

DAWN

(Book 5 of the Worn Series)

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Chapter One

You know those evil cartoon characters with loud booming voices that seem to bounce on every wall when they are really mad? Or the ones who cackle loudly accompanied by thunderclaps for more effect in the background? I should say is the exact personification of a really mad and raged Mr. Abiwu right now. I mean I did wake up in a strange place with the shocking realisation that I had been kidnapped—again—and only to realise that beside Alex sat detective Alice and they were dancing to the tune coming from the car radio.

What are the odds that the policewoman who investigated my father's death and stalked out of my house for weeks and represented the law was friends with Alex one of the great uncles? The answer is none. So yeah I was shocked and eventually got over it.

So I end up in this damn house again and even get some sleep because, well to hell with it I can't keep on wishing I'll roll over and die each time one of these crazy people decide to pull out their antics. But at the moment Mr. Abiwu combination of muttering in rage and boisterous laughter was not helping things.

I mean if the man turns out to be unstable (which I think he is), he may just kill me and never even remember it. Alice and Alex are standing by the door in the office and I am sitting in a comfortable chair trying but failing to keep up with Mr. Abiwu's heavy fast paces.

'That little maggot traitor.' He is referring to Taylor, 'how dare he try to set me up?'

Like I said before, cartoon.

'You obviously didn't put much reins on your son as you thought you did,' Alice says, 'at least you are smarter than him.'

He stops pacing—no he more like halts his pacing and pivots to land his crazed eyes on me. My heart skips when he strides towards me and plants his hands at either side of my chair.

'He will do anything for you wouldn't he?' he says in his crazed voice and his eyes bore into mine, 'well let him prove it.'

'What should I tell him?' Alex asks ready to take every command.

'Leave it I will deal with my son—you may leave now.'

'What about the others?' Alice asks.

'They are in your hands.'

Icy cold feelings rush into my bones as I picture who the others were. All the people I have come to care about. I am positive they are still trying to brainstorm where I vanished off to back at the cabin. That must be five hours ago.

Alice and Alex bow their heads and walk out. Mr. Abiwu doesn't move away from me but keeps his eyes focused on me such that I have to ask.

'So what's the plan now?'

He bares his teeth at me, 'the only reason I am not having someone beat you to death is because of my granddaughter living in you,' he growls, 'you have until she comes out to convince me why I should let you still remain in my life when you don't want anything to do with it.'

Should I be thankful that here is a notorious thief who still cares about innocent lives?

‘Maybe I need you to convince me why I would be crazy enough to let you anywhere near my child.’

His eyes bore into mine for a long tense moment before he steps away from me and walks to his chair, not sitting in it but standing behind it and placing both his hands on it.

‘I have a simple proposition for you Heather—I rarely ever want things from people below my standing. But this child is the only heir I’m going to get from Taylor that he truly cares about,’ he rolls his eyes as he carries on, ‘I mean it’s not like I can just force him to consummate with someone else—I do care about my son you know.’

‘don’t I know that much!’ I mumble

‘So this means a lot to me. She is a special child, protecting you from paying for the error of your ways. But if you can’t let me near her—which of course I may choose to just take her and get rid of you but I don’t want the child to hate me for life before I killed her worthless mother so I was hoping we can play happy family for her sake.’ He lets out a dramatic sigh, ‘it’s simple really Heather—either we all have access to this child’s life or none of us do.’

Seconds tick by as I let his words sink in. why is it even his decision anyway? Just because she shares in his bloodline he has no right to stake his claims on her—the tyrant!

‘So what will it be Heather?’

I have the most venomous words on my tongue but I know this is the moment that I keep my mouth shut lest I get myself killed. By him of all people. I mean there are worse ways to die.

He waits for a long moment and then realise that I am not going to answer. He nods, to whatever runs through that crazy head of his and pulls out his sleek phone from his pocket. His finger slides on the screen before he brings the phone to his ear.

‘Please present yourself to my office ASAP.’

And he lowers his phone tossing it back on the table. I really want to ask him who is coming. The terminator? That would either be Charlie or Alex right? What about Luther—he falls more on the silent assassin sniper type.

I sit still in my chair keeping my face impassive while my heart wants to literally jump out of my chest and run for the hills screaming. He then sinks into his office chair and crosses his leg on top of the other, looking relaxed since I saw him when I got here.

Five minutes later there is a knock on the door. Mr. Abiwu tells whoever it is to enter. I don’t turn around to see who opens the door and steps into the office. Mr. Abiwu acknowledges the person with a slight smile and I can feel the person approaching the table

‘Ah, Doctor Focus—it’s so nice to see you again.’ Mr. Abiwu exclaims

My body goes still. Doctor Focus! I haven’t seen the man since the morning he announced that I was pregnant and I didn’t hear nice things about him after that time either.

‘I really don’t appreciate being dragged here in such short notice but I suppose my job is made up of those and dare I say I wish we always met under better circumstances?’

Mr. Abiwu’s smile widened, ‘you are a man on the rope to save lives—I never imagine a proper time to call you just for a drink.’

‘Doctors have lives as well Rolland.’ Doctor Focus rolls his eyes at Mr. Abiwu—I mean I had no idea they were so informal towards each other. Oh geez I have no idea about most things when it comes to the tyrant in front of me.

‘Mrs. Phatshimo, lovely to see you again.’

I take a deep breath and force myself to look at him without unleashing my full blown screaming tantrum, ‘I can’t say the same.’

Doctor Focus gives Mr. Abiwu a pointed look. I think I am more surprised he isn't affected by the doctor's lack of fear and reverence for his cursed presence.

'Oh don't blame me Focus.' Mr. Abiwu says in a bored casual voice, 'I was just telling Heather that babies are born premature all the time—what with all the foods we eat these days.'

My heart screeches to a halt the same time my eyes go round and my hand fly to land open handed on my stomach.

'You wouldn't.' I growl at him. The mother in me coming to the forefront. Shield, sword, daggers and all. My sense and logic contemplate reasoning with him. I mean he does still have a better nature I could appeal to right? My emotion and heart want to play at his game. Pretend to agree to his terms. Play happy family during the day and slaughter people like chickens in the night.

He barks out a laugh, 'dear me Heather I think I have been holding back with you—you seriously can't mean I wouldn't do anything I say?'

I don't notice Doctor Focus approach me chair until he clamps a hand on my shoulder. I almost snap my neck as I look up at him only to see in his hand an injection with colorless liquid dripping from it.

'So what will it be Heather?' Mr. Abiwu repeats the bored tone, 'am I getting a revenge or I am getting a progress to my plans.'

I would know better than dare the crazy man and I have no idea what the hell that liquid in the doctor's syringe is—

'What is that?'

'Something to help the little one out,' Doctor Focus announces proudly, 'and the chances of both your survival is fifty-fifty. I developed it myself and I am still trying to make it work right—it's a seven up thing.'

Great, I am about to become his guinea pig for a strange pregnancy termination medication that no one would ever know what killed me.'

Then Mr. Abiwu crowns the horror by saying, 'it hasn't been easy for you Heather. Your father died and your family had to hide from an unknown killer. You have been so stressed out. Only to find that your criminal husband was the one behind it all. You run of course just like you ran that time—only this time he doesn't let you live to have to run again the third time.'

Jesus. Mary. And Joseph.

'You are going to kill me and frame Taylor for it?'

Mr. Abiwu gives a shrug while doctor Focus is looking lovingly at his little murder weapon. 'I didn't. you are—your choice will not only cost you your child but mine as well Heather—but I need that boy reformed in the right way and I think a little jail time will roughen him up a little—he is way too soapy for my use.'

Oh.My.God.

I had really underestimated this man's insanity. I mean seriously. How can he be so creative and evil at the same time?

'Time Heather—I value it as much as I do my money and you are here wasting it.'

I eye the syringe. I eye the mad man. I have no chance in hell to make it out of this alive anyway. Well I could knock the old doctor with a little push (the man does look frail) and outrun Mr. Abiwu from his office. But I won't escape the great uncles and whatever minion he has planted out there.

The man has a minion detective for crying out loud.

'Fine.' I hate that I am saying this, 'just step away with that thing from me.'

Mr. Abiwu shoes doctor Focus away with his hand. The crazy doctor actually clicks his tongue in disappointment, ‘man it’s not every day you get a proper candidate for one of these little babies.’

His irony brings a sick feeling inside of me. I keep a wary eye on him until he is away from me and I turn my eyes back on Mr. Abiwu.

‘What are your plans after the baby is born?’ I ask in a business tone.

Mr. Abiwu nods, acknowledging my shrewdness. I wasn’t born yesterday you know.

‘You choose whether you want to be in her life or not. Again it’s your choice Heather.’

Geez this man has no limit to his evil fallacies. I press my lips together before I blurt out anything that could get me killed. The good old doctor is still on standby with the killer syringe by the way.

I bring my hand on my tummy and flash him a wary smile, ‘I guess we are going to try the big happy family crap then.’

‘Thank you... at least you inherited your father’s good genes. Eric’s life would have been a waste.’

I inhale through my nose. He shouldn’t mention my father like he cared about the man he murdered.

‘You killed him.’ I just can’t help myself. All in all I am no longer afraid of this man like I used to, and if I am going to be living with him until I figure out a way out of this I need to set some boundaries. I look at him challengingly, ‘if we are going to be doing this, we have to set down some rules.’

Mr. Abiwu gives me a hard look, ‘now listen you little....’

‘Do you want this or not Mr. Abiwu.’

It is then that I realise the man really wants this. He bristles a little before pressing his lips together to get himself under control. Then in a tone which sounds like he is chewing poop he says, ‘fine, go on.’

‘Number one, you will not insult me with crass words. I already know that you don’t like me or approve of me for your son and incase I didn’t say it out I don’t like you either.’ I take a deep breath, ‘two, you will not speak ill of my deceased father, considering that you killed him, let him rest in peace.’

‘I live to speak freely-.’

I cut him off, ‘I won’t hesitate to remind you of the people you don’t want to remember Mr. Abiwu.’ I pause for effect, ‘your wife.’ He actually winces. Great I touched a nerve—I mean who knew? ‘and Zelda.’

He hisses, ‘I get it, dead bastard won’t be mentioned—anything else while I still care?’

Still arrogant to the very end I see. ‘You won’t hurt anyone I care about just to get your way.’

He scoffs, ‘the little....’ he pauses then takes a deep breath giving me a look that can freeze water, ‘just make sure they don’t piss me off—I am rather gun happy when I get mad.’

I raise my face, ‘well that will be all—anything you want to add to our contract?’

‘Yes—I will have my secretary type in our agreement and we both sign it—does that work for you?’

‘It does.’

I stand from my chair, ‘well then this meeting is over.’ I turn to walk out of the office and catch doctor Focus giving me an appraising look. What the hell?—I turn over my shoulder for one last statement, ‘oh and please stop kidnapping me, it’s a dying old cliché now.’

The man actually laughs, ‘fine Heather.’

I nod at him and walk out of the office. I make it down the hall and when I am positively another floor away from his office I sag against the wall and let out a breath before chuckling to myself. I can’t believe I did that. Well the man had it coming.

I expected the formal signing of the contract. We did it and got it over with. I am still to figure out what has him so intrigued by my baby? Maybe his grandfather biological clock is clanging. My brain companions shrug.

I also expected the arrival of the team from Kasane—but not all of them. I didn’t expect Judith and Hannah to be among them. I am standing on the verandah together with Mr. Abiwu watching as they unload from the car and I actually suck in a breath when I see them. I glance at Mr. Abiwu whose lips barely twitch in an evil smile and I know right away that the man had something to do with it. I feel my anger boiling. I clench my fists.

Taylor rushes to us and wraps his arms around me before lifting my face asking if I am okay. Mr. Abiwu just rolls his eyes and walks back into the house.

‘Jesus, Heather you are going to be the death of Me.’ he mutters, ‘are you okay?’

‘I am fine, they didn’t hurt me... you need to calm down.’

He needs to because Mr. Abiwu is just going to rile him up even more.

‘Now that I’ve seen you.’ He nods.

‘There she is.’ Julian exclaims, ‘the girl who keeps on disappearing.’

I smile at him, you just can’t be mad at the man for long. And he also walks to me, pushes Taylor aside and embrace me in a hug, Taylor gapes at him with his arms akimbo, ‘I thought those police jerks had taken you back to their office.’ He mutters.

‘They did.’ Lawyer says looking at the house, ‘this one anyway.’

Julian lets go of me and Lawyer also gives me a hug. Okay—I forgive them all now.

‘I am so glad you are okay—at least now Taylor can live.’

Taylor comes to push Lawyer away from me, ‘okay enough being handsy on my woman, while I am still asking nicely.’

Lawyer mutters something about like father like son he same time Hannah Judith and Celine come to suffocate me in a noisy group hug.

Ten minutes later, Taylor shoos everyone inside the house before pulling me into his arms again and kissing me silly.

Chapter Two

The terms of Mr. Abiwu on our little contract was that I don’t mention anything about doctor Focus. The audacity. So now the mad house was full. Alex and Charli and Luther also came to join in the mad house. And it took them exactly five days to settle in because Taylor was

on a mission to either murder them or beat them up. It was going to be three against three. If Mr. Abiwu hadn't butted in. yes, butted in. and so they settled for a stale mate.

Then there was Mr. Abiwu's fight with Taylor over him wanting to frame him. well not exactly a fight because the two actually laughed over it like it was a freaking joke and moved on after deadly threats about any repeated actions in the future. The case wasn't closed, its dangerously pending.

Okay—moving on to the next act of the mad house. There is Julian and Luther and Hannah. A dangerous love triangle I had to talk to myself in the mirror as a self-therapy for me to stop counting the day when one will murder the other. We even tried to convince Mr. Abiwu to let Hannah go (granted he has no idea about her little espionages) and his excuse was that he needed everyone around for Christmas. What?

Luther really cared about Hannah it turns out, in his words Hannah was, I quote, 'she is a little crazy and way out there but I never saw this as pretense.'

To say Hannah was shocked by Luther's declaration would be a major understatement. Hell we were all shocked. Even Mr. Abiwu himself. And Julian being—well Julian, he poured petrol on the fire when he said and I quote, 'I'm sorry that it had to happen this way—but I love Hannah too—she is unlike any woman I have ever met and I am not letting her go,' and for the big blow he added, 'she is mine and we are getting married as soon as Lawyer sorts his things with Judith.'

Yes he totally sold those two out. Shocked again, Lawyer and Judith had to come forth with their explanation and it was simply something like this and I quote, 'Judith and I are getting married next year, I already paid for her dowry—there is no going back.'

And everyone was speechless to comment, but apparently Mr. Abiwu ended the arguments with one knock off statement, 'you should know that the Abiwu men are as obsessive over their women as they are over power, let's just accept things as they are and have a happy Christmas no?'

With growls and grumbles and murmured expletives we all walked out of the meeting.

So that ladies and gentlemen is how I found myself in the crazy situation. Everyone is home (because Mr. Abiwu threatened to get gun happy to anyone who called it otherwise) for Christmas. The house is full and we all share meals in the dining room. For anyone who ever thought they'd ever had a crazy creepy Christmas, please allow me to add this one to the list.

I don't even feel excited when I wake up on Christmas Eve. At least the weather is cool and cloudy, just like how I love Christmas. I wake up with Taylor hand gently caressing my stomach (he finally convinced—no threatened me back to his room). He murmurs something in my ear and plants soft kisses all over my face and I think I mumble something about him letting me sleep in peace. Whatever it is must have been funny because he chuckles softly in my ear before leaving me to sleep in.

What's the point of waking up? The only person excited about the new living arrangements is Gertrude. The woman has been coming up with remarkable menus for every meal for the past month and a half. She is in heaven while all of us are singing kumbaya near the premises of hell.

I only wake up when I can't sleep anymore and that's nine am. Still too early to avoid breakfast. I am two weeks away from labor so I have been using that to avoid, well everything. I was hoping against hope that after the damn Christmas Mr. Abiwu would release people from confinement. How am I supposed to survive living a month in an environment filled with people who are secretly dreaming of murdering each other?

Thirty minutes later I walk into the dining room and it's the same old setting ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Abiwu is at the head of the table looking like he has achieved something great. The four uncles are seated at either side of him. Judith is seated next to Lawyer and Hannah of course is next to Julian but is facing Luther who is not trying to hide his open stare at her.

I have never been glad to not be someone my whole life.

'Look who has finally decided to join the fiesta in hell!' Alex says as he digs a fork into his eggs. I ignore him as Taylor helps me in my chair. The bigger the pregnancy gets, the harder it is to do simple tasks. Don't let anybody tell you anything else.

