


TOPE OMOTOSHO

Brown Roses

FLOWER SERIES
BOOK ONE

- 
1. Plant
 2. Water
 3. Bloom

Brown
Roses

Brown Roses



FLOWER SERIES
BOOK ONE

TOPE OMOTOSHO



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To the Vine who cares and nurtures me.
I love you.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dapo: I love you. No words will be enough to thank you for your support. I can only show you every single day how much you mean to me. It's true to say I won't have come this far without you constantly encouraging me, staying up till past midnight as I write. Your steadfastness is one of your most endearing qualities, and your patience and love means so much to me. You see in me what I struggle to see in myself. Thank you, my Sweet Caramel.

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To my readers: I can't appreciate you enough for your support. Your love. You motivate me to keep going when I'm so discouraged and feel like throwing in the towel. Your

testimonies and lessons make the late nights worth it. You are amazing! Thank you, thank you. God bless!

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“We are the garden, and our Father is the Gardener.”

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Amazing book. The characters are somehow stuck in my head. That's how great it was. Amazing story and relatable characters.

-Ebos

My Nigerian KK has struck again. Tope, you've delivered another thought-provoking novel. I was like, abi is this a true-life story ni 'cause every emotion was really captured such that I could connect with it.

I totally RECOMMEND this book. Learn about guilt, grief, forgiveness, love and lots more through the relatable experiences of humans like us.

-Tolulope

Surely a satisfying read. Relatable characters, real conversations, different lessons about overcoming insecurities and learning to love yourself the way God loves you and so much more.

-Temitope Abatan

Where Are The Heels?

I wanted to save several quotes. The author wrote so many things that were spot on. The romances were beautiful...in a realistic iron sharpening iron way. As it was, I loved getting lost in a Tope book.

- Heather Wood, bestselling author of *Until We All Find Home*

Tope's books are always like a breath of fresh air. Clean and very enjoyable to read. WATH (just like other books by the author) will take you through a flurry of emotions. Are you lost on the topic of purpose? There's something for you here. In fact, there's for everyone. Lessons aside, it's so entertaining to read and relatable as always. It's a fantastic work.

-Tolulope

With These Shoes I Thee Wed (Book 1)

Temitope spins a story that is brutally raw and true to life. Quirky, fun, humourous, deeply spiritual, some cringe-worthy moments and unforgettable characters that suck you right into their world as they hold you by the jugular. Read into the late night you must because their creator

holds nothing back. She peels the layers away from our everyday masks of propriety and touches on the core of the human frailty. You can see yourself in the quintessential lawyer who, despite her prowess in the courtroom, is a woman who battles the deepest insecurity a woman can have. You will identify with the illustrious fashion designer who, despite her success on the runway, is unlucky in love. And there's the woman who fights off attraction to a man who's off-limits. What do these women have in common? They're all navigating the single life in a world where none of the men are what they seem at first.

Temitope always weaves stories that draw out spiritual and life lessons. There's always something to learn, but what I love about her stories is her ability to shatter every known table known to culture. Nothing is ever how you expect it to be. There are twists and turns and whilst you're on the roller coaster ride of this drama, you're never, ever left the same. The stories, the characters, they linger still in your mind and in your memory. This is just part one and I am itching for the sequel.

- Sola Macaulay, Author of the Hand You Hold

This is a masterpiece. I really enjoyed following Toke's story. It was so relatable, and engaging that I couldn't drop it till I finished reading. This is awesome-tastic. Great job Tope! We want more.

- Reader

I enjoyed reading this book. I loved Adetoke's journey. Indeed, God leaves no one behind. It is really an interesting read.

- Excellentvicky

Now You Know Where It Pinches! (Book 2)

A great follow-up to book one, Tope Omotosho writes an intensely emotional tale which will leave you turning the pages.

- Osar Adeyemi, bestselling author of After the Storm.

Tope Omotosho delivers another page turning piece! Now You Know Where It Pinches is a beautiful tale that will warm your heart and rekindle a daring trust in God even in the face of daunting uncertainties.

- Emike Osumah, bestselling author of Ripples.

Love Me Again

Tope is a fearless writer who goes boldly where others do not dare to tread. In her fiction, she reveals profound spiritual truths, showing that God is at work even in the darkest times of our lives. *Love Me Again* deals with painful subject matters, and I actually gasped when I read some of the shocking twists in this story. But it all comes together beautifully. We need books that reflect the sticky and messy situations of life, and how, according to Romans 8:28, God works all things for the good of those who love Him.

Love Me Again does this with flair.

– *Milla Holt, bestselling author of the Color-Blind Love series*

I moved through the pages of *Love Me Again* so quickly. I fell in love with the characters as I followed them through the myriad of emotions that Tope put them through. I laughed. I cried. I rolled my eyes. The story was so real, and I was thoroughly entertained. But as interesting as the story was, the best thing about *Love Me Again* is the doctrine. Tope wove important tenets of the Christian faith intricately into the fabrics of that story. I was taught by the Holy Spirit as much as I was entertained. So take it from me when I say *Love Me Again* is a must-read, and not only because it is thoroughly entertaining but chiefly because Tope Omotosho writes God's heart.

– *Bisola Badejo, bestselling author of Life-Row*

This was my first Nigerian Christian Fiction book. I had no idea what to expect and how it would be different. It met all my standards and expectations and more. I was constantly warmed by the beauty and depth here. This had everything I love.

Solid, solid book.

– *Heather Wood, bestselling author of Until We all Find Home*

Love Me Again is a gripping tale in every sense of the word. How the author explores sensitive themes without sugar-coating pain and hardships of life is beautiful. The way she weaves God's light, love and purpose through such intense, heart-wrenching pain leaves the reader totally intrigued, entertained yet face-to-face with the tangible goodness of God.

– Emike Osumah, bestselling author of *Love’s Winding Path*

Once Upon a First Love

I totally enjoyed reading *Once Upon a First Love*. I like the use of language. Even though the language is English but the ‘Nigerianness’ came through wherever there was a need to douse it with that flavour. Only a Nigerian person would say, “This one you came to our church today, Timilehin will not let me rest.” Reading sentences like that made the book relatable.

- Temmyyinks I admit that I have never read a book like this in my entire life - mind you, I’m an avid reader. Despite my extremely busy schedule, I “marathon” read the book because I couldn’t put it down until I read the very last page! The book is well written and has “no word fillers” I could relate with the storyline and most importantly it felt like my love life with God was “x-rayed”, a diagnosis made and treatment commenced.

– Aijay

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PROLOGUE

ANDREW

SOMEWHERE IN SURULERE...

Hate was messy. It left scars and caused irreparable damage. He knew because he'd spent parts of his life bouncing between two estranged parents. The other parts (which were longer and more serene) he'd spent with his paternal aunt. Even with her godly, one-sided view of love, he could tell what he was feeling now was different.

If love meant getting goosebumps from a touch, having your heart thump loudly, and grinning like a fool—then he was in it deep.

I'm in love with her...

As he traced his fingertips lightly over her sleeping arm, the reality of those words hit him hard. He wasn't dreaming. She was real. This moment was real. No doubt, he was for sure crazy about this girl, which was why he knew he was in too deep. He just needed to get everything in order. Not wanting a recurrence of his parents' strained relationship.

Nonetheless, he wanted to remember this moment for the rest of his life because no woman had ever tripped him as she had.

Andrew couldn't take his eyes off her. Her mouth stayed open as she snored softly, strands of her braids strewn across the pillow. A drool leaked from the side of her mouth, a habit she repeated when she was exhausted from school stress. One she always denied doing, and he constantly teased her about. Just for fun, he once threatened to take photos to show to their

close friends, which led to her throwing silly tantrums and him stealing and exploiting her lips.

He rolled onto his side, balancing his hand on the bed and cupping his chin as he stared at her over the next few minutes, eyes closed, until she stirred. His gaze swept across her face, taking in the smooth planes and hollows of her cheeks.

She's all mine.

The sweet joy of that sent a thrill down his spine and trickled down to his feet.

He loved her.

TJ's eyes cracked open as if she was aware of his silent declaration of love. She peered at him briefly before closing her eyes again. "You're such a creep. You're freaking me out again."

He barked out a laugh. "Haven't you figured it out yet?" He leaned down and claimed her lips briefly before drawing back. "Creeping you out is kinda my thing." And just because he couldn't resist, he claimed her lips once more.

"Hmm," she mused, smiling, "please creep me out some more." He snaked his arm around her slender waist as she snuggled closer to him.

"Slept well?" He queried.

She nodded. "I did, actually. Especially after how you kept me up all night."

Andrew gave a lop-sided grin. "Sorry, babes." Thankfully, Auntie B wasn't home to lecture him on the perils of fornication. He couldn't deal with her religious beliefs right now.

"Are you really sorry?"

"No, I'm not." He laughed when she smacked his arm. Having her there with him was surreal. There wasn't a day that went by that he couldn't believe she wanted him. One of the most gorgeous women he had ever laid eyes on wanted him. Him. And not because he had anything significant to offer her, but because the only thing he had right now was his love, his heart, and attention. And if he could give her the world, he would do it in a heartbeat. "Hope I didn't hurt you. Did I hurt you?" That was one thing he vowed never to do: make her cry.

"No." She shook her head and ran a thumb along his jawline. "At least I know you missed me while I was in school."

“Oh okay. In that case...” He reached out and tickled her, causing her to roar with laughter, pleading for him to stop. He did, not till after he had stolen a few kisses from her partially swollen lips. He almost patted himself on the back for laying his mark on her. Branding her as his. He wanted her to remember him every time she went off to school, just so she knew what she stood to get when she returned and never doubted how he felt about her.

More importantly, so that none of those Uni hormonal boys would make a move on his girl, he travelled the long route to Ibadan while she was at school just to claim his territory.

Though at twenty-five a few people thought the six-year age gap between him and TJ was inappropriate; he wasn't concerned.

“When are you going to tell your father about us?” He asked, palming her flat, smooth stomach. Only they both knew what they hid from prying eyes for the time being.

She inhaled quick breaths, still trying to catch her breath. “I don’t plan on telling him. Not yet.”

He frowned. “TJ—”

She raised her hand to silence him. “I know what you’re going to say. I should tell him. The sooner the better. But babes, he doesn’t need to know. Not yet. I can just tell him how much we love each other and everything will be fine. Stop being a worry wart, Kelechi,” she said, referring to his Igbo name. She preferred calling him that—saying she *just loved the ring of it*.

He looked at her, certain that his scepticism was visible on his face: he couldn’t help but worry.

“Did you already tell Kalu?”

“Not yet. I’m more bothered about how your father will react to the news.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “I promise you that everything will be fine. My dad adores me and he will support whatever decision I make. He has always been there for me and this won’t be an exception.” She leaned in close, her lips brushing against his. The kiss was slow and passionate, and it quickly heated up. Like their love and everything else about them.

He drew back, looked her in the eyes and quietly said, “I don’t want to lose you.”

He didn’t mind being vulnerable with her. She was his person. If he couldn’t risk confiding in her, if he couldn’t be open with her, there was no

one else he could see being this open with his feelings besides his best friend Kalu.

“And you won’t,” she said, not blinking. “Promise.”



A month later . . .

"She called my vegan streak nonsense. Can you imagine that? She *forced* me to eat that icky Ofada soup with that stinky rice." TJ put her hand over her mouth, and Kelechi was ready to grab a paint bucket from the bathroom if she was going to hurl her insides out. He was still recovering from the fishy smell she had thrown up two days before. She held up her hand. *False alarm*. "Why can't your aunt just leave me alone to do my business? What have I ever done to her? Why is she so obsessed with me?"

He took off his shirt and tossed it on the mattress. "She's just having a hard time understanding you, that's all."

"No, no, no. She hates me. I'm certain of it."

"You can't be certain of someone you don't know."

"I hate it when you talk to me like I'm a child." TJ grabbed a pillow and shoved it against her face, letting out a small scream. Done, she pulled it away from her face and tossed it on the bed. "Kelechi, why are you always making excuses for her?" She jumped off the bed. "She says so many terrible things to me and you blame it on her inability to understand me. It's complete B.S!"

He raised a brow at her word choice. She looked away and muffled out an apology.

"I will talk to her after dinner." He closed the gap between them. "Everything will be fine. Don't stress about it." He rubbed her arms and bent low to kiss her on the lips. She pushed him away at first, but as he kept on, she surrendered herself to him. After a few minutes, he drew back, his hands on her shoulders. "Don't be angry, you hear? Things are going to get better between you guys."

“Stop talking to me like I’m a child!” She slapped his hands away. “Why can’t we move to another apartment? Why must we live with your aunty?”

They had been over this already. “TJ, it’s not that simple. I’m trying my best. Just give me some time.”

“I’m on break now. Maybe I can get a job to support you—”

“As what? A secretary? Cleaner? Babe, you can’t get a decent job with just your secondary school certificate. Any job you get won’t cut it.” And he would never allow it. He loved that she wanted to help, but this was his responsibility.

“I have savings.” She retorted stubbornly, but he knew his jab hurt her. But she’d equally shot her shot, not knowing her savings were a reminder of how different they were. How much he hated he couldn’t provide for her as he ought to.

He stroked her cheek. “I appreciate you wanting to help, but I’ve got this. It’s my responsibility to take care of you and our baby.” He placed his palm on the small bulge. “And God willing, I will try my best to do well by you two. I just need you to trust me.”

She searched his eyes and said, “I trust you.”

Aunty B, I told you before that she doesn't eat meat."

His aunty narrowed her eyes on him. “Again with this nonsense?”

“She doesn’t enjoy eating things that have blood in them,” he said in his girlfriend’s defence.

Aunty B hissed. “It doesn’t have blood again. It has been cooked and spiced.”

He didn’t know if the older woman saw it as an insult to her cooking or she was just being stubborn in her ways. “I know... you’re a superb cook, Aunty B.” He struggled to find the right words. He sincerely hoped this wasn’t how his life was going to play out—constantly trying to appease the two women in his life. “Her food preferences are a little different from ours.”

“A little?” She scoffed. “My friend, I’m not in the mood for too much talk this evening. You see this my back?” She hunched her shoulders and patted her back. “I carried you there when you were a baby up till you were two years old. While you slept and drooled on my blouse and your saliva flowed down my arm, I washed clothes, cleaned, and went to the market.

This morning, I told your girlfriend to carry her bowl of cereal to the kitchen, boil rice and warm the soup so the both of us can eat. If you see the way she was dragging her feet, you would think she was twenty months pregnant. She's very lazy. You go out to work, to take care of her and your child and she crosses her legs in my parlour like a princess. Common to sweep and dust she cannot do."

"Aunty B..."

"That girl has bewitched you! That's the problem with these Yoruba girls.

"Why do you have to make this tribalistic?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not." Andrew quirked a brow. *Like seriously?* "I'm only saying you should have had the good sense to use protection with that spoiled girl. Abi, is it her money you were going after?"

Andrew stiffened at the mention of TJ's family money. "No. I didn't go after her because of her father's money."

"Are you sure? You can tell me the truth."

"Aunty B, you know me better than this. I love TJ."

Aunty B scoffed. "Which yeye love. *Abi*, she seduced you? *Talk true.*"

Andrew rubbed his eyes tiredly. The back of his head was already aching from the many fronts and back from the two women in his life. "Please, stop."

"*Mba!* That girl will be the ruin of you. Let's bet on it." She held up her pinky finger. He pursed his lips together. "Yes *nau*. The only reason I allowed her to come here was because of that baby she's carrying. What do you think will happen if you two lived alone? She can't take care of you, talk more of a baby. She does not eat meat. What does she want? Crab? Oyster? Waffles and Toast? Rubbish! Does she think this is her father's house or a hotel?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "Andrew Kelechi, I hope you are not marrying that girl. Don't let what happened to your father happen to you."

He winced at the mention of his parents.

"TJ is better than what you think of her. You need to understand who she is—"

"I'm not interested."

"Aunty B... you're a Christian, please don't do this to me. Where's the love?"

"This is love in the form of hard truths and common sense. Or have you not heard of tough love?"

Geez! "I'm overworked as it is. I don't need this kind of stress when I get back from work." He paused, placed his palms at the back of his head and lowered his head a little. He was like that for a while, then raised his head to face his mother once more. "Her father called me today."

"What did he say?"

He shook his head. Mentioning it was a mistake. "It's nothing I want to talk about."

She frowned. "Then why are you telling me?"

"I'm sorry. Never mind."

"Did he insult you again?"

"It's nothing for you to bother about, Aunty." It would only lead to more hassles from her if he told her TJ's father had thrown his money in his face; a payoff to leave his daughter alone.

When he said nothing further, Aunty B took that as her cue to improve her persuasion skills. "Having a baby is not cheap. There's a lot of money that goes into taking care of a child. Immunisation. Baby food and clothes. Toys. Diapers."

The thought was enough to make the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. But he wasn't a quitter. "Something good will turn up. I'm sure of that. In the meantime, I'm heading to bed." He kissed her cheek. "Good night."



His weight dropped on the bed and he hit 'stop' on Christina Perri's 'a thousand years' playing in the background. The words reverberated in his ears, laying waste to his heart and everything he thought the song represented in their relationship.

*I will not let anything take away,
What's standing in front of me,
Every breath,
Every hour has come to this.*

This. This moment... How had he not seen this coming? Andrew clenched his jaw. Clearly, his judgement was flawed to think this was their love song. That this was their moment. That they had any *love* thing going on between them.

He squeezed his eyes shut; he didn't want to hear it anymore. The artist's sweet words no longer swayed him or made his heart race in tandem to the music.

Maybe the more he thought about it, the more it would translate to his reality.

At this moment, love songs were overrated.

I'm sorry I can't marry you. You're not the person I wanted in the first place, TJ had said. *"You were just Plan B. But I can't go through this any longer. It isn't fair to you."*

Andrew glanced down at the engagement ring he'd bought a few weeks ago. The saleswoman at the jewellery store had assured him it was a pretty ring even if it was modest: a slim, white gold band set with a white marquise diamond and small, round diamond accents. *Your soon-to-be fiancée would love it! She would be happy to receive it out of love,* she had said. He had no doubts. He'd just been excited to present it to her. Thinking back, he realised now that the queasiness in his stomach and tightness in his chest at the time was more of a warning. A heads-up that his girlfriend might not accept his ring rather than fussing over the carat size or whatnot.

Most definitely, that was what the saleswoman should have assured him of. Not whether she would fall in love with a piece of metal.

Idiot! He let his gaze wander to the rose petals on the floor and the hundred candles he'd spent the better part of a day lighting up around the house just to add an ethereal glow to the intimate setting. Although it had taken Andrew several reminders and complaints for him to take the initiative in romantic gestures, he still knew he had a long way to go.

Knowing what he knew now, the effort he'd put into planning a proposal seemed pointless. Wasteful. *Crazy.*

No doubt *he* was the fool here.

How could he think she would want to spend forever with him? Someone like her didn't need someone like him. Right from the start, they were miles away in social class and ideologies. But Andrew had believed in their love and discarded every negative thought.

He swiped a trembling palm down his face. He'd been wrong. Everyone advised him against dating her. Told him to take careful steps and not rush into anything serious. Thinking that at nineteen she was mature enough for a relationship was wrong and foolish on his part. He was both blind and foolish to fall for her innocent smile and carefree personality. He couldn't pinpoint when things changed. Didn't even know what caused her sudden coldness towards him.

He had given his heart to a child hoping she felt the same way about him. That she would respond to love. He snorted. *Yeah, I'm the biggest fool of all.* This was what he got for falling for innocent looks and big, brown, googly eyes.

When he noticed movement across the room, he looked up. She was back in their room, at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes and tossing them into the pink luggage near her feet with no flourish. That action was totally like her. TJ was the least organised woman he had ever met. But what did that matter now with the news she'd just given him?

Why was she doing this? Why was she leaving him?

"Let's talk about it." He couldn't just give up.

She shook her head, not bothering to look up at him, making him feel more used and insignificant than he already did. "There's nothing to talk about. I should have done this a long time ago."

He felt his muscles tense. So she'd been waiting for the right time to break up with him? "When? When you were convincing me you were in love with me?" He shot up from the bed. "When you tricked me into thinking you wanted us to be together? Yes, TJ! Please, tell me when you should have done that instead of making me trail after you like a lovesick puppy!"

She turned and gazed up at him. "I'm sorry, Kelechi."

"Don't you think it's kind of late for apologies?"

She pursed her lips. "I shouldn't have been in a relationship with you."

As he tried to speak, his throat ached. "You mentioned being in love with someone else." It was supposed to come out as a question, but the truth was glaring in her eyes. Her expression revealed the truth he desperately wanted to be a lie. His gaze dropped to the floor. The beating of his heart reverberated in his ears and he felt his knees weaken. He still needed to know. "Who exactly is it? Do I know the person?"

"That doesn't matter."

His gaze shifted to her. The woman's face he'd caressed so many times. Her lips he'd kissed with vigour and devotion. Eyes that he'd stared at when he declared his love for her and no one else. Even though all he wanted to do was hate her, a renewed passion for her flooded his body at that moment.

Looking at her hurt.

He shut his eyes and gritted out, "Who. Is. It?"

"Telling you wouldn't change anything, Kelechi. I'm sorry. I know you love me. But I don't love you. I never did. I was just using you to get to him. But then I liked your company as we spent more time together. And the more time we spent together, I fell for you... but I can't get over him. I'm sorry we're in this situation where I stupidly got pregnant." She paused, and he blinked his eyes open, wishing he could put a stop to this altogether. "I care about you. I do. But you're not the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. That's the truth. No matter how painful it is."

No, no, no. "This isn't you, TJ. You're not the coldhearted girl everyone thinks you are. Deep down, I know there's more to you than this stunt you're trying to pull off."

She laughed. "You think this is a stunt? It's just like you to think like that. But this is who I am. It's who I've always been and nothing can change that. The sooner you take my words to heart, the better this," she gestured at the both of them, "can be over and done with."

Andrew pinched his lips together. "TJ... you said you loved me." He swallowed past the pain at the back of his throat. Knowing he was making even a bigger fool of himself for bringing himself low to ask the question. "Was that true?"

TJ pursed her lips. "I've said all I have to say."

There was only one word that jumped at him from her many words. One other thing he needed to know. "Who's him?"

Her brows drew together in slight confusion. "What?"

"You said you were only using me to get to him. Who's *him*?"

She moistened her lips and turned on her heels. "It's none of your business."

With one move, he grabbed her arm and spun her around. Her chest collided with his. "Don't make me repeat myself, TJ. Who is the man stupid enough to fall for you?" *A man as stupid as I was.*

Her lips twisted in a sly grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

His fist balled up, and he tightened his hold on her arm. She winced. "This isn't a joke!" One uncalculated move was all it took in combination with the heat of his anger boiling over.

"Let go of me!" She screamed. "Let me go, you're hurting me."

Andrew let go of her arm just as she yanked it and staggered backwards. He had never given in to anger before. That wasn't the man he wanted to become. She could weaken him by flinging his love in his face, but she wouldn't reduce him to a beast.

Andrew watched as she rubbed her arm.

"Are you alright?" *The baby*. "Is the baby okay?"

He took a step forward, but she raised a hand. Stopping him from coming closer. Barely twenty-four hours ago she craved his touch, but now she wanted nothing to do with him? It dug the knife deeper into his chest.

"I'm okay. I'm going back to my father's house. You are going to make it big, I guess. After all, I am your meal ticket."

Andrew frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"And it's unfortunate that I'm pregnant. At least I know our baby would be okay if you're smart enough to use the money wisely."

His jaw flexed. "So, having a baby is a mistake?"

"No." She looked him dead in the eye. A habit she'd formed when she wanted to deliver the worst of blows. "Having a baby with you is a mistake." She moistened her lips, and he tore his eyes from the gesture. "Someone once said there's a thin line between love and hate. You shouldn't love me, Andrew."

What? He frowned in confusion.

And then she told him the one thing, one person, that would make him cross that thin line, knowing they could never go back to what they had. Jealousy snaked into his heart and like a deadly sting left his heart paralysed.

"And so all this because you want me to hate you?"

"Do whatever you want. I'll keep you informed of the baby's progress." She turned her back to him and continued to gather the little things she had left. Her makeup bag was the last thing she packed. He'd often teased her about it: she liked anything on her face as long as it made her look good.

"It's true what they said. You're just a kid. You never understood what commitment and love were all about."

She gathered the last of her Proud Belle products and, without looking back, walked out of his life.

*And all along I believed I would find you
Time has brought your heart to me
I have loved you for a thousand years
I'll love you for a thousand more*

He didn't need Aunty B and all his friends to say I told you so. He'd been stupid. Now he knew it.

Andrew blinked away his tears. Lies. They were all liars: love song artists. Love enthusiasts. Love couldn't possibly last that long. He'd just had his heart broken, after all. If only this much was true: love wasn't for everyone and it didn't last a lifetime. She wanted him to hate her?

Mission accomplished.

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CHAPTER I

ANDREW

EIGHT YEARS LATER...

Who, for goodness' sake, created blind dates in the first place? It had to be a woman. Only women could come up with such swoony, romantic notions. Something completely absurd. Did they expect the man to be a willing participant? Because Andrew wasn't. He didn't do dates. Blind dates. Online dates. Double dates. None of it. He had done exclusive dating once. Gotten involved in casual dating, several of them—he was no longer interested in any of it. But here he was, on a blind date. Of which blind dates, in Andrew's opinion, were only for the desperate. And he wasn't desperate.

He couldn't imagine why anyone would choose to suffer such punishment? Meeting someone they'd never met before and hoping that for some inexplicable reason and, by chance, things would work out between them and they would be exclusive. Get married. Make babies. Grow old.

Too harsh? Probably. But Andrew had learnt his lesson a long time ago. Hurt people carried scars and wounds. Only those with wounds inflicted that hurt on others. Regrettably, he'd worked himself into that category.

Maybe that was why he was having such a bad date for a blind date right now. Because of all the many hearts he had broken.

"Once again, I apologise for being late," he said.

She tilted her head, causing her long black hair to slip to her back. "You know, if you didn't want to come you could have just said so instead of wasting my time. I've been seated here for half an hour already."

"I'm sorry. As I explained over the phone, I had to drop a client home and was stuck in traffic. That's hardly beyond my control." He eyed her half-empty plate. "Though it seems you already had dinner without me."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Are you a joker? You seriously expected me to wait for you before placing my order?" She shook her head. "No, darling. I've had a hell of a day and I needed a refuel. At least you got here in time to pay." She put one hand on the table and lifted her fork with the other. "Why don't we start over, shall we? Caroline told me tidbits about you, but don't you think it would be better if you made the introductions yourself?"

Andrew observed the woman seated in front of him, shoving a forkful of salad into her mouth. She was stunning: straight black hair, a pretty face, a confident smile revealing perfect dentition. He had an advantage over her because of his height and could tell she was well-proportioned in her black one-shoulder dress; exposing shoulders doused with tiny freckles.

He did like a woman who was confident in her skin.

But the last thing he wanted was to be here—seated in an expensive restaurant on a date with a woman with no filter. He wasn't even sure this woman was 'it' for him. He couldn't even recall what her name was. Still, he owed it to Caroline, their mutual friend, to be on his best behaviour tonight.

"I'm Andrew Madu. I work in a cab company."

She wriggled her nose. He recognised the look of disgust and disappointment when he saw it. "You're a cab driver?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Didn't you finish school or something?"

Andrew snorted and spewed out a laugh. Was this woman for real? Was there no end to her ludicrous conclusions?

Just then, a server approached their table and handed Andrew a menu, and he welcomed the distraction. He went with the creamy potato soup, sweet potato fries and grilled sandwiches. In his opinion, if he had to eat out, he would rather eat something foreign rather than intercontinental dishes he could prepare conveniently at home. He wasn't a great cook, but raising a daughter who had eclectic tastes demanded that he try.

"I graduated from Uniben with a degree in Computer Science."

"And you're unemployed? That's unfortunate." She smiled sympathetically, bobbing her head. "I can understand, though. The economy has not been kind to job seekers." She tilted her head to the side. "Caroline mentioned you have a daughter. How old is she?"

"Seven."

"What's her name?"

"Isabella."

"Aww, cute name. And her mother? Isn't she in the picture? What happened to her?"

"No." That one word came out a bit too rough. And from her raised brow, he knew she noticed his gaffe. She waited, expecting him to answer the rest of her questions.

He silently pleaded the fifth.

Andrew's meal was placed in front of him when the server arrived with his dinner and her dessert. After a long day's work, he held back his concerns over the size of what was his dinner. He hoped Auntie B might still have leftovers he could take later.

The awkward silence stretched on for a few minutes and Andrew accepted that solitude while he dug into his food. Later, his date took the stage and started gushing about her job as a data analyst in some big company. At some point, he blanked out when the conversation became monotonous.

For starters, she was clearly not his type. Why was she eating a salad? For goodness' sake, she was already broomstick-thin! And it wasn't like she was a model.

But for his own sanity's sake, he kept that information to himself. Hell hath no fury like a conceited woman who treated her appearance like a badge of honour.

Another issue was that she didn't take any breaks. Didn't all that yapping leave her thirsty? He eyed her half-empty wineglass. Then again, she wasn't an alcoholic. He lifted his glass to his lips and sipped his wine. After that, it was one sip after another. "So I told her she wasn't even being honest with me. Like, was she really going to toss me aside because her spouse didn't want her to fix her nails anymore? Do I come across as a terrible influence? I was the one that introduced her to him, and now she's acting like a nun. People are funny, you know?"

Andrew could only come up with "hmm" as an answer.

"I know, right?" His date snorted.

Andrew wanted to yawn.

She tsked and shook her head. "Some friends sha... they can be backstabbers."

Just like Caroline. Because this was the worst date in the history of dates. No. He frowned. His worst date was when a woman brought three of her brothers and they all sat at the same table. And then she opened her mouth to confess she was *mami water*. This date with this woman didn't even come close to it. He wanted to shoot a text to Caroline and tell her off for introducing him to Yvonne or Yolanda or whatever her name was.

"...do you understand what I mean?"

He blinked. "Sorry. I wasn't listening." He wasn't even going to form like he was interested in anything she'd been rambling on about.

She frowned at him. "What don't you understand? I've been speaking English for the last couple of minutes."

Shoo? Probably it was time to come clean. "Maybe I'm just not interested in what you're talking about."

If looks could kill...

He dabbed his mouth with a napkin. He needed to put an end to this torturous date as soon as possible. "Listen, Yolanda..."

"It's Yvette!" She snarled.

"Sorry. Yvette. I don't think this will work out. Let's call it a night and forget this date ever happened. Sounds good?"

After a couple of minutes, Andrew was walking out with his phone clamped to his ear. On the other end of the line, the connecting call was ringing. "Never set me on a date again," he said to his phone as soon as she picked it up.

"Ah! Why *nau*? I thought you would like Yvette. She's really cool. I know she can be a handful, but she's responsible, and you said you wanted a responsible woman."

"No. I said if I ever wanted to date again, I would want a woman who was responsible." He felt a trickle of white wine down his nose, landing at the top of his lip. He swiped at it with his handkerchief and dabbed the tip of his hair and forehead.

Caroline snorted. "That's just semantics."

He slipped his jacket off, tossed it in the backseat, and got into the driver's seat. "Whatever the case, I had to let your friend down easy."

"Andrew, what did you do? Wait." A pause, then a loud groan. "She's calling me. Andrew, if you did something to her, I swear I would be so pissed at you."

"I'm sure you ladies would have fun discussing the one million and one ways you would like to make my life miserable, or maybe curse my life over a cup of ice cream while watching melodramatic chick-lit movies. I'll let you go."

"Andrew—"

"Caroline, we'll talk later. Your friend needs you."

"Andrew!"

Served her right for fixing him on a blind date.

He tapped 'end call' and reversed out of the parking lot and headed to his Auntie B's to get his daughter. He would stop by a burger place to pick up one of his daughter's favourites: a burger with extra fries and cheese as a peace offering. She hadn't been too happy when he confessed he had a date later in the evening. He needed his daughter to know he would always be there for her, no matter what. And he wouldn't leave her, just as her mum had left them.

Given that it was a work night on Lagos roads, traffic was light when he drove home after picking up his daughter. Even though Auntie B made her eat Okpa and pap for a light dinner, she fell asleep in the car after devouring a burger and fries. Andrew mentally reminded himself to vacuum and clean the car first thing in the morning. Having roaches in the car was an unpleasant experience that did not go well—both for him and his passengers.

Despite his tiredness, he sat in front of the TV after tucking Isabella into bed. He wasn't particularly interested in watching anything, but he just needed something talking in his ear. The quietness irked him somehow.

"In the meantime, have you heard the latest from one of my favourite beauty brands? Erinma Roberts, CEO of Proud Belle, plans to launch new products to mark the company's 20th anniversary. I am so looking forward to the party that's going to go down."

Andrew nodded off as Ari Mato danced to a beat in her head while the audience applauded.

“All right, I know you guys are just trying to make me feel bad. You know I’m a terrible dancer.” The audience laughed. “But I just want you to know that I’m so proud of my girl Erinma and all she’s accomplished. Not just as a woman, but as a Nigerian woman. Since taking over as CEO a few years ago, she has been one of the most influential black women in the country, and possibly in Africa. Take a cue from my girl, Erinma, and know that no matter what life throws at you, you can become whoever you want to be. That’s all for today. Love you all to pieces!”

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CHAPTER 2

ERINMA

Papa Nor-nor...em never commot. E still dey inside the house o!
Quick come! Madam eye don open! Make we carry am go hospital!
Quick carry am!
You did this...
"Erinma?"

Erinma jumped when she heard Dr. Rayo's voice. She walked away from the endless memories and her mind settled back to reality. "Huh?" She looked away from the window, immediately distancing herself from the repeating thoughts. Thoughts that carried the baggage of guilt, irritability and a lack of confidence.

She dropped her gaze to her hands. Warm feelings tingled her palms, reminding her of the cup of coffee she held in her hand. How long had she blanked out? She returned her gaze to the woman who appeared to be in her mid-30s but was actually in her forties. "I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"Is it PTSD?"

Erinma nodded. Guilty as charged. She didn't want the woman to feel like months of work had gone to waste. Erinma had never forgiven herself. She still didn't believe they were gone. That she couldn't wander into her mother's garden, walk up to Mr. Moses while he knelt in the dirt and listened to him talk about how seasons were important for growth, maturity and blooming. To draw on his wealth of experience in culling, pruning,

watering and the seamless pattern he conjured with gardening and intimacy with God.

Dr. Rayo showed a kind smile. "Are you okay?"

It was not a smile filled with pity or disapproval. It was just a kindness that Erinma had become accustomed to in the woman's presence. No judgement. No awkward eye contact. The feeling was so euphoric and Erinma wanted to lay camp there and never leave.

"I'm fine." Erinma shifted on the couch, propping her elbow on the yellow and blue accent throw pillow to get comfortable. Months of being in the same office, sitting in the same blue linen, high-back sofa and she knew the exact position to take, the exact tilt of her back, to feel relaxed. "I guess I just got lost in my thoughts for a moment."

Her therapist's eyebrows drew together in worry. "Are you sure you don't want to continue with the sessions?"

That was one thing Erinma felt sure of. "No. I feel it's time to push forward."

"And you're certain you aren't stressed? I'm aware a lot is going on at the company. You're preparing to introduce new products to mark twenty years of Proud Belle?"

Erinma felt a sudden rush of adrenaline through her veins at the thought of work and what she had achieved at Proud Belle so far. "Yes. It's a deep cleansing moisturiser for the average working woman who isn't overly bothered about makeup but still wants that glowy, radiant complexion. And then facial products." She lifted the mug to her lips. After a few sips of the lukewarm liquid, she set the mug on the coffee table in front of her. "I'm sorry. What were we discussing earlier?" *Before I blanked out...*

"Plastic surgery. You were about to tell me your thoughts on it."

"Oh..er..yes."

Erinma looked down at her hands. The light and dark discolouration was her skin. It was leathery, tough... like beef jerky. Not exactly an attractive way to describe her appearance when she wasn't a piece of meat dangling to attract a wild animal. Not if a man loved his woman charred but just without the spice.

There was no black pride either—at least not in the way that a black woman would proudly embrace the brown colour of her skin. It didn't matter how hard Erinma looked at it or how long it had been; it would still take some getting used to. This was the new her.

Why was I rescued while others didn't make it?

The question devoured her thoughts and she was no closer to an answer than when she first posed it.

She coughed in her fist. "I used to believe that cosmetic surgery was useless. The woman who did it was worried about her body, and she was dissatisfied with how God had formed her. And then I flip the coin and laugh at myself, questioning myself for feeling that way. Shouldn't makeup give the illusion of plastic surgery?" She laughed softly at the absurdity. "I always told myself, *'Why can't you accept yourself as you are?'*" Erinma raised her head to meet Dr. Rayo's intense gaze. "However, here I am, forty-seven surgeries later, and having a complete change of heart. When I look into the mirror, I see a lot of things I want to change about my body and I'm dissatisfied. It's not something that makeup can fix." She chuckled dryly. "Those are the thoughts running through my mind. It's ironic and hypocritical for the CEO of a makeup company, isn't it?"

Her face, which had once been flawless, was now a brew of the various shades of distinct parts of her body.

"No. Your emotions don't need to be categorised to fit into a box, Erinma. Own your feelings. I've told you this before."

Erinma nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's going to take some getting used to."

Erinma sighed deeply and rubbed her palms over her arms. "Sometimes I feel like I was perfect one day and the next day I turned to this," she gestured at herself, "I'm no longer perfect and have to fly to another country to fix myself." She rubbed her forehead.

"Do you believe that as humans, we don't need fixing? That certain parts of our body don't need redeeming?"

"No. I understand that there are people with deformities who need to have corrective surgery."

