of him.

"What do you want from me?" she snapped, her voice slightly raised, causing a few glances their way. Noticing them, she lowered her voice.

"Twenty-five," she answered his question. "So, what can I get for you, sir?"

Deciding this was neither the time nor place to satisfy his curiosity, he ordered egusi soup and beef. Watching her walk away from him, he pondered her question, what do you want from me? He honestly did not know. One thing he was absolutely sure of was that she had awakened in him an awareness he had never experienced in his life. There was no going back now. Not until he found

out what he wanted from her. He would only return later this evening, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, weeks and months after until he knew exactly what.

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Fuming, Ifeoma scooped soup into a ceramic bowl. She had seen Chuma arrive. Actually, she had spent the entire morning tied up in knots, anticipating his appearance. He'd intruded into her dreams last night, too. Carrying her in his strong arms over his wide shoulder as they ran from strange creatures together. She'd woken up sweating and aroused. And it had taken her a long time to drift back to sleep. It was bad enough that he was taking over her dreams; now he was here demanding her presence. No, demanding that she serve him. Like he was a King of some sort. Who the hell did he think he was?

Peering through the partition at Chuma, Ifeoma observed him scowl while he waited to be served, and she twisted her lips. He did look like a king. Like a warrior, tall, handsome and sturdy. Like someone I should stay away from, she mused. He would dominate her and she was determined that no man ever would. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman, she told herself.

"Na wa o, Mr Frown-face is something else; very rude," Oluchi who had just walked in, commented, bringing Ifeoma out of her reveries.

"I know," Ifeoma answered placing the bowl she held on a tray. "Very arrogant," she added.

"But you told me that he was nice yesterday, that he even smiled three times." Oluchi stuck out three fingers.

Ifeoma laughed. She'd probably spoken too soon. Glancing in his direction again, she noticed that his scowl remained unchanged.

"My dear, I guess his name will revert to Mr Frown-face." They both laughed.

After serving Chuma herself because she never wanted to be summoned by him ever again, Ifeoma continued with business as usual. However, she could not

prevent her mind and her eyes from wandering to him every now and then. Her breath shortened when she watched him walk up to the serving counter after his meal.

“Thanks for another delicious meal, Ify,” he murmured, handing her a thousand Naira note. “Ify?” When had she become “Ify” to him? What was going on here? He ignored her gasp. The look in Chuma’s eyes dared her to refuse the money he was holding out in front of her in the presence of her waitresses; who were both regarding them with astonished expressions.

Ifeoma accepted the money. He seemed satisfied by her acceptance.

“See you later this evening,” he said flashing her a brilliant smile. With that final statement, he turned and walked away, leaving her, Oluchi and Loretta gaping after him.

Chapter Seven

Ifeoma whistled as she cleaned the tables and rearranged the chairs. Another day had come to a successful end. She had made a profit of one thousand Naira. It was not much, but she had saved ten thousand Naira this month. And since she was paying back the loan for the restaurant in ten thousand a month installments, she considered this a good profit. Only about eight thousand more and she would be able to make the rent this month as well. Oh, but she needed to pay Oluchi and Loretta. She needed about twelve thousand more. Sighing, she shook those worries away. She was alive and could work. The money would come as long as she worked hard.

Thanks to the three thousand Naira that Mr Frown-face Chuma had paid since yesterday, she was a lot closer to her goal now. Thinking about this, she determined that she would no longer refuse his tips. If he insisted that she alone served him, then so be it. She would take the tips from that service. It was all fair and good. A smile played on her lips as she thought about him. He'd come in as late as he'd done yesterday and sat at his usual spot. Not waiting to have him demand her service, she attended to him herself. It had been more peaceful between them because he'd simply eaten and left.

Sweeping her eyes around the canteen, Ifeoma nodded in satisfaction. It was ready to be closed now. She was usually the last one to leave because she liked to tidy up and do the inventory herself. Pulling together the burglary proof metal gates and securing them with a large padlock, she continued to whistle. Just as she was about to turn around, Ifeoma noticed a shadow on the ground beside her and paused. Then with stealth and agility, she swung a hand around throwing a heavy punch at the intruder.

"Fuck!" she heard a male voice curse. She raised her hand to attack again, but he grabbed it. "Ify!" he yelled. "It's me, damn it!"

"What the hell—" she gasped. It was Chuma.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, breathing heavily from the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“Jesus,” Chuma muttered, cupping his face. “Here I am thinking I would look out for you. Not even considering I was the one in danger.”

Ifeoma burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she said reaching out to touch the part of his face where her fist had met his flesh.

“Did I hurt you?” She was still laughing.

“Yes, damn it,” he spat, and then joined her laughter.

When their laughter faded, a short silence ensued as they found themselves locked in each other’s gazes. The streetlights and the moonlight were their only sources of illumination, causing the atmosphere to feel suddenly warm and magical to Ifeoma.

“What are you doing here, Chuma?” she asked again, wiping away tears of laughter from her eyes.

“I don’t know, Ify,” he answered honestly. “I just wanted to make sure that you got home safely.”

“But why? You don’t even know me, I—”

“I’m aware of that fact, Ify, And I want to rectify it.”

“Why? What do you want from me?”

Ifeoma did not believe good men existed. They always wanted something. Except for Uncle Emeka, all men had ever done was to disappoint her.

“I don’t know,” was his answer. Another moment of silence followed. “I don’t know why, but I like you.”

Ifeoma’s heart thudded heavily within her rib cage. She felt a lump in her throat and had to swallow hard before she could speak again.

“I won’t sleep with you,” she murmured, lowering her long eyelashes. “I need your patronage, but I won’t sleep with you for that.”

A disarming smile spread across his luscious lips.

“I am not asking you to sleep with me, Ify.” He regarded her as if she was a puzzle he needed to fix. “I don’t know what it is about you, but I like being around you.”

Ifeoma had mixed feelings about his response. While she felt relieved that he wasn’t interested in having sex with her, it irked her all the same. He was just like all the other men who didn’t find her sexually attractive because she was skinny.

“Please let me drive you home,” he requested, interrupting her thoughts.

“Why?” she asked, then realising that she was beginning to sound like a broken record, she smiled.

“I think my honest answer to all the whys you will ask tonight is; I don’t know.” He sounded amused.

Taking a deep breath in and exhaling deeply, Ifeoma nodded her agreement. As she followed him into his jeep, she felt like she was falling into a deep pit.

“So, what part of the East are you from?” Chuma asked her as soon as she settled in the front seat.

“Awka,” she replied. Chuma started the car engine and pulled out of the parking spot.

“You?” Ifeoma asked, pointing the directions leading to her home with her finger.

“Abia state, but I grew up in Enugu.” He glanced sideways at her.

“I went to DMGS at Onitsha, so I know Awka quite well.”

“Ah, DMGS! People from that secondary school are so annoyingly proud of that school… it’s almost like a cult!”

Chuma threw his head back and laughed. It was true. His grandfather and father had attended DMGS and made sure that both he and his twin had attended too.

He told her that and she smiled.

“So, you are a twin, do you look alike?” Chuma shook his head. “No, he is yellow pawpaw like you,” he replied, referring to their fair complexion.

“Do you have any sisters or brothers?” He noticed her hesitation.

“Three sisters,” she answered after a few seconds. “No brother.”

“Are your parents in Lagos or do they still live in Awka?”

“They are dead,” she replied, turning her face towards the window. A clear sign to him that she did not want to continue the conversation.

“Sorry,” he murmured, and decided not to push it any further. There was obviously some painful history there. The silence that followed was strained.

“Do you have any sisters?” She turned back towards him after a few minutes of silence.

“Yes,” he answered. “Ada, the baby of the house. She hates being called that; but, no matter how old she gets, she is our baby.” He chuckled, and she smiled. The atmosphere lightened again.

They continued in silence only broken by Ifeoma’s directions. The further he drove, the more Chuma realised that she lived in the slums and quite far away from the canteen. A sense of admiration struck him about her again. Did she have to take many buses to get to work? His mind spun with thoughts about ways to make life easier for her. He could buy a small car for her and teach her how to drive. Or maybe hire a driver to take her around.

“Turn left and park at the end of the road please,” her soft voice brought him back from his thoughts. He did as she directed.

Killing the engine, he looked at the building where she lived. It was unfinished and unpainted. The street was lined with similar dilapidated houses. With no electricity, the noise of generators disturbed the silence of the night. It was the worst housing he’d ever seen. A fierce protectiveness sprung within him.

“I’ll walk you to the—”

“No,” she refused sharply. The look she gave him, told him not to fight her on this. He nodded.

“Thank you… Chuma.” Her voice sounded cracked.

“See you tomorrow,” he said in a low tone. She gave him a crooked smile and got down from the jeep. Chuma waited in the jeep till she got into her building before driving away.

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That was the beginning of their unlikely friendship. For the next two weeks, Chuma spent his evenings in the canteen with Ifeoma. He went in late so that he could drop her off at home at the end of the day. She still refused to allow him to pick her up in the mornings, just as she refused any other offer of help to arrange her transportation to work. It infuriated and impressed him at the same time.

“I’ve been curious to know how you stumbled upon my humble canteen,” Ifeoma commented one night as they sat eating in the canteen. They were the only ones there because the waitresses had long gone, and he’d stayed back to drive her home.

“After a business trip, I was very hungry, and I was stuck in traffic,” he answered, taking a spoonful of Oha soup. Ifeoma waited while he swallowed. Her eyes following the movement of his throat and the bob of his Adam's apple. A sudden need to kiss his Adam's apple overwhelmed her. She shifted her eyes away from the source of her temptation. He appeared oblivious to her plight. “So, I saw your sign Eastern Delight,” he continued. “I’m usually picky about where I eat, but I had no choice. I sent the company driver in to buy soup to take away.” Ifeoma suddenly remembered the strange man in a hurry to buy food a few months ago.

“Ify, I swear, after eating the onubgu soup, it felt like I had died and gone to heaven.” Heat warmed her cheeks. Chuma noticed the colouring of her face. His throat tightened.

“Have you ever thought about expanding?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I’m trying to stay out of debt and pay my loans first,” she murmured.

“Let me help you—”

“No,” she sighed. “Stop asking, Chuma, the answer is still no.”

“Why won’t you let me? I don’t want anything back in return; I’ll even give you a loan if you insist.”

“No.” Her tone was sharp now. “Drop this conversation please.”

They scowled at each other for a few seconds.

“Okay, but don’t expect me to stop asking,” Chuma muttered, breaking the silence.

They resumed their meal in silence. “I want to take you out this Saturday,” Chuma broke the silence again. Ifeoma held her breath, waiting for him to continue.

“I have a boat in Lagos Marina. I love to sail on Saturday sometimes.” Still speechless, Ifeoma dared not say anything, dared not move.

“The weather appears promising, no rain. We can have—”

“I have to work on Saturday … I work on Saturdays, remember?” Her voice suddenly returned, cutting him off. She could not allow him to continue, to paint a picture in her mind. It was hard enough not to reach out across the table and touch him. Keeping her desire for him in check was torture. She did not need him painting this perfect fairy-tale picture in her head. Especially when it was obvious that he wasn’t attracted to her. She was just a hobby to him. A problem to fix. Something interesting to occupy his bored rich mind. No, she won’t encourage this.

Chuma’s dark eyes flashed with anger. He took in a deep breath as if trying to calm himself. He didn’t succeed.

“I know you work Saturdays, damn it.” His voice came out harshly. “I know you

worked last Saturday, and the Saturday before that and Sundays too."

Taking a gulp of water as if he needed that to finally calm down, he swallowed slowly. "I just want you to have one Saturday off. Just one. And relax. Stop fighting the world!"

Ifeoma's pulse jerked at the intensity she saw in his eyes. This was all too much. She felt like she was drowning. To spend a whole Saturday relaxing on a boat with him? How could she do that and not fall at his feet? Or beg him never to leave her? No, she couldn't. He made her weak, she had to fight him, preserve herself. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman.

"Don't you have any girlfriends to go sailing with?" She didn't want to hear the answer to the question. But she wanted his answer to torture her. Surely, he had other women he would rather take on a boat with him.

"No," was his simple reply. After moments, he dropped another bombshell. "I can never take anyone I'm sleeping with into that boat." He looked repulsed at that possibility.

"It's my haven. You'd be the first woman apart from my sister to ever step foot on that boat … that is if you say yes."

That answer did not please Ifeoma. Another statement confirming that he was not in any way attracted to her. He could take her on that boat because he didn't see her as a woman he'd sleep with. He'd pretty much established he regarded her as his sister.

A lump wedged in her throat. Ifeoma nodded. "Okay," she conceded. Chuma paused, and then broke into a disarming smile. She looked away. I'm not my mother; I am a strong woman.

There was no point in fighting it. Even if she was falling deeply for him, he had zero attraction for her. Why not just enjoy his friendship that she'd come to depend on? His financial advice on saving money had helped her for the past two weeks. She'd not even realised just how much money she had been wasting on little things until he had pointed them out.

"Fantastic, Ify, it will be fun. There's something about sailing that relaxes me. I'm sure you will love it too." Chuma said, his voice laced with excitement.

“Can your sisters help with the restaurant? I don’t want you losing any money because of me,” he asked, but before waiting for a reply, he continued, “I could give you the equivalent of what you make if they can’t.”

“Chuma, again, stop with wanting to give me money.”

“Sorry, it’s a force of habit. It’s just that—”

“My sisters can cover for me on Saturday. I won’t lose any money.” He seemed pleased with her reply. They consumed the rest of the meal in amicable silence.

Chapter Eight

Wiping the sweat from his face with a handkerchief, Chuma grimaced. This was his third miss. He had served the ball to Adaora who had returned the serve expertly. It was Saturday morning and they were playing table tennis at Lagos Country Club.

“Big bro, your game is a little off today, where is your brain at?” she teased.

“My game is fine, thanks,” he replied with a smile. “I’m just letting you win.”

“Don’t do me any favours. I can beat you with my eyes closed,” she taunted. Chuma laughed. Adaora was good at table tennis, but he was the best. His game was a little off because he was excited about his boat trip with Ifeoma later that afternoon.

“Be talking that rubbish until I defeat you mercilessly.”

“All I hear are words, give me action!”

Chuma served the ball again and she returned it quickly. The ball was in play until she smashed again. He missed it. Damn, he thought, my game is really off.

“What’s up, Chuma?” This time, Adaora sounded worried.

“Nothing,” he answered. She looked at him sceptically.

“Okay, this friend of mine, she—”

“She?” Adaora looked even more dumbfounded. Chuma ignored her surprised gasp.

“Yes, she,” he admitted.

This was a first for him. He was never friends with women. The way he could relax and talk with Ifeoma for hours without trying to be someone other than himself was new to him. Never had he been able to do that with anyone else

besides his family. He was always on guard, putting up a façade to suppress his true nature —obsessive, controlling and brutal. Ifeoma had a way of making him relax. He genuinely enjoyed her company.

“I want to help her get out of some financial difficulties she’s been having, but she won’t let me help her. She won’t let me give her any money or buy her anything,” Chuma continued. They had abandoned the game and made their way to the shade for refreshments by this time.

“I’m trying very hard not to take over her life in the way that I want to, but I can’t keep watching her struggle.” He paused, his gaze skimming across the well-maintained lawn in front of them. There were only a few other people present at the terrace where they sat. It was still early in the morning and Chuma knew more people would trickle in as the day progressed. He loved it here, especially in the early mornings. The greenery and the vast spacious land, people jogging and cycling across the long track, it reminded him that Lagos wasn’t always about hustle and bustle. Sometimes people liked to take a moment to chill, do things other than go to work. “How do I give her money without you know, appearing to be an arrogant jackass?”

Adaora pondered the question for a few seconds. “But you are an arrogant jackass,” she muttered.

“Louder sis, I did not hear you.” Chuma shoved her playfully. They laughed and then a short period of silence followed. Adaora glanced sideways at Chuma.

“Are you sleeping with her?” she asked.

“Being nosey, are we?” Chuma raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t help it; you have never talked about any of your girlfriends.”

“She is not my girlfriend,” Chuma replied quickly.

“Plot thickens, hasty to deny she is your girlfriend but here we are talking about her, hmmm…”

“Ada, just answer me,” Chuma snapped. Adaora giggled.

“My answer is, don’t. It is always rude to impose your assistance on anyone.”

Chuma contemplated what Adaora had just said. He knew she was right, but it was hard for him. His obsessive nature was difficult to suppress. Especially because he had come to care for Ifeoma so much. She was now like family to him.

“Man, this must be killing you,” Adaora sounded amused. “Mister Control Everything is fighting his natural instincts.”

Chuma sighed. Adaora had no idea how much. Many times, he had been on the verge of contacting the firm’s financial investigator to find out who Ifeoma’s creditors were so that he could pay off all her loans. He’d been able to talk himself out of doing so each time. That would destroy their friendship and he knew it.

Every time he dropped her off at home, he found himself fighting the urge to drag her out of there and put her up in a penthouse apartment. She had told him about her sister, Nene. And although he knew that the situations were different because he wasn’t sleeping with Ifeoma, Chuma understood her misgivings about accepting that kind of help from him. Nevertheless, it did not prevent him from feeling frustrated about her refusal to accept his help. For the first time in his life, he wanted to give a woman money and was disappointed in her refusal to accept it. Women never refused his money.

“This non-girlfriend must be really special to you,” Adaora said, bringing him back from his roving thoughts.

“She is, she really is.” He didn’t bother to deny it. Ifeoma was like a breath of fresh air to him.

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“I can’t believe Ifeoma is going on a date with Mr Frown-face,” Chioma muttered to Nene who was visiting their apartment for the first time in months. Since Nene moved out, it had become rare for all her sisters to be gathered together. Today was one of those rare occasions and Ifeoma was happy, even though she still did not accept Nene’s lifestyle. Apparently, Chioma had invited

her over to help get Ifeoma ready for the boat trip with Chuma. Nene was the fashion expert in the family and her sisters usually turned to her for makeup tips and fashion advice.

It was Saturday morning, and they were gathered in the bedroom they shared. All her sisters could talk about was her outing with Chuma. They'd woken up very early, excited, and when Nene had walked in, it dawned on Ifeoma just how excited they all were.

"It's not a date," Ifeoma responded for the hundredth time.

"What do you call sailing on a boat with him, then? A boat!" Chioma cried, refusing to be deterred.

"We are just friends; he just wants me to relax."

"Ify, please what are you going to wear?" Nene asked, not bothering to hide her disbelief that Ifeoma was in denial.

"You can't strap down your chest this time," she added.

Ifeoma gasped. Nene snickered in response.

"Yeah, we all know about your watermelon boobs," Nene said with a smirk. They all laughed.

"Just a T-shirt and jeans. As I said, it is not a date," Ifeoma said in response to Nene's question.

"Over my dead body!" Nene exclaimed. She opened the travel bag swung across her shoulders and brought out a few multi-coloured summer dresses and three sandals.

"No, I can't wear those," Ifeoma said, shaking her head. "Is it General Okonkwo that bought the clothes for you?"

Nene shook her head. "Ify, that's not the point here. The point is that you have to knock that Mr Frown-face to his knees on your date."

"It is not a date," Ifeoma cried. Her sisters rolled their eyes in unison.

“Please, Ify, do this for us,” Nene pleaded. “Please, for once don’t be yourself, let us dream for you, please…” Her voice broke at the last word.

Looking at her three sisters, Ifeoma understood what they were feeling. They wanted to believe that she really was going on a fairy-tale boat trip with a handsome rich man who adored her. They wanted to hope that it could also happen to them. She couldn’t let them down.

“Okay, Nene, make me over, but nothing too extraordinary. I don’t want to look like an ashawo.”

“Trust me, you can never look like an ashawo,” Ngozi who was usually silent mumbled, causing them to turn to her and then burst into laughter.

With the radio on, Nene worked on Ifeoma’s hair, curling it with flexible rollers. Ifeoma went to try out different dresses for her sisters to choose from with the rollers still in her hair.

“That one is too long,” Nene said after she came out from the bathroom with a blue ankle length summer dress.

“You have lovely legs, Ify, why do you always want to hide them?” It was Chioma this time.

“Okay, let me try on another one,” Ifeoma said. She had worn this one first hoping that her sisters would choose it. The dress she knew would look better on her was the multicolored summer dress that hit her above the knees. It was slightly tighter around the chest and made her breasts more prominent. She worried Chuma would think she was trying to get his attention. Which she wasn’t. Was she?

As she stepped out wearing the dress, there was complete silence in the room. All three of her sisters gazed at her with strange expressions on their faces.

“What is it?” she asked, puzzled.

“Oh, Ify, you are beautiful!” Nene exclaimed, placing a hand on her chest. Warmth rushed to Ifeoma’s cheeks.

“I’m not,” she disagreed. An automatic response she could not control.

“Ify, how can you not see that you resemble Tyra Banks?” Chioma, who was fascinated with Tyra Banks, said.

“I do not, I’m skinny and—”

“Stop, Ify. I know dad called you skinny all the time, but you are not skinny!” Ngozi’s voice, which was usually soft and rarely heard, boomed, startling everyone else into silence. “You are tall, slim and a knockout. With gorgeous breasts, a firm tight ass and long legs.”

Still silence.

“I don’t want you to ever think otherwise. Especially on your date with Mr Frown-face.”

Ngozi looked drained after that outburst as if it had taken so much effort to get those words out.

Ifeoma swallowed the words, “it is not a date”. There was no point in saying that anymore. She would give her sisters this dream. She relaxed and allowed her sisters to fix her up. They talked and laughed while they did her hair and makeup; reminding Ifeoma of old times. Of a time before Nene decided to become the kept mistress of a married man. She wished she could bring the family back together again. Actually, if she wanted to wish, she wished they had never grown up in their home.

Ifeoma sometimes wondered about their mother. How had she coped with all of them gone? How was she coping now? Was she even still alive? Had their father finally destroyed her? Shaking those sad thoughts from her mind, she focused on the new excitement she had brought her sisters by agreeing to this outing with Chuma. She decided to have fun. Even if it was not a real date.

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Soft soul music floated through the car’s radio speakers as Chuma drove his jeep to pick Ifeoma up. He was dressed in a casual grey T-shirt and a pair of khaki

shorts. A face cap covered his head and Ray-ban sunglasses shielded his eyes from the sun. He'd put on Nike sneakers because he hated going barefoot on the boat. Apart from being obsessively neat, he also had a phobia of germs.

He'd ordered grilled fish and various wine choices for this boat trip. He wanted Ifeoma to relax and enjoy the water as much as possible. Perhaps he would treat her to one of his fantastic massages. Today, she won't be a woman struggling to pay bills; she would just be a woman with no cares in the world. If she wouldn't let him solve her financial problems for her, he resolved to at least pamper her today.

Chuma parked at the end of her street and dialled Ifeoma's number. She used a basic mobile phone with no connections to the Internet or data functions. His attempt to suggest changing her phone fell on deaf ears. He'd purchased a Blackberry phone for her but it was in his apartment collecting dust because she wouldn't accept it. Ifeoma still didn't want him coming into her apartment. He suspected she was somewhat embarrassed by it, but the reason she gave him was that she didn't want to give her sisters the wrong impression. Smiling, he recalled that conversation which had occurred four nights ago after dropping her at home.

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"Can I come up and say hello to your sisters?" Chuma asked.

"Why?" she responded, surprised.

"Well, because I see them peering through the window."

Ifeoma glanced at the windows of her flat. The curtains suddenly closed at that same moment.

"No," she replied.

"Why not?"

“I don’t want them getting the wrong impression.”

“What impression?”

“I don’t want them to think you are my… you know… sugar daddy or something,” she said.

“What? Ifeoma Okafor, I may be eight years older than you, but I certainly don’t look like a sugar daddy!”

She laughed. He relished the sound of her laughter.

“Keep telling yourself that,” she teased, sticking out her tongue playfully at him before climbing out of the car. A warm sensation settled in his chest.

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Waiting eagerly for her to come out of her apartment, Chuma stood by the jeep and glanced around. There was a garbage pile in front of every house in the neighbourhood, including Ifeoma’s building. Although he was parked slightly far from the entrance of her apartment building, wafts of rancid decay from the garbage piles floated into his nostrils propelled by the breeze from nearby trees. He was sure the local government council rarely attended to refuse disposal in this part of Lagos and this infuriated him. He made a mental note to speak to the local government chairman who was a friend of his, to ensure the refuse disposal in this area was top priority in the coming week. He wished he could find the landlord of the horrible building and beat him to a pulp. It should be illegal to rent apartments like this, he thought. Then it dawned on him what his next project to invest in should be. Real estate with affordably priced rental apartments for people like Ifeoma who worked hard but didn’t make enough.

Chuma reached for his phone ready to dial Ifeoma’s number again when he saw her emerging from the house. His heart lurched forcefully in his chest and his stomach flipped at the sight of her approaching him. As she walked closer to him, he felt his breathing pause and a sudden tightening of his chest and shorts. His eyes roamed over her greedily when she paused in front of him with a

hesitant smile.

Dressed in a bright floral summer dress and silver sandals, she looked like a tall drink of water offered to a thirsty man stranded in a desert. His eyes dropped to her chest, her dress revealed a bit of cleavage. And what a gorgeous cleavage it was. Where had that chest come from? He tried not to stare, but couldn't help himself. A flow of warm blood rushed to his groin, hardening it painfully. His gaze dropped further to her legs exposed by the above-the-knee dress. Long firm legs. He had never been a 'leg' person, but suddenly, images of those long legs wrapped around his waist took over his brain.

Look at her face, his brain screamed. Look at her face, asshole!

But as his eyes traveled back to her face, it stopped on her breasts again.

Wow, just wow! He could see the outline of her nipples pressing against the thin fabric of her dress. His throat went dry with an overwhelming need to fasten his mouth on them.

How had she managed to keep all of that hidden from him? Feeling annoyed with himself for the lustful thoughts in his mind, Chuma's gaze jumped quickly to her eyes and noted the same fear he had seen in her eyes the first time he had met her.

Awareness dawned on him. She doesn't want me to notice her as a desirable woman. It occurred to him that his reaction to her changed appearance frightened her. Chuma's heart raced like a speedboat and his groin was on fire with lust as he berated himself for his perusal of Ifeoma's body. But damn, he could not help himself. She looked incredibly beautiful and drop-dead sexy. Her thick black hair was swept to the side with curly tendrils falling down the side of her face and her full lips coated with red lipstick. He wanted to kiss those lips so badly, wanted to kiss her neck, breasts, all over her smooth buttery skin.

"Maybe this is a bad idea," she whispered, shattering his lustful fog. Her tone sounded uncertain, her cheeks looked flushed. He didn't blame her; he'd practically accosted her with his eyes.

"Don't be silly, Ify." His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears. Then, deciding to be honest, he added, "you look stunning, Ify. I'm just not used to seeing you all dressed up." That sounded lame to him, but he had to say

something to break the tension. Shoving his hands into his pocket to hide his blatant arousal and to prevent himself from pulling her into his arms, Chuma managed a stiff smile.

“Let’s head off and enjoy the sunshine, Ify,” She seemed to relax. He, on the other hand, was in no way relaxed.

Chapter Nine

The soothing music by Anita Baker coming from the car radio did nothing to calm Ifeoma's nerves as she sat in the front seat beside Chuma. She cast a quick glance his way and felt her stomach clench. He sat rigidly straight; his eyes focused on the road ahead, his grip on the steering wheel tight. The silence was thick. She'd noticed the way that he had looked at her. It had frightened and excited her at the same time. Her changed appearance had pushed his buttons. She was not sure yet if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Another subtle glance at Chuma's scowling face made her shiver inside. He did not look pleased.

Ifeoma searched her mind trying to come up with something clever to say. She wanted to break the tension she had created, but, having never been in this position before, nothing clever came to mind. She looked at Chuma again. His T-shirt emphasised his muscular chest and arms. His sunglasses and cap gave him an unruffled look. However, she knew he wasn't calm. Something in the air had shifted between them. Her eyes dropped to his muscular thighs and legs exposed by his shorts. The sparse hairs scattered on them made him look potent and masculine. Propelled by an unexplainable force, Ifeoma tracked her eyes further upwards. Her gaze fixated on the impressive bulge in his shorts. Moisture pooled between her legs and she squirmed in her seat. Chuma's attention temporarily strayed from the road and captured her movement.

"Ify," he growled. It sounded like a warning.

Her pulse fibrillating helplessly, Ifeoma turned her head towards the window beside her.

They reached their destination minutes later. The short drive was filled with tension, and Ifeoma was somewhat relieved to escape being confined in the car with Chuma. She breathed in the fresh air and sighed. I do need this break, she thought. It was windy and Ifeoma could feel her hair scattering about her face.

"I should have brought a scarf," she mentioned, trying to keep her hair still with her hands.

“No, it looks beautiful this way,” Chuma said before he could stop himself. Heat warmed her cheeks, and she dropped her hands.

“You look beautiful, Ify,” he said again. This time, his voice so low that she barely heard him. Blushing furiously, Ifeoma cursed her light skin because she knew it would be evident how his praise affected her. She suppressed her automatic response of denial to any compliment about her looks and replied, “thanks, Chuma…. And you look good too.”

Their eyes met and held. She looked away first.

“So where is the boat?” she questioned, following his lead. There were a few boats at the dock. Chuma pointed to a white medium sized sailboat named Angelina— after his mother.

“She is gorgeous, Chuma,” Ifeoma remarked, smiling. She had never been on a boat. He smiled back. Ifeoma could tell that he was proud of the boat.

They walked together towards the docks. Chuma helped Ifeoma climb into the boat, holding her waist steady from behind. The wind chose that moment to blow her dress upwards and expose her backside. Mortified because she knew he was right behind her, Ifeoma silently cursed her sisters for forcing her to wear a thong. Apart from the vein at the side of his head that had become more prominent, there was no sign from his expression that he’d noticed.

An excited squeal escaped Ifeoma’s lips as soon as the boat started moving. She lay on a recliner directing her gaze at the serene waters surrounding them. “This is fantastic!” she exclaimed.

Chuma was still setting the sails. “Yes, it is,” he replied.

She was under the shade because her fair skin always burnt after prolonged exposure to the sun.

“How long have you owned this?” she asked Chuma when he eventually joined her after getting the boat sailing.

“Three years,” he replied settling on the recliner beside her.

“Must have cost a fortune.”

“Yes, it cost a bit to buy, it also costs a bit to maintain,” Chuma stated dryly.

“Which kind of wine do you drink?” he asked her. He had just opened a mini cooler containing several bottles of wine immersed in ice. Ifeoma laughed.

“That’s a question for rich people,” she teased, and Chuma smiled.

“I haven’t drunk in a long time. When I was in university, I tasted red wine at a party,” Ifeoma answered. Interested in this story because she rarely talked about her past, Chuma leaned forward.

“Did you attend the party with a boyfriend?” The question seemed innocent enough although she heard a slight edge in his tone.

“Nope, I have never had a boyfriend. Too busy struggling to survive to have one,” was her reply.

That response tugged at Chuma’s heart. Her background was so different from his. Yet she came out strong, confident and beautiful inside and out.

“I’ll have that one, looks like it would taste nice.” Ifeoma pointed to a bottle of Moscato. Chuma opened the bottle and filled her glass. She took a sip and smiled. “I was right.”

Chuma’s groin tightened. He’d been trying so hard not to be overwhelmed by his sudden physical attraction to Ifeoma. He’d caught a glimpse of her firm bottom as they climbed into the boat and he’d clenched his hands tightly to stop himself from reaching out to touch it. He poured himself a glass of scotch and took a quick gulp. Looking at her laying there, on his boat, relaxed and sipping wine, Chuma suddenly became angry with himself. He couldn’t relax because all he could think about was running his hands over her buttery smooth skin. His brain was flooded with images of him touching her in non-friendly ways. Ways that would make the devil blush.

What the hell is wrong with me? he thought, disgusted with himself. How can I turn such a lovely friendship into something dirty? He scrubbed his face with his palm. Yes, for the first time Ify has shown some skin, handle it like a mature man, damn it, he chided himself. But his body did not listen. Watching her as she focused on the serene waters, he was intensely aware of her. He’d never been so physically aware of any woman in his life. Ifeoma turned her head towards him

and smiled. An innocent sweet smile, oblivious to his inner turmoil.

“I see what you mean, Chuma,” she remarked. “There is something about sailing that is very relaxing and peaceful.”

At that moment, he could have laughed at himself. Only it wasn’t funny. He had brought her here hoping they would both relax. Since he found her company soothing, he’d assumed they could share his haven. Never had he imagined an intense bout of lust would hit him or that under her baggy clothes lay the body of a goddess. Now he was more wound tighter than ever. At least, she was relaxed. Half his plan had worked.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, rising to get the grilled fish he’d brought. He needed to put some distance between them, clear his head. “I got some spiced grilled fish.”

She squealed in delight. “I love grilled fish, Chuma, you are the best!”

His heart stopped. Reality hit him.

Ifeoma was his karma. This was his karma for the horrible ways he had treated women. For the first time in his life, he wanted a woman so much that he physically ached, but he would do nothing about it. She was too good for him. His track record with women was atrocious. He did not want to ruin Ifeoma’s life. She was so refreshingly genuine and she had personal battles to fight. He couldn’t add his lust to her problems. Resolving to keep his desire for her in check, Chuma walked back to her with the tray of grilled fish. The excitement that shone in her eyes filled his soul with longing. He would rather die with unrequited lust than hurt her.

The fish was large, so he cut it in half, placing half on a plate and handing it to her. He took the other half and sat down. They settled to eat in silence.

“Are you angry with me?” Ifeoma asked suddenly.

Her question surprised him. “What? Why?”

“Well, you haven’t said much to me and you keep avoiding eye contact.”

Chuma wanted to hit himself for not controlling himself better.

“I’m not angry with you, Ify,” he answered softly. Wanting to assure her, he reached for her hand. Touching her sent a jolt of awareness to his groin, making him adjust his position. “I just have a lot on my mind,” he said, lifting his hands swiftly from hers.

Ifeoma noticed the speedy removal of his hand from hers.

“I did this for my sisters, you know,” Ifeoma muttered, her ego stung. He did not have to make it obvious touching her repulsed him.

“Did what?”

“All of this,” she waved her hand over her clothes and hair. “They wanted me to look nice today.” Ifeoma hesitated, annoyance furrowing her forehead. “I did not do this to entice you, believe me.”

Chuma could not help the laughter that erupted from his belly.

“I know you didn’t, Ifeoma, trust me, I know.”

Chuma had been around women whose intent it was to seduce him. He knew how they operated. No, Ifeoma had not set out to seduce him. But she’d unwittingly awakened his lust. He could not blame her for that, only himself for allowing his penis to take over his brain. He had to protect her from himself.

“Ify, I’m an ass, always have been.” His voice was solemn. “Meeting you has made me want to be better. I admire you so much.”

Ifeoma’s heart melted. She looked away from the intensity in his eyes. What could she say to that? How could she fight her attraction to him? Yes, she had told him she didn’t want to entice him, and it was true in a sense, but a part of her wanted him to really see her. She’d felt a sense of power when she’d rendered him speechless by her transformed appearance. There was a thrill that rushed through her veins at his perusal. It made her feel desirable and feminine for the first time in her life. It was a heady feeling.

“You are not an ass, Chuma,” Ifeoma rebutted. “I admire you too.” He was the first man ever to offer her assistance without asking her for anything in return.

“You don’t know me well enough, Ify,” he disagreed, shaking his head.

“I know enough about you to confidently say that you are a kind and good man.”

Chuma wanted to refute her statement again because he knew he wasn’t kind and good. He only wanted to be that way around her. She brought out the best in him. However, he let her words wash over him and hoped that she would always be able to see him that way. This made him even more determined to keep his hands off her. He did not want to turn her into another one of his bitter exes. She did not deserve to suffer that fate just because he didn’t know how to have healthy relationships.

The two of them sat in silence for a while, enjoying the breeze and the smooth movement of the boat as it glided above the water. Glancing sideways at Ifeoma as she lay relaxed in the recliner, Chuma felt satisfied that he’d convinced her to come. She looked so peaceful and fragile with her body languid and relaxed. Yet he knew that she was tough and resilient.

“Do you miss Awka?” he asked her, wanting to know more about her past.

“Not much, we grew up in a horrible home,” Ifeoma answered dryly.

Chuma became very still. He wanted to soak up any information she shared about herself. He suspected that she had a difficult past, and had on more than one occasion dissuaded himself from doing a background check on her. He cherished their friendship and did not want to violate her privacy. Still, it was difficult for him to control his obsessive need to know everything about her.

“My father was a raging alcoholic who hated that he had no male children,” Ifeoma said this with a faraway and sad look in her eyes. Chuma’s chest tightened. He wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her, but he didn’t move because he didn’t want to interrupt her flow of words.

“He abused me and my sisters and my mother emotionally. He considered us a curse just because we are females.” Ifeoma paused again as if the memories were too difficult.

“Did he ... beat you, hurt you?” Chuma asked hesitantly, worried about his response if the answer was yes. He knew it would cause uncontrollable fury to rise within him.

“No, never us, but he hit my mother many times,” she replied, making him

exhale with relief. The thought of anyone hitting Ifeoma sent him into a blinding rage.

“Chuma, my mother is … was weak, she loved my father and defended him after all the horrible things he did and said to us.”

Sensing that she had more to say, Chuma remained silent.

“I hate my mother for being so in love with my father that it made her weak. Unable to stand up to him.” She was breathing faster now. “I hate being female, I dress in baggy clothes, never make up, strap down my breasts because anything that makes me female, I consider it a weakness.”