'This is just a setting to torture ourselves with empty murder threats.' Charli says looking at Taylor. Taylor ignores him and starts serving my food after shooing Gertrude away. No he actually glared at the poor woman until she scurried away like a startled cat.

'Be nice to Gertrude.' I reprimand him

'I told her not to bother she doesn't listen.' He mumbles irritably.

Celine who is sitting across from me rolls her eyes and picks her mug of coffee to her lips. She is the only one who hasn't promised to murder anyone on the table – yet.

'Gertrude is a wonderful woman to keep up with you monsters.' Celine announces loudly like it's important news.

'Thank you madam Celine.' Julian bows his head mimicking Gertrude's voice.

The other uncles snicker while Hannah nudges Julian with her elbow. He grunts but continues laughing.

'While I was explaining about the great uncles, did I forget to mention they are a bunch of impulsive immature five year olds?' Lawyer deadpans looking directly at me.

I offer a small shrug, 'oh you wouldn't steal the joy of me discovering this by myself.' I say as nonchalantly as I can.

Hannah bites her lips and her eyes somehow land on Luther who retaliates with such a scalding hot look the poor woman had to look down. I suspect Julian kicked him under the table or he wanted to kick Luther but his foot accidentally landed on Charli who didn't waste time by plastering a jam coated slice of bread on his face.

The thing in slow motion slid down his face and landed on the table before Julian landed his older brother with a frosty glare. Alex and Lawyer were laughing loudly. And just like that, the food fight started. I mean we are adults, it's Christmas Eve and well here goes nothing. Not that I join in anyway, I don't want anyone to be almost murdered by Taylor.

As for Mr. Abiwu, he is just sitting there easily at the head of the table like the responsible adult among children paging through the newspaper. You know what? I am done trying to understand what goes on in this house.

Celine is by the couch, an old hymn book on her lap singing 'silent night'. The woman can actually sing. Moments later, Julian and Hannah walk in the living room with a box labelled 'Christmas supplies' and they set it under the large tree that we all ganged up on Mr. Abiwu to let us place in the living room.

Julian gets on his knees and blows dust off the surface of the box. Hannah squeals and swats her hands across her face as Julian continues to blow dust kisses on her. After a few

coughs and shrieks she finally gives up trying to escape the dust tirade and comes onto Julian claws out and all. The picture makes me chuckle as Julian lifts his hands up trying to defend himself but also totally undone with laughter.

Celine closes her book and shakes her head looking at the two as well. Her gaze finds mine and we roll our eyes at the scene. She stands from the couch and comes to stand by the windowsill with me.

It has gotten warmer as the day progressed and now at full midday the sun has taken up complete residence in the sky and the snowy white clouds that had gathered early morning have vanished like a dream.

‘Great singing by the way.’ I tell her.

‘Taylor is not the only angelic voice in the family.’ Celine gloats giving me a sideways glance, ‘I actually used to dream about music school and all that crap when I was younger.’

‘Younger? You’re still very young.’

‘Heather dear, even you must know that life has a way of aging you in a day.’

I know what she means. Images flash in my mind and I banish them because that’s what I do. No matter how many times I think over a horrible image, I always end up with the disappointing conclusion that nothing could be done now. Some dark scars are meant to be packed away in dark corners of our hearts I guess. I used to believe in some form of redemption, now I am not so sure. After everything that’s happened, I feel more inclined to look out for myself. That way, I know what I am doing. But that is also a lie.

‘Celine.’ I breathe out, ‘if I may ask—does Mr. Abiwu have a perfect family complex or something?’

Celine laughs. But it’s a weak laugh, ‘it’s not a complex, it’s twisted.’ She says, ‘he has been doing this every Christmas since--.’ She pauses and I just know. ‘Ruthless as he may have been, he didn’t take the loss of Taylor’s mother very well.’

What? She must have seen the scowl on my face because she goes on to explain;

‘These stories are not always as you heard them Heather. There are just some details no one ever talks about.’ She shakes her head, ‘things that explain why Taylor can never totally turn his back on his father no matter how cruel the man is.’

‘He cares about his father,’ that alone is a mountain of mystery on me. He seemed to not understand my feelings towards my father when he is the same towards his. For all that its worth, somehow I know that Taylor and I’s relationship has been shaken to the core. To the point whereby I allow myself just to feel. My love for the man is unreasonable. Even when I still hurt because of him I still can’t seem to turn my back either. But I know we are no longer the same as when we first met. When we married.

Celine scoffs bringing me out of my reverie, ‘once upon a time this was a perfect close knit family. They were just so damn perfect they made the rest of us look like we didn’t know how to exist in harmony.’ She rolls her eyes, ‘personally I think Mr. Abiwu was willing to keep things that way, as long as his family didn’t know what he did in the dark. But of course there came a time when he couldn’t hide it from them anymore—and everything fell apart.’

I glance back at the tree where Julian and Hannah are proceeding to hand crystal balls and decorations on the tree branches. It adds a whole new feeling—or, my wild mind projects a realistic picture from Despicable Me where the minions are basking in a false temporary tropical island. How can I not worry about what will happen when this phase is over?

And I am having way too many serious thoughts today. I shouldn’t. They won’t get me anywhere. Celine breaks into my thoughts again and this time she is singing ‘oh holy night’.

I smile at her when our eyes meet. Feeling almost close. But we can't be—we are broken souls. I have come to learn that the broken have nothing to give if it means mending their deepest wounds to accommodate such blossoming existences of life.

And then Alex strides into the room, instantly breaking the dreamy atmosphere. He even has to clap to announce his arrival like he even needs to. The bastard.

'Getting straight to the point.' He throws himself on the couch and takes Celine's hymn book paging through it because I think his hands just need something to do, 'who wants to ditch tomorrow's Christmas party with me?'

We all look at him. 'What?' I am the one who asks. I just can't help it.

'Well they are all going to be here to celebrate the seasons with the leader of their clan—duh... and the little precious one is a bonus as well.'

Celine sucks in a breath while my heart skips a beat and my hand comes to rest on my stomach, 'what?' I ask again. I mean its Christmas Eve, the atmosphere around this damned house is even close to settled. What is this now?

Alex looks at me then shakes his head, 'I don't like you but I just feel sorry for you—not that you are the pitiful type or anything and I don't do sorry feelings for people.'

'Point taken Alex.' Julian growls at him through his teeth, 'we promised to get through this holiday in a peaceful stalemate so can you please not push buttons?'

Alex actually acquiesces and raises a palm at me, 'sorry Heather—I just hate cases that prolong unnecessarily.'

I don't have to say anything to him so I just turn away from him and look out the window a sick feeling rising in the pit of my stomach.

'Ignore him Heather.' Celine tries to reassure me, 'let's go out for a walk.'

I know better, 'no.' I whisper and turn to Alex, 'tell me what the hell you are talking about now.' I demand, glaring at him. I still can't believe that I am letting Mr. Abiwu into my child's life—what is this now?

Alex rolls his eyes, 'seriously Heather, how can you not know these things? Your father led a great clan—he left it all of course but there are still some lunatics out there who are loyal to him.'

'Alex!' Julian and Celine exasperate all at once but it is too late

'No she should know—Christmas will be over soon and its easier if she knows what the hell is going on.'

By now I am close to hyperventilating but I manage to snap, 'just say it!'

'They are rebuilding your father's clan.' Alex says, 'and your brother is the leader.'

Brother!

'you are the heir as well—its clan business now--, and that baby could be the only thing Mr. Abiwu and the rest of us can use to not cause a warfare between our clans—she connects the families together.'

My brow creases, 'what do you mean?'

I mean really—I thought the marriage was what brought the family together as Mr. Abiwu has been flaunting how unsuitable my family was. Not that I cared about families I just wanted to be with Taylor—well look where that got me.

'The marriage contract wasn't that solid – you could have just divorced Taylor and all this is over—but the child is a permanent connection, we definitely cannot fight each other now.'

My jaw drops open and everything falls into place. Mr. Abiwu is rushing the man-man deal to increase his influence and power so that he won't be subdued by the rising clan—and

having me on his side makes things easier for him to put down the rules like always. Like I said before, ruthless people should not be allowed to be smart.

And brother. I had forgotten his existence for a while now—I mean wasn't he supposed to be in hiding—my breath gets caught in my throat—if he has been hiding from the mad man Mr. Abiwu he surely wants to come back and take revenge. Surely this child is standing in the way for a much heated war.

I can't believe the bastards have already dragged my unborn child to this madness and should I be thrilled that they are making her a pillar of peace?

I shake my head bringing my mind back to the present, Alex is staring at me with a smug smile on his face, Julian and Hannah seem to be holding their breaths, and I don't have the strength to see what Celine is doing. But by the silence that has engulfed the large living room I know that I am the only one who had no idea about this little piece of information.

Taking a deep breath and I give a nonchalant shrug, 'well what do you know? The Abiwus are born dignified.'

Alex's smug expression is quickly replaced with surprise, Hannah and Julian match his expression. What did they expect? A tantrum? My usual frozen with shock stance?—not this time Johnny.

'Well are you all going to stand there gawking at me like your pants are full?' I say in a commanding voice, 'it's Christmas Eve—get on with it.'

I leave their speechless presence and waltz easily into the kitchen like my brain is not about to explode and something inside of me is about to snap and break. Every time I have soft feelings towards these people I get to find out a little more of their hidden selves—I need a holiday.

'Madam Heather.' Gertrude beams at me as I grace the kitchen with my presence, 'good morning.'

'Merry xmas.' I put all the cheerfulness similar to my inner grief into my voice, 'I need a sweet fix I am famished.'

'Oh dear you didn't have to come all this way, you could have just rang me.'

I scoff, 'I am not inclined to call someone who is in the same house as me, its laziness bordering towards insanity.'

Gertrude smiles and rolls her eyes, 'I just need you to take it easy these final days.'

I roll my eyes as well, 'I am sick of sitting in some stuffed chair feeling like a whale—I just want to feel normal.'

'You are the only normal person in this house and Judith.'

I nod in approval at her statement.

'So what's a sweet fix?'

Good, now we are talking. I watch her eyes grow wide as I explicitly explain how I want my sweet fix to be like. Who said sundaes were only for desert? And so what if I want it to be completely chocolate with Mt Everest pillar of cream and chocolate chips on top instead of cherries. It's Christmas Eve and I want it. And why should she be shocked that I want a milkshake along with that? Hasn't she ever heard of a milkshake?

'I don't know if I can pull that off without food poisoning you.' She mumbles, smart way to deny me my cravings.

'You Gertrude can pull anything off – you made stuffed fish for dinner last night—you deboned the fish by yourself and they were so good they brought a moment of awed silence at

the dinner table.’ I rumble on, ‘if you can make a meal to shut the great uncles up during meals, you can do anything.’

Gertrude is gaping at me and I think she is beginning to wonder if I am alright. I realise motivation isn’t working so I settle for staring her down with all the bitter vengeance I am feeling towards all the lunatics at the moment for keeping such vital information from me.

She gets the point and nods reluctantly, ‘you are right madam—I will whip it together and bring it to you.’

I smirk at her, ‘I wasn’t born yesterday—I will wait for it here.’

Gertrude smiles nervously. That’s right sister—no escape.

Chapter Three

The woman has a talent. My imaginary sweet fix delight is right here staring at me and I have a large spoon in my hand as my tongue licks my bottom lip. I sink my spoon into the soft yummy delight, pushing the spoon down the one and a half liter desert glass I can’t help but pick a chocolate chip and pop it into my mouth.

Hmmn. I love stress food. Since when did I start having stress food? Since I started living a soap opera. Wild mind answers. Why do they have large dessert cups? Logic wonders. Mad house, my sense sings. I am so mad I don’t know what to do with myself—that’s emotion and heart.

I moan as the chocolate delight slide down my throat, its sweetness lingering for a moment and I decide that it’s time to attack the sweet fix fountain. I pull the spoon out from the gooey delight and lift it ready to lick the living day lights out of it—and Judith walks in—no dancing into the kitchen like she is one of those Disney maidens who have a song in every scene and a charming prince at the end of the movie.

She halts when she sees me and her eyes go starry when she sees my sweet fix, it only lasts a moment before she looks at me with concern.

‘That’s a lot of sugar to take before dinner.’

I give her a dirty look, ‘mind your own business.’

She raises an eyebrow and walks to the kitchen unit. Moments later she return with a spoon in her hand.

‘What are you doing?’

She sits opposite me and shovels her spoon into my giant sundae before shoving the spoon into her mouth. She groans loudly I absently hoped no one heard and got the wrong impression. It all happens so fast I only have time to gape and then glare at her before she swallows the whole thing and her face breaks into a –er—crazed expression?

‘Wow I think I had a trance.’ She marvels, ‘Gertrude has outdone herself.’

I can help but smile. But I can’t let her enjoy the delight I had to bully Gertrude into making. I swat her hand way when she is reaching for another shovel.

‘You can’t eat all that? Are you trying to kill yourself?’

'It's Christmas Eve—mercy abounds during this time.' I finally lick my spoon—holy crow, if I ever escape this house I am kidnapping Gertrude.

Judith's face becomes sober, 'it does.'

I scowl, 'what's with that look?'

Judith sighs, 'today is the eve party and dramas at church.'

Oh I get it, 'who must have taken over the plays this year?'

Judith shrugs, 'the group is pretty much proactive and adaptive to changes—I just can't get over what pastor Luke must be thinking of me.'

I snort, 'that man never thinks anything about anyone—and if there is any person who has a terrible reputation is an on and off church goer like me.'

Judith shakes her head, 'Malcom has no right to judge you like that,'

I really don't want to think about this, 'he was just hurt Judith, the man is mad about you.'

'Was.' Judith rolls her eyes, 'I don't think he'd ever want to see me again.'

I give her a rueful smile, it is apparent that she cares about him a lot—he is her friend after all. If only she hadn't winded up in the arms of that caveman Lawyer. Love is a blind bat soaring towards an inevitable death.

I dig my spoon into my gooey delight and shove an impossibly large amount into my mouth. Yes, so kidnapping Gertrude.

'Try him.' I say as soon as I swallow and still in the aftershocks of sweetness because I go on to say, 'you may need to clear your feelings before tying yourself to caveman.'

Judith gives me a funny look, 'I should be offended,' she lets out a short laugh, 'but are you okay?'

I raise my eyebrows at her, 'I am enjoying a sundae that would send any five year old to an early grave—why would I not be alright.'

'You just said.'

'Do you like it here?'

Judith blinks, 'no of course not—this is not my usual Christmas fest,'

'There you have it,' I say in a revelation-filled voice, 'it's stress food.'

Judith shakes her head and we start to attack the sugar gooey in silence.

Someone clears their throat. We both turn and sigh in relief when we see Hannah. I am the one doing something dangerous.

'Can I talk to you Heather?'

I blink at her, 'uhm sure.' I get up and reach for my sundae, Judith slaps my hand away. I flash her a scowl before I follow Hannah out to her room. She shuts the door the moment I step inside. Something about all this reminds me of the days we were conspiring against this household and got caught within twenty-four hours. Yeah it's not my destiny.

'What's up?'

Hannah hesitates, 'look, this is none of my business and I may be out of line but I thought I should talk to you about what Alex said.'

I shake my head, 'I don't--.'

'Just listen Heather—the decision is still yours. Thing is I have known about this for a while and Mr. Abiwu didn't want you to learn about your brother's work yet—I think Alex did you a favor but outing it and you can have more time to think about it.' She sighs, 'I just wanted to tell you that you are not obliged to stay if you don't want to. Your brother has the power to finally grant you your freedom—they won't hurt you.'

I stare at her as her words sink in, ‘why? Why are you trying to help me?’

‘Because you don’t deserve to be treated this way and be terrorized by them.’

I snort, ‘I am not being--.’

‘Heather, you think you are staying here for love? Has Taylor done anything to stop his father from mistreating you? Threatening your family and killing your father?’

‘Stop.’

‘Has he? His loyalty to his father always comes before anything else, before you—why would you stay here just to hold on to a person like that?’

I stare at her for a long moment before I start laughing. Mr. Abiwu that clever bastard. He made me sign that stupid pact so that I will never leave even if I had the way to. But why does he suddenly want to keep me here?

‘I got it Hannah, I will think about it.’

I don’t give her a chance to say another word before I walk out of the room.

And yes of course hours later after not able to face dinner I am bend over the toilet emptying Gertrude’s poisonous delight. Maybe I should have listened earlier. This feeling sucks. I already had it for the first weeks of my pregnancy I was sure I promised myself to never subject myself to such a torture. Or to put it more clearly. No more babies.