"But?"

"No buts... I guess I can understand why they feel the need to. Especially when they don't feel good about themselves. I think about people who have no means of changing the way they look and have to be comfortable in their skin. I'm not sure if they ever feel more secure with themselves, but I don't want to keep living in fear of how I look."

"That's a foot forward in the right direction." Erinma pressed her lips together and nodded once. Wishing she wouldn't wobble and fall flat on her

face with that forward movement. "You said you had questions that floated in your head from time to time. What about?"

Erinma ran her tongue over her cracked lips. She instinctively reached for her purse and pulled out a Proud Belle's lip moisturiser: tangerine flavoured. With shaky hands, she applied the lip balm and placed it back in her purse. "There are still days when I love who I am and days when I despise the fact that I'm alive. My elder sister believes that my life is a testament to God's goodness. But I'm still not sure what life is all about. Like, why live here and now when you'll eventually end up in heaven living another life? Why do I have to put in so much effort in this life?"

As it was, her life was categorised in two ways: pre-fire and after-fire.

Pre-fire she was full of life.

After-fire, she felt bereft of what life was all about.

"How come you feel that way?" Dr. Rayo moved a few of her thin box braids to her back: silver... appropriate for her mocha/medium brown skin tone. She wasn't your average therapist. But then, Erinma had nothing to compare the woman to other than the portrayals she had seen in rom-com movies. They were usually all professional and unreadable in a skirt or pants suit and straight face that hinted disinterest. Instead, the woman in front of her was elegantly dressed in skinny jeans and a periwinkle silk blouse that was half-tucked. Legs crossed at the knees, feet tucked into black lace-up shooties. She clasped her hands on the notepad in front of her. She oozed warmth and kindness.

"Erinma, life on earth is like a dress rehearsal for the main event; where we get to be with God forever. So also, we did not automatically receive eternal life as soon as we were born. We need to accept Christ first and earth gives us that opportunity to receive Him."

Erinma knew that much. Her Executive Assistant, Odavwaro, had mentioned something similar a few times. Words Erinma still struggled to understand. These days, she saw life differently.

She had gone from caring less about her life and her purpose, to feeling fearful of her life and guarding what she had left to do on earth, and back again to the former. The tug of war between the two emotional states was both exhausting and perplexing.

"I don't know how to move forward or let things be. I know it's been two years already and everyone feels I should be over this. But," she swiped the

back of her hand over her eyes, "I can't help it. It's just so hard. One day I'll be good. Another day I'm down in the pits. Is that normal?"

"It is. It's hard to process the pain of losing someone. Harder to get over the guilt you may be feeling. But Erinma, understand that Christ has made you guilt-free. *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.* That's in Romans chapter 8."

Erinma nodded. "A friend said something similar. I want to let it go. But every day, with Noelle lying in the hospital fighting for her life, I'm reminded of the past. I so badly want her to survive this. She deserves a better life than this."

"And you still feel this is your responsibility to give her that better life?"

Erinma tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "No. I can't control what happens. Sort of like that Scripture that says we shouldn't plan our days without God; expecting a tomorrow when the only person who can guarantee that is God."

"It's quite a humbling scripture. We don't have full control over our lives as we think we do. We can't control the outcome of things in our lives."

"And also that forgiveness isn't an option."

"And you need to accept God's forgiveness. It's sometimes a long journey but very fulfilling. Even if the person we need to forgive is ourselves."

"I realise that."

Dr. Rayo smiled at her like a proud parent. "This is our last session. I'm glad you've improved. Don't forget what we've achieved in the last six months."

Erinma forced a smile. "I won't. I'm truly grateful for your help. I know it's your job, but... thank you."

"It's a pleasure, Erinma. Working with you has been a learning experience for me as well. If at all you feel you need to talk, just give me a call. Okay?"

Erinma nodded. "Thank you." Although she didn't see the possibility of that happening. Six months was enough pouring out her heart and sorrows unto someone. She couldn't help but wonder how therapists handled their burdens. Did therapists have therapists?

"And remember... scars don't go away, but wounds do. You only have to be brave to see your scars—visible and invisible—and not feel the pain of

what brought them.”

Erinma nodded again. “Understood.”

“Now say this after me: I’m a burn survivor.”

“I’m a burn survivor.”

“My scars don’t define who I am.”

“My scars,” Erinma pushed saliva down her throat, “they don’t define who I am.”

“I have survived this. I am still me and I’m getting better.”

God, help me believe those words. “I have survived this. I am still me and I’m getting better.”

Dr. Rayo offered a friendly smile. “You’ve come a long way and going forward you’ll do fantastic, Erinma. I’m certain of it.”

“Do you mind putting some of your assurance in a prescription bottle to go?”

Both ladies burst out laughing. Erinma, however, wasn’t joking. Kind of. The outside world still creeped her out.

“I have little to give, but... I know who has loads of it. And He’s waiting for you to ask and always ready to give.”

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16.

“But whenever you feel caught up with anxieties, just ask God what He feels about your scars.”

Erinma picked up her bag.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Dr. Rayo stood and marched to her desk pressed against the grey walls of her office. She returned to her seat, phone in hand, her fingers darting across the screen. “Tomi extends her thanks. She thoroughly enjoyed the facial treatments you sent her.”

“Awwn, I’m glad. Did she have a good time at her prom?”

“Absolutely!” She handed Erinma her Android phone and Erinma smiled at the teenager who looked radiant in a long, glittery baby-blue gown. Her natural hair fell perfectly straight over her shoulders. “She’s so pretty.”

Again, Dr. Rayo grinned like a proud mama.

Just a few minutes later, Erinma was on her way to work. She kept her gaze fixed on the road ahead, her sunglasses perched on her nose, not turning her head to either side of the windows. Not that anyone could see her. She had opted for tinted windows. Not caring that it drew unwanted

attention from law enforcers, who stopped cars at various checkpoints for no apparent reason because they were looking for their next meal ticket.

Terrain's *Stayed On Him* came on the radio and she cranked up the volume. Tapping her fingers on the steering wheel, she sang along and navigated her way around the traffic.

She enjoyed driving herself, but since the accident, she could only do so during the day.

Erinma's nighttime driving made her apprehensive at times. The panic attacks that came with being behind the wheel, combined with the dark streets, made her nervous and only re-lived the events of that night. The smoke clouds. The sting of the heat on her skin.

Song over, conversations flowed between the radio talk show hosts:

Female voice: *And the Ari Mato show starts a new season this week! Definitely looking forward to what this new season has in store for us. Kenny, you know I've adored that woman's show forever.*

Male voice: *(chuckles) That I know.*

Female voice: *Incoming news states a tanker explosion on the outskirts of Lagos—*

Erinma turned off the radio. Fire accidents took people's lives every day, only—like a handful of burn victims, Erinma had come out of the fire but not without the scars to show for it.

God, what do you think about my scars? You said in Your Word I wouldn't be burned when I go through the fire. And yet, here I am.

A minute passed. And then:

Your scars are beautiful to Me, Erinma. Trust in Me for the unveiling.

CHAPTER 3

ERINMA

Slowly, she inhaled the crisp morning air as she wrapped her arms around herself. In retrospect, Mr. Moses had somewhat been a master storyteller of sorts—even if his sole lingos were pidgin English and Igbo—he told stories from the Bible with passion and understanding. It was similar to tales by moonlight—an African culture where an older person, usually a woman, would tell folktales to children and all who were willing to listen. But this time it wasn't a folktale but the Gospel.

The fragrance of a believer.

Erinma had been more than eager for the seeds of the Gospel to germinate in her life. But as she got older, such stories mattered less to her as she became more focused on her love life and the role she played at Proud Belle.

You killed them. Those poor people died because of you.

Erinma gasped for air as she opened her mouth. Her eyes squeezed shut. She shook her head and pressed her palms against her ears to bid the thoughts away. On all counts, it wasn't a pleasant thought. It contradicted everything her therapist had told her.

God, please make it stop. Make the thoughts stop.

Even though quietness hummed around her, she could hear the deafening screams and see the chaos in her mind's eyes as people scurried across the compound, crying that the boss' daughter was trapped in the house with

their gardener's small daughter. Erinma could still smell the thick smoke that filled the night air.

And as if those memories weren't enough, the weight of guilt lay heavy on her chest even two years later.

They died because of you.

She held her middle as a familiar wave of nausea overcame her as those five words floated in her head like a thick, dark cloud, showering heavy drops of water on everything else, dampening her mood. She'd woken up that morning after an hour spent the night before studying the Scriptures. Words leaping from the pages and wrapping their arms around her heart, allowing their warmth to seep in and make her feel loved and safe. She felt at peace as she slept off. Only to awaken three hours later from a nightmare recounting the night's horrors.

It felt like she took one step forward and two steps back to the same spot.

She felt compelled to pull at the few strands of hair that remained. Scream. Fall to the ground as she allowed the deep-seated ache burst forth and succumbed to the nausea that always followed. She was already shattered on the outside. On the inside, the weight of her remorse pressed down on her heart on the inside. Waiting for it to crack open.

Erinma blinked her eyes open.

No matter what anyone said—she knew she was partly to blame for what happened that night.

Shoving the bile back down her throat, Erinma refocused on her reflection in the full-length mirror. If it had been up to her, she would have skipped this furniture piece when the interior decorator revamped the house. That is, if her therapist hadn't insisted on it.

In addition, Erinma made certain that all the rooms had fire extinguishers and smoke detectors, and that an entryway was made in both the kitchen and bedroom for a quick escape. She double-checked the gas burners and all appliances every night to make sure they were turned off. She slept with only the ceiling fans on, no matter how hot it was or how many mosquitoes were buzzing around.

For several months, she'd slipped into a shadow of her former self. She'd lived out of touch with reality. Undecided about her life, completely disregarding anything she'd accomplished and plagued with unanswered questions.

God, I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to feel this way.

Everyone said it wasn't her fault. That it just happened.

God, what do You feel about my scars? About how I feel now?

You're My special rose, Erinma. I love you. Nothing has changed...

Her shoulders sagged in relief. Accepting those thoughts, Erinma turned her gaze out the window and her heart skipped a little at the sight of her garden. She'd picked the closest room with the best view of the backyard, even if it was the smallest of her three-bedroom bungalow rooms.

She welcomed more distracting thoughts she'd been mulling over for a while.

If you knew you would live for only a short time, what would you do differently about your life?

The question still disrupted her emotions and left her slightly confused. Odavwaro had asked her that question. Six months later, the question persisted somewhere in Erinma's mind with an empty rectangular checkbox beside it waiting to be filled with a response. Somehow, Erinma believed the answer would be the start of something new. Still, it raised another question she wasn't sure she had a straightforward answer for: what had she done on earth so far with the life and resources God had given her?

"I don't know," Erinma had said after several minutes had gone by. *"I'm not sure what I would do."*

"I know what I would do. I would live with eternity in view. I wouldn't let anything dictate what I can or can't do. Knowing my days are numbered, I would live free and loved and stop to smell the roses," Odavwaro said with conviction, flicking her thick wrist as she brushed away Pringles crumbs off her jeans. *"Once in a while, events make us remember our time on earth is temporal."*

Something warm and tingly thrummed in Erinma's chest even now.

Odavwaro's reply shouldn't have come as a shock to Erinma. Her executive assistant and recent friend had always been the solid-Christian type. Her relationship with God was envious and intimidating, and the ease with which she spoke about God so easily in casual conversations always gave Erinma goosebumps. That, and the accompanying craving to grow closer to God and maybe get to know Him on a more personal level. Hear Him speak. Follow His path for her life—whatever that path may be.

But Erinma's Sunday church learnings and tidbits about God from her youth weren't enough to explain why her life had taken a sharp trajectory

for the worse. She was unprepared. Her sheltered and easygoing life didn't know how to deal with such drastic changes.

Her response to Odavwaro's hard-hitting question proved as much:

"What roses?" Erinma responded with a dry laugh. "Don't you get it, Odavwaro? People are dead because of me! How do you expect me to get over that? There's nothing left on this side of the world that I can call beautiful." Couldn't she see what had become of her? "Everything I knew or believed about myself doesn't matter compared to Noelle's parents dying. Or Noelle lying in a hospital bed and fighting to have a normal life. Nothing else matters."

"It wasn't your fault..."

"It was because I did this to them. If I wasn't there..." Erinma let her words trail off as the words stuck in her throat. They wouldn't have needed to enter the main house if she wasn't there. If she hadn't been at the house, they would still be alive talking about Noelle's achievements in school and making plans to further her education. If Mr. Moses was alive; he would lecture her on the wealth of nature.

Odavwaro paused for a bit. *"There is something beautiful, Erinma. God already told me. And I know, with time, He'll tell you too. You just have to open your eyes to see it,"* came Odavwaro's soft reply. *"It would be hard. But ask God to open your eyes. You're alive for a reason. This war... this fight, it's not over yet."*

Back then, Erinma wished she could see what Odavwaro saw. But her question bothered her. She didn't want to think about which side of eternity she might have ended up on that night. Because she still blamed herself. Still believed she should have died that night and not Mr. and Mrs. Moses. With their godly principles and easygoing lifestyle, they were the sweetest couple she'd ever met.

And then, just like that, they were gone.

Gone to be with the Lord.

She had heard that phrase many times, a pre-horrible incident. But now that it hit so close to home, it felt different. Personal. She was only eleven when her grandmother passed, but the idea of death had only been the physical process and nothing about the soul or spirit.

Now, she pondered upon what it felt like to be so close to God that you could see Him face-to-face. To be with Him not just in faith and spiritual

connections alone, but everlastingly. A semi-physical and spiritual way where a person was close enough to touch Him.

Her face squeezed as she frowned; did that even make sense?

Erinma turned from the window and got dressed. Every inch of her was sore from failed attempts to sleep at night.

As if to torture her, the nightmares of that dreadful night kept her awake, reminding her she was lucky to have cheated death. That she'd come so close still shook her to her bones.

I'm so sorry, Mr. Moses, she whispered. Surely, someone far above would accept her apology or pass it along to the Moses' if they couldn't hear her at the moment; but she desperately wanted to believe they were in a better place.

Following Odavwaro's words, Erinma had asked, begging God to open her eyes. And He had, filling her heart and soul with light that had left her sobbing for days.

Erinma's eyes had opened to the truth and countless possibilities that were made available to her—about who she was in Christ and the benefits that were open to her.

When she'd recovered, something had changed within her—her insides burning with fire and a wave of peace she'd never known before, even though she still looked the same on the outside.

She paired a long-sleeved turtleneck with a matching shade of dark pencil pants and a pink sleeveless blazer. Her wig of choice for the past month had been a honey blonde that curved at the nape of her neck. She peered at her reflection again, knowing that this was just one of the many things she couldn't conceal with Proud Belle's many facial and beauty products.

She blinked, shifting her gaze from the circles to the jagged lines that ran across her left cheek and down to her neck. No amount of moisturiser could soften or smooth out the brown, dried-up skin. She had spent so much time staring at her reflection that she knew where the hollow was, even if she had to close her eyes. The incessant itching that had once tempted her to tear her flesh, if only to make it stop.

She shook her head as she took one last look at her appearance, and then she grabbed her scarf and jacket from the bed, taking hurried steps out of her house.

It was at times like this she came close to regretting her impulsive decision to move out of her parents' house. Back then, it had been the best option; the pressing need to be independent and try to build her life into what it was now.

The sound of her phone ringing broke the car's silence as she turned out of her street. She put on her earphones and answered the call.

"Erinma love, how are you?" Her mother asked loudly, amid the noise in the background.

Erinma squinted at the disturbance. "I'm fine, mummy. Good morning."

"Good morning, dear. There's heavy traffic going to the Island because of those nuisance trailers and tankers heading to Apapa. Honestly, I'm so fed up with this country. It's always one problem or the other. Now there's trouble with one of those reckless drivers that rammed into someone's Range Rover. To top it off, the A.C in this car isn't working and heat is killing me here."

"Sorry, mum. I can imagine. Hope no one was hurt."

Her mother sighed heavily. "Not at all. It's the rear end of his car that bore the brunt. Anyway, it is well. I wanted to check up on you. It's been a while since you came to the house. When are we seeing you?"

Erinma stopped at a red light and fidgeted with the loop of her earrings. Her mother always sought an opportunity to see her. It didn't matter she frequented the house once a week for Sunday dinners. "I don't know, mummy. You know how busy things are at work."

"Oh, I know. You don't have to remind me. Your father keeps going on about it." Another sigh passed her mother's lips. "I just miss having my two girls around. Maybe when you and your sister give me grandkids, I won't feel this alone and jobless."

Erinma smiled at the subtle reminder for her to get married. Somto, her elder sister, had been married for over a year and almost everyone was eager to hear the good news. Neither of them knew the couple had waited a year to enjoy their honeymoon before trying for a baby.

Information Somto had only made privy to Erinma.

"You aren't jobless. You plan charitable events. You're organising a get-together for widows. Erinma almost scoffed. Her mother was hardly ever idle. Maybe that's why her father hated staying home. All his life he'd always been hands-on in all of his business. Things changed. Such was life.

“I want to hold tiny Erinmas and Somtos. Maybe when you and Lanre finally settle down, you two can work on that.”

She felt a small pinch in her chest at the mention of her longtime boyfriend and now fiancé.

“I’m currently on my way to the hospital.” Erinma opted for a change in topic.

Mum sighed. “I should go there as well. Please, send my love to her. We are praying for her.”

“I will.”

Her phone beeped then, and she smiled once she glimpsed the caller-Id from the corner of her eyes.

“Mummy, please, I will call you after my meeting and let you know when next I will come. Greet daddy for me.”

“Okay, my darling. Take care.”

Erinma said she would and hurriedly accepted the other call.

“Hey, Doll face,” his warm voice sent a thrill down her back, although the pet name made her cringe a little. It was like the effect of an African Walnut—sweet to eat but left a bitter aftertaste in the mouth.

“Hi.”

“I’m guessing you were talking to your mum. How is she doing?”

“She’s good.” She checked her dashboard for the time. 7:45. Odavwaro had scheduled her meeting for Eleven o’clock. There was still plenty of time before she had to show up at the office.

“I just called to check on you. Heading to the Plaza for a meeting. I wish I could get one of your good luck kisses. It would totally make my day.”

She chuckled as she brushed a strand of hair out of her eye. “Sorry. Maybe later?”

“Hmmm. I’ll hold you to that. What are you wearing?”

Erinma stiffened at the question. This used to be the norm for them. But things had changed.

“Clothes.” She swallowed against the bile that rose in her throat.

He chuckled. “I know you’re wearing clothes, Doll face. You won’t step out of your house naked.”

“Yeah. Sorry Lanre, I have to go. I’m almost at the hospital.” Her chest prickled at the lie.

“Okay. We’ll talk later. I love you.”

Her heart didn't flutter. No matter how much she willed it to. "Love you, too." And she did. She loved him. Her gaze flicked to the engagement ring on her finger. After the fire, he had gotten another ring for her. Erinma lost the last one in the house fire when she pulled it off to take a bath. But deep down, she knew something had changed. Lanre was still the same lovable, masochist guy he used to be, so the change was most likely from her.

When the call ended, she blew out a shaky breath and told herself to relax. Why had she lied? She was still some minutes away from the hospital. But she was itchy to get off the call. Having that line of conversation with Lanre was one she was not looking forward to.

No matter if it was a norm for them a long time ago. Something she wasn't proud of.

If she felt this way when they spoke over the phone, then when they were together in person it was a whole other ball game. At first, when they started, she had felt on top of the world dating Lanre. But now, Erinma doubted a lot of things. Her self-confidence dented. When the pitiful stares and crude comments from online haters became unbearable, she had almost resigned from her job. She couldn't understand how people could be so cruel after all the years she'd spent at the company, working side-by-side with them and picking up from where her father stopped and building it to what it was now.

She shook her head and willed the bad memories away. She checked the dashboard once more. Three minutes past eight. She took a deep breath. It was going to be a great day. Erinma could feel it. Maybe it was also because God had intimated her with an overwhelming peace that something big was coming her way. She was excited. She strongly believed in miracles.

Suddenly, her spirit was lifted.

CHAPTER 4

ANDREW

“H ope you girls had fun,” the guy said. “I know I did.”
“I did as well. Let me speak for myself,” one girl cooed and nudged her head in the other girl's direction. “I don't know about that one.”

The guy snaked his arm around the cooing girl's waist and pulled her close.

“Stop it, *joor*,” she said, but her body language said otherwise. “We're in public, baby.”

Dipping his head, he whispered something into her ear and she giggled, pressing her hand against his chest. Whatever he was saying had her fisting his shirt and pulling him close. The other lady, on the other hand, busied herself with her phone, acting like the other couple was invisible.

Andrew was on the verge of interrupting their silly display of affection and telling them to get into the car. However, he held his tongue. It wasn't the right way to treat a paying customer, and basic training said that customers were king. Even with their crabby attitudes. Didn't mean it gave them a right to mistreat others.

He inhaled deeply and willed himself to relax. How old were they? *Probably in their early twenties*, he thought. Most likely as dumb as he was when he let himself get enamoured by a woman.

On the brink of frustration, he snatched his phone from the cupholder and dialled home to check on things. He had dropped his daughter off at Auntie B's apartment while he attended to an emergency at work caused by one of his drivers who had called in sick—stopping halfway through his trip. Andrew had to take a bike to where he was, shove him in a yellow taxi and continue the trip. Obviously, it was free. Two hours later, he was terrified when Bella complained of throat pain and a fever. Auntie B confirmed her glands were swollen.

Andrew might not have needed to work on his day off, but the money was important. The more jobs he did, the quicker he attained his goals. The sooner he could offset his loans and prove he was a man of his word, the better.

When she answered the phone, she rasped, "Hi, daddy."

"How are you feeling?"

She coughed. "My throat aches."

Andrew frowned. "Does it hurt to swallow?"

"Yes."

He gazed at the people through the rearview window, his patience fraying. "I'll be back soon." He started the engine, and they stepped back from the car. Lolade's friend shot him a look. Andrew wasn't bothered. He would call another cab for them. Pay if he had to. But his daughter needed him.

The spoiled and snobbish girls could get another ride.

"Lolade, let's go before this driver takes off."

Lolade pouted.

The guy kissed her cheek. "I'll see you later." He came to the passenger's window and hailed Andrew. "Chairman, *abeg no vex*."

Andrew gave a slight nod.

"Okay then. See you later," Lolade said.

They got into the car and waved at the guy. The other friend told Andrew he could go. Her voice was heavy with irritation as she scowled at him.

"Did you call Lucy?"

"Same story."

"I swear, that girl has kwashiorkor. Did you see her stomach?"

The other lady laughed. "I saw it, I saw it! Didn't she say she ate too much?" She kissed her teeth. "One lie after the other used to come out of her mouth."

“If she likes, she can lie from here to Alaska. When she needs help and keeps her mouth shut, she will die of hunger and bad breath.”

“I’m tired of the girl’s matter. I feel bad, though.”

“*Abeg*, keep your guilty conscience to yourself. *Who self-righteousness epp?*”

Andrew refrained from eyeing the two women in the backseat. When he got the notification to pick up a passenger, he’d hoped it would be a guy, so at least they could chat about the Premier League or something equally productive. He’d had enough of the busybodies in one day. At least the two women didn’t have body odour. He had seen quite a few of those—his air freshener could not withstand it.

It can’t be any worse than this, he consoled himself.

A phone chimed, and the loud one answered it. “Hello, love.” She pressed a finger to her lips. “Yes, baby. I’m still at the office. No. I can’t make it to your place this evening. Awww,” she giggled and her friend coughed into her fist.

The Giggly Lolade slapped her friend’s arm.

“Of course, my love. Don’t you worry, I’ll be there over the weekend. Just the two of us. I’ll cook and give you a massage. Yes, baby. Love you too.”

Andrew overheard as she blew kisses to the man on the phone. Same lips she’d probably kissed the other guy with.

“You are doing that guy *strong tin o*,” the friend said when the call ended.

“*Abeg, lemme*. When I asked him to bring money for my business, did he come through? Is it my fault another guy is vying for my attention?”

You’re a cheat, is what you are, Andrew thought the words. Every fibre of his being wanted to yell it at her. But he kept his calm. He kept his eyes on the road while humming Bruno Mars’s ‘Count On Me’ in his head. Andrew had heard the song so many times it drove him crazy listening to it at home, but it was the only thing keeping him from losing his cool right now.

Because if there was one thing he hated more than body odours, busybodies, aggressive passengers and snotty rich girls... It was a cheater.

That he couldn’t deal with. He would rather be on a rooftop with a nagging wife.

As soon as he dropped them off, he doubled back home.

His daughter was lying on the couch when he got to his mum’s home.

“How’s the patient?” He asked.

“Alive and kicking. Cranky. She reminds me so much of her mother.”

Andrew shot his aunt a look. Hopefully, his daughter hadn’t heard her last statement.

“What is it? Why are you staring at me that way? It doesn’t mean I love her less.”

“Where is she?”

Aunty B turned and walked back into the kitchen. “In my bedroom. Make sure you make my bed before you leave.”

He took the familiar path that led to his Aunty’s dimly lit bedroom.

On more than one occasion, Bella had asked about her mother and all Andrew could do was come up with an excuse on how her mother didn’t know how to be a mother and made sure to tell her tidbits about TJ: food she liked (thank God she wasn’t a vegetarian), she loved to laugh—

Andrew frowned, halting his thoughts. There was no point in rehashing the past.

Bella lay on the bed with her head propped on one of Aunty B’s many floral-patterned pillows. Her yellow and pink socked feet tucked underneath the other as she gave undivided attention to her iPad. He caught a glimpse of one of the teenage series she loved to watch.

“Hey, Coco. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” she rasped. Her eyes lifted from the screen. “You came back on time.”

“I told you I would.” He touched her forehead with the back of his hand. It was warm to touch, but not too bad. “Come on. Let’s get you to that crazy, expensive hospital you like so much.”

“I like it because the receptionist always gives me chocolate and the walls are really pretty.”

Bella wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her to the car. “Does that mean you get sick on purpose so you can have chocolates?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Seriously, dad?”

“Just saying.”

“If I wanted chocolates all I needed to do is ask. You said so yourself: *don’t bend to cheap tricks to get what you want.*”

He kissed her forehead. “Glad someone is paying attention.”

CHAPTER 5

ERINMA

I 'm not sure of who I am anymore. Is this all there is to my life? God, how can I serve You more?

The desire bloomed in her chest, and like a spider plant its ribbons stretched out to her soul and spirit.

It was sad how being in the hospital or losing a loved one put things into perspective. How tragedy made a person rethink their life's priorities. Just as sad that Erinma knew she would have done a lot of things differently if given the chance because as of now, it seemed too late to be anything different from who she was.

It didn't mean she didn't have dreams, it just meant she had responsibilities that were placed on her and put on her big girl's pants and do what needed to be done.

Then again, the price had been steep.

As she entered the building, she felt a wave of peace settle on her and waved at some of the staff who were on call. She took the elevator straight up to the children's ward, then smiled at a few nurses as she made her way to the butterfly room, past the foyer and wards. The mural artworks on the wall were primary colours of yellow, blue and red with signposts that said, 'welcome' 'bring your smile' 'Gardens are pretty'.

Each step she took was both fear and hope-driven. When she got to the blue door, she took a deep breath and pushed it open, summoning every

ounce of joy she could. She made herself smile widely. Her cheeks quickly ached at the muscle movements. Noelle needed her to be brave.

“How’s my girl?”

“Aunty E,” she rasped, followed by a cough. Nasal prongs were inserted into her nose, and the tubes extended snugly behind her head, all the way to an oxygen tank.

Erinma took quick strides to her side. “Take it easy. How many times do I have to tell you that a simple wave would do?” She bit down hard on her lip to stop the tears threatening to come down. The taste of blood at the tip of her tongue. Her lower lip, sore, was probably used to such harsh treatments from all the times she’d oppressed it in recent times.

Erinma raised a brow. “If you call me that again, I won’t give you the books I got for you.”

Noelle’s face was pale. She wore tiredness like it was an everyday necessity; like underwear. She should wear a smile on her face; joy marring her cheeks with lines from life currently being lived and enjoyed. Not confined to a hospital bed and a sickly-sweet room to make her life more bearable; a life she had yet to experience fully.

Erinma used to think she took the brunt of the fire, but every time she came here it made her sick to make comparisons of her life to that of a little girl whose only pain before the fire was a scabbed knee or a few verbal rebuttals from chores left undone.

In every way, this was much worse.

“I got something different for you today.”

Noelle lowered her gaze wearily to Erinma’s hands. “What?”

Erinma reached into her tote bag and pulled out a small purple teddy bear.

Her girl’s lips curled into a small grin. “I love it.”

“I knew you would.” She placed the bear on the table with the others. “What should we name this one?”

“It’s a boy. We’ll call him Ben.”

“Ben. Hmmm.” Erinma turned the bear to her, then nodded. “I like the name. Good choice, Noelle.”

Another coughing spell ran on for a full minute. Erinma stroked the little girl’s head. It was warm to touch, but nothing so serious to be concerned about.

“I’m feeling sleepy.”

“Okay. I’ll read you a story. Which one do you want?” Erinma pointed at the small shelf she’d brought in eight months ago. “Pinocchio. Snow White. Rapunzel. Cinderella. Or—” Erinma brought out the books. “My book of Bible stories, Tola and the Pigeon, or Alfred, the Pig in the Sky.”

“Cinderella’s my favourite,” Noelle wheezed. “But I’m tired of it.”

“Mine too. And ditto the tiredness. Try not to talk so much. Just point at which one you want, okay?” She showed Noelle more of the books; a few Enid Blyton books, bedtime stories, and a compilation of Bible Stories. Noelle chose the latter. Erinma set aside the other books and sat next to her on the bed. The girl’s head was on her chest as she read out the story of Deborah. A strong woman in the Bible who was a prophet and wife. A woman who the whole of Israel came to meet so she could judge the people and settle quarrels. She was well-respected in the land. She was a woman strong enough to live for God and obey His calling for her life.

“Deborah spoke to Barak, telling him it was time for the battle to deliver the people from the unacceptable behaviour of king Jabin. But Barak didn’t want to go. He was afraid. And so Deborah told him she would go with him, but if she did, a woman would get the glory instead of him. Barak had no problem with that. He was happy Deborah would be with him. They go to battle and Jabin’s army is chased into the sea. Sisera, the commander of the king’s army, escapes and runs into a woman’s tent, seeking protection. But he didn’t know that was where he would lose.”

As the story ended with the Israelites getting victory in the war, Noelle whispered, “I love Deborah. She’s so brave and strong.”

“Just like you, sweetie.” She stroked Noelle’s cheek with her thumb.

“I know my parents are in heaven, Auntie E.”

Erinma’s heart thumped as she closed the book. “How do you know that?”

She touched her chest. “I know it here. My mum said if we ask Jesus into our hearts and confess with our mouths that He becomes our Lord and Saviour then we’re saved. And even when we die we will live forever. Because our bodies die, but our souls live.”

Erinma couldn’t meet Noelle’s gaze. Her eyes swung from the animated book cover to her chocolate brown fingernails.

“My mum was like Deborah, too. She was a really strong woman.”

It was easy to picture the rosy-cheeked woman with the infectious smile and upbeat demeanour. Erinma was always drawn to the woman’s ease with

life. And to watch her suffer in the end...

Erinma gripped the edge of the bed. Tears welling up. *Don't you dare fall!* She tipped her head back and pressed her lips together. Regaining control of her emotions. It wasn't surprising that she'd captured her daughter's interest at such a young age and taught her God's truth. She definitely caught Noelle young. Erinma finally looked at her. Smiled. "Yeah, I believe so too. She was incredible." Mr. and Mrs. Moses didn't just *talk* about God, they lived Him out. Erinma could only hope to exude such virtues. She wasn't perfect. She wasn't even halfway there. For the time being, she simply existed.

Noelle yawned.

"Sweet dreams."

Noelle went still, her breathing shallow as sleep swept her away. Adjusting her head properly against the pillow, Erinma got off the bed with a sigh and moved to the small bookshelf. They had read every book in their small library. Several times. Erinma was tired of reading them, but persisted because of her girl's sake. Reading Noelle's favourite stories until she expressed a desire for more stories, adventures, and fairy-tale endings. At first, when she had been admitted to the hospital, Noelle's hope had been firmer, trusting God that they would discharge her soon. But now she was talking about heaven?

Erinma crammed a book into a tight corner, nearly breaking a nail in the process.

Despite Erinma's surgeries and the recovery period, Noelle hadn't gotten better, following the diagnosis of pulmonary hypertension.

Erinma sat on the chair, finished with her task, and watched Noelle sleep. Her chest's continuous rise and fall. Deborah had been a strong woman who was confident in her role as Judge over the Israelites. Erinma knew she was doing well in her role as CEO of Proud Belle, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something else awaited her.

An uncharted path.

Her gaze shifted to the life-size butterfly on the wall. Its wings were pretty colours of pink, purple, and blue. This was what her girl had to look at asides from the TV mounted high up on the wall. Erinma had made sure Noelle got the best treatment, including the best living conditions. Anything to make her girl comfortable.

The mild smell of antiseptic reached her nose as she exited Noelle's room. At the nurses' station, a man in a white coat stood with his head bowed low as he reviewed a file in front of him. Without him facing her, she knew who it was.

"Dr. Osho?"

He spun around and faced her. A smile captured his face as he gazed at Erinma.

"Erinma. Good morning. I was told you were around, so I waited here. You look tired. Have you been getting enough sleep?"

Growing self-conscious, Erinma tilted her head so her hair fell a little at the side of her face. "Yes, I'm fine, thanks."

Dr. Osho raised a thick brow questioningly.

She conjured a small smile for his benefit. "It's a busy period for us at work. I'll be fine." She cleared her throat. "How is she doing?" Erinma motioned to Noelle's room.

The smile dimmed as he shook his head. "Not so good. If we don't get a new pair of lungs soon, she won't make it."

She'd heard the words over the last couple of months. But even as they said it she held onto faith. Hope. God's promises were yea and Amen. So why wasn't Noelle receiving a clean slate of health? A miraculous healing?

The tears flowed freely. How could this doctor man hold so much power and knowledge to declare the end of a person's existence? A child who barely had time to make her dreams come true and had her whole life to look forward to.

"I'm sorry, Erinma. We are trying our best for that little girl. We just need a miracle."

"A miracle." She sniffed. "God is still in the business of miracles, right?"

He smiled kindly. "I believe so."

"Thank you, doctor. I'll be back later in the evening."

"My shift would be over by then. But Doctor Bonita will be on duty."

Erinma nodded and moved towards the exit of the hospital. She was a familiar face at Eden's Hope Hospital. She had frequented the place every day for the last seventeen months. Every day she held on to the hope that her visit would bring good news, but time and again, it seemed Noelle's miracle was taking its time coming.

When she was in her car, she took out her phone from her bag. Three missed calls from her mother, Two from her fiancé. A couple of text

messages. None from work, which was good. She'd given her executive assistant Odavwaro strict instructions that she wasn't to be disturbed unless it was an emergency. No calls meant all was well at Proud Belle.

Her parents had started Proud Black (now Proud Belle) fifteen years ago, a makeup company that catered to the Nigerian woman who yearned to look good, but also with an edge that made her own her shade and ethnicity. When the business garnered international recognition via Nigerians in the diaspora, it opened doors for the company. International partners lined up at their door, eager to join the brand to make it bigger. Bolder. Better. Her father, being the businessman that he was, took an offer with a multi-millionaire Asian partner, Suravi. Together they built Proud Belle into what it was today.

With Suravi's help, they opened an industry in Singapore and distributed the products worldwide. The only caveat Suravi had was that Proud Black be renamed Pretty Belle.

Her father made a concession at Proud Belle.

Together they built a profitable beauty company that challenged the world's beauty standards and catered to more acne-prone dark-skinned women. More money was spent on research to make more skin-care and treatment products available to minority women. Explore additional African herbs with rich oils that could be made available. Needless to say, it was a huge success.

Erinma and her family were living the dream.

The good life her parents provided made growing up easy for Erinma and her elder sister, Somto. They had a network of people who wanted to be associated with them, but it wasn't any friendship that had stayed true to the term. Except for her girlfriend, Destiny. Over the years, Destiny had always been by her side. But ever since she'd landed a job as an air hostess in Safari Flight, she was always away—flying to one country or the other. Her friend was living out her fantasy. Erinma couldn't be happier for her best friend. Destiny was having the time of her life. They had remained friends since secondary school and even remained in close contact when Erinma was away at university. While Erinma was in school, it gave considerable publicity to Proud Belle.

Erinma's skin care products were top of the line. She became the envy of her classmates when she showed up to class with ever-glowing skin and posh clothes. She wore Proud Belle with pride and became an ambassador

for the company. Her female coursemates at the university all wanted to use PB's products. The more people who loved the products and spread the word about the brand, the more the company grew.

Her father liked to say it was the invisible hand of God working behind the scenes for his good. In addition, he always said to Erinma and Somto, *do what you love*. When PB hit many obstacles, as all businesses do on their way to success, her father always had a smile on his face. Given the stress of the job, he would do it over again.

And yet every luxury Erinma had enjoyed, every bubble she'd willingly entered, had burst with a loud pop with the fire incident, leaving her with skin grafts, scars and post-burn trauma.

She gazed down at the burn scars on her hands and fingers. In the first few months after extensive surgeries and recovery time, Erinma knew no matter how good PB's primer or brown powder tried to cover her post-burn scars, it wasn't something she wanted to keep doing for the rest of her life. Erinma had never thought herself to be superficial or vain because of her parents' wealth or her good looks, which she inherited from both of her parents. But with the accident, she realised how there had to be more to life. A simple way of living that called to deeper. More.