Her revelation made him quake inwardly. Now he understood the sudden change in her appearance.

“I wanted my father to love me, to respect me, but he never did. He always made sure that we knew how useless we were to him. Especially me.”

“Why especially you?”

“Well, because…” She paused as if it was too difficult to get out. He waited patiently. “He believed I couldn’t even bring him a bride price because I am… you know…”

Chuma shook his head. He honestly did not know.

“Too thin. No man ever … noticed me, wanted me.”

He held himself rigidly, absorbing this information. His head spun with multiple emotions, predominantly anger. Anger that a father would reduce the self-esteem of his own daughter so low as to make her hate her own femininity. If her father weren’t already dead, he would have liked to visit him and teach him a lesson himself. He was beginning to understand Ifeoma a bit more. Her desire to be independent, her lack of effort in her appearance.

“I’m sorry you had to endure that. I’m sorry that your father did not see how completely strong and beautiful you are,” he said, his voice raspy with emotion. “I never want you to doubt this. You are the most beautiful woman I have laid my eyes on. Your beauty goes beyond being skin deep.”

Ifeoma's heart thudded at the ferocity of his tone. Swallowing her typical denial, she whispered, "thanks for saying that, Chuma." She settled back in her seat and shortly after, drifted off to sleep. Chuma, watching her while she slept, resolved to protect her from every adversity. Even himself.

They sailed back smoothly and arrived at the marina around five thirty in the evening. By the time they got to the carpark, it was deserted. Side by side, they walked silently to the jeep parked under the shade created by branches of tall palm trees. Ifeoma suddenly halted beside the jeep, forcing Chuma to stop as well.

"Thanks for forcing me to take today off," she murmured, a soft smile curving her lips. "I enjoyed being with you today, the conversation, food, wine and the fact that I could forget all my worries."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. You should take more time off," Chuma replied, smiling back at her. She remained standing there, as if immobilised. With the wind scattering her hair over her face, her creamy skin glowing in the illumination provided by the setting sun and the flush on her face, she looked almost ethereal. Chuma stood beside her and inhaled deeply.

"I want to take care of you," he said, his voice deep and low. Goosebumps appeared all over her skin. Her throat tightened with emotion.

"You have… today was fantastic."

"I want to do more," he insisted.

"You have done more than I could ask for," she whispered. And before she could stop herself, she placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

Chuma was startled by the sudden physical contact. Ifeoma appeared shocked by her own impulsivity. Slowly, she turned towards him so that they were facing each other. He could see the pulse at the base of her neck pounding. It matched the rapid pounding of his own heart. She kissed his other cheek and retreated, giving him a nervous smile. Chuma froze, not moving, not trusting himself to move.

Rapid emotions filtered through her large expressive eyes; surprise, fear, panic. And then he saw desire. Placing her palms on his chest, Ifeoma touched her lips

to his. A very soft touch and then retreated again. Chuma tried to keep still, his body was ablaze with want, but he couldn't move, didn't want to. It was killing him, but he didn't want to do anything to drive this moment along. He waited, his heart fluttering at a dangerous rate, his body alert and poised. She repeated the kiss, this time flickering her tongue over his lips. This pushed Chuma over an invisible edge, and with a deep groan, he captured her mouth with his.

Startled by the surge of pleasure she felt at the contact of his tongue with hers, Ifeoma moaned. A deep throaty sound that she couldn't believe came from her. She had never been kissed before. She was uncertain of what to do, so she did what came naturally. She opened her mouth and let his tongue move against hers. He tasted of wine and something else, something unique and sweet. Soon her tongue tangled with his in a delicious rhythm. Heat warmed between her legs and she felt a growing pressure there. Wanting to soothe that pressure, she rubbed her body frantically against his, eliciting a harsh groan from him. She couldn't get close enough. Ifeoma wrapped her arms around Chuma's neck and pressed her body against him. She was almost as tall as he; her chest was against his, her belly against his, her pelvis against his. She could feel the strength of his hardness against her pelvis and she moved against it urgently.

"Ify, Oh, God!" Chuma rasped, cupping her bottom under her dress and lifting her up. He wrapped her firm long legs around his waist, and adjusted their position slightly, so her back was flush against the door of the jeep as he deepened the kiss. Aroused beyond endurance, he ground her core against his erection. Slow down! Slow down! A voice in Chuma's head screamed. But he couldn't. As soon as he'd tasted her mouth, he knew instinctively that this was her first kiss. He wanted to take it slow, but her fevered response made it almost impossible. Running his hands over her back and then cupping her soft breast through her dress, he plundered her mouth. Her deep throaty moans fuelled his arousal.

"Ify…" he groaned against her mouth. It was both a warning and a plea. He needed to stop this. He was no good for her.

The exquisite sensation of her hand moving under his shirt to touch him caused all rational thought to cease. Moving his head, he pressed his mouth against her neck, she moaned. He moved his head even lower and pressed his mouth against her breast, sucking the hardened peak through her clothes. She arched her back, offering him more. "Please, oh, please…" He heard her sharp moan which

reverberated in the air, permeating his sensual haze.

Chuma froze. He couldn’t do this. This was Ify. She trusted him, she was pure, and she didn’t need an asshole like him. Shuddering from the intensity of his lust, Chuma withdrew his mouth from her breast. He heard her frustrated gasp, but he still held her gently to stabilize her while she slid her legs from his waist. He placed his forehead against hers and took rapid short breaths, trying to calm himself down. Ifeoma squeezed her eyes tightly shut, her own pants matching his.

Then suddenly, she backed away from him, running her fingers through her hair, looking everywhere but at him.

“I'm sorry,” she muttered. Still no eye contact. “I did not mean to… I don't usually do that…”

He reached for her face and cupped it in his hands. He tried to smile but in his aroused state, he could only manage a crooked twist of his lips.

“Don't be sorry, Ify,” he murmured, swallowing past a sudden lump in his throat. “You have nothing to be sorry about. You are perfect.”

“No, I’m not—” she began.

“Yes, you are,” Chuma interjected, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. “I’m no good for you.”

Chapter Ten

She missed him. She was also angry with him. He had not shown up at the canteen for the past four days.

Why did I have to kiss him? Ifeoma asked herself repeatedly. That kiss, that whole passionate episode had altered her world. Every time she thought about it, her entire body tingled. Her body had come alive with his touch; never had she felt so feminine in her life.

Now, Chuma had disappeared. Not a word from him apart from a short text message the morning after their boat trip telling her that he had a family emergency. He had not even replied her text asking him what the emergency was. Ifeoma was no fool; she knew he was just trying to politely turn her down.

Angry with herself for letting him get under her skin, she pounded the yam with more force than necessary. I don't need him, she thought angrily. I don't need any man.

Only those thoughts did not give her the comfort that she needed. She missed everything about him. His confidence, the way he took charge and prevented her from having to do so, his voice, his laugh. Oh, why did I have to kiss him? Why did I ruin everything? Now he wants nothing to do with me! Deep fear rumbled in Ifeoma's tummy at the thought that she would not see Chuma again. Feelings of despair threatened to take over her mind, causing tears to escape from her eyes.

Wiping away the tears from her face, she continued with her task of pounding yam. She had vowed never to depend on anyone for her happiness, and here she was crying over a man who didn't even want her. Ifeoma straightened her back and took a deep breath. "I am not my mother; I am a strong woman," she muttered to herself repeatedly as she raised the mortar high and pounded it incessantly into the large pestle until the yam was smooth and soft.

"What did you do to Mr Frown-face? He has not shown up for the past four days," Oluchi commented later, while they were sitting behind the serving

counter. The canteen was full, and their customers were helping themselves to their meals.

“Why must I have done something? He is a grown man who can choose to eat wherever he wants.” She did not intend for her voice to come out as sharply as it did.

“Sorry o,” Oluchi muttered. “I was only asking because since….” She hesitated. Ifeoma smirked.

“Since what?”

“Well since that Saturday you did not come to work, he has not shown up and you dress better.” Oluchi looked as if she was trying to find the solution to a complex maths question. “You are now wearing normal clothes and even putting on makeup,” she continued, appearing intrigued by her own developing theory.

Ifeoma had decided after that boat trip, that there was no point in hiding herself any longer. She had decided to embrace her femininity. Nene, ecstatic about it, had taken her shopping for a few clothes at the local market. She was still getting used to dressing up without strapping down her breasts with a bandage. She had even noticed a few men glancing her way at the canteen. But there was only one man whose attention she craved.

“I think you like Mr Frown-face and he is not feeling you,” Oluchi concluded, bringing Ifeoma back from her musings. Ifeoma’s heart skipped a beat at the accuracy of Oluchi’s deduction.

“I don’t like him,” Ifeoma denied. Her denial sounded weak even to her own ears.

“Madam Ify, let me school you. With these rich men, you have to play games.”

“Biko, I don’t need relationship advice from you—”

“Who is talking about relationship advice? I’m talking about sex advice,” Oluchi said, rolling her eyes.

Ifeoma threw her head back and laughed.

“Madam Ify, listen, men as rich as Mr Frown-face have had various kinds of women throw themselves at them.” Oluchi refused to stop her unsolicited advice. “You have to be more exciting. Find what he likes and use it against him.”

“So, who have you trapped with all your games, Oluchi?” Ifeoma asked, amused. The one thing she liked about Oluchi was that she was at least honest about her one goal in life. That goal was to marry a rich man or trap one with a forced paternity. She was determined to use her natural beauty and curves to achieve that, and she never once wavered from that focus.

“Just wait, you will soon see me on magazine covers as the wife of a billionaire. Just wait!” They both laughed.

“My dear, I like your determination. I wish you could keep it focused on getting an education.” Ifeoma couldn’t help but chip that nugget of advice in. She wished she could shout it on top of a roof. “Woman, you don’t need a man! You need to educate yourself.”

Maybe if her mother had, their lives would have been different.

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“I’m running away from a twenty-five-year-old woman!” Chuma muttered to himself, shaking his head. If he weren’t so frustrated about his conflicting emotions, he would have found his predicament amusing. He sighed as warm water hit his body from the showerhead above.

He was at his family home in Enugu. His mind had been so consumed by thoughts of Ifeoma since that kiss. All he could think about was having her in his bed and making love to her over and over again until she screamed his name. Yet, he couldn’t help the weight of responsibility he felt for her, he knew that he could not give himself over to his physical needs when it came to her. With her, he wanted to be careful, to be patient.

Ever since he had begun knowing women, he had never felt such an intense need

to both devour and protect one. It was a strange and scary feeling which had caused him to do something that he had never done before— run.

Yes, he admitted that he was running from Ify. The call from Mama Uzo that their father had suffered a stroke was devastating, but Chuma had felt it was the best opportunity for him to escape his turmoil. He offered to visit Enugu even though his sister Adaora had the least of the workload at the firm. He wanted to escape Lagos, escape his confusing feelings for Ifeoma. He wanted to clear his head.

Chuma's mind drifted back to the kiss again. He had years of experience with women, and he had believed that he was a pro at the art of seduction. Somehow, it didn't feel so this time. One kiss from Ifeoma and he had lost all control and turned into a fumbling teenager with his first crush, dry humping her like a frustrated dog. She had the sweetest lips, the most pleasing touch. He shuddered just remembering the exquisite sensation of that touch. Switching the faucet settings to cold, he let the cold water spray his skin, and he groaned. This ought to take the edge off.

Chuma was feeling somewhat restored after his shower. He put on a green T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He was on his way to visit his father at the hospital and have a talk with his doctor. His father was due to be discharged that afternoon. The stroke had left him with minor weakness in his left hand and leg, but the doctor thought he was good to go home. With ample rest and physiotherapy, the doctor had assured him that a full recovery was possible and even to be expected.

He wanted to know everything about his father's recovery needs so that he could arrange home physiotherapy. Having stayed in Enugu for four days already, he was due to return to Lagos after his father got home later in the day. Adaora and Nnamdi were scheduled to fly in the following day to take over.

Seated at the backseat of the family car on his way to the hospital, Chuma decided to check his phone. There were no new messages, so he re-read the text message he had received from Ifeoma before his arrival in Enugu. It was a simple message in response to him informing her that he had to fly to Enugu to attend to a family emergency.

"What family emergency? Is it your dad? Hope everyone is okay?" it had read.

He knew he should have responded, but he hadn't, and that made him a first-rate asshole. Even so, the message had calmed him. He had read it many times in the past three days since his arrival. He had been on the verge of replying to the message each time he read it, but fear stopped him each time. He was terrified that if he did, he would call her, if he called her, he would hear her voice, and if he heard her voice, his resolution to stay away from her would be shattered.

"I'm running away from a twenty-five-year-old woman," he muttered to himself again. It was laughable, and yet the anxiety he felt about returning to Lagos was real. Lagos meant facing Ifeoma and having to fight to keep his lust for her under control.

The drive to the hospital was short. It always amazed him how much he had become so accustomed to Lagos traffic such that any lack of it, he found quite disturbing.

"Wait for me here," he said to his father's driver who had driven him to the hospital. "We will be out in a short while." The driver nodded. He got down from the car and walked towards his father's private hospital room. The door was slightly ajar. Mama Uzo was sitting by his father's bed, Chuma stopped.

"Don't ever scare me again, Ofor," he heard Mama Uzo say to his father as she gazed longingly into his eyes. Ofor was his father's first name, and only his mother had used it. Everyone else referred to him as Chief Obi.

"You can't leave me. Do you hear me, Ofor? You can't," she continued. Chuma heard his father laugh. A deeply satisfied laugh, which tugged at his own heart.

"Won't dream of it," his father said to Mama Uzo, kissing her softly on the lips. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

When their kiss deepened, Chuma decided to interrupt. He was not prepared to watch his father make out with anyone.

They broke apart quickly as soon as he walked in. Mama Uzo looked startled and somewhat guilty, her gaze shifted around uncomfortably. Chuma resisted the urge to smirk. He never understood why they insisted on hiding their relationship. It was so obvious to everyone that they cared deeply for one another.

“My son, welcome,” Chief Obi said to Chuma, after clearing his throat.

“Chuma, welcome. I was just here bringing your father his breakfast,” Mama Uzo muttered as if needing to explain her presence by his father’s side.

Chuma knew damn well that she had spent the night by his bedside. Mama Uzo was a petite and slim woman with chestnut brown skin, who, despite the hard life she had lived, had aged gracefully. She always stayed by his father’s side through significant events. Chuma smiled at her, then deciding to let her off the hook, he added, “I know. Thanks for getting his breakfast for him.”

Mama Uzo appeared relieved that Chuma had bought her explanation and smiled too.

“I’ll leave you to arrange your father’s discharge,” she said as she stood. She, however, was not subtle enough to prevent herself from automatically bending over and placing a kiss on Chief Obi’s forehead before she left.

Chuma shook his head as soon as he was alone with his father. “Why not just marry her, dad? Save us the misery of pretending we don’t know about you two,” he said to his father, walking over to occupy the seat next to him. Chief Obi sat upright in bed. Apart from a slight drop of his left shoulder, no other sign of the stroke showed. Chief Obi was a tall dark-skinned man with trimmed facial hair like Chuma’s, but unlike Chuma, kept a full head of hair instead of shaving it bald.

“Trust me, I have tried; she does not want to get married again.” His father’s admission about the relationship surprised him.

“And since she is raising three daughters, she is worried that admitting a relationship with me would mean encouraging sex without marriage,” he added.

“Too much information, dad. I didn’t need to hear that!” Chuma shrieked, never wanting to picture his father having sex.

“I may be your father, but I also have needs—”

“Okay, the subject is officially changed!”

They both laughed. Chuma was glad to see his father in such high spirits. He

was also grateful that the stroke had not been fatal.

He met with his father's doctor and discussed the medications, recovery physiotherapy, and follow-up appointments. An hour later, they were both seated in the backseat of the SUV on their way back to the family house.

"Chuma, after my stroke, I thought about you," Chief Obi remarked.

"Me? Why?" Chuma who was looking out of the window turned towards his father.

"Because you are my first son. I know you and Nnamdi are twins but you have always taken the position of the first son. Besides, you were born five minutes earlier." Chuma waited to hear where his father was going with this conversation.

"I know that in the past, after your mother died, I failed my children and I wasn't a good parent," his father continued. "I know that during those years, you were forced to take charge and cover up my failure."

Chief Obi paused, looking away as if the memories brought him shame. Chuma remained silent. That had been an awful period in his childhood. His father had been persistently drunk, forgetting to make sure the daily needs of his children were met. Chuma had needed to step in and create a schedule for himself and his siblings.

"I met Mama Uzo and my life was turned around," Chief Obi's voice was solemn. "She made me see things I didn't want to see." Another moment of silence resulted from his father's admission. Chuma suspected where this was going. For the past three years, his father had been talking to him about settling down.

"What I'm saying is you need to find a woman; you are thirty-three, Chuma, and the way you chase after money without slowing down will lead to a stroke soon."

"I have women," Chuma retorted, getting annoyed.

"Not bedmates, son, I mean a woman you can trust," his father sounded exasperated.

“Why not worry about Nnamdi? Why me?”

“Because Nnamdi is not as stubborn as you are.”

Chuma sighed. Chief Obi sighed too.

“All I’m saying is, every man needs a woman he trusts.” His father looked out of the window after that statement, a sign that he had finished with the conversation, for now.

Turning his face towards his own window, Chuma reflected on his father’s final statement, “every man needs a woman he trusts.”

The only woman that came to mind was Ifeoma. It occurred to him that apart from his sister Adaora, Ifeoma was the only other woman he could trust. Playing idly with his facial hair, he determined what to do. He decided to visit her as soon as he got back to Lagos, apologise to her for being a cad, for running away from his feelings for her. He would rekindle his friendship with her. Chuma made up his mind to allow his friendship with her to blossom naturally. He would not allow his lust to destroy the only healthy relationship he had going, outside his family.

Chapter Eleven

“I can’t get over how pretty you look,” Chioma said to Ifeoma. They were both sharing the mirror, getting ready for the day.

“Thanks, Chioma, but you need to stop saying that before my head explodes,” Ifeoma replied with a shy smile. Looking in the mirror, she admitted to herself that she liked how the blue jeans skirt emphasised her hips and legs. She also liked the multi-coloured blouse that Nene had forced her to buy. “It makes you look soft and feminine,” Nene had said.

“But it is true. Mr Frown-face must be an idiot,” Chioma said, regarding Ifeoma through the mirror.

“Chioma!” Ifeoma cried, heat flooding her cheeks.

“It’s true, if I were a man, I would be all over you.”

“Aww, sis, such a nice thing to say,” Ifeoma hugged Chioma. “I think it’s best this way, Chioma. At least now, I can focus on the canteen. We have debts to pay.”

“I know, how much have you managed this month?”

“I have managed a lot. Thanks to Chuma’s patronage, I need only about four thousand,” Ifeoma answered her sister. A regretful sigh escaped her lips. She had lost her most generous customer because she couldn’t control her hormones. Mr Frown-face was not the idiot, she was.

“You never… told us what happened between you two,” Chioma muttered hesitantly. Ifeoma waited for Chioma to apply mascara and then red lipstick. No matter how many times her sisters pleaded with her, the only makeup Ifeoma had finally allowed herself was lipstick. She liked how the red shade made her lips pop. However, she hated the feeling of mascara or eye shadow around her eyes. Cooking with firewood always made her eyes water; she did not need mascara running down her face all day.

“I ... I kissed him and he wasn’t happy about it,” Ifeoma finally admitted. She heard Chioma gasp. “I think he wants us to be just friends, and I … I ruined that.”

“So, how was it?”

“How was what?”

“The kiss, Ify? How was it?” Chioma sounded excited. It was ironic that Chioma who shied away from dating could find romance and love so fascinating.

“Hmmm, Chioma, you know when you are eating a mango and the back is gone, and what’s left is the sweet, succulent part…” Ifeoma sighed, remembering the sensation of Chuma’s lips and tongue against hers. She was glad he’d stopped when he did; because she would have readily given herself up to be gobbled alive if he hadn’t. Chioma’s eyes widened as she listened.

“He has the sweetest mouth ever …” Ifeoma shuddered.

“I hope my own first kiss is as good,” Chioma said wistfully.

“I hope whoever gives you your first kiss knows how lucky he is to have the opportunity,” Ifeoma replied, hugging her sister again.

Glancing at the time, Ifeoma quickly applied bright red lipstick over her full lips. It was almost time for lunch. Chioma also had a lecture in an hour. Satisfied that she looked good, Ifeoma grabbed her handbag and walked out of the apartment with her sister. It took two buses to get to the canteen. Oluchi was already waiting by the entrance. Loretta joined them a few minutes after. Before long, customers started trickling in. Loretta and Oluchi were attending to two customers while Ifeoma attended to the third.

“What can I get you, sir?” she asked Mr Ayodele. He was a regular customer who grew up in Onitsha and enjoyed food from Eastern Nigeria.

“Hmmm, Ifeoma, is it just me or are you looking lovelier every time I come here?” he asked, his eyes roaming over her. Ifeoma cheeks felt flushed. This had been happening to her all week—customers complimenting her on her looks.

“Thanks, Mr Ayodele,” she replied shyly.

“Hmmm, I will soon pay a bride price to have you as my second wife,” he continued with a huge grin on his face, and Ifeoma chuckled.

“Second wife ke? Mr Ayodele having two wives will kill you o,” Ifeoma teased. He shook his head.

“Maybe I will send my wife away and marry you, then.” He paused with a distant look in his eyes. “Imagine having a beautiful woman like you at home who can cook like you can … heaven!”

Ifeoma chuckled again.

“Be serious, Mr Ayodele. What can I get you?”

“I’m serious o,” he said, then added, “Onubgu soup and pounded yam with goat meat.”

With a smile on her face, Ifeoma turned away from Mr Ayodele and towards the serving counter. And that’s when she saw him and her heart rammed into her chest violently. For sitting in his usual corner was Chuma. She’d smelled his spicy cologne before she even saw him. Their eyes met, and she forgot how to breathe.

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Chuma’s heart was pounding so hard, he feared that it would burst out of his chest. He had arrived at the canteen a few minutes ago and had observed the exchange between Ifeoma and the middle-aged man sitting at the far end corner. Her back was turned to him, so he took the opportunity to admire her long legs and the way that her jeans skirt fitted her firm hips and the slight curve of her bottom. He liked the way she had her curly hair bound neatly at the back, and the way she was standing tall while bantering with the man. It exuded her newfound confidence in her femininity. On the other hand, he felt strangely irritated at how the man ogled Ifeoma, although he was proud of the way that she handled it. Seeing her was like breathing fresh air after being locked up in a casket.

And when their eyes met, he noticed the emotions that raced through hers. Surprise, joy, and then anger. She turned and walked away from him. He sighed and rose to his feet.

“Ify,” he called.

“I’ll attend to you soon, sir,” she replied, almost running from him.

Sir? Sir? Seriously? Chuma thought. He had gone from Chuma to ‘sir’ really quickly. He followed her swiftly into the serving area. Oluchi and Loretta gaped at him, startled.

“Leave us!” he growled. They hesitated, glancing at Ifeoma for direction. “I said, leave us!” This time they didn’t hesitate, they dashed away speedily.

Chuma and Ifeoma stared at each other hungrily as soon as they were alone. The serving area was a small room separated from the canteen by a wooden partition, but it felt too small in that moment for Ifeoma. The way Chuma’s tall powerful frame filled the room and the way his intense eyes focused on her made her feel trapped.

“I ... I have to serve Mr… Mr…” Ifeoma muttered, her throat tight, the name of her regular customer suddenly eluding her memory.

“Ify, I am sorry for not calling,” Chuma said in a low but deep tone.

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t need you to call.”

“Yes it does, I was … I needed space to think.” His admission made her stomach churn.

“Look, I get it, you are not attracted to me. I’m a big girl. I can handle it. I am sorry for kissing you. I shouldn’t have.” She did not notice the change in his expression as she mumbled on nervously. “I just don’t want to lose you as a customer ... and friend. Forget that kiss ever happened, I get it… I—”

Before she could say another word, Chuma grabbed her hand and placed it on his groin. She gasped in shock as her palm made contact with his erection.

“That’s right, Ify. That’s right.” Chuma’s tone was raw and husky. “I have been

walking around like this all week."

Her eyes were as wide as saucers. "All I have to do is think about you and this happens," he continued.

Ifeoma's heart raced uncontrollably at his words.

"I don't usually walk around like this, Ify. I usually make sure that this is taken care of," he growled. Exhaling deeply to calm himself, he said more gently, "I'm just trying to be a better man, I'm really trying." He let go of her hand. Ifeoma felt her body tremble and her core clench with arousal. She realised that Chuma was also fighting his attraction to her. But why? He must be used to having women falling at his feet and taking what he wanted from them. Why was she so different from all the other women? She didn't know how to feel about this realisation yet.

"Ify, Mr Ayodele is waiting," Oluchi said, poking her head into the room.

"I'll be there in a sec," she replied. Then to Chuma, she said softly, "I'm glad you came back."

He exhaled with relief and grinned, the tension between them forgotten. "I'm glad to see you too. I missed you."

Ifeoma smiled back at him. "Now, why don't you go and have a seat and I'll get your egusi soup," she said, nudging him out of the room.

"How do you know that's what I want to eat?" he asked as he left the room.

"Because you told me that's your favourite soup."

Her response made his heart swell. How did he think he could stay away from her? She had now become a vital part of his life. In the three weeks of knowing her, he could not see his life without her being a part of it.

As he sat back down in his favourite spot, in his favourite restaurant, with his favourite woman only a foot away, Chuma formulated a plan as his father's words came back to him. Every man needs a woman he trusts. He trusted Ifeoma completely. There was no point in denying that she meant a lot to him. He wanted more than just sex from her. Anticipation built up inside him as the plan

in his head developed. All he had to do was tread cautiously. I'll just have to play my cards right, he thought, a sudden feeling of relief flooding his senses. He smiled, for he finally knew what he wanted from Ifeoma. Turning to Mr Ayodele who was engrossed in his meal, Chuma's smile widened. He had that jerk to thank for putting the idea in his head.

Chapter Twelve

Chuma switched off the car's engine at the end of the street to Ifeoma's apartment.

"I am inviting my family for dinner and I want you to cook for us," Chuma said, turning to Ifeoma in the passenger seat. "I will pay for your services."

"When is it?" Ifeoma asked, picking up her purse from the back seat of the jeep where she'd kept it.

"It's this Sunday evening," he responded. "Ada and Nnamdi will be there. You can use my kitchen."

"What time is it? I would like to be there much earlier and leave before they come in." It was obvious that Ifeoma felt nervous about this.

Chuma hesitated. "It will start around seven in the evening," he said.

"Good, I will be there about five-thirty and leave in an hour. That will give me enough time."

"How much do you charge for this kind of thing?"

"I have never cooked for events or anyone for money."

"Why not, Ify? You have massive talent as a chef."

Chuma believed that if she branched out more from focusing only on the restaurant, she would make more money. Ifeoma, on the other hand, wanted to focus on paying her debts first before taking on more risks. This was a frequent topic of discussion between them. Chuma was a shark when it came to business and he had noticed that Ifeoma did business with her heart. She made friends, he made enemies.

"I'll pay you a hundred thousand Naira," he informed her.

“What? You know that’s too much!”

“It’s a private service and I’m paying you for your time.”

“Actually, if you provide the ingredients, I was planning not to charge you.”

“Now, what kind of businesswoman is that?” His tone was laced with amusement.

“You are more than a customer, Chuma, you are my best friend.”

His heart slammed forcefully into his chest. The simplicity of Ifeoma’s statement was touching. She had no agenda. He’d never been with a woman without an agenda. Yet he wanted more. He wanted her complete surrender, to be his in every possible way.

“We will negotiate your fee later. You know damn well that I will pay you,” Chuma said, a smile curving the corners of his lips.

“Who can ever stop you from doing what you want to do, Chuma?” she teased.

“You have managed to stop me from doing a few things that I want to do,” he said.

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“For instance, I have been wanting to pay for an apartment for you and your sisters, but you keep refusing—”

“Chuma—”

“I usually get my way, yet, here we are, and I am still dropping you off in this dump.”

Ifeoma did not feel offended by Chuma’s statement. She knew she lived in a dump, but she was not about to let him take over her life. She never wanted to end up like her mother who needed a man for her happiness, or unhappiness thereof.

“It’s my dump and I plan to work my way out of it,” Ifeoma said with

confidence.

“I know you can, and you will … I just want to help. Let me—”

“Good night, Chuma,” Ifeoma said, chuckling. This conversation never ended. “See you tomorrow.” She placed a quick kiss on his cheek and jumped out of the jeep. Chuma shook his head. One thing Ifeoma was yet to learn about him was that he never lost and he always got what he wanted.

He sat at his desk on Friday morning going through financial reports when his phone rang. It was Ayo, the firm’s best financial investigator.

“Hello, Ayo,” Chuma said, answering the call. “Have you found what I need?”

Never one to waste time on niceties, he always went straight to business. This infuriated his brother Nnamdi, whose way of doing business was wining and dining potential clients first before going for their accounts. Chuma’s approach was always to investigate their intended clients first and then make them an offer they had to accept. He believed that his approach worked better because it often led to him getting what he wanted.

“I have found out about Ifeoma Okafor’s creditor,” Ayo said over the phone. Chuma held his breath. He knew he was taking a road which, if not tread upon carefully, could cause him to lose Ifeoma’s trust for good. However, he was determined to make sure that she had nowhere else to turn but to him.

“Yes, and how much does she owe?”

“Four-hundred-thousand Naira,” Ayo replied.

Chuma sighed. If only Ifeoma would let him take care of her debts. That money meant nothing to him. He could pay it off without blinking an eye.

“He is a nasty man,” Ayo continued. “There is talk that he lends money to women and then forces himself on them if they can’t pay back on time.”

Chuma felt a twist in his gut. Had the man forced himself on Ifeoma? Ifeoma had trust issues when it came to men; he’d sensed it from their conversations. His brain roiled with rage at the thought of anyone who would hurt Ifeoma in any way.

“What’s his name and where can I find him?” Chuma’s tone was low even as he tried to control the venom in his voice.

Ayo told him what he needed to know, and he wrote it down. He would pay the man a visit and get the truth from him one way or the other.

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Chuma’s apartment was like something out of a magazine. Ifeoma had never seen a place so beautiful in her life. Marble walls, dazzling white terrazzo floors, mirrors on the ceiling, exquisite chandeliers hanging from them. And his kitchen —wow! Modern equipment everywhere.

“I could die in your kitchen!” she squealed in delight running her hands over the kitchen counter. “Oh, my God, and the cooker...” She placed a hand on her chest and exhaled. “You know rich people live like this, but to see it up close… Oh….”

Watching her excitement about his apartment made Chuma both pleased and saddened at the same time. He grew up having everything he wanted, and she grew up having to struggle for things he took for granted. She deserved everything; he wanted to give her everything.

“Can I get you something to eat? Drink?” he asked her as he opened the fridge. She shook her head twice, still inspecting his various blenders, juicers and kitchen appliances that he hardly ever used.

Chuma took a cold bottle of beer from the fridge and poured it into a glass. Then he stood back and watched Ifeoma gush about his home. He took the time to really admire her while she was distracted. She looked lovely dressed in a white pair of shorts, which brought attention to her long firm legs, and a red and white tank top that emphasised her generous breasts. Totally makeup-free except for the red lipstick coating her full lips, and her hair covered with a scarf, she looked simple and yet striking. His body responded predictably to being near her. Adjusting himself before settling on the kitchen counter, Chuma took a sip of his beer. If only Ifeoma knew how her life was about to change, if only she knew

how much he wanted it to.

“Oh, Chuma, you might have to drag me out of your kitchen,” she cried, interrupting his thoughts. Her new object of fascination was his electric yam pounder. “This can make my life so much easier.”

“If I had my way, you will never leave my kitchen,” Chuma blurted out. That statement got her attention and she stopped. They regarded each other in silence, then she turned away again.

“I need to start, your family will be here soon...” she muttered, pulling out an apron from the kitchen hook. It was large and seemed to swallow her slim frame. Chuma’s groin tightened. The sight of Ifeoma wearing his apron filled him with yearning. Soon, if his plan worked, she would always be in his kitchen, his home, and his life.

Singing along to Sade’s smooth operator, Chuma assisted in any way that he could. Never having cooked a proper meal himself, he could only help her with chopping vegetables and washing up used plates and bowls. Ifeoma was preparing fried rice and chicken, salad, and goat meat pepper soup, Adaora’s favourite starter. He planned ice cream for desert. The smell of food being prepared in his kitchen reminded him once again of his mother and that memory brought him peace.

“You enjoy slow and dull music,” Ifeoma said, grinning as she stirred the pot of rice on the cooker.

“What? I’ll have you know that Sade is a legend who transcends time!” he argued. “You, on the other hand, listen to ‘noise’. That’s what you enjoy, noise.” Ifeoma laughed. He referred to her favourite Rhianna song, shut up and drive, as noise.

“You can dance to my choice of music. But can you dance to “Smooth Operator” or a song by Anita Baker?”

“Don’t get it twisted, Ify, I am a demon on the dance floor.”

“Doing old-school moves,” she mocked, thrusting her tongue out.

Chuma broke into a dance move and Ifeoma burst into a fit of laughter.

“Still old-school, nowadays what we do is twerk.” She began shaking her hips. “Now, this is what I call dancing!” she said as she gyrated her hips.

Chuma attempted twerking and laughed at himself.

“I look like an idiot,” he groaned.

“I totally agree.” A female voice announced from the kitchen door. Ifeoma froze. Her gaze collided with two sets of curious eyes.

“Hello Ada, Nnamdi,” Chuma said, greeting his siblings. Then turning to Ifeoma, he said. “Ifeoma, meet my twin brother, Nnamdi, and my baby sister, Adaora.”

Ifeoma’s heart drummed furiously in her chest, but she smiled, nervously. She was so surprised and confused. Did Chuma plan this? Did he know they would show up earlier than expected? He did not appear surprised by their presence.

“I’m not your baby sister,” Adaora protested, taking Ifeoma’s hand for a handshake.

“Hello, Ify, nice to meet you.”

“Hello,” Ifeoma replied, her face warming with embarrassment.

Nnamdi also shook her hand but kept eyeing her quizzically. “Hello Ify, are you the one preparing the lovely meal we smell? Because I know it can never be Chuma.” Nnamdi asked, his tone brimming with amusement. “This okpo can’t cook to save his life.” He pointed to Chuma as he said that.

“Yes,” Ifeoma answered quickly, determined not to make this seem like anything but work. “Chuma employed me to help prepare this dinner because I am a cook. I will just finish up and leave.”

She was mortified. They all looked glamorous and she looked a total mess dressed in shorts and a tank top.

“No,” Chuma added quickly. “Stay and enjoy the meal with us, Ify.”

Ifeoma fought back the urge to send a sour look his way. “I have almost

finished… I'll be out of—"

"Come on, Ify, you can't cook this lavish meal and not join us," he coaxed.

Ifeoma was aware of the odd expressions on Adaora and Nnamdi's faces as they observed the exchange between them.

"But I don't want to intrude on your family time." She made another attempt to decline, convinced now that Chuma had set her up. He wanted her to meet his family and knew the only way she would agree was to manipulate her. Ifeoma did not even want to contemplate the reason Chuma would want her to meet them. What game was he playing?

"You are not intruding," Adaora said, her soft voice breaking through Ifeoma's thoughts.

"Come on," Chuma said again, his deep voice resonating within her. Ifeoma felt her face heat up. This man made her weak. She couldn't say no.

"Okay," she agreed and heard his relieved sigh. The look in Chuma's eyes at her acceptance made Ifeoma's heart flutter. It felt as if she had just accepted another proposal that had nothing to do with sharing a meal with his family. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman.

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"So, I see you got my 'stiff' brother here to dance," Adaora whispered to Ifeoma. They were sitting together at one end of the table while Chuma and Nnamdi sat at the other end, engrossed in a conversation Ifeoma wished she could hear.

"He is not that stiff," she replied with a smile. She spooned some rice and held it close to her mouth. "Okay... Only a little stiff," she added, chuckling. Adaora laughed.

Ifeoma liked Adaora immediately. She was attractive, petite and curvy with smooth caramel skin. She also had a warm personality, which surprised Ifeoma

because she’d expected snobbery. After all, isn’t that what rich people were known for?

“Yeah, my brother only goes to clubs to sit and drink. He never dances, which is quite a shame.”

They continued their meal in silence while Ifeoma avoided Chuma’s gaze. She worried that her longing for him would show on her face if she so much as looked at him.

“So, you and my brother, what’s the deal?” Adaora asked. Ah, finally! Ifeoma had been expecting this; she was surprised that it had taken this long.

“We are friends; I own a restaurant and he enjoys the food there.” Ifeoma had rehearsed this answer so many times in her head till she almost believed it. Only, sometimes at night, when she was alone, she thought about being with Chuma in ways that were not in any way platonic.

“What restaurant is that?”

“Eastern Delight. It is a small canteen in Ikoyi.”

“Your food is delicious. I can see why Chuma enjoys eating at your restaurant."

“Thanks.”

Ifeoma had a distinctive feeling that Adaora wanted to talk about her friendship with Chuma some more, but was buying time.

“I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but I think Chuma likes you a lot,” Adaora remarked, causing Ifeoma’s heart to skip a beat. She didn’t respond. “He talks about you all the time.”

Ifeoma’s gut twisted. What was Chuma saying about her?

“He tells me how much you inspire him,” Adaora continued, unaware of what her words did to Ifeoma. “The way he was in the kitchen when we walked in, I have never seen him like that … so happy ... so relaxed. You are good for him.”