‘That’s what they all say we are five in the family.’ Lawyer had mused then, finding my predicament rather funny. I had given him a glare and said, ‘should I be grateful that your parents brought five raging serial killers in the world?’ and the only thing he could say was, ‘Outch!’ and continued to rub my back.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ Julian scowls down at me. I suppose he is not very informed about home remedies for vomiting nine months pregnant women. If he had just minded his own business when I had quietly excused myself from the table to throw up in peace without anyone knowing he wouldn’t have to go through this.

But no, the bastard was in the kitchen exchanging food bargains and blackmails with Gertrude he saw me rushing down the hall to the downstairs bathroom and now I couldn’t face my consequences in peace.

‘Nothing—I smelled something I don’t like.’ I let him help me to my feet and walk to the sink to splash water on my face. I don’t feel better but I am hoping against hope that the worst is over.

‘Oh—do you need to lie down?’

Phew he is buying into my story. If anyone finds out that I deliberately ate to get sick I am so screwed. Not that I wanted to get sick—no, I just wanted some sugar... but no one would understand that.

Julian has his arm around my shoulders as we exit the bathroom and we run into a traumatized Gertrude by the doorway. Crap.

‘Oh this is all my fault.’ She breathes, ‘I should have known better than to listen to you.’ What the hell?

‘Hey!’ I say the same time Julian asks

‘What do you mean?’

‘She ate gallons of sugar before dinner—I think she may need a checkup.’

‘What? Are you insane?’ I try to deny it but the thin line on Julian’s lips is discouraging, ‘I am not five.’

‘I thought so too.’ Julian says.

I whip my face between the two of them, ‘look I had a stressed out moment—okay—can’t we just let it pass and I promise never to do it again?’ thank god none of them know I had diarrhea before attempting to eat dinner.

‘I know you got stressed out—but when you start taking it out on hurting yourself we won’t have it.’

Oh geez I’m flattered, somebody cares about my existence.

‘That’s not it... you don’t even know what happened.’ I argue. I should have settled for a tantrum instead of stress sugar intake. Besides I only ate it this once—why should I get violently sick—oh this cruel world.

‘What happened?’ Taylor’s voice make me snap my head up to look at him as he strides towards us and pushes Julian’s hand away, replacing it with his. ‘Are you okay.’

‘I am fine.’ I try to stare the two traitors to shut up.

‘She is not fine.’ Gertrude stresses, ‘she’s been sick, you need to get the doctor.’

I groan and sag against Taylor’s strong body.

‘Of course.’ Taylor replies immediately and did I mention that I feel like fifty pound of concrete stone? Sugar is supposed to give energy not drain the little that I had left. Is anything trustworthy out there anymore?

I don’t know why Julian and Gertrude never mentioned the sugar incident—not that I should be grateful. But seeing doctor Focus saunter in here like he is on duty or something (which he is) makes me only picture his lovely injection he was stroking like a secret lover the last I saw him.

Thanks heavens, Julian or Gertrude do not come in the room as Focus does his diagnosis but so help me god Mr. Abiwu is there and Celine as the good old doctor—ironically—is asking me how I am feeling and exactly what happened. I recount he effects not the cause.

‘its pretty normal to have nausea even weeks before labor,’ the good old doctor explains to the two alike men who are nodding attentively like two clueless braggadocios receiving lecture from a noble well learned nerd. ‘Many women experience gastrointestinal upset late in the third trimester, the baby is growing making the uterus to crowd in the space of the GI tract.’

I growl, ‘English please Dr Care bear.’

He settles his eyes on me, ‘the baby is sitting on your intestines.’ He says as if he is talking to a five year old. I purse my lips in annoyance while Celine finds it so funny she guffaws. I give her a dirty look and Taylor rubs my back in relief I think.

He goes on to rumble other medical nonsense and I am too sagged with relief that my little sweet fix isn’t the cause after all before he makes his leave.

So at the end of the day I am absolutely cross with every breathing human in this house. I decide, that is the following day and its Christmas to put all the worries of this world aside and enjoy the day. I mean Mr. Abiwu did lay out presents and all down the Christmas tree that he

hated in the first place. Maybe it's a Christmas miracle. Besides I need to save up energy for the party later tonight.

While everyone is busy preparing for the party I am delighting myself in Mr. Abiwu's gardens. The man has great eyes for gardens I will give him that. The smart shrubs and smell of flowers are soothing and just beautiful. There are paved paths along waist long hedges in a puzzle like manner. The pavements lead to a green area with neat short grass and a large tree with a shade worth of a Disney picture. There is a wooden bench under it and I just want to sit there and bask in the peaceful moment.

I stretch my legs in front of me as I bask in the cool peaceful area. Evil people's properties shouldn't have any location of peace. Or maybe for the sake of other people who do not cultivate evil for a living, there just have to be a little piece of heaven here. I close my eyes and tilt my head back against the wooden bench

I suddenly have the feeling of eyes on me. I slowly sit up straight and open my eyes. Taking a second to admire the natural beauty around me, I then turn my head towards the place I feel eyes coming from. My eyes land on Mr. Abiwu's large house, straight to the balcony where my starrer is. His arms are folded on the railings, body leaning forward, dark eyes glued on me.

Why is he giving me that thoughtful look? Most times I don't know what is happening in Taylor's head—okay every time... but that look is just dangerous for my existence. It makes him look so much like his father. As if he doesn't already. I sometimes have sleepless nights thinking about what I would do if my baby resembled the two men... okay none of that right now.

Do I wave? We are way past the waving stage. Waving is for when you are glad to see someone and you have all these good springy feelings when your eyes meet. (I do have springy feelings right now but that's beside the point.)—do I stare back? Staring back is declaring a challenge and I am soooo done fighting and gravelling with these people. Yes Taylor is now 'these people' welcome to the party.

Things are no longer the same as when we first met. Not all love scenarios are strong bonds that keep people glued together through storms and hurricanes. Because hurricanes are what we have been swimming since—well since I got crazed by those dark eyes. The same eyes that are glued on me from a distance and making me feel like I am out of breath.

Maybe it's his looks. Wasn't that the other thing that had the man's existence plastered on my incurable romantic self? It makes no sense to say that this could work anymore. I don't trust him and I soooo want out of here I so don't care if I never have to see him again. I have already done it before and it's a much better feeling than living in fear of him leaving again.

So no waving, no staring back—I stand up with as much speed as my whale sized body allows me and decide to just leave the place. Angry now, because that's what I feel whenever I think about our messed up relationship. Anger.

So without so much as a blink I turn to walk and guess who I almost collide nose to nose with?

'Can't I just not see you at all?' I glare at Alex as he looks down at me with the same expression on his face as mine. Did I mention that I have become shorter as the baby is growing?

'I could say the same thing.' He says in a bored tired tone, 'what the hell are you doing at this side of the house?'

I gape at him, 'what are you doing outside the house?' I scoff, 'I didn't know psycho killers also needed moments of peace—is there any space for the word peace in your head?'

Alex tilts his head to the side regarding me for a second before his mouth curls to an amused smile, 'I am beginning to learn that there is.' He says feigning thoughtfulness, 'seeing that the more I see of you the less I want to kill you.'

This sick bastard!

'Certain people should just vanish on Christmas day.' I mutter as I begin to walk around him and the man steps in front of me, blocking my way.

'Have you considered my offer to ditch the party?'

I look at him as if he is gone nuts, 'I hate my life right now but I don't have a death wish.'

'Me neither.' He raises his hands and I didn't even threaten him, 'I won't lay a finger on you—when are you going to learn that as long as Taylor claims you none of us will dare harm you?'

Oh right I forgot that Taylor is staring at this exchange from the balcony.

'When the cow finally jumps over the moon.' I answer Alex, 'now move over and stay a mile away from me.'

'Heather.'

I freeze in my steps to rush from him. Not that he just grabbed my arm and made me stay in one place. No. but because—geez since when did Alex start calling me so lovingly by name?

'Don't you want to know what happened to your friends back in college?'

What?

'What is wrong with you? That was two years ago, can't I just move on? You already are evil—you don't need to practice cruelty.'

The goof actually rolls his eyes, 'whatever—look I don't have much time alright? But like I said before, I just want to tell you this.' He sighs, 'what I told you in that cell that day was all true—Stephan worked for Mr. Abiwu under me. The little rat ran off and got me into trouble with the clan, they hate lose ends—anyway, he had to be taken care of and so I did and saved my head only to meet you.'

I gape at him again, 'are you insane? Is this a sob story or what? Do you need someone to talk to?'

'I just hate uninformed victims—you are the most uninformed I have met in all my years.'

I curl my free hand into a fist, 'fine? What exactly do you want Alex? You have been yapping nonsense all Christmas trying to put a damper on my mood—so out with it.'

'I don't want these families to come together... you are the only one in the position to stop this union.'

'What?'

'You Heather.' He exasperates, 'can walk away from this family and end this—your brother is powerful now—Mr. Abiwu or Taylor won't be stupid to test him—this time you can leave and put an end to all this.'

What the hell?

I start to pull my hand from his grip as my mind is beginning to want to process his words and I won't let it. But the bastard tightens his hold on my hand and goes on to say the only thing that can get through to me.

'If you return to your family, your baby will have a normal life—if she is born here--.'

He scoffs, 'I don't need to paint a picture of what she will become.'

'What's in it for you?'

He pauses, not to think—not that he thinks at all. At least I suspect he doesn't. I suspect he has no idea what a brain to mouth filter is, 'I don't want the union—the Abiwu clan couldn't have joined itself to a more miserable family in its entire existence.'

Wow—from insult to insult- this man doesn't have any breaks at all.

'And what's so great about your family that it has the likes of you? Are you going to carry the greatness to the grave?'

He narrows his eyes at me, 'is that a threat?'

'Don't tempt me.' I grit at him. And the man actually yanks at my hand and hurls me on him. A gasp escapes my mouth as he leans down such that his breath is flushing on my face as he says;

'Don't flaunt your power onto me Heather—I have no problem being done with you to solve my little problem.'

The crazy man is muttering death threats at me and the only thing I can think about is that he said problem twice in one sentence. It's not normal.

And then his tight grip on my hand loosens the same moment he steps away from me his face expressionless. And that's when the feeling hits me. This man is not stable. None of them are- but this one is a notch higher than the normal equilibrium in the family.

I touch where his hand was gripping my arm tightly—whoa, since when did I start swelling from tight grips? I've been staying indoors for too long.

I lift my eyes to meet the unstable man's as he says, 'think about it Heather—but I am not giving you any choice here.'

I only feel a cool breeze of someone passing by before I see Alex falling on the ground on his back. His hand immediately comes to clutch at his face and that's when I notice Julian standing above him taking heaves of deep breaths.

'I've been dying to do that all holiday.' Julian growls down at him.

'I should kill you right now.' Taylor suddenly growls beside me, making me flinch. I didn't even notice that he is there and he is holding my arm, examining it closely.

I think I am in shock.

Alex chuckles as he begins to get on his feet, using his hands to lift his weight. Blood is coming down from his nose and filling in his gums and teeth as he laughs looking at Julian who is getting another fists ready.

'Julian little Julian?' he taunts as he stands on his feet, 'what are you doing?'

'Giving you the strike Taylor wants to give you but can't because you are the great uncle.' Julian answers.

Alex clucks his tongue, 'the little bastard's death threats are getting old—why don't you be a man Taylor and risk it.'

'Some of us like using our minds.' Taylor says, 'they will come a time I will be able to get my hands on you and you better not be anywhere near me then.'

Alex smirks, 'I don't think there is a chance to settle grudges in hell—because the only time you will ever be able to touch me is when we are dead got it.'

And with that, the fist fight started.

Chapter Four

Mr. Abiwu is pacing again. Faster this time. Double frustration.

I cocoon closer to Taylor on the couch who tightens his arm around me and continues to rub his hand up and down my arm. It's helping to soothe the shock I had been in earlier and the bloody fist fight didn't help. I mean bloody not as a swear word but as an adjective.

These men are many things that includes flaunting guns comfortably like its everyday business—but who knew they fought like they were doing a rerun for kick boxer?

Julian is sitting with Hannah of course with an ice pack on his knuckles while the rest of him seem untouched—because I swear I witness him rolling on the ground when Alex had given him a blow in return.

Alex—well he looks well beaten up. Bloody nose, disheveled clothes – the whole nine yards and I am sure he don't know where to put the icepack that's why he glares at Gertrude when she brings it to him.

Judith seems like she is not sure what is going on as Lawyer is holding her the same manner Taylor is holding me. Celine is just like—well she has seen this before, as she is standing between Luther and Charli who also have—I have seen this before—expression on their faces.

'A week—that's all we had to endure for this holiday to end perfectly.' Mr. Abiwu stops pacing and glares particularly at Alex and Julian, 'I was going to suggest that everyone pack and run on boxing day because that's when everyone is allowed to take out whoever they want but I want this over after tonight's party.'

Luther nods as if he is agreeing with him and my heart skips when his eyes land on Hannah. That means Julian now has two great uncles who want him dead.

'Whatever man!' Luther mutters before walking to grab Alex's arm and leading him out of the room. Charli gives Mr. Abiwu one pregnant look before going after them.

Hannah and Judith share glances before Lawyer takes both of them out. I can't help but think that a silent battle line has been drawn and things are about to get ugly. Some normal people worry about being dead broke after Christmas and the January disease. As for us? How to escape murdering each other.

Julian is walking towards me when Taylor gives him a seething look, stopping him in his tracks. 'Are you okay?' he asks instead.

I nod. I don't have any physical wounds right? Julian nods back in satisfaction before walking out of the room. That leaves Mr. Abiwu, Taylor and I in the room.

'You promised not to run.' Mr. Abiwu concludes the whole thing with his easy threats as usual, 'I trust you to keep on with that promise.'

I try with all my might to not scowl at him but being polite to Mr. Abiwu is an uphill task right now I should start writing a book.

'Father!' Taylor says and Mr. Abiwu just nods at me before walking out.

'Come.'

And minutes later Gertrude is putting ointment on my now not very swollen arm while Taylor is on a phone call in the balcony.

'It took longer this time around.' Gertrude finally says something after treating me quietly I thought she was having a mental breakdown, 'it's usually entertaining all month with the fights and I get to be the nurse.' She actually smiles impishly at that one.

I raise an eyebrow, 'are you kidding me? These men wants to kill each other.'

Gertrude rolls her eyes, ‘like they ever could. Killing a member of the family is the biggest sin here, don’t worry about it.’

Like it’s that simple.

Then she shocks me by her next words, ‘so what are you going to do?’

‘What?’

‘Alex isn’t keeping it secret that he doesn’t want your family and his joined—

‘What?’

Because why in the ever loving hell would Gertrude be interested in what is going to happen. I thought her only mission was to make sure everyone retained their sanity?

Gertrude sighs, ‘I’ve been here for a long time,’ she glances at the balcony where Taylor is still on his phone call then back at me, ‘they don’t only care about their positions and influence—they genuinely care about their families—believe it or not.’

I just shake my head because well I can say it’s no news. Even the devil cares in his own twisted way about his demons. So there is that.

‘Anyway—the party is in a few hours and I need to get you ready.’ She pats my arm, ‘get ready for this one—these people have their own definition of business mixed with pleasure.’

THE PARTY

The party is outside in the gardens by the pool. During this night time the place is like from a dream. Dimly lit, flower scented, soft music and the surface of the pool glistening like diamonds under the moonlight. The giant Christmas tree had been shifted outside and stood like a large sentinel overlooking the whole party.

I am in a turquoise dress that I had argued over thirty minutes with Gertrude to wear. It was beautiful and looked stunning on me, I’d rather prance around in comfortable pajamas but I don’t want to fuel more stress to these people.

Tonight is when great decisions are to be made. Decisions that some of us couldn’t escape. Had I known the depth of this issue I would have ran away long time ago. Promising Mr. Abiwu that I wouldn’t run was probably an ignorant pact on my part. Promising to stay with my child in the family before fully understanding what I was signing for was also a lame move.

Now here I am all elegantly dressed my child days from coming into this world and she already has a say in what goes. I sigh, life is just so complicated.

‘You shouldn’t be alone.’ Lawyer comes and takes my arm into his, ‘where the hell are Julian and Taylor?’

I shrug ‘I ditched them, they are probably tearing the entire house apart.’

Lawyer sighs, ‘woman—you shouldn’t be looking for trouble right now.’

I look at him, ‘that’s the only thing that makes sense.’ I narrow my eyes at him, ‘where is Judith?’

‘She’s with Hannah.’

‘Alone?’

‘Well they don’t have anything that could possibly cause chaos between two strong clans.’

I press my lips together.

‘It will be fine Heather—we won’t let you out of our sight and the little stunt Alex pulled was out of line—it won’t happen again.’

I tilt my head to one side, ‘blood is thicker than water Lawyer—you all just can’t abandon Alex, Charli and Luther for me—so please don’t give me that sense of security.’