"God, where are You?"

The answer was immediate. ***I'm right here, Erin.***

"Can't You see Noelle is dying? Won't You send help?"

Be strong for her.

She coughed out a laugh. Was God being serious right now? Be strong for her? What had she been doing for the last several months? Erinma had gone all out with getting the best medical care for Noelle, and dedicated most of her time by the girl's side.

Erinma knew she was a young Christian, but sometimes she found herself clueless about the ways of God.

Girlish laughter reached her ears, and she turned to see a man with a well-groomed beard kneeling in front of a young girl of about seven years old. The man pressed the back of his palm against the girl's neck and she giggled once more. When he said something to her, she nodded vigorously, her palms pressed together in prayer. He stood up. And when he stood up, he stood *up*. He was quite tall. Probably a foot taller than Erinma's 5'5" if she really wanted to narrow it down. He took the girl's hand in his and they made their way to the front doors of the children's hospital.

She mentally captured his athletic body, admiring his bulky frame and confident strides. Clearly, he was comfortable in his skin.

What am I doing? Ogling a tall, muscular stranger was what she was doing. She cleared her thoughts of his physical characteristics, focusing instead on his interactions with the girl Erinma presumed was his daughter.

Erinma had seen him a few times with his daughter. But his daughter was healthy, not stuck to a bed with an oxygen tank.

Which was as well.

Not everyone had a sick child to visit.

And not everyone was grateful for the joys of good health. Another thing Erinma's insides struggled to be grateful for, knowing she should be the one on the bed.

The man turned his head slightly, as if he was aware he was being watched. Their gazes collided and she looked away, but not before noticing the beginnings of a frown on his handsome features. She started her engine, changed gears and reversed out of the parking lot with speed and precision. She didn't dare to turn around to see if he was staring at her. She didn't want to see his disgusted expression.

The only time she forgot about her scars was when she was in the room with Noelle. However, in the real world, out in the open where everyone could see her and opinions could be formed in the blink of an eye, she was reminded once again of who she had become.

CHAPTER 6

ANDREW

“Daddy, let’s go.” Bella tugged on his arm. Andrew shifted his gaze from the car and back down at his daughter. Her droopy eyes and pale face looked up at him. “Yeah, sorry. Let’s go in.” He shook his head at what had just played out, perplexed as to why the woman had bolted as soon as she noticed him staring at her. Was she a private investigator? A spy? He wouldn’t put it past the old man to try something as silly as that. It had come as a surprise when he finally sighted the driver days ago. Only for her to flee after their eyes met minutes ago. The side windows were tinted so he couldn’t get another glimpse of her, but he caught the licence plate number: *ENR285PB*.

What private investigator used a unique plate number like that?

He rubbed the back of his neck as he took the stairs two at a time. He pulled the glass door open and walked in. The breeze from the A.C. cooled his face. The aroma of vanilla in the reception area was more pleasant than the usual antiseptic odours in hospitals.

He was grateful he had the funds to bring his daughter to a sophisticated children’s hospital. Not that he wanted to spend his hard-earned money in a hospital, but he wanted the best care for his daughter, even if it was just to treat a common cold.

The receptionist was smiling down from her large desk at his daughter as Bella accepted a blue candy wrap from her.

Andrew nodded at the elderly woman. "Good morning, ma."

"Morning, Mr. Madu. Bella, my love, how are you?"

"I'm fine, ma," Bella replied with a tired grin plastered on her face. "How are you too?"

The receptionist grinned. "I'm very well, my dear. Thank you for asking." She raised her eyes to Andrew. "The doctor is currently with a patient. Please, have a seat."

As Andrew did, he caught up with the news while Bella played a few games on his second phone while he monitored BAM Cabs on his mainline. Occasionally, he got behind the wheel and handled small distances. Bella was his priority, and he made every effort to be available whenever his daughter needed him. It had been difficult at first, trying to balance his business and being a single dad. But he found a way to balance his job and be the dad Bella deserved.

Forty-five minutes later, as they walked back to the car, he found himself searching the spacious parking lot for any sign of the sleek car, but it wasn't there. Disappointment slid over him. He half-hoped it would be there so he could walk up to the driver and ask why she had been watching them. Because he knew it had been a woman.

His eyes narrowed as a thought dawned on him but he quickly discarded it. It wasn't possible. Even if it was, he would fight hard to keep his daughter safe from the likes of them. They didn't want to be a part of her life. She'd never be in theirs.

"Can I have fries and burgers?" Bella asked as he drove out of the hospital premises.

He arched his brow. "Burgers? As in plural?"

"Yeah, I want two burgers."

"Coco, you want to eat more than me? Is it now a competition?"

She rolled her eyes with a hint of a smile on her lips. "It can never be a competition, daddy. You're so tall and big, and my stomach is like the size of your foot."

Andrew barked out a laugh. There was never a dull moment in his life. Bella kept him on his toes, which left little room for dating. Not that he minded. He wasn't ready to let another woman into his heart.

CHAPTER 7

ERINMA

Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are.

Erinma mentally recited the Scripture as she planted the seeds in the dug earth and covered them with the dirt. She found gardening to be cathartic after a long day/week of brainstorming, meetings with several department heads and keeping up with the day-to-day management of the company. Every day, no matter how late she got home from work, she made it her responsibility to water and tend to her plants. She knew that giving care was the only way she could feel better. In some ways, it felt like she was seeking absolution from her sins, even though she knew Jesus had done justice to that already.

Without her help.

You will always be guilty.

She blinked several times in response to the disturbing thought. *Where did that come from?* Whatever the case, she felt a surge of panic rise in her chest.

You forgot the concluding part, came the soft, sweet voice she was growing to know and find comfort in. It was nothing like the sardonic murmurs that tormented her from time to time, shaking her tree and raining down uncomfortable leaves all around her.

Erinma closed her eyes and tried to remember it. *If God can clothe the fields and meadows with grass and flowers, can he not clothe you as well, O struggling one with so many doubts?*

She blinked her eyes open. “What doubts do I have, God?” *Please take them away if they aren’t making Noelle feel any better.* The only thing she doubted was if Noelle would make it out of the hospital alive and come live with her. Erinma had rented the three-bedroom bungalow a year before, hoping to rediscover herself and come to terms with her new reality.

After the accident, she became unsure of who she was and who she was supposed to be. She got to her feet and grabbed a few of her tools. She yanked dead plants and pesky weeds from the baby’s breath, orchids and sunflowers. Then she moved on to her vegetable patch and knelt in front of it. She inspected her lettuce’s root ball before beginning the task of digging a hole twice as wide as the root could fit into, making sure the hole was somewhat jagged to adequately accommodate the root. Mr. Moses had given her the instructions a long time ago when she asked why he moved plants around the garden. It was to ensure that they received the necessary light and nutrients. So far, she had faithfully followed his principles.

When she questioned his actions, he told her, “*E be like sey you dey look after pikin. You go make sure sey him get all the milk and love from him mama and papa.*” She thought he was destroying the plant and flower, but in actuality, he was nurturing them. “*Like Bible talk am, Make una dey inside mi, so dat I go dey inside una too. As di branches nor fit bear fruit with en own pawa unless e dey inside di vine, na so una nor go fit bear fruit, unless una dey inside mi.*”

Erinma carefully lowered the flower into the hole, making sure it sat slightly above the soil line. Then she refilled the hole and patted it down. She added a bone meal and watered it. It was one of Mr. Moses’ trade secrets of making the root system strong.

Erinma looked over her work, pleasure coursing through her at her hard work, despite the pull to climb onto her bed and sleep for several hours.

I’m caring for you, Erinma. I transplanted you here to re-bloom.

That made her heart flutter. What Odavwaro said to her was true: God had plans for her. Plans that included her scars and the circumstances surrounding them. *Thank You, God.*

With heaviness in her limbs, she dragged herself to her bedroom to soak in the tub and ready herself for another Sunday dinner with her family. They

were there for her during her darkest hours. Throughout her multiple surgeries and recovery period, her mother was by her side.

It might have sounded stupid to them when Erinma announced at dinner that she was moving out. Her marriage to Lanre was supposed to happen pre-fire, but when that happened, things changed. Marriage was no longer centred on her mind. Her life as she knew it was upended. She could have died and the emptiness she felt day-in-day-out would never have been filled. That alone swayed her decision to get her own place.

“We are your family, Erinma. Let us take care of you,” Mum had pleaded when she announced she was moving out just before her sister Somto and husband, Chuks, joined them for dinner.

“I can take care of myself, mum. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m a big girl.”

“And your wedding to Lanre? What will he say?”

“The wedding is only on hold. I need to recover fully first: mind, soul, and body.”

“But—”

“Mum, please don’t make this any more difficult for me. I need some time to myself. As for the company, I left Odavwaro in charge. She’s up-to-date on everything that’s going on and will keep me posted.”

“Is this move temporary?” Mum asked.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think it is.” Erinma’s gaze moved to her father, who had remained piercingly quiet since her announcement. “Daddy?”

“If doing so will help you recover faster, then go ahead. I know you’ll stay on top of things and I trust the company will survive the duration.”

Erinma peeled off her mud-stained clothes and tossed them into the empty laundry basket—she had done her laundry earlier in the day. It was a huge step for her father to hand over the reins of the company to her executive assistant, even if it was only temporary, and Erinma was grateful he trusted she had the right team working with her.

When she and her family got together for dinner, it was always a classy affair. Maybe it was her mother's way of playing host and giving herself an excuse to dress up. Ever since her father climbed up the corporate ladder and got more exposed to the finer things of life, he used that as a benchmark for most things he did.

Tonight, though, she wasn’t in the mood to dress up.

Erinma dressed down in ripped jeans and a lightweight turtle sweater, having just showered. Even with her parents, she was hesitant to show any skin.

She noticed how her father's gaze lingered on the scars, tinged with pain. It was best if she was covered up, so they didn't rehash memories, although they still lingered.

Her phone rang with a call from her best friend.

"Hi, girlfriend," Destiny said once Erinma answered.

"Hi ya. What's up?"

"I'm good." Destiny yawned. "How are you?"

"Fine. You went to the concert, *abi*?"

"Yes o. It was mad fun, babe. You missed out."

"Did you go with your new boyfriend?"

Erinma sensed her friend's hesitation before she said, "No way. He's not a fan." Erinma was aware her friend had been seeing a guy on steady for a few weeks. So far, Destiny was all hush-hush about it. But time had a way of unveiling things. Especially since her best friend hadn't been in a serious relationship in months. Destiny's on-again, off-again flings with an attractive passenger, her cabin crew or casual dates with good-looking men during lay-overs in gorgeous cities didn't count with Erinma.

"So, hopefully, I get to meet your guy soon enough. Lanre wanted to go but I couldn't. These days, I just want to avoid some of these concerts."

"I understand, sweetheart. It's because of the appearance thing, right? No worries."

Actually, it was more than that, but going into detail would only make things more awkward. "Are you getting ready for your flight?"

Destiny yawned again. "My flight doesn't leave until late at night."

"Have you gotten enough sleep, though? Seriously, Destiny, don't spend all night at a concert when you have to work the next day," Erinma said.

"Babes, you're well aware of my family's problems. You should tell me to take off my shoes and party hard."

As she looked around her bedroom, Erinma once again realised how fortunate she was: exquisite furnishings and a queen-size canopy bed. A wardrobe stuffed with designer clothes and shoes. She didn't have to worry about the Academic Staff Union of University's constant strikes, which stalled the lives of many undergraduates. She hadn't experienced the many

troubles that many of her peers had in their unsteady economy and job search.

Everything she had was the result of a blessed life.

As her elder sister would point out, Erinma had more reasons to be thankful.

“Is your brother still using those drugs?”

Destiny groaned. “Yeah, and I’m fed up.”

Erinma was well aware of Destiny’s younger brother’s dealings with self-medicated drugs due to his battles with low self-esteem. The issue had given Destiny many headaches.

“I wish you would come to Bible Study with Odavwaro and me once in a while.”

“What do you even talk about in that Bible Study? Is it not just Bible, Bible, all the time? I can open my You-Version App and read as much as I want.”

Erinma applied a little lip-gloss. “It’s not just Bible reading all the time, Dee Dee. We discuss a lot of things: life, daily challenges, and bad habits. We find answers to our problems in God’s Word.”

Destiny yawned again. “Maybe next time. I don’t know.”

“Dee Dee...”

“I swear, babes, I’ll think about it. You know how things have been at home and with the job.”

“Okay.” *Don’t love your job more than you love God*, Erinma was tempted to add. But she didn’t want to come across as pushy. Erinma already felt guilty for getting Destiny her current job. Yes, they were better off now after her best friend had gone through several job interviews and was roaming about Lagos in search of a decent job—all while her family depended on her for a living. They had been living hand-to-mouth for several months owing to their circumstances.

“Oh well. It’s Sunday. Dinner with the fam?” Destiny’s question cut into her thoughts.

“Uh, yeah.” Erinma glanced at her watch. “I’m already running late.”

“Okay. We’ll talk later. Love you, sis.”

“Love you too.”



“I’m proud of what you’ve done with the company so far. But as you know, more can still be done.” He took a sip of his favourite pastime: Baylis. Erinma never understood his love for the drink. Yes, it looked creamy and velvety. Chocolatey, even. But she couldn’t stomach the tiniest percentage of alcohol in her system.

“Thank you, daddy.”

He looked more relaxed now that he was home all the time. His eyes were alert and bright other than the tired, baggy looks of before. Although there was still some of his bulky frame that he was yet to gain.

“I spoke with Suravi yesterday. We discussed the upcoming product line and she’s excited about how much Nigerian women are looking forward to the ageless facial cream and body scrub. She was particularly impressed that you interviewed women in that age group to talk about how successful Proud Belle products have been and how each product they’ve used has helped transform their lives.”

“I’m glad she did. God gave me that idea. I can’t take credit for it.”

Her father wagged a finger at her. “Yes, but you must keep in mind that you are a vessel in God’s hands. If you were not at His disposal, it wouldn’t have happened. Take some of the credit, my dear.”

Erinma remained quiet and focused on finishing her food while her sister spoke about her upcoming trip to Abuja for a week’s conference and wouldn’t be able to make next Sunday’s dinner. Her husband was also MIA that evening. Chuks shuffled between Nigeria and the U.K

“I can’t afford to miss this important meeting. I’ll also be speaking at an event sometime in the week,” Somto added. “And this could lead to more speaking opportunities for me.”

Erinma peered over her glass at her father. “Good,” their father said, nodding. “Good. Good.”

Mum’s cutlery clattered on the plate as she tossed a glare at their father.

“You and your husband are always busy. When are you going to stay together long enough to make babies? You’re almost forty o! Stop all this jumping from one place to another and build a family,” Mum advised.

Somto and Erinma exchanged glances.

“Mummy, Chuks and I are already a family. Having children doesn’t make us any less of one.”

“Can you hear what your daughter is saying? You are truly your father’s daughter. That kind of rubbish talk shouldn’t come out of your mouth. If your father and I carried the business on our heads, you wouldn’t be here. Talk more of wanting to build a career path. What do you think your husband’s family would say? That we gave them a fruitless daughter?” Mum pursed her lips. “Don’t bring shame to this family. *! na-anụ m?* (*You hear me?*) Get your priorities straight!”

Mum’s gaze swung to Erinma. “And you, don’t follow your sister’s footsteps. Marry as soon as you can and don’t keep the young man waiting. As you are probably aware, the market is tight. It’s been years since I was in the dating pool, but I remember it was tough for a woman to find a good man to marry. Don’t let Lanre slip from your fingers.”

Somto snorted. Mum’s gaze flicked to her again, narrowing her eyes.

Erinma cleared her throat. “I have a meeting with Nelson during the week to discuss some of our branding strategies and website development. He mentioned some ideas I think would go well with our new product line and appeal to youths.”

Her father nodded. “Very good. I’m glad things are going smoothly.”

“Great job, sis,” Somto quipped.

Mum muttered a ‘well done’ under her breath.

They moved to the living area. Her mother loved the colour green, and their living room followed that colour scheme in olive and magenta. All the furniture had been custom-made. Her mother never liked anything common and if people had reason to come to her home, she wanted them to notice its uniqueness. It was a pat on the back for her.

After a few hours of catching up and less-than-subtle hints from her mum about her and Lanre finally setting a date and getting married, Erinma got into her car so her mum’s driver could take her home. Her mother had insisted he drove her back home when she came every Sunday.

Erinma sighed and rested her head against the headrest. Exhaustion seeped into every part of her body. Stifling a yawn with the back of her hand, she took her phone out of her purse and checked through her Instagram Feed. Today alone, she had over a hundred followers. She had kept her posting to a minimum since the accident. Only posting funny

videos, pictures, promoting Proud Belle products, inspirational and motivational quotes and what have you. No more selfies or pictures of fun dates with Lanre.

People online could be crass with their comments.

Before the accident, the comments were at a minimum. After the accident, it had doubled. People body-shaming her and questioning the authenticity of Proud Belle's products. It was amazing how quickly many people went from devoted fans to haters in the blink of an eye. She frowned. Or maybe they already were, but she hadn't seen it because of the bubble she lived in.

Curbing her annoyance, she tapped the search icon and typed *Lanre Nejo*. The blue checkmark on her boyfriend's Instagram handle came out on top. The official page of Lanre Nejo, one of the heirs of a billionaire Yoruba mogul. His most recent post showed him chilling in front of his grey Maserati, his hands in his pockets. His caption: Once in a while you just have to take a moment to appreciate the good things in life. Xoxo.

Next up was a boomerang video of him and Titobiloluwa Jacobs—a top lifestyle blogger/influencer and Publicist—laughing and joking around with a new phone series from a well-known phone company.

Erinma glanced out the passenger window and saw they were still a distance from her house. Having time to kill before she got home, she went through his wall, post after post. Digging deep as far as a year ago since he didn't post frequently, but had a growing following of over a million.

Erinma stopped at a post of the last photo of the two of them he ever posted. A black and white of their foreheads pressed together, their eyes closed. The last time she had her natural hair on full display. It was amazing how little they valued cherishing the little things until it was too late. A tear fell from nowhere, and she swiped a hand across her face. She read the caption:

“Things happen in life. I'm grateful my sweetness is still among the living. Thanks for the love and care for my Doll-face. Please keep us in your thoughts and prayers. We appreciate the love. XOXO.”

Fresh tears welled up.

There were over two thousand comments with praying emojis and red hearts, as well as people wishing them well. She smiled as she read a few of

the comments and smiled. She'd been confused about her relationship with Lanre the previous week, but it seemed like all she needed was a reminder of their love and why she'd fallen for him in the first place.

Erinma's thoughts recapped the memory of when she met the cool and flirty Lanre Nejo. Erinma spotted Lanre across the room. When she noticed him staring at them, a surge of warmth rushed through her body. She'd thought Lanre had his eyes set on her best friend's curvy figure. Since their school days, Destiny had always been the go-to person for men who adored full-figured women. Erinma, on the other hand, thought she looked good with her hourglass figure and small frame. Lanre had walked up to them, shouldering his way through the throng of sweaty and love-struck fans, mouthing the lyrics to a nostalgic love song.

Erinma grinned to herself. It was the ideal meet-cute if she used modern terminology. He was dangerously attractive in a tight red polo shirt with the tattoo of a lion's head on his chiselled biceps peering at Erinma. As he approached her, his eyes kept making contact with hers.

Erinma had never understood women's appeal for the whole bad-boy thing, but she could see it now. And she could feel his gaze as he assessed her. She stood up straight, secretly hoping he liked what he saw. Having a man by her side was not so hard a feat. Still, several of them fell short of her expectations: smart, tall and capable of making her laugh. Someone she could be free with without her father's money posing as a sifter.

When he stood in front of her, he gave a slow smile that made her knees buckle, her heart fluttering at his handsome face.

He leaned in close and she could smell his earthy scent mingled with a hint of alcohol. "Hi. My name is Lanre." He extended his hand.

She swallowed hard at his husky male voice. "I know." She'd seen several photos of him on social media and TV. He was every bit as attractive as they made him out to be. In person, however, the cameras had missed a few nitty-gritty on him: beautiful light brown eyes and his earthy scent, which ignited a spark within her. He was Adewole Nejo's third son, on the brink of starting his own tech company. His father owned Velocity Group, which included Marigold Royal Hotel and Suites in Nigeria and Ghana and had just recently opened one in South Africa. Safari Flight was also owned by the Nejo family. Destiny and her had even gushed about him one too many times. And now he was standing right in front of them. Erinma tried to contain her excitement. *Act cool.*

She returned the handshake with a smile. “I’m Erinma Roberts.”

“I know,” he said, repeating her response to him. His eyes swept over her in a not-so-casual way. Erinma was confident in her red one-shoulder corset dress. Beside her, Destiny coughed and Erinma made quick introductions. Completely taken aback, not because she’d forgotten her best friend was standing next to her (which she had), but that she’d been totally enamoured by him. That hardly ever happened.

She watched as they exchanged polite greetings with each other and did a mental backflip when Lanre returned his gaze to her. Eager for her best friend to catch on and leave her alone with the caramel-skinned guy in front of her, Destiny eventually took the hint (after several glares and head nudges) and sauntered off to the ladies’. Erinma and Lanre exchanged numbers after a brief conversation. Barely ten minutes after he returned to his friends, she got a notification of a new follower: Lanre Nejo. Thankfully, she had her back to him, and he couldn’t see the silly grin plastered on her face.

She waited a whole hour later and followed him back.

Erinma focused outside the window of the car as the driver took a turn to her street. Not too long after the concert, they hung out as friends and weeks later he took her out on their first date.

Recently, she felt he was pulling away. That they weren’t as close as they used to be pre-fire. Why was she so much in doubt? Lanre loved her. He would never hurt her. Maybe he was also trying to come to terms with her sudden mood swings and withdrawals. The disfiguration of her appearance.

If anything, maybe she had to reaffirm her love for him. She abandoned the app and opened their WhatsApp chat.

Hey. What are you up to?

Just leaving the parents’ place.

Thinking of you. I love you. 😊

Once she was safely home in bed, she checked the message she sent to Lanre. It was delivered, but he hadn’t read it yet. She typed out another message:

Let’s plan a date night soon. Kisses. 😘

Erinma dropped the phone on her bedside table and went to bed.

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CHAPTER 8

ISIMEME

You sabi play? Something dey worry you! Abeg, commot for here o jare!

Isi rolled her eyes at the ridiculous display of two grown-up men arguing over football headlines at a newsstand. Taking cover from the sweltering Lagos sun. It was about twice as hot as her skin was used to. Sweat beads stood out on her forehead, and her underwear was stuck to her back under her blouse.

As she walked down the street with other commuters, she hiked her bag up her arm and doubled her pace, her eyes searching for a particular building among the many boutiques and offices. She'd heard so much about Lagos life before she moved. The stories were true: robbery during the day, harassment from *area boys* and high living costs, but Isi wasn't going to let that hinder her from getting ahead in life.

She hadn't woken up and left her family and little friends she had in Benin for no reason.

This was where God needed her to be. If Isaac in the Bible prospered in the land during the famine, then she could withstand a few hiccups along the way getting to her own promised land.

I love this crazy city...

Isi was starting to know the town as if she'd been born there, rather than in the far-off state of Benin city. Having spent only three months in Lagos, she wasn't looking forward to returning home. It was everything that every

visitor to Lagos lamented about: noisy, congested, crazy traffic with hurried commuters.

All the same, Isi was excited to be a part of the hustle and bustle of the megacity. She'd stayed tied to her uncle's side for far too long. Too long that she'd remained silent to the hardships she'd faced in his house.

The past is the past.

Discarding those thoughts, she settled on more pleasant memories.

Like her first time in Lagos. Her lips twitched as she smiled.

She'd visited back when she was nearing thirteen. Her mother had brought her along when visiting a longtime friend from secondary school. Isi had thoroughly enjoyed her stay, bonding with Erinma Roberts, the only other girl in the house who was her age. Maybe it had to do with the dazzling mansion Isi and her mother had spent their stay in that made everything appear exciting and too good to be true: the plush bed and fluffy pillows, with cool air from the air conditioner blowing across her back. The clean rooms lacked the musty, mouldy stench that Isi had learned to live with. The rashes on Isi's arms and back had not itched during those blissful nights.

The next day of her stay, Erinma showed her around her house. Had acquainted her with all her toys and they had eaten chips and eggs and sausages with a side of ketchup and a large cup of soda. Even if Isi had arrived in black leggings (ripped around her hip), an old yellow dress she'd had since she was eleven, and her hair neatly plaited two days before in the popular Evelyn King hairstyle. Erinma's parents were wealthy, but she had never made her feel small or inadequate. Isi felt like she'd made a best friend in Lagos. She felt like she belonged and wasn't looked down on because of her drab clothes and how poor her family was.

She'd let herself fantasise about being a princess, living in a mansion and marrying a prince. Her imagination knew no boundary. She envisioned herself in a stunning yellow princess gown, beautiful heels and gorgeous accessories. Isi wasn't so certain now if that vision had been a figment of her imagination or a thought planted by God because it kept recurring. It gave her hope that she'd never felt before.

But it quickly elapsed.

After a painful goodbye, Isi and her mother returned to Benin, and they had lost touch as the years went by.

Isi's lips twitched at the memory. Now that she was older, she had done away with the absurd thought of marrying a prince.

Looking left, right and left again, she crossed the road and made her way to the tall building with the signage *Proud Belle* written in black and Fuschia pink with a sprinkle of petals.

No matter the years in-between, Isi had kept up with Erinma's life on social media. Her rise to the position of CEO of Proud Belle. Even the unfortunate house fire. Isi's stomach churned at the thought. But there were some good things the fire hadn't relinquished her childhood friend of.

Erinma's relationship with the handsome Lanre Nejo, son of multibillionaire Adewole Nejo, owner of Marigold Royale—one of the most opulent hotels in the country—was every girl's dream come true. Their relationship kept social media alive with pictures of them together and people tagging them with captions like; #couplegoals #WhatLoveLooksLike #GoodLoving #RelationshipGoals #ManCrush #LoveAndMoneyMakesTheWorldGoRound, making their relationship seem more like a public affair than a private, intimate one. Isi didn't think she could stand having her relationship for everyone to look at and gush over, or worse, criticise.

Of course, people lied on the Gram, but Isi didn't believe photos could lie with the way the couple gazed into each other's eyes—even if the entire world was watching. But what did she know? She had never been in a committed relationship. Had never been kissed before. She drew the line on boundaries with holding hands and the occasional hug with the opposite sex.

Isi adjusted her cotton blouse and ran her hand down the front of her high-waisted trousers. Telling herself to breathe. *Why are you so nervous? This is Erinma, for goodness' sake!*

She bit her lower lip. *But what if she's changed? It's been eighteen years.*

Just walk in.

Oh, that sweet voice of the Lord speaking to her. Sometimes she wanted to run and do as He asked, and other times she wanted to cower and hide. This was one of those latter instances. But obey, she must. He'd led her here for a reason. That, she wanted to believe.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked into the company and went straight to the woman in a white dress behind a massive white desk. Her face was

painted in colours that blended to give her a stylish yet professional look. Perfect for the cosmetic company's first public face.

"Hi, good morning. Please, is Erinma Roberts around?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't. But if you let her know I'm here, I'm sure she'll want to see me..." Isi's words trailed off as the receptionist stared at her like she had confessed to having scales for skin.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," she remarked sarcastically.

"Please. I've come a long way to see her. Do you think you might be able to help me? Just tell her my name and if it doesn't ring a bell, I'll leave."

The receptionist raised two thin brows. Her eyes slid down Isi's frame and back to her face. "And who are you that you believe your name carries weight? I'm familiar with the president's daughters and what they look like. Yes, you are fair like them, but you are no Fulani chick."

"I'm a friend," Isi stated firmly, frustration seeping into her body.

"Oh really?" She gave her another lazy once-over. "Well, the CEO is currently in a meeting. And she won't be free for another five hours." She motioned to the plush seating area with her hand. "You could wait it out and maybe if you see her, you can tell her your name. But as for me? I have work to do." The receptionist focused on the computer screen in front of her and her tapping on the keyboard filled the silence.

That was it? End of discussion?

"Thank you," Isi said.

"And don't even think about charging your phone here or using the restroom. This is not a public establishment."

Isi blinked and turned away.

Patience, Lord. Patience is all I need right now. Give people small power and they abuse it. Wasn't that the same problem the country was having? Pockets of corruption in different parts of the nation were making life difficult for the masses.

She settled down on a red sofa and appreciated how comfortable it was. A pleasant relief from the wood slabs on the yellow and black public bus that had brought her down to Victoria Island. Obviously, the management had spared no cost in creating a welcoming lounge area. She took out a notepad and a pen. But her thoughts returned to her childhood friend. When Isi first heard about the fire, she wanted to reach out, praying her friend would be okay. She also prayed for the girl who got hospitalised. She knew

how a loved one's illness could be draining on all levels. Her uncle's health had deteriorated over the years, and she couldn't abandon him.

Nope. Not going there.

Flipping open her notepad, she went over her objectives for her stay in Lagos. Squatting in her cousin Nosa's tiny apartment with her husband and kids wasn't exactly fun. And half the time Isi was scared stiff that a bedbug would sneak out and hide in her clothes.

She shuddered at the thought of the blood-sucking insect on any part of her body.

With a shake of her head, she dismissed the disturbing thought and for the next few minutes, while keeping an eye out for Erinma, she concentrated on her business plan and the steps she needed to take to launch her career as a chef.



Two hours later, Isi considered taking a break—her throat parched and tummy growling. She left the building after learning from the receptionist where she could get some food. She used her hand to shield her eyes from the unrelenting sun's rays. Across the street, a few people were coming and going from a small cream building. Isi made the move to cross the road to the building when a bike-man appeared from the wrong side of the road. She jumped back, but her eyes widened as she noticed a sleek black car heading toward her. She stepped back quickly, just inches from being hit by the car.

She doubled over, her hand on her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

How did that happen?

She heard cars pull over in the distance, doors open and close, and hurried footsteps as someone rushed to her side. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" A male voice inquired above her head.

The overpowering scent of patchouli and vanilla from his cologne assaulted her senses. She nodded, her head bowed. "I'm fine." She straightened. "I'm sorry I didn't check if a car was coming..." When she saw the man in the clear sunglasses, her voice trailed off. Her mother would

call him *Adesusu* because he was the pure definition of a stud with his fair complexion and well-defined facial features.

"Are you on some sort of suicide mission? Or are your village people pursuing you? That was extremely reckless of you! Don't you know how to cross a street?" He pointed at her left. "You look left, right, and then left again. Take a closer look next time before attempting to cross the road to avoid being killed."

Isi stared at him, her lips parted. His expression was unreadable, but his tone revealed a hint of anger. Was he seriously scolding her before lecturing her on how to cross the street? Irritation crept up her back. What gave him the right to talk down to her, as if she were a child? Did he think she was trying to kill herself on purpose?

"I'm sorry. It was a mistake."

He stared down at her for a few moments. "It's fine. I suppose anyone could have made the mistake." Dark brows knitted together. "Are you sure you're fine, though?"

Isi almost laughed. Now he wanted to act all prince-charming and all? Well, it was too late for a do-over. "Yeah. You don't have to worry about me." She looked behind him and noticed two other men dressed in black standing nearby. *Okay...who's this guy? And why does he have guards with him?*

"Where were you heading to?" He asked.

Isi wiped the sweat from her brow and pointed at the eatery. "Over there."

"For lunch?"

His voice held a foreign tilt to it.

"Yes."

He looked at her again for a brief moment. Then he nudged his head to the cars lining the roadside, which were flanked by two armed police officers. "Why don't you hop in? I'll take you there so you don't have to cross the street."

Stranger slash possible kidnapper alert! God forbid.

She shook her head. "No, thanks." She wanted to get as far away from him as possible. "I told you I was fine." Besides, she didn't want to fall into the hands of some ritualist on the hunt for fame and fortune.

He narrowed his gaze on her, but Isi stood by her decision.

"All right, if you insist."

“Trust me, I won’t make the same mistake.”

He gave a slight nod. “Alright. Enjoy the rest of your day.” He didn’t move away immediately, lingering by her side as though he wanted to say more or offer his assistance one more time. Isi turned, crossed properly this time and walked to the eatery, but she had the impression that his gaze remained fixed on her until she entered the crowded eatery.

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CHAPTER 9

ISIMEME

Isi was growing restless.

It was three hours since she walked into Proud Belle and there had been no sight of Erinma. Had the receptionist set her up for a failed mission on purpose? To top it off, she could taste the thyme from the fried rice at the back of her throat irrespective of her minty gum. At least her tummy was full. *Why would people queue to eat that?*

God, what should I do?

Wait.

Isi chewed on her lip. *Maybe I should talk to her.*

The nudge to wait still weighed heavily on her mind.

She expelled a breath and turned to face the door as it swooshed open to let in a well-dressed man who went straight to the receptionist. The receptionist flashed him a smile and fluttered her eyelashes.

Isi wanted to gag.

The man leaned in close and spoke in hushed tones. The woman cackled and placed a hand on his forearm, still giving off that flirty vibe. Then she tilted her head and pointed in Isi's direction. When he turned around, Isi could immediately tell why the receptionist was flirting/acting inappropriately and was all smiles.

The man was... gorgeous.

He reminded her of Alex Ekubo, a well-known Nigerian actor. Maybe this version was a tad bit finer.

Not overly tall. Just the right height with her head hovering close to his shoulder—If she happened to stand close to him, she'd be just the right, her head hovering close to his shoulder. His dark hair complimented his light brown skin. His jaw was chiselled, nose was beautifully moulded, eyebrows were perfectly groomed and his eyes...

Isi blinked. They were beautiful. But she felt those eyes had more experience than any guy she'd ever dated. She could see the caution signals in bright yellow and black bouncing off him.

"Hi there," he waved as he approached the lounge.

She raised her hand. "Hello."

"Have you been waiting long?" He unbuttoned his mauve blazer to reveal a matching waistcoat and a white dress shirt and plopped down on a black sofa.

Isi shrugged. "It depends."

He quirked his brow. "On what?"

"On your definition of long."

He peered at her as if trying to figure out what she wasn't saying. "My definition of long is anything over twenty minutes." He jutted his chin, curious. "What's yours?"

"Three hours. Give or take."

His pupils dilated. "You've been here for three hours?"

Were his eyes nut brown or chocolate brown? She couldn't figure it out with the two sofas between them. "Yes."

"And Tosin is aware of this?" He gestured to the receptionist, who was currently on a call.

So that's her name...

"She was the one who said I had to wait. She also said I couldn't use the restroom or charge my phone."

He looked back at Tosin, who was still on a call. "Don't mind her. Who are you here to see?"

"The CEO."

"Interview?"

Dressed like this? Isi almost laughed. "No. I'm an old friend."

His gaze narrowed, and he looked her over, and she squirmed in her seat. She wondered what he saw when he looked at her in her inexpensive

clothes and she told herself she was being ridiculous. This guy— stranger— couldn't define who she was, nor could she let his appraisal of her ruffle her feathers.

"I'm Nelson, by the way. And may I have the pleasure of knowing your name?"

"Isi."

"Lovely name. Benin?"

"Yes. You've been to Edo state?"

"During NYSC." He tilted his head. "I haven't seen you around Erinma before. Are you new in town?"

"Nelson, she'll see you now."

Isi turned her head in the direction of the female voice. Tosin eyed her from where she stood. Isi shot her a look but almost squirmed in her seat. Or was that her bladder trying to get her attention and not Tosin's squinted eyes?

"Can I have your phone number?" He asked, rising to his feet and buttoning his wrinkle-free jacket.

"Sorry. No."

"I don't pick up girls like this, if that's what you're worried about."

"No, it's not that. I just don't know you well enough to give you my number."

He cocked his brow. "But isn't that the point of getting it? So we can get to know each other?"

Isi smiled a little. "True. But I still don't feel comfortable giving it to you." She tilted her head to the side. "Would you prefer I give you a fake phone number?"

"You don't look like the type of person who would do that."

"I'm not. Maybe next time if we happen to cross paths again."

He pressed his lips together. "Fair enough. It was nice meeting you, Isi. Enjoy your stay in Lagos."

"Thanks."

He turned and she watched him as he walked away. One thing was sure: there were attractive men in Lagos and her heart wasn't safe if it was already flapping widely for two men in one day.

"Hey, Isi. You said you wanted to see Erinma, right?" Nelson said, walking briskly towards her.

She blinked her thoughts away. "Yeah?"

“Why don’t I take you up? If you’re an old friend, I’m sure Erinma would love to see you.”

She frowned. “Don’t you have an important meeting with her?”

“I do. But if you’re a good friend, Erinma wouldn’t want you seated here waiting for God knows how long.”

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes.” He winked at her and nudged his head at the elevator. “Come on.”

She cast a glance at Tosin, her head bent low as she spoke into the phone. “Sure, why not?” It was a risk, but she would take it. Bag in hand, she quickened her pace to keep up with Nelson’s long, purposeful strides. By the time Tosin noticed what had happened, she was on her feet. Her gaze narrowed on Isi. Nelson waved at her just as the elevator doors were closing. Isi followed Nelson’s lead and gave her a small wave at Tosin. Isi could have sworn she saw steam coming out of Tosin’s ears.

Isi slapped a hand against her cheek. “I can’t believe I just did that.”

Nelson slid his hands into his pockets and leaned against the silver handrail. “What—jumping the queue when the gatekeepers are unreasonably cruel and power-hungry?”

“Yes. No. I mean I have never intentionally violated office policies before. What if she calls security?” In this case, the ‘she’ could be Tosin or Erinma. Isi felt sick to her stomach as she considered the possible consequences of her rash action: what if Erinma didn’t want to see her? What if she was arrested? “Will she call the police?”