Glancing across the table at Chuma at that very moment, her eyes met his, and

her heart flipped. She felt as if she was falling into a deep well. She was losing her battle with him. She did not want to fall for him. Oh, but I have, she thought. I am in love with him, God help me.

“I’ll get the desert,” Chuma announced, rising to his feet. They had just finished the delicious fried rice and fried chicken.

“Let me help,” Ifeoma said, also standing up.

“No, I will join Chuma. Ify, you have done more than enough. This meal was fantastic,” Nnamdi said, standing up. Ifeoma sat back down and smiled. She loved when people complimented her cooking.

She watched as Nnamdi and Chuma walked off into the kitchen. Nnamdi looked nothing like Chuma. His skin was lighter, and he had thick curly hair on his head and no facial hair. From the few discussions that she had had with Nnamdi while they ate, Ifeoma found him to be pleasant. Unlike Chuma, Nnamdi smiled a lot. Although Nnamdi was handsome in a youthful sort of way, to Ifeoma, Chuma’s looks were more compelling and masculine. She had even started to find his persistent scowl alluring and his rare smile devastatingly heart shattering. Ifeoma did not notice Adaora’s knowing expression as she fixated her gaze on Chuma’s retreating figure.

∞

“How old did you say she was again?” Nnamdi asked Chuma when they were alone in the kitchen.

“Twenty-five,” Chuma replied, opening the large deep-freezer to bring out chocolate-vanilla-rum ice cream.

“Damn, she looks younger,” Nnamdi said, opening a cupboard and retrieving four ice-cream bowls. “She is very pretty,” Nnamdi added, searching for a tray in the lower cabinets. Chuma pulled out two trays from the neatly stacked side shelf. Nnamdi should know by now how organised my kitchen is, he thought, shaking his head.

“So, you are certain she is the one?” Nnamdi queried as he began scooping ice cream into the bowls.

“Yes, I am.” Chuma had no doubt in his mind. He couldn’t see himself taking a leap to settle down with anyone else but Ifeoma. She had brought him so much joy in the three weeks of knowing her than he had experienced with any other woman over the years.

“Isn’t it too soon, though? You have only known her for three weeks,” Nnamdi said, eyeing his brother sceptically.

“I have never been surer about anything in my life.”

“How does she feel about it? Have you told her how you feel?”

Nnamdi and Chuma talking about a woman was nothing new. Except that this time was different. They were in new territory; talking about a woman in serious terms, not about sexual escapades, or a break-up, but the possibility of a future, of settling. This was certainly new territory for both.

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet. She is not where I am yet, but soon, she’ll be mine,” Chuma answered, placing the ice-cream bowls on two trays and handing Nnamdi a tray. Nnamdi peered into the sitting room to find Adaora and Ifeoma laughing and looking through photo albums and shook his head.

“Poor girl,” he whispered to Chuma.

“Who? Ify?” Chuma raised a brow.

“Yeah, Ify, she has no idea what she has gotten herself into.” Nnamdi looked amused. “My controlling, obnoxious, obsessive twin brother is obsessed with her, oh, poor girl.” Nnamdi made air-kissing sounds. Chuma flipped Nnamdi the middle finger. He was not dissuaded. “As I said, poor girl,” Nnamdi teased as they both walked out of the kitchen.

Chapter Thirteen

“It was a lovely evening, Ify,” Chuma said. He was washing the dishes and humming a happy tune. Ifeoma was standing behind him, silently fuming. Adaora and Nnamdi had left a few minutes ago, and it was just the two of them now. “I’ll drive you home once I finish up—”

He did not see it coming, but he felt the sting of the dishcloth on his back before he heard her anger.

“Aw!” Chuma yelled, trying to rub the spot where the towel had made contact. “What did you do that for?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that your siblings would be coming earlier than I expected?”

“I wanted them to meet you,” Chuma said calmly as he carried on washing the plate he held.

“You didn’t even give me a heads-up, they both looked nice and I looked a mess!” she continued heatedly. Chuma paused, still not turning towards Ifeoma.

“You always look lovely, Ifeoma,” he replied, resuming his task.

“That’s not the point.” Ifeoma couldn’t prevent the rage rapidly building up within her. “The point is that you tricked me, you manipulated me.” Her voice was louder now. Chuma appeared unruffled by her anger.

“Why did you do it? Why?” Ifeoma persisted.

“Well, I talk about you a lot, and they were becoming curious—”

“Oh, you talk about me,” Ifeoma interjected, her eyes flashing. “What did you tell them? Oh, come and meet the ugly, skinny, poor cook from the slums that I am friends with?”

Chuma froze. Placing the plate in his hands into the sink carefully, he turned

towards Ifeoma, a fierce glint in his eyes. “If you know how much I admire and respect you, you will never ever refer to yourself as ugly or poor in my presence.” His voice was low as if suppressing the need to raise it.

“Oh, you admire me, and you respect me,” she retorted. “I don’t need your admiration or respect. I am not a piece of furniture or a painting!”

Ifeoma knew at the back of her mind that she sounded irrational, but she was furious. She could not carry on like this, wound tight in a limbo of mixed feelings and signals.

“I don’t need your admiration or respect, okay,” she cried again. “I’m not a damned painting!”

Chuma took a deep breath in and out. “Why are you picking a fight, Ify?” he enquired in a controlled voice. “What do you want from me?”

“What do I want from you?” Ifeoma muttered, shaking her head as if his question was the dumbest question she’d ever heard.

“Yes!” Chuma snapped. “What is it, Ify? I’m trying here. I’m really trying!”

“Not hard enough, Chuma. I don’t want you to admire me like a painting. Look, but don’t touch.”

“Ify—” A low cautionary sound.

“I want you to touch me—”

“Ify,” This time he sounded hoarse.

“I want you to kiss me—”

“Ify…” He made a move towards her.

“I want to feel your body pressed against me … inside me—”

“Ify!” Chuma growled, sounding like a wounded animal as he eliminated the distance between them and lifted Ifeoma forcefully into his arms. The blatant desire in his eyes as he carried her into his bedroom caused Ifeoma’s heart to

thud rapidly inside her chest, her bravado suddenly shaken.

∞

As soon as he got to the bedroom, Chuma put Ifeoma on her feet and gazed into her eyes with suppressed need. He wanted her so badly that his body trembled. Slowly, he lowered his head and fused his mouth with hers. Ifeoma opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue. He heard her moan as their tongues mated hungrily. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Ifeoma drew Chuma nearer. She wanted to feel every inch of his skin. Her hands became restless as she pulled at the edge of his shirt. He helped her take it off, interrupting their kiss briefly before he found her mouth again.

Ifeoma sighed with pleasure as her hands roamed over Chuma's chest and taut stomach. Their mouths and tongues continued to duel with each other. Chuma's body was masculine and potent, firm in all the right places. Her palm brushed against the sparse hairs on his chest, enjoying the feel against her palm. She heard his harsh intake of breath when she brushed her thumb over his nipple. She repeated the action on the other nipple, and she heard him swear.

"Oh, Ify," he groaned as he sucked her soft lower lip into his mouth. She tasted of ice cream, rum, and sweetness. Chuma crushed himself against her as his tongue explored the dark corners of her mouth. Intense desire burned in his blood and he needed to feel her skin. Chuma pulled Ifeoma's shirt off her body, once again breaking contact with her mouth.

"Turn for me," he murmured and Ifeoma complied, turning her back to him so he could unhook her white cotton bra. She turned towards him again and slipped it off, a shy smile playing on her lips. Chuma paused, his pupils dilating in awe. Ifeoma had the most stunning breasts he had ever seen. Large, round, firm and standing proudly in front of him. "You are beautiful!" Chuma whispered. "Do you hear me, Ify? You are beautiful…" He couldn't get enough of her breasts. Kissing, sucking, nicking, and licking them while she whimpered restlessly against him.

"Now, please.. I want you now," Ifeoma pleaded. The pressure was building

between her thighs, her panties soaked with the evidence of her need. She wanted more.

Quickly getting rid of the rest of their clothes, Chuma carried Ifeoma and placed her in the centre of his large bed. He took a moment to admire her naked body sprawled out on his bed, her arms lifted high above her head, her legs slightly apart. “I’ve dreamed of you like this so many times, Ify,” he murmured before joining her.

Reaching for the drawer by his bedside, he brought out a box of condoms and sheathed himself in one. Then Chuma gazed into her eyes. “You are perfect, Ify,” he groaned as he drove his rigid length into her, inch by delicious inch until he was buried to the hilt. He heard a long-drawn-out moan and his arousal intensified.

Beads of sweat settled on his forehead as he fought the instinct to pound his body into her. He needed to take this slow, but she was so warm and tight. Chuma closed his eyes at the surge of intense pleasure he felt and stilled himself, trying to give her time to adjust to him. Suddenly, Ifeoma flipped their position so that he was on his back and she was astride him. Startled, Chuma’s eyes snapped open and locked with hers. There was something in her eyes that made him pause. She needed this, to be in control. Relaxing in this position, he gave her all the control she needed.

He placed his hand on her hips as she began to move, slowly at first, moaning, her eyes rolling shut, her gorgeous breasts bouncing with each movement she made. Then her movement became quicker, her moans of pleasure sharper. She rode him fast and hard like she was chasing away ghosts from her past. Sensing that she was close, Chuma sat up and bit a hardened nipple before blowing on it. This drove her over the edge. “Chu—” She clamped her jaw shut to stop herself from crying out his name, ending the rest of her release with a throaty cry as her body quivered against his.

Watching Ifeoma come apart in his arms was the most sensual image Chuma had ever seen. She looked sated as she slumped against him. He was pleased that he brought her pleasure. Pleased, but not satisfied. Lifting her in his arms, Chuma carried her and pressed her back against the nearest wall. He was still buried deep inside her.

“Open your eyes and look at me,” he commanded. Her eyes fluttered open. Chuma ran his thumb over her nipples and then dragged it lower past her flat tummy. He finally settled his thumb against her sensitive nether nub. “Ohhhhh!” she moaned.

“What is my name?” he growled into her ear as he began moving inside her, his thumb continuing its wicked assault on her clit.

“What is my name?” His voice was harsher. Her eyes were glazed with passion; she shook her head. He pressed his thumb harder and she cried out in ecstasy.

“Say my name, Ify. Say my name,” he demanded, thrusting faster and deeper. Ifeoma gasped in surprise, she couldn’t believe pleasure was building up again. She was so close, so close.

“Say my name. Say it! Say it!” His movements within her more forceful, hitting all her nerve endings.

“Chuuuma!” Ifeoma cried. A shrill surprised cry as her body stilled. “Chuma. Chuma. Chuma,” she chanted, her body shuddering violently against him.

His name on her lips seemed to snap a fuse in his brain and Chuma moved like a madman against her. “Yes, Ify! Yes! Yes!” he roared. “That’s my name. Don’t forget it. Don't ever forget it!” he yelled as his body detonated his powerful release.

Chapter Fourteen

Waking up with a start, Ifeoma sat upright on the bed. She knew from the deep subconscious state of sleep that this was not her room. The bed was too soft and comfortable, the atmosphere too cold, and no mosquito buzzing sounds disturbed her sleep. She glanced at Chuma's sleeping form beside her and smiled. He snored quite loudly and with his face completely relaxed; he looked less formidable than he looked when awake and alert. The air-conditioner blew cold air directly on the bed, causing Ifeoma to shiver. She gently tugged at the blanket to cover her naked breasts, careful not to wake him.

He moved slightly, his snoring paused for a few seconds and Ifeoma kept still until he resumed snoring. Watching Chuma sleep, Ifeoma thought about the night before. Never had she imagined that she would experience so much pleasure from being with him. He had been so attentive to her needs, and he never stopped telling her that she was beautiful. They had finally stopped reaching for each other around two in the morning. Exhausted, they had fallen asleep almost simultaneously.

As she watched him sleep, a gradual panic rose within her. Oh, my God, what am I doing? She thought as a sudden overwhelming panic took over. This was exactly how her father controlled her mother. They lived in a small two-bedroom bungalow in Awka. Almost every night, Ifeoma and her sisters could hear their mother's moans and cries of pleasure. Even though they never talked about it, they all knew what was happening. Ifeoma knew that her mother waited patiently most nights for their father, and despite his horrible drunken physical and emotional abuse, she never seemed able to turn him away. Because of that, she associated sex with control. After Mr Chibundu attempted to rape her, she concluded that this was how men, controlled women.

However, something about last night and the way Chuma had given her the lead when she needed it, told her she might be wrong. She'd also seen him lose control and become vulnerable to her touch. He confused her, and she didn't know what to do with her feelings for him. All she was sure of was that she'd fallen deeply in love with him and he now had the power to dominate her. She vowed never to let that happen.

As she ruminated on the events of the night before, her anxiety grew. Her body still hummed with the aftershocks of what they had shared, red marks from his touch were still visible on her skin. She could not let him control her with this; she could not let him take over her life. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman, she thought hysterically. I have to be strong. I have to leave now. Her anxiety escalated into a full-blown attack, and she felt herself suffocating. Her heart beat frantically. Ifeoma swung her legs off the bed and scanned the room for her clothes.

Spotting her shorts, she stood up quietly and quickly put them on. Her gaze darted around searching for the rest of her clothes. She couldn't find her bra or her panties. Deciding she would just have to leave them in his apartment, she picked up her tank top lying on the floor beside the bed. She swiftly pulled it over her head, breathing heavily from the anxiety attack threatening to overcome her. She needed to escape now and take the first bus home. Oh, what do I tell my sisters? Ifeoma wondered anxiously, searching her mind for an excuse she could give for not coming home last night. Now dressed up, she tiptoed carefully towards the bedroom door. Perhaps, his car broke down and I—

"What are you doing, Ify?" Chuma's voice boomed from behind her, making her stop. She turned towards him, blood draining from her brain. She felt dizzy.

"Are you sneaking away?" He sat up, the blanket falling from his chest to just barely covering his groin.

"You think I am going to allow that?" Chuma looked incredulously at Ifeoma who was still frozen on the spot.

"You think after we have given each other the most pleasurable night of our lives, I'm going to let you sneak away and take the bus home like nothing ever happened?" he questioned her with an even tone.

Assuming it to be a rhetorical question, Ifeoma remained silent, and he didn't bother to wait for a response.

"You really don't know me, Ify." He sighed and ran his palm over his face. Chuma gazed intensely at Ifeoma. "Everything has changed now, Ify," Chuma said. "You can't run away from this." He pointed first to her and then to himself with his finger. "We are together now, okay?" His tone became gentler. "Okay? Okay?"

Ifeoma nodded, tears glistening in her eyes.

“I know that something in your head frightens you about giving yourself completely to me,” Chuma continued. “But I am frightened about the way you make me feel too.”

Ifeoma found it difficult to breathe. It must have been hard for him to admit that.

“Come to bed, Ify. It’s only six in the morning. We will get up in an hour, have breakfast, shower, and then I will drive you home, okay?”

She nodded in agreement again. Then she walked back to bed and lay beside him. Moving closer to her, Chuma wrapped his arm around her. “It’s okay, Ify,” he murmured, kissing her neck. “It will all be okay. I will take care of you.”

And that was exactly what she was worried about, relying on him to take care of her. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman.

∞

The canteen boomed with activity. Ifeoma was having a busy afternoon. Eight customers sat enjoying their lunch and one more customer had just walked in. Loretta jumped up from her stool to attend to the elderly man. Full of inner peace, Ifeoma whistled as she went about her chores.

It had been an amazing week with Chuma. Although he had not clearly defined their relationship, she knew that he cared about her a lot. She was happy with the way things were because she was afraid of placing a label on their relationship. Although, it was clear to everyone that things had changed; including Chuma’s sitting space. It was no longer in the far end corner, but right behind the serving counter with Ifeoma. He still dropped her off at home every night, and she’d finally allowed him to come up to her apartment to meet her sisters who were all so enthralled by him. Nene had not been present at the time, and Ifeoma had promised that he would get the chance to meet her soon.

Smiling as she thought about Chuma, Ifeoma served the latest customer to

arrive, some oha soup, goat meat and pounded yam. Chuma would be there at any moment. He usually showed up during lunchtime and she couldn't wait to see him.

"Landlord is here o," Oluchi announced, interrupting Ifeoma's blissful musings.

"What? Why?" Ifeoma asked, surprised. She had already paid the monthly rent and the monthly installment fee of her loan.

"I don't know what he wants, but he is standing outside asking to speak with you," Oluchi replied nonchalantly. Ifeoma washed her hands and wiped it on her apron. "Monitor things, Oluchi, I'll be back soon." She said as she made her way towards the front of the canteen.

Exhaling deeply as soon as she saw Mr Peters, Ifeoma squared her shoulders and walked up to him.

"Mr Peters, how are you, sir?" Ifeoma asked nervously. "Is something wrong with the money I paid?"

"Nothing!" he snapped, turning towards her.

Ifeoma gasped, placing her hand over her mouth. Mr Peters' face was badly bruised, and he had a broken lip and his right eye was swollen.

"What happened, Mr Peters? Are you okay?" Ifeoma asked, concerned.

"Don't ask me any question. This is a one-week eviction notice. You have one week to pack up and leave," Mr Peters replied bitingly. He was short, fat and had a protruding stomach. His bald head and thick moustache made him appear comical but the look in his eyes was not in any way amusing. His eyes were full of malice.

"What?" she exclaimed, terrified. She couldn't have heard him correctly. "I paid my rent—"

"I don't care! I want you out of this building by the end of the week or I will call the police."

"You can't do this, Mr Peters—"

“Yes, I can, and I have,” he interjected, spitefully. “I want all your property gone by the end of the week.”

“What about the money I owe you? I —”

“I don’t need you to pay me back. Just take your trouble and leave my life. Witch!” He shook his head. “All you yellow Igbo people, I should have known you are a witch wanting to ruin my life.”

“Mr Peters, please,” Ifeoma pleaded, getting down on her knees right there in the dirt. “Please, sir, I need this accommodation for my business. I have been paying you, sir. Please. Please.” Tears were now flowing freely from her eyes as she begged Mr Peters.

“What did I do wrong? I will fix it. I need this business for money to pay my rent, my sisters’ school fees—”

“That’s not my problem o,” Mr Peters muttered as he strolled away.

Ifeoma remained on her knees crying. She turned her face towards her beloved canteen and found everyone staring at her with pity. Oluchi ran out to her and embraced her.

“Everything will be okay,” she whispered, pulling Ifeoma from the floor. “We will survive.”

∞

It was hard for Chuma to watch. Parked on a discreet corner by Eastern Delight, he observed the scene as it unfolded. He felt like a monster because he had orchestrated the whole situation that was playing out before him. He gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles went pale. He hated being the cause of Ifeoma’s pain, but he didn’t see any other choice. This needed to be done. He couldn’t allow that evil man to continue to wield his power over her. Especially now that he knew the idiot had forced Ifeoma to perform oral sex on him twice. The first time, before he gave her a loan to start the business, and the second

time when she couldn’t pay it back on time. The man admitted it himself after Chuma paid him a visit with a few policemen who extracted information from him. It had taken a lot of self-control on his part not to throttle the little man right there. After ensuring that Mr Peters never bothered Ifeoma again, Chuma had walked out leaving him at the mercy of the policemen. To avoid jail time, Peters had agreed to forget the rest of the money Ifeoma owed him, and Chuma was the one who had insisted that he let Ifeoma off the lease contract for rent.

Nonetheless, it was still difficult to see Ifeoma in pain. When he saw her drop to her knees to beg that fool, Chuma had to physically restrain himself from jumping out of the car and pulling her into his arms. For the first time, he was glad for Oluchi who he’d considered a nuisance until today. Taking a deep breath in as Oluchi led a tearful Ifeoma back into the canteen, Chuma felt his throat constrict. Ifeoma meant the world to him and he would do anything to protect her. Anything. Even if it meant making her cry temporarily so that he could keep her safe from snakes like Mr Peters.

Chuma remained in the car for several minutes fighting the desire to rush into the restaurant and gather Ifeoma into his arms. Sighing deeply again, he turned on the ignition of his vehicle. He glanced one more time at Eastern Delight before he drove off from his hidden parking spot.

His drive back to work was smooth. And within thirty minutes, he was at the car park of his office building. Allowing himself to overcome his guilt for manipulating things to protect Ifeoma, Chuma climbed out of his car and strode up to his office. He had work to do. Somehow, work had not occupied his mind as much since meeting Ifeoma. A sure sign that she was meant for him.

∞

Ifeoma went through the motions of serving her customers. She could not believe that after months of putting all her effort into getting this canteen up and running, she was about to lose everything. It was like a bad dream that she couldn’t wake up from. She decided that she would keep this problem to herself because she did not want to bother her sisters until she could figure out her next course of action. She wouldn’t even tell Chuma. He would just offer her money,

which was his usual solution to any problem. She never wanted to be indebted to him.

“What are we going to do, madam?” Oluchi asked as they sat waiting for customers. It was late afternoon, the least busy time and only one customer was present.

“I really don’t know, Oluchi,” Ifeoma answered, trying not to cry again. “I will have to find another place to rent.”

“But why? You have a rich boyfriend; why can’t you ask him for money?”

Oluchi did not understand Ifeoma’s need for independence. As far as she was concerned, Ifeoma was not utilising her opportunities adequately.

“He is not my boyfriend—”

“I disagree o. The way you people exchange saliva here; he is your boyfriend.”

Despite her sorrow, Ifeoma laughed.

“If Mr Frown-face were my boyfriend, I would have my own Jeep by now,” Oluchi continued, her hand on her hip. “In fact, if he were my boyfriend, I would not be working here sef, I would stay at home and cook for him; and only him.”

“Well, he is not your boyfriend!” Ifeoma snapped, strangely territorial all of a sudden. “He is mine!”

“Oho!” Oluchi exclaimed with a knowing smile. “At last you finally admit it.” And they laughed.

A few hours after that exchange, Ifeoma spotted Chuma walking through the front door. At the sight of him, it felt like all the weight on her shoulders had been lifted away. She ran towards him, and jumped on him, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders as she slumped her body in his.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she murmured, kissing him all over his face. Elated by her greeting, Chuma held onto her tightly until finally, his mouth descended on hers and they kissed passionately.

“I’m going o,” Oluchi announced, interrupting them. “Loretta and I are leaving now.”

“Okay, thanks for today,” Ifeoma replied, burying her face in Chuma’s chest, slightly embarrassed that she’d forgotten all her reservations about public displays of affection.

“How was your day?” Chuma asked Ifeoma after Loretta and Oluchi had left. He silently wished that she would tell him about Mr Peter’s visit.

“It was busy, we had a lot of customers and…” Her voice broke.

“What is it, Ify?” Chuma asked hopefully. “I’m here now, it will be okay.”

“Nothing really, Chuma, it was just so busy … and I missed you. You didn’t show up this afternoon.” She muttered, her voice quivering.

Chuma was filled with disappointment. Did she not trust him to protect her?

“I was stuck at work,” he answered, avoiding her eyes. He knew he was a terrible liar. His family could always tell when he was being dishonest.

“Are you hungry? Should I get you something?”

“No, Ify. I ate at work,” he replied.

A small smile twisted the corner of Chuma’s lips as he bent down and picked the gift bag that Ifeoma had knocked out of his hands when she ran towards him. Then he handed the bag to her.

“What is it?” she asked, reaching for the bag.

“Open it.” Chuma waited for her to open it. He was a giver, but, unfortunately for him, Ifeoma was not a taker. No matter how many gifts he gave her, she declined most of them. It made him exasperated with her.

“It’s a dress! And shoes! Oh, Chuma, they are so pretty. Thanks.” She touched her lips to his.

“Wear them; we are going for a ride.”

“You mean I should put them on now?” she enquired softly, surprised.

“Yes, now,” he responded. “I will wait for you. Fix your hair, too.”

Excited and curious, Ifeoma went into the serving area and changed into the lovely red and silver strapless dress and three-inch silver sandals with straps. She took off the scarf covering her hair and let her hair fall loosely down her shoulders. Opening her purse, she brought out her lipstick and reapplied the shiny red coating to her lips before dusting some powder over her face.

Chuma held his breath when she stepped out. She was stunning. Like a runway model. Tall and gorgeous. The dress clung to her slim toned body, emphasising her breasts and the slight curve of her hips. Her lipstick made her mouth look pouty, and her hair let down, framed her oval-shaped face perfectly. With the high heel shoes on her feet, she was as tall as he was. Ifeoma smiled seductively at him. His penis stood at immediate attention. Hot damn!

“Oh, God, Ify,” Chuma murmured hoarsely. “I want to rip that dress off you and find the nearest flat surface.”

“Later, Chuma, later,” she said, turning her back to him. “Zip please.”

Staring at the expanse of flesh exposed by the unzipped dress, Chuma’s mouth watered. He swept his tongue across her back before fastening the zip with shaky fingers. She wriggled her bottom against his groin.

“Damn, Ify, you are killing me,” he grumbled, his lips twisting into a crooked smile. “Don’t play with fire, sweetheart.”

“I’m a cook, Chuma, I’m always playing with fire.”

Chuma laughed. He had never felt happier in his life.

Ifeoma followed him out of the canteen and locked up, not bothering to tidy up or do inventory. She would just have to come in earlier tomorrow and sort it out. All she could think about now was being with Chuma. He made her so happy.

“Where are we going?” Ifeoma asked Chuma, excitement sparking in her voice. She had forgotten all about her predicament.

“Now, what kind of surprise would it be if I told you?” Chuma replied glancing sideways at her. He was trying not to drive too fast because he was excited and nervous at the same time.

“Just a little hint,” she persisted.

“Okay, we are going to a restaurant.”

“As long as I am with you, I don’t care where we go.”

Chuma’s heart expanded. This woman had him by the balls. Simple statements like that from her made him feel like a king who owned the world. I am in love with her! The realisation struck him suddenly. Although he was one hundred percent sure she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, he hadn’t considered love as an important part of the deal. He didn’t even believe in the notion of love. It was messy, and it made men and women do stupid things. Yet, here he was, ecstatic about his love for this twenty-five-year-old woman, who was not even his type. Now, she was no longer just his type, she was his only type.

A few minutes after they left the restaurant, they arrived at their destination. Chuma led her out of the jeep towards a building. Ifeoma followed closely beside him, holding his hand. She stopped when she saw the sign that said Eastern Delight hoisted on the ground floor of a three-storey complex building. Puzzled, she turned towards Chuma.

“What’s going on?”

“Just follow me,” Chuma said, leading her into the building.

Ifeoma froze as soon as she stepped inside. It was a beautiful modern restaurant with mahogany tables and chairs neatly arranged, silk table clothes spread across the tables and lovely floral arrangements on the centre of each table.

“Follow me to the kitchen,” Chuma said. Before she could respond to his prompting, he took her hand and led her to an even more fascinating kitchen where three yam pounders, multiple fancy kitchen equipments, including two large cookers, were strategically placed.

“I bought what I think you need but we can add anything else that you want,”

Chuma was saying, but Ifeoma hardly heard a thing. Her mind was reeling from shock.

“Ifeoma Okafor, this is all yours,” he said, holding out a bunch of keys towards her. “All paid for in your name.”

Ifeoma was still speechless, her eyes widened in astonishment, her heart fluttering.

“Ify, I was there this afternoon. I know about Mr Peters. Trust me, he will never bother you again. I will never let anyone hurt you again.”

Getting down on a knee, Chuma brought out a box from his shirt pocket. He opened it and Ifeoma gasped. A huge diamond ring dazzled her vision.

“Will you marry me, Ify?” he asked simply because he was a simple man. Always direct, he did not know how to use any other approach.

She stared blankly at him for a few seconds, then turned and fled.

Cursing, Chuma got to his feet speedily and pursued her. He caught her in his arms before she could get far. They were in the middle of the empty restaurant.

“Let go of me!” she screeched. Chuma dropped his hands. Ifeoma escaped his embrace and began to pace the room.

“You were there this afternoon? How do you know about Mr Peters?” Ifeoma questioned, panting heavily from the emotions surging through her.

“I found out about him, about what he did to you, I’m sorry for what he did. He will never bother you again.” Chuma’s tone was calm, even though he felt the direct opposite.

Ifeoma paused her pacing as if suddenly having an epiphany.

“Mr Peters … his face … did you … did you do it?” she asked, eyeing Chuma sceptically.

“Not personally, but I was there when it happened.” Chuma did not bother to conceal that truth. “I wanted them to do worse, to break his neck.”

“Did you tell him to… to—”

“Yes! Ifeoma, yes!” Chuma answered indignantly. “I told him to stay away from you.” He noticed the repulsion on Ifeoma’s face, and then added. “I don’t regret it, I don’t apologise. I will do anything to protect you.”

“Protect me!” she cried in disbelief. “You think losing the restaurant I worked so hard for is protecting me?” Ifeoma shook with the rage that swept through her entire body. Chuma said nothing.

“You are a controlling, manipulative asshole, and I will never marry you!” Ifeoma pointed angrily at him as she spoke.

Flinching inwardly at her words, Chuma remained still. A deep-seated fear that he was losing her made his insides burn. Many women had called him an asshole. It was nothing new. Until now, he had actually thought nothing of being called that because he knew it was the truth. Even his family frequently called him an asshole. But hearing it coming from Ifeoma’s mouth was like a knife to his heart.

“I did all of this for you! Ify, can’t you see that?”

Chuma drew closer to Ifeoma, desperate to make her see how much she meant to him. He couldn’t lose her. She backed away.

“No, you did it for yourself. To control me. I will not allow you to control me!” she snarled, her nostrils flaring. Just then, the front door to the restaurant burst open.

“Congratulations!”

The loud sound of cheering from the door interrupted them. Ifeoma and Chuma glanced simultaneously at the entrance.

Nnamdi, Adaora, Chioma, and Ngozi walked in cheering loudly with flowers and champagne bottles in their hands. Adaora held a big banner with congratulations on your engagement written boldly across it. They seemed to halt in unison as soon as they properly observed the expressions on Ifeoma and Chuma’s faces.

“You got my sisters involved?” Ifeoma turned towards Chuma, unable to keep the fury from her voice.

“I wanted to make this a wonderful night for you, believe me, Ify, I did this all for you,” Chuma replied, running his palm over his shaved head. The vein at the side of his head became more prominent. Ifeoma had come to learn that this vein always gave away his true emotions even when he appeared composed.

“Should we leave?” Adaora asked hesitantly. The atmosphere was awkward and full of tension.

“No, I’ll leave,” Ifeoma said, her tone low, her eyes not straying from Chuma’s face. “Stay away from me,” she said to him as she took off her shoes and ran out into the night, leaving Chuma staring after her.

∞

Ifeoma ran as fast as her legs would carry her. Ignoring the stares of the people she passed on the street, she kept going. She was not sure where she was headed, but she knew that wherever that was, it needed to be as far away from Chuma as possible.

Finally, she stopped when she came to the end of an unknown road. She sat on the ground and tried to catch her breath.

How could Chuma think he was doing her any good by ruining the life she had created for herself? How? And to think that her sisters were aware of his plans? Did they not know her at all? She felt betrayed in the worst possible way. She needed to talk to someone. Only one person came to mind. Ifeoma picked up her phone from her bag and glanced at the screen. There were multiple missed calls from Chuma and Chioma.

Ignoring the missed calls, she scrolled to Nene’s number and dialled it. Nene picked up on the second ring.

“Congratulations, Ify,” Nene said in a cheery voice. “Chioma told me about Mr

Frown-face's plans to propose to you tonight."

"You know too?" Ifeoma couldn't believe how fast this news had spread. Chuma must have been so confident that she would agree to his marriage proposal. But, how could he? After pulling such a stunt? Ifeoma felt anger begin to rise within her again. Who does he think he is?

"Yes, she told me this morning, and she said the rock is huge." Nene's reply interrupted Ifeoma's angry thoughts.

"I am not engaged, Nene."

"What? Why? Did you say no to him? Are you crazy?" Nene sounded incredulous.

Ifeoma heard Nene's heavy sigh over the phone before her next question, "do you want to talk about it?" Ifeoma nodded, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Yes. Nene, tell me where you live. I need to see you."

"I'll pick you up now. Tell me where you are."

"What! You have a car? How? When?"

She heard Nene laugh. "Just tell me where you are, big sis, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Ifeoma told Nene where to find her and she was there in twenty minutes. She switched off her phone because Chuma was still calling. Then she climbed into the front seat of Nene's Mercedes-Benz.

"Big Lagos chic," Ifeoma commented when they arrived at Nene's well-furnished two-bedroom apartment. Curious, Ifeoma pranced around staring at happy photographs of Nene and General Okonkwo hung over the magenta walls of her apartment. She had never been to Nene's apartment or met General Okonkwo, so Ifeoma was surprised to discover that General Okonkwo was young and attractive. More so, the fact that Nene appeared happy with him stunned Ifeoma. She looked at a particular picture where the General regarded Nene as if she was the centre of his world. Ifeoma felt her throat tighten. There was so much love in his eyes.

“Ify, I know that he is married, and it’s wrong, but I love him,” Nene muttered, standing beside Ifeoma.

“But how can you be comfortable knowing he belongs to someone else?” Ifeoma still could not understand.

“I try not to think about her. When he is with me, I am so happy.”

Ifeoma followed Nene into the living room, which had a large flat television screen. They both sat down on one of the comfortable sofas.

“He is so good to me and I know you think he locks me up, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t want me to work because he is trying to protect me,” Nene continued.

“How can you say that?” Ifeoma asked, bewildered. Was Nene so naïve that she couldn’t tell it was all a game?

“His wife is terminally sick with cancer. He can’t leave her now. They have two children,” Nene answered. “He doesn’t want the public to know about me because he doesn’t want to bring shame to his family.”

Ifeoma tried to digest this information, to give it merit, but she couldn’t. However, it was obvious that her sister was deeply in love with this General Okonkwo fellow. All she could do was support her and hope she didn’t eventually get hurt.

“Nene, you are grown. I’m sorry for not being there for you. I’m sorry for judging you,” Ifeoma said solemnly. She should have been there for Nene. They all went through a difficult time growing up and she should have made more of an effort to support her sister. Even if she did not agree with her choices.

Nene reached out and embraced Ifeoma. “I know what I’m doing is wrong. I just don’t know how to stop loving him.” Her honesty pulled at Ifeoma’s heart.

“I hope things work out for you, I really do.” And she meant it.

They stayed in each other’s arms for a few more minutes before moving apart.

“Let’s text Chioma and Ngozi to let them know you are okay,” Nene said with a smile. “They have been blasting my phone with calls.” Ifeoma laughed, and

Nene sent a quick text telling her other sisters that Ifeoma was okay, and was spending the night with her.

When Nene was done with sending the text message, the two of them sat on a brown leather sofa and snacked on boiled groundnuts while watching a Nigerian movie. A few scenes into the movie, Nene glanced sideways at Ifeoma.

“Do you love him?” she asked her.

Ifeoma could feel her eyes flooding with tears. Nene reached for her and pulled her close.

“It is scary, I know,” Nene crooned, rubbing Ifeoma’s back gently.

“He bought me a restaurant,” Ifeoma said, drawing comfort from her sister’s touch. She didn’t want to be strong tonight.

“I know, and he bought a three-bedroom apartment for us, too, on Badagry road.” Ifeoma froze.

“What did you say?”

Nene took a deep breath and sighed. “Ify, he called Chioma and Ngozi this morning. He visited them at their university and asked them for permission to marry you.” Nene paused, her lips twisting into an amused half smile, then said, “After all, you told him our parents are dead.”

Ifeoma cringed as she recollected her lie to Chuma about their parents. She fidgeted, waiting for Nene to continue.

“He bought a well-furnished three-bedroom apartment for me, Chioma and Ngozi. Each room has its own bathroom and toilet. The kitchen is massive, and the sitting room too.” Ifeoma’s breath was coming in short spurts as Nene spoke. “I haven’t been there,” Nene said, answering the question in Ifeoma’s mind. “Chioma sent me the pictures via email. I have them on my laptop.”

Without asking for permission, Nene jumped to her feet and brought out her laptop. Ifeoma remained silent, her head still unable to process the information Nene had just shared with her.

“He wanted to surprise you, Ify. I knew that it was a terrible idea, but it sounded very romantic, so I kept quiet,” Nene carried on as she switched on the computer. They waited in silence for a few seconds before it came on. And when it did, Nene browsed through her emails and opened the pictures.

“Oh, God, Chuma,” Ifeoma gasped. The apartment was lovely, beyond what she ever expected for herself or her siblings.

“Ify, I know that the idea of depending on him or any man for that matter, frightens you, but you can’t let what dad did to mum and to us keep you from finding your own happiness.” Nene’s voice was grave. “I sometimes wonder if that is why I’m still with General Okonkwo, if somehow, I feel that the little love I get from him is worth the pain from when he leaves me to go back to his wife.”

Ifeoma glanced at her sister, whose eyes were wet with unshed tears.

“Ify, the truth is that loving someone does not always mean losing yourself,” Nene said with surprising intuition. “You are not mummy; you are a strong woman.”

Later that night, as Ifeoma lay awake in bed, unable to sleep, she pondered what Nene had said to her. Chuma was not like her father. He was controlling, yes. Obsessive, yes. Domineering and manipulative, absolutely yes! But he was also kind and extremely loyal. He defended his family with vigour and brawl. Never once had she felt frightened in his presence. She always felt safe with him. A smile crossed her lips as she thought about how wonderful it had felt to see him earlier that evening when he walked into the canteen. She’d now come to depend on his silent strength to get her through the day. Ifeoma realised with a sudden pang that she needed him as much as she loved him. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman.