He pauses for a moment digesting my words then nods, ‘you are right—but maybe this will be helpful.’ He takes both my hands in his and give me a sincere look. ‘As long as you are Taylor’s, I protect and care about what is his just as he does with me.’

‘And if I leave him?’

‘Will you?’

My heart skips for a moment. I want to say a strong yes because that’s the decision that my sense and logic are screaming at me to make. But the thought of having to stay with my brother who I barely ever got along with is just sickening. Maybe I am a lost cause. I really don’t know which direction I am taking anymore. Or which voice in my head to listen to.

‘I will save you the trouble of overthinking.’ Lawyer says after a while, ‘it doesn’t matter what you decide Heather—all I know is that it will rain cats and dogs before Taylor lets you walk away from him.’

I shake my head, ‘he walked away from me.’

‘for heaven’ sake Heather when are you going to let that one go?’

He actually groans as if I am the one unreasonable here.

‘Well I can’t—I can’t dedicate myself to this relationship again to have to watch him leave a second time.’

Lawyer regards me for a long moment before he nods and says, ‘I know I have told you—but the decision is yours.’

Geez I have been hearing that a lot lately that can’t be a good sign.

I only nod and flash a tight smile at him before we continue into the party. I exchange pleasantries with a few people I recognize and meet those I don’t. Later, Hannah and Judith join me for a stroll in the gardens, Julian and Lawyer behind us.

‘Heather, my mom and sister wants you to say hello.’ Judith says

I nod, ‘sure, how are they?’

‘they are fine I am sure—they only worry that I am not telling them the truth—at least if they confirm that I am really spending Christmas with you.’

I touch her arm, ‘I will—I can’t believe Malcom didn’t tell you out.’

Judith scoffs, ‘the threat he received was no joke Heather.’

I get that.

‘If he really loves you he wouldn’t cause that kind of trouble with your family.’ Hannah points out.

I shake my head, ‘if they even believe him.’

‘Maybe not—but these people monitor anyone who knows about them—a mistake is not correctable it’s pricey.’

‘I will keep my family out of all this.’ Judith says then rolls her eyes, ‘if mother didn’t possess some kind of sixth sense.’

I chuckle softly, ‘that she does--.’

I remember the first time I met the woman. She only looked at me for a few seconds and I could tell she could tell that I was not okay.

‘And what about you?’ Hannah looks at me, ‘are you ready to see your brother?’

I shake my head, ‘I don’t know—I just want tonight to be over.’

‘We all want to know whether you are staying or leaving.’

And there it is. The summary of what is happening tonight, plain and simple. Had the bastard brother of mine come six months ago I would have gladly gone with him. I didn’t know much then, I didn’t know all the stakes. And I definitely hadn’t made an agreement with Mr. Abiwu.

But I still can’t answer the question plain and simple the way Judith put it. So that means I have indecision and I am screwed. Well it’s not like they are going to place me on some platform and ask me to choose a path before they start cutting each other. But the picture fits them.

‘I don’t know.’ I decide to be honest with my friends, ‘is it really my decision to make?’

Hannah looks at me levelly, ‘it is if you hold on to the right to make it.’

‘It’s not the supreme court.’ Comes Lawyer’s sharp voice, making us all jump, ‘it’s a family meeting.’

We all stop strolling and turn to look at him with similar scowls on our faces.

‘We know better.’ Hannah raises an eyebrow at him.

‘You are not helping Heather.’ Lawyer glares at her before he turns to me, ‘it’s time Heather.’

My heart skips as I follow his gaze to where Taylor stands waiting for me. He is looking at me the same way he was looking at me from the balcony earlier. I finally, for those few seconds understand that look. This decision really is up to me. Whatever I say really is going to go. Of course whatever decision I will make will fuel a fight, that’s inevitable. But what breaks my heart the most is that he looks afraid. Something I have never seen on his face before. I have seen him angry, determined, fighting—never afraid.

Is he afraid that I will leave? Is he really that powerless to stop me if I decide to leave? Will he try? No, am I going to leave with my brother tonight?

I walk to him and he takes my hand. I have a strange moment I want to pull him in my arms and wipe that look off his face—but where is the part of me that was so done with his drama and family?

‘Let’s go,’ he says.

I nod and flash a small smile, ‘okay.’

There is a moment where he almost says something and I am also battling with my words but we both decide to let it go and start towards the house.

And the man does it again, he actually has us all stand in the front of all these people that I have no idea who they are and there is that moment of gawking and unauthorized pictures. I shake hands with people who swear are glad to see me but I have never seen them from Adam but this time I don’t want to run because I am dreading the meeting at the end of this party.

Because they came. No one missed their entrance but I am the only one who recognized them. For all the time I have lived with brother I had been fighting my own demons I never really thought much about his existence, but the man looks a lot like father. He was in the lead of the group of my four uncles. I had just gawked and wanted to hide.

The worst part was when they had approached the Abiwu clan which consisted of the great uncles of course, Mr. Abiwu himself, Lawyer and then there was Taylor and I. a very stiff and formal greeting was exchanged and Mr. Abiwu had implored them to feel at home.

But that was not what put a permanent lump to my throat. That came when brother seem to be glad to see me and for a moment we shared the deep unspoken pity for the loss of our

father. I had always respected him and we had never been close siblings but what the hell? I had asked about mother and aunt and he refused to say anything about them.

So by this time when the people are gawking and taking pictures my mind is reeling so much I don't mind standing there like a freaking statue for an hour.

But of course it comes to an end and the dreaded moment comes. Yes, that same darn room again. Only this time there is a table set such that each family sits facing the other. At least Celine is here to sit at my other side, the testosterone could kill someone.

My brain companions are all over the place yelling—historic moment! I mean this needs to be documented. The hard feelings are solidly hung in the air I can feel its cold existence snaking deep in my bones. What would it take for these men to just take out guns and shoot at each other? Nothing! And the worst part? They can all get away with it.

'Oh what a pleasure to be on the round table together again Elvin!' Mr. Abiwu begins with his usual annoying false polite gait. And by the way brother's name is Elvin.

Brother doesn't wipe the dark look on his face, 'don't even start Rolland—whatever respect I had for you as a fellow city runner is long gone.'

'Hard feelings?' Mr. Abiwu grins, 'state your case against me.'

Brother grits his teeth, 'are you kidding me? its infuriating and ridiculous that I have to sit here with you after what you did to my father—to my family—but I believe in more reasonable ways to settle matters.'

Mr. Abiwu nods 'that's a start.'

The uncles stare at each other across the table and I know if a fight is going to break out each person has already picked up their opponent. My uncles all go by the names that start with Es'. Edwin, Edward, Erinson and Enzo.

'No it's not a start Rolland.' Brother raises an eyebrow, 'it's the end... as you know me intent to recreate my father's clan to a new phase. This is just another lose end I am tying up.'

That can't be good.

'By all means let's conclude this.' Mr. Abiwu carries on with his false polite tone, 'what are your terms.'

'I believe that you had been misinformed about the joining of our families-' Elvin, my brother states seriously all eyes settling on him, 'there will be no joining. Our history proves that the Makoni clan and the Abiwu clan cannot work together.'

'That's an overstated opinion Elvin.' Charli, the second oldest Abiwu son speaks, 'your family agreed to this union.'

'Elvin wasn't around the day the agreement was made.' Edward, the oldest of my uncles explains casting a dark look Taylor's direction.

'Eric was the leader of the clan back then.' Luther argues, 'Elvin's absence doesn't count as anything.'

Brother pins the men with a hard look, 'there was no clan back then either.' He grits, 'and now there is and I am here to say that my sister was taken without my approval.'

Oh wow I am so touched.

'this marriage is bringing both of our families down a gutter I don't want to leap into... there will be less dead bodies if we all just mind our own businesses.'

'Is that a threat?' that is from Alex because the freak is so violent thirsty he'd actually die in any peaceful environment.

'It's a warning.' Enzo the youngest of my uncles says coolly, 'we want a peaceful settling of this matter, but it's entirely up to you.'

And my heart started beating fast because somehow I know where this conversation is going now.

‘State it then,’ Mr. Abiwu says, ‘what are your terms of a peaceful settlement?’

There is a moment silence before brother finally speaks.

‘We don’t want anything to do with your family and the Abiwu clan. We want this union to end the same way it started... I intent to take my sister back with me as early as tonight.’

My jaw hits the table followed by everyone else’s eerie silence.

‘What about the child?’ Mr. Abiwu asks, ‘the child is an Abiwu.’

‘I have spoken to my lawyers—you will have full child access to her but there is no connection to our families.’

Mr. Abiwu nods and I am close to hyperventilating. I swallow a lump in my throat as many emotions the leader being anger surges through me. How dare he just show up here and start making decisions about my life all because of their stupid clans.

‘Is that all?’ Mr. Abiwu asks calmly

‘Yes and obviously after the separation we all expect you to never contact anyone of us unless it’s about the child.’ Brother nods towards me, ‘and you will be communicating through the lawyers to do that.’

Mr. Abiwu nods continuously and the great Abiwu uncles all remain expressionless during the staring contest with my uncles who seem entirely satisfied with brother’s decision. Celine, Lawyer and Taylor’s expressions are the same as the great uncles. You’d think you were talking to stone walls by the way there were looking. I almost implore on brother to please emphasize his point again because I don’t think they got it clearly.

Not that I am supporting his views—I am personally seconds away from standing up, jabbing a finger on his chest and shouting expletives that would bring this sensitive meeting to a full fighting mode.

‘Very well.’ Mr. Abiwu stands and starts to pace around his chair—that can’t be good, ‘so here are my terms.’

And Celine stands with a bundles of laminated documents in her hands. Was she having them all this time? She begins to distribute them to brother and my uncles before she returns to her seat and Mr. Abiwu resumes his talking.

‘People who have become a part of our family cannot be released—it’s a clan rule that has served us well for generations.’

Tension lands in the room with a resounding thud.

‘And if a member is to leave they can state it themselves... that kind of decision can’t be decided by any other person.’

And yes, all eyes settle on me. I squirm in my seat inching closer to Taylor beside me.

‘as for the child—we do not let the children go... she is Taylor- my son’s daughter—she is not going to live with strangers—that is none negotiable.’

‘Now wait a minute Rolland--.’ Bother stands.

Mr. Abiwu raises a hand, ‘sit down Elvin.’ And he does, wow, ‘you are young and ambitious and fearless—good attributes—but you don’t want to start a disagreement with a strong older clan believe me—and if you have any love for your sister at all...’ he trails and I know what he is not saying.

We all do.

There is no leaving—the only way I will ever get to leave is my right now impending death. Just like his wife and Zelda. I feel my heart drop to my feet as the reality slaps me in the face. And Taylor?

He is sitting silently like all this is normal. Maybe it is.

‘You wouldn’t.’ brother growls.

‘You want to bet?’ Mr. Abiwu says the same moment Alex stands and comes to my side. A cold shiver runs down my spine.

The executioner.

And for the record I never liked Alex—so it doesn’t matter if he is the executioner or not—his existence is just suffocating. I am already short for air why the hell is he coming to stand beside me.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Taylor storms standing on his feet casting a fiery look at Alex such that he stumbles back from me a few steps before he remembers that it’s Mr. Abiwu who is first in command.

‘I will not let my sister stay with people who are willing to hurt her.’ Brother also stands.

‘oh how touching Elvin,’ Mr. Abiwu’s voice raises an octave higher but in a mocking tone, ‘your dedication to bringing your family back together is out of this world—wow do you all see that?’

Julian throws a smirk at brother speaking for the first time, ‘this meeting will not conclude well if you don’t tell us what you really want.’ With raised eyebrows, he eyes each of the uncles individually waiting for an answer.

‘What makes it hard to believe that we want to take care of our own?’ Says Edward speaking for the rest of my brother’s family.

‘She is my wife, she stays where I am.’ Taylor says in a cold voice, ‘if you are not interested in any joining this meeting is over—we promise to stay out of your way if you stay out of ours.’

And just like that, all the little threads that had been holding people’s violent tendencies snaps and all hell breaks loose.

You know that scene in a gangster movie where by a bunch of nervous criminals meeting to close a deal with limited time on their hands because a few annoying die hard detectives are always sniffing in their business? That’s exactly the feeling—and before we all know what is happening, I am looking at eight murderous men pointing assortments of weapons towards each other.

I am already familiar with the guns—I mean yeah big deal of course I expected them to have been carrying guns under their belts—but a freaking sword? And a dagger. Maybe Julian likes to be all fun and games but I am positive I wasn’t hallucinating when he pulled out a large freaking sword from out of his jacket. Even Enzo, one of my uncles who had the sword aimed at his windpipe blinked in shock and almost dropped his gun.

Okay, maybe Julian isn’t as crazy because he at least have a way to defend himself—but Luther is just staring darkly at Edward who stares back. I guess they settled for fist fight...

Taylor pulls me behind him, using his body to block me from this PG18V scene before me. Lawyer comes to stand in front of me again, creating a complete men wall so that I can’t even see a thing. my brain companion’s huff in disappointment. It’s not every day you find yourself stack in the middle of a holly wood style killer scene.

‘This is why we don’t want anything to do with you.’ Brother growls glaring daggers at Mr. Abiwu, ‘what exactly do you benefit from keeping a member you don’t approve of?’

‘A lot actually,’ Mr. Abiwu exclaims openly enjoying the scene before us all, ‘I don’t want you to shoot at my family behind my back. We both now both strong clans can’t operate in the same region unless they are one and you and I are not really compatible.’

‘We don’t want to compete with any of you—we just want away from you don’t you get that? You killed my father and I have no plan to make you pay for it—that alone should show my true intentions unlike you.’

‘I’m sorry you don’t find us to be good role models?’ Mr. Abiwu is really enjoying this, ‘now that we are at the hard topics—how are you planning to settle your father’s debt?’

Brother’s face hardened and he pinned Mr. Abiwu with a steely look, ‘my father’s life was the payment, and do you really want to go down that road?’

‘no I don’t—just thinking about that good for nothing swindler makes me want to burn the entire city down. And it doesn’t help that he has a little brainless bun just like him to continue the generation.’

Brother’s face hardens even more, turning a darker shade of black as his teeth ground together. My uncles stood on alert, ready to take any command he wants to offer. They seem ready to sacrifice their own life and not care about the consequences if it all comes down to a fight.

The great Abiwu uncles look ready to do the same. And then it occurs to me that these people don’t value their own lives the same way they don’t value others. They have done and seen it all and nothing looks scary anymore. Maybe.

I watch brother relax his features a little bit and I am secretly relieved that he decides against the hissing blood lust that has permeated the air.

‘Well then Rolland we are here to help you not have our brainless genes from your family line.’ Brother grits out and I think he tries a taut smile but comes out like he is a man in great pain.

Mr. Abiwu throws back his head and laughs, ‘Heather darling why don’t you tell your dear concerned brother about your decision?’

My body stiffens, in all the chaos I had illumined that at this moment I am invisible and now all eyes are on me. Mr. Abiwu pins the two men hovering over me with a hard look and they open a way for me like they are curtains of a stage play.

Brother settles his eyes on me and I look back at a stranger. The small amount I have lived with him, I was invisible to him except when he wanted to order me around or marry me to that freak Charles, whatever happened to him anyway.

Now he has the nerve to show up here and try to detect my life. Or maybe I should just be reasonable and think about the next thing that comes out of my mouth. But of course I have no good clean record of deep reflection before making decisions so here goes nothing...

‘Wait a minute before we jump into all the serious stuff!’ I say with a raised hand and all the eight uncles blink momentarily breaking their icy murder staring fest. ‘What is this all about really—because I can’t seem to put together the details that lead to the part where eight grown men want to kill each other because of this?’

I wave at myself for good measure. I mean I am already past the stage of shock and for now I am saying whatever my mouth wishes to dish out.

Great now they are looking at me as if I am the crazy one. I am not the one holding a freaking sword to someone’s windpipe like some kungfu master.

‘What are you even doing here?’ I say this to brother, ‘I spent months just trying to figure out your reasonable existence while you danced between fatherly role and representing yourself

as my brother all the while I danced myself into this mess now you want to prance in here like the hero saving me from a freaking dragon castle.'

Brother's mouth actually drops open as he regards me with surprise. Well I don't blame him. I bet he never imagined I could speak like this. Well put a decent girl in a house full of crazy uncles, an unhinged crime leader and a husband she doesn't understand and this is the result.

And Mr. Abiwu raises his eyebrows to brother. Yes, the man is unhinged.

'Heather—do you want to stay or not.'

And I exclaim, 'of course I am staying... its safer for me to deal with four crazy uncles I am used to I am not ready to start the circle with the other ones unless you plan to buy me my own private island and let me live in it in peace.'