He smirked. “You should rethink giving me your number. Seems you need some fun in your life.”

She laughed nervously and massaged her forehead.

“But to answer your question, no. I don’t think Tosin will do that. Especially since you’re with me.”

Isi looked up. “What floor are we heading to?”

“Four.”

She nodded, and wrapped an arm around her belly. Maybe she shouldn’t have gone with the yam porridge and fish.

He frowned. “Do you have acrophobia or something?”

“What?”

“Heights. Are you scared of heights?”

“Oh. No. I’m not afraid of heights.” Her skin tingled as she felt sweat forming under her armpits. She used her hand to fan herself. “I’m just a little nervous. Are you sure she won’t mind me intruding on your meeting?”

"That depends."

"On what?"

“That you didn’t lie about being close friends with her.”

Isi frowned. “I don’t lie. And I said we were old friends. Old meaning I haven’t seen her in years.”

“It’s okay. I trust you.”

The elevator dinged as they got to their stop. The doors opened to reveal soft pink and beige walls. A black sparkly board with the words 'Proud Belle' printed in pink glitters hung on one side of the wall.

A pretty plus-size woman welcomed them and led them down a long corridor. Framed images of black and Asian ladies wearing Proud Belle products were displayed on either side of the walls. Isi had only ever used the banana-flavoured lip gloss and brown eye pencil—makeup had never really been her thing. Nelson stopped in front of a glass door, which Isi assumed led to the CEO’s office.

All of a sudden, her mouth felt dry.

“Ready?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Isi entered the cool, tasteful office behind Nelson. A brown L-shaped desk with metal frames and a pink leather chair sat next to the window. A woman was talking, apologising for keeping him waiting and peppering him with questions about website optimisation and such.

“...I really want to get this right, Nelly. My father is also breathing down my neck and you know how he feels about slackers.”

“Have I ever failed you?” Nelson said, unbuttoning his jacket once again. He turned to Isi and nudged his head for her to stand next to him.

Isi took a few steps and was by his side. Her stomach was still in an uproar. But a look at her friend up close and a calm settled in her tummy, her heart squeezed tight within her chest. A honey blonde wig rested on her friend’s head, a side fringe falling down the side of her face. Scarred tissues lined the edge of her face, disappearing down her neck. Tears rushed to Isi’s eyes.

God, why beautiful Erinma?

She has never stopped being beautiful to me, Isi. She doesn't know it yet, but she's on the path to spread My fragrance. She still looks like Me. She is made in my image, still.

Erinma shook her head. "No. But there's a first time for everything." She looked up from her iPad and her gaze moved from Nelson to Isi and regarded her. Isi felt her chest tighten at her obvious scrutiny. "Nelson?" Was all she said.

"Yeah, I met this lovely damsel in the reception area. She called herself an old friend of yours."

Erinma's gaze narrowed the more, curiosity settling on her features. "An old friend?"

"Hi, Erinma."

She blinked. "Wait, your voice is so familiar." Her eyes widened. "Isimeme?"

Isi nodded and her throat constricted when Erinma gasped and came to her, arms spread, and enveloped her in a hug.

"Oh my goodness! It's so good to see you."

"Same here." Isi held on to what God had said, knowing one day she might have to repeat those words out loud.

CHAPTER 10

ERINMA

Erinma burst into the house, dumping her bag and laptop bag onto a couch. She hurried into her bedroom, stripped off her clothes and jumped into the bathroom for a quick shower.

Isi is in Lagos!

Despite her hectic work schedule, seeing Isimeme had been the highlight of her day. When Nelson walked into her office with the woman, she'd assumed he had brought one of his numerous girlfriends with him for their meeting. But a closer look revealed she wasn't any random sidechick. This was an old acquaintance of hers.

Years may have passed but Isi still looked the same—if anything she was even more stunning. Erinma could still remember bits of her childhood dates with Isi. They'd had lots of fun, and her elder sister had indulged them by letting them play dress-up with her clothes—as long as they didn't leave any stains on them. It meant bathing *before* they could wear Somto's clothes.

Already, Erinma was racking her brain for free time so she could spend some time with her friend. They undoubtedly had a lot of catching up to do. Erinma had tons of questions: was she finally staying in Lagos? Was she married or engaged? What had she studied at the university? Did she still dream of being a chef, or had her life goals changed? What had she been up to in the last seventeen/eighteen years?

Erinma would have to send Odavwaro a message to slot Isi in that week regardless of how busy her schedule was. She had a dentist appointment later that week and dinner with her parents on Sunday.

She squeezed some lotion on her hands and massaged the sweet chocolate and coconut scent into her calves and hands. She had barely had time to speak with Isi at the office because she had to rush off to her next meeting with the sales and marketing team and other back-to-back meetings that had lasted for two hours.

Given the constraints of time, they were able to come up with something solid for the launch of Proud Belle's next product—honey and oats-based body lotion and facial scrub products aimed at the youths. And for the average woman, a deep cleansing moisturiser.

For the tenth time that day, she was grateful she had capable hands on her team. People she trusted to bring their A-game to work every day and who were equally as passionate about the company and what it stood for, just as she and her father were. Even though Erinma's default mindset was to show them who was boss, she knew that a positive work ethic would go a long way. As a result, she launched the employee team-building bonding sessions outside of the company's walls.

She'd been at loggerhead with her dad concerning some of her work ethics and decisions, but Erinma knew that if one had to expect excellence from one's employees, one had to treat them with equal respect and decency on one hand, and put them on a firm hold on the other. It was all about finding the right balance.

Erinma checked the time on the wall clock. 6:48 *p.m.* She wished she could call to cancel but she knew they both needed the time out together. Their work schedules and the fire accident had put a slight crack in their relationship. Plus if she cancelled, it would only make Lanre upset. In fact, it seemed like she was doing a lot of things that irritated her fiancé these days. If it wasn't her choice of clothing, it was her sudden shift in philosophy/life outlook.

But wasn't that what life-altering events did to people? Make them reconsider their lifestyle and make changes where necessary.

Since she took the bold step to move out of her parents' home, she had paused the drastic changes. Too much at a time was hard for her to handle. It seemed like a good step in the right direction when she broke the news to her parents. Her mum, being the anxious, worried, fear-driven woman that

she was, had freaked out—calling her almost every day and at all odd hours. Thank goodness, that had largely stopped.

No one understood her need for independence. The sleepless nights she endured or the gaping hole she couldn't fill while staying at their house. The need to rediscover herself had been her motivation.

Selecting a black sheath dress with long chiffon sleeves she paired it with red strappy heels. The dress had a v-neck bodice and exposed some cleavage. Lanre liked her showing a lot of her assets but ever since the fire... she didn't see the point in their display.

Hoping her clothing option wouldn't be a problem, she donned a straight honey blonde wig that hovered a little above her waist. It was Lanre's best look on her and if it made him happy, it gave her less headache during their time together.

"You look a little worn out," Lanre said when he picked her up at seven-thirty sharp. "If you were so tired you could have said so. I wouldn't have driven all the way here to pick you."

"I offered to drive but you—"

"Don't shove that in my face, Erinma. Did you really think it would be good to let you drive all the way here on your own? I know how you get driving at night."

She stiffened at his tone. "I could have taken an Uber. You didn't have to come. I'm not fragile."

"Tell that to your parents." He reached out to the stereo volume and turned it up. Ade Falase's falsetto's voice grazed her ears. Erinma glared at the volume knob. Tempted to tune it down. She hated the musician's songs. How many times she'd mentioned it to him but Lanre always turned a deaf ear to her. The man's songs were vulgar and irritating. Always talking about a woman's body like it was something to be used and dumped.

Your smooth planes turn me cra-zzy

Your lips give me electric shock.

Your eyes turn me to zombie!

If your hips don't lie, I'm gonna die!

Bend down, give me electric shock!

Bend down, give me electric shock!

Erinma grimaced slightly at the poorly written lyrics. She gave Lanre a sidelong glance. And they call this music?

Long ago, Erinma saw no reason to dislike such songs. If the beat was catchy, the voice was alluring, she chose to ignore the lyrics and move her body in tune with the beat. But now, if only because she felt less than perfect, she despised hearing a man describe the dips and smoothness of a woman's curves.

After a few minutes, Erinma had successfully drowned out the noise and placed her attention on the phone. After shooting a text to her assistant to set up a lunch date with Isi, she looked up the piece of property she'd been eyeing for some time now. A dilapidated two-storey building at a prime location in Ikoyi. It was off a busy street, ending at a close, yet had adequate parking space for at least twenty cars. But that wasn't what tripped her the most. It was the cute store that sat in the front, exposed to the view of public eyes. A fantastic location for a store. The entire plot was up for lease.

At just thirty-one, she felt she'd somehow peaked on a business level with her role at Proud Belle. Right from when she could understand what it meant to own and run a business, she had watched her father navigate his business deals despite economic challenges and still profit at the end of the day when others complained of a loss. He was always prodding her to ask questions about why he carried out certain actions.

With everything she'd learnt, Erinma had hoped to one day set up/run her own company one day—something not affiliated with a cosmetic company. She wanted to be her own boss. Reaching the stars was her goal. Each time Erinma looked at the property, it reminded her of her dreams. Dreams she had long since shoved aside with the focus on taking over her father's role as CEO after his stroke and looking after Noelle.

As they walked into the dimly lit restaurant, Erinma could feel pairs of eyes on her. Or maybe it was on Lanre. She couldn't tell and didn't want to know. What woman didn't like the tall, rich and the last available bachelor in the Nejo dynasty? His skin tone was a shade lighter than roasted groundnut brown. Erinma used to fantasise about having his babies. Cute mulatto-skinned babies with a blend of both their personalities.

But dreams fizzled. Reality struck. She didn't feel as beautiful as she used to when she saw herself through Lanre's eyes.

She took in the restaurant's décor. It was elegant, and yet devoid of the one thing she adored. There was just something about the way nature infused a space with love and colour. Fresh flowers had a way of

stimulating the senses and making the mood more relaxed while also sending out an invigorating vibe.

"Hey," he took her hand, "I'm sorry about earlier. I've had a crazy day at work and I took it out on you."

Erinma gazed at him over their candlelit table. His black suit clung to his lean shoulders like a second skin. His light brown eyes latched on to her. There had been numerous apologies over the last couple of months, and she forgave him every time. She wasn't sure what she could do if he didn't control his anger and keep his emotions in check.

"What happened at work?" she asked.

He let go of her hand and leaned back in his chair. "It's those dumb employees that HR recently hired. One of them is acting like a know-it-all. He's in charge of the finance department, and what—he's been there two minutes and he's giving my father ideas on how to save costs. Is that his job? Isn't he only supposed to follow whatever orders we give him? I don't need his idiotic suggestions spoiling things."

Erinma struggled to see the vacuous actions of the new recruit. And judging from her silence, Lanre guessed it too.

"You're supposed to take my side, Erinma."

She blinked. "I am on your side. I just don't understand what the problem is."

"Do you need to see what the problem is? You only have to accept my word for what it is. That's the issue with telling you these things." He shook his head, raised his glass of white wine to his lips, and took a long sip of it before returning it to the table. "Your dad should not have allowed you to take his place at PB. You're too sentimental."

Erinma jerked her head back, as if she'd been slapped. "What's that supposed to mean?" She could take a hit for her appearance but not for her job at Proud Belle. She did excellent work there, and even he knew it. "If you're having a bad day at work, don't take it out on me. I could have stayed home. I don't have to be here to take any of your insults."

Lanre wiped his face with his palm. "I'm sorry, Erin. It's not like that." He shifted forward and took her hand across the table, linking their fingers together. "*Ma binu*. I'm sorry, babes. Please forgive me. It's the merger. It's been keeping me on edge. I hardly sleep at night. I'm worried the company will have to downsize again."

Five months ago, MARKTEL and SOLTA, two competing tech companies, had signed a merger. Times were hard. Businesses were closing and people were losing their jobs. Petty crimes had risen, and people were worried about the future. PB had ridden it out and stood strong, maintaining their position as the market leader. As it turned out, women still wanted to look their best even in an economic crisis. Some dubbed it the 'lip-stick effect'.

She offered him a small smile. Kept her tone light and easy. "Are you sure you don't want me to take a look at the annual financial report? Maybe I can help?" But she knew the answer to her offer even before it left her lips. Lanre didn't take help often. He liked to handle his issues on his own. So when he shook his head in response, she wasn't surprised.

"No. I don't want to add my problem to yours."

She felt slightly pained at that: didn't he know she truly wanted to help?

"It's no problem, Lanre. We are getting married. How many times do I have to tell you that we're in this together? Your problems are mine as well."

Lanre grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I love how supportive you are. Do you know what would make me happy? If I could get two million naira to pay off some debts and salaries. I had to tell the useless head of the finance department to keep things quiet. I don't want to upset my father. I'll raise the funds on my own." He swore under his breath. "I wish I hadn't gotten involved with that get-rich-quick scheme. I just wanted to make it on my own without Yomi or Bode making me out to be some kind of fool."

Yomi and Bode were his elder brothers who ran Marigold Hotels and Safari Flights, respectively. Lanre had always felt obscured in their presence.

"But your dad has a right to know. He would understand."

A server walked up to their table and asked if they were ready to order. Lanre grinned up at the lady dressed in black trousers and a white shirt with a dark brown apron cinched around her waist. "We will order soon. Can you please give us five more minutes? Everything is delicious here, it's really hard to choose," Lanre said kindly to her.

She grinned. "Alright then. I'll be back in five."

After she left, Lanre faced Erinma again. Smile gone. "I'm not a child. My father shouldn't bail me out of my mess. I'll handle it myself, and if it means putting in more late nights and working my back off, I will." He

waved his hand. "Anyway, let's not talk about work anymore. Let's talk about us." His eyes roamed over her. "You look good in that dress. Not what I would choose, but anything you wear with that hair is always sexy."

She hated how his words boosted her confidence, but that was exactly the effect it had. And he knew it.

"Thank you," she said and peered down at the menu card. "Why don't we make a selection before the waitress returns." Erinma felt his gaze on her, but he said nothing and obediently did as she suggested. The server returned in pronto time and they both ordered.

"I've really missed you, Erin." His voice was silky sweet and his eyes glinted with unmasked desire. "When do we get to go back to the way things were?" His gaze darted across her face, down to her chest and back to her eyes. "I don't understand why we have to wait anymore. We're both consenting adults. Both our parents have agreed to the wedding. We are practically married. Nothing stops you from spending the night with me."

"We've already discussed this—"

He raised a hand. "You want us to wait for the traditional and church wedding, but baby, we don't have to wait."

"I want to do things right." *From now on.* "I want us to do things differently this time around."

"Erin, please. Help me help us. It's taking everything in me to resist any temptation." He lowered his voice to a calm but fervent whisper. "It's not like I'm asking for something you weren't able to give before the accident. I was patient while you were in the hospital recuperating. I was by your side while you endured the pain. Don't make this harder for me, Doll face, please."

She swallowed hard.

"I want us to resume plans for the wedding. You've recovered. We can get married."

The prospect of revealing her body to him was more terrifying than the two-hour-long meetings she had with Suravi to present progress reports and evaluations.

"Don't you want to get married?"

What? "I do."

"Good." He brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "Because no one can love you like I do. And I can't wait to have you as mine." He leaned in and kissed her. "Sounds good?"

“Mm-hmm. Yeah.” She couldn’t say no. When things got tough, he was there for her. When her body was ravaged by fire burns and she was utterly broken, he didn’t break her heart. How then could she make him understand she didn’t want him to see her body? Scar tissues ran down her back, across her midsection and down to her feet. Her therapist advised her to write things she liked about herself before and after the fire. Erinma still couldn’t bring herself to love anything about herself right now.

Lanre grinned. “Perfect. I’ll inform the mothers.”

Their orders arrived not too long after. They had a quiet dinner and Erinma was grateful when he didn’t try to cajole her as they ate. Already, the grilled fish tasted like char in her mouth and her appetite had waned considerably. She didn’t want to have the conversation with Lanre, but she knew it was unavoidable. The food would finish. Dinner would end and she would have to address his request.

After dinner, Lanre led her to his car. “So what do you say? My place or yours?”

“Lanre, can we not do this tonight? I have a board meeting tomorrow and I still have to prepare for it.”

He walked up to her and wound his hands around her waist. She leaned closer to him as shivers ran down her body. He breathed out and the hint of coffee and mint from their dessert hit her nose and she almost wanted to know how the blend tasted. “I know this is hard for you. I know you would want to go slow.” He caressed her chin, his fingers. “I’ll be good to you, Erin. You know that. Please, come over tonight.”

She nodded. “I know. But no.” Lanre had always been good to her. He loved her. Although he hadn’t said those words in recent times. But she believed it. She wanted to believe it. “I just need more time.”

“And I just miss us. I miss the way things were.” His eyes searched hers. “Don’t you miss that?”

Honestly? “I do. But I just need more time.”

Lanre’s jaw hardened, but he nodded. “Okay. I’ll be patient. But I want you to put me into consideration.”

“I will.” To appease him, she pressed her lips to his and kissed him. It was a soft kiss. Not as heated as in previous times. But she knew she was holding herself back. She had been holding herself back for a long time. When she pulled back and looked into his eyes, Erinma could tell he knew everything going on within her. But he said nothing.

Lanre dropped her home thirty minutes later. With a small wave, she got out of his car and walked in without looking back. Taking off her ankle-strap heels, Erinma walked out to her flower garden. Her bare feet sunk into the wet, cold grass. The heels of her foot dug into the ground as she held her middle and shivered slightly from the chilly night air. The smell of the roses drifted to her nose and she closed her eyes, taking in the sweet fragrance. Then there was the smell of lavender also. There were a lot of intermingling smells; sunflowers, jasmine, freesias, honeysuckles, mint... and she loved it.

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

1 Corinthians 3:7.

The verse stuck with her. She opened her eyes and tilted her lips up to a smile. Nature had always captivated her. The vivid greenery proclaimed God's goodness as the Lord of nature. The burst of flowers praised a fun God with an eye for colour and had a playful personality. Flowers, according to Noelle's father, are God's way of creating an ambience worthy of a King. It was what He wanted to walk on. Erinma had thought it breathtaking.

Here, in this garden, was her happy place.

Ignoring the cool sting on the back of her legs and her dress getting stained, she sat on the ground. The blanket of stars in the sky shone like twinkly lights. Reminding her of Christmas. The moon appeared as if it was watching her small children, although it was a given that the stars were much larger than the moon. Erinma was tiny, almost insignificant, in comparison and yet God was interested in her.

Here, in this garden—amid all the flowers and plants, the dampness of the earth; she felt closer to God. And she was aware God was looking at her at that moment. From the colossal Him to minuscule her. Her interest in God had changed following the fire.

It had been exactly two years, six months and fifteen days since the day her world took a sharp turn. Erinma had long processed the pain, had long since given God a glimpse of her heart to see the places no one could comprehend. Or when the words wouldn't come out to express how she was feeling.

Then there were the recurring nightmares that continued to keep her awake most nights. When this happened, she either stayed up late to finish

pending work, or in the worst-case scenario, took sleeping pills. She had stopped the sleeping pills when she got addicted to them. But with constant prayers, plus the effect of severe withdrawal symptoms, she was free. Yet, it didn't block out her reasons for needing them.

God, please help me. Help Noelle.

I can make dead things blossom. A field that has been burnt can still produce beauty.

How long, God? How long do I have to wait to see the manifestation of all this?

The silence was deafening.

She sighed. "Okay, God. I'm waiting."

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CHAPTER II

ANDREW

Andrew placed his daughter on her bed, pulling the coverlet up to her chin. He stood there, staring at her frame as she slept. Her facial features held a familiarity that gripped his heart; bringing back memories he wanted to forget forever. Because she was growing to look just like her mother. He so badly wanted to erase that gene from his daughter's DNA. Anything that belonged to her mother, he could extract with some kind of machine and make sure Bella had none of her mother's characteristics—personality, distinguishing features, an absurd obsession with specific types of food. And yet, no matter how crazy the world got, he didn't think they had come up with such a contraption.

He gritted his teeth. Hating the feelings that came with thinking about Bella's mother. He forced out a breath. Well, it mattered less now. The woman was long gone and buried. Bella was half his as much as she was her mother's. That was all that mattered. That was all he would focus on.

Closing the door gently after him, he headed to the living room. The TV volume was turned down because the opposing team was humiliating his football club. He turned his gaze away from the goalie who had his hands behind his head, face in agony as they lost another goal.

He settled on the couch. "Instead of you playing the game, you're there holding your head." *Gosh!* There was going to be a lot of rantings on social media if they lost. This was the third home game they were losing.

He increased the volume.

The vibration of his phone cut his attention from the screen. It was a video call from his best friend.

"Hey, man."

Kalu locked his gaze on him. "Sup? You good?"

Andrew scratched the side of his head. "*I dey, jare*. Tired is all." He placed an arm at the back of his head. "How's everything over there?"

"Good, good. How's my gorgeous god-daughter? Is she feeling better?"

"Yeah, she's good." Andrew yawned. "Just went to bed."

"What did the doctor say?"

"A throat infection. He prescribed some drugs so she should feel better in some days."

"Good to know. So..."

Andrew arched an eyebrow.

"Girlfriend?" Kalu asked.

"You know the answer to that."

Kalu scoffed and shook his head. "It's about time you found yourself a woman. Don't you think Bella could benefit from a feminine touch in her life?"

"She has me."

Kalu hiked a brow. "I didn't know you were cross-sexual."

"You're high on whatever you're smoking over there."

His best friend laughed but then sobered up almost immediately. An incredulous look stretched across his face. "The last time I took one of those was...." Kalu shook his head, bewildered. "Damn, I can't even remember."

Andrew grinned. His chest swelled with pride for his best friend, at how far he'd come. The Kalu he knew fifteen years ago couldn't go a single day without smoking. It was a miracle he'd gotten his act together. However, his lifestyle changes following his conversion to Christ had been swift. Andrew barely had enough time to grasp the readjustments before his friend enlisted in the United States Army so he could attend college. After college, he stayed in the army and eventually became a chaplain.

"Your mum called last Saturday. She said to talk to you, try to change your mind."

Kalu chuckled.

“Seriously, guy. Why don’t you just explain things to her? That way, she’ll stop pestering you about getting married and you can rest knowing she won’t bother you. That is until you provide her with a couple of grandbabies.”

“I doubt that would ever happen. She would never understand. You know my reasons, so don’t even bother trying to talk me out of it.”

Andrew sighed. He knew well enough that his best friend had resigned himself to a life of singleness like the Apostle Paul. He didn’t want to believe his friend at first, but then...

Andrew shook his head. He wasn’t going down that road.

Not today. *Not ever.*

“I’ve told you way before TJ that I’m not interested in any babe,” his friend said quietly.

And now Kalu had brought it up.

A snide retort was at the tip of his tongue, but he shoved it back down.

Every time they had a conversation that tilted towards an argument, Andrew didn’t succumb to it.

While Andrew couldn’t say he agreed with Kalu’s decision, he knew raising any concerns would be hypocritical. “It’s all good. She’ll take you seriously someday.” He walked away from that topic.

They spoke a bit more about Andrew’s work and Kalu’s job as a chaplain. His friend shared moments where he had opportunities to talk to soldiers about his faith and why he believed in God. His challenges from his life pre-Christ. Only a few met up with him for Bible Study now and then. Later, they switched the conversation to the ongoing football match, with Kalu rubbing it in Andrew’s face that his team was winning.

"Humour me. When was the last time you went out on a date?"

"Besides that crabby blind date your sister set me up with? It was two years ago."

Kalu furrowed his brow. "And you're cool with that? You don't think Bella deserves a—"

"I've been busy with the business, Kalu." Andrew said, cutting him off. "You're aware of this. I'll teach Bella whatever she needs to know. I'll Google it. I'll read more books. Whatever. But I don't need a woman in my life." *As well as my heart.*

"Wow. Who would have guessed you would be a great dad?"

He removed his hand from the back of his head and stretched it at the back of the couch. "Bella comes first. It's a given. I will always be there for her."

Ever since he started BAM, his cab company, he could afford to move Bella and him out of their dingy one-bedroom apartment to a nice semi-detached bungalow in a decent part of town. He could afford to do a lot of things. He wasn't swimming in money yet; he still had bills to settle, but at the rate the company was moving, he could count on having investments that would secure Bella's future.

"You know, I still hear from her..."

"I don't care. And Kalu, I swear, if you bring this up again, I'll stop answering your calls."

Kalu raised both hands in the air. A tentative smile on his lips; albeit sad. "I hear you loud and clear, brother."

"Great."

"Just remember, you need to forgive and let go. Forgiveness isn't for the other person as much as it's for you. Your joy, heart, and peace of mind."

"There's nothing you're saying that I don't already know."

"Then practise it. I know it's not always easy, but this is way easier than what Jesus had to go through to secure our salvation and forgiveness."

"Can we please change the topic?"

"Is my sister still trying to hook you up?"

"No. Thank God."

Kalu chuckled. "My sister sent me a picture of her wedding gown." He chuckled. "I still can't believe my baby sister is getting married."

Andrew yawned. "It's about time Caroline settled down with a nice guy."

"Not all those losers she's been hanging out with."

"At least when she has kids your mum will be too busy to disturb you."

"Yeah. I feel bad, though. That I won't be there to walk her down the aisle."

"Your uncle will walk her down the aisle. The last time I bumped into him, he couldn't stop going on about it."

"Better him than anyone else."

Andrew understood more than anyone else his friend's pain. Had carried it as his own throughout the years. When Kalu's dad had walked away from the family it had been devastating. Kalu was only ten. Things had been hard on the family of four (excluding Kalu's dad). His absence had left a void

that seemed to widen as time elapsed. With Kalu's mum left to run things at home, Kalu had carved a different path for himself—angry and bitter at his dad's desertion and possible rejection. He joined a small gang that was a disturbance to the neighbourhood. They promised to look after him. Gradually, the friend he'd known all his life became a shadow of himself.

When he turned twelve, Kalu smoked a pack of cigarettes in two days. By sixteen, he frequented bars and was with different girls every other week. As Kalu grew older, his features sharpened and his looks beckoned the opposite sex. As time passed, Kalu lost a bit of himself to those girls. And if Andrew remembered correctly what their youth pastor had said about the dangers of soul ties and sex covenants and sexual sins.

No matter how much they argued or ended up in a fist fight, all Andrew could do was watch his friend self-destruct. But Andrew wouldn't give up. No matter how much his father and Auntie B warned him about Kalu, he wouldn't abandon his friend.

They were best friends. They attended school together—until Kalu dropped out before their final Senior School Certificate Examinations. They went to church and occasionally discussed a topic that was taught. Regardless that Kalu was no longer the boy he knew, Andrew couldn't let his friend waste his life. They always had each other's back, come rain or shine.

Thinking back now, maybe—scratch that—it *had* been foolhardy to risk his life for someone who he wasn't even sure would get his act together in the end. Not even the tears of Kalu's mother could have swayed him. Someday, by some miracle, it had. And Andrew had the marks to prove it. Over twenty years of friendship, Andrew wouldn't do anything to jeopardise it.

Kalu nodded. "I'm glad you're there with them. I don't have to worry too much."

Andrew cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck, bidding the memories away. "You don't have to worry at all. I'll always be there for you guys. You all are family."

His friend smiled. "I appreciate it. How are things with you and God?"

Andrew shrugged. "Still the same."

"I'm praying for you, bro. You know you can talk to me though? About anything at all."

"I know."

“You were there for me. I want to do the same for you.”

Andrew pinched the tip of his nose. “Guy, stop getting emotional and all.”

Kalu shook his head but left it at that. He knew Andrew well enough to know he wasn’t ready to talk about it. Andrew liked that they were friends but still respected each other’s privacy when necessary.

Normal conversations resumed between them. Andrew mentioned nothing about the car he saw at the hospital or how the woman took off immediately he sighted her. He wanted to keep the conversation light and keep all worries to himself. At least, till he could figure out what was going on.

Because the only thing that mattered most in Andrew’s life was his daughter, and if he could give her a comfortable life, he would be a happy man. Even if, like his friend, he remained single for the rest of his life.



Three days since Bella’s last hospital appointment, they were back at Eden’s Hope Children’s Hospital for a follow-up. He scanned the parking lot for the Black Audi Q5 he usually saw. It was there, but the driver was absent. Meaning whoever owned the car was most likely visiting a patient and was probably not a stalker-like he’d thought. Andrew peered at everyone who greeted them and those who minded their business hoping to bump into her.

But how could he recognise someone he was yet to see for himself?

The doctor pressed the tips of his forefingers to Bella’s throat and asked if it hurt.

“Not like before.” Bella shook her head.

“And it’s easy to swallow?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Osho smiled. “That’s good news. Your dad has definitely been taking care of you.” He reached into his coat pocket for a pen and scribbled something in Bella’s file. “Drink something warm and it should be completely gone in a day or two.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re very welcome, Bella. The next time you come here, you should be good as new. Or you could just skip coming here and cajole your dad into getting you ice cream.” He winked at Bella and she laughed.

“She’ll only get ice cream if she cleans up all the mess she made at home.”

Bella spun around and Andrew rearranged his face to a mock frown as his daughter glared at him.

Dr. Osho raised his hands in surrender. “Ah, well, my jurisdiction ends within the confines of this hospital. All I can do is give a diagnosis and write a prescription for what my patient requires.”

Bella swung her gaze back to the doctor. “So can you prescribe for my daddy to buy ice cream for me?”

Andrew coughed out a laugh.

“Err—”

Minutes later they walked out of the doctor’s office with a white slip with the words, *please consider getting patient Bella ice cream.*

“Daddy, I need to use the toilet.”

“Alright. I’ll be here waiting.” As she strolled off to the ladies, Andrew dug out his phone from his pocket and was checking his notifications, turning to lean against the wall when he bumped into something. Rather, *someone*. His phone slipped from his grasp but he caught it just in time before it hit the floor, just as a petite frame moved to catch the phone.

“I’m so sorry,” a feminine voice apologised.

He grabbed the small woman by her shoulders. Noticed her slender build and the unmistakable jolt of electricity that ran up his arm to his shoulder blade and zipped down to his toes. “It’s fine. No worries.” He bent his head slightly to look at her. “Are you okay?” The fragrance of her perfume filled the air between them. She smelt sweet, like flowers and chocolate. And from the looks of her clothing, it seemed she came from money as well. Lots of it.

Her bag looked like it could buy two times the clothes he currently wore.

He frowned.

On impulse, every part of him wanted to push her away. But his hands, his body, had another mind of its own.

She bobbed her head, but her lips quivered. Her gaze did not meet his.

“I’m fine.”

His eyes narrowed on her face and the long, brown hair fell to one side of her face. The single tear that fell down her cheek betrayed her. Andrew didn't want to care about her or what was bothering her. He didn't want to concern himself about her matter. And yet he found himself saying, "you're crying. It doesn't really look like you're fine." *Andrew, what are you doing questioning a stranger?* He scolded himself. But what else was he supposed to do? Act aloof? Wave her off and act like he couldn't be bothered? "Do you need to sit down? I could get you a bottle of water." His tone was clipped. Distant.

Now he was offering to get her water. This was bad.

He wrenched his hands from her and dipped them into his pockets, taking a step back.

"I—" She shook her head. "I just received bad news."

Andrew's heart plummeted. Part of his annoyance melted away. "I'm really sorry to hear that. Is there something you need? Maybe call a family member?"

"No. I'm the only family she has." Again, she spoke without glancing up at him.

Okay? Did she have bad breath or what?

"Daddy, I'm back," Bella said behind him. When he turned to look at her, she was looking up at him in confusion. Her gaze swung to the woman and her brows scrunched up in confusion. Heaven only knew what was running through her mind.

"I have to go. Thank you for, er—."

"Catching my phone?" He offered.

Finally, she looked up at him and smiled. "Take care." And just like that, she walked past him.

"Daddy, is that woman okay?"

"I don't think so, Coco." He watched her walk away in her royal blue power suit down the hallway.

"I saw a long scar on her face. It looked really bad. Maybe that's why she was hiding her face, y'know."

He frowned, wondering what had caused the scars on her face. "Yeah. Maybe."

"Can we go and get my ice cream now?"

"Not until you clean your bedroom." Andrew couldn't dislodge thoughts of the woman from his mind. She was a mystery to him, that was for sure.

But he doubted he would see her again, and so he discarded every thought of her.

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CHAPTER 12

ERINMA

“How is she doing?”

Odavwaro’s voice snapped her out of her reverie. She’d been thinking about Noelle and the tall, nice-looking stranger at the hospital. “Bad. Very bad.” She’d just returned from and was still in a state of shock after Dr. Osho delivered the bad news to her: her lungs were getting inflamed by micro-particles and her airways were closing. Her knees buckled as he told her Noelle was facing a mortal threat and might not survive the next few days.

“I’m so sorry, boss.”

Erinma nodded and wiped the tears away from her eyes. Throat clogged, she squeezed out: “Thanks, sis.” Despite everything she was feeling, the endearment struck true. Odavwaro was her assistant, but she had gradually grown to become like a sister to her. Her bubbly personality made her fun and easy to relate with. Odavwaro embraced every inch of who she was, despite her size. And she was every bit a dear friend to Erinma, even after she’d kept everyone at arm’s length after the fire.

Besides Destiny, there was only one other person she’d connected with. But that was a long time ago.

After the fire and months of seclusion from the outside world (including Lanre and her best friend Destiny), Odavwaro had shown up at her parents’ house with a box of strawberry glazed doughnuts, a nonfiction book and a

pack of Capri Sonne, which was Erinma's favourite drink—even if it belonged in a child's hand than in hers.

How could she explain to anyone that she felt lost? Like they had stripped her identity from her in one night. That looking into a mirror made her relive the horrors of that night. But somehow, Odavwaro understood.

We all have scars. Just because yours can be seen doesn't make you less of a person. You are still made in God's image. Because of your scars, there's a part of Him that's scarred, too.

The thought that God could feel her pain had touched Erinma. Although it wasn't enough to ease the gnawing guilt, that was how her friendship with Odavwaro had begun and was blossoming. "The doctor said it's only a matter of time till she leaves us." Erinma shook her head. "But she's so young. She has a future laid out for her." She pressed a fist to her mouth and felt another round of tears rushing up her throat and behind her eyes.

Odavwaro's warm, chubby hand rubbed her back. "It will be okay. God knows best."

"I know. I just wish I could understand a little of what goes on in His mind, what He thinks and how He plans everything out."

"Yeah, I know. I guess there are just some things about God we would have to find out later. Like way, way later after all has been said and done."

Erinma wiped her eyes again. "I need to get my mind off this. Any messages I need to attend to?"

"Mr. Olabisi called. The meeting with Z-Mac has been scheduled for three p.m, and you're supposed to meet with the sales and marketing manager at one and with the plant manager at one-thirty. Would you like me to cancel any of the meetings?"

"No. My problems don't have to affect the lives of those that look up to me."

Her assistant pressed her lips together.

Erinma narrowed her gaze on her. The thick line between boss and employee was thinning out. Even if she was Odavwaro's boss, she still wanted to hear her out. She breathed out. "Say it."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself. You are going through a tough time, you're allowed to take a minute or two to breathe."

"I can't afford to slack now. My father wouldn't slack on this. We're just about to release our latest honey-based skin moisturiser product and it's going to be huge." *The market leaders are us. We need to always be on top*

of our game, her father had said to her one time too many when she queried his late nights and unavailability at family get-togethers or holiday periods. Now that he had left her in charge, she understood the depth of his commitment. “Besides, this will give me something else to focus on, other than what’s happening at the hospital.”

Odavwaro gave a resigned sigh. “Okay. Just take things easy.”

Erinma pulled out a thick paper from a file and flipped it so Odavwaro could look at it. “What do you think of the design for the new lotion?”

Her assistant’s lips twisted in thought. “It’s cute, but it can be better. It doesn’t need a bee on it, in my opinion. Who wants to imagine being stung by a bee while applying makeup? And the oats could also be more subtle. Then for the other one, the white and pale pink packaging is lovely, but the design is not it at all.”

“I agree. I feel like something is missing. To be honest, I’m tempted to sack our design team. They’ve been messing up for weeks.”

“Our customers are between the ages of thirty and forty, right? Why don’t we create three demographics for the average Nigerian woman in her 30s, mid-30s and 40s? That way, we can appeal to our customer’s personalities.”

Erinma tossed it back on the table and rubbed her forehead as tiredness set in. “That could work. We can also conduct a poll. But I know it has to be way more appealing than this joke they made.”

“Right, so we want it to exude fun and maturity; like I’m getting older, but I’m still fun and I can still look good. That kind of thing.”

Erinma loved it when Odavwaro used words like ‘our’ ‘we’, as if she truly considered herself as part of PB. “True,” she said, grabbing her iPad. “I’ll create a mood board and think of something.”

“Need me to make you a cup of tea?”

“Coffee, please. Plenty of cream and sugar.”

“It’s on its way.”

“You’re the best. Did you arrange a meeting with Isi?”

“Yes. Thursday afternoon at 2:15.”

Erinma was already reaching for her phone. “Great. I’ll text her now to set it up. Thanks, sis.”

After her assistant left and Isi had confirmed their lunch date for Thursday, Erinma’s thoughts doubled back to the tall and dark brooding stranger she’d run into at the hospital. He was the same man who she’d seen with his daughter. His deep, masculine voice had caught her off guard. In all

the times she'd watched him, she never imagined what he would sound like. The concern in his rich baritone voice had almost made her break down right there on hospital grounds.

She had noticed that there was no ring on his finger. Erinma blinked twice. Not that his marital status mattered to her; single or married, she was off the market. Whatever his relationship status, his love interest would surely milk all the attention and care he lavished on her.