And for the first time, that thought brought her comfort.

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Chuma focused his attention on two teenage boys riding their bicycles down the

street laughing and talking as they rode around in circles. Exactly the way he was feeling. His mind whirled around in a cycle of consternation.

“I have never seen you like this, Chuma,” Nnamdi muttered, handing Chuma a bottle of beer. They were lounging on Nnamdi’s apartment balcony that faced the street.

“It’s been two days, Nnamdi, two days,” Chuma brushed his face with his hand. “I can’t get her on the phone, she won’t even talk to me.”

“You’ve got to give her time to—”

“No!” Chuma snapped. “She is stranded; she has a few days to leave the canteen. I can’t let that happen.”

“So, what are you going to do, bro? Force her to talk to you? Force her to marry you?” Nnamdi asked, amusement ringing in his voice. “Chuma, you have to realise that you can’t always control everything.”

“I know that, damn it! If I could, I wouldn’t be here, would I?” His tone was sarcastic.

“But, Chuma, why? Why?” Adaora who had been sitting silently this whole time chimed in. They both turned their heads towards her.

“Why can’t you be normal for once? I mean, meet a girl, date her, and then ask her to marry you? Why do you always have to manipulate things to suit you?”

“You are not being helpful here, Ada,” Nnamdi remarked.

“No, let her finish,” Chuma said, turning fully to face Adaora.

“How did you think forcing her to lose her canteen was going to go down, eh?” Adaora took a sip of her wine before continuing, “or buying property for her sisters without asking her? What I’m saying is that women like to be included in these decisions you know.” She carried on without waiting for a reply now that she had the platform to speak her mind. “As your siblings, we know you did everything you did because you love her, but does she know that?”

Chuma twisted his lips. Adaora had a point. He had never mentioned the word

love because he never thought Ifeoma needed to hear it. Love was never a word he used with anyone simply because he believed that actions were more powerful than the word itself. And besides, he'd never been in love before Ifeoma.

"Women need to hear the words, you know," Adaora said as if she read his thoughts. "Chuma, Chuma, Chuma …" She shook her head as she repeated his name. "You need a class on romance."

Nnamdi and Chuma glanced at each other and then burst into laughter.

"What?" Adaora questioned, puzzled.

"Women and romance," Nnamdi teased, still laughing.

"Keep laughing instead of taking notes," Adaora continued, refusing to be derailed.

"Buy her flowers, Chuma, send her a box of chocolates, and for goodness' sake, tell the woman that you love her. Igbo man, that is simple Romance 101. Even daddy knows how to court Mama Uzo better."

The room was quiet for a few seconds after Adaora's last words, then the three of them splintered into uncontrollable laughter.

Feeling in better spirits after he left Nnamdi's apartment, Chuma drove straight to a floral shop and bought a bouquet of mixed flowers. Having never bought flowers for a woman before, he did not know what to pick. The florist advised a mixture of roses, bougainvillea, and lilies. On the card, he wrote, forgive me, Ify. I love you. He also added a box of dark chocolates to his purchase. Then smiling because he realised that he was about to do something he assumed only silly men did, Chuma drove home, humming to the soul music floating from the car stereo.

The plan was for him to go and find Ifeoma later that night, and saturate her with flowers, gifts, words of love, and any other romantic gestures Adaora had come up with. She belonged to him and he couldn't live without her. It was as simple as that. But before that, he needed to go home and shower and change his clothes.

Chuma parked his jeep in the garage and got out. He held the bouquet of flowers

in one hand and the box of chocolates in the other. He was walking towards the front entrance of his apartment building when he saw her. His dark eyes locked with Ifeoma's brown eyes. She was smiling uncertainly.

Chuma's heart pounded wildly in his chest, and he remained frozen. Before he could gather his wits, Ifeoma raced towards him and jumped into his arms sending the chocolate box and flowers flying out of his hands.

Chuma wrapped his arms around her tightly.

"Oh, God, Ify!" he rasped. "I love you!"

"Chuma!" she cried, kissing him all over his face. "You are stubborn. You are controlling. Arrogant. Manipulative. Loyal. Kind. Protective. Generous. And I love you. I love you. I love you." She said each word between kisses.

Laughing, he twirled her around, and when he finally brought her down, he pressed his mouth against hers. She kissed him back fervently until they had to separate to get some much-needed air into their lungs. They panted and breathed heavily, gazing into each other's eyes.

"You are not an asshole, Chuma. I'm sorry for saying that," Ifeoma murmured.

"Actually, I am. Ify, I'm also sorry for not telling you what I was doing." He placed his forehead on hers. "I love you, Ify, I did all that because I love you."

"I know, Chuma. It was just too overwhelming."

"Well, I'm about to overwhelm you even more, my dear Ify," Chuma said with a half-smile. "You are moving into my apartment tonight, you will accept the restaurant because it's yours, and we are getting married in two weeks."

Ifeoma giggled. "Two weeks? How can we even plan a wedding in two weeks?"

"Oh, I will do anything to put a ring on that finger," he said lifting her left hand and placing a kiss on her ring finger. "The sooner the better."

"My sisters, I can't leave them…." she muttered, suddenly anxious.

"I spoke to them, Ify, they want you out. They want you to live your own life.

They have the apartment I got them, they can also visit us whenever they like."

Sensing that she needed more convincing, he added, "I will look after them; they are my sisters now." That seemed to do it because she finally relaxed against him.

"Oh, Chuma, you are right, I am overwhelmed!" Ifeoma cried, ecstatic. "I am overwhelmingly in love with you."

As she looked over his shoulders, she noticed the flowers on the ground and the box of chocolates that had burst open with chocolate pieces scattered on the floor.

"Those flowers had better be for me," she said half teasingly, half seriously.

"No other woman deserves flowers from me," Chuma answered, glad to hear the tinge of jealousy in Ifeoma's voice. His spunky Ifeoma was back to him. He loved it. Taking her hand in his, he picked up the flowers and the box of chocolates, balancing them awkwardly in his other hand. Then he handed her the bouquet. She smiled and brushed her lips against his.

"Later, I will tell you the story of how I came to buy flowers for the first time in my life," Chuma said to Ifeoma as he led her into his apartment building. She chuckled happily in response.

PART TWO

LIFE AFTER LOVE - Confronting Ghosts

Almost 5 years later…

Chapter Fifteen

Chuma glanced at the divorce papers on his desk and shook his head. A sensation of rage and dread ran through him. Ifeoma had really done it! She had sent divorce papers this morning through a scrawny lawyer who showed up at his office. If she thinks I am going to sign these papers, she doesn't know me well enough, he thought with a bitter taste in his mouth. There was no way in the world that he was going to divorce her. In fact, he had let this separation go too far and now it was time to put an end to this nonsense.

He picked up his phone and dialled a number, then he waited.

"It's time to set my plan in motion."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Chuma?"

"As sure as I am of my name being Chuma Obi!"

"Once done, it can never be undone. And if she finds out—"

"I will do anything to keep my family. Anything."

"Okay, Chuma, I'll begin the process."

Chuma ended the call and sighed. How had things come to this? Everything had come tumbling down. His perfect life was shattered. Scratching his shaved scalp, he thought about what he was about to do. Although he knew that it had to be done to bring Ifeoma back to her senses and back to him, if she ever found out that he was behind it, she would never forgive him. Yet, he had to go ahead with it. The divorce papers on his table were an indication that he had to step in. That he had to be the old Chuma he had been trying so hard not to be. He was never a man who waited for things to happen; he made them happen.

It had been three months since she walked out on him. Three months since she ran out of this same office and out of his life. She had caught him in a compromising situation. He should have known better; he should have never

allowed himself to be in that position in the first place. It was just that at the time, he'd been vulnerable. He'd felt like he had nowhere to turn. She had shut him out completely. He had just wanted to be needed, if even for a moment. Chuma had berated himself every day since, and if he could turn back the hands of time, he would never have allowed Sandra to get that close to him.

Believing that he deserved Ifeoma's rage, he had let her go. But he had also hoped that she would eventually cool off and want to talk things over. He had given her time to do so, only for a day to turn into a week, and a week into months, and now it had been months and she was serving him with divorce papers. No, it was time for them to face each other. Time to face their grief and demons together. They had gotten into this marriage speedily because the first time Chuma saw Ifeoma, he had known that he wanted her in his life. He had manipulated her life to ensure that she had no other choice but to marry him. He did not mind doing the same thing to make sure that she came back to him. That was the only way that he knew how to operate. It was how he had been raised… no, forced…from an early age to take control of life. His childhood had not afforded him the chance to be a boy with no cares in the world. While that made him the successful businessman that he was today, it was also the reason for his many failed relationships. He had no true friends, and his family was always wary of him. Until he met Ifeoma.

Ifeoma had cracked his tough exterior and brought out his boyish nature. Now, he smiled, he was more relaxed, and he even laughed when something was very funny.

Chuma focused his gaze on the computer screen in front of him, but could not see what was on the screen. The visit from the lawyer had disrupted his morning and there was no point pretending that he was all right. He switched off the computer and closed the files sitting in front of him on his desk. And with that, he stood, picked up his briefcase and walked out of his office.

"I'm heading out," he told his secretary, Bola. Bola was the woman he had hired to replace his former secretary, Sandra. She was much older and was good at her job. But most importantly, he did not find her in the least bit attractive, just the way he wanted it.

"Do you want me to transfer any calls to your mobile?" she asked.

“No, I am a ghost today,” Chuma said with a wry smile and she nodded.

He drove directly to the gym where, for the past six months, he had spent most of his evenings attempting to work out his frustrations on the punching bag. It helped him to feel better by releasing the tension in his muscles and making him believe that he could face whatever was thrown at him, even if that feeling lasted only for a few hours. Throwing the full force of his emotions into punching the bag hanging from the ceiling, Chuma tried to forget the day Ifeoma left him.

Chapter Sixteen

It was raining heavily. Ifeoma hurriedly made her way to the restaurant from the car park. She shook off the excess water from her umbrella and cleaned her feet against the foot mat. It was Friday morning, and she needed to check to make sure that the cooks had prepared the meals to her specifications. It was not that she didn't trust them, she did. It was just that she hated to give up control completely. She had hired two cooks for the new restaurant; Effiong Bassey and Bisola. They were both excellent cooks, especially Effiong Bassey who was the lead chef. He was a thirty-year-old chef whom Ifeoma had hired initially on a trial basis. She had employed him as a permanent chef just a year ago. He had learnt her cooking methods exactly and quickly, so that the taste that her customers had come to associate with Eastern Delight, and with her cooking, had remained untarnished, even though she was no longer the one doing the cooking. Bisola the assistant chef, was also good. She was eager to learn, and Ifeoma liked that she had dreams of owning her own restaurant in the future.

"Madam Ify, someone dropped off another letter for you o," Oluchi said as soon as Ifeoma got into the small office she used when she was at the restaurant. Oluchi had stayed on as manager of Eastern Delight, and Loretta was now the assistant manager.

Ifeoma felt the heat under her armpits. It happened every time she got one of these letters. This was the third one so far this month. They were arriving more frequently now.

"Who is sending you these letters sef?" Oluchi asked, handing Ifeoma the letter. "I saw it on the floor as soon as I opened the restaurant gate this morning."

"Nobody," Ifeoma replied sharply. Then immediately regretted the harshness of her tone. "An old friend," she added in a gentler tone.

She put the letter aside and turned to Oluchi.

"How much profit did we make this week?"

“Thirty-eight thousand.”

“Great, we need to deposit the money in the bank later today,” Ifeoma said. She usually deposited the profits from the restaurant every Friday into a business account. At the end of the month after paying the regular staff, Ifeoma, Oluchi, and Loretta divided the rest based on prearranged percentages. So far, they were doing okay.

“All right then, let me get some work done,” Ifeoma said. She wanted Oluchi out of the room, so she could open the letter in peace.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Oluchi replied, shutting the door behind her as she exited.

Alone now, Ifeoma sighed and opened the letter. Just as she had suspected, it was the same handwritten note:

Dear Mrs Chibundu,

How is my wife?

Don’t forget you are still married to me.

What is hidden must come to light.

Love,

Your true husband.

The first letter had arrived about six months ago. A strange man had delivered it to her home. The letter had frightened her tremendously because she had never told Chuma about her past with Mr Chibundu and the fact that he had actually paid her bride price. According to the Igbo tradition, even though no ceremony had been performed before she ran away with her sisters, she was still married to

Mr Chibundu, unless her father returned the bride price money. Knowing her father, Ifeoma was certain that it had never even occurred to him to do so. Consumed by fear, guilt, and sorrow, she had withdrawn into a shell. In a catatonic state, she had cut off everyone around her.

Ifeoma's throat tightened with sorrow as she recalled that day after receiving the letter. She subconsciously placed her hand on the locket she wore around her neck. It contained a picture of Ekene. She wore it every day. The chubby and gorgeous little toddler whom she and Chuma had created. Her pride and joy. Tears fell from her eyes at the memory of him. She could never forget. She wiped away the tears with the back of her hand and took a deep breath.

As she had been doing for the past six months, Ifeoma buried her feelings inside her, stood up, and straightened her shoulders. She had learnt how to be strong by dealing with her abusive father over several years. In some ways, she was grateful for the ways in which his treatment had toughened her up. The last time she had allowed herself any weakness, she had driven her husband into the arms of another woman. This time, she was determined to stay strong. Ifeoma shredded the letter and left her office.

"Madam, welcome," Bisola greeted her when Ifeoma walked into the kitchen. She was stirring a pot on the cooker.

"Thank you," Ifeoma replied absentmindedly, picking up a ladle. She dipped it into the pot and tasted the soup. She nodded her approval, impressed by her chefs. They were getting better every day.

"Great job, Bisola," Ifeoma said, commending her. Looking around the kitchen, Ifeoma inspected all the other pots on the cooker. Everything appeared satisfactory. The restaurant opened at noon and they seemed to be ahead of schedule, which was a good thing.

"Where is Effiong?" Ifeoma asked, taking over frying the meat.

"He is outside pounding yam," Bisola replied. Ifeoma smiled. Effiong, Effiong, Effiong! He was such a traditionalist. He hated using the electric yam pounders because, as he explained it to her, the yam did not come out smooth enough. So, he preferred to use the old method of pounding with a mortar and pestle. On some level, Ifeoma agreed with him, but, still, it was hard work. The number of customers she now had was triple what she had at the little old canteen. She

would much rather he used the machines since doing so was easier and more efficient in her view.

“Well, if he insists on using his muscles to pound yam, who are we to stop him?” Ifeoma muttered, amused.

“And he has sexy muscles, too,” Oluchi who had just walked in, said with a sigh. Ifeoma simply shook her head and laughed.

This was not the first time that Oluchi was commenting on Effiong’s looks. She had begun to have this dreamy expression on her face ever since he began working there. Effiong, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to Oluchi’s admiration. His only focus was running the kitchen.

“Oluchi, but he is not your type,” Ifeoma remarked. “He is not rich.”

“A woman needs two types of boyfriends,” Oluchi responded, her tone serious as she dispensed what she considered words of wisdom. “The one that is fine and good in bed, the chewing gum boyfriend, and the one you simply marry for his money.”

She paused, a dreamy expression in her eyes, and then she added, “Effiong can be my chewing gum boyfriend while I search for a rich husband.”

Ifeoma and Bisola burst into laughter.

“Biko, don’t distract him o, he is a superb chef. I don’t want to lose him because of woman palava,” Ifeoma said, placing pieces of fried fish into a large plastic food warmer.

“He needs distraction, he is wound too tight,” Oluchi countered, a small smile playing on her lips. “I know just how to unwind him.”

Effiong walked in seconds after that statement and Ifeoma noticed Oluchi’s embarrassment as Oluchi scurried away. Ifeoma and Bisola burst into laughter again.

“What? What’s funny and why did she rush off?” Effiong asked, perplexed. Ifeoma shook her head. Effiong really never noticed what went on around him.

“Nothing, she is on her period,” Ifeoma lied and Effiong scrunched his face in disgust. “I hate working with too many women,” he grumbled, causing Ifeoma and Bisola to laugh again.

Before long, the restaurant opened and was in full swing. It was busy. Ifeoma loved it. Being busy prevented her from thinking about her grief, her failed marriage, and her secrets. She was afraid that Mr Chibundu would reveal them. He obviously knew where she was. And instead of confronting her, he was taunting her with letters.

That was the reason why she had sent the divorce papers to Chuma.

Even though Chuma had hurt her with his infidelity, she didn’t want to hurt him with her secrets. If they were already divorced, then her being married to Mr Chibundu wouldn’t hurt him. It had been four days since she had sent the divorce papers to Chuma. She had still not heard anything back from him. He had not even acknowledged her petition, and her lawyer hadn’t heard from him either.

She sighed. Today was not the day to think about this. She planned to wait a few more days and then call him. Her heart skipped a beat when she thought about hearing Chuma’s voice again. She had not seen or heard from him in three months.

“Madam, someone is here looking for you,” a waitress told Ifeoma, interrupting her thoughts.

“Who is it?” she asked. She was not expecting any visitors. Her sisters always texted before they visited the restaurant, and Nene was still in hospital.

“I don’t know, he is wearing a suit and said he is from the government,” Lillian, the waitress replied. Ifeoma’s pulse quickened as she put the spoon down and removed her apron. Effiong took over her task without being asked.

“Go, I’ll take care of everything,” he said, simply. Ifeoma left the kitchen and walked towards the man standing near the entrance to the restaurant. She instinctively knew he was the visitor because he looked out of place and wore a grey suit.

“Hello, how can I help you?” she asked the man as soon as she got to him. She

did not recognise him. Was he Chuma's divorce lawyer? Her heart skipped a beat. Was their marriage finally over? Ifeoma dreaded to think that it was, even though she was the one who had filed for the divorce.

"Are you Mrs Ifeoma Obi?" the man asked. His tone was wry as if he was bored.

"Yes, and you are?"

"I am Mr Farouk Ibrahim," he said, showing Ifeoma his identity badge. Ifeoma inspected it closely. "I work for Nigerian Inland Revenue Service, and we need to talk," the man continued.

Shaking slightly, Ifeoma nodded and led the man into her office.

"I am not sure what this is about—" she began when they were both seated. Her office was a small simple room with a single window facing the street and a ceiling fan. A small desk sat in the centre of the room separating two cushioned chairs. There was a desktop computer placed strategically on the desk, allowing just enough space for a few other files. Ifeoma had bought the computer a few months ago to help with her university studies when she stayed late at work. She also found it useful to upload the restaurant documents. On the floor was a printer attached to the computer, and a shredder right next to it.

"It's about the taxes that you owe the government," he said as he opened the briefcase he was holding in his hand. He brought out some documents and held them out to Ifeoma who took them from him with shaky fingers. Her stomach roiled with trepidation.

Ifeoma went through the documents and gasped at the total amount of tax she owed stated at the bottom of the page.

"Five million Naira!" she exclaimed. The man simply nodded.

"You have paid nothing since this business began four years ago. Even the set-up business tax has not been paid. It has accumulated," he said, throwing Ifeoma into a state of panic.

"I don't have that kind of money … my husband … my estranged husband, he bought me this restaurant. I did not handle any of the transactions. I—"

“Listen, madam, I am not here to ask questions, I’m only here to collect the money. This restaurant is registered in your name, isn’t it?” he enquired.

“Yes, but I—”

“Well, you have two weeks to pay up or we shut down the restaurant and put it up for sale,” he interrupted, handing Ifeoma some more papers. “Don’t forget that people go to jail for this kind of stuff. I suggest you get the money as fast as possible.” The man stood up and picked up his briefcase. “Have a nice day,” he said.

Ifeoma sat still. What just happened? This is unbelievable! How could this have happened? How could Chuma not pay the taxes?

Placing her fingers on her temple to relieve the pressure there, Ifeoma studied the documents again. They looked accurate. She owed the government five million Naira, and she had just two weeks to pay it or she would lose the restaurant. Where was she going to get that kind of money? She had enrolled in online classes at the university and was already paying the expensive fees; she had to pay rent since she had moved out of the home she shared with Chuma, and there was Nene.

She was paying for expensive inpatient psychiatric care for her ever since Nene had gone into a deep depression following the end of her affair with General Okonkwo. And she had her employees to think about. She couldn’t let them down. They all depended on her. Her other siblings, Chioma and Ngozi, were in their final year. Chuma had already covered tuition costs for them, but she still sent them a little something every month.

Ifeoma was still pondering her options when a soft knock at the door brought her out of her thoughts.

“Come in,” she answered, scrambling to hide the documents she was still holding. It was Oluchi.

“What did that man want?” Oluchi asked.

“Nothing,” Ifeoma answered, avoiding eye contact with Oluchi. “Please, can you look after things? Let me go to the bank and deposit our earnings.”

“Ify, you can talk to me, you know. You don’t have to always struggle by yourself.”

Ifeoma’s eyes glistened with tears. She was touched by Oluchi’s concern.

“Thanks, Oluchi,” she said, rising to her feet. “I’ll tell you what’s going on later, but not now. Right now, I need to get to the bank, so can you cover for me while I’m gone?”

Oluchi nodded and went into the cash safe. She opened it with the security code and gave Ifeoma their earnings for the week.

With determination, Ifeoma drove to the bank. She requested an appointment with the bank manager after depositing the money. Her appointment was for Monday morning. She’d decided to borrow the money using the restaurant as collateral. Hopefully, a bank would be kind enough to lend her that kind of money.

On Monday morning, at approximately 10:00 a.m., Ifeoma sat across the table from a tall and slim bank manager dressed in a well-fitting charcoal coloured suit. The interview with him was going well and Ifeoma was pleased until he began to look at her documents and his reaction to her changed.

“Are you Chuma Obi’s wife?” he asked.

“Yes … but we are separated,” Ifeoma replied. It was always difficult saying that.

“Give me a minute,” he said, then taking her documents, he entered a private room. From what Ifeoma could see through the glass partition, he was making a phone call. She watched his animated gestures as he spoke, occasionally glancing in her direction and smiling. Ifeoma smiled back and averted her eyes. A few minutes later, he ended the call and walked back into the office. His expression was one of regret.

“I’m afraid we have to deny you the loan at this time,” he said to Ifeoma, handing her back her documents.

“But why? I am prepared to put up my restaurant as guarantee—”

“Sorry madam, but the matter is closed, please try another bank.” Annoyed, Ifeoma snatched her documents from his hands and stormed out.

She tried four other banks and failed to secure a loan. No satisfactory reasons were given, except that she was denied. The last bank manager she had spoken to told her that her credit status was poor, but she knew that was a lie because she had never borrowed money from a bank.

Idiot! Ifeoma thought as she left the bank. Frustration hit her hard. She had nowhere else to turn.

Later that evening, Ifeoma could not concentrate on her favourite cooking show on television. Tears of frustration and exhaustion from the day’s numerous trips from bank to bank were finally falling freely down her face. She was sitting on her leather couch in front of the television, inside her rented two-bedroom flat.

Feelings of despair threatened to overwhelm her. She had exhausted her options and would lose the restaurant, everything she had worked so hard for. The thought of disappointing her family and her employees threatened to send her into a full-blown panic.

What if she could not pay and was found guilty of tax evasion and sent to jail? Fear gripped her. She searched her mind frantically for solutions. She could… no, she would not do it. She could not do that. Ifeoma stood up and ran her fingers through her thick hair. The idea came to her again, and again, she shook it off. No way! She wouldn’t borrow money from Chuma. She picked up a pillow from the couch and screamed into it.

Chapter Seventeen

“Hold on, son, I’m coming!” Chuma yelled as he pulled his shirt speedily over his head and dived into the pool. “Daddy is here!”

But the deeper he got into the water, the farther the small body floated from him.

“Hold on to my hand, son!” he cried, swimming vigorously and stretching out his hand towards the small body as it floated farther and farther away.

Choking from being under the water for so long, he swam to the surface to get air into his lungs. Just a few more seconds and I’ll get back and save you, son, he thought frantically. He gasped as soon as he made it to the surface.

Ifeoma stood at the edge of the pool, tears in her eyes, her appearance disheveled.

“You killed my son! You killed my son, asshole!” Ifeoma screamed at him. “You killed my son! You killed my son!” The chant became louder and louder.

Chuma sprang upright in bed, sweating profusely. It took a few seconds for him to gather his bearings. He glanced at the antique clock on the wall. The time was four in the morning. He had just had another nightmare in which he had failed to save his son, and in which Ifeoma had accused him bitterly. This was not the first time he was having this dream, it was just that now, he was having them more frequently.

With a sigh, Chuma swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat on the edge. Burying his face in his hands, his chest tightened with grief. He hated this feeling; this new feeling of waking up lost. He’d lost everything. Everything! And he felt it strongly. Soon, he found himself fighting the urge to go to the mini-bar downstairs and drown his despair in a bottle of rum. However, he remained seated, breathing deeply, in, and out. He was not going to repeat his father’s mistakes.

After twenty minutes of breathing exercises, Chuma stood up. There was only

one way to pull him out of his despair. He strolled to his closet and picked up his gym bag from which he retrieved his boxing gloves. Putting them on, he headed downstairs to the basement. It was a large room with a treadmill, an exercise bike, and his personal favourite, a sturdy standing punching bag. He also liked this room because it was dark except for the dim lighting provided by the small electric bulb on the ceiling. Here, he could grieve in peace.

Before long, Chuma was throwing heavy blows at the punching bag accompanied by loud grunting and panting. Memories of coming home six months ago, from an urgent business meeting to a quiet house, plagued him as he threw punch after heavy punch. Memories of rushing to the hospital to find Ifeoma in the pediatric ward with a vacant look in her eyes. He lifted his hand and punched it into the bag with a deep groan. His mind saw the look in her eyes that evening, they were like daggers penetrating his soul. She had told him to close the gate leading to the pool before he left. He trembled with guilt.

“I should have closed that gate!” Chuma muttered, lifting his hands again and punching the punching bag. Alternating rapidly between both arms, he swung each punch with force.

“I am sorry, Ify!” he yelled. Another Punch. “I’m sorry, Ekene my boy!” Another punch. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Chuma repeatedly punched the bag until he collapsed on the ground exhausted.

Later, he dragged himself to the sitting room and lay on the sofa. Within minutes, he was fast asleep.

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It was Friday morning. Chuma was sitting at his desk unable to concentrate. It had been seven days since he had sent Farouk from Inland Revenue to Ifeoma. He was anxious. Ifeoma had not yet reached out to him, and Chuma knew that no bank would lend her the money. A lot of the bank managers of the major banks in Lagos were indebted to him because it was his influence that had gotten some of them their jobs. He had spread the word to them not to lend money to Ifeoma, and he was confident that no one would cross him. So why was Ifeoma

not reaching out to him? Had she found someone else to lend her the money? Who would lend her that kind of money? His stomach tightened again. Could there be another man?

Chuma shook his head and placed his fingers on his temple. He felt a headache creeping in. The thought of Ifeoma with another man made his insides churn although he knew there was no other man. The restaurant kept her occupied. Chuma knew she stayed there most nights until very late. He was ashamed for doing it, but since their separation, he occasionally sent someone to tail her. He'd convinced himself that it was for her protection. But deep down, he knew it was because he couldn't let go of her. She meant the world to him and he was determined to get her back; whatever it took.

Ever since the day he had set his plan in motion, Chuma had been unable to focus. Even Nnamdi had noticed this during a board meeting the day before. Twice, Nnamdi had to repeat himself to Chuma, and even then, Chuma had denied that there was a problem.

His family was unaware that he and Ifeoma were having marital problems. He had explained Ifeoma's moving out of the home they shared, as a need for her to distance herself from the place where she had lost her only child in an awful and tragic accident.

When he had conceived the plan to get Ifeoma back, he was convinced that it would work. Now, his confidence was faltering. He had expected Ifeoma to reach out to him for the money immediately. Yet, he should have known better. Ifeoma was proud, strong and resilient. They were all the reasons he had fallen in love with her in the first place. Chuma knew that she would fight tooth and nail to get that money somewhere else before admitting defeat and coming to him. He resolved to give her one more day and then raise the stakes. He was a businessman who knew how to get what he wanted. And he wanted his wife back.

"Sir, your wife is here," Bola, his secretary, announced through the intercom. Chuma's heart crashed painfully into his ribcage. Blood rushed to his brain making him fill dizzy. As if conjured by his thoughts, Ifeoma was here. After three months of being apart, she was finally here. He took a deep breath and tried to control the volcano of emotions rushing through his veins. Although he had expected Ifeoma to turn to him for the money, he had not really prepared

himself to see her today.

“Send her in,” he said, hoping that his voice did not betray any of his emotions. He waited, seated behind his desk, reclining so that he did not appear anxious. Within seconds, Ifeoma walked into his office in a slightly above-the-knee length Ankara dress and silver strap sandals. His breath held as his gaze locked with hers, stopping time.

Moments passed before he dragged his eyes slowly down her body like a starved man just served a delicious-looking meal. Ifeoma could no longer hide behind the category of being too slim because even though she was still slim in the arms and legs, her hips had spread generously from childbirth and he loved it. Her dress clung to her perfectly emphasizing those hips and the curve of her breasts.

Her long, thick hair was packed into a severe ponytail, emphasising the contours of her beautiful oval face and large brown eyes. He had missed those eyes. Even though they were flashing with anger at him now. Bright, shimmering red lipstick— his favourite shade of lipstick— coated her full lips, beckoning for him to kiss her.

She was stunning. He had really missed her. How had he managed these three months without seeing her face? How had he managed these six months without touching her?

“I can see you got rid of your home-wrecking secretary,” Ifeoma said, breaking the silence, her lips twisting into a sardonic smile. “Why? Have you grown tired of her, too?”

Chuma grimaced. He deserved that, but he was also determined to remain calm.

“Ify, nice to see you,” he said after clearing his throat because it suddenly felt dry. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“You have not even acknowledged my divorce petition!” she snapped. Chuma took a deep breath in and counted to ten in his head. The psychologist he had been seeing since Ifeoma left him had taught him how to use breathing exercises to keep calm. It worked most of the time.

“Please have a seat,” Chuma said, pointing to the seat opposite him. He had remained seated when she came in, wanting to hide the physical evidence of his

body's arousal. What will she do if I grab her and kiss her? Probably slap me hard. That thought amused him. Even a slap from her would be welcome at this point. Any physical contact with her would be welcome.

"I prefer to stand, thank you."

"Would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee? I could get my sec—"

"This isn't a social visit," Ifeoma cut in sharply, annoyed. How could he be so calm when her entire body was thrown into complete chaos from seeing him again? He looked and smelled good. Was he more muscular? His piercing eyes looked sexier, and God, his mouth, enticingly full. All she could think about was kissing him again. It had been months since she had touched him. She shook her head, disgusted with herself. How could she still want this man? How could she be so angry with him and still want him so much?

"So, why are you here, Ify?" Chuma's deep voice questioned, interrupting her thoughts. Ifeoma placed her hand on her tummy to steady her nerves. She sighed and then sat down on the brown leather seat opposite him. There was no point in standing. There was also no point in being confrontational. After all, she was here to borrow money.

"I need your help," Ifeoma said, her lashes lowering.

"In what way?" Chuma asked. Ifeoma was surprised that he was not gloating at her acquiescence.

"I need you to lend me some money. The restaurant… I'm owing taxes, and it will be repossessed next week if I don't pay." There was some silence. Ifeoma felt uneasy. She hated that she needed him to bail her out.

"I'll pay you back. I promise. I just need the restaurant to …"

"Done," Chuma interjected. Ifeoma regarded him sceptically.

"You don't even know how much—"

"How much?"

"Five million," Ifeoma replied, her heart pounding rapidly. She knew it was a lot

to ask. However, she also knew it meant nothing to him.

“Done.”

“Just like that?” Ifeoma could not believe this. Chuma was generous, but she had expected some resistance from him because of their impending divorce. There were still unsettled issues between them and she had anticipated him being difficult. His immediate amenability surprised, pleased and worried her at the same time.

“Well, no… not just like that,” Chuma said. Ifeoma froze. What terms and conditions did he have in store for her? Knowing Chuma, she would not like it.

“I don’t need you to pay me back,” he continued in a calm voice. Chuma did not feel calm. His body trembled inside. His entire plan to get Ifeoma back hinged on this moment.

“No, I will pay back … I promise, I —”

“Actually, what I want in return is for you to move back home.” Chuma’s tone remained even. Ifeoma jumped up glaring at him angrily.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed. “Chuma, why are you like this, eh? Why won’t you just sign the divorce papers? Why won't you give me the money, I’ll pay you back—”

“I’m not signing any damn divorce papers,” Chuma retorted, raising his voice. He had abandoned his breathing exercises. He couldn’t help the irritation creeping up inside him. Did Ifeoma really believe he would just sign those stupid divorce papers like a chump? Did she really believe he would not put up a fight? Did she really not know how much she meant to him?

“Why not, Chuma? You certainly moved on quickly with that secretary of yours!”

“It was a mistake.”

“Oh, a mistake that your penis was in her mouth?” Ifeoma looked incredulously at Chuma, her eyes shining with fury.

“It wasn’t like that,” Chuma retorted.

“Oh, okay, how was it? Enlighten me, please … Ehhh by accident your dick fell into her mouth?” Chuma flinched. Ifeoma rarely swore. He could now tell how livid she was. He rapidly calmed himself.

“Stop this, Ify, we need to talk about this without all the anger—”

“I don’t need this rubbish, all I need is some money from you and I will pay you back.”

Ifeoma began pacing the room. His office was a large room with a floor-to-ceiling glass window facing the streets. A huge maple wood desk was at the end of the room, directly opposite the door. Chuma sat behind this desk, unruffled. Like the king of the whole world. He was dressed in a well-fitting black suit paired with a red tie. Ifeoma could not see his shoes, but she knew instinctively that they were black leather shoes. There was a small shelf containing several files attached to the wall.

Typical of Chuma’s need for order, those files were impeccably organised. A sudden desire to scatter those files and ruffle him a little overwhelmed Ifeoma. She detested that he sat calmly in his comfortable brown leather seat while she was a complete mess. The flat screen desktop computer in front of him was on and Ifeoma could see from her angle that it was in screen saver mode. Beside the computer was a picture frame containing a picture of the two of them smiling. They had taken the picture in Paris two years ago when they went there on holiday. He had said something naughty into her ear before that snapshot. She was also heavily pregnant in that photo. Sorrow flooded her heart. They had been so happy. How could things have gone so wrong in just two years? Chuma’s next words interrupted Ifeoma’s thoughts.

“Well, if you need money from me, then I think it’s best that you listen to my proposal or lose everything. Your restaurant. Everything.” He spoke more calmly this time. He needed to refocus on the plan. Riling Ifeoma up or trading insults with her would not help his cause.

“What I need is for you to move back home and attend marriage counseling with me. It is a three-month programme. If after three months of that, you still want a divorce … I’ll sign the damn papers.”

This seemed to get her attention, and she stilled herself. Realising he had her complete attention, he continued.

“What I want is for us to talk to a trained specialist. I have been seeing one. We need to talk, not shout. Not yell. Not withdraw. We need to talk about us … about Ekene—”

“Don’t!” she snapped, interrupting him. Her hands moved up to block her ears. The name of her late son caused her to withdraw into herself again. She could not bear the grief. She could not face it.

“Ify, we do! We need to talk.”

“I don’t need this nonsense,” Ifeoma cried as she picked up her handbag and fled his office, tears in her eyes.

Chuma sighed. He held onto the edge of the desk firmly as Ifeoma rushed out. His throat was tight with emotion. He hated to do this, but he had to. Ifeoma was still grieving. He was still grieving. They needed to grieve together if there was any chance of them finding their way back to each other. Chuma knew without a doubt that she would be back. The seed had been sown. And there was one thing he knew about people and money. When people desperately needed money, they were forced to think about options they would never have considered otherwise. He had been in investments for far too long that he knew Ifeoma would be back. Now he had to focus on the rest of his plan.

Ifeoma stormed out of Chuma’s office, almost running. The tears clouding her eyes blurred her vision. She needed to get as far away from Chuma as possible. She needed to think. There was no way she was going to move back into that house. No way. How could she? Just a few minutes with him and she had crumbled. How could she live with him, see him every day and not be completely enveloped by him again? And there was Mr Chibundu to consider. If there was a time to sort it out, it was now. Ifeoma never wanted Chuma to find out she had kept that part of her life from him. She was somewhat still married to Mr Chibundu. He would never forgive her if he found out she hid that from him.

In her desperate need to escape, she rushed out as soon as the elevator door opened and bumped into someone as she exited the elevator.

“Sorry,” Ifeoma muttered, not looking up to see who it was.

“Ify?” she heard a familiar voice call out her name. She snapped her head up. It was Nnamdi.

“Hello, Nnamdi. Long time, how are you?” Ifeoma mumbled, quickly drying her tears. Nnamdi pulled her into a brief hug.

“Are you okay, Ify?” he asked, concern in his eyes.

“Yes,” Ifeoma answered quickly. “I’m just having a stressful time at the restaurant.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Chuma is … sorting it out. Thanks.” Ifeoma replied with a smile. Nnamdi searched her face briefly.

“I don’t know exactly what is going on, Ify,” he said with a serious tone. “Whatever it is, we are here for you. You are family.”

Ifeoma’s heart expanded with emotion and fresh tears formed in her eyes. She nodded. “Thanks, Nnamdi,” she whispered and continued on her way swiftly because she did not want to cry in front of him.