And Julian snickers at the expression that comes on my brother's face. I can almost make out his thoughts. Who are you and what on earth have you done with Heather?

'it's not your decision to make,' Brother growls at me, 'you must all be insane if you think we are taking any decision made by her.'

Oh my geez just when I was about to give him five stars for caring about my existence.

It's not my place to speak around here—it's their damn business and I don't even know a thing about their clan rules but I have had enough.

'Because dear brother.' I imply a false sweet tone in my voice, 'I am the thing that dragged you all here together in this same room and I am not a statue on an auction.'

'The lady has spoken.' Mr. Abiwu grins, 'I am sick of this gathering myself—let's just end it.'

'We also have our terms Rolland—either Heather comes with us or we are not leaving.'

'The house has many extra bedrooms you are welcome to stay however long you want.' Julian announces, 'well that is if you can sleep with another eye open of course.'

I am a sore witness. It is Edward who throws a punch at Luther first and of course the man retaliates. Loud grunts follows their first activity.

I don't have time to see any other action because my body is pushed against the wall and before I even blink Taylor buries my face in his arms the same moment I hear the gun shots.

Chapter Five

It's dark. No, the lights are still on but there is a dark invisible blanket hovering over the room, on all of us. A few men are on the floor wriggling in pain where the bullets had penetrated not to kill but to hurt. Or that's my own opinion.

Then there is the blood and the faces of people who are not going to back down. Or perhaps I see it that way because as of now it seems I am the only one fazed by this entire ordeal. Many days and weeks with these people and I still can't expect what they are capable of. The answer is simple.

I wasn't born for this.

Tension is thick in the air and seconds seem to tick by loudly on an invisible clock as Mr. Abiwu and brother share a long pissing contest. Looking at two of my uncles pressing bleeding wounds and the other one still under the edge of Julian's sword, he has no choice but to back down.

I can't help but think that Mr. Abiwu should at least appreciate such act of bravery it's very rare. At least in his circles.

'Now that's just messy.' And the man has enough grace to look offended by the way the whole thing ended. 'Can't you just give up now?'

And brother does something that I can imagine any loving brother would do—but he is no way near loving when it comes to us so what the hell is he up to?

'I am not leaving Heather with you—not after the separation of our clans.' Brother seethes, 'I will not be taunted that I was powerless enough to leave a connection between our families after such obvious acts of hatred and dare—and no revenge was taken.'

'You are free to take revenge.' Mr. Abiwu exclaims, 'but as long as Heather is carrying a child that has my bloodline she is not going anywhere—when the child comes however—whether to take her is no option because I intend to give my grandchild the best and that best includes having her parents with her. Heather is not a surrogate mother.'

Brother's nostrils flares as he utters the most unbelievable words even Mr. Abiwu with all his ruthlessness couldn't have reached that level, 'not when the child is not in the picture.'

Taylor's entire body stiffens while all the Abiwu uncles and Mr. Abiwu himself pins him with such a hard look I was positive it would stop his heartbeat.

At this point I decide to take things into my own hands—

'You can disown me.'

Even as the words leave my mouth I can't believe it myself. The hard stares all falter for a brief moment as they shift their gazes at me all saying the same—what the hell?

I shrug and carry on because I have already jumped into this hole and there is no crawling out now.

'Disown me... as my brother you have the same position as my father—disown me, because I am not going anywhere with you.'

Brother straightens his spine and turns his indignant stare at me, 'you have always been a disobedient one.' He growls, 'they are not your family.'

'Neither are you.' I retort back, 'look around you—if that's how you want to roll your dice these days that's fine—but why do you have to appear in my life like you have the right to just because I was unfortunate enough to have been born by the same crazy man as you.'

Even in this heated moment where a dozen intimidating men are all ears for a small woman like me--- I mean, its phenomenal—Julian smirks humorously his eyes twinkling at me. Seeing a smile, even though it's small and twisted and surrounded by blood and evil, it warms me.

In fact if I am to be honest with myself—seeing all the great uncles—yes even Alex—unharmd and taking their powerful stand, brings me relief. That's when it hits me. Like a damn tsunami. Maybe I have been twisted because well how could I escape it when I have been living with these people for months—but deep down in that part of my heart that I had sworn I would never open to anyone—I really cared about them. All of them. Facing the choice of leaving and never seeing them again is unbearable for me. It seems like a darker place because this is a dark place presently.

Maybe brother sees my epiphany on my face because his expression shows that he has given in and is going to back down.

‘Very well if that’s what you want Heather.’ Brother says, ‘I will henceforth, remove you from our family—you will not be recognized as a part of it as from today and forever.’

‘For pete’s sake.’ That’s Celine, speaking at the conclusive part as usual, ‘we got it we are not in elementary school--.’ She comes to where Taylor and I are standing, ‘we will leave you to your business then,’

Taylor looks at her, she rolls her eyes, ‘she saw all this just now and chose you—can’t you just trust that she won’t run off with me?’

‘It’s you that I don’t trust.’

I slowly pull myself out of his hold, ‘I need to--.’

He reluctantly let me go—well mostly because even if he wants to keep me in this room by his side like a damn tick—the scene is still bloody and there are people bleeding to death here and they have other manly businesses to take care of—my work here is done.

He nods and Celine and I flee from the room like frightened hens.

I don’t know how I feel about all this. I have a certain sinking feeling about brother’s words. Like the words blood is thicker than water are finally waking up in the deepest part of me and I don’t know how to escape it.

And then there is the fact that I have just put my life in the hands of the very people I knew well enough I should run from. Okay—conclusion is that I am insane. There, no need to ask what is wrong with me anymore.

I raise my head as he enters the room all well put together and immaculate like he wasn’t in a bloody room moments—okay hours ago—but well still—and I watch him with a mixture of conflicting emotions as he walks to me and in a few strides he is sitting on the bed and has me enveloped in his arms.

There are no words necessary here. Everything has already been said and done and he spells it all in just four words;

‘Thank you for choosing us.’

Like I would have chosen otherwise. Like I would have had enough brain power to shake off the hold he had on me since that day I fell and looked into his eyes. If there was ever a fight in me against this unexplainable connection we have, it’s all gone.

Gone with the wind and I remain here willingly in this place where I sense doom but I am unwilling to budge and leave. Yes I know the best choices and the right decisions but that’s all gone with the wind as well.

I lean into his embrace and close my eyes, maybe this makes sense. Maybe it is in my power to make it make sense.

‘I was afraid you were going to leave with your brother.’ He lets me go and takes my face into his palms.

‘Would you have let me go?’

He snorts, ‘I was afraid of what I would do to stop you from leaving me.’

And Lawyer's words about Taylor never letting me go flash in my mind. I place my hands on his cupping my face.

'Don't ever leave me again like you did Taylor.'

'I will never again, I promise.'

'Good because if you do, I will kill you.'

He leans forward and kisses me hard.

Chapter Six

Boxing Day? Don't ask!

Nothing much happened anyway. Hannah and Judith were the only ones who had no idea what had taken place last night while the rest of us were still trying to convince our minds to not think about it.

Gertrude doesn't disappoint with her cuisine and the rest of the day goes in a blur. Brother has left even traces of him cannot be found in the house or the yard. A sudden fear grips me when it finally dawns on me that I now completely have no place left with family but here.

And I push it at the back of my mind because—well there is no need to think about what I can't solve.

It is on New Year's Eve that Mr. Abiwu finally gathers everyone in the living room. By everyone I mean no one has left yet and today is the last day. But if I had thought this was a goodbye parting speech I was so wrong. It was another trouble that is rising.

Hannah has been found out. Well by Mr. Abiwu and we were all screwed.

'We are dealing with things outside but I do not expect secrets in my own family.' Mr. Abiwu gets to the point like always and the room falls silent. At least no one darts a glance at Hannah because what else could he be talking about?

'No you are dealing with things outside.' Alex says with a bored tone, 'if you have something to get out of your chest why don't you just get to the point?'

All heads turn to him. I mean, I guess I'm not the only one who has never heard Alex directly snap at Mr. Abiwu before. Perhaps the past night was too much for him, psycho that he is and all that.

'I don't mind taking matters into my own hands.' Mr. Abiwu says.

'Haven't you been taking matters into your own hands all these years? What has changed?' Alex rises to his feet, 'do so now.'

A small evil smile appears on Mr. Abiwu's face, oh now what? 'You are all loyal to the family business I assume?'

The other three great uncles scowl at him disapprovingly, 'like you even need to ask,' that comes from Charli.

'Then I suggest you do what is right honoring that title.' He finally settles his gaze on Hannah who doesn't even flinch, 'do we offer mercy to a person who openly comes in to destroy the family?'

‘You tell me.’ Julian speaks, coming to the woman’s rescue like we have all been accustomed to now, well maybe except Mr. Abiwu, ‘you can’t tell me that you were completely in the dark all this while.’

‘I was giving you all the freedom to make the right choices.’

‘And your choices are always right?’ Julian rises as well, great, this could be a replay of Christmas Eve night, ‘Taylor is the new clan leader, and we are following new rules.’

I swear eight pairs of eyes slid warily at Mr. Abiwu who to my great disappointment was not bringing steam out of his ears by now.

‘Oh please do enlighten me what you intent to do with Miss Zara’s obvious misintentions.’

Of course Julian answers, the man is going to get us all killed, ‘Zara’s betrayal no longer has any value of threat since she is joining the family.’

Zara jerks to her feet, ‘no I am not.’

Judith reaches out to sit her back down when Lawyer takes back her outstretched hand and gives her a stern look. She raises her chin at him stubbornly.

‘Join or die,’ Alex, the bloodthirsty one is kind enough to interpret the situation to her.

‘I’d rather die than be with people who killed my sister.’

Am I the only one who blinks? I don’t think so—but based on the way the men seem like they almost want to roll their eyes, I guess they know what sister she is talking about. At least Judith seem lost as well so I’m not alone.

‘that is a matter between you and Taylor,’ Mr. Abiwu shrugs, ‘I merely took it upon myself to see to it that my son didn’t destroy our family because of the little whores he brought to the picture.’ He looks at me, ‘sorry Heather.’

‘They were engaged!’ Hannah looks Mr. Abiwu straight in the eye, ‘you are willing to destroy any thing that stands in your way—there is no good reason for it.’

‘We already know that.’ Luther raises his eyes to the ceiling, ‘we can’t sit here for a stupid revenge speech, and let’s get this over with.’ He also stands, somehow it now feels wrong to be the only one sitting—in case we have to run for our lives any minute that is. But there is no way, for the sake of my life am I going to stand and try to put down arguments with these crazy men in my present condition.

Luther looks at Mr. Abiwu, ‘Hannah is part of the family now—she is not to be touched,’

‘They are not yet married so that status has no ground.’ Alex points out. I mean whose side is he on.

The side where he gets to strangle someone, wild mind reasons. Makes sense, Sense agrees, I nod mutely at my thoughts.

‘We can do that today.’ Julian announces, ‘no pressure.’

Hannah recoils from him as if he is holding a snake, ‘what? Are you insane, I am not joining this family—you are crazy,’ she tells Julian then turns to all the great uncles, ‘you are all crazy—that explains it.’

Luther gives Julian a pointed look. With an exasperated sigh, Julian marches towards Hannah and lifts her off the ground as if she weighs nothing before throwing her over his shoulder.

‘Close this case,’ he calls out as he matches out from the room with a yelling Hannah throwing blows on his back.

Mr. Abiwu shakes his head, as if he is agreeing to Hannah’s declaration about them being crazy men. Well I couldn’t agree more.

"So what's the next agenda on this meeting?" Alex asks as soon as the eerie silenced that had followed Julian's departure settled.

"We prepare for an impromptu wedding" Mr. Abiwu answers and walks out from the room.

The drama of this household never ends.

Chapter Seven

The departure was. Well like I hadn't expected.

Okay based on the tension that had been floating in this mansion of doom I had honestly expected a full blown war to start. Some rusty picture of men in cow boy hats and guns that smoked after a shot.

So this scene was disappointing.

I mean why Alex is dragging his bag towards his car like he is leaving the place of a long beloved vacation. It's the wrong look on a serial killer.

And why did he almost give me a heart attack by bidding me farewell as if he is really going to miss me. And oh it gets worse

He called me sister. I mean just shoot me and get it over with.

And then there is Charli and Luther. Why the hell did they hang out together like freaking kindred spirits? Both dark and seemed to drag a foreboding essence with them wherever they set foot.

They could have at least bid me farewell one by one. I felt like I was about to meet my maker back there.

So after all is said and done. These men still scare the crap out of me. Maybe I should have ran off with my brother.

And Taylor would have gotten himself and a few others killed in the stupid process of coming after me.

Speaking of which where the hell is he?

I scowl around me and when my eyes land at my right he is right there leaning against a pillar looking at me.

I peel my feet off from where there had been glued and walk up to him. He immediately opens his arms for me and I plant mine on my hips.

"Why did you let me deal with that on my own?"

A small smile that still drives me crazy.

"I wanted to have an excuse to bash one of the great uncles."

"So childish!" I mutter under my breath while fighting a smile.

"You feeling okay?"

And the national anthem has started. Don't get me wrong, the attention is much needed and appreciated but Taylor overdose everything he touches and well..... Get the picture?

"Splendid!" I reply with a different adjective from last time and that was thirty minutes ago. Because yeah kicking the uncles and everyone else out of the house in one piece and alive took that long for the psycho father of the house.

"You look tired, let's go sit and relax, you will still see them at the wedding."

I scoff as he begin to lead me back inside the house, "and why on earth would I miss them?"

"Because you have developed an irrevocable soft spot for all these psychos except me."

I scoff again. "Cry baby much!"

"Haven't I gotten back into your good graces yet?"

I cast him a side glance, "well there is the meeting room

"Out of my control."

I wait until he has made sure that I am comfortable on the couch and he sits beside me before I say,

"What would you have done if I had chosen to leave with my brother?"

"You wouldn't have." He answers confidently.

I narrow my eyes at him as my brain companions do the nuh-uh you do not head shake.

"I considered it for that moment." I confess. "It was the less heavy option. I can at least provide a clean future for her..." I rub my tummy where the precious little one rests and only a few days to coming face to face with her ticking time bomb dynasty.

"And then?"

I take his hand, "I pictured you getting yourself killed."

Okay maybe not that horrendous but that concludes it.

He almost rolls his eyes. Almost

"Heather I wouldn't have let you go anywhere away from me. I won't let you walk out of me for as long as I want you and for me that's the rest of my life so it's never going to happen."

And after all is said so confidently it takes me seconds to finally start doubting whether it makes sense at all ..., The man lays his head back on the couch and closes his eyes shifting such that half my body is lying on top of him.

JUDITH

I take a deep breath as I walk into the living room. Away from Lawyer the defender of his own twisted laws.

It's suffocating and exciting, and does many things to me at the same time. I like and hate his caveman nature.

I feel like I am the devil's next project whereby he is on the mission to unleash my darkest desires and bring them to me like a well-served temptation on a golden platter.

See I wasn't raised for men like Lawyer. I was raised and trained and mentored against everything about the man. But the moment the man settled his gaze on me and made me his target I was forever screwed.

Rules and codes of behavior? Who am I kidding? I have broken them a million times without looking back.

And now I was in deeper crap. My father is still getting over the shock of all this. It would have been less of a blow if I had simply walked in and announced my wedding date. (Which I did by the way)

But no, the son of a motherless goat had to come up with the we-are-having-a-baby issue. What the hell?

So yeah I really needed some air. And oh not to mention that I had been held hostage in this damn house for, I don't know the whole damn Christmas holiday

So I am infuriated when I march into the living room and I jump when Heather let's out a scream.

"Heather!" Taylor is holding her shoulders as she brings her hands on her belly. She breathes in and out through her mouth as she calms herself, (a therapy Heather believes never worked)

"Are you okay?" Taylor asks worry masking his face.

Heather nods and gives him a beautiful smile, "I think it's time."

My heart screeches to a halt while Taylor makes a sound I want to believe is his joyous cry but makes my heart freeze with incoming panic.

"Okay I got you." He tells her as he bends to scoop her into his arms and plants a firm kiss on her lips before he makes a beeline go the door.

It takes me a few seconds to collect myself before my reasoning kicks in.

Lawyer, I have to get him and Julian. Taylor will be concentrated on Heather and his coming daughter he will need people he will trust to get around.

I rush back to the room where I had left Lawyer with my last word statement.

His eyes settle on me steadily the moment I enter the room. The power that he has over me cascades its presence and make me shiver.

I shake my head, "the baby is here."

His eyes widen, "shit, oh where is she?"

"Taylor got her ... where is ..."

"I'll send him a text. Let's go." He is already poking on his phone as he strides across the room towards me and takes my hand.

I barely have time to blink before we are marching out of the room.