A guy like that, a family man, was most likely very supportive of his wife.

She admired fathers who were actively involved in their children's lives. The trait was sluggishly picking up speed, other than the usual escape of leaving the woman to run the show. And his daughter reminded her of Noelle. Back when Noelle had her family. If Noelle's father saw his daughter in her current state, his heart would break.

Oh, God. Please take this guilt away. Forgive me for bringing hurt to her.

A sigh escaped her lips. She wanted to get her thoughts in line with work for the day, but that wasn't happening. She took her phone out of her bag, and she placed a call to her boyfriend. Mentally crossing her fingers that he could cheer her up. Say something that wouldn't make her feel worse than she did right now.

"Hi, babe," his smooth voice filled her ears. "How's your day going?"

"Not so good." Erinma breathed in deeply. "I spoke with the doctor today about Noelle." She swallowed hard. "She's not going to make it."

"Damn, babes. I'm so sorry."

"Me too." She felt the onset of tears.

"Is there anything you need me to do?" He said, his voice sounding half-interested in their conversation.

Couldn't he just show some empathy?

The aromatic scent of cappuccino hit her nostrils as Odavwaro walked in with a mug of coffee and placed it in front of her. As quietly as she walked in, she let herself out.

"Erin?"

"No. I - I just wanted to let you know." What did she think? That he would drop everything he was doing and rush over to console her? That, for once, he would pay attention to her when it concerned Noelle? "I'll head over to the hospital after work."

"Okay. Everything will be fine. I'll call you later."

“Yeah, sure.”

Erinma pushed through the day with every part of her immersed in work; body, soul, and spirit.



Erinma

Nelly: I came over but was told you stepped out. Your assistant gave me the news. I'm sorry about Noelle.

Erinma: Yeah, me too. Still believing for a miracle.

Nelly: You good?

Erinma: Not really. Hanging in there.

Nelly: If you need anything, let me know.

Erinma: :) Thanks.

Nelly: How's your friend, Isi?

Erinma: She's good. Funny enough I'm meeting her for lunch in a few.

Nelly: And I didn't get an invite.

Erinma: ??????

Nelly: I need a favour. Could you please give me your friend's number?

Erinma: Why? Get it yourself.

Nelly: 😞

Erinma:

Nelly: Please nau. She said she wasn't going to give it to me.

Erinma: So why do you expect me to? Plus I don't approve of a relationship between you guys. All you do is break hearts and I won't subject her to such treatment.

Nelly: Judge Erin. And aren't you being a lil harsh? We never really talk about my personal life.

Erinma: Not judging. Only observant. And you don't discuss your personal life because you don't have one. It's all out in public. Wasn't it two days ago you were at Oba Aremeyin's birthday bash with one eye candy on your arm?

Nelly: She's just a friend.

Erinma: If you say so.

Nelly: *sigh* How else can I ask her out?

Erinma: Do it the old-fashioned way. Talk to her and ask her out. She's not like those other girls who fall for your charm.

Nelly: 😊Where do I meet her?

Erinma: Will send the deets to you.

Nelly: You're a lousy matchmaker

Erinma: Like I care



"I still can't believe you're here in Lagos. The last time we saw each other was like seventeen, eighteen years ago."

"Eighteen," Isi confirmed.

"Eighteen! Wow. Time flies." *Speaking of time.* Erinma's gaze flew to her watch and back at Isi. "I have some time before my next meeting. Why don't I take you out for lunch? My treat."

"I would love to."

"Yay!"

On her way out, Erinma stopped to ask Odavwaro if she needed anything. She took a mental note of her assistant's order and walked out to the elevator with Isi. Erinma and Isi made small talk in the elevator and Erinma got to invite her to a Singles' program at her church. Her church was quite a distance from where Isi was staying, but her friend asked for the details and promised to be there.

Erinma could barely contain her joy at seeing her friend again. They'd just connected when they first met. Their friendship seemed predestined from the start. Although it was years ago, Erinma wondered if things would be just as light and easy as they were back then or completely different—especially since they were no longer kids.

Erinma drove to a cute pop-up restaurant twenty minutes away from her office. She and Isi engaged in conversation as she drove. “When did you arrive in Lagos, *sef*?”

“Three months ago.”

"Seriously? And you didn't reach out all this while? I'm offended."

"Don't be. It's not like that. I've been living with my cousin and her kids. Her husband works with a construction company. He's currently not in the state because of a job so it's not so cramped at the moment."

"Sorry about the cramped lifestyle." She gave Isi a glance before returning her gaze to the road. "I'm glad you're in Lagos, though. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"Yeah. I remember our childhood like it lasted for years rather than two weeks. It was the first time I heard of a candy room."

Erinma chuckled. "I still can't believe my mum did that. She wanted to make the house fun for Somto and me so she had a room specially made for us. Like a mini theme-park." Her mum had filled the room with every toy and candy Somto and Erinma could imagine. The excitement over the room lasted for months! All of their friends were curious to see for themselves what Somto and her were saying.

"Fun times."

Erinma heard the nostalgia in her friend's voice and smiled. "So what was it like at home in Benin?"

"Nothing exciting. My mum remarried some years back."

"Oh, I didn't know. Do you like your step-dad?"

"Not really."

"Ugh, why?"

"He wasn't crazy about me. It showed in his actions."

Erinma's gaze was drawn briefly away from the road to her friend's solemn expression. "I'm sorry, Isi. Hope he wasn't abusive?"

"No." Isi shook her head. "He's not like that. He just didn't want me in the picture so much." Isi's voice carried a mix of sadness and hurt. "Anyway, it's fine. That was years ago. My mum is happy and I'm okay."

It's one of those things, Erinma. Moreover, I really want to know how you're doing. I'm sorry about what happened; the fire and everything. All I could do was pray when I read about it on the news."

"God has been faithful, Isi. That's all I can say. Sometimes I have nightmares about what happened."

"How is the small girl that was in the fire?" Isi asked.

"She's still in the hospital. Not getting better." Erinma explained Noelle's current state as the doctors had informed her. Her visit in the morning. She'd read another Bible story to her. This time on Gideon. Noelle had fallen asleep mid-story. "We continue to hope for the best."

"I'll keep praying."

"I appreciate that."

Erinma bit on her bottom lip as she caught sight of the food joint. She needed a little air. "Wait in the car. I'll get the food and we can eat in the car." She manoeuvred her car in a tight parking space and went to join the queue which was growing by the minute. It was lunch hour and people were hungry.

"What can I get you?" A man in a black apron asked her when it was finally her turn. He was the owner of the establishment as well as the chef. He was also not bad on the eyes. Erinma had a long-standing crush on him because of his exceptional culinary skills. There was just something gratifying about his food.

"Hi, Jordan. Is the vegetable rice still available?"

"Yes, it is. How's everything with you?"

"I'm good, thanks. I've brought another potential fan for you."

"I'm flattered. So what would you like today?"

"Two plates of vegetable rice with honey stir-fried chicken, please. And your special honey-garlic Shrimp Chow Mein."

"Great choices. Your order will be with you shortly."

"Thank you."

Erinma could have easily ordered from their Instagram page, but she loved coming herself. She'd known the guy as far back as three years ago when he still catered to weddings and birthday parties. Jordan's food wasn't the usual party jollof-rice everyone loved—even though he did that excellently well. When he cooked, he did so with flair and attention to the tiniest of detail. Like food wasn't just to be eaten but appealing to look at.

For her love of his cuisine, she'd kept close tabs on him. Hoping he would be the caterer at her wedding.

She was sorry to hear of the closing of his restaurant and everything that followed.

Minutes later, her food was given to her. After settling her bill, she made her way back to her car. Isi was on her phone.

"That smells good. I haven't even opened it and I can already imagine how it tastes."

"Your imagination hasn't even begun to wander."

Isi raised a brow at her. "I thought you only liked sweet things?"

Erinma laughed. "My mum curbed that habit when I was sixteen."

One bite of the food and Erinma let out a low moan. Beside her, Isi equally emitted a sigh.

"The food is delicious. Can definitely taste the Cameroon pepper," Isi said.

"It's amazing."

"I can see why you love it. Everything was tastefully made. Definitely not bad for a side restaurant."

"I agree. I've been a fan of his food for ages. He was closed for a while but I bumped into his restaurant a few months ago and I always come here when I can get away or need the closest thing to home cooking."

"Not plastic-like. I tried out the eatery opposite your office, which is nothing short of horrific." Isi wrinkled her nose and Erinma laughed. "Do you cook?"

"Yes, but definitely not like this."

It was Isi's turn to laugh.

"Talk to me. We hardly had time to chat the other day. Have you finally moved to Lagos?" Erinma spooned another piece of chicken in her mouth, dodging the brownish sauce from staining her blouse.

Isi nodded. "Yes. But I might have to find my own place, as soon as I'm financially settled."

"What are your plans for a job?"

"I don't know. I got a certificate from a culinary school in Benin, so I'm hoping I can get a job in a restaurant or a hotel."

"That's great. Do you mind if I talk to Lanre and ask if he could help out at his father's hotel?"

"To work at Marigold Royale?"

"Yes."

"That would be a dream. If that worked out it would be incredible. Thank you, Erinma."

Erinma waved her hand. "What are friends for?" She chewed slowly on the rice, savouring the blend of flavours. Then she took another bite of the chicken. "And yes, I'm inviting you for lunch at my parents'. Told mum I ran into you and she wants to see you. Is Sunday after church okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. That would be great. Will Somto be there?"

"She should be. All dependent on her work schedule."

"How's your friend, Nelson?"

"He's fine. Funny you should ask. We chatted about you earlier today."

"Me? Why?"

"You made an impression on him. He wants to ask you out."

Isi almost laughed, but she shook her head. "I'm not interested in any relationship for now."

"You got your heart broken?"

"No. I have never had a boyfriend before." Isi chewed on a piece of honey-glazed chicken.

Erinma's eyes bulged. "What? Are you pulling my legs right now?"

"No. Why would I joke about something like that?"

"I don't know." Erinma's curiosity had sparked to life. "Why?"

Isi lifted a shoulder. "I need to get my life together first."

"He asked for your number. I refused to give it to him. Told him he would have to ask you himself."

"God bless you."

"And he's meeting us here in a few minutes so he can do it himself."

Isi's gaze widened. "Erinma!"

CHAPTER 13

ISIMEME

“What? Do you have anything planned for the rest of the day?”

“No.” Isi had planned to do some online research to see if there were any job vacancies in the area. When she woke up in the morning, she’d contemplated broadening her scope and applying for nanny duties or other job descriptions. When Erinma mentioned working at Marigold Royale, it had given her a lifeline to hold on to.

“Then what’s the problem?”

What was the problem? Isi wished she had an answer. She was grateful for Nelson’s intervention the other day, because God knows what the Tosin lady would have done to keep her from meeting Erinma.

“He is a nice guy,” Erinma continued when Isi didn’t respond right away. “He’s Just a little confused at times, and I think he has a lot going on personally. I’ve known him for quite some time now. We haven’t talked in depth, but I know he keeps a lot of things bottled up. As though he finds it difficult to trust people.”

“I did not come to Lagos to find a husband.” She uncapped her bottle and drank all the water. She threw away their empty take-out containers and water bottles into a free nylon bag.

Erinma frowned. “Who said anything about marriage?”

“Then would you be with a man if there was no chance of marriage?”

Her friend snorted. “So you can’t be friends with him?”

“I can,” Isi said slowly, “but he’s too fine and all.”

Laughter bubbled out of her friend and Isi couldn’t help but smile. This was Erinma’s first laugh in Isi’s presence. While she’d smiled and expressed her delight at seeing her, those smiles never reached her eyes. Hearing her laugh was worth the two-hour journey and all the bus-mounting and bike-hopping she’d done to get to Proud Belle in time for their lunch date.

Spending some time with Erinma was what she needed to encourage her. Her job search was hard.

“You want me to tell him not to bother?”

“You certainly want him to.” Isi waved a hand. “It’s fine. He can come.”

“Good. You need another friend in Lagos. More like a tour guide.” Erinma checked the rear-view mirror. “I think he’s here.” Isi cleaned the sides of her mouth with a serviette and followed Erinma out of the car.

“Hi Erinma,” he gave her a side-hug. Then he looked in Isi’s direction. He looked good in blue jeans and a light blue button-up shirt.

“It’s good to see you again,” Nelson said.

“Same here. How have you been?”

“Well enough. You? How’s life in *Lasgidi* so far?”

“Stressful.”

Erinma and Nelson laughed.

“I have a meeting soon. Nelly, treat my friend well please,” Erinma said.

Nelson placed his palm over his heart. “I solemnly promise to treat your friend with utmost care and respect and defend her honour if any useless *agbèrò* looks at her.”

Erinma wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know if I should believe you or call a cab to take her home.”

Nelson looked offended. “You would trust a stranger over your longtime friend?”

“I’m guessing so.”

He motioned to Erinma’s car. “Go to your meeting, *abeg*.”

Erinma’s fingers imitated making a phone call. “Call me if he’s bothering you.”

Nelson arched one of his brows. “And you’ll rush out of your meeting to save her?”

Erinma maintained eye contact with Isi, ignoring him. “I’ll send someone to get you.”

Isi took her bag from the car. "Talk to you soon. Don't forget Marigold Royale."

"I won't. Bye ya!" And she was off.

"At long last, we're alone," Nelson said. "You've had lunch. Maybe you would love a tour?"

"A tour?"

"Around town."

Isi slung her handbag over her shoulder. "Don't you have to go to work?"

"I am my own boss. Besides, I have a team working now."

"So, you're like David sending his men off to war while he watches Netflix and chills."

Nelson looked momentarily confused.

"Are you a Christian?"

"Is that a criterion for dating me?"

She laughed and swept aside a strand of her hair from her face. "Dating? You better calm down, *Oga*."

"I'm very calm, My Lady. And please, you can call me Nelly." He wrinkled his nose. "*Oga* sounds a bit too formal."

She scoffed. *Funny guy*.

"So where to go first? Is there somewhere you have in mind?"

Isi chewed on her lower lip. "I've been wanting to go on that long Canopy walk at Lekki Conservative centre. Or the Nike Art's Gallery." She had seen pictures of it online. She hadn't just gone to those places because it wasn't on her list of top things to do at the time.

"A lover of art." He looked her over. "I should have guessed that would be something you would love."

Isi tilted her head and gave him a questioning look. "What else do you 'guess' that I would like? Because it's obvious you've spent time thinking a great deal about me."

He grinned. "I could come up with a couple of things."

She smiled. "Ah, I see."

"Are you flirting back with me, Isimeme?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head vigorously. "No. What?"

Nelly barked out a laugh and clapped his hands.

Isi could feel the heat climbing up her neck.

"I'm sorry. I'm just playing with you. Your facial expression was priceless."

“It's true what Erinma said.”

That sobered him up quickly. “What did she say?”

“That you’re very confused sometimes and you’re afraid to trust people and you cover your thoughts with jokes.”

He blinked, a bit stunned. “Erinma said that?”

Isi nodded. “Yep.”

“Huh. Interesting. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“It’s fine. I’m not easily offended.”

He led her to a Black Toyota car parked on the side of the road. Nelly surprised her by opening the door for her. Call her silly, but she looked forward to the cool air conditioning and getting to know him better.

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CHAPTER 14

ANDREW

He fiddled with his phone while waiting in the lobby. Andrew hadn't been here in a long time. It was only fitting that he came in person to seal what had bound them over the last four years.

Thirty minutes later, the receptionist announced that he could go in. Andrew was ushered into a boardroom with cream-coloured walls. Only one of the dozen chairs was occupied. A jug of water sat in front of the elderly man.

"Good morning, sir."

"Andrew Madu. Please, have a seat."

He sank into one of the black swivel chairs, his gaze fixed on Mr. Joe Jacobs.

"Sorry we couldn't do this in my office. I just need a slight change of environment."

"It's not a problem, sir." Andrew cleared his throat. "I wanted to confirm in person if you received my last instalment?"

"Oh, that. Yes, I did. I'm quite impressed. Over the years you've actually been able to raise back the capital of your cab money; even though I told you the money was yours to keep."

"I appreciate the kind gesture, sir, but I don't like accepting handouts. I told you I would treat the money as a loan towards a better life for Isabella

but I was never going to take it as a payoff to keep away from Tito. As much as you don't believe me, I loved your daughter."

"I see." For several seconds, the older man held his gaze. "You both did the right thing. There was no way you two could have had a life together. I know you see that now."

"I'm not going to rehash the past."

"You might not have been the gold-digger I pegged you for, I'll give you that. Are you aware of how Tito is faring?"

Is that a trick question? Andrew had avoided looking up TJ's social media pages, but her personality wasn't one to stay hidden. She'd briefly worked for her father's consulting firm before striking out on her own as a lifestyle blogger and influencer.

"I haven't spoken to her since she handed Bella to me, sir. I didn't breach our agreement."

Mr. Jacobs waved his hand. "Oh, I'm not referring to that."

Andrew had no idea what the man was trying to achieve with his statements, so he said nothing. Waiting.

"Are you aware of her drinking problems?"

"I might have heard something in passing." He'd come across an article with pictures of her half-drunk with a tall, lanky dude with dreads and another of her wearing shades stepping into her car in front of said dude's house. The man looked to be in his late thirties—far older than her. If he remembered correctly, it'd said: *Day after Tito Jacobs partied hard with Real Estate mogul, Omar Jimoh. Walk of shame?*

Years ago, the mere thought of another man touching what was his would have infuriated him. And although things were different, he couldn't help but worry about TJ and whatever silly games she was playing at.

"Seeing her like this breaks my heart." The older man scratched his greying brow. "I tried my hardest to do right by her. I tried to keep her away from riffraff and people I thought would veer her off the path set before her. She had such a bright future. Still does. But if she continues to act like a spoiled brat, she will be wasting her opportunities. You're a father now. I'm sure you will do everything possible to protect your daughter."

Andrew didn't even want to think of Bella becoming anything like her mother.

"It's probably just a phase."

Mr. Jacobs snorted. "You and I both know my daughter does anything she likes, whenever she likes. This has nothing to do with whether she's going through a hormonal phase or she's having some sort of quarter-life crisis or whatever scientists call it."

Andrew didn't come for this. It was none of his business what TJ did with her life. Aside from that, the conversation was beyond awkward. "I should take my leave. I appreciate what you did for Bella and me." He rose to his feet.

"Sit down, Andrew." He lifted the glass from the table to his lips and sipped it. He dropped it back. "I want us to strike a new deal. I want to see my granddaughter."

Andrew's jaw muscles twitched.

"If you recall, it was my daughter who signed off on her rights. Not me. So, I have every right to see my granddaughter. I don't think I'm asking too much. I'm not also asking that you relinquish her to me. All I want is to get to know her."

"Why now?" It was a reasonable question. Ever since TJ had signed over full custody of their daughter to him, TJ's father had never requested to have anything to do with the baby or Andrew, aside from their monetary transactions.

Mr. Jacobs brows furrowed. "Times are changing. I have lived with more regrets than I would like to admit. For once, I would like a chance to be a good role model. I believe everyone deserves second chances—don't you think?"

"I don't know. I believe a person should be deserving of a second chance. There's always a price to pay."

"I'll agree to that." Mr. Jacobs tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Andrew noted the bags under his eyes. "I'm not making any demands."

"It sounds like one, Sir."

Releasing a sigh, he sat up straight. "Then allow me to rephrase my words. If it's okay with you, I would love to see my granddaughter. I've made do with photos here and there over the years."

"Were you having us followed?" His voice was a tad high.

"Occasionally. Not because I didn't trust you with Bella's care. Curiosity got the best of me. I kept picturing Bella looking a lot like TJ when she was her age, and the more I saw, the more I wanted to meet her. So what do you say? Can you give me a chance to get to know my granddaughter?"

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CHAPTER 15

ANDREW

“Daddy, I need help with something.”
“Sure, what’s up?”

Andrew appreciated the easy rapport he had with his daughter. Being somewhat a novice in the parenting department, he relied on books and online materials to keep him going. Occasionally, he rolled with the flow. He could ask his best friend’s sister. He could also wing it; come up with spontaneous answers off the top of his head. In any case, he knew he was capable of—

“What’s a period?”

His fingers froze. He tightened his grip on the pen in his hand. Numbers swimming across the page. “What?”

“What’s a period?” She repeated.

Play it simple, Andrew. She couldn’t possibly mean anything else. “It means full-stop. It comes after a sentence.”

At His daughter's loud laughter, he looked up. Had he missed something?
“What's funny?”

“I'm not four years old. Duh... I know what a full-stop is in writing sentences. My teacher taught me in Grade One.”

He frowned. “Then what are you talking about?”

Bella did a face palm. “Period as in science...”

"Periodic table?" Now he was wishing that was what she was talking about. She couldn't possibly mean...

Bella shook her head.

Andrew bristled at what 'period' she was referring to. *God, I thought I still had a couple of years before this.* Hadn't reports said it didn't happen till eleven or twelve.

Avoiding Bella's innocently curious eyes, he glanced back down at the spread of papers before him. Usually, he brought back some of the company's financial records for review. A way to keep abreast of what was happening. He hated doing it, but it was unavoidable. "Er, why are you asking?" *Please don't let it be woman palava.* That was something he couldn't deal with.

"I overheard a senior telling her friends she started her period. And that it was painful." Bella wrinkled her nose. "The way she was holding her stomach like she was really in pain."

He scratched the back of his ear. Right now he preferred doing the financials to having this conversation with his daughter. No matter how close they were. "It's difficult to explain. Why don't you try asking grandma?" Grandma was Auntie B. Andrew mentally patted his back for his quick thinking. "I'm sure she would be happy to explain it to you."

Bella made a face. "Grandma is ancient. Will she remember what it is?"

He barked out a laugh. "I'm sure she would remember when she was a teenager." *I hope.* He wasn't going near that line of conversation.

She looked sceptical. "Really? She's ancient."

"Grandma isn't ancient." *Even if some of her ideologies are.* "She just has more experience with this."

"Why don't you have that experience?"

"Because I don't have all the answers and this is sort of a special topic for just girls."

"Like sex?"

Andrew tensed. *What the heck?* "Where did you hear that word from?"

"Jessica's house."

Jessica was Bella's best friend since kindergarten and the two had been inseparable since then. "What do you girls know about sex? And why are you talking about it in the first place?"

"Nothing. Just that it's only supposed to happen when you're ready."

"It's not supposed to happen when you're ready but when you get married. There's a difference." Andrew shook his head. "Who even told you that?"

"Jessica's sister said so."

"And how did this conversation start?"

"She said that her teacher taught them about the reproductive system and every girl had to... you know...pass out blood."

Andrew suddenly regretted finishing the last batch of pancakes. He recalled the scrawny teenager with short hair who was constantly chewing gum. If his memory served him correctly, Jessica's sister wasn't even sixteen yet. "Jessica's sister doesn't know what she's saying. She's still a child."

"She's a teenager." Bella corrected him. "And her teacher taught them in school. Unless you're saying we shouldn't listen to our teachers anymore, and that is the opposite of what you say."

"Young lady, don't forget I'm your dad." *And why are you so smart?*

She pouted and turned her gaze downwards. "Sorry, sir."

"It's not everything Jessica or her sister or any of your friends say that you take at its word. You need to find the truth as well. On your own. You did the right thing coming to me. But I'll appreciate it if you come to me first."

"But you'll only send me to grandma or aunt Caroline."

"Yes, because I get to choose responsible adults who can give you appropriate answers."

She shrugged.

"Are we cool?"

"I guess."

"You guess? Come here." Andrew stretched out his hand to his daughter. She took her time getting to him but once she was, he eased her into his arms. "Look, trust me, you don't want us to talk about that period stuff now. It's full of pimples, body odours and hair under your armpits." Bella grimaced. "As I said, let's take it easy on learning new things. And this conversation would be so much easier with an adult. Preferably a woman. Not your friends who don't know much about it."

"I don't even want to be a teenager."

Andrew chuckled. "Are we good?"

"I guess."

He raised an eyebrow. “You guess? Don’t let me tickle the answer out of you till you fart.”

“Ewww, dad.” She stepped back a bit but there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

“Great talk.” He patted her back. The awkwardness of a few minutes ago faded away. Less than five years from now, his daughter will be a teenager (one of the worst parenting years in a parent's life—so he heard). Then she would come home saying she had a boyfriend, and he would try to act cool even though he would totally be freaking out on the inside. Eventually, she would get married and have kids and he would be all on his own.

Andrew blinked once, and then twice. He picked his pen up and forced himself to balance his books, consoling himself that he still had at least a few years before Bella grew up.

When he told Kalu about it later that night, his friend spilled water on the screen of his laptop.

“Coco is all grown up!”

“Not yet.”

Kalu arched his brow. “See why you need a woman?”

“I hope your keyboard is damaged,” Andrew replied.

“Your ill intentions can’t touch this.”

Andrew snorted.

“This guy...” His friend shook his head. “Just because one woman hurt you doesn’t mean all women are bad.”

“Says the guy who’s forever single. Besides, I don’t want my daughter to be abused by her step-mum.” Andrew shook his head. “It’s not a good enough reason.” Although in truth he didn’t think he could handle another of Bella’s innocent questions on the female anatomy. But he wasn’t going to say it out loud.

“Imagine having to explain everything about birds and bees.”

Andrew pressed down his disdain at the topic. “Bella is my responsibility. Mine alone. No matter if any woman waltzes into our lives, Bella would always be number one. I’ll give her the sex talk when it’s time.”

“Not disputing that, bro. I only want you to properly think things through. One bad experience shouldn’t mar you for life.”

But it did. He wanted to say the words to his friend but shoved them down.

“I’ll add that to your collection of 1,000 Ted Talks,” Andrew replied dryly.

“One day you’ll realise I’ve been saying the truth all along.”

Andrew snorted. “Which is?”

“You need to open yourself to love again. Forget the past, and for Bella’s sake move on.” Kalu checked his watch. “Got to go. Bible study starts in a few minutes. I’m teaching the new converts about growing up spiritually. Something you should practise.”

“All the best. Talk to you later,” Andrew said, sidestepping the verbal jab. His phone’s screen displayed a photo of him and Bella laughing. Andrew knew if he looked closely at his daughter’s picture he’d see her there. But Andrew didn’t need to do that. He could find her if he closed his eyes long enough and ran through his archives of memories. But he didn’t want to dredge up memories.

With everything in him, he shoved back every memory of TJ, good and bad, into a deep dusty cabinet at the back of his mind and slammed the door shut.



Sunday morning arrived, and Andrew drove Bella and him to a church he’d begun attending after they moved to the area. His Glory Centre had a large membership, and Bella adored their children’s church. As was typical for kids, she’d made a couple of friends there. As he made his way to the adult church after dropping Bella off, he tried distancing himself from any mental distractions. He wanted to focus on the sermon. Reap some benefits from the Word.

Kalu’s words had struck a chord from their last conversation. As with his talk with Mr. Jacobs.

Andrew needed to do right by Bella.

As far as he could tell, this particular church made him feel right at home. It wasn’t the usual pretentious crowd or judgemental messages he’d had been subjected to in a long while.

If only he truly wanted to listen.

For a long time, Andrew had neglected to cultivate his relationship with God. Blame it on work or the lackadaisical manner in which he approached anything God-related. But he was aware that it was more than that. Much, much more. He wasn't ready to admit the reason for his non-committal attitude towards the things of God. The only reason he still frequented church was because of Kalu and Aunty B.

Based on his reflections, Andrew couldn't say he was growing as a Christian. Not that he didn't want to grow. But he didn't know how to. Was there anything else required of him to do aside from reading his Bible and praying? Neither of which he did consistently.

Nevertheless, he'd all but given up on making any headway.

He chose a seat at the far back of the church hall and joined in the worship session. It was an intense session and Andrew felt a tingle go down his spine when a man in the choir sang 'Love Broke Me'. The first time he heard the song was when he and Bella first came there. The song had reached the deepest recesses of his soul, bringing tears to his eyes. He knew he wanted to worship in His Glory Centre because of that one experience.

Even now as the brother sang, Andrew found himself raising his hands in praise to God.

*I want to fall deeper in love with You
I want to memorise who You are to me
Return me to that childlike trust
That carefree abandon that trusts in You, Lord
For this heart desires nothing less
Instil Your desires in me
Make me more like You*

Andrew sang along, following the lyrics on the screen, until the whole hall fell into a hush, with a few people on their knees and some lying flat on their faces. It was in their varied postures of worship, the hall lulled with pregnant silence, that one of the pastors took up his position at the pulpit. Minutes later, the pastor led them in a short prayer and as the congregation settled into their seats, Andrew's gaze was pulled to the altar, where the pastor had written a few phrases on a whiteboard: *going deeper, growth*. And he wrote a few more words around them: *safety, comfort, salvation and peace*.

For a minute, his mind wandered back to nine years ago, when he was naive and in love. The woman he'd given his undivided attention to, the woman who he would have done anything for— had been lying to him all along.

Andrew blinked and he refocused on the elderly preacher. He should at least pay attention to what was being said.

“...you must deepen your relationship with God. You cannot continue to drink milk. I did a little research. Did you know that if you only drank milk for the rest of your life, you would overdose on calcium? An adult can never survive solely on milk. Too much calcium in your body causes constipation and may result in additional digestive issues. It's okay for babies to survive on milk alone at a certain age, but as you grow, you should develop an appetite for more. The question I want you to consider is this: Are you hungry for more?”

Andrew craved more; he wanted, needed more of God in his life. Needed to point his daughter in the right direction. Still, what was he supposed to do?

The pastor continued, “Some babies find it difficult to make that transition because they are used to the texture of the previous food. When you start introducing new textures, they turn away, squeeze their faces and look at you as if you're mean and they start crying. Unfortunately, some of us Christians are like that as well. When introduced to hard truths, we harden our hearts to them. When you begin to settle for just being okay, when you settle for a casual attitude in your walk with God—you need a wake-up call. You should acquire a taste for more. Don't just be fed, start to eat for yourselves.

Because whether you realise it or not, you have allowed yourself to drift to a place where you have forgotten the price Jesus paid so that you could have a relationship with God. You have forgotten the past from which God called you out, into this present reality where you are. Where there's peace, safety, comfort and salvation. You probably think this is all there is to it for you. But I'm here to tell you that there is more. Higher awaits you. Growth is beckoning you. God has expectations for each of us. Are we meeting those expectations?”

As the pastor spoke for a few more minutes before wrapping up his sermon, leaving Andrew with a lot to think about. Though the pastor hadn't fully answered his question on how to move forward in his Christian life, he

did explain that the topic would be covered over the coming weeks; both Sundays and weekday meetings.

Andrew planned to attend.

He rose to his feet and strolled out of the hall to the children's church. Like him, there were a couple of parents hovering near the entrance, waiting their turn to pick up their kids. Mothers, for the most part. Andrew wondered how things would have been had he been married. If Bella had a mum who she eagerly awaited to see.

Why was he thinking about a mother for his daughter? He was fine the way things were. This is Kalu's fault. The uninvited words of his best friend were dancing in his head. It wasn't that he never attracted the attention of a woman. He'd had Bella strapped to him in a body harness that Caroline had given him when she was a baby.

Caroline had meant it as a joke, but Andrew saw it as a lifeline.

He laughed quietly to himself. He could recall the collective pool of disapproval and admiration women threw his way. Opportunities came for him to milk the situation. Yet, he didn't.

As soon as he gained entry into the colourful children's church, he was greeted by a welcome sign on a purple and white cardboard paper. It was next to a multi-coloured poster of the Ten Commandments. He sifted through the children who were waiting for their parents and spotted his daughter in her peach sleeveless dress and chatting animatedly with some other girls. "Bella. Time to go."

"Brother Andrew?"

His brows drew together as he whipped around to face the voice. He looked down at the pretty lady in a white and yellow polka dots dress and a black cardigan who had appeared by his side. A cute toddler tugging at the hem of her dress. "Yes?"

She beamed up at him and extended her hand. "My name is Eliana. Bella's teacher."

"Oh, hi. Nice to meet you," he said, shaking hands with her just as Bella approached.

"Same here."

"Hey there, Coco."

"Coco?" Eliana's forehead creased in confusion.

"It's my nickname for her," Andrew explained.

Eliana wrapped her arms around his daughter's shoulders and bowed low to meet Bella's eyes. "It's a lovely nickname. I wish I had a nickname, too."

Bella's face lit up. "My daddy gives the best nicknames. He's cool like that."

Andrew and Eliana both chuckled. Eliana stood up straight. "I just wanted to meet you and acquaint myself with you. Isabella is a wonderful addition to our class. She's a delight."

"Or you mean she's troublesome?" Andrew cocked an eyebrow as he peered down at his daughter. In turn, Bella gaped at him.

Eliana laughed while shaking her head. "No. She's doing really well."

He slipped his hands into his front pockets. "Glad to hear it."

Eliana nodded. "I hope you're enjoying the services."

"Yes. So far so good. I haven't been disappointed yet."

"And hopefully there won't be any reason for you to be."

They made small talk and he learned she was married and worked as an interior decorator. "Well, it was great meeting you, Brother Andrew. I hope we'll see more of you and Bella."

"Of course."

"Bye bye, Auntie Eliana!"

"Bye, Coco!"

"How was church today?" He rested his arm against the window as he inched the car out of the parking lot alongside other parishioners who were just as eager to leave.

Bella shrugged. "It was cool. Jessica came to church today."

"That's nice. Do you remember what they taught you, or did you girls just gossip the whole time?"

"I learnt about Jacob and Esau."

"And?" He prodded.

"And I learnt not to cheat others of what belongs to them. Can I have chips and chicken for lunch?"

"Not today, please." Andrew always had a monthly budget, and he was on the verge of going over. He'd just paid for Bella's swimming lessons at school after she had pestered him for months.

"Pleaseeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee," she sang.

"Nope. Do you have any money?"

Her cute face scrunched to a frown. "Only a little."

“Remember what I said about impulsive buying and home allowances?” From the rearview mirror, he saw her nod.

“That I can’t always get what I want when I want it.” She twisted her lips in thought. “And I need to learn how to make money and save it if I want something so badly.”

“And?” He prodded again.

“I won’t be able to buy anything else if I spend all of my money on burgers.”

“Well as a family we are close to that. So I need us to take things easy. We can plan that for the end of the month.”

She folded her arms and looked out the window.

Andrew decided to end things there. Let her simmer down and think about their talk.

When a woman in a black weave through the driver’s window came into view, his pulse quickened, but he shook his head. It wasn’t the woman at the hospital. The car was unfamiliar. He thought back to the woman he’d bumped into at the hospital. Since meeting her a while ago, his thoughts had occasionally wandered to her.

“I wonder how she’s doing,” he said aloud. He was concerned because he was worried.

Nothing else to it, he told himself.

His attention had been drawn to the pain and tears welling up in her eyes. That day at the hospital part of him had wanted to walk her to her car and ask what the problem was. Only one thing stopped him from unleashing any care that day—the engagement ring on her finger.

Reeling his thoughts in, he chose to focus on other things.

His phone rang later that evening, while his daughter was doing homework at the dining table and he was preparing dinner. He bit back a swear word after seeing the caller ID. He grabbed his phone and shut the kitchen door for privacy.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Andrew. How are you?”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Good to hear. I called to remind you of our last conversation.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir. I haven’t forgotten about it.”

A deep, throaty laugh followed. “I see you’re still as stubborn as before. You have done your best over the years to keep this relationship strictly

professional. I admire that about you, but you should keep in mind that blood is thicker than water. Please, consider my request.”

He clenched his teeth. “I’ll get back to you on that, sir.”

“All right, then. I’ll leave you to your Sunday evening.”

End of call.

Andrew massaged his forehead. He’d been happy to prove the man wrong—both him and TJ. Shove it in their faces that he was a better man than they thought. It had backfired and there was a chance he would get burned.

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CHAPTER 16

ERINMA

Erinma sat down on the couch for a light dinner and flipped to the lifestyle channel to catch up on the Ari Mato Show. After Oprah Winfrey's show ended years ago, it became one of Erinma's favourite shows. Usually, Erinma recorded each show due to her hectic schedule, but she had free time since Lanre called to cancel their date for that evening. Fortunately, her sister called to say she'd be there soon.

She didn't want to be alone at home right now. Her last visit to the hospital had been tough. Noelle was still in critical condition and barely conscious when Erinma entered her room.

She wanted to stay by her side, but the nurses had advised her not to and encouraged Erinma to leave and get some rest, saying there was nothing she could do there for her. The chances of Noelle regaining consciousness were slim. So Erinma went to get some food while she waited for their call if anything changed: for the better or for the worse.

God, she can't die. Don't let her die!

Tears rushed to her eyes, which she wiped away with the back of her hand. Turning her eyes to the TV.

"I want you to remember that you have everything it takes to become who you need to be," Ari told the camera, a smile on her lips. Today's show was mostly outdoors with Ari dressed in a pale pink T-shirt paired with Capri-like trousers and pointed-toe pumps. The popular TV host was

speaking with a group of market women and traders who embarked on the day-to-day hustle for a better life.

In this episode, Ari was giving them female products, accessories and *Ankara*.

When Erinma took over as CEO of PB, she was invited to appear on the show. They were having a season on female CEOs in the country and the challenges they faced. Proud Belle had provided eye-shadow palettes, matte lipsticks, mascara, loose powder and a facial care package to the entire female audience. Their Sales had skyrocketed by fifty percent. Women talking about the products on Instagram and tagging PB.

It was a great experience.

It made Erinma love Ari Mato all the more.

Even though there was a lot of salacious talk regarding the woman's personal life, she was still popular among women.

The male folk adored her.

When Erinma heard her phone buzz beneath her, she jumped out of her chair. Her heart rate returned to normal when she realised it wasn't from the hospital. It was an incoming video call from her best friend.