Her drive back home was like a blur. Ifeoma’s mind was thrown into confusion. She had not expected Chuma to demand she come back. Although she knew there would be strings attached to his offering her money, she had not expected him to want reconciliation. Her mind had been consumed with jealousy because of thoughts of him and his secretary together. It never occurred to her that he wanted her back.

In the divorce papers, she had cited irreconcilable differences as the reason, instead of infidelity. Apart from the fact that she could not prove infidelity, she did not want to smear his name. It didn’t matter how angry she was with him. Many times, these past few days, she wondered why he was dragging his feet when it came to signing the divorce papers. She had not asked for much except that he leaves her the restaurant and her car. They were both gifts he had purchased for her. She had not even asked for alimony. Ifeoma only assumed Chuma wanted things to be difficult for her in his typical controlling way. Never

had she considered that he didn't want to divorce her.

After parking her car in the garage, Ifeoma climbed the stairs to her flat feeling the entire weight of the world on her shoulders. She had nowhere to turn. Before she could open the door with her keys, it swung open.

"Hi, sis," Chioma greeted, standing aside to let Ifeoma inside.

"Hi, baby sis," Ifeoma replied hugging her sister. Her sisters had keys to her apartment and she had a key to theirs. They often visited each other spontaneously. Today especially, Ifeoma was glad that her sister had visited spontaneously.

"Are you okay?" Chioma asked her as they walked into the medium-sized kitchen together.

"Not really," Ifeoma replied honestly. Out of her three sisters, Chioma was the only one she could candidly talk to about Chuma. Nene and Ngozi felt she had overreacted and did not understand the sense of betrayal she felt after seeing Chuma and his secretary in his office. None of them knew that Mr Chibundu taunting her with his letters was the main reason she wanted a divorce.

"I went to see Chuma today," Ifeoma said, taking Oha soup out of the freezer. Chioma did not respond. "He wants me to move back home. He wants us to go for marriage counseling."

Ifeoma put the bowl in the microwave and turned it on. Chioma remained silent. The noise from the microwave was the only sound in the kitchen for a while.

"He won't sign the divorce papers until I do," Ifeoma concluded. She poured water into a pot to boil. Chioma bent down and brought out a small bag of garri from the lower cabinet.

"Ify, you have to at least try. I know he hurt you, but you have to try." Chioma observed Ifeoma as she spoke. "At least give it a few weeks. If you find it too hard, then walk away. But you have to try." Somehow, those words from her sister made sense. There was no harm in trying. All she had to do was sit through some counseling sessions with Chuma for three months. How hard could that be? After that, she would get her divorce and still keep the restaurant. She needed some ground rules for that to happen, though. Ifeoma knew she was still

intensely attracted to Chuma. There was no way she could survive keeping her emotions at bay if sex was involved. The first ground rule for her survival for the next three months was to keep physical contact with him to the barest minimum. She could do this. How hard could it be?

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He smelled her before he saw her. Chuma sat in Lagos country club waiting at the terrace for Ifeoma who had asked to meet with him there. Ifeoma had a unique scent. Avocado and coconut oil with some other fruity scent he was yet to identify. Before she moved out of their room, he had loved to watch as she mixed those oils in a bottle and slathered the mixture over her smooth buttery skin every morning and evening. That scent was branded into his brain and always went from his nostrils straight to his groin. Like it did now. Chuma inhaled deeply. Ifeoma was coming back home.

“Hello, Chuma,” Ifeoma said as she walked around to take the seat opposite him. “Thanks for meeting me here.”

Chuma smiled. “Hello, Ify, it was no problem at all.” She looked simple and lovely in a pair of bright lime green shorts that flaunted her long firm legs and a loose flowery silk shirt. Her feet were tucked into green sandals. Once again, she had coated her full lips with his favourite shade of red lipstick. He sometimes wondered if she used that lipstick on purpose just to torment him. If so, it was working, because the only thing he could think of doing as he looked at her sitting across from him, was to use his mouth and tongue to wipe that lipstick from her mouth until she cried out his name.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Chuma asked. Ifeoma nodded.

She watched as Chuma signaled to the waiter. He looked good, his blue T-shirt clinging snugly to his chest and arms, his muscles looking more defined than when she had last noticed them. She loved that his facial hair was still left the way that she liked it, a dusky shadow over the sides of his face and jaw. She stared at his mouth and her heart skipped a beat. That mouth had brought her pleasure countless times. How was she going to survive three months with him?

When only a few seconds with him and all she wanted to do was kiss him and throttle him at the same time. She was in big trouble. He was the only one who had this kind of confusing effect on her.

“Mrs Obi, it has been a long time. Nice to see you,” the waiter said as soon as he got to their table. She glanced at Chuma at that moment, and their eyes met. Ifeoma’s heart rate quickened. There was an intensity in Chuma’s eyes that made her face feel warm. They had been here together many times before that horrible tragedy. Suddenly, her mind was flooded with memories of a happier time. Ifeoma felt her throat tighten.

“Nice to see you too, Andrew,” she muttered, sliding her gaze away from Chuma’s. “I’ll have some … orange juice.”

“Yes ma, and I’ll add a splash of rum just as you like it,” Andrew said with a wide grin. Ifeoma nodded.

Chuma ordered a pint of chilled beer and grilled fish. He knew Ifeoma would join him later to eat the fish. She always did that; refused to order food, claiming she was full. But as soon as the food he ordered arrived, she would dig her fork into his plate, forcing him to share it with her. Of course, he usually grumbled about it, but secretly, he found it quite endearing.

“You’re sure you want nothing else?” Chuma asked before the waiter left. Ifeoma nodded, and he smiled. This was just like old times. More than ever before, Chuma wanted Ifeoma back in his life. She made him happy. It was as simple as that.

“I have decided to try things your way,” Ifeoma said as soon as they were alone again. Chuma held his breath, waiting for her to continue.

“I will move back … home and try the counseling thing … for three months and see …” Chuma exhaled but didn’t say a word.

“I … uh … I want to discuss how that will work.”

The waiter came in with the drinks and Ifeoma waited for him to place them on the table.

“Thanks, Andrew,” she said. Chuma simply nodded at Andrew. Andrew smiled

and walked away. He loved serving their table because Chuma always gave generous tips.

“I’ll move back. But not into our … your room. I will move to the other room.”

She searched Chuma’s face for a sign that he understood what she was trying to say. His face was expressionless. The vein at the side of his head became more prominent.

“I mean … you and me… we are not … I mean no sex between us,” Ifeoma muttered. She took a sip of her drink and continued, “I don’t want sex to confuse things.”

“You can’t be serious,” Chuma said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I am dead serious,” Ifeoma said, indignantly. “Sex confuses things … you said we need to talk—”

“I haven’t touched you in months. You are my goddamn wife,” Chuma snapped, his voice slightly raised. A few heads turned in their direction and a rush of embarrassment flooded her cheeks. This is probably not the best venue to have this conversation, she thought, mortified. She had only wanted to meet him somewhere neutral. Not at his office or at home. Now, she was not so sure. All they seemed to do these days was snap at each other.

“Well, you should have thought about that before you shoved your penis into your secretary’s mouth,” she snarled in a low grating voice.

“And we are back to that again, aren’t we?” Chuma sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you that is not what happened?”

“I don’t care what you say. I know what I saw!”

She paused. There was no need to hash this out here. All she wanted to do was lay down her own terms. Just like he did his. She ran her fingers through her hair.

“What I’m saying is that the only way I’ll agree to move back in and do it your way is if we keep sex off the table and talk. I am prepared to lose the restaurant otherwise. I have started from the bottom before. I can do it again.” She gave

this practiced speech with more bravado than she felt. If Chuma refused her, she knew she was in trouble.

The waiter brought the fish seconds after she had said this. There was silence as he placed the plate of fish in the middle of the two of them. He appeared unaware of the thick tension between them, although Ifeoma suspected he was only pretending. The tension was obvious.

“Enjoy your fish, oga and Mrs Obi,” Andrew said with a smile. Ifeoma was now convinced he was calling her that on purpose. As if to remind her who she was—Mrs Obi. Ifeoma and Chuma did not even look his way. Their gazes dueled with each other. Andrew slipped away quietly.

“Fine,” Chuma conceded. “Have it your way.”

“Thank you, Chu—”

“Don’t thank me now, Ify.” His tone was deep and raspy, his posture relaxed. “Thank me when you are purring with satisfaction after you have begged me to make love to you.”

Ifeoma’s heart beat faster. Chuma’s voice sounded confident. Her mind was immediately filled with images of the numerous times she had lain sprawled against him, content, and doing just that— thanking him after they made love. Her body flooded with heat. Why did she suddenly feel more turned on now? There is something seriously wrong with me, Ifeoma thought listlessly as she reached for a fork and dug into the fish.

Chapter Eighteen

“Madam Ify, where do you want me to put this?” Effiong was referring to the box full of shoes that he was holding in his hands. Ifeoma had asked him to come over to her apartment to help her pack. She had left things at the restaurant in the care of Oluchi and Loretta. Today, she was moving back home with Chuma.

“Please, put the packed boxes together on the floor. When I am done, we will carry them downstairs and call a taxi.”

“Yes ma,” he agreed, placing the heavy box with other boxes in the corner of the small sitting room.

Ifeoma continued to fold her clothes neatly and place them inside a large black box on the bed. She had mixed feelings about moving back home. The thought of being in the house so close to Chuma every day made her nervous. Although, in a sense, she also felt relieved to find out he was no longer involved with his former secretary and that he wanted her back with him.

The shrill sound of the doorbell startled Ifeoma.

“Please get the door, Effiong,” Ifeoma called from her bedroom. She wondered who it was. Her sisters were very busy preparing for their final year exams, and it couldn’t be Nene because she was still in hospital.

“Who is it, Effiong?” Ifeoma asked, exiting her bedroom carrying a heavy box. She came to a standstill. At the door of her apartment and for the first time, stood Chuma looking delectable in a pair of black shorts, a red T-shirt that hugged his sculptured torso, and a black face cap covering his shaved head. His eyes swept over her from head to toe and then back again settling on her face, making her feel flustered. She silently derided herself for putting on an oversized dashiki dress and not bothering with her hair or makeup.

Effiong rushed towards Ifeoma and took the heavy box from her. Chuma leapt forward and grabbed it from him viciously. “I’ve got this,” he said, his tone

saturated with irritation. “You can leave now,” Chuma said to Effiong. “Your services are no longer needed here.”

She gasped at Chuma’s rudeness. Effiong hesitated, looking at Ifeoma for confirmation.

“Leave now,” Chuma repeated. Although he was talking to Effiong, his eyes were fixed on her.

“Effiong, it’s okay. Thanks for your help. I’ll see you later at the restaurant,” Ifeoma said, flashing Effiong a bright smile. He nodded at her.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Effiong said before he retreated and left the apartment. His departure was followed by an uncomfortable silence. Chuma still held the box in his hands. His gaze did not shift from her. The room suddenly felt very warm. Ifeoma’s heart was beating fast.

“You did not need to be rude to Effio—”

“You are my wife. You need help with anything, I’ll help you. Simple!”

Speechless, she merely stared at Chuma.

“I don’t want to see that idiot here or anywhere near you.”

“Effiong is not an idiot—”

“His place is in the restaurant’s kitchen and not sniffing around my wife.”

“I can’t believe this; he was not … sniffing around me. He only came here to help—”

“As I said, you need help with anything, I’ll help you. It is that simple.”

Although it set her determination to be strong and independent back a thousand-fold, Ifeoma nodded in agreement. For some strange reasons she did not want to decipher, this statement from Chuma comforted her. The one thing she could always count on was Chuma’s ability to look after her.

“Now, let me know what you need help with. I hired a moving van. It is parked

downstairs."

"Oh, Chuma … thanks." Ifeoma was pleased. She had anticipated needing multiple trips with a taxi. And on a Saturday morning, she was not sure how easily she would have found a cab driver willing to make those trips.

Her simple gratitude made Chuma feel ten feet tall. He would do anything to get her to trust him again, to love him again. Anything.

They worked together silently packing and moving boxes from her apartment to the van. Chuma appreciated the silence because it provided him with an opportunity to look around the little apartment Ifeoma had made her home for three months. It was small but tastefully decorated. A few pictures of Ifeoma and her sisters decorated the sky-blue walls. There was no picture of him anywhere in sight, causing a wave of sadness to hit him. It seemed as if she was expunging him from her life and it was all his fault. He had messed everything up. The one thing that gave him a glimmer of hope was the fact that she still wore her wedding ring. And as long as there was some hope to hang on to, all was not lost.

Chuma lifted another heavy box and stole a glance at Ifeoma. She was engrossed in fastening the zip of an over-stuffed black suitcase. Even all natural without a stitch of makeup on and her hair scattered over her face, she was still beautiful. His heart tightened with longing. He wished things could go back to the way it was before everything fell apart. That way, instead of stealing glances at her, he would simply pull her into his arms and crush her lips against his. He would peel away that tent she called a dress, and make love to her on the blue couch beside them. Better yet, she would not be in this small apartment but in his bed, in their large comfortable bed, having a lazy Saturday morning like they used to. Hopefully, we will get back to being that way again. Whatever it took, he would ensure they got back to being that way again.

The drive back home was a thought-provoking drive for Ifeoma. The two of them had shared that house together for almost five years. It held many pleasant memories, but it also held some very painful memories too. Chuma appeared calm and not in the least bit worried, unlike Ifeoma. He had his gaze focused on the road ahead, a simple sign of the cautious driver he had always been. Watching him now made her remember the time when he had taught her to drive. That was three years ago. And it had not been an easy task because she was not

the most careful driver there was.

“Remember when you taught me how to drive?”

Chuma turned his attention from the road with a smile on his lips.

“Yes, I remember. It was hard, Ify, you almost killed us many times.”

Ifeoma laughed. The sound of her laughter squeezed his chest and went straight to his groin, tightening it also.

“It was not my fault. That jeep you drive is too hard.”

“So we are blaming the poor jeep now?” Chuma chuckled as he signaled the van to turn left. He turned the van towards the street leading to their home. “You hit the gate three times. Also, with your own small BMW.” He smirked jovially. “Do you blame your car as well?”

“The gate was not properly open those three times.”

“Oh, now it is the gate’s fault.” Chuma shook his head, amused. “Women!”

“Okay, I admit it. I am an awful driver.”

“Every time you drive out of the house, I say a silent prayer.”

“I have already admitted to my poor driving skills, mister excellent driver,” Ifeoma teased, twisting her face into a mocking expression.

“You’re damned right; I am an excellent driver.”

A short period of silence followed. Ifeoma was enjoying the easy vibe between them. She hadn’t even realised how much she had missed this; talking with him and throwing playful jibes at him. Their discussion about driving reminded Ifeoma that her car was still at her apartment. I need to go back later to get my car, she thought as she turned towards the window by her side.

“I’ll send someone to get your car later today,” Chuma said, removing that worry immediately from her thoughts. He always did that—anticipated problems and solved them. He was a dependable man. It did not matter how betrayed she felt

about his infidelity, she knew she could always count on him.

“Thanks, Chuma.”

“You are welcome.”

Finally, they were home. Chuma sensed Ifeoma’s anxiety. He was anxious as well, but he did his best to remain calm. They were going to be alone in the house again after being apart for three months. Longer if he were to add the months in which Ifeoma withdrew completely from him. Now, they would have to deal with their loss. He swallowed hard. They would have to face the loss of their son together. He hoped their marriage could survive it because Ifeoma was his entire life.

Chuma pulled up to the gate and pressed the horn twice. Within seconds, the main gate of their detached five-bedroom duplex opened wide and Chuma drove the van in and packed close to the front door.

“Oga, welcome,” Ahmed, the gateman, greeted. He then turned to Ifeoma and his smile widened. “Madam, the madam, welcome o! We have missed you.”

A flush rose to Ifeoma’s cheeks. Chuma noticed it and his throat constricted. Ifeoma was home at last. She belonged here. She belonged with him.

“Thank you, Ahmed,” she muttered, avoiding Chuma’s gaze. She was suddenly afraid.

Her eyes roamed over the house and she inhaled deeply. It was a large and lovely house. Chuma had purchased it a week before they were married. The exterior was a pale green colour and the interior beige. The compound was massive with a well-maintained lawn and an impressive pool in the backyard. Ifeoma sighed. She could not bear the thought of seeing that pool again. The pool where Ekene had died all alone. Tears burned behind her eyelids and she fought hard against them. She would not cry. No, she would stay strong. I can do this, she thought, resting her hand on her tummy. Only three months and it will all be over.

“Let’s go in, Ify,” Chuma said, drawing Ifeoma out of her thoughts. His voice was soothing as if he understood her fear. Ifeoma nodded and followed him into the large sitting room.

Her breathing stopped. Everything had remained the same. It was as if she had never left. The photographs on the wall had remained the same. She looked around confused. Chuma had not even taken down the photographs of Ekene that were hanging on the wall. Her eyes fixated on a picture of Ekene. In it, he was smiling. He was a chubby ten-month-old infant with thick curly hair and two front teeth. His eyes sparkled and his skin glowed. He looked like Chuma but had inherited her light complexion.

A fierce rage rapidly rose within Ifeoma. How could Chuma leave the pictures on the wall knowing that she was coming here today? How could he do this to her? She turned towards the door intending to run out of the house when he caught her by the waist.

“Let go of me!” Ifeoma screamed, hitting him on his shoulder. “Let go of me, you monster!” But Chuma held on tightly. He felt her body tremble as she sobbed. “Let go of me! Let go of me!” She repeated as she wept against him. He knew it was going to be hard for her to see the pictures of Ekene still on the wall, but the therapist had advised him to leave things the way they were so that he could face his own grief. So they could both face their grief.

“Shhhh, Ify… it’s okay. It’s okay,” Chuma murmured as they clung to each other. They stood there until her sobbing quietened. It may have been seconds or minutes, Ifeoma was unsure. Nonetheless, his arms around her made her feel safe.

“I need to unpack,” she muttered, withdrawing from his embrace.

“Don’t worry about your stuff. Ahmed and Tayo will help you unload it from the van and unpack for you,” Chuma said. Tayo was the housekeeper who came in daily to clean the house and left in the evenings.

“I ordered dinner, I know you don’t like eating other people’s food, but I don’t want you to cook tonight,” Chuma continued. “Is that okay?”

Ifeoma smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Chuma.”

Chuma disappeared into the kitchen, and within minutes he was back with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. “Welcome home, Ify,” he said, handing Ifeoma the flowers.

She took it from him and inhaled deeply. “Lilies, they smell lovely. Thanks, Chuma.”

“Thank you for coming back home,” he said simply.

Ifeoma’s stomach tumbled. Chuma was so hopeful, but she couldn’t tell him that she didn’t intend to stay. That her being here was just temporary and only because he had demanded this in return for lending her money. There was too much betrayal between them. Did he honestly believe that they could heal from that? Did he believe marriage counseling would suddenly erase the hurt and pain? The look of hope in his eyes surprised and angered her. That image of his secretary on her knees in front of him with his trousers unzipped in the middle of his office tormented her constantly. Did he honestly believe she could simply forget that?

“I need to get some rest, Chuma,” Ifeoma muttered, turning away from him. “Thanks again for the flowers, the money, everything.”

She walked into the kitchen and placed the flowers into a small flowerpot. She positioned the flowerpot in the centre of the long mahogany dining table. Chuma stood in the sitting room watching Ifeoma as she did that. He was oblivious to the movement of boxes from the van and up the stairs to the guest room at the end of the hall, by Ahmed and Tayo. All he could see was Ifeoma. There was so much unspoken between them, and yet so much that needed to be said. He just had to be patient. It was still day one. He would try his best not to let his need for control overcome him, he would give her time. At least the first part of his plan had worked. She was finally home.

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They walked on eggshells around each other the rest of the weekend. Their conversations were polite, and they had limited physical contact. In fact, their only physical contact was early this morning when Chuma had accidentally brushed against her in the kitchen. They were both reaching for the fridge at the same time. He had muttered a quick apology under his breath and allowed her to retrieve a bottle of water before he reached for a mango.

Their avoidance of each other was grating on his nerves, but he wanted to give Ifeoma time. He knew that she was apprehensive about their first session with the psychologist the next day.

“How is your online university programme coming along?” Chuma asked Ifeoma, attempting to make conversation. She was seated on the balcony holding a cup of peppermint tea in her hands. Until recently, Chuma had hated the smell of peppermint tea. However, he had gradually become used to it, especially since he had come to understand why Ifeoma drank it. It was mostly to settle her stomach whenever she was anxious.

Ifeoma turned towards Chuma and smiled. It was Sunday evening, her second day of being home with him. She had come up here to relax. It was a peaceful area of the house. From here she could see the other buildings surrounding the house and she could observe how her neighbours lived their lives. On a few occasions, she had seen more of her neighbour's lives than she had wanted to.

“Fine, thanks. I have one more paper to submit and then the semester is over,” Ifeoma replied before taking a sip of her tea.

“How is writing the paper going?” Chuma moved from standing at the entrance of the balcony and settled on the reclining chair beside her.

“It’s going okay, although sometimes I wish I had more time to research. With running the restaurant and studying, I hardly find time to write a satisfactory paper.”

“I could help, you know; I have a master’s degree in business administration.”

Ifeoma smiled. Chuma had beaten that horse to death.

“I know, and you were the best graduating student,” she teased. He chuckled.

“You are damned right I was,” Chuma bragged.

“Although I also recall Nnamdi telling me he was the best graduating student. One of these days, I will find out which one of you is lying.”

Chuma threw his head back and laughed. “That yellow fool is the one lying. He was too easily distracted by skirts to beat me.” His eyes shimmered with

amusement as he spoke.

“And you? Were you easily distracted by skirts?”

“Ify, nothing can ever distract me from my goals.”

Ifeoma’s gut clenched. The look in Chuma’s eyes when he said that, sent shivers down her spine. His tone had turned possessive. Silence followed his statement.

“On a serious note, Ify, I’m proud of you for doing this online university education thing. If you need any help with papers or anything else, let me know,” Chuma said, breaking the silence.

“Thanks, I will keep that in mind.” Ifeoma took another sip of her peppermint tea. She could not help but wonder why she was so determined to get away from him. He did nothing but offer to help her. At the back of her mind, she knew her fear of losing him when he found out about her deceit superseded her anger about his infidelity. It was easier to hide behind her anger than her true dread.

When Monday finally came, Ifeoma drove to the restaurant, her mind filled with worry. Chuma was going to pick her up at lunchtime so they could go and see the therapist together. She had never been to see a psychologist and did not know what to expect. But talking about her problems had never been her thing. How she dealt with problems was to push them inside, ignore them or run away from them and try to forget them. That was how she coped.

As soon as she got to the restaurant, Ifeoma pushed her worries away. She immediately got to work supervising her cooks in the kitchen, while Oluchi and Loretta organised the staff. And because she was so busy, she did not even realise how quickly time flew by. One minute they were rushing through the lunch crowd, and the next minute, Chuma’s tall frame was strolling into the restaurant for the first time in months.

As he approached her, Ifeoma thought about how his presence seemed to overshadow everyone else whenever he entered a room. He had an intimidating presence, and people automatically respected him wherever he went. It was probably in the arrogant carriage of his walk and the persistent scowl on his face, Ifeoma thought and smiled. Or simply the fact that his suits— like the grey one he wore now— cost more than what most people earned each month. Whatever it was, people seemed to shrink into insignificance whenever he was around.

Like now for instance.

“Are you ready?” Chuma asked Ifeoma when he got close to her.

“Yes, let me get my purse,” Ifeoma muttered nervously as she retreated into the kitchen.

Chuma took that brief opportunity to look around. He had not been inside the restaurant in months. Since the time he and Ifeoma moved in together, he rarely came out here to eat. He didn’t have to. There was always a delicious home-cooked meal waiting for him at home. And when Ifeoma had moved out, he had been too lost in self-pity to come here.

The last time he had been to Eastern Delight was ten months ago, to celebrate Adaora’s birthday. Her husband, Ikenna, had thrown a surprise party for her here. Chuma’s eyes travelled around the restaurant. He admired what Ifeoma had done with the place. It was packed with customers, and she had maintained the beauty of the restaurant. The walls remained bright yellow. The tables and chairs were still excellently maintained. It was in every sense now an upscale restaurant. The thing that surprised him the most was that Ifeoma still refused to charge exorbitantly, choosing instead that her meals remain affordable.

According to her, food was not only for the rich. Chuma admired her for that because apart from the brilliant quality of the food, the reasonable prices kept her customer base persistently on the rise. Once again, a sense of respect and pride filled him. Ifeoma was a hard worker, and he liked that she strove for excellence.

“I’m ready,” Ifeoma said, snapping him out of his thoughts. Chuma nodded, noticing that she had retouched her lips with red lipstick. He fought back the driving need to kiss her as they walked together out of the restaurant. Instinctively, he placed his hand on the small of her back to guide her out. He noticed her body stiffening at the physical contact, but he kept his hand there. He needed some physical contact. He was after all, just a man.

The drive to Wholesome Health was uneventful. They engaged in polite conversation, but most of the journey occurred in companionable silence. It took about forty-five minutes to get there due to heavy traffic, but they still made it just in time.

The psychologist's office was located on the ground floor of a white four-storey building complex made up of several businesses. Ifeoma followed Chuma's lead, her heart beating rapidly with trepidation. As they walked into the office, Ifeoma's breathing stalled. She did not expect it to look like a normal office. She had expected that there would be a couch where people lay down and blamed their life's problems on their parents, just like she had seen numerous times in movies.

However, it was a simple office with two comfortable leather seats opposite an executive leather seat. A small table stood between those seats. She also did not expect the psychologist to be a young pleasant looking man. She had expected an old bespectacled man who looked judgementally at people while they poured out their hearts to him.

"Hello, Chuma," the psychologist said, greeting Chuma with a firm handshake. "And this must be Ifeoma," he continued with a bright smile on his face.

"Hello, Dr Olubanjo. Yes, this is my wife, Ifeoma," Chuma replied.

"Hi, Ifeoma, Nice to finally meet you."

Ifeoma's heart plummeted. Did Chuma spend his time here blaming her for everything?

"Hello Dr Olubanjo," she said, shaking his hand. Dr Olubanjo showed them to their seats, and he took the executive seat opposite them. He offered them refreshments, which they declined, so he rose to make himself a cup of coffee. Ifeoma glanced around the room while she and Chuma sat waiting. On the wall hung laminated copies of qualifications from Howard University, his master's degree in psychology from McGill University and Ph.D. from Princeton. A framed photograph of his family also hung on the wall.

In the picture, Dr Olubanjo stood beside a dark-skinned petite woman and two smiling young daughters. From his accent, Ifeoma could tell that he had spent most of his life in America.

"I usually like to dive first into reasons," Dr Olubanjo said, taking his seat. "So, my first question is why are you here?"

Ifeoma was not sure what to do, so she turned to look at Chuma who was sitting

beside her.

“I’ll start since this is Ifeoma’s first time,” Chuma said. “I’m here because I want Ifeoma back.”

Ifeoma felt a tight twisting in her gut. Dr Olubanjo and Chuma turned towards her. It was her turn to answer. A few seconds ticked by.

“I am here because Chuma forced me.”

She heard Chuma suck in his breath.

“Great, that’s a good start. Honesty,” Dr Olubanjo said, taking a sip of his drink.

Ifeoma suppressed the desire to burst into laughter. This was ridiculous. How was talking to this man going to solve her problems? How would he help her get rid of her past sorrows? Would talking to him bring back Ekene? Would it erase Chuma’s infidelity? Or her horrible upbringing?

“My second question is, what do you think is the reason for being at this point in your marriage?” Dr Olubanjo’s voice came again, bringing Ifeoma’s wandering mind back to the present. The room was silent. Chuma scrubbed his face with his hand.

“Ifeoma saw me with my secretary in a … in a compromising position at the office,” Chuma muttered. Ifeoma held herself rigidly. Was Chuma really going to talk about this here? In the presence of this stranger? “Every time I try to explain what happened, she shuts me down,” Chuma continued in a quiet voice.

Ifeoma snickered but remained silent.

“I think it is important that she hears that I didn’t cheat on her—”

“So, what do you call your secretary giving you head right in the middle of the office?” Ifeoma cut in, annoyed. If Chuma wanted to humiliate her in front of this stranger, she would not make it easy for him.

“That’s not what happened—”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? That woman was kneeling in front of you and your

zipper was down! I know what I saw. I’m not stupid!”

The room became silent after Ifeoma’s outburst, and a red angry flush coloured her face.

“Ifeoma, Let Chuma tell his story and then you can respond. That way you both hear each other.” Dr Olubanjo’s serene voice permeated her heated mind. Ifeoma relaxed back into her seat, turning her face away from Chuma.

“Ifeoma, I was just trying to talk to Sandra about a few details of work when she suddenly got on her knees in front of me. It happened so fast, I could not react quickly enough,” Chuma said, his tone solemn.

“So, you are trying to tell me that you had no idea she would get on her knees to…to…” Ifeoma trailed off, her tone sounding disbelieving.

“No, not when it happened, but thinking back, I should have seen it coming. Sandra…eh … kissed me a few days before….”

Chuma paused, running his hand over his eyes as if the confession was draining his energy. “She was staying late at work with me and she suddenly kissed me. She apologised immediately afterwards and said that it would never happen again. I believed her. I even blamed it on the late night and my own vulnerability, but I should have addressed it, not pushed it away. I shouldn't have let it slide. I was just still lost in my own grief.”

Ifeoma shook her head in disbelief. This had to be the worst lie ever conceived by a human being.

“What you are expecting me to believe is that she suddenly dropped on her knees, that she surprised you—”

“Yes, Ifeoma, that was exactly what happened. You walked in before I could react—”

“So, you are saying that if I had not walked in, you would have turned her away?” Ifeoma raised her eyebrow sceptically.

“Ify, the truth is I really don’t know. A part of me was about to push Sandra away, but I also felt weakened by loneliness and a need for comfort, so I froze.

In my head, I wanted to stop her, but my body froze."

Chuma's earnest admission stunned Ifeoma into silence. He exhaled before continuing.

"You shut me out after Ekene died. You did not allow me to touch you; you did not allow me to grieve with you. I dreaded coming home to the cold house because you shut me out." Chuma's voice rang out with the intensity of his emotions. "I needed you, I needed you, but you shut me out. I was vulnerable and maybe Sandra sensed it. So, the truth is I don't know if I would have turned her away. I never got a chance to react."

"So, it is my fault, eh? So, I made Sandra get on her knees to do it?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"What are you saying, then? If I didn't show up, and you cheated on me, it would have been my fault?"

"No, I'm only saying that I needed you and you shut me out!"

"Yes, blame everything on me! I am the worst person in the world. Blame Ekene's death on me too. I failed as a wife. I failed as a mother. I couldn't even look after my own son!" Ifeoma stood up suddenly and fled the room as fast as she could.

Chuma rose to go after her, but Dr Olubanjo stopped him.

"You may not see this as progress, but it is," he said to Chuma. "She talked. That's progress."

Ifeoma flagged down a taxi that happened to be passing by at the same moment when she came running out of the building and onto the main road. She got in and asked him to take her to Inland Private Psychiatric Hospital where her sister, Nene, was receiving inpatient care for severe depression. She had been on suicide watch for the past two months.

Ifeoma spotted Nene sitting in the common room watching television. After a hearty embrace, they walked together to the hospital cafeteria where Ifeoma bought Nene a hot meal. They talked about general subjects but danced carefully

around the topic of the men in their lives. Ifeoma was cautious never to mention Nene's ex-lover, General Okonkwo. The bastard had broken her heart by choosing to marry someone else after his wife died of cancer. Anytime Nene heard his name or read any news about him, it set her back into a worsened depressive state.

After visiting with Nene, Ifeoma took a taxi back to Eastern Delight to retrieve her car. Loretta had already closed the restaurant and texted details of how much the restaurant had made to Ifeoma. By the time she left the restaurant to go back home, it was almost midnight.

When she got home, the house was in complete darkness. Chuma must have gone to bed, Ifeoma thought with relief as she walked into the sitting room. She flicked on the light switch to the sitting room and a surprised gasp escaped her lips. Seated on the couch was Chuma, his face contorted into a deep scowl. Ifeoma opened her mouth to speak but before she could say anything, Chuma jumped to his feet and with agility, lifted her off the floor. He moved swiftly carrying her across the room until she felt her back pressed against the sitting room wall. His eyes flashed with a mixture of fury and lust. Ifeoma's eyes widened with fear and a tinge of excitement. Their eyes interlocked in a battle of wills. His dark onyx and dangerous, hers brown and challenging.

"Never make me worry about you like this again!" Chuma growled, his voice hoarse.

Trembling slightly, Ifeoma nodded. She could hear her own pulse pounding rapidly.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

Chuma pressed his forehead against hers. His breathing was harsh as he tried to control the turbulent emotions within him.

"I'm sorry about Sandra, I should never have let her get that close to me."

He trailed his thumb slowly over Ifeoma's face. His thumb moved over her full lips and she reeled in the desire to flick her tongue over it.

"I'm trying to give you space, to take things slow just like you asked me to," he murmured as he continued tracing his thumb over her face. His deep voice

reverberated within her body, producing a flood of moist heat between her thighs. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples tightened. “Don’t rile me up, Ify. I’m just a man. Not a saint.”

As suddenly as he had picked Ifeoma up, Chuma let go of her. Then he calmly strolled away towards the staircase. She stood there gaping after him, her body shaking from the force of her physical arousal.

Chapter Nineteen

The days that followed were uneventful. Their routine remained unchanged. Ifeoma would get up early to prepare breakfast, and they would proceed to eat their meals while discussing general topics or, in complete silence. Chuma would then leave immediately for work and return later in the evening for dinner where they would share a meal in the same manner - polite and detached.

Their next appointment with Dr Olubanjo was in three days. They had scheduled their sessions for Mondays. Ifeoma wondered how she was going to cope with yet another soul-baring episode because the last one had drained her.

“I’m inviting my sisters over tomorrow. I would like to have them over for lunch, is that okay?” Ifeoma and Chuma were in the dining room eating breakfast when she asked him this. He looked up from his newspaper. She sighed inwardly. Finally, she had his attention. He had been so distant since she had come home back late the Monday before.

He rarely looked at her now and had avoided any physical contact with her since that day. Of course, this was what she had said that she wanted, but since he had put his hands on her that night, all she could think about was having him touch her some more. It irritated her that while she seemed to be in a state of constant arousal, he remained unaffected. And that newspaper Arrrgh! She hated it. It was there every morning, covering his face. As if the news he was reading in those pages was more interesting than her presence.

“Absolutely. They are always welcome here,” Chuma replied. He went back to reading the newspaper. How did Ifeoma expect him to respect her wishes when she pranced around the house in transparent nightclothes like the one she had on now? It was surprising that he had not already flipped her on her back or stomach and had his way with her. Every time he glanced at her, that’s exactly what he wanted to do, but he was trying hard to respect her wishes, and to be able to do that, he was safer staring hard at the small prints of The Guardian.

“Will you be back at your usual time today?” Ifeoma asked him.

“Yes, I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

“What would you like for dinner?”

“Whatever you prepare is fine.”

“I know, but what would you like?”

“Egusi soup and garri.”

“Okay,” Ifeoma muttered.

Chuma had not looked at her from behind the newspaper even once. It frustrated her. They were just like two strangers living together. She could not understand why this bothered her, especially since this is the way she had spelled it out that things would be.

Chuma finished his coffee and rose to his feet. “Thanks for breakfast, Ify,” he said, walking towards the kitchen, empty plate and mug in hand. “I’ll see you later,” he said as he put the empty plate and mug in the dishwasher.

An unexpected and overwhelming need to provoke Chuma overtook her. She deftly threw her fork on the floor so that it landed beside him. As soon as he turned his attention to the fork on the ground, Ifeoma rushed towards it and bent over in front of him to pick it up. She heard him inhale sharply and a sly smile curved her lips. She knew that her nightgown was transparent and that he had glimpsed her backside barely covered by her sheer lacy underwear.

“Oh, I’m so clumsy,” she murmured, heading to the sink where she rinsed the fork. “I’ll see you later, Chuma.”

Without replying, Chuma picked up his briefcase and left the room. His face may have seemed expressionless to anyone else, but not Ifeoma. She knew him better than that. And she noticed her favourite vein pulsating at the side of his forehead.

After Chuma left, Ifeoma finished eating and cleared the table. It was just eight o’clock in the morning and she had about two hours before she needed to get to the restaurant. Oluchi and Loretta usually got there much earlier so she never needed to rush. She was glad to have them step in this way. They were so good

at their jobs that it allowed her to relax and focus on other things, like studying.

After a quick shower, she worked on her term paper. Feeling restless after just a few minutes, Ifeoma got up and wandered around the house. When she came to the sitting room, she peered through the transparent sliding door that separated the sitting room from the backyard. Beyond the doors sat the glorious pool. Ifeoma froze. The pool was totally drained of water. It looked like it had not been used in months. Her hand flew over her mouth as she stood there dumbfounded. The small brown wooden gate they had constructed beside the pool was shut. Ifeoma had not seen the pool since the tragedy. It looked like an empty graveyard, dry and deserted. Her mind transported her back to the day of the tragedy that had altered her life forever.

It was on a Friday morning just like today. She had received the first letter from Mr Chibundu the previous day. Oluchi had found the letter at the gate of the restaurant. She had been so distracted and worried about the contents of that letter that she had not slept well that night. The sleepless nights led to her being tired and stressed out in the morning. Sleep overtook her around mid-morning when she nodded off. She had woken up a few minutes later and could not find Ekene. She had been seized by panic as she frantically went from room to room calling out to him. Then, she had come to the sitting room and walked past this very spot where she now stood. She had looked out into the yard through the transparent sliding door, the gate leading to the pool was ajar. She heard the piercing scream as if it had not come from her own body.