At least I am sure that weird doctor Focus won't be there. He is too close with ... What does Heather call Mr. Abiwu again? Psycho devil father of the house- I snicker at the thought.

Within moments we are already outside and getting into the car the same moment that the back of Taylor's car is leaving the compound.

Lawyer removes my hand from the front seat door, eyes glued on his phone and pulls me towards the back door.

When I see Julian purposefully open the driver's door I stop my protest mid-way.

"Where is the big boss?" Julian asks as the car eases out of the yard.

"Somewhere in the village trying to blackmail the Jesuits." Lawyer replies without taking his eyes off the phone.

Julian lets out a scoff, "he's still obsessed about that area?"

"Abiwu wouldn't feel alright if he didn't run half the damn country. That why we are all in the mess we are in."

"You think? Things have never been the same ever since Taylor met Heather.... But it's never boring with Heather around."

The fond smile I see on Julian's face matches Lawyer's. If there is one thing that these Abiwu men had in common is that they are all irrevocably fond of Heather. Of course it's almost unbelievable but it was an unspoken truth now that none of them will ever hurt her.

"Where's Hannah?" The words leave my mouth as soon as the thought comes to mind.

Julian only flashes a small smile at me through the review mirror and it takes all my will power to not smack my face with my palm. Which is imprisoned in Lawyer's by the way.

I take a deep breath and try to think about anything else. I know too much such that it takes me seconds to put together what is going on.

An heir is being born, and in their world they take the whole damn thing seriously. You'd think it was a monarchy or something.

Well maybe in a way. It really was. It fascinates me. While it seems to vex some people to be caught up in such a world so fit for Hollywood you wake up each morning wondering whether it isn't all just a dreamI am euphoric to be a part of it.

It feels like a deep dark evil side within me has been unleashed and I can't wait to grasp its full potentiality.

Except right now of course. Right now I have so many things charging around my every vessel and artery it's a wonder I am not shaking.

"Can you believe the bastard wants to send one of his own doctors to a private hospital, is someone dying?" Lawyer drops his phone on the car seat and glares at Julian as though he is the culprit.

Julian sighs, "uh damn that Charli."

Ah so Mr. Abiwu has heard the news already. I still can't figure out the reason behind Luther and Charlie's undeniable loyalty towards the crazy man.

"Someone will die for sure if we let any stranger near Heather and the baby."

Julian groans in agreement, "like I said, it's never boring."

I so want to roll my eyes. Can't we all just have a normal birth like all normal people? Well not that anyone in this car is normal. It's obvious these two men are not. As for me, well I can only say every girl have a dark secret and mine has to do with newborn babies.

How am I ever going to survive this day? I have no idea. But I intend to keep my dark secret in a dark corner so I just have to find a way.

And the memory comes in slides just as it does every time it decides to make an appearance, picture after picture of thick undiluted regrets and shameful half-truths

But that's a story for another time. At the moment I was beginning to think that I have something else to worry about. The Abiwu clan have overtaken the entire maternity hall.

It's been four hours since we got here and it took one hour for the hospital staff to start avoiding coming this way...because dearly beloved Uncle Lawyer and Julian just don't get what is taking so long for the baby to pop out.

'Let the people do their job, sit down.' Gertrude who had arrived thirty minutes ago with the necessary items we had left behind in our rush gave the two a frown I have never seen grace her ever-patient features before

"Should it take this long?" Julian asks Lawyer like he would know the answer to that

"I don't think so ... something is wrong and they won't tell us." Lawyer fisted his hands.

I scoff because I can't help it, it's been four hours, I am apprehensive and these two lunatics are not helping

"Why would they, your presence here is a large lit sign board for 'incoming gangster baby' I understand your anxiety but why the body guards?"

Julian ignores me and turns to Lawyer again, "if nothing happened within the next fifteen minutes I am going in."

Lawyer nods, "ten minutes."

Julian nods.

"Nothing is wrong," Gertrude tries again.

"And you would know?" Julian finally pays her attention.

Gertrude rolls her eyes, "I have three kids."

"Three times you've done this and you still didn't ask for your money back,"

Gertrude gives Lawyer a dirty look, "I'm not the one who scared half the hospital staff away" I say out of embarrassment, I mean if I ever show my face here again this is all they will remember me for.

If I ever show my face that is...

Lawyer narrows his eyes down at me, "and why on earth are you so worried about your appearance at this hospital!"

"Being here with you would make anyone worry about their appearance like all normal people would."

But of course that is not the road lawyer is headed and I am not going to catch up with him even if it's the last thing I do

But leave it to Julian to stir the boiling pot, "I'm positive church boy doesn't work here.... not that you find the church here often"

I am about to say a few dirty words to Julian when the typical hospital double doors that separate anxious waiting room residents from where the real deal is taking place fly open.

Four pairs of eyes swing to the panting nurse or doctor, whatever

"What the hell is going on in there?" Julian is almost on the poor tired nurse's face

The man sighs, "What is going on is that we have a new cute girl in the building." He transforms from wary to giddy in two seconds flat

Okay maybe that isn't as slow-blink mouth agape worthy as Julian throwing his arms around the nurse...

The nurse freezes and can't stop his eyes from escaping his sockets. Conclusion; the man is aware of who these lunatics are and well I wouldn't want to hug any of them either.

Unaware of the bruised ribs he has just caused to the poor informant Julian turns to Lawyer who mirrors his giddy expression.

I turn to Gertrude and return her smile.

"Can we see her now?" I ask the nurse.

He smiles, "that's why I'm here,"

I beam at him getting the unsaid joke. No normal person would walk past those guards.

"Let's go then" Lawyer grabs my arm and marches past the man and bumps his shoulder against him.

The nurse staggers back and raises his hands in surrender.

"What is wrong with you?" I whisper-growl at him.

"Why are you smiling with the nurse do you know him?"

What?

"When has it become a crime to smile at another human being?" I respond sassily

"You just try it Judith, just try it"

I roll my eyes at him but he doesn't see me because he continues marching down the hall dragging me along with him.

As we come close to the rescue room, I am overcome with excitement and curiosity to see the little one. And my best friend Heather

Chapter Eight

A cold shiver shoots down my spine as we enter the room. Now I am in the middle of my own self counselling session I don't have time to analyze how the hell Julian got here before us.

I take a deep breath and stamp the dark feeling of guilt rising within me down as I flash a smile at Heather the moment I step fully into the room.

She is sitting on the bed, in a nutshell she is glowing. While some women look like something else during pregnancy, Heather well, she just became even more beautiful

And looking at her now, she is not going back to her ordinary self but it even gets worse.

Sometimes I secretly hate her for being simply breathtaking and not realise it.

"Judith!" She stretches her arms towards me like a little kid with unwavering excitement in her voice. And me, like an equally little kid I rush to wrap my arms around her.

"Hey congratulations, I am so proud of you." My words come out muffled because I am still trapped in a bear hug.

And surely I am proud of Heather. Where most women were burned to the ground after meeting all these lunatics, she managed to remain intact and even stole the affections of the entire family.

I could swear on my own life that Mr. Abiwu deeply cares about Heather, but he'd go to his grave a hundred times before admitting that

"Thank you, I'm so glad you are here."

I pull back and mock scowl at her, "and where else would I be?"

She rolls her eyes to the other side of the room where Julian, Lawyer and Taylor were hovering over a bundle that was securely stuck in Julian's arms.

And I am also immediately caught up in the moment as I make my way to the baby. My heart bruising my ribs. How long has it been since I avoided newborn babies? Like forever.

There just weren't any in my circles and I have had nine months with Heather to prepare for this moment but I guess it wasn't enough. I am destined to be tormented for life with the memory.

I shake my head, earth to Judith. I take a deep breath as I approach the little giddy group and do what I know how to do the best. A big smile always hides all other dark feelings right?

'You are disrupting the baby's oxygen supply.' I wave a finger at each of the men who all pay attention to me because of the tone of my voice, 'look at the poor girl, she is only been here for a few hours and already seem to regret it.'

Julian laughs and walks to me with the little bundle, 'here is your crazy aunt Judith, starting from today you can just ignore her like we all do.'

I roll my eyes at Julian, 'congratulations!' I give Taylor a brief hug before turning to receive the little one in my arms.

'Bend your arms a little more, her head need to be completely comfortable.' Julian instructs as he gently lowers the baby into my arms.

‘I know how to handle babies professor!’

‘I can’t take chances with Solana I am her god father.’

I make a horrified face and turn to Taylor who is already at the bed raining kisses on Heather’s face, ‘how can you make crazy Julian the godfather?’

I don’t wait for his comeback and concentrate on the baby. And holy crow—are babies supposed to look this perfect their first day on earth? I knew the two love birds were bound to make cute babies but oh hell—this can’t be normal.

‘She is so pretty.’ I breathe as my heart thuds loudly, not from panic but that instant fall in love at first sight feeling.

‘Like her mother.’ Julian and Lawyer are quick to emphasize.

Taylor plants another kiss on mommy’s face, ‘that she is.’

There is that moment when love is just floating in the room like its coming from a deep burning furnace. Like warm sun rays that light and warm us at the same moment. Something you rarely experience with these lunatics.

‘What does Solana mean?’

‘Sunshine.’ Heather answers with a smile, ‘she is my sunshine.’

I flash her a gentle smile, indeed, in the dark world this little girl has been born in, she at the moment seem to be the pillar of some peace between people who wish to kill each other.

‘Our sunshine babe.’ Taylor kisses her again, ‘our sunshine.’

I almost scoff, it doesn’t take Taylor long to be possessive towards his daughter. I walk to the hospital bed and lay Solana in Heather’s arms. The beautiful sight of mother holding daughter breaks my heart into a million pieces and I am caught up in that moment until a loud clap startles me.

‘Okay so where are the presents?’

We all turn to look at Taylor. There is a silence at the moment. I left, no I got dragged here by that man I couldn’t even grab my well thought of and prepared present. I am now so cross with him it takes all my will power to not glare-dagger him to his deathbed.

‘They are with Gertrude.’ Julian announces, ‘she is on her way.’

Lawyer and I turn to him and he shrugs in response. If indeed they are with Gertrude that means she had to go through my stuff to find it. Grrrrr.

An hour later we are in the restaurant next to the hospital premises after the nurses (because one wouldn’t have managed) had to chase us out and let the cute family rest.

Hannah and Gertrude had also joined us with presents and stuff. In conclusion we left the room looking like it had just had a visitation from a bunch of enthusiastic artistic kindergarteners.

‘So you have to help us convince Mr. Abiwu to not hold a welcome party at that house.’ Hannah pleads with Lawyer and Julian,

‘Why would we change his mind?’ Julian says seriously, ‘she’s his granddaughter too.’

‘Yes,’ Lawyer agrees, ‘honestly, it would have been worse today if that man hadn’t accepted this child to join the family.’

‘This is not about your family politics.’ Hannah tells them, ‘this is about a little girl who deserves a less stifling environment.’

Gertrude smiles gently at Hannah, ‘well I don’t see the point of it. Mr. Abiwu, I still don’t know why, but he is so obsessed with his granddaughter right now, and of course knowing Taylor she is bound to have stifling moments her whole life so why not start earlier?’

The table goes silent for a moment and we all look at Gertrude in surprise.

Suddenly Julian smiles approvingly at the woman, ‘good take it from someone who knows--- when it comes to Solana, don’t try to interfere—just be there for her... besides I know Heather won’t give those two control freaks an easy task with raising the kid.’

A silence again before a soft chuckle erupts among us as we all in our own way envision poor Solana with grandpa and dad hovering over her mercilessly. They should have had a son. A strong-willed one like both of them.

Chapter Nine

Hannah, Gertrude and I finish hanging the last of the party lights. We didn’t manage to convince the men to convince Mr. Abiwu or grandpa as he goes by now, to change to venue but he did agree to only make it a family thing. We used the baby of course and put all horror stories in his head. She really is our sunshine.

‘There, that should be perfect for a two week old princess.’

Hannah sighs contently, ‘I think we need more flowers.’

‘I will tell the gardener to bring some, I’m going to finish in the kitchen.’

We both wave at her silently because we have tried and failed to make her let us help her in the kitchen.

Hannah sighs again and runs her hand through her hair, the diamond on her finger glistening under the lights.

‘We need to go and change, the party begins in thirty minutes.’

I nod silently and start up the stairs.

I choose the dark green dress. It’s perfect and comfortable and I am sure it blends well with all the girly colors that have decorated Solana’s welcome to the family party. I am just starting to pin my hair in a bun when a soft knock comes at my door.

‘Hey you left your phone in the kitchen—a Lala has called ten times already.’

I turn to Hannah, ‘ten?’

‘Better take it.’ She gives me my phone, ‘you look hot in green.’

I blow her a kiss before dialing Lala’s number.

"And how is mom?" A lump forms on my throat as I finally get the courage to ask. Things didn't go down well at home when Lawyer showed up. Of course my parents, because they are normal put up a fight against this whole thing. It didn't help that Malcom found his new preaching fervor by assuring every living human that he came into contact with that I have been damned and have sold my soul to the devil.

I had no idea that hate for someone you once loved could be twice as strong. Until now

"She's fine," Lala my younger sister answers after a long pause. "It's not like some of us exist to those two anymore. Everyone's eyes are fixed on the road for the prodigal son to return."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "That's not true and you know it

"Please Jude we both know you will eventually come to your senses and leave that criminal...you always do."

Yes, like every miserable human being on this damned planet, I have my paraphernalia of mistakes and I have come to my senses on regular occasions.

But this one of those normal mistakes. It's a mistake I wanted, one I still want and gave no plan to come to my senses about this one.

I have already lost my childhood friend because of that.

"Well if you say so." I mumble.

"Good, and please visit home soon you are not that prodigal yet"

What?

"Talk to you soon Lala," I mumble before I end the call. I won't make promises I can't keep. I have learned that so far

I put it all at the back of my mind and concentrate on the arrival of princess Solana.

My head is spinning a little after the make out session with Lawyer and the phone call with Lala. I give my head a little shake as I walk into the living room the same moment Taylor is ushering his wife and daughter inside.

A gentle smile spreads on my face at the lovely little family. An awed silence follows and I'm positive all of them are also thinking the same thing. The members of the family are all lined up in the middle of the room ready to welcome the little family.

Mr. Abiwu with a bow tie and all walks forward and plants a welcome kiss on Heather's cheek while he simultaneously patted Taylor on his shoulder. Heather smiled at him as she gently placed Solana into his arms.

Mr. Abiwu chuckled like a jolly Santa when he holds her. We all exchange glances and smiles. This little girl is bound to unleash the man's softer more human side. Perhaps that is a good thing.

Still chuckling, Mr. Abiwu exclaims, 'let the party begin now.'

And it does. For a while we are all so lost and happy and everything seems normal. Even Luther and Charles are agonizing about the party decorations.

'Does everything have to be pink?' Charli eyes the paper plate in his hand with a wince.

'That's not pink Charli, its light red.' Alex tells him while his eyes are fixed on the couch where Heather is with Solana along with her admirers and Mr. Abiwu is not leaving her side. Even Taylor gave up I guess. I wonder what Alex is thinking, he made it no secret that he didn't want anything that connects them to Heather's family.

'It's coral,' Hannah looks at Alex, 'stop with the murder look at the baby.'

Alex scowls at her, 'the baby?' he scoffs, 'that little bastard is going to rain trouble on all of us when all this little dreamy part is over.'

Charli lets out a sigh, 'your caring for the family is touching Alex.'

'don't mock me, I am only being reasonable, while the rest of you fools pick up random women from pathetic connections to make our family even more pathetic than Taylor has already made—I am making sure this family retains the power and splendor it once had,' he shoves his plate into Charli's hands before he turns to Hannah, 'coral is a blend of pink and orange, it's the same thing.'

Hannah and I watch him worriedly as he strides right across the room and leaves. At least he didn't bang the door.

'Don't mind Alex, he has his issues,' Charli tries a reassuring smile that looks so wrong on him, 'just focus on Solana.' He gives the coral plate to Hannah and follows after Alex.

Hannah sighs, 'you know there are always odd seeds in a family pod right?'

I nod, 'Charli and Alex are definitely one.'

‘Do you think Heather is safe?’

I look at Hannah not sure whether to settle for the soft healing lie or embrace the dark truth. After learning about her sister who was once Taylor’s lover I am a hundred percent not sure to believe her resolved stance regarding the issue.

Her story is just so watered down and I can’t believe these people just took it lightly. They are evil, cunning and dangerous. How in the world could they have not known Hannah was following them around? A lot about this family spooks me, but this one made my heart race when I over think on a sleepless night.

‘Let’s hope Mr. Abiwu’s new found adoration for his granddaughter would save her and Taylor from the impending horrors.’ I force a smile.