"Bestie!" Destiny squealed as Erinma answered the phone.

"Babes, calm down. Do you want to block my ears?" Erinma settled back down on the couch and began recording the rest of the show.

"Sorry." She let out a small scream. "You don't know how long I've wanted to be here. What remains is for me to learn French so I can land a husband in this place. *Oui, oui*."

Erinma laughed. "You're not serious."

"Who's joking with you?"

"Pay me a visit when you land back from la-la land."

Destiny's eyes sparkled. "Seriously, Erinma. Did you ever believe I would be here? Doing my favourite job in the world, traipsing from one country to the next and getting paid to do it? I can't stop praying for you and Lanre. God will bless both of you for me."

"Amen."

"You will continue to be a source of blessing to many."

"Amen."

"You will have like ten children."

Erinma pursed her lips.

"You will not say amen to that one? It's a good prayer, *nau*." Her friend chewed on her lip and Erinma knew she was holding back a laugh. Erinma had only talked to Lanre to employ her in his brother's airline company. Destiny recently had been promoted to senior flight attendant, and the benefits from the job had been mind-blowing for her.

"When we have the children, we can bring them over to you so you can look after them. If you're in the country."

"Don't worry girl. I gats you," Destiny said with a wink. "What are you doing with your fine self? Aren't you supposed to be on a date with your man crush?"

"He had to work late, so I'm home alone." Erinma watched as Ari held the bread seller around her shoulders as the woman sobbed. At the scene, something shifted in Erinma. "Noelle isn't doing so well. The doctors said she might not survive the coming days."

"Aww, baby girl. I'm sorry."

"I'm torn over the whole thing." She tucked her feet under her. "I wish things were different. I can't help but feel responsible."

"Sweetie," Destiny said, putting her hand to her chest. "We all wish things were different. But this is how it happened. We get knocked down, but we get back up and keep going. What happened with Noelle was tragic. But don't do this. I won't let you beat yourself up. As your bestie for life," she circled her palm across the screen, "I need to shake you out of your self-righteous guilt."

"It's not self-righteous guilt—if that in itself makes any sense."

"It makes plenty of sense. How could you have known the fire would happen? Who could have guessed that Noelle would insist on spending time with you? No one."

God could have, she reasoned. But she couldn't even question His motives. He was God.

Erinma dropped her head in her free hand.

"What are your plans for tonight? Since your man is MIA."

She exhaled a sigh. "Right now, I'm watching Ari Mato."

"That woman is ballin'! Why wouldn't she look like a million bucks and have children for highfliers when she looks like that at over forty. She's living her best life." Destiny flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I watched the last episode where she interviewed that Nigerian footballer. Can't remember his name right now." Destiny bit her lip. "He has six-packs, and

black hair with tiny locs,” She said, nipping the edge of her oval-shaped fingernail with her teeth. “Niran something.”

“Niran Aremeyin. Son of Oba Aremeyin in Ondo state,” Erina offered.

“Yeah.” Destiny grinned. “That guy is a snack!”

Erinma sat back in her seat, rolling her eyes. “You need deliverance. Every man is a snack to you.”

Her BFF narrowed her eyes at her. “*Desserts get grade o!* People like your fiancé and Niran are as sweet as macarons or crème brûlée. Some could just pass for plain custard and milk. “There’s no going back once you’ve tasted better.”

What if you could live out your own dreams, Erinma? The thought triggered a wistful feeling. Erinma shoved it away. She felt bad thinking about opportunities while Noelle was fighting for her life.

Yeah, the melancholy feeling died quickly.

The doorbell rang.

“Lanre?” Her tone had a slight edge to it.

“Nah, he’s working late. It’s Somto.” Erinma stood up and walked barefoot to the front door.

“Oh-kay.” Destiny wriggled her fingers and said, “I’m going to skedaddle.”

“Can’t you guys get along for once in your life? What’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem. You know she’s the one with the problem. She doesn’t like me. It’s best if we just keep things the way they are.”

“At least say hi.”

“Her hellos are tinged with condescension and irritation. I know where I’m not wanted. Babes, I’ll talk to you later. Love you!” Destiny blew her a kiss and hung up before Erinma could persuade her to stay on the line a little longer.

The doorbell rang again as Erinma pulled it open. Her sister Somto, was still dressed in her work clothes: black palazzo pants and a white lacy shirt with cute Alaïa shoes. But the white nylon bag in her hand with the slogan of Erinma’s favourite doughnut shop warmed her heart.

“Thanks for coming.”

Her sister pulled her into a hug. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m trying.”

Somto took a step back and studied her. “You are going to be fine. Everything will be fine.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.” She placed a hand over her heart. “But you have no idea how painful this is. It’s my fault this happened.” She walked away and plopped down on the couch.

“No, it’s not.”

Erinma shook her head. “It is.” Whatever anyone said, she knew she had a role to play.

“It’s not. I’ll make us some hot chocolate and we’ll nosh on this. I’ll be right back.”

Erinma squeezed her eyes shut and could still feel the soot burning her eyes. She could smell the smoke and hear the screams. She had vivid memories of that day. Erinma had decided to relax at her parents’ beach house after weeks of press release and media coverage, along with unavoidable back-and-forths with their offshore partners. The gardener and the housekeeper—who also worked as the cook—happened to be Noelle’s parents, and other housekeeping staff were already stationed there. Erinma’s father used the place to host foreign guests, sometimes Suravi—when she came to visit, which had only happened twice in Erinma’s life. Noelle and her parents were assigned to the boy’s quarters.

She’d just stepped out of the shower after trying on the lavender-infused goat milk shower gel they’d launched only three weeks ago, when the smell of smoke hit her nose. Alarmed, she rushed to her door and hurried down the hall to the bedroom where Noelle was. After Erinma had invited her to watch the kid’s movie *Paddington* with her, they had decided to stay up in the bedroom while Erinma hoped to get some sleep. It was supposed to be a girls’ sleepover. Instead, it was a nightmare.

Erinma’s knees buckled at the sight of smoke seeping under the double-panelled doors and she dashed to the door and grabbed the door handle. Her hand throbbed from the metal’s scorching heat, causing her to scream. She blew out a breath, coughing as she yanked off the towel wrapped around her head, twisting it around the bruised hand with jerking movements before opening the door.

Noelle lay motionless on the bed. A haze of smoke surrounded her.

Erinma was startled by a scream and her gaze skittered out the window to see Noelle’s mother sobbing, her hand pressed to her chest as grief overwhelmed her bulky frame. Next minute, the woman was holding her wrist and her knees were sinking to the ground.

Erinma screamed her name in terror but she knew there was nothing she could do from where she stood. Could people hear her over the commotion outside? She needed to act fast. Needed to get Noelle out of there as soon as possible. The curtains and wardrobe were being chewed up in flames. Erinma wheezed and pressed her bathrobe sleeve against her nose, her lungs struggling to take in fresh air. Forcing her feet forward, she jogged to Noelle's side. She pressed two fingers down against Noelle's neck and exhaled a sigh of relief: she still had a pulse, albeit a weak one. Erinma's eyes watered and she gulped back a sob. *This is my fault!* She couldn't stop to berate herself. Not now.

She lifted Noelle's dead weight from the bed. Erinma's eyes flew to the door. The red-orange flames danced close to the bed. Her father's custom-made and imported French dressers burned without hesitation.

God, help us!

The room got darker as more smoke clouded the air. Erinma dashed to the door, but she bumped her knee against the dressing table and slipped on the rug, her head colliding with the sharp pointy edges of the table, and she and Noelle tumbled to the floor together. A snake of fire inching close to them. Erinma managed to pull Noelle away notwithstanding the pounding of her head.

A trickle of blood slid down to her eyelids and she blinked rapidly. She pushed herself up and stumbled out the door, pressing Noelle's nose against her chest. Her lungs were empty of clean air, her chest constricted.

Somehow, they'd made it out with Erinma's clothes melting to her body. She'd slipped into unconsciousness in the middle of the garden and what happened next faded into obscurity.

She blinked, her eyes refocusing on her living room. That night had been a miracle, as everyone had said. People died in such accidents, but Erinma had lived to tell her story. Her scars were proof of God's grace. Her chest, however, was heavy with guilt. Noelle's parents hadn't made it out alive. What she couldn't say was why she was away from Noelle for that long. She'd been in desperate search of the sleeping pills right before stepping into the bathroom. The prescription bottle tucked away in a kitchen cabinet. She came back to the bedroom too late. Erinma shut her eyes. She was a fool.

You're a murderer.

No. It was a mistake.

Her sister returned with two floral-printed turquoise mugs, putting an end to her terrifying train of thought. She dropped the mugs on the side table and took a seat next to Erinma.

“What about Lanre?”

“He’s at a meeting.”

Somto coughed up a dry chuckle. “I swear I dislike him more and more.”

Erinma gave her sister’s arm a small nudge. “Come on. You’re talking about my future husband. He’s not as bad as you think him to be. We all have flaws.”

“And as an outsider, I can honestly tell you he’s a very unserious person.”

“Judge not that ye not be judged. That’s God’s Word.”

“Have the common sense to avoid being treated as a fool later.” Somto pointed at her. “That, my dear, is experience talking.”

“Did I tell you Isi’s back in town? We played dress-up in your clothes,” Erinma added at her sister’s puzzled expression.

“Oh. Her mother is mum’s friend. That’s good. At the very least she can displace that Destiny chick.” Somto reached for her cup and brought it to her lips.

“What’s your beef with Destiny?”

“No beef. Just let her keep her distance from me, and she’ll earn a bit of my respect.” Somto took a sip of her tea. Erinma was sure it was black with no cream or sugar. Just the way her sister liked it. Somto was an executive director at a prestigious oil company. Despite her interest in fashion and looking good, she didn’t share their father’s love for Proud Belle. Business was not in her blood. And as a result, she charted a new career path for herself. Their father had initially reacted negatively to the news. In Igbo culture, his firstborn’s decision to leave the family business, while plausible, didn’t go well with him. Especially since he only had female children and not the preferred male child to take the reins of the company. For years, their tumultuous relationship had affected the entire family. Until recently, when dad gave them all a scare and Somto and Dad had patched things at Christmas.

Everyone could breathe freely again.

Her phone rang. This time, it was the hospital calling. Erinma grabbed her phone and jumped to her feet. She scraped a hand through her hair as she stared down at the hospital acronym: *ECH calling*.

Why would the hospital call if not...No, she thought. It could be good news. But then what if it wasn't?

"Erinma?"

"I can't answer it." Her hand trembled as she shoved the phone to her sister. "You answer it."

Somto took the phone from her hand and answered the call. "Hello. No, I'm her sister. Okay. Yes, thank you. She'll be there shortly. Thank you for calling." Somto hung up the phone. Her silence stretched on for a few seconds, but to Erinma it felt like a lifetime. "I'm sorry, Erin. She's gone."

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CHAPTER 17

ERINMA

Two weeks had passed since Noelle's funeral and Erinma still couldn't shake off the dread that accompanied her loss. She hated that Noelle was gone. Hated that she was the one who put her in that situation that led to her death and that of her parents. None of this would have happened if Erinma hadn't gone to the beach house and invited her up to watch a movie. What she hated the most was that she hadn't been by Noelle's side when she died. But the smile on her face... that had comforted Erinma. Her death was peaceful. And maybe now she was with her parents, she would be happy again.

But it's my fault! My mistake!

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she looked around her living room. Erinma's hopes that Noelle's situation would get better and come live with her had been dashed. The solitude stabbed at her sorrow and it felt like the surrounding walls were closing in. Suffocating her.

I need air!

She shuffled towards the door, ignoring her simple outfit of Burgundy joggers and a grey long-sleeved shirt from her morning walk, grabbed a face cap and her key fob and shuffled out the door. Isi had to babysit her cousin's children hence her unavailability. Somto wasn't in town. Destiny's flight back to Nigeria was scheduled for late tomorrow. And Erinma wasn't

in the mood to face her parents—her mother’s theatrics would only hurt the more. That left one option for that Saturday afternoon.

Lanre had promised to come over but he had an impromptu virtual meeting with some of his investors and he couldn’t come until way later.

She got into her car and drove over to Lanre’s house. In forty minutes, she came into view of his four-bedroom duplex with brown Swiss roofing sheets. There was once a time Erinma had frequented the place and claimed it as hers, knowing she and Lanre would marry. She’d mentally captured the many changes that would make his house more appealing to her. She’d even spent several nights at his place... in his bed.

Erinma chased those thoughts away.

As she’d discovered, getting sexually involved ahead of time was not the way to build a long-term commitment. Which was why she’d decided not to spend the night as she’d done in the past. Because she doubted everything about herself now. Housing doubts if she physically appealed to him like before.

Still, it didn’t make her miss that part of their relationship any less.

He still made passes at her. But Erinma could tell something was wrong even though she didn’t know what it was.

Lanre had always been gentle with her. Until recently, that is. He was constantly on edge due to the merger. She remembered the beginning, even way before they made their relationship official, he always made time for her. The distance between them crushed her.

She understood the demands of his job. She, too, held a high-ranking position at PB and knew how much effort it took to keep a company going. Knowing all of this made it easier to support him without appearing clingy. With wedding preparations in full swing, she hoped they could work out the kinks in their relationship. Make it as good as it was prior to the fire. Maybe even better.

Erinma noticed his Maserati wasn’t parked in its usual spot as soon as she drove into his compound. She spotted him standing at the door. A towel was strewn over his shoulder and his chest glistening with sweat indicated he’d just finished a workout session.

Erinma parked, got out of the car, shut the door and took quick strides toward him.

“Hey, doll face.” She clung to him as he wrapped his arms around her. She buried her face between his neck and shoulder and told herself not to

cry when the grief of the last few weeks overtook her.

His hands moved up her back to her shoulders, massaging the back of her neck.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come to you as I said I would. Work has been crazy.”

She straightened a little. “It’s okay,” she whispered into his neck.

“How are you doing?”

Bad. “I can be better.”

“I would have come to you, you know. I’m not so insensitive to what you’re going through. I know you loved that girl.”

Erinma tensed.

That girl?

That girl!

She wanted to scream that her name was Noelle. That he shouldn’t label her as if she were someone random and unknown. That neither of them was special. They could both have ended up like Noelle. Noelle had the potential to make something of herself. She had hopes and dreams for the future, but they were all gone. But Erinma let it slide, pulling back and forcing a smile. Having an argument was pointless. Erinma followed him to the back of the house and straight into the kitchen. The focal point of the space was a wooden table surrounded by high stools. A coffee maker, a TV mounted on the wall, the appliances and plates were in monochrome shades of black and white. The stainless steel double-door refrigerator sat in the middle of two doors; the door on the left opened to the pantry and the door on the right leading to the rest of the house.

It smelled like it always did: clean and starved of any cooking.

Lanre never liked to cook. He ordered in or his mother sent him Tupperwares with food for a week. All he had to do was pop it in the microwave. Even so, it was a chore.

Lanre walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water while Erinma sat on a high stool. He returned to her and handed her the bottle.

“Drink some water. Your hands are shaking”

She followed his instructions.

“Better?” He asked after she took a few sips.

She gave a nod. “Yeah. Thanks.”

He rubbed her arms and brought his lips to hers. At first it was a simple brush of their lips. But soon it escalated. He kissed her till she was left breathless and hungry for more even though she knew she couldn’t,

shouldn't, take what was happening between them to the next level. She was vulnerable. Her emotions were jumbled. Her fingers rose his chest and circled his neck. Lanre, sensing her desire and ignoring her slight hesitations, deepened the kiss and wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her closer to him. Erinma snapped to her senses when his hands began to move in unbidden directions. She lowered her hands from his neck and planted them firmly on his chest, pushing him back.

"Stop," she rasped out.

Lanre raised a brow, perplexed. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to do this. Not right now."

He remained quiet for a bit, staring at her with unreadable eyes.

"Let me shower, then I'll order some food so we can have dinner. Is that okay?"

She exhaled slowly. Relieved he wasn't putting up a fight. "That's fine."



They sat outside by the pool. Over spaghetti bolognese, mixed fruits and barbecue chicken, he discussed his company's merger. Lanre had ordered from Marigold Royale. The food looked great, and tasted fine, but Erinma didn't have the appetite. All she could think about was Noelle being buried six feet under and she was here, eating food specially made for them.

She knew what her therapist would say: *it wasn't your fault, Erinma. Allow yourself to live again.* Erinma had informed Dr. Rayo of Noelle's passing via text and she responded with a call to check on her. Offering encouragement and she was more than willing to make herself available if Erinma needed to come in.

Goosebumps ran up her arm at the cold, evening air blowing over them. Erinma drew her shirt sleeves down to her palms. These days they had shorter days and longer nights.

Her stomach was in a knot. Now more than ever she didn't want to live life not doing what she wanted.

"I'm considering leaving Proud Belle," Erinma blurted.

She saw Lanre's brows draw together as he chewed on a chicken thigh, taking a break from discussing his work issues. "To go where? Are you planning a trip I'm not aware of?"

Erinma licked her lips, tasting the pepper kick from the sauce. "No, I mean I'm stepping down as CEO."

Lanre's cool gaze met hers. "What?"

"I've been thinking about it for months and this feels like the best thing for me to do."

He chuckled. "The best thing? Do you even know what you're saying?"

"I know what I want now."

"So you were confused before or what?" He raised a finger. "Okay. And when you leave, what do you plan to do?"

Erinma pursed her lips, then said, "I'm going to open a flower shop."

Lanre's eyebrows slanted upwards and she could see the million questions on his face. "A what?" He burst out laughing. When he slapped his palm on the table, drops of her orange juice splashed on the cream tablecloth. "That's the craziest thing I've heard. Are you going into comedy now?" He tore another piece of chicken and popped it into his mouth. He licked his thumb and index fingers before taking up his half-empty glass of wine. "Be serious. What do you want to do?"

She was getting tired of his responses. "You heard me the first time, Lanre."

He set his drink down and wiped the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "You're actually serious. Why this drastic move? Does it have anything to do with the death of that little girl?"

Erinma's eye twitched. "She has...had a name."

"Have you told your dad? That you want to shirk away from the family business." He ignored her last statement. "Because if you did, I'm sure he would never let you abscond your duties to the company."

"I'm not shirking or absconding from my responsibilities!" She wanted to scream how she felt. Wanted so badly for him to understand what was going through her mind. But he couldn't know if she didn't even know how to express her thoughts to him.

She leaned back in her seat and pressed her fingertips to her forehead. She took in a steady breath before speaking again. "I-I just can't do it anymore, Lanre. Try to understand me before dismissing my thoughts."

“Erinma, baby, I do. I understand what you’re currently going through. I also understand that people grieve differently. All I want is for you to take some time to yourself. Gather your thoughts or else you will keep spiralling downwards and make more bad decisions.”

“What bad decisions have I made?”

“For one, moving out of your parents’ house. And then pushing your friends away when you needed solitude. You needed family around you and not being on your own. Then you left that fat chick to run your father’s company. What if things failed?”

“But it didn’t! Odavwaro did a good job and I was on top of things!”

He tossed his napkin on the unfinished plate.

Yes, her decisions could have been purely sentimental. But it was much more than going through the stages of any grieving process.

“Doll face, let’s calm down.” Lanre reached across the table and took her hand in his. “If you want to do something different, why don’t we focus on us...on our wedding? We have a lot of planning to do: the dress you want, the reception and guests... our honeymoon.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. “Why don’t you just focus on that instead?”

She drew her hand back to herself and folded her arms tightly across her chest. “I can plan our wedding and make plans for the flower shop.” He grabbed his glass of wine and finished its content. “This is not a spur-of-the-moment decision, Lanre. The least you can do is ask why I want to do this. Is that too much to expect from you as my man?”

He dropped the glass back on the table. “No. But I know you. I know you make crazy choices after a tragic event. You’re a very emotional person, Erinma. Look at what happened after the fire, you pushed people away—”

“Because I didn’t want anyone to look at me. How does that count as a poor decision?”

“Let me finish.”

She looked away from him. “Talk.”

“Then you moved out of the family house.”

Erinma turned to him, lifting a brow. “Is there a problem with being independent?”

“No. Are you even listening to me? I’m saying when things happen, you do unexpected things. I have a problem with you throwing away this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a CEO of a multinational company. Do you know the power you wield? The connections you could make with that

position? Do you know how many people want what you have? I don't approve of you stepping down."

She tensed at his tone and choice of words. "You don't have a right to demand that of me."

"I have every right to exercise my authority as the man you are going to spend the rest of your life with. You are wearing my ring, doll face."

She shook her head and stuck her tongue in her cheek. *This is ridiculous.* "Wait, so a piece of expensive metal makes you think you can dictate what I can or can't do?"

He dropped the empty glass back on the table. "I'm not dictating. I'm only stating my opinion. At the end of the day, you have the deciding factor. But I don't want you to make a mistake. What do you think your father would say when you tell him?"

"He would understand."

"*Ehn-ehn?* Remember the whole Somto fiasco and how long that lasted? You really think your father would let you walk away so easily?"

The truth of his words shut her up.

"Take some time out to think," he repeated.

"I've done nothing but think about this for years."

He blinked twice. "For years? Erinma we've been dating for five years and you didn't deem it fit to share this part of yourself with me?"

She wiped the sweat from her brow. Not wanting to lift the face cap and expose her burned and half-bald scalp. The first time Lanre had viewed her patchy scalp, he had looked like he was going to be sick. He couldn't look her in the eyes, and she kept her hair covered up. "It's not like that."

"Then what's it like? You complain I'm being distant in this relationship, but here you are—keeping things from me."

He was right. She was keeping things from him, but only because she didn't think he could handle it. Which was wrong in itself. It was at the tip of her tongue to apologise.

"What happened to Noelle and her parents was a mistake. You can't carry the guilt in your head forever. You can't let it rule your life and make you become someone you're not. Owning a flower shop is coming out of nowhere!"

Her apology vanished. "Why are you being a pessimist?"

"I'm trying to be realistic, Erinma! In case you're yet to figure it out: I'm looking out for your best interest. That's all I care about."

She stared at him. “That’s all you care about? What I want means nothing to you?”

He sighed. “I didn’t say that. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

Erinma glanced up at the darkening sky. She was a long distance from home. She would be driving home at night at this rate. “I need to go.”

“I’ll take you home.”

“No. I’ll call an Uber.” She forced a smile. “You said you still have a meeting. It’s fine. I’ll get my car after church tomorrow.”

She cleared the dishes, and stored the uneaten food in the refrigerator—surprised to find most of the Tupperware soups gone. Done with the cleaning, she dug out her phone from her pocket and scouted the cab app. Every attempt to book a cab failed as it took several minutes to secure a ride for her.

In frustration, she called Somto. Bracing herself for an inevitable pep talk.

CHAPTER 18

ANDREW

He arrived at the address and waited outside a black gate. There was no one waiting. No one appeared to be waiting for a cab. Andrew took out his work phone and dialled the number from which the request had been made. It rang, but his attention shifted when a woman approached the passenger window and knocked. His breath caught in his throat when he saw it was the woman from the hospital.

She wriggled her fingers at him. She said what he thought was a 'hello'.

Andrew rolled down the passenger window that separated them.

"Hi, good evening. Bam Cab? Mr. Andrew, right?" She spoke in a shaky tone.

He took a quick scan of her facial features, viewing the scars freely now that nothing was blocking her face, albeit a black face cap. Her face was a mix of smooth and jagged brownish scars that ran from her jaw to her neck. More burdensome were the recent additions: her eyes. They were red and puffy. Like she'd been crying.

He cleared his throat. More from embarrassment because he realised he'd probably stared at her longer than he had intended to. "Yes, I'm Andrew. Good evening. You called for a ride?"

"Yes. I did." She didn't act or sound bothered by his gawking. Most likely used to it. That made his perusal hurt some more.

"Are you ready to go?"

She looked back at the house she'd emerged from and diverted her gaze back to Andrew again. "Yes, I'm ready." Instead of getting into the backseat, she opened the passenger's door in front and sat next to him. She gazed out the window again and Andrew followed her gaze. A light-skinned guy emerged, dressed casually in jersey shorts, a sweatshirt and crocs. The tight look on his face and his clenched jaw spoke volumes. Who was the guy, anyway? A current boyfriend? An ex? Bad company?

A tattoo of a lion's head and a quote adorned both of his arms.

Whoever he was, he was most likely involved in her fallen tears.

Or maybe he was a side flame? Last he checked, she had been wearing an engagement ring.

She's one of those girls...

And yet, as soon as the thought came, he squelched it. He didn't know her. It was wrong for him to assume she was one of those girls who slept over at their boyfriend's place. In this case, fiancé. Plus, it would only make him a hypocrite. Moreover, he couldn't reconcile the woman at the hospital in all her corporate garb and the woman seated beside him, who appeared dishevelled in a simple outfit.

Looks can be deceiving.

Andrew had seen his fair share of mistaken identity.

He was curious if she remembered him. Like the last time, her perfume permeated the air around him again, this time with flowers and chocolate.

"Can we please leave?" she said in a whisper. Her gaze was firmly on the road in front of them.

"Yes, ma'am."

Andrew reversed the car, did a U-turn, and drove away.

"Do you want some music?" He asked when they had put a full five minutes from her pick-up location.

He half expected her to say no. Maybe she wanted to be on her own. But if she did, she wouldn't have sat next to him.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "Why not?"

"Any song in particular?"

She smiled and glanced at him. "Something slow. Gospel preferably."

Once they were at a red light, Andrew selected a song from his growing collection of Gospel songs. He selected *Drawn to You* by Audrey Assad. Andrew didn't know what to think of her yet. He'd run into her twice and

neither time did he get that spoiled, bratty vibe that all rich girls gave off. This one appeared laid back and modest.

The music filled the car. He heard her sniffles and saw her dabbing her eyes with the back of her sleeve from the corner of his eye.

Andrew pinched his lips together.

You don't have to ask about her problems.

But if I don't ask, I'll come off as callous and insensitive.

Two words that a few women had used to describe him in the past.

She sniffed again.

The inner battle continued. He gripped the steering tighter. *I'm not uncaring and insensitive. I just don't want to care.*

Another sniff.

Andrew drew a breath. "Are you okay?" He gave her a sidelong glance.

She turned to look at him in shock. Her lips parted. "I'll be fine. Thanks for asking." She forced a smile for an added touch then grimaced and looked away.

He chanced another glance at her and glimpsed a small scar on her jaw. *How did she get those scars?* He couldn't imagine the agony she went through.

She said she would be fine. Not that she was fine. He could end it there. Allow the music to fill up the silence as he drove the next thirty minutes plus to her destination. Or he could make conversation and inadvertently promote his business. He went for the latter.

"Do you mind if I ask a question? I don't want to disturb you or anything."

"No, I don't mind. And you're not bothering me."

He nodded. "How did you hear about us?" He asked. Needing to align his thoughts on more important things and not carry her problems on his head.

"BAM Cab? My elder sister is to thank for the referral."

"Any idea on how she heard about us?"

"Er... I think she said she was running late for an event and was disappointed by a taxi and she heard about you guys and gave you a try, eventually settling for BAM. Which is how she referred your cab company to me."

Andrew nodded. It was good to know his company was making progress. Any kind of advertising was expensive these days but nothing could beat word of mouth. "Where do you work? If you don't mind my asking?"

“Proud Belle. It’s a beauty company. Maybe you can talk your girlfriend into buying our products if she isn’t already.”

He frowned. The name struck a bell.

“That was a really nice song.” She said when the song ended. “Who sang it?”

“Audrey Assad.”

“Never heard of her. I’ll look up her songs. Thanks for the hook-up.”

Next song was *Gracefully Broken*. One of Andrew’s favourites.

“Matt Redman and Tasha Cobbs?”

He was surprised. “Yeah.” Apparently, she knew her gospel Jamz.

Another red light came into view, giving him another chance to look at her. Knowing she was in a serious relationship, he killed every notion of her being available and settled for being acquaintances if that was something she wanted (being that they’d run into each other three times now if he counted the way she drove out of the hospital parking lot the first time).

“Thanks for the other time. At the hospital. For asking how I was.”

“You remember me?”

She laughed. “I do.

They fell into a comfortable silence as he drove. The windows were up, and there was cool music and a cool air in their midst. Not to mention her heady scent. He shook his head at the latter as he glared at the careless bus driver who had cut-in in front of him. Years of driving hadn’t made him immune to the recklessness of bus drivers.

Her face was turned to the window as she bobbed her head and sang along to Travis’ Greene *Worship Rise*.

“Whatever happened with the news you got at the hospital. Sorry, if I’m being too involved. I’m only concerned.”

When the silence lingered, he figured out what the answer was.

“She didn’t make it.”

“I’m so sorry—” He didn’t even know the woman’s name.

“She was buried a month ago. She was my gardener’s daughter. Her parents passed before her.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What happened? Do you mind if I ask?”

“It was a mistake. A.C caught fire.”

Andrew had heard of such things happening but never witnessed it. “How did it start?”

Her phone rang then. She excused herself and answered it. Her tone, flat. Andrew lowered the volume so Cece Winans' *Alabaster Box* was kept at a minimum. He couldn't help but overhear her end of the conversation. "Hi. Not home yet. I'll let you know. It's fine. I guess we were both upset and not in a good place to have that conversation." Then her dull tone got excited. "Really? I would love that. I love you too."

The call ended and she stayed quiet. Gazing out the window.

Andrew didn't know if he should repeat the question or—

"What made you opt to be a cab driver?" she asked out of the blue.

Okay, we're changing the conversation. "I couldn't get a job when I left the university. My parents and sister needed financial aid. Then I had a daughter to raise, and I needed to have time for her, so I started driving cars for a living." That was half of the story, but she didn't need to know that.

"Your daughter was with you at the hospital, right? How is she?"

"Much better now."

"What's her name?"

"Bella. Short for Isabella."

He turned onto her street and slowed the car to a cream gate. The mechanised female voice on his Google map told him they had reached their destination. A security guard was standing next to the gate.

"Here's my card." He extended it to her after she alighted the car. "In case you need a chauffeur for any trip or private meetings. You could call ahead of time and I could fix you in."

She angled her head and peered at him. "What if you have another customer?"

"I'll let you know if I do. I do out-of-state trips as well."

"I'll keep that in mind. It was nice to meet you, Andrew."

"Same here." He didn't know how to ask for her name.

And the less he knew of her the better.

She nodded once, took a step back and walked towards the cream gate.



Andrew

“*Biko gwa m, (please, tell me)*, when are you going to settle down? Don’t be like that your friend o. Singlehood is not an easy thing; not to add being a single parent.”

“But you did it effortlessly with me.”

Aunty B snorted.

Andrew quietly laughed as he scooped some egusi and okra soup with his finger into his mouth. Taking in the rich lamb and shrimp flavours. He never went a day without him thanking God for Aunty B, for all she’d done for him in the past and now, with Bella in the mix. Andrew was only twelve years old when his dad delegated responsibility for his care to his younger sister, a decision made because his father frequently travelled to other states for work. Over time, Andrew grew accustomed to his aunt and saw her as his ever-present parent. Even after his father retired and returned, he developed a close relationship with his aunt. His mother, on the other hand, was married and had her own family.

Their relationship was almost non-existent.

Andrew’s family dynamics were unique at their best. Of course, a lot of Nigerian families had their hitches. All he allowed himself to focus on were the good times he shared with his dad. He didn’t have much of a relationship with his mother, which was fine with him. A close-knit family was one thing Andrew yearned for as a child. A warm and loving home. When that hadn’t happened, he concentrated on his daughter. Bella may require a woman’s presence in her life, and he would be delusional to believe he could be everything she needed. Deep down he wanted to try, but...

"Aunty B, your cooking is amazing as always," distancing himself from negative memories.

"*Daalụ, nwa m nwoke (thank you, my son)*. That's why you need to meet someone so I can teach her all your favourite meals and make certain that you and Bella are properly cared for."

"You're here for Bella and me. No need to look

"Ugh...see you. You think I'll be here forever."

His hand froze over the bolus of eba he'd been rolling at the tip of his fingers. "Is everything okay? Your health...?" his voice trailed off. He didn't want to think about anything happening to Auntie B.

"No. No one knows their time. You need to be ready at all times."

His thoughts sailed to the Boss Lady—he'd given her that moniker. The petite curvy boss lady he'd run into at different intervals. Something about her rattled his guarded defences. He'd long since shut down when it came to eliciting emotions in him.

That wasn't going to happen.

Best not to kindle that fire.

He dipped the bolus in the crowded soup, and raised it to his mouth. "You're not going anywhere. I won't allow it. I'll go down on my knees and beg God for thirty more years."

She exclaimed. "*Haba!*"

"God and I have a new arrangement. You are not going anywhere."

Auntie B smiled. "Okay o. At least you're now on good terms with God. I thank God. He has been faithful to me. He did not let me be put to shame."

"Yeah, God has been good. And I'm really grateful to you, Auntie B."

She stood up. "Just get a wife and I'll accept your thanks with my full chest."

He chuckled to himself and scooped some soup into his mouth, his tongue clashing into a flake of soft, dried fish.

Heaven knew he wanted to have a respectable home. That he regretted his past actions of not starting the right way, but he could never regret his daughter.

Boss Lady popped in his head again.

Andrew couldn't kill his curiosity. He dug out his phone from his pocket with his free hand, licking his fingers, and took to Google. He typed out *Proud Belle* into the search engine. There were over a million results, but the top nine, including videos, were enough for him to become acquainted with her. Andrew coughed into his fist, eyes widening. She was not only a Proud Belle employee, but also its CEO. Pictures of her before the incident flooded his screen, and his breath caught in his throat as he soaked in the pretty brown-skinned woman. Her flawless skin. Her smile, rich and welcoming. Unrelenting, his eyes devoured more information on her. His snooping was getting the best of him.

Erinma Nneka Roberts is a Lagos-based Nigerian who is the current CEO of Proud Belle's Cosmetic and Beauty Company which was founded by her father, Nonye Chiemeka Roberts. Born in 1988 in the United States, she completed her primary and secondary school education in Nigeria before continuing her university studies in International Management at Warwick Business School in the United Kingdom and trained as an esthetician for a year.

"It's an honour to lead one of Africa's most renowned cosmetic and beauty companies. Make no mistake: Proud Belle has a wide range of products for all women, even if you're not a fan of makeup," she said in one of the videos.

Andrew fixed his gaze on her pretty brown eyes, round cheeks and shy dimple. The curve of her neck. He swallowed hard as something fluttered in his chest. He frowned. He hadn't entertained such feelings like this in a long time.

"As a woman, you should always be comfortable in your own skin. That's why, at Proud Belle, we only want to help you get to that point where you can look into the mirror and appreciate better that gift you already have on the inside. We don't make you beautiful, we show you how beautiful you are. We have reached greater heights because of you and we can only go higher as a company with your support."

Eloquent speech. Smooth confidence. Beautiful woman.

Everything about her was perfect; a guy couldn't help being drawn to her.

When his eyes connected with the pictures of the burned-out house and her after pictures from the fire scorching her skin, he felt a sharp pinch in his chest. How did someone go from that to this in a matter of seconds?

Other pictures were of her old self—before the fire, and many others with random people. Andrew's gaze sharpened at one in particular. He tapped it and the image opened a link to an entertainment blog. The man had a possessive hold around her waist. Her fiancé, Olanrewaju Sanmi Nejo. Same guy she'd seemed in a hurry to leave the other day.

"You're no longer eating?" Auntie B's voice jolted him. Saving him from exploring the weird sensation in his chest because of the latter picture.

Andrew looked down at his smudged fingers, which had become rough and solidified from the eba particles and lack of moisture. “I got carried away with something online.” Was there an edge to his voice? He cleared his throat, hoping to get rid of whatever craziness working its way into his system.

“Oh? What is it?” Auntie B stepped closer to him. She peered down at his phone over his shoulder. “Jesus is Lord! *Gɛnɛ mere ya? (What happened to her?)*”

“Fire accident.”

“Awww,” Auntie B moaned. “What a shame. Beautiful girl like that...” she clucked her tongue and sighed. “God always knows best. It’s just like that Nigerian airline where people crashed and one or two people survived. Lord, have mercy. Ah! Very unfortunate. So why are you checking her?”

“I ran into her a couple of times. Plus, she used our cab service only recently.”

“Oh, that’s good. Is she already married?”

“Engaged.”

“That’s good. Thank God for that.”

Andrew checked out her personal Instagram account and was disappointed to discover that it was private. Not discouraged, he followed her using Bam-Cab’s Instagram account. She could choose if she wanted to follow him or not when she viewed his IG account with only over four thousand followers. What was there was strictly work-related. His personal account had less than three hundred followers and had mostly pictures of him and Bella goofing around.

He set his phone aside and finished with his meal.

“Is there still pepper soup?” he asked after he was done washing the dishes.

She gaped at him, wide-eyed. “Do you still have space for pepper soup after all that?”

“It’s for the road.” Andrew flicked his wrist. It was almost time to pick Bella up from school. “I’ll take it to go.”

She shook her head. “Go and marry! You’ll be here eating all my food.”

“Auntie B, leave the marriage thing for later or never. As you said, God knows best,” He said, unfazed when she glared at him. When she didn’t back down he averted his gaze from their staring match.

This woman *sef*, he smiled to himself just as a notification for a text hit his phone.

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CHAPTER 19

ERINMA

Erinma released a nervous breath. The cool of the air conditioning grazed her arms and she took another long sip of the pink mocktail a server had offered her. The sweetness of pineapple and sour taste of the lime clung to her palate in a tango dance. Just like how her tummy currently twisted.

She moved around the room greeting guests and employees. Acknowledging their presence and thanking them for their years of support. Erinma sent a text to Odavwaro, asking if all the goody bags were ready for the over hundred female guests in attendance to celebrate their twentieth anniversary.