The image of Ekene's small body floating upside down in the pool filled her mind. Ifeoma began to sob. "I'm so sorry!" she cried, tears streaming down her face, "I'm sorry, Ekene! I'm so sorry!"

Ifeoma collapsed onto the carpet, her hands over her face as she continued to sob. It was all her fault. Her father was right. She was useless. She couldn't even protect her own son.

She stayed this way until a sharp and persistent ringing sound interrupted her sorrowful daze. She quickly dried her eyes and went in search of the sound. It was coming from her phone. Ifeoma raced towards the kitchen to get it before it stopped ringing. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw who the caller was. It was from Inland Psychiatric Hospital where Nene was a patient. She answered the call immediately.

“Is this Ifeoma Obi?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Hello, I am Dr Olaolu, the psychiatrist looking after Nene Okafor. I have you down as her next of kin.”

“Hello, Dr Olaolu. Yes, I am her next of kin, her sister. Is everything okay?” Ifeoma felt dread churn her insides as she asked.

“Nene attempted suicide early this morning.”

“What? Is she okay?”

“Yes, she was found by a nurse before any real harm occurred. She was rushed to the hospital and has just been discharged.”

“How did she?”

“She tried to hang herself with a bedsheet.”

“Oh, my God,” Ifeoma could hardly get the words out. Nene had been doing so well the last time she had seen her. “You said she was getting better.”

“Yes, she was. But then she regressed suddenly.”

An upsurge of fury hit Ifeoma as a realisation came over her.

“Did she have any visitors recently? I saw her last week, and she was fine.”

“As a matter of fact, yes she did. A man … one General Okonkwo visited her yesterday evening—”

“How could you let him visit her? He is the reason she is there in the first place!” Ifeoma cut in, running her fingers through her hair in frustration.

“We have no right to deny her any visitors.”

“Well, I am the next of kin and I don’t want you to ever let that man visit her again.”

“It’s not that simple,” the doctor tried to explain as patiently as possible. “Nene has the capacity to make decisions for herself and she is the only one who can refuse a visitor.”

Ifeoma sighed long and hard. The doctor had a point. She just had to convince Nene to break all ties with that monster.

“Thanks for letting me know. I will be there shortly to see her.”

Overwhelming sorrow threatened to overcome Ifeoma; she could never seem to catch a break. It seemed as if life had nothing but pain and loss in store for her. She took a deep breath and straightened her back. She would not succumb to defeat. I am not my mother; I am a strong woman.

After ending the call, she got dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a pink cotton sleeveless top. She rang her other sisters to let them know what had happened with Nene. Then she called Oluchi to tell her she would be late and then headed out on her way to see Nene.

Before long, she was consumed with her duties as eldest sister and her painful loss was once again buried deeply in the dark corner of her mind.

∞

Chuma sat in the small canteen opposite his office building waiting for his siblings. They had planned to meet up for lunch. They usually did this at least once every other week, since the three of them worked in the same building. He ordered a glass of water and idly glanced at the menu. None of the food appealed to him. Ifeoma had really spoiled him. He could not enjoy a hot meal that was not prepared by her. He usually ordered chicken salads or cold sandwiches whenever he came here.

A smile spread across his lips when he recalled this morning. Ifeoma was playing games. Her sly bend-over antics were not lost on him. He could tell she wanted him as much as he wanted her, but he wanted her to make the first move. When he made love to her again, he wanted no ambiguity. There had to be no

regrets and she had to be one hundred percent there. He had waited about six months; he could wait a few more weeks or months if he had to. Above everything else, he wanted to reconcile with her. They always had amazing sex, but beyond that, they had shared a very deep connection. He wanted that back. Despite wanting her physically to a point that it hurt, he agreed with her point of view that sex confused things.

The growling noise coming from his stomach made him look at his watch. Nnamdi and Adaora were always late. They sometimes gossiped and giggled with each other, like little children. Chuma always felt left out because he never fit in with them. His attitude to life left little room for jokes and games and he often wished he could be more like Nnamdi who didn't take life too seriously. The only person he could giggle or relax with was Ifeoma. For some reason, she had been the only one who pushed him not to take himself too seriously.

As if on cue, he spotted Nnamdi and Adaora walking towards him laughing about something he was sure he wouldn't find amusing.

"You are late," Chuma said as soon as they got to him.

"Don't mind Ada, she does not walk anymore, she waddles," Nnamdi said with a chuckle. Adaora touched her protruding belly and laughed.

"I'm allowed to. I am seven months pregnant. Carry a baby in your tummy and let's see how you walk."

Nnamdi's face furrowed as he shook his head.

"I thank God I'm a man," he said with a look of disgust on his face at the thought of being pregnant.

They took the seats opposite Chuma.

"Na wa o, Ada, that your husband keeps knocking you up," Nnamdi joked. Adaora gasped.

"This is my second pregnancy," she objected

"And your last. No more maternity leave for you. At the rate at which you keep going off on maternity leave, we will be left with all your clients," Chuma added

with an amused smirk.

“What? You can’t dictate that—”

“Try me. Just tell that husband of yours to stop getting you pregnant.” Chuma sounded serious, but his siblings knew that he was joking.

“Or you’ll do what? Throw him into the backseat of your car and threaten him?”

Chuma and Nnamdi’s eyes connected, and they burst into laughter.

“Yes, he told me,” Adaora continued, suppressing her own laughter. “Did you guys think that he wouldn’t tell me how you shoved him into a car years ago and warned him to stay away from me? Controlling freaks that you both are, I tell you!”

“Snitch!” Nnamdi muttered, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “Tell that snitch of yours that he will pay.”

“How do we make him pay?” Chuma asked Nnamdi as if Adaora was not present.

“I know how, we’ll break his ankle next time we play football together,” Nnamdi answered.

“Leave my husband alone!” Adaora cried, half-jokingly, half-seriously, knowing her brothers were not above that.

“Okay, let’s not break his ankle,” Chuma agreed too quickly.

“Thank you.”

“Let’s just sprain it instead.”

“Waka!” Adaora said, flipping Chuma a rude gesture with her hand.

They all laughed.

Not too soon afterwards, they settled to their lunch. Chuma had ordered his usual chicken salad. Adaora was having the same thing as Nnamdi; fried plantain and fish stew.

“How is my gorgeous niece?” Chuma asked Adaora.

“She is fine. Ikenna lets her get away with everything, and I have to say no a lot. She needs a sibling to challenge her self-obsessed toddler behaviour. I can’t wait for her to meet her little brother.” Adaora patted her stomach again. Chuma’s throat tightened.

“You are having a boy?” he asked.

Adaora nodded. “We found out last week,” she answered.

“Congratulations,” Nnamdi and Chuma said in unison. The mention of a son had triggered an intense sorrow in Chuma. He lowered his eyes to his meal and shoved a forkful of salad into his mouth.

“How are you, Chuma?” Adaora’s voice was soft and full of concern.

Chuma shrugged. “Fine.” Then after a brief pause, he added. “Ifeoma moved back home last week.” He heard the surprised gasps from both Adaora and Nnamdi.

“What? When? You didn’t even tell us,” Nnamdi said, dropping his fork.

“I wanted her to settle in first.”

“So, how are things with … the both of you?” Chuma could tell from Nnamdi’s hesitation that he knew something was wrong but didn’t want to pry.

“We are fine. Just adjusting, that’s all,” Chuma responded, avoiding Nnamdi’s gaze. He took a sip of water to soothe the strange dryness in his throat. Thinking about his failed relationship with Ifeoma always made him edgy.

“I saw Ify at the office the other day,” Nnamdi confessed dryly. “She was crying. Said something about a problem with the restaurant and that you were taking care of it.” Chuma knew what Nnamdi was doing, goading him to talk.

“Yes, I have sorted it out.”

“What did you do, Chuma?” Nnamdi’s tone sounded accusatory.

“Nothing … Okay, you know me. The restaurant had some … financial troubles. I bailed her out on the condition that she would come back home.”

“Oh, Chuma…” It was Adaora this time. She placed a palm on her forehead.

“What else was I supposed to do? I needed her back!” he said, raising his voice.

“There is plenty else you could have done. How about simply asking—” Adaora began.

“She filed for divorce. I wasn’t about to let that happen,” Chuma interjected, his tone was defensive.

Silence. It was as if they were all frozen by Chuma’s admission.

Adaora was the first to move. She placed her hand on Chuma’s. “For the first time ever, I’m with you. She is the best thing that has ever happened to you,” she said softly. “Do whatever you’ve got to do.”

Chuma’s eyes met hers and softened. He was glad that she agreed with him on this. Chuma second-guessed his decision to blackmail Ifeoma into moving back home every time. He didn’t need his family doing the same. They continued eating in silence for a while after that.

“Well, I might as well say this now. I just found out I may have a daughter,” Nnamdi announced, eliciting a startled response from both Chuma and Adaora.

“What!” Chuma exclaimed in disbelief.

“I… um… hooked up with a woman Four years ago-”

“And you did not bag yourself?” Chuma interrupted.

“I did, but it broke. She told me at the time she would take care of any—”

“I don’t think I need to hear this,” Adaora protested, appearing uncomfortable with their conversation. They ignored her protest and continued.

“Four years? How do you know the child is yours?” Chuma enquired.

“I don’t know that yet, I’m awaiting DNA test results.”

“Why did the woman come forward now after four years?”

“I don’t know … but I know I have to find out if that little girl is mine. She looks just like me, like mum.”

“Bro … this is messed up … I always had that fear, you know,” Chuma muttered as he took a sip of water. A moment of silence ensued.

“I could be a father….” Nnamdi looked scared at the prospect.

“What about the girl’s mother?” Adaora questioned. “Are you two friends, dating or hooking up still?”

“That’s a different story. I don’t even want to talk about her until I know for sure that the little girl is mine.” Nnamdi replied, shaking his head.

“I can’t believe how calm you are about this,” Chuma remarked as he pushed his plate away. He was done eating.

“What can I do, shit happens,” Nnamdi responded nonchalantly. And Chuma once again envied his brother’s ability to live life lightly.

“Well, keep us posted,” Adaora said to Nnamdi, and he nodded.

“Yes, I find out for sure in two weeks.”

The conversation soon shifted to work and shortly after, the three of them strolled back to the office. Chuma had so many meetings with potential clients that exhausted him. He loved the prospect of new clients but sometimes it involved a vigorous vetting process to be sure that the firm was willing to handle those accounts. The vetting process was the most draining because Chuma liked to leave no stone unturned. He dug deep into people’s backgrounds to find out if there were any loopholes before he accepted their accounts. He did not like dealing with embezzled money and the firm always rejected money from crooked businessmen.

By the time Chuma got home, it was a few minutes after eight and he was famished. He hoped that Ifeoma had not eaten without him because he enjoyed having dinner with her. He had texted to inform her that he would be late and that she could start dinner without him but hoped that she hadn’t.

The smell of Egusi soup met his nostrils at the door. He inhaled deeply. He loved this smell. It reminded him of his late mother, and, now, Ifeoma. It was strange, but whenever he smelled Egusi soup, he felt at peace with himself.

“Welcome home,” Ifeoma said when she spotted him.

“Thanks,” Chuma replied, lowering his briefcase and removing his suit jacket. He loosened his tie and approached the dining room where Ifeoma sat. Her meal was untouched. There was a covered tray opposite her and Chuma took the seat he knew was for him. His heart swelled with relief. Ifeoma had waited for him.

“How was your day?” He asked her once he had settled to his meal. She hesitated as if contemplating whether to tell him what was on her mind.

“Nene attempted suicide again this morning.”

Chuma held himself still. He glanced at Ifeoma and noticed tears shimmering in her eyes. His gut clenched.

“Is she okay?”

“Yes,” Ifeoma replied. “General Okonkwo visited her again. He keeps torturing her by keeping her on a leash of hope. Why can’t that fool leave her alone? Why?”

Chuma said nothing; he just listened intently while Ifeoma spoke.

“Nene is still obsessed with him; how could she want to kill herself over that fool. How?” Ifeoma continued her tirade. She needed to pour out her mind. She was tired of holding it all in. “Why does she not think about us? How we would feel if she actually succeeds and kills herself?”

The tears she was fighting escaped her eyes.

“I have told her to stop him from visiting, but she won't listen. She would rather see him… even if that makes her want to end her life.”

Chuma listened silently to Ifeoma.

“I am frustrated. I don't know what to do … I can't stop her from letting him visit

because she has the capacity to decide for herself. The psychiatrist won't let me override that decision. I am stuck. I just hope she doesn't succeed in killing herself. I feel so helpless about this."

Ifeoma looked subdued. He had never seen her so subdued. It made him want to find General Okonkwo and pummel him to the ground.

"Ifeoma, don't worry, I'll take care of this," Chuma said quietly.

"How? How? She won't stop him from visiting. She won't listen to me, and that fool won't let her go. He is married for goodness' sake. He doesn't want to marry her but wants to keep using her. I don't want her to kill herself…"

"I said, don't worry, Ify." Chuma's decisive tone made Ifeoma halt. She gazed into his eyes and nodded.

"I hope she doesn't kill herself … I really hope so," she said and then continued eating.

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Sounds coming from within the house woke Ifeoma. She sat up in bed still feeling groggy from deep sleep. Keeping still, she listened hard for the sounds and it continued. They were grunting sounds. Ifeoma jumped up from bed startled. Is there an intruder? A thief in the house? Her immediate thought was checking up on Chuma. She ran into the master bedroom and opened the door. The bed looked rumpled, but it was empty, he wasn't there. Moving further into the room, she checked the bathroom, and he wasn't there.

Cautiously, Ifeoma climbed down the stairs. She realised that the sound of grunting and banging was coming from the basement. Walking on tiptoes and with her heart racing, Ifeoma made her way to the basement and stopped. The door was slightly ajar, and the room was dark except for the dim light coming from the single bulb hanging from the ceiling. Ifeoma quickly hid and observed as Chuma threw heavy punches at a punching bag, groaning with each blow. Transfixed, she crouched there hidden and watched in fascination as his muscles

rippled with each movement of his hand. He wore nothing but boxers and his fit form was a gorgeous sight to behold.

She tried to see his face, but the light was too dim, so she focused hard until with a certain movement of his head, the light caught his expression and Ifeoma's heart beat paused momentarily. It was the expression of a wounded man. He looked tortured as he flexed his glove-covered hand and rammed it into the punching bag.

"I'm sorry, Ify!" she heard Chuma groan. "I'm sorry, Ekene, my boy! I should have closed the gate! It's all my fault! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" His voice sounded hoarse as he repeatedly punched the bag yelling those words.

Intense emotion choked Ifeoma as she watched Chuma collapse to the ground holding onto the bag. Then she heard his sobs. "I'm sorry!" he whispered one more time in a broken voice.

Unable to move, Ifeoma kept her eyes fixated on Chuma. This was the first time she had seen him cry. Her heart thudded violently in her chest and her eyes burned with tears. When she saw Chuma suddenly get up, Ifeoma moved swiftly out of the way and ran. She hid under the stairway and listened as sounds of his footsteps gradually disappeared.

Squatting where she was, Ifeoma waited, unsure if it was safe to leave her hiding spot without being discovered. Then she heard Chuma's loud snores. He was asleep. Ifeoma got up and made her way to the sitting room where she found Chuma sprawled on the leather sofa, fast asleep. Her chest constricted painfully. She walked towards Chuma and placed a soft kiss on his forehead. She couldn't wait for the appointment with Dr Olubanjo tomorrow. She had to let Chuma know that she didn't blame him, that it was not his fault and that it was her own fault that Ekene drowned in the pool.

And that was exactly what Ifeoma did when they attended the therapy session with Dr Olubanjo.

"I want to talk about the day Ekene drowned," Ifeoma said to Dr Olubanjo. Chuma glanced in her direction, a surprised expression on his face. She knew why he was surprised. They had never talked about Ekene's death.

"Great, Ifeoma," Dr Olubanjo said. His voice was always even pitched. It

reminded Ifeoma of the sound of a humming motor engine.

“Ekene was always very curious about the pool. You know thirteen-month-olds … finding the joys of walking independently and wanting to go everywhere...” Her voice became shaky as she spoke, her throat tight due to the sudden lump that had lodged itself there.

“I eh … I received a letter from home the day before he died. It was bad news and … I didn’t sleep a wink the night before. I was so tired and sleepy, so I nodded off for a bit … just for a bit and …” Ifeoma broke off, unable to continue past the tightness she felt in her neck.

She turned towards Chuma and found tears glistening in his eyes. “I don’t blame you Chuma, it was my fault—”

“No, it was mine, you told me to close the gate before I left, I was so busy on the phone … I should have done it—” Chuma interrupted vehemently.

“Chuma, it was not your fault … I fell asleep … I was with him when it happened … I should have closed the gate myself. You had an important business meeting—”

“I should have closed the gate, Ifeoma. You told me to.”

“Please don’t blame yourself. You are … you were a wonderful father… You have to know that … you were a wonderful father.”

Chuma’s heart expanded at her words. The tears from his eyes fell down his face. He needed to hear that from Ifeoma. He needed to hear that she did not blame him; because he already blamed himself.

“It was my fault and not yours, Chuma,” Ifeoma said again, her voice so quiet that Chuma didn’t hear her until she repeated the statement.

“It was an accident, Ifeoma,” Chuma refuted. “It was not your fault... And maybe it was not my fault either. It was just an accident …” Chuma paused, considering his own statement.

“It was just an accident,” he said again, this time more confidently. “It was an accident, Ifeoma. It was an accident, Ify. Say it, Ify; it was not your fault. It was

an accident.”

Ifeoma exhaled and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“It was an accident, Chuma.” She placed her hand on his and squeezed. “It was an accident,” she repeated. They gazed into each other’s eyes and a silent remedial conclusion took place between them. Dr Olubanjo sat observing them silently and scribbling rapidly on his notepad.

Chapter Twenty

The restaurant was filled with customers, causing some to wait before they could be seated. Two people were standing by the entrance. If any more showed up, they might have to wait outside. Ifeoma was scrambling to move people along as quickly as she could.

“Oluchi, Mr Okoro has finished eating, and he is still sitting there reading a newspaper,” Ifeoma whispered into Oluchi’s ears. Oluchi laughed.

“I pity that man’s wife. He does not like going home,” Oluchi said. She chuckled some more then added, “If we get him to leave, we can make room for that man and his girlfriend over there.” Oluchi pointed to the man and woman standing at the entrance.

“How do you know that they are a couple?” Ifeoma asked, her eyebrow raised. “Because of the way that he is standing beside her possessively.”

“Na wa o, Oluchi, you should write a book on relationships,” Ifeoma teased.

Oluchi laughed again.

“Write a book? When I’m looking for a rich husband? I have no time for that.”

They stood by the kitchen door peering into the restaurant.

“How do we get Mr Okoro to leave before Mr and Mrs over there get fed up of waiting?” Oluchi asked Ifeoma.

“Maybe we should just tell him to leave.”

“That might be rude,” Oluchi muttered. She stood contemplating for a while then released the top two buttons of her blouse to expose her ample cleavage. “Watch and learn, Madam Ify, watch and learn,” she said as she strutted off towards Mr Okoro.

Ifeoma observed Oluchi talking to Mr Okoro. Oluchi was bent forward and Mr

Okoro's gaze directed at her chest. Within moments, he was reaching for his wallet. Ifeoma felt a smile tug at her lips. Oluchi was very savvy, and it worked for her.

"I told you, Madam Ify, watch and learn," Oluchi said to Ifeoma as soon as she was back in the kitchen.

"What did you say to him sef?" Ifeoma asked.

"It's my secret. If I tell you, I'll have to kill you," Oluchi replied with a mischievous smile. They both chuckled and Oluchi left Ifeoma to continue with her duty of organising the waitresses and managing the restaurant.

Ifeoma heaved a deep sigh of relief. She loved this restaurant. And thanks to Chuma, she had paid off the taxes she owed. Thinking about Chuma brought a smile to her face. Since their last counseling session with Dr Olubanjo four days ago, she and Chuma had been talking to each other a lot more.

Last night, they had even gone through old photographs and videos of Ekene. Ifeoma loved that they could now remember Ekene together without sorrow or bitterness. She touched the locket hanging from her neck and smiled again. She couldn't wait to get back home to Chuma. They planned to relax on the boat this weekend, and Ifeoma was looking forward to their time together. They had shared many pleasant memories on that boat.

She turned off the gas cooker because the soup was warm enough. Just then, her phone beeped. She reached into the pocket of her apron and retrieved it. It was a text message from her sister, Chioma, simply telling her to call her.

Ifeoma left the kitchen in search of Effiong. She found him at the back of the restaurant, pounding yam.

"Effiong, please take over the kitchen. I have to make a phone call in my office," Ifeoma said to him. Effiong wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief he retrieved from his pocket, and then nodded.

Ifeoma rushed to her office with her heart in her mouth. Once inside, she locked the door and dialled Chioma's number. She waited patiently while it rang. A deep-seated fear that Nene had done something to herself again kept her heart beating fast.

“Hello,” Chioma greeted, cheerily.

“Hello, Chioma, you asked me to call you, is everything okay?

“Yes, in fact, everything is perfect!”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you not seen the news?”

“What news? What are you talking about?”

“Ify, General Okonkwo has been arrested by EFCC,” Chioma said.

“What?”

“This morning, he was arrested. Apparently, he embezzled millions of Naira from the government. And he is also a drug lord who smuggles cocaine and other hard drugs.”

Ifeoma’s body went numb. Blood pounded in her ears. She typed her password into the desktop computer in front of her and the screen came alive. This was too good to be true. She needed to see this for herself.

“Ify, are you still there?”

“Yes, Chioma, I’m in shock,” Ifeoma answered, her eyes focused on the heading of the online news blog she had pulled up:

General Okonkwo arrested by EFCC this morning for fraud. Also facing drug and human trafficking charges.

“I’m in shock…” Ifeoma muttered, her hands shaking as she clicked on another link. This time, it was a picture of General Okonkwo being led out of his home in handcuffs.

“Ify, do you know what this means?” Chioma’s voice rang out with excitement over the phone. “It means he won’t bother Nene again. Certainly not from jail!”

Ifeoma exhaled deeply. She remembered the look in Chuma’s eyes when he said he would take care of things. Without a doubt, Ifeoma knew Chuma was

responsible for this.

“Oh, Chioma, I’m so happy … so happy!”

“So am I. That bastard deserves to spend the rest of his life in jail.”

After Ifeoma ended the call with her sister, she relaxed in her seat. Chuma was not perfect, but he was perfect for her. He always erased all her anxieties. Like a rogue, he defended and fought for her. She found it extremely sexy the way that he took care of her. For her entire life, she had taken care of everyone else; her sisters, her employees, even sometimes, her mother. But Chuma took care of her. And for the first time ever, Ifeoma realised that she enjoyed it. She wanted to be taken care of. It didn’t make her weak. It made her strong to realise that it was okay to be taken care of. A sudden need to see Chuma overwhelmed her. Only a few more hours, Ifeoma thought, a huge grin spreading across her face. Only a few more hours and I will go home to my husband.

∞

The atmosphere in the conference room was tense. Nnamdi and Adaora wanted the firm to take up a new client, but Chuma was not yet satisfied.

“Look, I don’t think it is safe to accept his account yet,” Chuma said to the ten senior partners sitting around the large conference table. He heard audible sighs in response to his statement.

Chuma did not bother to look up from the laptop in front of him. Yes, he was obsessive, and he liked to go over things multiple times to ensure there were no mistakes. That was only because he did not want to take chances on a new client that could jeopardize the firm’s reputation.

“Chuma, what else do you want?” Nnamdi asked him. “You have checked him out, Alhaji Musa is clean.” Nnamdi was obviously frustrated. In their partnership, everyone had to agree before any client was taken on. Except that sometimes, Nnamdi and Chuma who founded Zenith financial firm and Zenith mortgage bank had executive votes that overrode the others.

“I don’t like the fact that he has no paper trail. It’s too good to be true,” Chuma argued. He didn’t like the fact that they hadn’t found anything. There was always something to find if one looked and he had been looking intently. Chuma did not trust a man with no paper trail.

How did he make his Billions?” Chuma looked around the room as he spoke. “He has no company, no business and suddenly, boom … Billionaire! No, I am not yet happy till I know how.”

“We are passing on a lot of money here,” Nnamdi said, also looking around the room. Most of the senior partners avoided eye contact with Nnamdi and Chuma. They did not like getting in the middle of their disagreements.

“But, Chuma, you have vetted him and found nothing, why are you still worried?” Adaora asked quietly. A few heads turned to her direction.

“Because I have found nothing. No billionaire becomes a billionaire without a little something. I like to know what we are dealing with first.” Chuma replied in a matter-of-fact tone. A few of the senior partners nodded their heads in agreement to his statement.

“While we are sitting, someone else may take his business,” Nnamdi persisted in a grating tone. Chuma looked directly at him.

“It is better for us to lose bad business than for us to come under federal government Investigation because of doing business with fraudulent people. I will not allow what we have worked so hard for to be flushed down the toilet because you want to rush into business without proper research.”

“Fuck you, Chuma,” Nnamdi cursed, rising to his feet. “I’ll give you one week and if you don’t come up with a genuine reason other than your bloody gut feeling, we take this to vote.” And with that statement hanging in the air, Nnamdi stormed out. Silence followed his departure and Chuma exhaled deeply.

“Let’s discuss Chief Odogwu’s account,” he said in a calm voice as if Nnamdi had not just cursed at him and walked out.

The meeting ended an hour later. Chuma stood up and gathered his files together, feeling slightly drained. It was not strange for him and Nnamdi to have heated arguments during board meetings. Because of the difference in their

personalities, they often clashed about their different approaches to business. Nnamdi was a risk-taker and often dived in headfirst. It sometimes paid off, but his flair for taking risks had put the firm in a sticky situation in the past where they were almost under investigation for fraud. From that time onwards, Chuma scrutinized every potential client as obsessively as he did everything else.

Putting his laptop back in a carrier case, he started towards his office. Chuma paused briefly when he saw Adaora standing by the door of his office.

“Hey, sis,” Chuma said as he got to her. “You should have gone in to take a seat; you know you shouldn’t be standing so much in your condition.”

“I’m pregnant, not crippled,” Adaora said with a smile. They walked into his office together.

“What’s up with Nnamdi?” he asked Adaora once they settled and were drinking tea.

“He received the DNA test this morning. He is definitely the father of little Nkem,” Adaora replied, taking a sip from her cup.

“Oh … that explains a lot. He rarely walks away during meetings. He usually sticks to his argument until we either vote or we get exhausted and move on.” Chuma played idly with his neatly trimmed facial hair for a few seconds.

“How is he feeling?” he queried.

“Scared, mostly numb. He is still trying to process it all.”

“It must be tough, but I’m sure he will be a great father.”

“I know, I told him to take a few days to reflect and regroup. He will be all right. I just came to tell you not to be offended by his outburst.”

“It takes a lot to offend me, Ada, trust me … no shaking.”

Chuma’s phone began to ring. He glanced at it and then at Adaora.

“I need to take this in private,” he said. She smiled and rose to her feet.

“Sometimes I don’t know who you are, Chuma,” Adaora muttered, “I need to take this in private,” she repeated Chuma’s words, mimicking his tone as she exited his office. “As if you are the damn secret service.” Chuma laughed at her comment.

Immediately after she left, he placed the phone against his ear.

“Kayode, how far?”

“It’s done. General Okonkwo has been arrested. You were right … he is a shady politician. Sold drugs, and was even involved in a prostitution ring, supplying prostitutes to politicians,” Kayode responded. Chuma sucked air deep into his lungs. That fool won’t bother Nene anymore.

“Thank you, Kayode. Most politicians have skeletons in their closets. One can only find them if they are fully investigated. I’m glad my hunches were right.”

“They were, boss, they were. I’ve always trusted them myself.”

“Thanks once again, Kayode.”

“No problem, my man, anything for you. You saved my life. I remain loyal.” Chuma smiled.

“I didn’t. I only helped with hospital bills—”

“You did, if you didn’t pay for my dialysis and kidney transplant, I would be a dead man,” Kayode cut in.

“If you say so, Kayode, if you say so. But how is your health though?”

“I’m doing great. So far, my body is not rejecting the kidney. And working with the police force has given me more purpose in life. Helping people get justice is very rewarding.”

“Great, Kayode, I’m glad to hear that.”

After ending the call with Kayode, Chuma continued working until it was time to head home. He had gotten so engaged in what he was doing that he did not even realise how late it was. It was seven o’clock. He put away all his files and

asked his secretary to go home before he departed.

He whistled happily while he drove. Thinking about the past few days with Ifeoma put a smile on his face. They had talked more about Ekene and shared pleasant memories of him together. There was no longer just grief, but also an acceptance of the accident. It had allowed them to finally move past the stage of feeling bitter and resentful. It was the first step to their reconciliation and Chuma was very pleased. He couldn't wait to get back home to Ifeoma. Maybe they could talk some more about Ekene. He was glad when she suggested they go for a boat trip over the weekend. To him, that was a sign that things were getting better between them.

Chuma removed his suit jacket and loosened his tie as soon as he got home. The aroma of food from the kitchen welcomed him and he inhaled deeply. Drawn as if by a magnet, he followed the scent to the kitchen to find Ifeoma in front of the gas cooker. His heart lurched in his chest when she turned towards him. She was wearing a pink dressing robe tied with a belt in the middle. Her soft curly hair cascaded over her face and down her shoulders. Her make-up was light, although her lips shimmered with bright red lipstick.

Chuma's gaze lowered to her feet. She was wearing red stilettos that matched the shade of her lipstick. His eyes roamed back to her face to find her brown eyes twinkling and a small smile playing on her lips. He swallowed hard.

"Welcome home, Chuma," Ifeoma said.

Chuma was speechless. Unable to move, he stood there in an arrested state.

"I saw the news this afternoon. General Okonkwo was arrested today," Ifeoma continued. She ran her fingers through her soft coils. Still no words from Chuma.

"You did that for my sister." It was a statement of fact and not a question.

"It eh…" Chuma cleared his throat before he continued, "… it was nothing at all. Just a phone call."

"You did that for my sister," Ifeoma repeated, her voice shaky with emotion.

"It was really nothing."

“Are you hungry?” Ifeoma blurted out.

Astonished by the sudden change in topic, Chuma did not reply.

“I cooked yam potage. If you are hungry you could start with that or…” Ifeoma untied the belt to her dressing robe to reveal the sexiest matching black lace bra and panties Chuma had ever seen. The contrast of the black lace against her fair skin was the most erotic image he had ever beheld.

“… Or you could start with this,” Ifeoma whispered, caressing her own body with her hands. All the blood in Chuma’s brain drained down to his groin, hardening it painfully and tenting his trousers. He had never been this aroused in his life.

Ifeoma’s gaze trailed downwards to the evidence of his arousal and she gave him a seductive smile.

“Well, I have my answer,” she said, walking towards him, swaying her hips from side to side. Chuma’s breathing stalled. His heart beat fitfully. Ifeoma wrapped her arms around him and placed a soft kiss on his mouth.

As if his brain suddenly snapped into action, he grabbed Ifeoma’s neck forward and pressed his mouth against hers. She welcomed the intrusion of his tongue, kissing him back with ardour. Chuma tried to be gentle, but he was ravenous. He devoured Ifeoma’s mouth, his tongue sweeping around her mouth feverishly. He heard her soft moans, and this inflamed his arousal. They suddenly broke apart, panting and dragging air into their lungs. Seconds after, they both reached for each other at the same time and resumed the familiar dance of mouth and tongue.

Ifeoma pressed her body into Chuma, grinding her core against his erection attempting to relieve the blinding need within her.

“Oh, God, Ify!” Chuma groaned, his body set ablaze with desire. He lifted Ifeoma and wrapped her legs around his waist, slipping off her shoes. She clung to him as they moved together clumsily out of the kitchen, both searching for the nearest comfortable surface. The bedroom was too far. They wouldn’t make it there. Kissing passionately, they stumbled towards the sitting room where they both landed on the sofa. Ifeoma giggled when her back hit the soft cushions of the sofa. She pulled him closer and brought his mouth down to hers.

Chuma abruptly pulled away, his expression serious as he gazed down at her. He traced his fingers over her lace-covered breasts. Then without warning, he ripped the flimsy lace apart exposing her large breasts. Ifeoma gasped.

“My watermelons,” he murmured in appreciation. Cupping both breasts in his hands, he murmured, “I have missed you.” He heard her soft giggle as his mouth descended on her breast.

Chuma reacquainted his mouth and tongue with Ifeoma’s D-sized breasts, groaning with pleasure as he kissed, licked, sucked and nicked her breasts. Ifeoma moaned loudly, whimpering at the sensual pleasure. His head moved lower, trailing kisses over Ifeoma’s flat tummy and over her caesarean section scar. He dragged her lace panties off her hips and over her thighs and legs, tossing them aside carelessly. Then he spread her legs wide apart and buried his face between them. Ifeoma cried out in ecstasy when Chuma’s tongue made contact with her wet throbbing centre.

“Oh, Chuma, I can’t,” she cried, her body writhing uncontrollably at the exquisite sensation. He showed her no mercy as he continued his voracious feast between her thighs.

Moaning raucously, Ifeoma’s head thrashed from side to side. She placed her hand on the back of his head, anchoring him there, afraid he would stop.

“Please don’t stop. Please don’t stop,” she pleaded. Her body was wound tightly like a spring ready to snap. And it suddenly did snap.

“I’m coming! Oh, Chuma, I’m coming! Ooohhhh!” Ifeoma yelled, arching her back off the sofa as her body stilled, and then splintered against Chuma’s face.

A deep satisfied sound escaped his lips as he withdrew his head from between Ifeoma’s thighs. He wiped the moisture on his face against her tummy. Moving quickly, Chuma got rid of his own clothes. She was still recovering from her climax when Chuma held her hips steady with his hands and shoved his engorged length into her. “Ooohhhh!” Ifeoma cried out in delight.

He closed his eyes. An intense feeling of pleasure struck him as he was finally reunited with his wife. He remained motionless for a few seconds, savouring the moment. Then he began to move, slowly at first, and then within moments, picking up the pace.

Ifeoma was a screamer, and her screams made him lose his mind. Carnal sounds of body slapping against body, and groans and moans filled the room.

“You are my wife,” Chuma growled, his thrusts becoming more frenzied. “You are mine!”

Aroused by his possessive words, Ifeoma dragged her nails down Chuma’s back. He groaned at the pleasure-filled painful sensation.

“You are mine too. You hear me. You are mine!” she cried, matching his movements with upward thrusts of her pelvis.

Chuma knew he was close, and he needed Ifeoma with him, so he moved his thumb down her body to find her sensitive spot and Ifeoma moaned. His head descended on her breasts again as he continued pounding his body inside her and brushing his thumb against her clit. The combined pleasure was all too intense for Ifeoma. Her entire body was on fire from Chuma’s ministrations. She was close to the peak again. She shifted the angle of her body, so that he hit her repeatedly at just the right spot. And then her body shattered.

“Again… Again…Oh, Chuma… Oh, God!” Ifeoma screamed, convulsing violently against Chuma.

A string of guttural expletives erupted from Chuma’s throat as he exploded within her seconds later, the force of his climax almost pushing them off the sofa. With a drawn-out sigh, Chuma collapsed on top of Ifeoma, completely spent.

“Chuma, that was fantastic,” Ifeoma whispered moments later. Chuma had swapped positions with her so that she now lay languidly on top of him on the sofa.

“Yes, it was. It really was,” he agreed, brushing away hair from Ifeoma’s face. He suddenly swatted her bare bottom with his palm.

“Ouch! What was that for?” she screeched.

“That was for keeping us apart all this time when you know how much magic we make together,”

Ifeoma chuckled in agreement. “We do make magic together,” she admitted. “I’ll never keep us apart again.” Her promise was solemn, and this made Chuma kiss her damp forehead.

They lay on the sofa lazily for a few more minutes before she made a move to get up.

“Where do you think you are going?” Chuma enquired roughly.

“I need to pee.”

“Well, come back immediately after, I’m not done with you yet.”

Ifeoma’s mouth twisted into a half-smile. Yes, she knew Chuma was not finished with her yet. She had awakened the beast; she knew she was not getting any sleep tonight. She looked forward to spending the entire night in his arms.

“I will come back soon, and besides, I’m hungry. Aren’t you?”

Chuma grinned. It was a disarming and boyish grin.

“Actually, I am.”

“I’ll get some yam potage from the kitchen on my way back,” Ifeoma said as she rose to her feet. “I need you to replenish your energy with food because I’m not done with you either,” she added mischievously. Chuma roared with laughter. He loved that Ifeoma’s sexual appetite matched his.

“Come back quickly, woman!” A raspy satisfied sigh escaped his lips as he watched her glorious naked body exit the sitting room.

Chapter Twenty-One

They could not get enough of each other in the weeks that followed. Ifeoma spent most of her time with Chuma when she was not at the restaurant, and Chuma rushed back from work every day just to be with Ifeoma. She had moved back into the master bedroom.

Chuma smiled, remembering the day she had moved back. It was three weeks ago, the day after she had surprised him with her lacy underwear. He had come back from work to find Ifeoma sprawled on the large bed in the master bedroom, all her personal effects neatly arranged on the dressing table, the aroma of her fruity oils permeating the air. Without a word, he had jumped onto the bed with her.