Hannah laughs, ‘I like how you think--- I don’t think I like what I am thinking.’

‘It’s not like Heather can leave anymore—she made her choice.’

Hannah shrugs, ‘did she have a choice?’ she says airily, ‘do we?’

My heart skips a moment at the serious look that clouds her eyes but I don’t have time to observe it further because Julian comes to snake his arms around her in an octopus wrapping kind of manner.

My eyes leave the sickening couple and focus on Heather. She seems happy. I guess that is all that matters. Choice or not. Taylor and Heather belong together. I knew it the first time I saw Taylor grab her arm after that hike. Now back there I didn’t know as much about him as I do now but I always knew that the man was a mysterious closed door. A dangerous kind of closed door.

And besides, it’s not like I ended up here with my eyes closed. I knew what I was getting myself into. Yes. So then why am I so scared of—I don’t even know what I am afraid of

Chapter Ten

When I sight the black gate of my house, my heart thuds so hard I think a rib is broken. I haven’t been home since that crazy son of a motherless goat tried to sabotage my parents into accepting this marriage by telling them that I was pregnant. The old way he called it. Well what I was expecting from a guy who has no idea what it feels like to disappoint your parents and younger siblings.

So that is why I am here now with gifts (as a bribe) and my sober face to clear up this mess. I just can’t vanish from my family. My family will have to be somehow half way part of my life, whether Lawyer is the mafia or not.

I take a deep breath before I get out of the taxi. With shaking knees I walk towards the gate. The only other time I had stood outside the gate forgetting how to knock was years ago in high school when I had ditched classes to go to the mall.

I thought I was in trouble then. Well this out rules every evil thing I have ever done in my entire lifetime.

Breathe in and out, in and out--- and with my brain full of oxygen I pound a fist on the gate twice and wait. I am think about turning and bolting when Karabo, my baby brother pulls the gate open.

‘Judith!’ he squeals and wraps his arms around me.

I hug him back a wide smile spreading across my face. ‘KB how are you my little man?’

He pulls back and excited innocent eyes meet mine, ‘I am fine now, it’s never boring with you around these days.’

‘Gee even you too are flashing this story in my face.’

He shrugs, ‘sorry sis, I have nothing else to think about—you are the breakfast lunch and dinner topic.’

‘That bad?’

‘Come inside and find out.’

I suppress a sigh as I follow Karabo inside the gate asking him random questions about school and his teachers. The first thing I notice is my heart spiking up. Maybe it’s just that I am nervous after all that’s happened and well last time I was here didn’t go so well either.

That’s why you are here. To clear the air, I remind myself as I walk closer to the front door. Hannah tried to talk me out of this. The less my family knows the better. But she wouldn’t understand. She has no family to worry about, neither do Heather. You just can’t close the door on people you love and face the other direction. Not unless they do not exist at all.

Karabo is pulling my hand as he pushes the door open and at this point I can say that my heart is in my throat. The living room is still the same way I had left it when Lawyer practically hurled me out of the house and mother was yelling at me to not leave with him while father yelled at her for encouraging me to want to keep a fatherless baby in his house. Yeah it had been that bad.

So everything was exactly the same except for mother’s fond smile when she sees me enter. No surprise, just glad you came smile and I can’t help but freeze and blink in return. Because I did have a prodigal son scenario in my head regarding my entry into the house. Thanks to Lala and now I am the one shocked.

‘Look who’s here!’ Karabo says singsonlgy as he finally takes the gift bags out of my other hand and leaves the room to devour the contents. Mother stands from the couch and comes to gently place her hands on my shoulders. Okay so I am not going to die today.

‘Finally, I thought you would never come, how was your workshop?’

I blink again. First of all nobody was supposed to know I was coming, secondly, workshop?

‘Uh--.’ Is all I manage to let out before Lala strides into the room with the same sentiment written all over her face?

‘There you are, thank God you came, because it was going to be an awkward dinner.’ She rolls her eyes, ‘I don’t dislike him anymore but I still think the man has a strange vibe. You know like he could be a vampire or an alien from another world.’

I always thought Heather and my sister would make a great pair.

‘It was all a misunderstanding—and he is such a gentleman.’ Mother smiles.

I scowl, what the hell are they talking about? They surely couldn’t be talking about Lawyer because I left him at the Abiwu house still waltzing around Solana like the rest of them.

‘Who is a gentleman?’ I have to ask.

Lala rolls her eyes, ‘Lawyer,’ she chuckles, ‘I admire his courage, and he came to explain himself even though father looked like he wanted to kill him.’

A cold shiver runs down my spine. Lawyer was here?

'They are in your father's study right now, we were just about to prepare dinner.' Mother gives me a gentle pat before rushing back into the kitchen humming a song she only ever sang when she was beyond herself with happiness.

'Lala.' I whisper; my mind formulating a million ways I can get the hell out of the place, 'how long has he been here?'

'An hour or so I think.' She whispers back, 'why are we whispering?'

'I—I think I left something in the car.'

She scowls at me, 'you don't have a car.'

I shake my head, 'I mean taxi.'

'It's still here?'

I blink, 'no it's long gone, but I have the guy's number, let me just call him and see how long it will take him to get here.'

Lala raises an eyebrow, 'you are not chickening out are you?'

I laugh nervously, 'chickening out of what?'

'Lawyer really wants this to work—he obviously knows how important your family is to you for him to come all the way here and explain himself--- I know you must have been giving him a hard time considering the way he carried you out of this place like a bat out of hell.'

What in the world is Lala watching these days.

'I am not chickening out—I need to make a call.'

Really make a call. Translation, run the hell out of here like-as Lala said- a bat out of hell so that I can figure out how the hell Lawyer ended up here as though he knew my little plan.

Lala nods, 'five minutes or I am calling the alarms.'

Why did my sister have to know me so well?

As soon as the final part of Lala's butt enters the door I take out my phone while making a beeline for the gate. Coward, yeah, call it as you wish. But if Lawyer is really here I don't think I want to stay and witness whatever shit is about to unfold on me

I am looking for Hannah's number while my other hand is about to open the gate when I hear footsteps behind me.

I freeze.

It takes me exactly half a minute to recollect myself to turn around and I am only able to master a blank look at him. And as for him, I can only say that I am in big trouble right now the world would have to end to save me from this predicament.

"What are you doing here?"

Always play the betrayed one card. Works every time.

By the expression on his face he doesn't buy it.

"Should be asking you the same question sweetheart." He pins a little smile.

Shit

I laugh nervously, "This is my home."

One eyebrow goes up, gulp... would it be too giving away if I fan my face, my thudding heart needs a little help here

"It didn't take me seconds to figure out what you were up to. I thought you wanted your family to not be involved."

Denial, always the second option, "what did you think I was going to tell them? I just wanted to make sure they would not try to look into where I vanished to.... Your family is not that hard to find"

One step and he is towering over me. "Half-truths lead to many other truths Judith, they are not imbeciles....."

I gape at the accusation

"Now you decide whether you want your family involved or not, right here and now," he actually points at the ground for emphasis on the 'now' part

I plant fists on my hips, "why would I want to bring my family into this?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

I swallow, "look I wasn't here to---"

He chuckles pointing a finger at me, "don't do that Judith, look I know it's hard for you to just withhold the truth from your family in a way that would make all this reasonable to them.... But you are the one who wanted them out and if you have changed your mind, why do it behind my back."

I shake my head, just how long did he have to think about this, this is ridiculous.

"I wasn't going behind your back," I deny.

"Judith!"

"No listen, I never said I'd consult you every time I want to see my family,"

"You should have because of the way we left, you either came here to explain or lie, now which is it"

I look him square in the eye still not ready to let go of this one, "I came here to see my family Lawyer, and of course that would have required a little explanation, I don't know why you had to come here and have all these people starry eyed towards you." I pause a thought flashing into my mind, "what in the world did you tell them anyway?"

Long pause. Now I know for a fact that Lawyer is not a thinker. Contemplation doesn't exist in his dictionary

"What do you think?"

My scalp prickles, "what is wrong with you, why are you sticking to that story, sooner they will know the truth."

He shrugs, "is your family in or out."

I blink, because why the hell am I answering this question again?

"Of course they are out Lawyer, you know that." I glare at him, "you shouldn't even be here."

"Oh I should be here, before you jeopardize us and everything." He leans closer, his breath fanning my face, "but thankfully I have all the loose ends tied and sorted out"

I blink again and try to take a step back but a steely arm hooks around my waist and pins me into place.

Why is he even angry?

"Oh I am so grateful that you have the right to budge in on every step I take,

"Why would I want my family involved in all this?"

"I should be asking you the same thing Judith..... Anyway, it doesn't matter now, but in the future...."

I narrow my eyes at him, "don't come to my house like that."

"Or what? Thanks to my visits they are not going to call the National Guard on me to take you back home."

"You don't have to worry about that, my dad won't accept me back into his house to raise a bastard child.... Which is a story that you made up,"

"We both agreed to this plan."

"That's because I didn't have anything else in mind that time,"

He draws away from me a little and gives me a skeptical look, "you have a better story now?"

"And if I do? I can only imagine what story you cooked up this time."

He sighs, "I don't know why you are so sensitive about this, let's just tell them the truth, and we won't let anything happen to your family.... Or, maybe it isn't a lie after all"

"What isn't?"

Because, all the things my family knows about the two of us are pure made up stories even I myself am still trying to convince myself that I haven't gone bat shit crazy just yet.

He leans closer to me again, his eyes taking a dark color I have now come to recognize as the moment I need to voice out my restraints in regards to this relationship.

"The baby issue." His lips brushes on mine as he whispers the words sending my heart into a spiral jumpstart.

"Why? You have a baby in there somewhere."

"That's the only reason your parents let me marry you.... So why don't we just go with the original plan."

His lips press harder against mine, I press myself against him while his fingers scratch my skull. I hook my arms around his neck, someday, just some ordinary day in the hopefully nearby future I am going on a quest to find out why I lose all my sense when I get close to this man like this.

I have kissed a man before. Well Malcom to be more precise when we wanted to experiment taking our relationship to the next level. It had felt so wrong, well for me because for so many years after that Malcom was still asking me what my problem was.

Point is I have never been so senseless because of another human being before—

His fingers abandon my hair and I feel both his hands thread against my back and then I am being pushed backwards. My sneakers move reluctantly against the brick pavement before I feel the hard cold brick wall of my house against me.

Lawyer's hands leave me and plants either side of my head. And I love it. I love this feeling of being trapped. Yeah I am weird. Meanwhile our lips are still locked in a bruising fest when a sharp voice startles us both.

'Guys get a room.' Lala whisper-shrieks as I push Lawyer off me and the goof only presses me against the wall refusing to unglue his lips from mine, 'mom and dad are just a few windows away from watching you two like this—and what the hell am I going to explain to Karabo when he sees you two.'

Lawyer is not stopping so I stomp on his foot. He grunts before finally releasing me, only to turn to Lala and giving her a cheeky grin. My poor sister looks like she is ready to bolt.

'Tell him the truth.' Lawyer says giving me a suggestive glance. I mouth a murderous threat at him.

'Why must it be up to me?' Lala mumbles folding her arms, 'you are both wanted in the house.' she waves at us carelessly, 'try to keep your hands off each other for at least the whole ordeal,'

'Ah seriously-.' I start to say but she is already round the corner and out of sight. Yeah she bolted. She still can't get over how I ended up bringing such a dangerous looking boyfriend home. Well that makes two of us.

'We'll finish this conversation later.' He says as he takes my hand and we start for the house.

‘This conversation is already over, it’s not going to happen—you created this ordeal so deal with it yourself.’

He doesn’t reply. That can’t be good.

Chapter Eleven

HEATHER

Solana has finally slept. After putting her in her crib, I walk back to the living room where the three ladies are having a serious discussion. Hannah and Judith have their heads bowed towards Celine who is saying something in hushed tones. After a while of listening in silence they both jump out of their seats yelling something incomprehensible.

‘Hey keep it down, the girl is sleeping.’ I whisper-yell at them

The three freeze a little before whispering sorrys’.

‘How can you start calling your daughter the girl already?’ comes from Celine, ‘it’s only been four months she’s still a princess.’

I sit next to Judith and grab one of the wedding pamphlets, ‘what do you know!’ I mumble.

Celine rolls her eyes, ‘you have so much to complain about after having so many people who would like to babysit for you.’

They just don’t get it.

‘Babysit? I’m afraid of what my girl would become? Half of you people supersede me when it comes to new mothers anxiety.’

‘She’s the first baby in the family for years.’ Celine says, ‘bear with them.’

‘There will be another one soon.’ Hannah quips, Judith starts while Celine and I raise an eyebrow at her. There is still a huge controversy with Julian and Hannah being together, did they decide to take the baby route?

‘Oh.’ Hannah presses her lips together, ‘I thought everyone knew already.’ She mumbles, glancing at Judith.

Judith places her face in her hands groaning something I decode as her promising to murder Hannah when this is all over.

‘What is going on?’ I ask all three ladies.

‘Yes what’s going on?’

Hannah seals her mouth shut so we both turn to Judith for an explanation and I am positive Celine and I have the same thought in our heads that is somewhere along the lines of- what the hell?-

Judith raises her palms in a surrender form, ‘look my parents gave us a hard time.’

‘Understandable.’ I nod

‘The last thing I need is for my family to be involved in this.’ Judith looks at me, because that had been my first worry when she got all mixed up with Lawyer, ‘Lawyer thought it would be a good excuse for the sudden rush of our relationship.’

‘So you decided telling them that he knocked you up would do it?’ Celine raises an eyebrow at her, ‘just like that.’

‘In my family, it’s the right thing to do. Once a man makes a woman pregnant he has to marry her no matter what.’

‘So was it planned or--.’

‘It’s not true.’ Judith interrupts Celine, ‘the bastard has been holding on to the story all this time it’s driving me crazy.’

‘I don’t get what your deal is?’ Hannah raises her face to the ceiling like she has had this conversation a hundred times without a breakthrough, ‘you are getting married anyway at the end of the day, make it true to keep your family out of this—they already think you are four months along.’

‘What?’ Celine and I chorus at the same time in shock.

Judith raises her palms again, ‘I know I’m in deep crap, wipe that look off your faces.’

Hannah doesn’t let the issue go, ‘well I’m worried about you Judith—you know that once you become a part of this family there is no turning back—you seem like you are withholding something because you really are not ready to be a part of it fully.’

Judith shakes her head, ‘Hannah, this isn’t about me changing my mind, we are getting married at the end of the week,’

‘So what? Heather and Taylor were married but the possibilities of their separation was very high until Solana came into the picture. You know that if you have Lawyer’s child now there is no turning back... and I still think you haven’t made up your mind.’

A silence descends in the living room and all eyes are on Judith because Hannah’s statement makes sense. Judith doesn’t meet our eyes as she suddenly stands, grabs her bag and marches out of the living room.

I stand to go after her at the same time raising a palm at the two ladies to let me go alone.

I find her just outside the door with her back leaned against the wall.

‘She’s right.’ Judith says as soon as I join her but she doesn’t look at me.

‘Judith--.’

She shakes her head, stopping me, ‘this was all exciting at first—I was rebelling and here was Lawyer on a silver platter to help me do it—I really didn’t think much about how much I was getting into until that crazy man dragged us to that house for Christmas.’

I sigh, ‘Judith-.’

She turns to me, eyes teary, ‘no you were right—you were right at the first time Heather—I just didn’t get why you were so eager to keep me away from all this, I thought you were using my family to guilt me away from all of it...’

‘Judith stop.’ I hold her shoulders, ‘you can’t do this right now.’ I shake her a little because she needs to understand, ‘this is not the time to list I should have okay? You need to focus on keeping the people you care about out of this. I know it’s scary, I am still scared till now myself.’

She gives me a skeptical look, ‘scared of what? You have been accepted into the family, even the clan recognizes you now—you are no longer in danger but under their protection instead.’

She doesn't know. She doesn't know of the pact I signed with Mr. Abiwu to get to where we are today. Even Taylor doesn't know. Solana will never know. This secret is always bearing down on me day and night—but of course I can't tell her that. Mr. Abiwu is still and will always be a raving lunatic—but at least he can stick to a deal. If I go against our agreement, I or Solana will be killed. Maybe I was naïve to believe his threat. But I won't play around with a man who killed my father and sought to destroy my entire family. Now my friend, who I care about, is in his web, and the only advice I can give her is to stay because I cannot summon enough courage to ask her to run. I too am trapped in this life and system without remedy.

'I can't tie myself forever to him Heather—it was a momentary thing and now I can't back out.'

Her words shock me.

'Judith!'

She shakes her head, 'I'm not sure if I love him or it was infatuation—I don't know.'

'Judith—you need to stick to what brought you all the way here and now.'