“Proud Belle’s CEO,” Somto said as she walked up to Erinma on her husband’s arm.

Erinma beamed at her family.

“As usual, you have done well,” her father said.

Somto bent and kissed both cheeks. “Great job, Erin.”

“Thank you, dad. Thanks, sis.” She looked at her father. Where’s mummy?”

“Doing what she does best: hosting and socialising. I’m co-owner of the company and still, they flock to your mother like she’s their boss,” he said with no censure. “Your mother would have been an excellent PR person She knows how to interact with people.”

She scanned the room till her eyes found her mother's tall frame. Elegantly dressed in a beaded long sleeve gown with her black hair pinned up in a tight chignon.

"Here come the in-laws," Somto muttered under her breath.

Erinma shifted her gaze to Mr. and Mrs. Nejo as they approached them with Lanre and his eldest brother Yomi following behind. Camera lights flashed at them from different directions. Erinma lowered her knees a little, following Lanre's Yoruba traditions of younger ones bending to greet their older ones out of respect.

"This is a beautiful event," Mr. Nejo said after they all exchanged pleasantries.

"I concur," Mrs. Nejo said, "you have outdone yourself, Erinma."

"Thank you, Ma."

"That's my daughter," Erinma's father said with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Speaking of which... we should start discussions on the wedding." Mrs. Nejo touched Lanre's arm and Erinma's eyes caught onto her amethyst gem ring set with tiny white diamonds. "Lanre told me you both are ready to get married. I can't wait for the planning to begin, Erinma. It's about time you two settled down. *Tete bi mO.*"

Heat crawled up Erinma's cheeks when Lanre winked. Her Yoruba was rusty, but she figured it meant, *quickly make babies*.

"Yes, we will discuss more at dinner tomorrow," her father said.

Erinma kept a smile plastered on her face.

When everyone dispersed, leaving only her and Lanre, he closed the space between them and pulled her into his arms. Inwardly, she drew back from his touch but he kept his hand firmly in place on the small of her back. She still hadn't let go of his put-down and snobby attitude at his place.

"You've been a bit cold since Saturday. What's up?"

Couldn't he tell? "I told you about my plans of opening a flower shop and you shot down the idea like it was crap."

"Oh, that. I'm sorry. It was work. I was stressed. *Jor, ma binu si mi.*" She knew he was telling her not to get upset with him. "You can tell me more about your ideas."

She cocked her brow.

"I'm serious." He stroked her lower lip with his thumb. "I want to hear all about it."

She gently pushed his hand away. "Okay. Maybe tomorrow at the family dinner."

"Sounds good." Lanre leaned close and whispered in her ear, "Your backside looks delicious in this dress."

How did his mind transition to that all of a sudden? Erinma drew back to meet his gaze, forcing a smile. His piercing gaze took in her black lace dress with an illusion neckline. Sleeveless, it exposed her arms a bit but she was fine with it. Her red strappy heels made her feel sexy, bold. She waited for his appraisal.

"Did you bring a jacket?"

She shook her head, confused. "No. Why?"

"I don't feel comfortable with you dressed like this."

She licked her lips. "Dressed like how? You think the dress is too simple?" She lowered her gaze to the dress. A Diane von Furstenberg's for that matter! She saw nothing wrong with it. "I don't see the issue."

"Your arms... they are exposed. You want people to stare at you?"

It took all of Erinma's strength not to hit him over the head with her clutch bag. Was he being serious? Her arms were exposed? What about her face? Did she need to throw on a masquerade mask to conceal the scars on her face?

Releasing a slow breath, she said, "But I wear sleeveless dresses when we go out to dinner. You never once complained about it."

"That's because you dress up for me. And it's late at night. Not everyone has to see your arms like this." She could feel the heat of his gaze as it skittered over her arms, bringing her insecurity back full speed. "You're going to address a lot of people. Be seen by thousands of people online. You really want them to see you like this?"

She winced at his harsh tone, annoyance making her stomach turn. "I don't care what people think. This is how I look now." Anger crept in on her. "It's my body. They are my scars."

He looked up and smiled at someone behind her. "Hello, Kamsi. I'll be with you in a minute." His smile slipped slightly and his gaze lowered to hers again. "I know it's your body. You have made that very clear in many ways."

Something about his words unsettled her. He pressed his lips together in a thin line but his arms snaked around her waist, brushing his body against hers. To the outside world, it looked like they were in an intimate embrace.

But Erinma saw it as mere keeping up appearances. It was beginning to look like that's what they had only been.

"Look at everyone here, people don't care much about you or your scars. They don't want to be reminded of it. They are here for Proud Belle. I wish you would see that I'm doing this for your own good, Erinma." He kissed her cheek and took a step back. "Put on a jacket." He fixed a dazzling smile on his face and walked off to mingle. When she heard his loud laughter, her stomach roiled. She blinked back her tears away and sipped her drink. Her hand shook as she held the glass.

Lowering the glass, her gaze followed a few people around the room as they mingled with a glass of mock pink champagne in their hands.

She sent a text to Odavwaro: need a jacket ASAP. Preferably black. And lacey.

Odavwaro: Why? You look gorg! 😊😊

But no questions asked.

Done.

I know someone who knows someone.

"Are you okay?"

Erinma jerked her head up from her phone. She hadn't noticed Isi and Nelly approaching. She forced a smile. "I'm fine. Just hoping we can speed things up and I can leave." She gave her friend a once-over. "You look stunning." Isi was dressed in a floral appliqué midi dress in a darker shade of red.

Isi blushed. "Thank you."

Erinma looked at the pair, wondering what was going on between them. "Are you two..." She wriggled her fingers at the two of them.

"Not yet," Nelly replied, giving a mock pout.

Isi shook her head but a smile tugged at her lips. "He's still trying his luck."

Hmm...

"Erinma, are you sure you're fine?" Isi inquired, her brows drawn together. "You seem a bit tense."

"I'm a little nervous. It's not a big deal."

"Don't worry you'll be fine. I've prayed for you and I know everything will be okay."

"Thank you. I need the prayers."

"Anytime, sis. I'm here for you."

Erinma was going to make it a priority to spend more time with Isi. She could tell they had a lot to talk about judging from the way Nelly couldn't stop grinning at her like a love-sick puppy. She excused herself to use the restroom. A few ladies were chatting and touching up their makeup. Erinma greeted them and walked into one of the stalls.

She wasn't going to pee. She just needed the restroom to herself for a few seconds if it was possible.

The room gradually grew silent as the clatter of the heels moved towards the exit. Erinma walked out and looked in the mirror after placing her purse on the countertop.

"My scars don't define who I am. I have survived this. I am still me and I'm getting better."

As soon as she said the words, ripples of relief washed over her. She was going to be alright. She just needed to get through the evening. That settled, she applied some lip gloss to her chapped lips and proceeded out of the ladies'. As she drew the door open, she noticed Lanre, his mother and elder brother having a private conversation. Lanre's tightened jaw and flushed cheeks suggested something was wrong.

"Mummy, you don't know how things are," Lanre said in a low tone.

"*Ma sọ ọrọ isọkusọ* (don't say nonsense). *Kini o fẹ ki awọn eniyan sọ?* (What do you want people to say?); that we are a bunch of heartless people? And even if she's not the same on the outside, she's still beautiful Erinma. You should stand by her."

"Mum, beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Yomi raised his glass to his lips with a smirk. "Lanre, here, does not see the same thing you're seeing."

"Shut up, Yomi," Lanre said defensively.

"Lanre, *Jọwọ, ni sūru diẹ*, please, exercise some patience. Tomorrow at dinner, we'll talk about wedding preparations. I trained you to be a decent man; continue to act like it."

"Are you sure the fire didn't get her genes?" Yomi started again. "I mean Erinma is a sweetheart but..."

"Don't be daft. Her genes didn't get damaged in the fire," Lanre said.

"Watch how you speak to your elder brother."

"Then tell him to keep his opinions to himself. *Oun ni ẹgbọn mi ko tumọ si pe Emi yoo gba awọn ọrọ rẹ ni irọrun*. (He's my older brother doesn't

mean I'll take his words lightly.)

Apart from the bits she understood, she wasn't sure what else they said. Lanre's harshly spoken words were enough to decipher the intensity of their conversation. Though Lanre's ability to speak up for her was flattering, learning what members of his family thought of her was unsettling.

Erinma stumbled backwards as the door pushed open from the outside.

"Oh, sorry about that. I had no idea you were there."

Erinma offered a friendly smile. "No worries." She stepped back, making room for the tall woman to enter. Erinma recognised her as one of Proud Belle's lab technicians.

She took a deep breath and walked out. Praying to get through the night without breaking down or losing her cool.

"Good evening," Erinma said and climbed into the back seat. She laid her head on the headrest, replaying the event in her mind. It was a success! Her father and Suravi's speech was beautiful and tear-jerking; recounting their years of hard work and perseverance. She hadn't thought she could get through the event, but her friends had rallied around her. She smiled to herself. Isi and Odavwaro stayed close to her in fierce support, as though ready to fight off any awkward stares or prolonged looks.

Fortunately, there were none.

Lanre had worried for nothing.

She would admit the jacket was a waste on a DVF dress, but the black lace Jacket with nude lining Odavwaro had scavenged for her would look good with something else in Erinam's wardrobe. But just thinking about him and his family made her insides twist. She'd declined his offer to take her home. Time to herself was a necessity these days.

"You called for a cab, Boss Lady. Or permit to say CEO?" Andrew asked.

So he'd done his research. Erinma chuckled lightly. "I'm curious. Do you work twenty-four hours a day? I mean, you own your own cab company." She had done hers as well. Surprised to discover her driver was actually the owner of Bam-Cab company. Maybe that was why she booked him again for the evening, intrigued by his start-up and progressive accomplishments.

“Job well done. Not all the time. I keep my personal jobs at a minimum because of Bella.” Several moments of silence elapsed between them, and Erinma tensed. “You look beautiful.”

She felt her cheeks heat up. “Thank you.”

He glanced at her from a rare view. “So tonight was a success?”

“It was. Thank God.”

“Praise God for that,” he replied. “Twenty years. It’s a big deal.”

“It is.”

The car filled with a cool silence that made her relaxed. She got out her phone and rummaged through the photos she’d snapped at the launch party. She went to her Instagram app and selected six cute pictures: Odavwaro in a stunning velvet over-shoulder gown in a purple shade, Isi locking arms with Nelly, Tito Jacobs (lifestyle blogger and influencer) in a draped mini dress, Erinma’s parents standing close together, the seven-tier strawberry and dark chocolate cake, and one last picture of Lanre with a phone pressed to his ear.

Her caption read: *20th anniversary of Proud Belle/product launch party was a teeming success! Grateful to fans for your love. We aim to serve and we cherish your unswerving loyalty. #PBis20 #20thmark #honeyandoatsfragrance #beautyproducts.*

Erinma's finger hovered over the check mark and then tapped it.

Already the likes and comments were trooping in.

Maybe one-day Erinma would find the courage to post her personal picture.

"Care for some music?"

"Sure."

An upbeat music took over the car's silence.

“*Stomp* by Kirk Franklin!” Erinma said.

Andrew grinned. “You know your gospel Jamz.”

She moved her shoulders to the beat. “*Wahala* for those who don't know Kirk Franklin. His songs are classics.”

"I agree. He's one of those who brought pop to gospel music."

Erinma winked at him, still mouthing the lyrics. “*I can't explain it. I can't obtain it. Jesus, your love is so, it's so amazing.*” She lifted one hand. “*It gets me high, up to the sky. And when I think about your goodness, it makes me want to. Stomp. Makes me clap my hands, makes me want to dance and Stomp. My brother, can't you see? I got the victory. Stomp!*”

He grinned. "You obviously know your music."

"*My brothers can't you see, I've got the victory!*" She chuckled at herself and reclined back on the seat. "I used to listen to Kirk Franklin while growing up. My sister and I would do the running man and cabbage patch to his songs. They were always so upbeat."

"The running man?" Andrew gave a low chuckle. "That's a sight to behold."

Erinma peered at him via the rearview. "What? You think I can't dance?" All of a sudden she felt invigorated.

"No. I just find it interesting that you can do the running man. I can't dance even if my life depended on it."

She laughed. "Don't worry, it's simple. Watch YouTube videos and you'll get the hang of it."

"Maybe I'll rope Bella into joining me."

She placed her phone back in her purse. "How is she?"

"She's good. We were supposed to have movie night today but I had to reschedule."

"Because of me?"

"Because of the job."

"Huh. Do you despise the job? The long hours, abusive customers and so on. It takes you away from your daughter sometimes so do you hate it?"

Andrew pressed his horn down, swerving gently to the left as a reckless Danfo driver tried to overtake him. "I don't hate the job. I've always been interested in transportation and logistics. I plan on expanding soon. Open a logistics company in the future."

"That's a great idea. Very enterprising. Did you go into it out of necessity or stumbled into it? It may be a wrong assumption but I'm guessing that you wouldn't have chosen this line of profession."

"To be honest, it wouldn't have been my first choice. I guess challenges have a way of causing you to see what you wouldn't have on a normal day."

Erinma pondered on that.

"Sorry I need to take this call."

"Go ahead."

He answered his call. "Hey, Coco. Shouldn't you be in bed?" She tried not to but listened in on his conversation. She couldn't help but think of Noelle as well. "You want what? You're joking. Put Auntie B on the phone."

She's where?" Andrew's face was in between a frown and smile. "I'm working. I'll talk to you later. Nope. Good night, Bella."

"Is everything okay?"

"Only my daughter that's trying to arm-twist me into bringing her a burger."

Erinma checked the time. "It's nearly 8:30. I'm not sure you'll have the time to double back and get a burger."

"Yeah. I'll just get it another day."

"Actually, I'm a bit hungry. Do you think we could make a stop at Cheesies? I think it's somewhere around."

Andrew locked gaze with her. "You really want a burger?"

She held his gaze. "I do, actually."

"Alright. As you please."

Erinma smiled. "BAM stands for Bella and Andrew Madu?"

"No. Bodies and Motors."

She gaped at him. "Oh—"

"I'm kidding. You were right the first time."

She watched as he made a right turn to Cheesies' Burger Place. "I'll just go in and get the burgers. How many burgers do you want?"

"No. I can get it—"

"This is on me. Take it as my compensation for having to miss her date night with her dad."

"You don't have to do that, Ma'am."

Getting formal now, are we? "You can't stop me. I'll be back in a few." She slammed the door shut, walking briskly to Cheesies'. Two people sat talking and sipping on a soda. Erinma placed her order and ten minutes later she was out the door.

She got into the back seat. "Four burgers, two extra-large fries, two crispy chicken and two bottled drinks." She extended the nylon to him. "For you and Bella."

He twisted in his seat to look at her. A frown marred his face. "This is too much."

"Tell her I said hi. Now you can take me home and double back."

Andrew blinked. He looked down at the nylon and back at her.

"Let's go." She took out her fries and nibbled on one.

She glanced up and he averted his gaze. Erinma lowered her eyes back to her phone and raised another fry to her mouth. She flicked her gaze

upwards and he did it again. He looked away. Erinma dipped her chin to her chest, smiling to herself. Then she looked up sharply, swiping the smile. “Is everything okay, Andrew? Maybe I have ketchup or mayonnaise around my mouth?”

“You should smile more. It suits you.”

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CHAPTER 20

ISIMEME

The interview at *Marigold Royale Hotels* had gone well. She got a call from the management yesterday afternoon that she was to resume work Monday morning at one of their restaurants; *Urban Mojo*. It was an all-African cuisine inspired by their Ghanaian chef. As part of her interview, Isi was asked to taste and replicate his palm nut butter soup and grilled tilapia fish with mixed herbs and spices that Isi was familiar with. Having taught herself to master the smell and taste of spices with her eyes closed, Isi ran by instinct to make some of her dishes. She executed the chef's meals accurately and within time.

Once the chef had tasted the meal and found it satisfactory that she could hold her own in the kitchen, he said he would get back to her. But Isi couldn't miss the way he stared at her with his beady eyes while she worked, feeling his gaze as it roamed the top half of her body.

At first, she believed she wouldn't get the job. God hadn't said anything about it to her. Besides that, she had little working experience aside from the two years she spent as a sous chef in a small Lebanese restaurant in Benin. She'd learnt a lot from them. Cooking gave her a new kind of joy. The beautiful aroma that drifted to her sinuses spread warmth to her body and made her toes tingle. It brought out the creative side of her where she experimented if the blend of certain spices could produce a winning recipe. Plenty of room for creativity.

She looked about the tiny room she shared with her cousin's youngest. It would be a relief to finally get her own place. If she put aside a chunk of her earnings, she could brave the move to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Iyana Ipaja. Yaba or Aguda would be too far from her place of work in Ikeja.

God, you brought me here for a reason. Thank You for this job opportunity. I'm so grateful. Please, help me, God. More than ever I need You. Having this job doesn't change that.

Keep praying for Erinma.

"I will." Isi hadn't stopped praying for her friend when in fact, her prayers for her had intensified since she got to Lagos.

Isi had just finished her devotion and wanted to go through her work clothes to make sure everything was ready for the week. So far, the light issue in the area seemed to be programmed: power came on at ten in the morning and tripped off at noon. It was a quarter past nine and Isi needed to iron a week's worth of clothing. Even though she was going to be covered up in a chef's jacket and apron, it didn't mean she had to appear on her first day looking ruffled.

The one travel bag she'd come to Lagos with was pushed under the bed to make leg-room. Getting on her knees, she pulled out the travel bag and sorted through her minuscule wardrobe. She laid out her clothes on the bed, arranging each outfit according to its day of use, and was shoving the bag back in position when the overhead light suddenly came on.

Isi jumped to her feet and began the necessary preparations. She was an hour in, charging her phone and listening to a Gospel track by Victoria Orenze when she glanced at her phone just as it buzzed with a new message from Nelly. Isi caught the one-sentence message before her phone's screen went dark. Can I call? She grinned and picked up the phone. Instead of replying she thought to call him instead.

"What are you up to?" Nelly asked, picking on the first ring.

"I'm ironing and reeling in excitement." She folded a light blue long-sleeved shirt which she often paired with slightly faded black jeans and white comfortable converse.

"Oh, yeah? What's up?"

"I just got a job!"

"That's crazy good." She heard him clap in the background. "Congrats dear."

“Thank you.”

“We should definitely celebrate.”

She laughed. “I’m starting to think you love an excuse to go out.” Over the last month, she had spent a lot of time with Nelly, getting to know him better. He usually took her out to see a movie or hangout at his favourite spots. He was a super-chilled guy and always in the mood for having fun. As she had come to know, Nelly wasn’t only good-looking, funny and fun-loving. He was really intelligent and good at what he did. He did a lot of freelance work from home even if he had an office and a bunch of employees who reported to him—which was why he had a lot of free time.

“This is not an excuse. It’s a necessity.”

“Hmmm. What do you have in mind?”

“Anywhere you want.”

Isi pursed her lip, her mind racing. That was a difficult one. He’d taken her to the Art Gallery, Lekki Conservative Centre, a few concerts and a lot of dining out at local eateries. Once, he tried cajoling her to dine with him at a classy restaurant and she’d respectfully declined. Aside from not having anything fancy to wear, she didn’t want to be indebted to him in any way.

“Can you swim?” she asked.

“No.”

“Seriously?”

“Can you?”

“Yes. And I would like to go swimming if that’s okay. You can sit by the pool and press your phone.”

“That’s not exciting, but then, as the lady wishes. Pick you up in an hour?”

“No, no, no. I won’t let you drive all the way here. I’ll meet you at Ikeja in an hour or so. That’s my caveat.” This was starting to be a routine for them; he offered to do or get something for her and she wriggled her way out of the situation.

He exhaled loudly. “You drive a hard bargain. See you in sixty minutes.”

She pulled out her bag again and selected a sheer blue sleeveless blouse, black pleated maxi skirt and strappy sandals. Then she took out her only one-piece swimsuit in a shade of aquamarine.

“Are you going out?” came her cousin’s voice behind her.

Isi stood and turned to her. “Yes. A friend is taking me out. I told you I got a job.”

“Hmmm. A man, *abi*?”

Isi shrugged. “Yes.”

“And he wants to take you out to celebrate?”

Where is she going with the questions? “Yes. Is anything wrong?”

“No o! I just want you to be careful with all those *Aristos* and Yahoo boys.”

And why would you presume he’s one of those? Isi shoved her irritation aside. She wasn’t going to dissuade her cousin’s thoughts any longer. Ever since Nelly dropped her off a month ago she’d been droning on about her ‘rich *bobo*’. “I promise to be careful.” Isi frowned. “Anyway, aren’t you supposed to be at your shop?”

Nosa flopped on the bed. “The useless electricity company cut off my power supply.”

“Ahn-ahn, why? On what basis?”

Her cousin popped her gum. “Money.”

“How much?”

Nosa eyed her warily. “Why? You want to ask your boyfriend for money on my behalf?”

Isi gave a small shake of her head. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“So you say. Is he married?”

“No.”

“A man won’t drive you about and spoil you for no reason. And certainly not for free. You better catch sense, Isi.” Her gaze dropped to Isi’s stomach. “And don’t get pregnant ‘cause it will spoil everything.”

How could Isi explain to her cousin that she was still a virgin and had never been kissed? “I’ve heard you.” Isi shoved her swimwear and towel into her handbag. “What are you going to do about the power?”

Nosa rested her head on a flat, overused pillow. “I’ll wait till their blood calms down and I’ll go to their office. I’ll give one of the guys a tip so he can make the marketer change her mind.” She popped her gum again.

“And that’s cheaper than paying your outstanding bill?”

Her cousin’s chin touched her chest as she nodded. “Hell, yeah. Much cheaper.”

Isi hung her clothes on the curtain rail. Arranging them neatly according to their days of use. “That’s wrong.”

Nosa laughed. “A lot of things are wrong with this country, Isi. Corruption is a lifestyle. Go with the flow or lose your mind. Choose one.”

“I choose none.”

Nosa’s laughter trailed after Isi as she went to take a bath. “Good girls don’t last long in Lagos o!”



She didn’t keep her word. She arrived at his office fifteen minutes late. His receptionist walked ahead of Isi as she ushered her into Nelly’s office. At least this one was nice, she wasn’t hot and spicy like Erinma’s receptionist. From the looks of the few employees she encountered on her way to his office they dressed business casual. Typically, the way Nelly was. Or maybe because it was a weekend?

Isi pushed open the glass door, his familiar sandalwood scent hit her nose even before she saw him. His chin was bowed low as he typed something into his laptop.

“You’re late.”

“I’m sorry. There was traffic.”

He stood, his eyes swept over her, taking in her appearance. “Are you sure you weren’t trying to stand me up?” He took a step closer, frowned. “You look tired. You should have let me pick you up.”

“Of course, I would be tired. And hot. The heat outside is horrible!” Isi evaded his talk of picking her up. After her little conversation with her cousin, she had more time to think about her relationship with Nelly on her way to his office. She liked him, yes. But being in a relationship wasn’t a priority at the moment. And leading him on wasn’t something she wanted to do. A conversation as to that regard was imminent.

“Hence the swim?” He cut into her thoughts.

She grunted. “Obviously. Heat in Lagos wants to kill somebody.”

Nelly shook his head while maintaining a grin on his handsome face. “Take a seat. You could use the time to cool off before we head out.” He walked back to his desk. “Would you like something cold to drink as well? Maybe to cool your insides too.” He winked.

“Bottled water would be good if you have any.” She pointed at the mini-fridge. “Can I get it there?”

“Nope.”

Again, he left his desk and walked to the black mini-fridge. He bent, pulled it open and took out a bottle of water. A smile teased the corner of his lips as he came towards her.

Isi eyed the bottle suspiciously before wrapping her hand around the cool body. “Thought you said there was no water there?”

“I wanted to be a gentleman and get it for you.” He winked again.

She only shook her head but couldn’t deny her rising body heat as her cousin’s words filled her thoughts.

“Give me some minutes, please. I need to go through a few things my people did before sending it off to a client.”

“That’s okay.” Settling on a leather sofa, she dropped her bag on the floor. “I’ll just enjoy your air conditioning while I wait for you. I still can’t believe you work on Saturdays.”

He chuckled.

Isi looked up from her phone momentarily as he worked. Drinking in his seriousness and the hard set of his jaw as he focused on his work. His green polo shirt not only looked good on him, but it also fit him perfectly in the right places. Enunciating his broad shoulders and displaying his toned arms.

Had Nosa been right all along? Was it possible he was interested in her more than a friend? The idea made her heart flutter in a funny way. Of course, she’d had crushes, infatuations and had love interests before, but she had never explored any of them. Her relationship with God took priority. And she didn’t think a man would be sold out on her values, beliefs, and love for God if he wasn’t sold out on God.

That didn’t mean she didn’t find Nelly appealing in almost every way.

If he asked her out would she say yes?

Could this be one of the reasons she was in Lagos?

Nelly raised his head and she glanced down sharply at her phone. She didn’t look up again until he declared himself ready to leave. Nelly took her to *Infinity*, a private family club in the highbrow parts of Ikeja. It was packed, but not with street urchins. Most definitely it was a club that catered primarily to the affluent. Isi felt a bit uncomfortable.

He slid his sunglasses on and looked like he belonged with the crowd. Isi felt awkward in her plain clothes. She tossed around heavy doses of self-talk in her head: *it doesn’t matter what people think, all that matters is I’m a daughter of a king. I’m a princess and I own it.*

Soon enough her negative thoughts took a back seat and she permitted herself to enjoy herself. She changed into her bathing suit and stepped into the water while Nelly watched her from the pool's restaurant upstairs with an open view of the pool area. The cool water felt great against her skin, soothing the prickles from the blazing sun. She felt like she was floating and gliding at times, and flying at others. It was both uplifting and exhilarating. She did some laps and even swam to the deep end. When Nelly looked her way, she waved.

Honestly, she didn't want to get out just yet. Isi had probably spent over thirty minutes in the water but at the same time it would be rude to leave her host on his own. That and she had worked up an appetite. Since they arrived, Nelly hadn't ordered anything to eat. He was probably waiting for her.

"Feel refreshed?"

Isi nodded. "And hungry."

He feigned hurt. "And here I thought you had pity on me."

She laughed. "I did but just a little. Like 20%"

"We might have to up that number." Nelly hailed a server to their table. Her eyes bulged at the prices beside the dishes. She glanced up at Nelly who was already giving his orders with no qualms about the ridiculous rates.

"What are you having?" he asked her.

"Er...nothing. A glass of juice is okay." Even the juice cost was enough for her transport fee to and from Nelly's office, coming from Iyana Ipaja. *I can even cook two super pack noodles, dice vegetables, boil an egg and drink sachet water and be full!* Her mother would have called the menu rich in 'mede-mede'. African slang for junk food.

"Are you sure?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Why don't you want to eat? You said a minute ago that you were hungry."

I did, didn't I? Explaining her thoughts on the prices would seem absurd...and offensive? And she didn't want to do that in front of the staff.

With a sigh, she did a glance at the menu and settled for a roasted chicken club sandwich. The server sauntered off to get their order.

"Where did you learn to swim?"

“My dad taught me when I was a teenager. Survival tips.” Isi pressed a hand towel to her hair to stop the dripping. “I think there was an incident in Lagos many years ago. A military depot explosion that had a lot of people killed when they unknowingly jumped into the canal.”

“I remember that day. It was horrible. I felt the ripple effect at my mum’s place in Surulere.”

Isi pursed her lips. Wishing the conversation would end. She hated thinking about that day and the hundreds of lives that sought refuge but drowned that night.

“Your dad did good. He would be proud of you with all those strokes you did.”

“I believe so.”

“When are you going to cook for me?”

A slow smile worked its way to her lips. “Whenever you’re ready.”

They ate as they spoke. When done with their food, he ordered a side dish of *Suya* and fries. Hours flew by as they talked on generic topics and stayed off personal ones. So it came as a surprise when he blurted:

“You’re extremely beautiful, Isi.”

She laughed self-consciously. “Are you sure your shades aren’t deceiving you?” She was plain-looking. Definitely not in the social class of someone like Nelly.

He took off his shades and set them on the table. His deep brown eyes were on hers. “There’s no pretence here, Sweetie.”

Her heart galloped at the pet name.

The spicy skewer meat was delicious, coupled with the crispy potato fries and a tall glass of cold and sweet lemonade. But the term of endearment from his lips made it even sweeter. And she felt she was on a sugar high.

God, am I falling for Nelly?

“Nelly, I’m not looking for anything serious right now,” she said. “You need to know that.”

“I know. And I won’t rush you into something you’re not ready for. I like you. And I want to get to know you better.”

Isi bit down on her lip.

“When are you going to take God seriously?”

“What makes you think I’m not? I’m serious with Him, Isi. I don’t joke with things of God. What do you need me to do? Invite me to your church and I’ll come.” He winked. “And I’m a very good dancer.”

His last words made her laugh. “I’m not going to lie. I like you as well. You’re growing on me every day. But—” she paused. “Let’s remain friends for now. Is that fine?”

“If that’s what you want for now, I’m cool with it. I can be your friend.”

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CHAPTER 21

ANDREW

Andrew averted his gaze from the female crowd seated at a round table with the identical artificial flowers in mauve and white that were assigned to each table with a peach tablecloth. For the past hour, they had been talking animatedly and tossing glances his way.

He was used to having the adoring attention of the female clan. When Bella was a baby, women approached him in supermarkets, clothing stores, and malls, asking if he needed help. And once they noticed his bare finger, they came in full force. He dove head first, waist down into dating, reeling in the attention. Because he wasn't looking for anything serious, he kept his heart out of reach from every woman he dated. He didn't want a repeat of what he went through. Didn't want any emotional turmoil.

He didn't feel anything when he ended things with them, and vice versa.

As he watched his daughter grow before his eyes, he realised he was hurting himself and a number of women. Even if he told them he was only interested in dating casually, feelings got involved somewhere along the way. Yet, never from his side. He stopped stringing women along two years ago. Since then, he bolted from any emotional commitments and had never looked back. He concentrated on his daughter and tried to be a good Christian.

And he still wasn't interested in that. Or more accurately, he failed at it, instead, he chose to focus his attention on Bella and Bam Cabs.

He applauded anyone who made that daunting decision to spend the rest of their lives with someone. Including them in everything they did. Opening their heart, mind, spirit and soul to it. To care and be there for them in good times and bad. *Trusting* them. It was admirable. And maybe if there was a woman out there for him, who would be totally committed to him and Bella, he might be willing to give it a shot.

If that woman ever came his way.

Another cackle erupted from the single women's table and he rose to his feet. His gaze swung to their direction instinctively, his eyes swung. A lady clad in an off-shoulder outfit in the aso-ebi of the wedding smiled at him. He offered a small smile in return and looked away.

Thanks, but no thanks.

He scanned the room to where Bella was seated with the rest of the Bridal party. His daughter looked pretty in her white lace dress with cap sleeves. It had a full-blown flared skirt that gave her that princess feel. She'd been so excited to be a part of Caroline's bridal train party, wearing a pretty dress and having her hair done.

Andrew shook his head and discarded his previous thoughts. Wondering what had come over him. *Most likely, Kalu's words are infiltrating my mind. I need to stop listening to him.* He would not put himself out there again. He couldn't put his daughter through forming an attachment with a woman who might never love her as her own.

His daughter didn't deserve that. And he wasn't selfish enough to subject her to it.

As a kid ran by his side, he moved to the side, a woman hard on his heel. Andrew shook his head and took quick strides across the dance floor to where the couple stood, surrounded by family and well-wishers.

Andrew shook hands with Caroline's husband then approached the bride. He tapped her shoulder. "Married woman!" Andrew hailed Caroline and embraced her.

"Thank you!" she screamed. "Bella looks so pretty in her princess dress. And her hair is beautiful."

"She does, doesn't she? Told her she couldn't wear it to school no matter how much she begged."

Caroline laughed. "I love that girl. She's my little spice queen."

"You look beautiful, Caroline. Your brother is thrilled about the wedding." She looked eye-catching in her wedding gown. Her hair styled

on top her head, makeup expertly done.

“Wish he could be here. He said he would try to come home for Christmas,” she said. Her voice was a little shaky.

He didn’t want to be the one who made the bride cry sad tears on her day. “Well, I’m glad to see you happy.” The music was loud and the party was in full swing.

“So...”

“So?”

“Seen anyone you fancy?”

“Nope.”

Caroline’s mouth fell open. “Seriously?” She spread her hands around her. “There’s not one woman in this place that catches your attention?”

“Why don’t you focus on being a newlywed and leave the whole dating scene alone.”

“What if I introduce you to a friend of mine?” She clapped her hands and jumped. Andrew was half afraid he would have to break her fall if she slipped. “I have someone in mind for you. She’s based in Abuja but flew in for the wedding.”

Andrew shook his head. He’d seen this coming. “No. God forbid.”

“It’s my wedding day. I’m not taking no for an answer. Besides, you owe me a wedding gift.”

“Caroline, no.”

“Her name is Rolake. You’ll like her. And she loves kids.”

He arched his brow. “Is that supposed to be the magic word? That she loves kids?”

She batted her store-bought thick eyelashes. “Yes.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Fine. Introduce away. But don’t be annoyed if I lack interest.”

Caroline squealed and threw herself at him. “Thank you!” She leaned back to look up at him. “I promise you won’t regret this.”

“I’m already regretting it.” He grumbled to himself.

If she heard him, she didn’t react.

She grabbed his hand and was pulling him away from the growing crowd, navigating them through the congratulatory remarks hurled her way. All the while Andrew hoped he wouldn’t regret his approval too much.



“What’s up Coco? Why the sad face? Thought you had fun.” She’d been quiet all through the ride back home. He’d blamed it on the stress of the day but was starting to think otherwise. She was usually all chatty and excited after a day and on a sugar high.

“I did.”

Andrew tossed his keys in a tray he kept on top of the refrigerator. “So what’s up?”

“When are you going to get married?”

He chuckled nervously. “Where is this coming from? I thought you liked us like this. We’re a dynamic duo.”

“I know.”

He led his daughter by the shoulder to the couch and sat down. “Talk to me. Remember, no secrets no matter what.”

She looked down at her fingers and twisted her mouth to the side. “I’m not sure if I want you to get married.”

That shocked him. “Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know. I guess it would feel somehow. What if she doesn’t like me? What if she doesn’t want me around?”

“Coco, I’m not even seeing anyone now.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

Andrew scrubbed a hand down his face. Couldn’t fathom why she would think that way and where it was coming from. “Did something happen at the wedding? Maybe from school? Something you remembered?” Had she seen him talking with Caroline’s friend, Rolake?

The woman was everything Caroline had rattled about: beautiful, intelligent. And when Bella ran up to him to ask if she could get a second serving of ice cream, Rolake was friendly, complimenting her dress was pretty and showing genuine interest in her—asking about her school and favourite colour. Bella had regarded Rolake with blatant suspicion and had refused to answer any of the woman’s questions.

Rolake had looked at him, slightly embarrassed, but to his surprise and her credit, she didn’t appear irritated or fazed by his daughter’s behaviour.

Andrew had peered down at his daughter. “Bella, she just asked you a question.”

Her wide eyes darted to him and he saw the fear. He saw her visibly swallow and turn back to face Rolake, answering in a small, shy voice. After that, Andrew had excused himself. Before he could question Bella’s odd behaviour, she was back to her old self, begging for that second ice cream.

“Bella?” He prodded. Watching her now as she gripped her fingers in her lap.

“There’s a girl in my class that moved to another state. My teacher said she went to live with her grandma, but I heard the teachers saying her dad remarried and his new wife didn’t want her.” Bella fixed her gaze on him. Unshed tears glistened in her eyes. “It’s not like the girl is my friend, but I feel bad for her. And I don’t want that to happen to me.”

He squatted in front of his daughter. “Bella, nothing like that is going to happen. I promise you. I’m not getting married anytime soon.” *Maybe never.*

Bella pulled back and stared up at him. “What if you see someone who really loves you and you want to spend the rest of your life with her?”

“Then I would only be with someone who loves you as much as I love you. Any woman who can’t accept that we are a complete package has no chance at being a part of our lives. Is that good?”

“Yeah.”

He drew Bella to his chest and kissed her forehead. “We’re going to be okay, Coco. You can count on me.” He pulled back. “Now let’s take a shower and watch a movie on Netflix.”

“Princess Nora’s Beach Party?”

“Whatever you want.” Andrew stood.

“Can we have popcorn?”

“Definitely.”

“With hot chocolate?”

“Don’t push it!”

“Daaadddd.”

“Bellaaaaaa,” he crooned back but it sounded terrible that they ended up laughing as he gave her a piggy-back ride down the hallway to the bathroom. Soon she was showered and they were seated in front of the TV

with a large bowl of popcorn, watching a cartoon. All Andrew could see was pink. And it was everywhere.

“Daddy, what about my mummy?”

He tensed. “What about her?”

“Will she ever come back?” Her eyes stayed glued to the TV.

“I don’t know, Coco. It was her choice to leave us. It’s not like she was a bad person, she just couldn’t handle being a mother at the time. I need you to trust me on this; her going away has nothing to do with you.” *Especially since she was only a teenager.* Andrew still felt guilty about his actions. He should never have started anything with her in the first place.

Bella gazed up at him. “So she isn’t ready now?”

Looking down at his daughter’s wide brown eyes he didn’t want to lie to her. As much as he wanted to shield her from the pain of her mother’s abandonment, he couldn’t hide it for long. “I don’t know, baby. But I do know that I love you and I’m crazy about you and I love those hugs you used to give me way back. Now that you’re getting older it’s like you don’t send me again.”

“That’s not true.”

Andrew lifted his eyebrow.

“Okay. Maybe it’s a bit true.” She pinched her small-sized thumb and index finger close till they were almost touching. “You *sha* know I love you.”