Thinking about it now, he felt an overpowering need to see Ifeoma.

“Chuma, is something funny?” Nnamdi asked, snapping Chuma out of his reverie. Chuma blinked twice and shook his head. They were in a boardroom meeting and he had not heard a word from the issue that was being discussed. An embarrassed flush warmed his cheeks.

“Ehm … sorry, I don’t feel very well … can we reschedule?”

There was silence in the room as all the senior partners turned towards him, their expressions bewildered. Chuma never rescheduled meetings. It was something that just never happened. Even when he was sick with malaria last year, he had dragged himself to work. When Ekene had died and he was advised to take time off, he hadn’t. But now, all he could think about was the intense need to see Ifeoma. It was like a compulsion he couldn’t fight.

“Are you okay?” Nnamdi asked, concern clouding his eyes. Adaora also looked worried.

“Yes, I eh … I just don’t feel like myself today.”

“Okay, we’ll reschedule for next week?” Nnamdi agreed, sweeping his eyes

around the room for confirmation. The other partners nodded unanimously, a few mutters of “yes” and “okay” resounded in the room. And just like that, everyone stood up to leave the room. But Nnamdi and Adaora stayed back.

“Have you seen a doctor?” Adaora asked softly, pressing her palm against his forehead. Fighting back a tiny piece of inner guilt for being a fraud, and the laughter that threatened to erupt from him, Chuma shook his head. “I will go to the doctors on my way from work later—”

“No, go now,” Nnamdi cut in. “Adaora and I will take care of things here.”

“Thanks, bro.”

Chuma left the conference room and typed a short text to Ifeoma requesting that she escape the restaurant and meet him at home. She texted back immediately informing him that she was on her way. Grinning from ear to ear, Chuma walked from the office building towards the car park. He had never done this before; leave work in the middle of the day just to be with a woman. And that woman happened to be his wife. How lucky was he? Only Ifeoma could make him act like a teenager who had just discovered the joys of sex. He drove as fast as the horrible traffic would allow him to.

When he arrived home, Chuma glanced around the compound. A feeling of disappointment tugged at his heart when he noticed Ifeoma’s car wasn’t there. Perhaps she is still stuck in traffic, he thought, pushing open the front door. I’ll just wait patiently for her.

Chuma strode towards the kitchen intending to grab a bottle of water from the fridge when he heard noises coming from the backyard. He changed his direction towards the sounds and stopped as soon as he got to the open sliding door leading to the pool. His eyes widened in surprise and his chest tightened with emotion. Ifeoma was splashing around in the pool squealing with delight. He stood there motionless, watching as she swum towards the end of the pool. She was not aware of his presence yet.

A rush of intense longing filled his senses as he observed her. He had not used this pool since Ekene died. In fact, he had drained the pool, unable to bear the thought of seeing water in it. Now, watching Ifeoma splashing around in the pool made his heart rate quicken. She turned to swim back and noticed him standing there.

“Chuma! When did you get in?” She asked, her voice ringing with excitement and her beautiful eyes sparkling.

“Just now. When did you … How? ... The pool … when?”

Ifeoma laughed.

“I got someone to fill the pool this morning when you went to work. And I paid an okada driver to bring me home on his motorbike,” she replied.

Noting the confused expression still showing on Chuma’s face, Ifeoma added. “After I got your text, I was too, eh, excited to drive….” Her thick lashes lowered coyly, and her voice was so seductive and sultry that it transmitted directly to Chuma’s penis, hardening it instantly.

“Goddamn, Ify, you are killing me….”

“Please don’t die,” she pleaded, her tone slightly apprehensive.

“Die? And leave all this? … I don’t think so!”

Chuma stripped down to his boxers speedily and jumped into the pool. With a loud screech, Ifeoma swam away from him. She was a good swimmer, strong and steady. But she was no match for the profound need boiling in his blood. In no time, he caught up with her and pulled her into his arms. She giggled until he ripped her bikini bottoms, making her gasp in surprise.

“Oh, Chuma … the neighbours …” Ifeoma protested half-heartedly.

“Then don’t scream,” Chuma murmured before his lips descended on hers. Soon, they meshed together in a slow rhythm of sensual pleasure that cumulated in Ifeoma muffling a cry of fulfillment and Chuma swearing under his breath as he found his own release.

“We should go on vacation. Paris, London or Milan,” Chuma announced, his voice languid. They were still in the pool, standing side by side at the edge. Ifeoma chuckled, splashing water about.

“This is one of the moments that reminds me that I am married to a rich man,” she teased. Chuma twisted his lips into an amused smirk.

“Seriously, we should do it. Two weeks away. Just me and you.”

“Oh, Chuma, that sounds nice, but what about our sessions with Dr Olubanjo?”

“We don’t really need him anymore now, do we?” Chuma kneaded her bare bottom under the water.

“Actually, I still do. Talking to him about the horrible relationship I had with my father has really helped me.” Ifeoma paused, turning to face Chuma.

“Because of how my father treated us for being a disappointment to him just because we were born female ... I eh … I somehow let myself believe I had wronged you when Ekene died…” Her voice trailed off. Chuma held himself stiff waiting for her to continue. He sensed she still had more to say.

“I felt that I had failed you as a wife for not being able to protect our son. A male child.”

Chuma cupped Ifeoma’s face in his hands, his eyes blazing passionately.

“Ifeoma Obi, listen to me; I don’t give a damn what the sex of any child is, okay? Children are a blessing. Male or female. I don’t care if we have a hundred female children.” The thick emotion in his chest caused him to halt. Once again, he wished Ifeoma’s father were still alive so he could beat him to a pulp for causing Ifeoma to doubt herself.

“If we are lucky and I make you pregnant again, I will be so grateful that I’ll never again complain about changing dirty nappies. I don’t care what sex the child is.”

Ifeoma laughed, although tears escaped from the corners of her eyes. Indeed, Chuma had grumbled on the few occasions when he had had to change Ekene’s dirty nappies.

“I love you, Chuma,” Ifeoma whispered, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders.

“I love you more, Ifeoma Obi.” He brushed his lips against her forehead. “We will go on vacation after we finish our therapy sessions with Dr Olubanjo,” he said.

At that very moment, the doorbell rang persistently, interrupting their idle afternoon swim. Ifeoma sighed. “Let me get it,” she muttered, reaching for the large bathrobe that lay beside the pool.

“Maybe if we ignore it—” Chuma began. The bell rang again.

Ifeoma got out the pool, quickly covering her semi-nakedness with the large bathrobe, and tying the belt in the middle. At the front door to the house stood Nnamdi.

“Ify, hi,” he greeted.

“Hello Nnamdi,” she answered with a bright smile, surprised to see him. Ifeoma stepped aside to let Nnamdi in. They walked together to the sitting room.

“I came to check up on Chuma, how is he? He is not picking up his phone,” Nnamdi said as he settled on one of the leather couches. Ifeoma’s face contorted with a confused expression.

“Chuma ke? He is fine—”

“Who on earth is that, Ify?” Chuma questioned, strolling into the sitting room, a towel secured around his hips and his body still glistening with moisture. He came to an abrupt halt when he spotted Nnamdi seated on the couch.

Nnamdi’s eyes darted between Ifeoma and Chuma, and slowly widened with discovery. He settled his gaze on Ifeoma.

“Your husband is an asshole,” Nnamdi said, shaking his head as he rose to his feet.

Chuma laughed. He could not even muster the guilt he should have felt.

“Why, what happened?” Ifeoma asked, still confused. Nnamdi pointed an accusing finger at Chuma. “This fool called off a meeting at work telling everyone he was sick when what he really wanted to do was whatever you both have been up to,” Nnamdi explained to Ifeoma, his tone bursting with repressed laughter.

Ifeoma turned to Chuma. “Is that so?” she asked, her eyes twinkling with

amusement. Chuma chortled in response.

“And there we were panicking when he didn’t answer his phone, thinking the worst had happened. Adaora sent me here. Wait till I tell her, asshole!” Nnamdi’s lips curved into a crooked smile.

“See you both later.” He shifted his eyes towards Chuma. “Unlike some people here, I’ve got work to do!”

Chuma laughed again. “Thanks for checking up on me, bro,” Chuma said. Nnamdi flipped him the middle finger but nodded his head in response. Nnamdi’s smile widened as he left Ifeoma and Chuma. Just before he got to the front door, he looked over his shoulder at Ifeoma. “Ify, thanks for coming back home to Chuma.”

∞

Ifeoma stared at the letter in her hand in disbelief. It was another letter from Mr Chibundu. It read:

My dear Mrs Chibundu,

Ifeoma my wife, I noticed you have been ignoring my letters. I hope you grasp that according to our customs and traditions, you are still my wife. I paid the agreed bride price for your hand in marriage and yet never received my due. I have been lonely for these few years without you and I only want what is due me.

I would like you to send five hundred thousand naira to my account number. The account details have been attached to this letter.

If I do not receive the money by next week Friday, I will inform your second husband about our secret.

With love,

Your true husband.

Ifeoma shook her head, her mind in panic mode. She had ignored Mr Chibundu's letters for a while now because she did not want to think about or deal with it. Now, he was not only taunting her, he was pushing for more. She had let this go too far and she needed to do something about it quickly. She needed to find a way to return the bride price to him before Chuma found out.

Things had been going so well between them. The connection they had was much stronger, and each day she spent with him drew her closer to him. She had even abandoned her plan of leaving after they completed their therapy sessions with Dr Olubanjo. Now, she genuinely looked forward to their counseling sessions. They made her realise how lucky she was to have found Chuma, to have found love when she grew up without love from her father. Ifeoma never wanted to lose Chuma again. She loved him deeply and would do anything to put this nightmare behind her.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she muttered to herself, dragging her fingers through her hair in frustration. Oh, God, I can't let Chuma find out I have lied to him… I either have to sort this out or tell him myself. Ifeoma's brain reeled with trepidation.

The major problem was that according to the traditional rites, either her father or a male relative had to return the bride price to nullify the union between her and Mr Chibundu. That would mean she had to return to Awka and find her father — if he was still alive. Then she would also have to convince him and Mr Chibundu to agree on this. Ifeoma continued to consider solutions in her head. It seemed so impossible.

How could she even pull off a trip to Awka without Chuma knowing about it? She had already told him that she had no living relatives in Awka. In a way, that was true for her. Apart from Uncle Emeka, she considered her parents dead to her. But still, she had blatantly lied to Chuma when he had asked her about her family before they got married. They had skipped organising a traditional wedding because Ifeoma had insisted there was no point going to Awka because she had no male relatives to perform the traditional rites and she was glad Chuma never pressed the issue.

Ifeoma placed her fingers over her temple. A tense sensation threatened to cause her head to explode. She rubbed on her temple, trying to relieve it. She looked around her small office; there were files on her desk. She had come here to do inventory and sort out payment for the staff when Oluchi handed her yet another letter left by the restaurant gate this morning.

Sighing deeply, Ifeoma tucked the letter under the files on her desk. She stood up abruptly. Feelings of resignation overwhelmed her. There was only one thing she could do and that was to tell Chuma the truth. She hoped he would understand and forgive her. She could not give in to blackmail. If she gave in once, she would have to continue, and she could not allow Mr Chibundu, or any man for that matter, to control her that way. Ifeoma resolved to tell Chuma the truth during their next counseling session on Monday. Hopefully, Dr Olubanjo's presence would help them deal with it together.

Abandoning the work on the desk, she left her office for the kitchen. Cooking always took her mind off things. Soon submerged in the chores around the restaurant, her worries became tucked into the dark recesses of her mind.

∞

The rain was pouring heavily from the skies as Chuma drove to Eastern Delight. Unfortunately, he had to go on an emergency business trip to Abuja to secure a client who had specifically asked for him. It irritated him that he had to leave this evening when he'd planned a whole day of relaxation with Ifeoma on the boat this weekend. But he had no other choice. The firm would lose a lot of money if they didn't secure this client. Especially since they had to turn down Alhaji Musa's account. He wanted to tell Ifeoma in person about this unexpected trip, and to see her before he left. He didn't want to spend prolonged periods of time away from her now that things between them were great. Actually, things were a lot better between them. They were closer to each other than they had ever been.

Chuma turned the jeep into the restaurant's car park cursing under his breath as he avoided a car parked on the wrong side of the road. People should learn how to park properly, he thought, exasperated. After finding an appropriate parking

spot and parking the jeep, Chuma got down and dashed quickly into the restaurant, unable to avoid getting a little wet because he had no umbrella. He hated umbrellas because he always lost them, so every time it rained when he was outside, he got wet.

He spotted Oluchi as soon as he entered the restaurant. She smiled at him and waved him over.

“Where is Ify?” Chuma asked Oluchi when he got to her. “I tried calling her—”

“Oh, she had to rush off to the market… we ran out of fish,” Oluchi replied, leading him to Ifeoma’s office. “She must have left her phone; you can wait for her here. She won’t be long.”

Chuma glanced at his watch. He still had three hours before he needed to be at the airport. He nodded. He would just have to wait for Ifeoma in her office.

“Would you like anything to eat or drink?” Oluchi asked Chuma once he was seated in the small chair behind the desk.

“No thanks, Oluchi.”

Oluchi left him, closing the door.

Feeling confined in the small room, Chuma darted his eyes around. Ifeoma’s desk was untidy. There were four open files on the desk. A half-empty glass of water and an open textbook on economics were also sitting on the desk.

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He and Ifeoma always argued about her untidiness. Yes, he knew he was obsessively tidy, and she probably wasn’t as messy as he made it seem, but he sometimes could not help picking up after her.

Deciding that he may as well be useful while waiting, he attempted to bring some form of order to Ifeoma’s desk. He glanced at the opened page of the textbook. It was bursting with yellow marker pen highlights and this made him chuckle. This was another difference between them. He never highlighted his textbooks. He considered it a form of desecration. Chuma couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face as he recalled helping Ifeoma with her studies last night. She was doing very well, and he was proud of her.

He placed a pencil in the book to save her page and closed it. Then he placed the book neatly on the corner of the desk. He picked up the files from the desk and a loose piece of paper fell to the floor. Chuma bent forward and retrieved it. He was about to place the piece of paper back from where it had fallen when his eyes caught some words from the letter and he stopped.

Dropping the files in his hands on the desk, he focused his attention on the letter. His heart beat fast as his eyes scrolled through the words on the page. He could not believe what he was reading. Ifeoma was married? Married to someone else? Chuma re-read the letter. His hands shook so badly, the letter almost slipped from his fingers. This had to be some mistake, some kind of hoax. Placing the letter on the table, Chuma pulled out his mobile phone from his pocket. He took a picture of the letter and the account number written on the back.

This was definitely a prank. Ifeoma was not married before him. She would have told him if she was. With his heart pounding like a disco beat, Chuma tucked the letter back into the files just the way he had found it. He opened Ifeoma's textbook and placed it on the desk the way it had been before he walked in. He did not want to leave any clues about his discovery until he had sorted this out. Whoever was pranking Ifeoma to extort money from her would be dealt with in the most severe way.

A quick peek at his phone told him he had been in the room only fifteen minutes. Chuma could not keep still. He wanted to get more information straight away. Leaving Ifeoma's office, he went searching for Oluchi. He found her at the back of the restaurant standing beside Effiong who was pounding yam.

Chuma and Effiong exchanged a gruff wordless greeting.

"Oluchi, can you tell Ifeoma that I dropped by? I have to leave for the airport now," he announced.

"Are you sure you can't wait? She will be back soon," Oluchi responded.

"No, I can't. I will call her from the airport."

"Okay, I will let her know."

Chuma drove back home, his mind unsettled. Confused feelings roiled through him. He knew nothing about Ifeoma's past except what she told him. He never

for once did a background check on her because he trusted her completely from the first day that they met. And that was unlike him. He was usually suspicious by nature. For the first time, he wondered if he should have looked into her past. The blackmail letter suggested that there were previous letters. If this crazy fellow is troubling Ifeoma and his accusations are false, why has she not told me about it? Why has she not informed me?

Doubt and fear bubbled up inside him. Was Ifeoma keeping things from him? Was there more to the story? Chuma rushed towards Ifeoma's closet as soon as he arrived home. He searched frantically for other letters or any clues about secrets she may have. He searched her jewellery box and private drawers and found nothing. Feeling like a fool, Chuma scrubbed his hand over his shaved head. He reached for his phone and dialled Kayode's number.

"Hello, Chuma, how are you—"

"Kayode, how far? I would like you to check up something for me please." Chuma wasted no time with pleasantries. He was feeling too agitated.

"Anything for you, Chuma, what is—"

"I would like you to go to Awka tonight. I want you to investigate my wife, Ifeoma Okafor. Find out everything you can about her and let me know tonight, or first thing tomorrow."

"No problem. I'll book a flight now."

"Thanks, man. I have to rush to the airport myself. Off to Abuja for business. Please let me know if you find anything as soon as possible."

"I will… I hope everything is okay?"

"Yes… I just… Never mind."

Chuma hoped everything was okay. But a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach threatened to engulf him.

After tidying up the mess he had made during his hysterical search, Chuma quickly got ready for his trip. He packed a few items into a travelling bag and rushed out of the house. If he did not get a move on, he would miss his flight.

There was nothing else he could do but wait for Kayode to provide him with the information he needed. In an almost zombie-like state, Chuma got into the awaiting taxi on route to the airport.

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It was another rainy Monday evening, and Ifeoma was sitting in front of the dressing mirror. She peeked at the clock eagerly. Chuma was coming back from Abuja today. She had just prepared his favourite meal, egusi soup, and spiced fish. She could not wait to see him. After their short telephone conversation on Friday when he had told her he was at the airport, Ifeoma had not heard from him again. She knew how consumed with work he could get, but ever since they had reconnected he had not allowed his job to overshadow his relationship with her.

An uneasy sensation gripped Ifeoma in the tummy. She hoped everything was fine at work. Chuma rarely talked to her about his work although she knew his job was very demanding. Hopefully, she could help him to relax when he got home.

Taking out the rollers from her hair, Ifeoma ran her fingers through her hair to give them a bouncy look. Chuma loved her hair let down and curly. She touched her lips with his favourite shade of bright red lipstick and smiled at her reflection. She had come a long way from hiding her femininity to flaunting it to please her husband. Only Chuma could make her do this— turn her into a seductress. She stood up and admired herself in the mirror. Not bad, she thought. Under her silk dressing gown, she wore the red lace push-up bra and matching lace panties that always drove Chuma crazy. Dabbing some perfume on her wrists, Ifeoma exhaled deeply.

A sad tinge passed through her as she remembered the secret she had to reveal to Chuma today. Because he was flying in today, they had missed their appointment with Dr Olubanjo and Ifeoma knew she could not wait another week to tell him the truth. She decided to come clean about everything tonight. First, she would soften him up with a nice meal and some mind-blowing sex, and then she would tell him. With any luck, he would not be so upset about it, or, worse still,

disappointed in her.

The sound of the gate opening alerted Ifeoma and she rushed to the window. She peeked through the curtains and saw a taxi driving into the compound. Chuma was home. Minutes later, the bedroom door swung open and Ifeoma turned towards Chuma with a broad smile. Her smile froze on her face when she noticed his sharp facial expression.

“Chuma, is everything okay?” Ifeoma asked, her heart plummeting fast.

Chuma did not respond. He walked into the room and dropped his travel bag on the bed. He opened it, withdrew a folder and held it towards Ifeoma.

Ifeoma took the folder from him. Her hands shook uncontrollably. She didn’t look at the folder.

“Chuma, ogini? What is it, my husband?”

“Am I really your husband, Ifeoma? Am I?” his tone was low but sounded lethal.

Although he looked composed, the vein at the side of his head pulsated and his eyes were red. Ifeoma’s heart pounded rapidly.

“What do you … what do you mean?” She swallowed hard.

“Why don’t you look inside the folder Mrs Chibundu, look at the contents of the folder in front of you which expose your lies.”

“Chuma, please—” She took a step towards Chuma, but he backed away quickly.

“All this time … All this time…” Chuma paused as if he could not get the words out.

“What am I to you Ify? A joke? A fool to manipulate?”

“Please don’t, Chuma… I planned to tell you today—”

“Oh, how inconvenient for you that I found out about your lies before you could tell me the truth…”

He laughed a humourless laugh and Ifeoma could feel the dread in her gut.

“Chuma, please let me explain—”

“Okay, explain. Explain to me how we have been married for nearly five years and I had no idea you were … no, are still married to someone else. Explain to me why I also had no idea that your parents are still alive. I specifically remember hearing you say that both your parents were dead. Explain, Ify. I’m waiting.”

“Chuma, please let’s sit and talk—”

“No, let’s stand, Ify, explain. I’m listening.”

“Chuma… It’s a long story… I—”

Chuma suddenly burst into laughter again. He looked hysterical.

“A long story … it is always a long story. So, this was your plan all along. To trap me… A poor bastard with enough money to spare...” He paused briefly, a blank look in his eyes. “Get me to fall hopelessly in love with you, buy you a restaurant…” His eyes widened as he continued with his theory. “Maybe you and your sisters were in on it together. Your plan was excellent. You were even able to get me to buy your sisters a flat … Oh, my … I am a stupid bastard!”

Ifeoma froze. She couldn’t believe what Chuma was saying. “Please don’t say these things, Chuma. You know they are not true—”

“No, I don’t know that, because you are a liar!”

“Chuma—”

“You win. You fucking win! Look inside that folder, Ify. I have signed your divorce papers, okay? You are free from me. In fact, you can have the restaurant, the car, your sisters get to keep their apartment, and guess what?” Chuma waited, looking at Ifeoma as if he really wanted her to guess. “I even added alimony. I am that sappy and stupid, I will pay you money every month for three years. See, I am that sappy because I have to hand it to you. Of all the women who tried this shit on me, you are the best.”

Ifeoma could not believe Chuma's hurtful words. Tears stung behind her eyelids. "Chuma, please. You don't mean this. Please let's talk to Dr Olubanjo—"

"To hell with Dr Olubanjo!" Chuma barked. "If I had known that all you wanted was my money, I would never have gone through the trouble of setting up your restaurant with that phony unpaid tax business just to get you back."

Ifeoma gasped, her eyes flaring in surprise.

"Yes, I did it! Your restaurant owed no taxes. See, you are not the only one who can play games, my dear."

"Chuma, please let's talk, let's sit down. I don't want a divorce."

"Make up your mind. First, you want one, and now, you don't."

"I don't, Chuma—"

"Well, I do!"

"No, Chuma."

Ifeoma ran towards him and wrapped her arms around him, frantic.

"Please, Chuma. I love you—"

"Ahhhh!" Chuma growled like a provoked beast.

Moving swiftly, he backed Ifeoma onto the bedroom wall and crushed his mouth against hers. She sucked his tongue into her mouth greedily. Their kiss was so forceful that Ifeoma tasted blood. She moaned, her body flooding with moist pleasure. She felt Chuma's hands cup her breasts and squeeze them as their kiss deepened. He lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist and Ifeoma ground herself desperately against his erection, eliciting harsh groans from Chuma. He suddenly bent his head and bit her neck, making her cry out with pain mixed with a jolt of pleasure that shot molten heat to her core.

"I love you, Chuma," Ifeoma whimpered.

"Liar!" he snarled as he bent his head lower and sucked a hardened nipple

through the red lace. Ifeoma arched her back off the wall, succumbing to the sensual assault.

“You are a liar. A beautiful liar,” Chuma growled before he captured her lips again. Ifeoma’s eyes fluttered open and she held her breath. Chuma’s eyes were open and the glare in his eyes as his lips moved over hers, reeked of disdain. With a guttural sound, Chuma let her go. He was panting heavily, and a fleeting shadow of shame crossed his eyes before he turned away from her.

“I am leaving the house for a few days. I will be back by Friday. I want you gone by then.”

“Chuma, please … please!” Ifeoma pleaded, her chest heaving rapidly as she struggled with the despair that pierced through her being.

“You can file the divorce papers in court yourself if your lawyer finds the new details I added are to your satisfaction,” he muttered in a controlled voice. Without another word or glance at Ifeoma, Chuma walked out of the room. She crumbled to the floor, tears pouring from her eyes like the rain that was pouring from the clouds outside.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I’m so sorry, Ify,” Chioma murmured, holding Ifeoma in a tight embrace. “I feel like it’s my fault.”

Ifeoma shook her head.

“No, Chioma, it’s not,” she replied.

“Yes, it is,” Chioma insisted. “It’s because Mr Chibundu wanted to marry me. You sacrificed yourself for me.”

“You were only sixteen, Chioma, I would never have let that happen, and it is not your fault.” Ifeoma hesitated, tears eating up her voice. “It was mine; I should never have lied to Chuma. I should have been honest with him.”

They held each other in silence for a while as they sat in Ifeoma’s rented apartment. She was glad she had kept the apartment after reuniting with Chuma. She would have been stranded if she hadn’t.

“I miss him so much,” Ifeoma muttered.

“I know; I am so sorry.”

“It has been a whole week; every time I call Chuma, it goes to voice mail. I went to his office and his secretary did not let me in. He doesn’t want to speak to me, to see me.”

“I’m sorry, Ify. I really wish there was something I could do,” Chioma said, as she brushed Ifeoma’s tears away with her fingers.

“Chioma, I just have to accept that it is over. I have messed up the best thing that ever happened to me. Maybe I am cursed. Maybe I don’t deserve happiness.”

Chioma pulled away from Ifeoma slightly so that she could look her directly in the eyes.

“Don’t say that, Ify. You are the best sister I could have ever wished for. You fought for all of us and you protected us all. Of course, you deserve happiness.” Chioma said, her voice hoarse. “If anything, you deserve the very best of everything.”

Ifeoma smiled in spite of her feelings of despair. She was glad for her sisters. Especially Chioma who had dropped everything to support her after Chuma asked her to leave. It was Chioma who had helped her pack her belongings. Chioma was also staying with her in the apartment, making sure that she was all right.

“Thank you for staying here with me, I know it is far from your new job and that you have to leave for work early each morning.”

“Ify, I will do anything for you.”

Ifeoma drew a deep breath into her lungs, flicked her eyes around, and then focused on Chioma. “I have been thinking that it is time for the four of us to go back to Awka to confront daddy and mummy,” Ifeoma said, rising to her feet. Chioma had a startled spark in her eyes. “I can’t stop thinking that maybe if we … if we tell them what they did to us, we can start to heal.” Ifeoma saw the unease on Chioma’s face. She knew Chioma hated to talk about the past. However, since her therapy sessions with Dr Olubanjo, Ifeoma had been thinking about the past a lot.

“Look at us, we are all floating in a cycle of destruction. Nene fell in love with a married man who treated her like an ashawo and she attempted suicide many times because of him.” Ifeoma brushed away the tears that escaped her eyes as she continued attempting to convince Chioma. “And Ngozi is so introverted, she has a problem with social interactions,” she continued. She stopped pacing and turned to Chioma. “You are so focused on your education and now your career. You never date or give guys the time of the day and me… well… I am the mother of all messes…”

Feeling suddenly inspired, Ifeoma sat back on the sofa. “Maybe the only way we can move forward is to confront our parents and maybe even forgive them.”

“Ify, I don’t know. I hate daddy so much; I don’t think I can ever forgive him.” Chioma said with a shaky voice.

“Please consider what I’m saying, Chioma, we need to go back to Awka and settle this once and for all... Otherwise, we will all remain in this cycle of destruction.” Ifeoma reached for Chioma’s hands, pleading.

“And you don’t have to forgive dad, neither of us does. Let’s just confront him, tell him what he did to us. We have run away for far too long.”

Chioma hesitated, appearing deep in thought. “Okay, let’s do this,” she finally said, and Ifeoma heaved a sigh of relief.

“Maybe we can finally get daddy to nullify that senseless union between you and Mr Chibundu,” Chioma added, picking up the remote to the television. She switched it on and relaxed into her seat.

“Now, we have to convince Nene and Ngozi,” Ifeoma muttered.

“Don’t worry, I will talk to them about it.”

A week later, the four sisters boarded a bus to Awka from Lagos. Nene could join them because she had been discharged from hospital a few days ago, to continue outpatient treatment. Her mental health had improved dramatically following General Okonkwo’s arrest. It was swift. As if the scales from her eyes suddenly fell off when she realised that the General also stashed other women around Lagos for his amusement and never truly had plans to settle down with her. Ifeoma was pleased that Nene was slowly getting back to her old cheerful self.

They were seated together in the front row of a luxurious bus. It was a pleasant trip for Ifeoma because she enjoyed being with her sisters. The last time she had traveled with her sisters was when they escaped Awka at night. She sensed the apprehension her sisters felt as they journeyed together. She felt the same way herself. Nevertheless, she did everything she could to keep the mood light and avoided talking about their upbringing. Ifeoma was convinced that the only way they could begin to heal and move forward was to break the chains of the past.

They got to Awka by six in the evening and checked into a hotel. None of them wanted to stay in the family home they had shared growing up. The memories were too painful. The next morning, Ifeoma hired a taxi to take them to their childhood home. Forty-five minutes later, they found themselves in front of the small white two-bedroom bungalow where they had grown up.

Ifeoma glanced at her sisters. They looked so frightened.

“It will be okay,” she muttered, placing her hand in Chioma and Ngozi’s hand.

“We don’t even know if they still live there,” Nene said with a worried expression evident on her face.

“There is only one way to find out,” Ifeoma responded as she knocked on the wooden door. The compound had not changed much. Everything outside the house had remained almost the same. The paint of the white walls had chipped away from almost every corner like it had years ago. It was typical of her father not to spend money looking after his property.

“Maybe they no longer live here,” Chioma whispered. She sounded relieved.

Ifeoma knocked again, fear tying a knot in her tummy. What if they have died? she thought. Unexplainable grief at that thought consumed her. The thought of never being able to tell her parents that she forgave them to their face, made her heart sink.

“Maybe they are dead?” Nene said. Her words hung in the air for a few seconds before the door swung open.

Their mother appeared at the door. No, a woman who looked like a shadow of what their mother used to look like. The woman who stood before them was thin and haggard. Her face was full of wrinkles, her hair completely grey and her eyes devoid of life.

“My children,” she muttered in disbelief, placing her hand on her chest. “It… I can’t believe this. Am I dreaming…?”

Suddenly, their mother fell to the ground.

“Mummy!” Ifeoma cried, dropping to the floor beside her.

“Nene, get some water from the kitchen,” Ifeoma said to Nene who hesitated.

“Quickly!” Ifeoma snapped. Nene and Chioma rushed into the house and brought back a bowl of water. Ifeoma splashed water on their mother’s face.

“Mama Ify … mummy … come on!” she whispered, frantically shaking her mother whose eyes fluttered open.

“Ify, my daughter … Ify…”

Mama Ify looked around, her gaze still appearing unfocused as she lay on the ground. “Nene, Ngozi, and Chioma … Oh, my children are here … I am not dreaming …” She began to cry, covering her face.

Ifeoma lifted her from the ground and led her into the sitting room. Her sisters stood by the door appearing unsure how to proceed.

“Please, come in,” Mama Ify said to Nene, Ngozi, and Chioma. They glanced at Ify as if asking for permission. Ifeoma nodded, so they entered the house, shutting the front door.

“Where’s daddy?” Ifeoma asked her mother. They were all seated in the sitting room. Ifeoma and their mother sat on the only two couches. While Nene, Ngozi, and Chioma sat on a wooden bench they retrieved from the kitchen.

“He … he is in the bedroom … He is ... he is very sick,” Mama Ify answered, her expression of sorrow making her look even more aged.

“What is wrong with him?” Ifeoma enquired. Mama Ify sighed and then got up.

“Follow me,” she said. Ifeoma hesitated, a perplexed expression furrowing her forehead. Her mother began to move towards the bedroom and she stood up to follow her. She came to an abrupt halt when she got into the small bedroom. Shocked at the sight before her, Ifeoma’s mouth flew open.

On the bed lay her father. He was cachectic and frail. Almost like a skeleton. His hair was completely grey, his eyes sunken and the bleak stare in them appeared frightening.

“Mama,” Ifeoma’s father called when he saw her. “Mama, are you here?”

Ifeoma looked at her mother questioningly.

“Your father has had multiple strokes. He is paralysed, unable to walk and has dementia.” Mama Ify responded to the bewildered expression on Ifeoma’s face.

“He calls everyone mama. Those are the only words he can say. He doesn’t even remember who I am.” Mama Ify moved further into the room. Ifeoma’s nose itched from the rancid smell of decay in the room.

“Papa Ify, the children are here,” Mama Ify whispered into his ear. He looked blankly at Ifeoma and smiled. “Mama, are you here?” he muttered in response.

Ifeoma choked on her tears. Her father was no longer with them; he was living in his own personal hell. Ifeoma expected to feel vindicated. She expected to feel gratified. Instead, she felt emptiness, sorrow and a sense of loss. All she ever wanted was her father’s love. She neither wanted this to happen nor did she want him to suffer.

“Yes, I am here, daddy,” Ifeoma said, managing a crooked smile back at her father. “I am here now.”

After their visit, Ifeoma convinced her sisters to come back the next day and help their mother clean up the house. It was obvious that her mother was unable to look after her father on her own, and Ifeoma resolved to hire a housekeeper to help them as soon as she could.

Nene, Ngozi, and Chioma were cleaning up their father’s room. He was lying in a filthy bed and looked unkempt. Ifeoma decided to give her father a wash while her sisters cleaned up the room. With the help of her mother, Ifeoma turned him to get him undressed and placed a cloth over him. From the look of the bed, it seemed that he had not been turned for a while and his skin looked red as if it was about to blister. A string of regret tightened her chest. She would make sure he got a house-help as soon as she could find one.

Ifeoma went to the bathroom, took a bucket of water and filled it with bath foam and grabbed a washcloth.

“Daddy, I am a complete mess,” Ifeoma said, as she dipped the cloth into the foamy water. She noticed her sisters pause their activities when she started speaking. The obscure expression on Papa Ify’s face did not deter Ifeoma. She wanted to let go of the bitterness in her mind.

“All I wanted was for you to love me. To accept me,” Ifeoma continued. She placed the cloth on her father’s arm and cleaned it. The aroma of the fruity bath foam rose to the air, gradually drowning out the odour of decay from the room.

“I hated being a woman because you did not accept that, as a female, I could be useful to you. I hid my breasts; I hid who I was. I felt that I was ugly. I hated myself.”

A small sob interrupted Ifeoma’s revelations. She turned her head to find her mother by the door weeping. She turned back to her father and continued her task of washing him.

“I went to plead with Mr Chibundu not to marry my sixteen-year-old sister and had to humiliate myself. You asked why he agreed to marry me instead of Chioma? Well, it was because I showed him my naked body.” Ifeoma took in a deep breath before she continued. “I did something I had never done before and that made him feel he had the right to … to try to rape me.”

Ifeoma saw Nene and Ngozi’s surprised expressions from the corner of her eyes. Chioma did not appear surprised. She looked angry. Ifeoma could still hear her mother sobbing, but she did not turn in her direction. Her eyes were fixated on her father’s blank countenance.

“Daddy, he attacked me, attempted to rape me. That was why I had to run. I could not bear being married to that pig, I just couldn’t. I would never have left. We would never have left.”

“Mama, are you here now?” Papa Ify mumbled.

“Yes, I am here now,” Ifeoma responded. “I want you to know that I finally met a man who loves me... Loved me … just like I wanted you to. He told me that I was beautiful. He looked after me, protected me...” Ifeoma’s voice wavered and she swallowed past a painful lump, which had formed in her throat. She cleared her throat so that she could continue.

“But I lied to him, I kept secrets from him because I was so ashamed of my past, I blamed myself for what Mr Chibundu tried to do to me and I was ashamed… I couldn’t even keep my marriage from falling apart … All I ever wanted was for you to love me, to accept me, to respect me… that’s all I ever wanted.”

Ifeoma sent a saddened look her mother’s way.

“Mummy you never stood up for us, never comforted us or protected us. I tried so hard not to be like you that I ended up pushing away the only man I have ever

loved. I forgive you because I need to move on. I forgive both of you."

There was silence after Ifeoma finished speaking. Nobody moved or said a word. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock on the wall.

"Mama, are you here?" Papa Ify's voice broke the silence.

"Yes, I am here," Ngozi said. Her voice was so low that it was barely audible. She moved towards her father, still holding the broom in her hand.

"Because of the way you treated us, I withdrew from everyone. In school, I was bullied for being so quiet. I hated myself; I don't have the confidence that girls my age have. People tell me how beautiful I am all the time, but I can't even see it because I never heard it from you. All I ever heard from you was how much I disappointed you. How we all disappointed you."

Ngozi turned to Mama Ify who was still standing by the door crying. "I was never able to talk to you about my struggles because you never cared much about us. All your time and effort was consumed with not making daddy angry. You would rather look after him when he got drunk." Ngozi turned back to her frail father who observed the scenario in front of him like an uninvolved spectator. "I want you to know that I have been dating someone for a year now. Because of my intense fear of trusting people, I hid him from everyone. Afraid that he would leave me. He asked me to marry him and I turned him down. Not because I don't want to, but because I'm scared of ending up like my mother."

Ifeoma felt hot tears on her cheeks. She had never known how much Ngozi had been affected by their upbringing because Ngozi rarely spoke about her feelings.

"Daddy, I have tried to kill myself several times." It was Nene who spoke this time. "I was deeply in love with a married man who lied to me. Yet the attention I got from him meant more to me than anything because I didn't get the attention that I craved from you." Nene continued cleaning the table in front of her. She did not turn towards her father. "It has taken me a long time to discover that I don't need attention from anyone but myself. I have decided to go to university; I will become something in life. I will try to forgive you, but I don't need you or anyone else but my sisters. I have the best sisters in the world. They have been my rock."