She just looks at me. And right there I see all the doubt and fear in my friend's eyes. I have a vague futuristic picture of a raged lunatic and havoc as well.

'I—I need to go home,' she inhales, 'to clear my head.'

I tighten my grip, 'Judith—you wedding is on this Saturday—what are you going to do at home?'

She sighs, 'I need to talk to someone—I know you mean well Heather but you didn't have a choice—you were born into this—you were never going to escape it even if you had met Taylor or not.'

My hands fall from her arms and I step back as though she has just slapped me.

'I'm sorry.' She reaches for and I take another step back, 'Heather--.'

'you are right—I wouldn't understand—I was not given a choice by my family—they wouldn't protect me but deliver me to the lion's den, I wouldn't know exactly what to tell you in your struggle.'

Tears fall down her cheeks, 'Heather I didn't mean...'

'I hope you make the choice that makes you happy Judith.'

I turn back into the house and close the door. And there is that moment, where dark memories flash slide by slide in my mind. I lean my head against the door. I am suddenly tired.

JUDITH

I am hiding in my room, not my sister's room watching runaway bride for the tenth time. I am still in the clothes I came with two nights ago and at this point I think I am going insane.

Its Thursday, a day left to my wedding. Tomorrow is the bachelorette party Celine planned, tonight is the family dinner. Ten times I have watched the damn movie and there is still no light bulb idea of how I can run away from my own wedding. Yeah I'm crazy.

I remember the look on Lala's face when I told her my plan. Or rather, I told Lala everything. In between my conversation with Heather—which went completely wrong—and my anxiety about the wedding—and my fears of the future I showed up at my sister's college

apartment and just spilled my guts like a drunkard. It was the next morning that I finally sobered up to understand the danger I put her in for telling her the truth.

But on a more positive note, Lala was shocked enough for the rest of my family I guess.

‘I won’t tell mom and dad such madness.’ Lala had said wide-eyed, ‘it would kill them.’

‘Forget I told you anything.’

‘No, if you want out of this, we will figure it out, no need to panic.’

Yeah right she was panicking enough for the both of us

‘Out of all the men you could have gone nuts for it had to be a high class criminal and now you have Stockholm syndrome.’

‘I know right.’

‘We could leave the country.’ Lala suggested.

I had laughed, laughed so hard she had to check the laptop if I wasn’t watching a comedy or something.

‘If only it was that simple.’

‘What on earth have you gotten yourself into? I thought the man was an ordinary thug who has the brains and can dress well but this?’

‘Lala you are not helping.’

‘Help? I don’t know anything else I can do to help you at this point other than hitting the road.’

‘Yeah me too—but I wouldn’t make it to the airport before I have to face Lawyer and explain to him exactly where I am going and why.’

‘Not if you vanish for a while or you don’t show up at the wedding.’

‘And where will I hide?’

For the first time I saw an evil smile form on my sister’s face. So that is how I ended up here in this room that is a friend of a friend, friend’s room, still in the same clothes.

So now it’s almost evening and I can’t help but wonder what’s going to go down during the family dinner when I don’t show up. The uncles will make fun of it of course.

A rap at the door snaps me out of my futuristic disaster thoughts. I blink into the dim room, because I was afraid to open the curtain, afraid to let the sun in like I was a damned vampire who couldn’t stand the sunlight.

The knock is persistent and annoying as I scowl at the door. I don’t recall Lala saying that she would come check on me though I just spoke to her a few minutes ago. I pick up my phone and open whatsapp, she is not online--, I am pressing dial on her number when the knocker speaks,

‘Judith open the damn door.’

My phone drops on the floor and the crashing down of a cracking screen doesn’t even make me wince as I stare at the door. I was expecting that. Of course I was expecting him to find me. What I wasn’t expecting is me still being shocked by it. I knew he knows my entire network, there is nowhere to hide. Best way to deal with Lawyer is to come forward clean and transparent and try to dodge the consequences.

Why didn’t I think of this before I got myself stuck in this predicament?

‘Judith!’ a little harsher this time.

I heave a long sigh before I start for the door, ignoring my damaged phone on the floor. Without a pause or a blink I turn the door handle and pull it open. Ready to face this and – three days, just three days I had already forgotten how much his looks vex me. He’s dressed up too. The family dinner, right

That's why he's probably here because there is no way in hell he is going to watch a disaster take place. Mr. Abiwu is unforgiving as he is unreasonable. If we don't get married I am a liability to the family and risk exposing them. I will have to be gotten rid of.

'We have fifteen minutes to talk before you get dressed and we go to the family dinner.'
H says walking past me into the room as if he owns the place.

That confirms he knew I was here all along. Was he giving me space to think? I close the door and turn to the room. He is already seated himself on a comfy looking chair I had pushed against the window last night as a trap to alert me of any intruders. Yeah I had actually pictured a person crawling through the window to murder me in my sleep.

I stand with a confidence I don't feel, 'we don't have much to talk about.'

'uh no that's where you are wrong—we are going to end this thing right now—I gave you two days to yourself without hovering over you—I am sure you have made up your mind about what you really want—about us and your family—you need to tell me exactly where you stand.'

I hug myself, because I am losing my stand here and this is not a time to back down.

Might as well get this over with, that's what my brain may have decided because before I know it words are pouring out of me like water from a tap opened by a toddler.

I feel like I am not ready for all this, frankly I don't want the wedding, I may secretly want my life to return to the way it was. I am plagued with guilt every waking hour for all the lies I am diving into since the first lie started. I do love him (I think) but marriage?—okay I am scared. It's like I just suddenly arrived here and by the time I opened my eyes I am here.

And saying all this is kind of weird because the man is just looking at me expressionlessly. No reaction, no wince even though at some point I explicitly explain how horrendously insane his entire family is and I quite frankly don't want to be a part of it. And I emphasize the point where by I do not want my family involved in all this—just because I somehow met him doesn't mean everyone in my lifetime suffers for it.

'Say something.' I whisper when his expressionless demeanor start to creep me out and his unfazed stance makes fear roll in my gut like hardened icicles.

He stands and I roll on my heels to avoid taking a step back.

'I know,' is all he says eyes steady on me, 'I was waiting for you to say it.'

I actually take a step back, 'then why?-'

'This is serious to me—I am not playing games.'

I scoff, 'you think I am playing games?'

'You are.'

I scoff again, 'you don't know-.'

'I know enough—you still can't let church boy go Judith—you think you owe him something because he is your childhood friend—I am willing to understand that,' he walks towards me until he is right into my face, and me? picture a frozen face when you pause a movie whereby the actor is stunned speechless, 'so here is what is going to happen—we are going to the wedding dinner tonight, for the record none of this happened, we were together the whole week—after the dinner you are going to have your party Friday night,' he palms my cheek, 'and on Saturday I will meet you at the altar, and we will be married. It may take you hours, days, months or even years to come to really understand what we have—but you will be with me when that happens.'

Chapter Twelve

Everyone is standing when we walk in arm in arm. For the first time since I met these people, I pick out something they have in common. Their expressionless gazes. Like nothing has happened for the past days. Like everything is the way it's supposed to be.

Even baby Solana who is in Heather's arms is as still and pensive as a baby in a drawing. Would it be wrong if I say that it's like I have just entered a house full of ghosts. Would it kill them to show a little emotion, anger, shock, and why are we not smiling?

My eyes meet Heather's. No reaction from that angle. She unlocks her gaze from mine and gazes into space. I feel my heart sinking as we approach the others and exchange the same old mechanical greetings. Gertrude has finished setting the table and announces that dinner is ready.

The conversations are the same old topics that do not lead to the issue at hand. Hell even Mr. Abiwu seem to be in some easy mood. Should that creep me out? Or maybe he doesn't know?

They don't know?

'You okay?' Hannah murmurs to me when she joins me at the table where I am eyeing the fruit bowl as though it is the golden jewel among many treats surrounding it.

'I think I can live,' I respond. It's like I have been given a truth serum since Lawyer's reprimanding approach at me. I am still digesting all that he said. As little as it was.

'He didn't hurt you did he?'

I look at her, 'what? No he didn't hurt me.'

Hannah nods, 'I'm sorry Judith I don't mean to assume anything but these are the Abiwu men.'

I scoff, 'Hannah- what?'

She shakes her head, 'it's just that you look a little freaked out and I figured it must be because of the method he used to bring you here.'

I gape at her, 'Hannah, I am fine, I look freaked out because—well—look the man didn't even do more than hold my hand since we last talked, that's freaky right.'

Hannah snorts picking up a red apple, 'why are you complaining? He finally decided to respect you until you get married.'

I feel heat go to my face, 'ah seriously, why are you sore about that?'

'Because it doesn't make any sense to me—you always went against every moral code you had since you met the guy—why hold out on that one.'

I press my lips together, 'it won't make sense.'

'So what of your family?'

'I am still trying to figure out what to tell them since I am not looking four months pregnant.'

'Yeah you are screwed.'

And we both giggle like two idiots. It's not even funny. I also pick up an apple and bite into it. 'I think I can live.'

'And your family?'

‘well the last time I spoke to father he swore on his great grandfather that he will never give me his blessing, and then five minutes alone time with Lawyer he offers one of his favorite fat cows for the wedding.’

Hannah smiles, ‘wow, I always underestimated the man.’

‘Me too.’

‘well I am glad you decided to go on with the wedding, there won’t be another drama,’ she lowers her voice, ‘these guys have been acting as if nothing happened after that so called family meeting—even Heather refuses to tell me about it.’

I shrug, ‘perhaps its better if we didn’t know.’

Hannah rolls her eyes, ‘I am a curious creature and its killing me—I mean, did you see Heather’s family leave?’

‘I save big cars with tinted windows leaving.’

‘Do you think they left this house alive?’

We stare at each other silently for a moment.

‘I hope so.’

‘Exactly,’

‘We can’t be sure Hannah, we only saw them coming in, besides it’s not like they can get rid of five bodies that early.’

‘Well why not? Charli and Luther look like they can make a person vanish just by staring at him.’

I chuckle, ‘don’t forget Alex.’

‘He’s the Judas Iscariot.’

‘What?’

Hannah rolls her eyes, ‘Alex is still pretty much pissed off about the way things turned out at the so called meeting, he looks like someone about to rebel,’

I shake my head, ‘how would you know that?’

‘I know everything.’

I purse my lips, ‘I think the meeting ended in agreement with everyone, Heather looks fine.’

Hannah scoffs, ‘she looks like someone who has dug a grave and decided there is no way out of it.’

I look around for Heather, ‘maybe there is a reason she didn’t leave with her brother.’

Hannah sighs, ‘well I intent to find some answers—we are all stuck in this family as well... we have to know what is going on.’ A long pause, ‘by the way, ho knew Heather’s family were so hot.’

I choke on a piece of apple till Hannah rubs my back.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Hannah seriously?’

‘Come on Judith—didn’t you see them entering. Did you see her brother? Good god—why do the evil ones have to be so breath taking?’

We look at each other and start giggling like idiots.

THE WEDDING

Every key of the piano makes my heart jump as I put one foot in front of the other down the red aisle. Rose petals are dusted on top of it. Flowers and ribbons are hung on the chairs and pews the people are standing next to as they watch me do the good old walk down the aisle.

I raise my eyes and there is Lawyer waiting for me at the altar like he said. His words ring loudly at the back of my mind. In them I have always sensed an unspoken warning. That always sobers me up like it is now.

But one thing I need to get clearly. Why do Mr. Abiwu have to be the one to marry us? I mean really. To my family, he's a travelling evangelist who also run a business empire other than a crime lord. Lala is there with the other bride maids. I had no idea my sister had it in her to be this person. She knows everything, yet there she is standing like she doesn't know what is going on. I hope for her sake she remains that way. Though I know lawyer knows that she knows. He hasn't said anything about it.

I guess she is safe, for now.

I reach the altar and the part where my dad gives my hand to Lawyer's. A smile on his face. I still don't know what Lawyer told my family but the people love him to bits these days. I see my parents exchange a smile before they all sit for the ceremony to begin.

I turn to face Lawyer. Our hands together, ready to exchange our vows.

Mr. Abiwu faces the congregation, ready to say the first part when a resounding bang pierces into the calm warm atmosphere. Gasps and surprised cries follows it before a thick white smoke rises into the air.

I stand there my mouth open like a fish on a hook as I watch real live commotion break before my eyes. People are running everywhere, covering their eyes and noses because of the choking smoke.

Others fall and others step on those that have fallen.

People are yelling other people's names over the commotion. I am just frozen into place. But I then realize that my hands are free. Wasn't I just holding Lawyer's hands a few moments ago? Where did he go? I turn to look behind me and I am greeted by a thick choking smoke. I squeeze my eyes shut and cover my mouth a nose.

Then someone grabs my free hand. Lawyer, I know because the hand is so familiar to me. I have held it a thousand times. Before I even manage to force my eyes open I am being dragged off the platform. I follow because we are obviously going to a safe place.

It all happens so fast. Soon I am jumping into a car the stinky smoke slowly fading as I felt the car speed away. I remove my hand from my mouth and start taking deep breaths while my eyes are tearing.

'Keep taking deep breaths, we will be to a safe place soon.'

I freeze. My entire body just stops. I sit up straight and open my eyes. Tears run down my cheeks. Though my vision is a little blurry I will not mistake that face.

'Malcom.' His name comes out of my mouth as if I am in pain. More than I am surprised. Sure I wasn't expecting this, not even during my wildest dreams. But it is the ramifications of all this that hit me first before I go berserk.

'What did you do?'

'Judith-.' He holds my arms with both hands, 'it will be alright, I will take you to a place he will never find you.'

'No.'

'You have to trust me.'

‘What did you just do?’ I yell at him, ‘what did you just do?’

He pulls me against him and wraps his arms around me, ‘it will be okay Judith—I will take care of you—I never gave up it just took longer to process but you won’t ever see him again.’

I sob. Not from relief. But because this is just downright insane. Malcom. I wasn’t expecting it. But Malcom came to kidnap me from my wedding. He has acted directly against the family and the clan. It wouldn’t matter what the circumstances were. Mr. Abiwu will come after us. After everyone I care about, even worse in Malcom’s case.

Even Lawyer won’t protect me.

Continue with Judith’s story in the short novel Smitten. The other characters from the Worn series are also found in the story. And also, Hannah and her quest for revenge while she gets tangled up with Julian.

SMITTEN

Chapter 1

I am still in my wedding dress.

The view outside, green grass, discarded trees, red soils and roaming livestock suggests that I am way away from Gaborone. God knows where I am. Maybe in the Kalahari Desert because I don’t think I have left the country yet. I wouldn’t know. I sobbed until I blacked out. And woke up in this strange house. It could be a hotel. It’s neat and beautifully decorated. It smells like cinnamon and chocolate.

My heels are gone and I pad barefoot around the house. My heart inside my throat. Right now I am more worried about my family than anything else. Mr. Abiwu and the uncles would

think that they hid me and they would threaten them. I should have fixed this while I still had the chance.

A door opens and I turn to face Malcom. He has come in with a tray of food again.

‘Judith I need you to eat.’

I only stare at him blankly, ‘take me back please.’

He sighs, ‘you will appreciate what I have done for you someday Judith—I am not letting you return to that man who has corrupted you and threatened your family.’

My heart just breaks, ‘my family isn’t safe, you have to take me back.’

‘They will be fine—the last thing those people want is to be involved with the media and the police—they won’t lay a finger on your family.’

Cold shivers run down my every vein and artery, ‘what? What the hell did you do Malcom?’

‘What must be done Judith? What should have been done a long time ago—for people like Heather—I am getting you out before you end up like her.’

I narrow my eyes at him, ‘how did you--.’

‘Alex, one of the family member was kind enough to help me do all this—at least one of them is reasonable.’

My mouth drops open. Alex.

‘What? You have to be joking.’

‘He is out for a good cause.’

My heart breaks a thousand times more as I finally grasp the situation, ‘oh Malcom—Alex would never destroy his family, these people never do—you are being used for something else—why couldn’t you just let it go?’

‘I am not being used, I know what I am doing and that’s protecting the woman I love.’

Pause, ‘the right and clear way—no lies, no secrets and no violence.’

I just stare back at him. I have all these future scenes of how all this is going to end. The fact that Alex is involved in this secret rendezvous is not going to end well. I may just be a powerless character who will be watching all this disaster unfold before me.

Author’s Note

I do not want to say this, but this is the finale of the worn series. But because I don’t take endings that well, we still get to be with Heather and Taylor in the next book Smitten which focuses on Judith and Lawyer.

Thank you for joining me during this time, down this lane, because I never thought the worn series would come this far. It all started as a short story I started on a hot day and I am so glad that the two had a long story to tell after all. Lol.



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