Chioma briefly glanced in Mama Ify's direction before casting her eyes on their

father.

“I’m a banker at First Bank. Despite your attempt to stifle me, I made it to the top. I am so proud of myself.” Chioma said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I may be female, but I can protect myself. I got my education, no thanks to you. I am not married to that pig, Mr Chibundu. No thanks to you. I owe everything to my sisters.” She paused, tightening her hold on the dust rag in her hand. “We may be a disappointment to you because we are women, but I am proud that despite what you did to us, we have survived.”

“Mama, are you here?” A momentary expression of anxiety showed on Papa Ify’s face as he spoke. His eyes scanned the room until they rested on Mama Ify.

“Yes, I am here,” Ifeoma answered, taking her father’s frail hand and squeezing it. It was ironic that their father now seemed to need reassurance from “Mama”—a female—when all he ever did was to lament about how useless women were to him.

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Chuma stared at the amended divorce papers in his hands and his stomach churned. Ifeoma’s lawyer had served him with them in the morning. It had taken enormous willpower from him not to strangle the thin man. Chuma flipped through the pages and sighed. Ifeoma had amended everything, rejecting his offer of alimony and even adding that she intended to sell off Eastern Delight, collect just the capital she had used to start her business and return the rest of the money to him. She had left everything he bought her, including her car, in the house when she moved out. She wanted nothing from him. For strange reasons, that angered him more than her deceit.

No way in the world he was signing this. He and Ifeoma were married for nearly five years. There was no way he would allow her to leave the marriage with nothing. As if these five years did not happen. Never!

With a frustrated grunt, Chuma flung the file from his hands and the papers scattered all over the sitting room. He flinched at the mess he had made on the

carpet. No woman had ever made him so angry that he had created a mess. Ifeoma's deceit had cut him deeply. But now, her quick dismissal of their marriage with these outrageous divorce papers that eliminated any ties to him, made him burn with fury. Did Ifeoma really think he would sign this and leave her with nothing?

Chuma brushed his face with his hands in frustration. A growling protest from his tummy reminded him that he had not eaten anything all day. He got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and picked up a mango. After taking a bite, he tossed it into the bin and spat out the contents of his mouth. He picked up a bottle of water and rinsed his mouth. It had been two weeks since he had had a proper meal. He had been fuelling himself with mangoes and oranges. Nothing seemed to appeal to him. It was so bad that every time he ate something, he felt sick.

He knew why this was happening. His body and brain associated good food with Ifeoma. With her gone, nothing tasted the same. He missed her. At least he could admit that. Despite the intense anger that he felt about her betrayal, he still loved her. Nothing could ever change that. Chuma climbed the stairs to the bedroom and opened Ifeoma's closet. He inhaled slowly as the fruity scent that still lingered there assuaged his senses.

The buzzing sound of his phone ringing in his pocket jolted him back to reality. He retrieved it and glanced at the screen. It was his father, Chief Obi. Chuma hesitated, contemplating whether to answer the call. It stopped ringing. He sighed with relief. But it was short lived because his phone started ringing again. He pressed the answer button.

"Dad, Kedu?" he greeted.

"O di mma, my son," Chief Obi replied. "Have you considered what we talked about?"

Chuma had been expecting this call. Everyone in his family had tried to talk him out of his decision to end his marriage. They pleaded with him to halt the divorce process and think about it for a while. Nnamdi and Adaora had visited frequently, trying to persuade him. They had even elicited the help of their cousin, Obiora. All to no avail. Chuma felt betrayed and wounded by Ifeoma because he idolised and trusted her. He never expected she could be deceitful.

“Dad, I don’t want to talk about my failed marriage with you,” Chuma muttered, rubbing his forehead in exasperation.

“Chuma, biko, you don’t end something good when you are angry. Take time to calm down—”

“No, dad, I am calm. She lied to me … She betrayed me… I can’t accept that in a wife—”

“Chuma, every woman has secrets, even your mother did… I know you like to think your mother was perfect, but she wasn’t. No woman is perfect, nobody is.”

“I don’t want Ify to be perfect—”

“Yes, you do! You put that poor girl on an impossible pedestal. A perfect woman who can cook, clean, not raise her voice, be a perfect mother, not challenge you —”

“She did challenge me on many occasions,” Chuma cut in sardonically. He loved when Ifeoma challenged him. He missed that. Chuma heard his father’s deep sigh.

“What I am trying to say, Chuma, is that it is okay to give someone a second chance, to forgive. It does not make you weak.”

“I have heard what you’ve said, dad,” Chuma muttered.

“Whenever you say that, I know that you have no intention of doing anything about it.”

He snickered at his father’s statement. It was accurate.

“Chuma, just halt the divorce process and think for a while.” His father’s tone sounded final as if that was his last comment on the subject.

“Thanks for calling, dad. My greetings to Mama Uzo and everyone at home.”

Restless after ending the call with his father, Chuma got into his jeep for a drive. It was a Friday evening and the traffic was not as bad as it was in the morning. Before he could rationalise his actions, Chuma found himself driving towards

Eastern Delight. He wasn't even sure what he would do when he got there. He parked the jeep and walked towards the restaurant. His stomach tumbled when he saw the "for sale" sign in front of the restaurant. Oh, my God, Ifeoma is actually doing this, Chuma thought, his heart lurching in his ribcage.

A sudden sensation of anxiety came over him. What if someone has already paid for the restaurant? With righteous indignation, Chuma marched into the restaurant prepared to confront Ifeoma. She had no right to sell this place. He bought it for her. Although he knew he was being irrational, he couldn't prevent the helplessness that overpowered him. Somehow, he knew that if Ifeoma sold this restaurant, every connection she had with him would cease, and he was not prepared for that to happen. He wanted to have some hold over her. Yes, he knew he was being selfish and an asshole. But he wanted Ifeoma to need him.

The restaurant looked busy when he got in. He spotted Oluchi and Effiong chatting by the kitchen door, so he walked up to them.

"Where is Ify?" Chuma demanded, interrupting their conversation. He noticed the irritated look in Effiong's eyes, but he didn't care.

"Chuma, how are you?" Oluchi said, turning to face Chuma.

"I am fine, thanks. Where is Ify?"

"She does not work here anymore. This place is now for sale," Oluchi answered in a matter-of-fact kind of way.

"What do you mean?"

"She has not been working here for the past two weeks. I and Loretta are now running the place until it is sold, then we will know what the next step will be."

"Do you know where Ify is working now? She left her phone at home. I haven't been able to reach her." Ifeoma had left the mobile phone he had purchased for her when she moved out.

"I am sorry, I can't tell you," Oluchi muttered, eyeing Chuma uncomfortably.

"Please, Oluchi, I need to speak to her."

“I’m sorry.”

Chuma noted the determined expression on Oluchi’s face. She was fiercely loyal to Ifeoma. He knew he wouldn’t get any information out of her. He glanced at Effiong who promptly looked away. No, he wouldn’t get anything from Effiong either. The fool has a crush on my wife.

“Okay, thanks, Oluchi,” Chuma muttered before turning and walking away.

Full of determination, Chuma drove to Ifeoma’s apartment. He was ready for a fight. Ready to make sure she did not sell the restaurant and that she accepted the alimony he was offering her. She couldn’t just dismiss the five years they had spent together. He had always ended his previous relationships by providing money for his exes. Ifeoma would take his money whether she wanted it or not.

The lights were off in her apartment. He walked up to the door and pressed the bell twice. No response. He was about to press it a third time when a lady next door peered through her own door.

“She no dey house o, she and her sisters travel commot.”

“Did they say where they traveled to?” Chuma asked, panic setting in.

“No, but e be like say na East them go.”

Chuma sighed. They must have traveled back to Awka.

“Did she say when she would be back?”

“No, but she talk say she go come back soon. I dey help am watch her apartment.”

“Thanks,” Chuma said. He turned away and rushed down the stairs.

Frustrated, Chuma walked back to his jeep and sat inside. His mind was in chaos. He felt confused. For the first time in his life, he doubted himself. Sure, he was angry that Ifeoma had kept her past from him. However, it was evident that she didn’t do it to deliberately hurt him or “trap him” as he had accused her. There had to be more to the story. Thinking back now, he remembered that early on in their relationship, Ifeoma had never asked him for anything. In fact, she

had refused almost every gift he ever bought her. He had forced the restaurant on her, forced her sisters to accept the apartment he purchased for them. He had even forced the BMW on her.

“Oh, my God! What have I done?” Chuma groaned as he recalled the horrible things he had said to her before they parted ways two weeks ago.

He smacked his forehead repeatedly, disgusted with himself at his behaviour that horrible Monday evening. The way that he had manhandled Ifeoma, bit her neck and roughly kissed her; he had hurt her. The image of her standing there with tears on her face, her lips bruised and the red bite mark on her neck came back to haunt him.

Oh, my God, what have I done? Chuma’s stomach turned. His body trembled with horror. What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I keep hurting the people I love? Chuma sat there berating himself for a long time. If he lost Ifeoma for good because of his horrendous behaviour, he deserved a life of sorrow. But he needed to apologise, he had to try to get her back. He had to change his own behaviour.

First, he needed to prevent the sale of the restaurant and then wait till Ifeoma got back home and apologise. He would accept whatever decision she made and live with it, even if she decided she wanted nothing to do with him.

Pulling himself together, Chuma placed a call to Ayo, a financial investigator who worked at his firm. He asked him to find out the estate agent Ifeoma was using to sell Eastern Delight and block any sales or offer more money if needed. He then rang Ikenna, Adaora’s husband and popular Nigerian musician, to request for a member of his security detail. He wanted someone to watch Ifeoma’s apartment and inform him as soon as she got home from Awka. Finally, he rang Dr Olubanjo to arrange more therapy sessions with him. He needed to find a way to control his obsessive, compulsive and controlling behaviour.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chuma looked at his wristwatch. It was almost noon. He had been contemplating flying to the East to find Ifeoma. She had still not returned. It had been four weeks. The bodyguard he had stationed in front of her apartment had no news to report to him. A sudden fear gripped him. Had Ifeoma moved back to Awka? Was their marriage over? Had she given up on them?

“Oh, God, please,” Chuma muttered, burying his face in both hands. He couldn’t bear the thought that their relationship was finally over. I’ll just have to wait till next Monday and book a flight to the East if she has not returned by then, Chuma thought to himself. He wanted to see her again, at least apologise and amend the divorce papers. He could not bear to leave her without anything. She deserved everything.

“Some people are here to see you,” Bola, his secretary announced through the intercom.

“Who are they?”

“They say they are related to your wife.” His heart stopped. Who could they be? “Send them in,” he said, and sat upright.

A few seconds later, Chioma, Ngozi, and Nene walked into his office. He stood up, excited to see them. He had missed them also.

“Welcome, please have a seat,” Chuma said. He arranged the third seat for Nene because he only had two seats in his office.

He offered them drinks, but they declined, so he sat back in his seat. He waited for them to settle. There was momentary silence. Chioma’s deep sigh ended the silence.

“We are here to thank you for your generosity and to return the keys to the apartment you bought us,” Chioma said, reaching for her purse and pulling out a bunch of keys. She placed it on his desk.

He sucked air deep into his lungs. He hadn’t anticipated this.

“I’m sorry, I can’t accept it; the apartment is in your name,” he stated, ignoring the keys on his desk.

“We never asked for the apartment, you offered it to us. You are the one who demanded that we take it so Ify could move in with you.” Chioma’s tone was even, but Chuma could tell that she was angry. He deserved her anger. And he felt like a heel for causing it.

“I’m sorry, Chioma, I’m so sorry for the things I said. I didn’t mean any of it… You all have to know I consider you my sisters.” Chuma’s voice came out hoarsely. He regretted his words to Ifeoma about her and her sisters every day.

“I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for all of you.”

His apology was received with silence.

“Please keep the apartment. Please. I won’t take the keys. I can’t actually… The apartment legally belongs to you ladies.” Chuma’s voice came again, breaking the silence.

Chioma glanced sideways at her sisters for a few seconds communicating silently with them before she nodded and picked up the bunch of keys. She placed it back in her bag.

Chuma heaved a relieved sigh. Intense emotions tightened his throat, so it was difficult to get his next words out.

“How...” He cleared his throat. “How is Ify?”

“She is fine,” Nene replied and Chuma looked at her. “We went back home to Awka. Her union with Mr Chibundu was dissolved.” Chuma felt a flicker of joy settle in his chest.

“Is she back in Lagos?”

“Yes, we came back very late last night.” It was Ngozi who spoke.

Chuma rarely heard her speak. She exuded a newfound confidence he had never

seen in her. “Chuma, Ify did not deliberately keep our past from you. Mr Chibundu hurt her. She was ashamed … She felt she was responsible….”

His heart pounded at Chioma’s words.

“Hurt her? How ... What happened?” he enquired.

He listened attentively as Chioma recounted how her father had arranged for her to marry Mr Chibundu when she was only sixteen, and how Ifeoma had taken her place instead. A new profound respect and admiration for Ifeoma developed as he heard the story. The way she protected her family was admirable and Chuma once again chided himself for hurting her.

When Chioma told him what Ifeoma had to endure for Mr Chibundu’s interest to turn away from her to Ifeoma, Chuma felt a fierce rage build up inside him. His rage intensified when he realised Ifeoma ran away from Awka because Mr Chibundu had attacked and tried to rape her.

That bastard will pay dearly, Chuma vowed inwardly. He, Chuma would see to it that Mr Chibundu was locked up in jail and that he would never see the light of day again. If it was the last thing he did in this life. That devil was going down!

“Oh, God,” Chuma muttered when Chioma finished relating the events of the past. “I’m sorry about what you all had to go through.”

“Ify took us back home, we have talked to our father, made peace with our past and we want it behind us now,” Ngozi said. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke and Chuma was glad she had come out of her shell.

He resolved to take care of Ifeoma’s sisters even if Ifeoma did not forgive him or want him back. They meant so much to him. He wanted to be there for them always, no matter what.

“We have to get going, I had to leave work to come here,” Chioma said, rising from her seat.

“Congratulations on your job,” Chuma cheered. He was glad for her. She nodded in response.

“Ifeoma doesn’t know that we came here. Neither does she know that we have

told you the whole story, so please be kind enough not to let her know we blabbed," Nene said, the corners of her lips twisting into a wry smile. She also stood.

"I'll try ladies; I'll try to keep this our secret." Chuma smiled.

He was glad they had dropped by unannounced. He felt a new sense of purpose. These brave, clever, independent ladies would remain his family whether Ifeoma remained his wife or not.

"Just one more thing before you go. How can I get in touch with Ify?"

"We are done blabbing," Nene snorted. "Figure out the rest yourself, mister. Ify is a wonderful, beautiful woman. Another man may snatch her away before you know it."

"Dagger into my heart, Nene. You have pierced a dagger into my heart!" Chuma proclaimed, placing his hand theatrically over his chest. They laughed at his dramatisation. Although he was joking, he literally felt the sting from Nene's words. The thought of another man coming into Ifeoma's life drove him insane with jealousy.

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The bus was too tightly packed. Ifeoma found herself squashed between an overweight man who smelled of engine oil and a young boy who had a large basin placed on his knee. Actually, the basin was so large that Ifeoma inadvertently had to share the burden of keeping it upright with the young boy who looked ahead unapologetically.

It had been three years since she used public transport around Lagos and Ifeoma almost forgot how inconvenient it was. She planned to buy a small second-hand car when the sale of Eastern Delight was finalised. The estate agent she had hired to sell the restaurant informed her yesterday he had got an offer from someone and Ifeoma was relieved. For now, she just had to continue with using the bus or borrowing Nene and Chioma's cars.

The bus conductor called out her stop. Ifeoma handed him the bus fare and got down from the bus, holding onto her tummy protectively. One could never be too careful when climbing down from these buses, because sometimes, the drivers took off before passengers had completely disembarked.

Ifeoma sighed at the intense heat that greeted her when she stepped onto the sidewalk. The distance from the bus stop to the new restaurant space she had rented was not very far, but in this heat, she dreaded the walk. She only hoped Effiong would already be there. He had volunteered to help her with making the furniture for the new restaurant she planned to open. She had bought the wood and had them delivered to the location a few days ago.

Ifeoma glanced around as she began her stroll down the street. The roads were tarred, various shops lined the streets. A young female street hawker strolled around with a tray of fruits balanced on her head, looking for costumers. The area was not bad. In fact, it was much better than where she had initially started Eastern Delight, although not as upscale as the location of the restaurant she had just put up for sale. She was glad she saved enough money to rent this new place and to have found it in the first place. All she needed to do was work hard with her sisters to spruce the place up.

Making the furniture was first on her agenda. Then painting the building. Finally, she would work on the kitchen. Nene and Ngozi planned to join her later during the day. Chioma couldn't because her job closed late in the evening. With any luck, the place would be ready in two weeks.

Thinking of her sisters, Ifeoma's face broke into an involuntary smile. Since the return from their trip to Awka two days ago, they were much happier. There seemed to be a sense of peace. Nene had started preparing for JAMB, the entrance examination to university, and Ngozi had been called for a second interview at a mobile phone company that paid well. Apart from that, they seemed closer to each other and more optimistic about their future.

Ifeoma was glad they stayed longer than they had initially planned because they needed the four weeks to sort out their parents. They found their parents a housekeeper who helped with chores around the house and Ifeoma had hired a non-resident home nurse who came to help with their father's care twice a day. For Ifeoma, forgiving her parents brought her the inner peace she had craved for a long time. She never wanted to carry that load of hate in her heart ever again.

Her phone buzzed, and she reached into her large handbag for it. It was a text from uncle Emeka thanking her for the foodstuff she had bought him when she visited. She smiled. He had already thanked her many times for the tubers of yam and bags of rice, but she was the one who needed to thank him for handling the dissolution of her traditional union with Mr Chibundu. Ifeoma had not even needed to be present because Uncle Emeka had taken care of everything in her absence. She was glad about that because she loathed thinking of what her reaction to seeing that pig, Mr Chibundu, would have been.

Ifeoma typed a quick text to her uncle thanking him for always being there for her and her sisters. She vowed to visit Awka more often to check up on not only her parents but her uncle as well.

As she approached the building, she saw Effiong standing by the gate in a pair of shorts and a black T-shirt. He beamed at her as soon as he saw her.

“Madam Ify, how far?” he greeted cheerily.

“Hey, Effiong, I hope you have not been waiting long,” Ifeoma responded with a smile.

“No, not too long.”

“How are Oluchi and Loretta?” Ifeoma asked as she unlocked the metal gate to the two-room unpainted bungalow space she planned to make into a new restaurant.

“They are fine. Oluchi is now acting like a madam o … so funny.”

“But she is. She deserves to run the place. I hope whoever buys it keeps the restaurant, so you guys can still have your jobs.”

“We could always join you here,” Effiong said, following Ifeoma into the spacious room.

“That is nice of you to offer, but I am starting all over again, I don’t want to drag you guys down with me.”

“We would all be honoured to work with you … I would be.”

Effiong's tone sounded passionate and Ifeoma noticed the intensity in his eyes. It made her wonder if Effiong had feelings for her. Ifeoma looked away. She didn't want to encourage anything. There was only one man she wanted. It was a shame that man didn't want her back. A sudden sad emotion washed over Ifeoma. She missed Chuma. It had been six whole weeks since she had last seen him. It seemed like a decade ago. Her hand instinctively went to her tummy. The bulge on her abdomen was still quite small and unnoticeable. Especially under the loose Ankara dress she wore. She knew she needed to inform Chuma about the life growing inside her soon. She just couldn't muster enough courage to face him yet.

"So, madam Ify, where do we start?" Effiong asked, bringing her mind back. She cast her eyes on the pile of wood positioned in the corner of the room.

"First, the flat square ones have to be placed in the centre of the room, then the long ones should be attached to the sides," Ifeoma said, pointing to the ones she needed. Effiong efficiently carried the wood and did as she requested. She muttered her thanks.

"I am so impressed that you can actually make furniture," Effiong commented as she crouched down to pick up a hammer.

"My brother, I had to learn many skills to survive o."

"A beautiful woman who can cook and build furniture … perfect combination."

Effiong spoke with an awe-infused tone that brought a flush to Ifeoma's cheeks. She was now convinced that he had feelings for her. Ifeoma did not respond to his statement. She did not want him to have any ideas about the possibility of anything happening between them. He was a good looking and nice man, but Chuma already occupied her heart. No man would ever come close to what she felt for him. These weeks without him had shown her how much she loved him. Each day she woke up, she dreaded getting a phone call from her lawyer telling her that Chuma had signed the amended divorce papers she had served him.

The only spark of happiness she felt was that she carried Chuma's baby inside of her. A piece of him that she would forever cherish. It gave her something to hold on to. A purpose for her life.

"If you tell me what to do, I can help," Effiong spoke again, jolting Ifeoma from

her thoughts.

“You can take this hammer,” Ifeoma said as she handed the hammer in her hand to him. She opened her bag and brought out another one. “Then follow what I do.”

They worked in silence. He was a quick learner and within twenty minutes, they finished making the first table. Ifeoma looked at it with satisfaction.

“Wow, Effiong, we did it!” Ifeoma exclaimed with delight.

“Yes, we did. Now, if we continue at this pace, we can finish making all the tables before evening.” Ifeoma glanced at Effiong with gratitude. He really was a nice guy. “Thanks, Effiong, for being here,” she murmured.

“Anything for you, Ify, I’ll do anything for—”

A sudden bang at the door interrupted Effiong. Ifeoma turned to find Chuma at the entrance, a deep scowl contorting his face.

Just when she recovered from the shock of Chuma’s sudden appearance into the room, he charged towards Effiong and landed a heavy blow on his jaw.

“Oh, my God!” Ifeoma gasped in shock. She watched in horror as Effiong staggered backwards slightly before he lurched at Chuma. They both crashed onto the floor fighting each other.

“Stop it!” Ifeoma cried. “Stop this right now!” Her loud voice seemed to penetrate the charged atmosphere because they suddenly stopped fighting.

Effiong jumped to his feet panting and Chuma slowly rose too.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Chuma!” Ifeoma exclaimed, exasperated.

“I want this fool to stay away from you!”

“I won’t be here if you were, would I?” Effiong retorted, his eyes flashing with renewed irritation. Chuma started towards him again and Effiong looked ready for another fight.

“Effiong, please … Let me talk to Chuma. Thanks for coming to help me today,” Ifeoma said softly. Effiong looked away from Chuma and back at her. He hesitated for a few seconds, still breathing rapidly.

“I’ll always be here for you if you need me, Ify,” he said to her before walking away.

“Yeah, fuck off, asshole!” Chuma spat at Effiong’s retreating figure.

“Chuma!” Ifeoma chided. She waited till they were alone before she continued. “He was only here to help me.”

“Yeah, he always is, isn’t he? A kind, helpful man, isn’t he?”

Chuma knew he sounded unreasonable and crazy, but he couldn’t help the burning jealousy that overtook him when he saw Effiong standing beside Ifeoma.

“Oh, Chuma,” Ifeoma muttered. “You need to stop fighting Effiong … Stop fighting people in general. Someone might eventually press charges, you know.” Her tone was light and teasing.

Ifeoma’s eyes devoured Chuma. He wore a pair of jeans and a well-fitting black T-shirt. He had lost weight, but he still stood tall and proud. Like a warrior always ready for battle. His broad chest was heaving heavily, and his eyes were dark and fierce.

They stood in silence for a few moments while Chuma took slow breaths to calm himself. His hungry gaze perused Ifeoma. He had missed her. She was dressed in a loose red Ankara knee-length gown with flip-flops on her feet. Her hair packed into a severe ponytail and completely devoid of makeup, she looked simple and lovely. Seeing her here today, he knew he couldn’t let her go. Even if she wanted him to.

Chuma continued to study her in silence and she stared right back at him. As if they were involved in a staring contest. When Ifeoma positioned her hands on her hips, the material of her dress stretched slightly. His gaze immediately caught the small bulge on her tummy and sprang back to her eyes, startled.

“You are pregnant.” A statement. Not a question. He knew Ifeoma’s body so

well. Someone else may not have noticed, but he did.

“Yes, Chuma, I found out last week … I wanted to tell you … I just haven’t had time. A lot has been going on … I went to Awka—”

“We are having a baby…” His eyes shimmered with wonder. His tone was husky. “Oh, God, Ify… we are having a baby.”

Ifeoma smiled at the expression on Chuma’s face. He looked so pleased.

“Yes, Chuma, I’m nine weeks pregnant.”

“Nine weeks…” Chuma appeared deep in thought for a few seconds. “It must have happened that night on the sitting room sofa. We did it so many times…” Ifeoma’s face heated up at the images Chuma’s words conjured up in her mind. It had been a blissful night of mutual satisfaction.

“Or the night after,” Ifeoma murmured. That entire week, they had made love repeatedly like sex-crazed animals. Chuma smiled.

“Yes, or the night after.”

They lapsed into silence again. It was a silence saturated with unspoken words.

“I’m sorry, Ify,” Chuma said, eventually breaking the silence. He thrust his hand into his jeans pocket and brought out a small box and a folded piece of paper. He sniffled before opening the crumpled paper.

“I am terrible with words, so I spent last night writing this down.”

He hesitated, twisting the corner of his mouth. “Actually, me and Ada. Because to be honest, I needed her help to get out what I really need to say to you.”

Ifeoma’s heart rate quickened and she felt her stomach flutter as she watched Chuma.

“Ify, I am sorry for hurting you. For the things that I said to you.” Chuma read from the small piece of paper he held in front of him. “I was angry, and I didn’t mean any of the things that I said. I would like you to know that you changed my life. Made it more meaningful. Better.”

Chuma briefly raised his eyes from the paper before dipping them back. Ifeoma would have found the entire scenario so amusing if she was not involved. But she couldn't laugh. Her throat constricted with tears. Oh, how she loved this complicated, stubborn, controlling man.

"You are strong, determined, kind, gentle, hardworking, beautiful, sexy, and I love you," Chuma continued reading from his note in a deep voice, which made Ifeoma's body tingle. "I am lost without you and I hope that you can forgive me. I understand if you can't."

He held out the small box in his hands before he continued. "When we first met, I rushed everything so that we could get married. I didn't give you a choice or a chance to refuse me. Now, I want to start all over again. Have a proper wedding like we should have had. In this box is a ring. Please consider marrying me again."

"Oh, Chuma—" Ifeoma whispered tentatively.

"I don't want you to decide now. I want you to take time and think. What I really want is for you to forgive me … and consider giving me … giving us another chance." He had stopped reading from the paper. Ifeoma was speechless. She took the box Chuma held out to her and opened it.

"Oh, Chuma." Ifeoma inhaled, astonished by the size of the huge diamond. "This ring is too big. I don't want you to spend so much money on me."

"I know you don't."

"This is too expensive. I don't—"

"Ify, I want to give you time, I don't want to rush you." Chuma leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on Ifeoma's forehead. "I love you and will accept whatever decision you make."

With a bright smile, he turned and strolled out of the room leaving his last sentence echoing in her head.

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The anxiety Chuma had been feeling for the past two days refused to diminish while he awaited Ifeoma's decision. He had been useless all day at work. He had already postponed two meetings today because there was no use pretending he could give his full attention to the process.

Chuma glanced at his phone, willing it to ring. He willed Ifeoma to call him and tell him that she forgave him and would marry him again. But the phone remained silent.

He picked up the picture of him and Ifeoma smiling, from his desk. They had been so happy then. Why do I always ruin everything? Chuma looked up and for the first time in his life, he muttered a prayer. "Please let her forgive me, let her come back," he whispered. It was difficult for him, but he was leaving everything now to fate. He did not want to manipulate Ifeoma or try to persuade her. He knew for them to move past this, she needed to come to him of her own free will.

He rose from his chair. It was time for him to go home. It was already eight o'clock, and he had kept his secretary waiting at her desk too long already. Although Chuma had told Bola to go home, she never left before him. There was no point sitting down and staring at his phone all day. Whenever Ifeoma called, he would answer and accept her decision. Please let her come back to me, he thought as he picked up his suitcase.

"Bola, you should have gone home, you know. I told you I was not working," Chuma said to his secretary when he shut his office door.

"I know, sir, but I don't like leaving you here." Chuma had also told Bola to stop calling him "sir" but she had also vehemently refused.

He waited for Bola to gather her things.

"Thank you for waiting. How is your son?" he asked as they walked out together from the room.

"He is fine, sir, Thanks once again for helping him get that job."

"It was a pleasure, Bola; he is a brilliant young man."

They continued to the front entrance of the building in silence. They were the only ones left in the building. Even the cleaners had long gone home. Chuma waited as Bola enabled the building security after closing the front door. Bola suddenly turned to him.

“It will work out fine between you and your wife. I am rooting for both of you,” she said, and this made him smile.

“Thanks.” He had never spoken with Bola about Ifeoma. However, he knew Bola was very observant and must have figured out what was going on. That was the reason she was excellent at her job.

“Try to eat something, sir, you are losing too much weight.” Bola admonished him with a maternal tone. He smiled again.

“Yes, ma,” he replied. They exchanged farewells and separated. Chuma walked towards the senior partners’ car park opposite the car park where Bola had parked.

He drove home determined to eat something. He intended to order a properly cooked meal and get nutrients into his body tonight as soon as he got home. He couldn’t control the outcome of Ifeoma’s response or whether she forgave him or not. What he could control was deciding not to fade away. He had already lost nine kilograms within eight weeks.

It did not take long for Chuma to arrive home because the traffic was light. He parked in the garage beside Ifeoma’s red BMW and sighed. The car would have to be returned to her even if she chose to end their marriage. She was carrying his baby, and he didn’t want her travelling in buses. That was just too risky. Whatever her decision, her comfort came first. Ifeoma could not logically refuse alimony or child support now. Bile rose to Chuma’s throat as he contemplated the worst-case scenario—divorce. He and Ifeoma would have to reach a child custody and visitation agreement. Oh, please let her forgive me.

Feeling weighed down by sorrow, Chuma got down from the jeep and strode to the front door. As he shoved it open, the soothing aroma of egusi soup flooded his senses.

“Ify!” Chuma exclaimed, tossing his briefcase carelessly on the floor. He raced to the kitchen to find Ifeoma standing by the cooker, a brilliant grin on her face.

She looked relaxed. At home. As if she had never left.

“Ahmed let me in,” she muttered shyly, switching off the gas cooker.

“Ify, Oh, God, Ify, I love you!” Chuma bellowed, lifting Ifeoma and twirling her around. “That gateman deserves a raise for letting you in.”

He lowered her to the floor, still holding her close to him. Cradling her face in both hands, Chuma joined their lips for a firm kiss that rapidly became passionate. Suddenly, he pulled away, his eyes intense with the rawness of his feelings.

“Oh, God, Ify, I was so scared that I had lost you for good. I love you. You know that, don’t you?”

Ifeoma nodded, tears glistening in her eyes.

“I love you too, Chuma, and yes, I will marry you again. Let’s start all over. Me and you.” She showed him the new ring on her finger and her face cracked into a bright smile.

“I insist this is too expensive … If I am ever kidnaped because I’m wearing this, I know who to blame…”

They both laughed. Chuma kissed the ring on her finger.

“I wish I could chain you to me, so you never leave me again,” he muttered, resting his forehead on Ifeoma’s forehead. His heart was racing like a speedboat. He couldn’t believe that she was really there. Ifeoma laughed at Chuma’s comment.

“I had a dream about you pursuing me with a chain when we first met, you know,” Ifeoma murmured and he smiled.

“Please don’t run from me,” he whispered into her ear.

“I’m here to stay, Chuma. I’m not going anywhere.”

He rewarded Ifeoma with a hungry kiss. She may not be perfect, but, she was perfect for him.

Epilogue

“Please, can all the members of the family stand together for this picture,” the hired photographer for Ifeoma’s graduation ceremony announced. He appeared frustrated. Everyone in attendance was chatting away and he had a job to do.

The guests stood outside Eastern Delight following the two-hour ceremony, which had been held in a location twelve miles away.

“It’s time for the family pictures please!” The photographer’s voice boomed again. Chuma noticed the frustration on the photographer's face and clapped his hands loudly. This got everyone’s attention.

“Photograph time,” Chuma declared.

Ifeoma held on to their twin sons and stood beside Chuma, a smile on her face. Her black graduation gown fit nicely over her red chiffon gown. The cap was slightly too big for her head but she used a pin to secure it over her curls.

Chuma looked sideways at Ifeoma, his eyes shining with pride. “Congratulations again,” he whispered into her ear and Ifeoma couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face.

“Thanks, Chuma,” she whispered back. Bright flashing lights captured that moment.

“Extended family time now,” the photographer announced. This time, everyone promptly arranged themselves in front of the camera. Ifeoma’s three sisters and mother stood beside her and Chuma’s siblings and father stood by him. The photographer continued to take pictures until the twins became cranky.

“Let me take care of them. It’s your day … Relax,” Chuma whispered to Ifeoma and she mouthed a “thank you” to him. Chuma held hands with his two-year-old sons and led them into Eastern Delight where the reception was scheduled to take place. They were his pride and joy. Chinedu and Chibuzo Obi. Chinedu was light-skinned like Ifeoma and Chibuzo dark-skinned like him. They appeared

similar to how he and Nnamdi were as infants.

“Do you want some cake?” Chuma asked Chinedu and Chibuzo. They both nodded, delighted. Chuma led them to the kitchen and cut two small slices of cake and handed it to them. They seemed appeased by this and ready to cooperate throughout the rest of the ceremony.

After picture time, the guests moved into the restaurant and settled for refreshments. Ikenna, Adaora’s husband, who was also a highlife musician, performed a few of his hit singles for entertainment. Ifeoma looked around with gratitude. It had been a long road to get to this place. She was grateful that she did not allow her past pain to destroy her chance for a happy future. Her eyes wandered to her husband who held the twins on his knee, nodding his head as Ikenna performed. She loved him desperately. He had supported her through all this. His gaze caught hers and he smiled. She automatically smiled back.

“Speech time!” the MC proclaimed and handed Ifeoma the microphone.

“I want to say thank you to everyone who came. It was a long road to get here. I am grateful to my sisters, my friends, my parents, and, most of all, my husband and kids. I love you all.” Resounding applause followed her speech.

The MC then handed Chuma the microphone.

He stood up, his expression filled with pride. “I am proud of you, Ify,” he said in a throaty voice. “We are all proud of you. You worked hard and graduated as one of the best students—” Loud claps interrupted Chuma’s speech. “I would like to mention that I was also the best graduating student—”

Laughter filled the room along with grunts of protest.

“Ha! How many times will we hear this?” Adaora grumbled.

“Na lie; I was the best!” Nnamdi called out. Chuma laughed.

“But seriously, Ify is one of the most hardworking women I know. I am the luckiest man on earth to have found you, Ify. Congratulations again.”

Tears formed in Ifeoma’s eyes as Chuma resumed his seat. She was the lucky one. A few other guests gave brief speeches. The celebration continued, and

refreshments were served to all the guests.

“Finally, the day is over,” Ifeoma remarked as they walked through the front door of their home. Chuma held their sons over his shoulders. They were fast asleep.

“Yes, I enjoyed today. Enjoyed seeing everyone, especially your mother who hardly ever comes to Lagos. But I’m pleased that it is over,” he responded. Ifeoma headed to the kitchen while Chuma carried the twins upstairs. He placed them on their beds before returning to join Ifeoma who had poured wine into two glasses. He sat beside her on the sofa. He took a sip from his glass, sighed with appreciation and lowered it back on the coffee table in front of them.

“I am glad today went well,” he said. She nodded in agreement, shifting closer to him on the sofa

“I’m also glad that the boys are asleep,” she whispered in his ear. She grabbed his hand and dragged it under her red dress. Chuma gasped.

“No panties, Ify!” he exclaimed, becoming instantly aroused. “You mean to tell me there was nothing under this dress all day?” His pupils dilated, and his nostrils flared.

Ifeoma flashed a mischievous smile.

“Well, there was, but I took it off before we got into the car on our way back home.” Her sultry voice shot straight to his penis, swelling it even more.

Chuma suddenly remembered the coy expression on Ifeoma’s face when she excused herself to use the restroom before they began the drive home. That Ifeoma had planned his seduction throughout the trip back home turned him on unbearably.

“Damn, Ify …” he murmured hoarsely and Ifeoma giggled.

“I’m only trying to have some….” She grabbed his crotch “… after a long day.”

Chuma laughed heartily. He loved that Ifeoma never shied away from her sexual needs. She always went for what she wanted. He held Ifeoma’s hand firmly against his groin, and she squeezed the huge bulge straining against his trousers.

“Take it ... Any way you want it … It’s yours, baby, it’s all yours,” Chuma groaned, bringing their lips together.

“I know, and it better stay that way,” Ifeoma murmured against his lips.

“Always, my wife, always.”

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Finally, to women who feel isolated, or go through oppression simply because of their gender, remember you are strong. You are not alone. I stand with you. Together we stand strong. Yes, we CAN!

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Amaka Azie was born and raised in Nigeria, West Africa. She developed a passion for reading at the age of twelve. Her interest in writing began in secondary school when she joined the press club. Her active imagination has captured the interests of many. With multiple stories in her head, she has finally decided to publish. Her debut novel, Melodies of Love has received many five star reviews.

Amaka currently resides on the Wirral in England with her husband and two daughters, where she also works part time as a family doctor. Apart from reading and writing, she enjoys watching crime TV shows, painting and travelling.

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