“Yeah, love you back.” He reached out to ruffle her hair but stopped short, knowing she would want to preserve the updo as long as possible for church tomorrow. Instead, he yanked on her earlobe.

Once he’d tucked Bella in bed he went back to the living room and put on an action movie he’d been struggling to finish for the past three days. There were thirty minutes of movie time left and he hoped he could be done before he headed to bed. Tomorrow was Sunday and they had to be up early.

Andrew especially wanted to catch the continuation of last week’s teaching.

Last Sunday, Pastor George continued the series, talking about sinking roots deep into Christ so on days of adversities we would experience growth and not wither away.

He closed his eyes. The face of his ex floated in his head. As much as he tried not to think about her, she crept up on him. He had loved her. Had

been more than willing to spend the rest of his life with her and prove he was the perfect guy for her. Only, she'd never really loved him. Using him and in the end leaving and abandoning their daughter in his care.

All these years Andrew had refused to ask about her whereabouts and check her social media handles. He didn't want to see how much she'd changed and blossomed into the gorgeous woman he knew she would be. He wanted her wiped out from his memory. For the first six months, while he battled sleepless nights, he wanted to hate her. But being the mother of his child awarded her a free pass from the heat of his rage.

Could what happened between them be counted as an adversity? Watching the woman he thought he loved confess feelings for another man was a tough blow to handle. A scar that refused to heal.

His phone beeped with a text from an unknown number.

Unknown Number: Hi, Andrew. This is Rolake. I got your number from Caroline.

He frowned.

Unknown Number: Well, she actually stored your number on my phone.

If Caroline wasn't already on her honeymoon he would have called and expressed his annoyance. What was she thinking, giving his number to a random woman, and on her wedding day? He peered down at his phone. Rolake was still typing.

Unknown Number: ...

I was wondering if you would like to meet up?

You can come with Bella.

Andrew blinked and stared hard at the screen. Was she asking him out? Like a date? He typed:

Andrew: Hi, Rolake. Good to hear from you. I won't lie...Caroline is a pain.

I don't think accepting your offer is a good idea.

I'm not looking for a relationship. Not now. Maybe never.

And I don't want to lead you on.

Unknown Number: I guess I understand. But I assure you it's just a friendly gesture.

I recently got out of a relationship so I'm working my way out of it.

Caroline has said so much about her big bro's best friend.

And I'd like to get to know you a bit.

I'll be in Lagos till Wednesday.

Let me know if you change your mind.

Andrew: I'm sorry about the relationship. That sucks all the time.

Unknown Number: yeah. Thanks.

Andrew: I'll let you know. If Bella's up for it, I'd reach out.

Have a good night's rest.

Unknown Number: And you too.

He checked the time. *10:05p.m.* Turning off the TV and lights, he dragged himself to bed. He would finish the movie another day.

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CHAPTER 22

ERINMA

Erinma usually liked to dress down, but tonight they were having dinner with Lanre's parents as they resumed wedding preparations. Instead of jeans and a blouse, she wore a black lace sheath dress and paired it with black tights and strappy heels. She had on a honey amber lace wig.

To his credit and her pleasure, Lanre had paid her compliments all evening. Just as if he was trying to make amends for what happened to his house last Saturday and at the launch party. All week, he'd picked her up from work and taken her to a restaurant for dinner before taking her home. While Erinma appreciated his efforts at an apology, she found it more thoughtful when he asked her to share her plans with him.

He gave her an open ear and they discussed more about her plans. And during dinner she showed him a mock business plan she'd put together for the flower shop. Since he queried her for keeping things to herself, she'd shared a bit more of the partnership she planned to make.

To his credit again, he'd applauded her ideas.

Maybe that was why she had an added bounce to her step.

It seemed like the way things were before the accident. His interest made her eager to share more things with him. Not just the business.

Erinma glanced subtly at Lanre. He looked sharp in a crisp dress shirt, a black blazer, and a tailored pair of dress pants. Her tummy fluttered when

she remembered the kiss they shared. It felt good to know that he still desired her.

Her therapist had advised her way back to share some of her inner feelings with her fiancé. *If that's the man you're going to spend the rest of your life with, you should be more open to him.*

Erinma planned to do that. Probably after the dinner and he dropped her home they could talk in her car.

She didn't trust herself alone with him.

"Lanre, how's everything at MARKTEL and SOLTA?" Dad asked.

"It's going well. Things are finally settling down."

"That's good to know."

"Erinma mentioned taking a break from Proud Belle."

Erinma mis-swallowed. She darted a glance at Lanre whose gaze was already on her. She glared at him. *What are you doing?!*

He lifted a shoulder and mouthed at her: *Trying to help.*

Erinma didn't need his help. She'd already planned how she would break the news to her dad.

But it was too late to recall the words. Conversations around the room halted and the silence was deafening.

Her father spoke first. "What did you say, Lanre?" Six pairs of eyes were trained on her fiancé. Since she sat next to Lanre, she could feel the heat of their gaze on her face even if they weren't talking to her. It would help if she leaned her chair further back. And only make her look ridiculous.

"Erinma expressed her concerns about being involved in Proud Belle. She's still a bit shaken over Noelle's death and she needs a break. I think so too."

Her father fixed his gaze on her. "Erinma, is that true?"

"Daddy, you and Erinma can discuss this after dinner," Somto interjected.

"I agree with Somto, dear," Mum said. "Talking about Noelle and her family is still a bit touchy for all of us."

Erinma wanted to hug them both but judging by the looks her father kept tossing her way, he didn't seem so ready to drop the subject.

"If it's a serious concern for Erinma, I think it's best we discuss it now. I don't know how to put off important things."

Erinma drank a large sip of water to ease the uneasiness in her stomach.

"Erinma?"

"Yes, daddy?"

“I’m listening.” He leaned back in his chair, one hand propped on the table and the other lifting his wine glass to his lips. “What is going on? Is the workload too much for you?”

“No. It’s not that.” She braced herself. “I have a business plan that I hoped to discuss with you later on.”

Dad said nothing; his expression unreadable. Erinma had seen such reactions long enough to know he was waiting to hear what she had to say. She hadn’t intended to pitch her business plan that evening, but she would since she didn’t have a choice. Only that she needed her calm nerves and sort out the conflicting energies bouncing off her fiancé’s body: was he for her or against her?

Lanre’s father spoke up. “I see your daughter takes after you. She’s turning into a business mogul.”

Erinma turned her gaze to her sister.

“It would seem so,” Lanre said beside her and she wanted to stab his leg with her fork. Why was he still speaking?

“You’re surrounded by family and business-minded people. Let’s hear your ideas. Two heads are better than one—in this case there are three heads. Who knows? We might have one or two things to add.”

“I really don’t want to discuss it ye—”

“She wants to open a flower shop,” Lanre interjected.

“My sister can speak for herself.” Somto glared at him.

Erinma jumped in. Her sister would have to take turns in throwing Lanre out the door. “Like I told Lanre,” she said, looking briefly at her fiancé before facing her dad. “I want to open a flower shop. It would offer a wide range of products, including fresh flowers for every occasion, artificial flowers, gifts, chocolates, plant supplies, and so on. I’m considering renting a building on Victoria Island. It’s been vacant for a while.” Erinma elaborated further. “According to reports, more people in the country prefer the idea of fresh flowers over artificial flowers, statistics show that the flower business has room for expansion.”

“Are you planning on importing?” Lanre’s mother inquired.

“I intend to do so, but not immediately. Due to the importation cost, it’s easier to grow the flowers locally. However, I’m still ironing out the kinks.”

Her future mother-in-law smiled and nodded.

“What building do you have your heart set on?”

Erinma described the place on Victoria Island.

“I’m familiar with the place. That’s a prime location. You have a good eye, Erinma,” Lanre’s father said. “I’m surprised nobody has snatched it up yet.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Her father’s head bobbed. “It is a prime location. What makes you believe this business idea will be profitable in Nigeria? I mean, if you give a Nigerian woman flowers, she would prefer you give her the money or take her shopping.” Someone laughed while Lanre coughed beside her. “We’re not like *Oyinbos* who give flowers to each other on every occasion. What gives you the impression this would work out? After all, all you have to work with are numbers.”

“And numbers don’t lie.” Erinma fired back. “You taught me that, Dad.” Hurt simmered in her chest at her father’s lack of approval or acknowledgement that her ideas were good. “You always said to do something you love. Well, opening this business is something I would love to do.”

“Talking business while eating isn’t a good mix. Our food is getting cold. Why don’t we focus on the wedding?” Mum said, trying to minimise the mounting tension in the room. “These two have been engaged for three years. It’s time we give them the wedding they want so we can have grandbabies on the way.”

Erinma caught Somto’s subtle eye-roll.

“Yes,” Lanre’s mother gushed, clapping.

Lanre threw his arm over her shoulder and planted a kiss close to her ear. “I agree.”

“Excuse me, please.” She shrugged his hand away and stood.



“What just happened in there?” Somto asked, following her into the kitchen. Thankfully there were no kitchen staff present; probably chit-chatting as they always did. Whenever they had important guests, Mum sent the staff to their quarters for privacy. According to her, it limited family matters leaking to the media from any of them.

“Why was your boyfriend rattling on and on and acting like he didn’t do wrong by you? I need to slap some sense into that boy’s head.”

Erinma rubbed her temples. “I don’t want to talk about it. Somto, can you just take me home, please?”

“You still aren’t driving at night?”

She shook her head. “Lanre brought me.”

Erinma thought about calling Andrew, but she’d left his card on her dresser. *Why hadn’t she saved his number?* She didn’t want a random cab driver picking her up at that hour. Times had changed and people were desperate and money-hungry. She’d rather the money be used for her business than settle ransom with a kidnapper.

“You want to leave right now?” She glanced at her watch. “It’s only seven-thirty.”

“If that’s okay with you.”

Somto rubbed her arm. “Wait a little while longer. At least let thirty minutes pass before we leave. Your future in-laws are still here.” Her sister sighed. “Are you sure you want to marry him?”

The door to the kitchen opened and Mum walked in. “Why are both of you here? Don’t you realise we have guests to entertain?”

“I’m not feeling too well, mummy. I want to go home.”

“Why? What’s the problem? Our in-laws are here. We still have a lot to discuss about the wedding.”

“She’s upset with Lanre,” Somto responded.

Mum locked her gaze on Erinma. “Why?”

This time Erinma spoke. “Well, we spent the whole time talking about me.”

Mum’s brows wrinkled as she frowned. “Did you and Lanre quarrel?”

“I’m just not in the mood. He should have kept the conversation about my business ideas to himself. Instead, he had to tell the whole family.”

“Oh, my darling. Boys will be boys.”

Erinma held back from saying something she would regret. Her mother wouldn’t understand and Erinma wasn’t ready to explain.

The kitchen door opened and Lanre walked in, his gaze immediately locked on hers, his brows lifting in confusion. “Erinma is everything okay?”

She turned her back on him and gripped the kitchen counter.

“Oh, Lanre. You’re missing your sweetheart. Somto, let’s excuse them.”

“But Mummy—”

“No buts.”

The room grew quiet as both women left the room. The sounds of Lanre’s shoes across the floor grazed her ears as he came up behind her. “I know you’re upset. But I was doing this for you.”

She snorted.

“Doll face, look at me when I’m talking to you. I’m trying to apologise.”

“You’re doing a terrible job.”

He held her shoulders gently and turned her around. She fixed her gaze on his shirt and told herself not to peek at the skin left exposed by his popped shirt. “You should have let me tell him at my own time, in my way. You humiliated me in front of our family by throwing me under the bus.”

Lanre sighed and pulled her to him. “I’m sorry, babes.”

“You’re always sorry.” She drew back from him. “Let’s just get this dinner over with and you can take me home.”

The rest of the evening seemed to drag on. They finally set a date for the wedding. About seven months away. Erinma had texted Odavwaro to look through a few of the Bridal designers in the country and give her the top five. It was past nine that they all said their good-byes and Lanre took her home.



She wiped her tears and snuggled on the couch with a mug of hot chocolate and caught up with the Ari Mato show. According to Odavwaro, the last episode had been motivational and empowering. Things Erinma needed at the time.

“...love you. I read this lovely quote by Heather Stillufsen, ‘Dear beautiful you, yes, you have within you the strength to get through even the darkest of days...don’t let anyone or anything steal your sparkle. Keep your chin up and know that things are going to get better...yes, they will...take it one step at a time...and keep believing in your dreams...always.’”

Erinma took a sip of the hot chocolate.

“Defeat is not an option when your DNA is marked ‘always victorious’.” She fanned herself with a cue card as she walked back and forth in front of

her purple velvet sofa. “I’m feeling all pumped like a motivational speaker.” The audience in the studio hooted. She smiled and pointed the card at them then at the camera that was zoomed in on her. “Be the slay queen that you are and own your crown! If you’re still alive, it’s for a reason and don’t let what others think mess you up.”

The crowd went berserk.

Easy for you to say when your life is all pretty and glammed up, Erinma thought. She knew she was spiralling back into the cushions of self-pity and depression but she couldn’t help herself.

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CHAPTER 23

ANDREW

“**T**he Disciples were once baby Christians. There were times Jesus told a parable to the crowd and He had to go back to explain it to His disciples. There was even a time when they wanted Jesus to rain hailstones on a town because of how they treated Jesus. Imagine that? These same Disciples who later were healing people with the touch of their clothes, raising the dead, and winning three thousand souls in a day, were once ignorant of the ways of the Kingdom. They were grown men, but baby Christians. They were yet to receive the promised Holy Spirit. I’m sure you and I would have had the same reaction. Maybe even devised harsher punishments. Because how can they treat my Master in this manner? *Ah! Dem no dey fear?*”

“So how did Jesus respond? Jesus told them that wasn’t the lifestyle they were to live. That wasn’t the kind of children He wanted to raise: murderers and revengers. That’s not the mindset He wants them to cultivate. And after Jesus’ ascension, if you flip to the book of Acts, and the epistles of John—you would notice there was a growth curve in the lives of some, if not all the Disciples. You could say they had a lot resting on their shoulders: the mandate to preach the Gospel to every nation, to baptise, heal the sick, raise the dead...make sure everyone with ears heard about Jesus. And that’s all true. But don’t you know a lot is riding on you and me as well?”

Andrew let the words stay in his mind as he meditated on them. This time it was Pastor John preaching, a co-pastor in His Glory Centre. He was a man Andrew greatly admired with his easy and relatable teaching style.

“How long do you want to remain a baby? Drinking the milk of the Word? Well, Jesus is telling you to grow up. Start serving. Be concerned about the growth of others. Stop being me, me, me all the time like little kids who don’t know better,” Pastor John said. “I have twins at home. My goodness, it’s stressful raising one kid at the time, talk more of raising two kids at the same time. My wife and I try, God helping us, to instil godly values in their lives. We expect these kids to grow up while we guide them on the right path.”

Somehow, Kalu’s words complemented the Pastor’s message, and Andrew was half-sure it was no coincidence. Clearly, he had a lot of growing up to do. This had to be God’s way of reaching out to him.

The words of Pastor John pricked his conscience. It made perfect sense to Andrew, because he had a seven-year-old at home. God help him, as much as he loved how cute she was as a baby, he looked forward to her being able to walk on her own, use the potty easily, eat without making a mess and talk fluently. He enjoyed their easy rapport and hearing her audibly talk about what was wrong and the goofy conversations they had now that she was a little older. It made it easier at times, but it also made him wish she could be a baby and he could just keep telling her what to do. In any case, he expected her to grow stronger, mature, and become more responsible as she grew older. That even after she left the nest to start her own family, they would have a strong bond.

Andrew shifted in his seat. Was that the way God viewed His children as well? Waiting for them to grow up so He could have a better and more intimate relationship with them? Grow till they also became influential, raising spiritual seeds?

“When these same children get married,” Pastor John said, “they will have kids of their own and the cycle continues. But for the cycle to continue, growth must happen.”



When the service drew to a close, Andrew sat back in his seat for a bit. It gave room for the early-leavers to make a beeline for the doors and hurry to wherever church-goers rushed to after a Sunday service. A few stopped to meet and greet with worshippers they bumped into once or twice a week. Still relatively new to the church, Andrew took pleasure in his own company. Needing some minutes alone, he chose that moment to regurgitate and reflect on the sermon.

“I need Your help, God. Please help me forge ahead. Help me grow into who You want me to be. Let me mature into a Christian ready to bloom and help spread Your Word wherever You need it to go. Help me in setting a good example for Bella. I pray this and seal it in the name of Your Son, Jesus, Amen.”

He felt himself relax afterwards.

Growing up involved forgiving wrongs. Letting go of his past. And that involved letting Bella see her maternal grandfather. He thought he had but knew better now that he was yet to fully let go of what TJ did to him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't put aside those memories. Which was one of the reasons why he couldn't open himself to love again. One terrible heartbreak seemed enough for a lifetime.

He glanced up and noticed the entrance was free now. With one foot out the door, he turned in the direction of the children's church when he heard someone call his name from behind.

“Andrew?”

He spun around at the familiar voice. “Boss Lady?” She looked beautiful in an Ankara jacket, white camisole and red pencil skirt. A black wavy wig with brown tips flowed down her back. She was in the company of another woman; slim and equally beautiful.

“Hi.” She waved at him. “Nice running into you. You attend HGC?” She asked.

“Yes. Just started a few weeks ago.”

“That's nice.” She gestured at the lady next to her. “This is my friend, Isimeme. Isi, this is Andrew.”

He nodded at Isimeme. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

He returned his gaze to Erinma. “How have you been? You haven't given me a call since the last time. I presume you haven't needed any transport services for a while.” Andrew inwardly revolted at his choice of words. It

sounded desperate and needy for attention. Definitely not how a grown man should behave.

Only one who had a crush on a woman.

“I actually did at one point. Unfortunately, I forgot your card at home and I didn’t store your number.”

“Need me to store my number on your phone?” Her brows lifted and he was quick to say, “It’s only business. Nothing else. I’m well aware you are engaged and would never do anything to jeopardise that.” *What is wrong with me?* Andrew shook his head. This was by far weirder than weird.

She smiled. “Thank you for the assurance.”

Andrew slid his fingers into his front pockets. “Just want to make sure you aren’t taking our business elsewhere.”

She gave an adorable laugh and as soon as it ended, he wanted to hear it again. “I won’t carry it elsewhere unless you say you’re unavailable.” She looked around him. “Where’s Bella? Is she in the Children’s church?”

“Yeah. I was just on my way to pick her up.”

“I hope she’s having a good time there.”

“She is. She can’t stop talking about her new friends—including her teachers, and what she learned. It’s been great so far.” *Say something else.* “Where are you heading from here?” Hopefully, the question didn’t sound creepy and intrusive.

“Going to get lunch.”

“You drove?”

She nodded. “I did. I drive during the day, just not at night.”

He shuffled his feet. He had a list of questions to ask: how was she doing? Was she still with her boyfriend? Was she still hurting over Noelle? Was she anywhere close to healing? Why did she drive only in broad daylight?

But those questions were too personal to ask an acquaintance (if he could call her that).

“Well, it was nice meeting you again. Although you still haven’t told me your name.”

“I’m so sorry. My name is Erinma. I thought you already Googled it.”

Ah... Dundee!

“Right.” He nodded. “Nice meeting you again, Erinma. Nice to meet you, Isimeme.”

“Bye.” She waved.

He nodded at them both.

Andrew, you're such a fool. He'd definitely acted like one. Need me to put my number on your phone? What was that? He wanted to kick himself. Andrew shelved the unwanted emotions as he watched her take confident strides to her car. As she pulled out of her parking spot he turned and made his way to the children's church. Minutes ago, he'd acted like a teenager. Words seemed to stay stuck in his throat and his brain had gone blank when he sighted her.

Erinma. Even her name sounded sweet in his ears as it rolled off her tongue.

He shook his head. Reminding himself she was someone else's woman and he couldn't entertain any other thought. But that wasn't what completely scared him. What scared him was this was the first woman he was feeling any form of attraction to since Tito. He didn't want to feel this way and it was probably good they saw each other as little as possible.



ERINMA

"He likes you," Isi said when they were seated in her car.

"What?" Erinma laughed as she drove out of the church premises. "No way. Is he blind or something?"

"Don't say that."

"It's true."

"Well, I think he likes you. The way he kept staring at you and wanting to put his number on your phone. And he's extremely good looking."

Her chest burned at Isi's appraisal of him. Why was she feeling that way? "You want me to set you guys up?" Even as she said it her stomach

hardened. *What's wrong with me?* Her feelings were ridiculously silly. She was engaged. She shouldn't be feeling this way about an attractive man.

Just stop thinking about him, she ordered herself.

Isi snorted. "Not interested. Besides, it's not me he was looking at like he would cut out his heart and hand it to."

Erinma wasn't going to argue with her. "What do you feel like eating? Let's stop somewhere and get some food."

"No. Let's go to your place. I'll cook."

"Okay, *nau*. Do you need any special ingredients?" Erinma inquired.

"As long as you have noodles, soy sauce, fresh vegetables, shredded beef and eggs."

Erinma frowned. "How can I have shredded beef sitting at home? We'll stop at a food mart and get some of the things on your list."

"Awesome."

Two hours later, Erinma could hardly move. "I'm stuffed! Isi has killed me with her amazing cooking."

"Thank you. I love having that Chinese feel to my meals."

"Speaking of love... What's going on between you and Nelly? He could barely keep his eyes off you."

Isi scratched her forehead. "We're friends."

"But you want more? I saw the way you looked when Tito hugged him."

Isi shrugged. "Yeah, I was a little jealous." She swirled her glass of iced lemonade in front of her lips. "I wouldn't mind having something with him. But I don't want to get ahead of God. I feel this pull to wait. As if He has something special in store for me." She finally drank some of the lemonade.

"I think Nelly may be way ahead of God. The way he looked at you that night..."

"I already told him we should remain friends for now."

Erinma thought about herself and Lanre. The incident at the Launch Party; the way he'd behaved and his family's true thoughts on her. *God, is Lanre still the guy for me?* Instead of peace, she felt the same gnawing in her chest; like a heaviness resting over her heart.

"What about you and Lanre? I guess you delayed the wedding because of the accident. Are you planning the wedding now?"

Erinma stretched her legs on the couch. "Plans are underway. Will you like to be part of the bridal train?"

Isi beamed. "You don't even have to ask."

“You didn’t even have a choice.” They both laughed.

“Can we go out there?” Isi pointed at Erinma’s garden. White patio sliding doors only separated them.

“Sure.”

Isi pushed to her feet and slid the doors. The aroma of the herbs and flowers wafted into the house and warmed Erinma’s chest.

“Erinma, this is stunning.”

Her head swelled at the compliment. “Thank you. I try to work here during my spare time.” She stood and strolled to Isi’s side.

Isi stared at her. “You did this yourself?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Wow. You’re really gifted. A CEO with a green thumb? Amazing.” She cocked her head to the side, “have you ever considered starting a flower shop?”

Erinma blinked at her. A strange sensation ran down her spine. “I actually have. It’s something I plan to do when the time is right.” Not after Lanre had revealed her plans. She wasn’t even taking his calls or reading his messages because she was still angry with him.

“And what if the right time is now?”

Erinma shrugged, squelching her anger. “Then I’ll put in every effort to make it happen.” She regarded her friend with suspicion. “The way you’re talking...is there something you know that I don’t?”

Isi returned to the verandah and took a seat on the cane chair. Erinma followed. “Erinma, I think God wants you to start a flower shop. And I know there’s going to be something phenomenal on the side. It has to do with food or something.” She looked back at the garden and Erinma followed her gaze. Taking in the blooming flowers and lush green grass. “Do you believe in God giving visions?”

Erinma shifted her gaze back to Isi. “You mean about the future?”

Isi nodded.

“Yes. I’ve heard of it. Seen people who had that gift. I just haven’t met someone who has it.”

Isi faced her again. “This is going to sound crazy, but I had a dream... more like a vision. I saw a building with a cute flower shop painted in white just beside it. The building was beautifully decorated on the inside, and there was a signboard on the outside, but I didn’t see the name. Then there were a lot of cars trooping in. People walking into the place were happy and

excited. Like they were going for a feast. The flower shop was more glorious. Every flower that went to a person reminded them of who God made them to be.”

Erinma sat stunned. *This is You, God.* Because Erinma had never mentioned anything about her plans to her circle of friends.

Isi sighed. “Sounds a bit far-fetched, doesn’t it?”

Erinma shook her head.

Isi looked back at the garden. “Do you know flowers don’t bloom at the same time? Everyone in life blooms at different times.”

“Yeah,” she replied, wondering where the conversation was leading to.

“When I first walked into your office, God told me something.” Isi closed her eyes. He said, *she has never stopped being beautiful to me. She doesn’t know it yet, but she’s on the path to spread My fragrance. She still looks like Me. She’s made in My image, still.*” She opened her eyes. “Now thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 2 Corinthians chapter two, fourteen and fifteen. Just like the fragrances of flowers, we are to be a fragrance of God’s perfume to others. Have you heard about brown roses, Erinma?”

Erinma shook her head. Her body visibly trembled at the change in atmosphere. Like there was a sudden charge in the air.

“Well, God says you are His Brown Rose. I’m not sure what it means, but you can ask Him.”

“I actually have a lot to ask Him.”

Why had He chosen to reveal something so important and personal to Isi and not to her? Was this the new way of serving Him that she’d been praying about? And the Scripture Isi had quoted. Was it in any way connected to the bigger picture?

“Do you want to ask me anything?”

Erinma licked her lips. “For starters, why would God tell you and not me? I’ve been praying for Him to use me in some bigger way and He tells you instead of me...why?”

“Well, it could be that you aren’t fully listening or you have listened but you need confirmation.” Isi smiled. “But don’t take my word for it. You can talk to Him too. I’ll be praying for you, sis.”

Erinma just sat there, dazed. Like she was living in some twilight zone.

“Are the nightmares gone?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Thank God.”

Later that night, long after Isi left, Erinma sat in her garden with her Bible in her lap. “God, You have to speak to me. I need to hear from You, too. Please.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’ll worship You, God. I’ll adore You. Please, dwell in my praises as I open my heart to hear from You.”

This method worked well for Erinma. During worship sessions in church or anywhere for that matter, she felt God’s soft whispers against her ear.

She sang a few worship songs. Willing all her heart and mind to focus and connect with God. And then, a few minutes later, after she’d belted out a couple of worship songs, she heard Him speak.

You are My brown rose, Erinma.

She blinked. *Brown rose?*

Your first thought of a brown rose is that it’s wilting, that it’s diseased with flora, but not so. You’re still beautiful to Me. My Son Jesus had scars. It didn’t make Me love Him less—His scars made me love you.

That startling revelation shook her. She literally felt herself tremble and wrapped her hands around her arms, rocking herself back and forth. The Scripture twirling in her head was the day of the Crucifixion—the beatings and crown of thorns. She squeezed her eyes as she replayed the words in her head of Jesus being nailed to the cross.

I felt His pain. I felt yours too, Erinma.

Left hand. Nail. *Smack!*

Give Me your pain from Noelle and her family’s death.

Right hand. Nail. *Smack!*

Give Me your self-guilt.

Feet. Nail. *Smack!*

Lay it all on Me. I can take it.

She was sobbing hard now. “What do You want from me, Lord?”

I know I can depend on you. Let your life offer a fragrance of worship to Me. Let it touch the lives of others in ways unimaginable. I walked with you, led you out of the fire for a reason. Your being alive is for My pleasure. You have scars but they don’t limit your purpose, they birthed it.

God, what am I supposed to do?

Use My garden. I create beauty. Like flowers, I will use you to let the fragrance of who I am spread to far places and touch lives you never

could have done on your own.

How?

Open a flower shop. Connect with Jordan. I have plans for both of you.

Okay, God. I'm listening. Tell me Your plans.

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CHAPTER 24

ERINMA

If she didn't do this now, she might give up completely. Yet Erinma stayed seated in her car. Ten minutes flew by and she still sat there, as if waiting to be pushed out by an invisible force. Her hands motionless and her feet numb as she considered her next move. The dinner with her parents only amplified her self-doubt. Her confidence had shattered by her father's refusal to give her his blessing or validate her ideas.

Her ideas were God-founded—which meant they would appear crazy to others, but only she, and perhaps a selected few, would understand them.

But great as they were, if the man she called her hero/mentor couldn't give her the validation she needed—what was the point of everything?

She doesn't know it yet, but she's on the path to spread My fragrance.

Her talk with Isi had been like an epiphany. Her conversation with God was God's stamp of approval.

Expelling a breath her gaze flicked to the silver diamond engagement ring on her finger. Each time she looked at it her body blazed hot. How dare Lanre divulge her plans to her father without consulting her first? If he could discard her feelings and pull this off when they weren't married; what else was he capable of doing?

Erinma didn't wish to know.

He'd called several times and she refused to take his calls. His messages were left unread. His betrayal ran deep.

Which was why she drove to one of her favourite restaurants. If she chickened out of her business opportunity because the people she loved didn't support her a hundred percent—where did that leave her and her hopes to do something she loved?

Noelle's death—the entire Moses' clan—had made her do some deep thinking about her life.

If you knew you would live for only a limited time, what would you do differently about your life?

Odavwaro's words swirled in her head, sank deep roots in her subconscious and now bloomed in her chest, making her imagine several possibilities that could be put to action. Because she would do a lot of things differently. Life, as she thought she knew, wasn't to be lived on her selfish ambitions but to please God. And if this was what He wanted for her then He had also given her the talents and capabilities needed to get the work done. Adrenaline rushed through her veins as she spent the better part of three hours putting together a solid and detailed business plan.

Moreover, God had reaffirmed that she could do it. The words received from her morning devotion were like a warm embrace and a push in the right direction: *Roll your works upon the Lord [commit and trust them wholly to Him; He will cause your thoughts to become agreeable to His will, and] so shall your plans be established and succeed.*

The book of Proverbs had cushioned the disappointments and renewed her hope. If this idea was truly from God and would bless Him...she didn't want to waste any time setting it into place. *Proverbs 16:3 AMPC*. Erinma had scribbled it down in her journal and repeated the words over and over till the words commit and trust were tattooed to her brain.

The distinctive aroma of Chinese stir-fry rice teased her senses and her tummy growled.

She hadn't eaten much in the last couple of days. She'd spent the rest of her weekend throwing herself into research on her business plans and looking into competitors. And Sunday's sermon further boosted her courage. Beyond a doubt, she knew this was the step she needed to take. She couldn't remain like this forever—hiding behind the protective shell of her father's business and not willing to explore what she could do on her own. Erinma knew she had a talent when it came to a green-thumb. She also knew that her second chance at life would be spent exploring this God-directed path.

She'd dreamed of this for a long time. And she wouldn't back down just because one or two people doubted her capabilities. If anything, it gave her more motivation to succeed. She didn't need to prove herself—she'd done that with Proud Belle.

You can do this, Erinma. Believe in yourself. Believe in God and leave it to Him to work the rest out.

Inhaling deeply, she got out of her car and strode towards Jordan. Her heels wobbled on the brick ground. As always he was up in the mobile truck, dressed in his chef garb but instead of a serving spoon he held a knife, ready to dice the colourful spread of vegetables before him. He looked up and grinned.

"Hi, Erinma. You're five hours early. I'm afraid lunch isn't ready yet."

"Good morning, Mr. Udofia."

He peered at her, brow arched. "Really? Are we getting formal now?"

"I didn't really come here for a social call. Even though something smells great."

"In that case, I still insist you call me Jordan. Let's take a seat and talk about what brought you here besides my cooking." He led her to two plastic chairs on the other side of the truck.

Erinma eased into a chair and crossed her legs at the knees.

Her insides twisted. Her heart rate was pumping faster than usual. "I'd like to make you a proposal."

"I'm listening."

"As you know, I've always loved your cooking. I tasted your food back when you were still in charge of *Food is Ready*."

"Wow. Okay. What party was that?"

"I think it was a wedding. Bolanle and Toolz. You made these amazing chicken balls with tomatoes and cheese. It was amazing."

He grinned. "Yeah. I think I remember. One of the oldies asked for three more portions. She said she wanted to give her dogs."

"Oh... are you serious? That's mean."

He chuckled. "It's a wedding. You meet all sorts of people. At least the woman wanted her dogs to have the best of the best."

"And did you give her?"

"No. It had finished by the time I returned to the serving point."

Erinma laughed. "I'm sure you were glad."

“Over the moon. I’m sure the couple wouldn’t want to hear the food they paid for was specifically packaged for that purpose.

She sobered and looked him in the eye. “I was wondering if we could strike a deal. I’m branching out from Proud Belle and I want to start a flower shop.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

"A flower shop."

"That's quite bold. If I may ask, why a flower shop?"

"Because I love them. I've always had a soft spot for greenery."

Jordan leaned back in his seat and folded his arms. "So how do I come to play in this business of yours?"

Erinma straightened her back. Going all business-like. Her whole body lit up with excitement about the project. "We will open a restaurant that doubles as a flower shop." When Jordan's face remained impassive, she continued, "It would be sophisticated and elegant. You could reopen your restaurant and cater to your customers, re-establishing your clientele. I'm sure a few of your customers, like myself, would be thrilled that you're reopening. They would also have an overview of the flower shop and be able to buy flowers for their fine dining. Of course, the flower shop would not only cater to the restaurant, but it would also have its own clientele and provide services for various occasions. However, we would thrive on each other's successes."

Her execution plans were still hazy, but Erinma was sure she would figure it out in the coming days pending her father’s approval and waiting for Jordan’s go-ahead. She knew he would want to think it over, which was fine with her. It was a huge deal.

"Wow. That's a grand plan you have there. I like the concept. I really do." A smile formed on Erinma's lips. "But I lack the necessary funds. I pumped a lot of money into this popup restaurant, and I can't come up with the money for this venture—which I'm guessing would be a lot."

Her pulse slowed down. If he liked the idea, hope wasn't lost. "What if I told you I'd source for investors for the restaurant and you can work out a payment plan, would that lessen your stress?"

He chuckled. "Do you really know my history? If you did, you wouldn't put faith in me."

"Jordan, I did my homework before approaching you. I know you were in prison for presenting a dud cheque to some people you owed money to.

Trust me, I wouldn't partner with anyone without conducting a background check first. But you said it yourself—God gave you a second chance. If you had another chance to redo things, wouldn't you take up the offer?"

Jordan stared off into the distance, clearly lost in thought. "First off, I believe I have a second chance. It's why I opted for this gig in the first place. Second, if God has given me a second chance, my actions shouldn't matter to anyone. Only to God."

"True. I won't dispute that. But look around you, is this where you see yourself in the next twenty years? Or would you rather be in a restaurant surrounded by state-of-the-art equipment, giving everyone a chance to see God's goodness in your life? You would be living proof that redemption is possible."

Jordan shook his head but kept a smile on his face. "I see why your father appointed you CEO. You have a knack for negotiations." He paused, rubbing his palms against his trousers. "Can I think about it and give you an answer by the end of the week?"

It wasn't a no. And it wasn't a yes, yet. But Erinma knew

"Sure. How long do you need?"

"Is there a deadline?"

"Not exactly, but it would be great if you had a timeline."

"A few days will do."

"And you'll pray about it?"

"That, and discuss it with my wife."

"I'll expect your response."

"And why me? I'm good but I'm not the best chef. You could choose from a lot of accomplished chefs in the country who would jump at the opportunity to partner with you."

"True. There are a lot of people who would take advantage of the opportunity. But you were the first person that came to mind when I prayed about it. I'm certain you're the guy for the job."

"I appreciate that. You'll hear from me soon."

Erinma stood. "Great. I'll leave you to your culinary flair. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Won't you be coming later for lunch?"

She shook her head. "I'm already behind with work. Lots of catching up to do. I'll have someone pick it up."



Erinma flipped the folder open and examined the sales reports for their new products. The better and improved designs for the new products were a winner. It was well received by the average single and married women who wanted to look good while hustling in their respective careers.

She chewed on her lower lip. Files, spreadsheets and folders were splayed across her desk. Her proposed business plans for the flower shop and restaurant were one of them. Working was better than waiting for Jordan's answer. She was hoping he'd send her a text or call to let her know he was fully on board.

Erinma blew out a breath. *Patience, Erinma.* Getting a straightforward yes would have been great but she knew this offer was something he had to think about carefully, considering his past, and if he was willing and ready to take on the project.

Because Erinma was ready to get things rolling if he was. Last she checked, buildings in her preferred location didn't stay long on the market and she wasn't going to take the chance of someone else having the place.

God, please don't let that happen.

She laid back on the headrest. If her father got wind of her choice of a partner, he may not approve of it. Regardless, this was her play.

"How are you?"

She looked up at Lanre, stunned that he was in her office. The wine colour of his suit blended with his skin colour and he looked all GQ and photoshoot ready. "Fine." She closed the folder containing her personal project and covered it with a sheet containing the marketing strategies for *Clean Fresh Milk* that needed her attention—she didn't know why but the sudden need for secrecy gnawed at her.

"I'm sorry, Erin." He squeezed her shoulder.

"Why are you here? You didn't tell me you were coming over."

Lanre perched on the side of her desk. "I wanted to surprise you. And maybe take you out for lunch."

"I already ordered lunch."

"Come on, Doll face. Don't be like that."

He reached out to touch the side of her face but she moved to the side. “Uh-uh, Lanre. Sweet words won’t help you this time. I’m still upset with you.” She still hadn’t heard from her father but her mum and sister had shown their support in the text messages they sent to her right after her meeting with Jordan.

He sighed. “Look, let’s be real here. Your father might not have listened to you if you told him. Somto fought with your dad for years before he took her career seriously.”

“And how do you know I wasn’t prepared to take that chance? No matter what you say you shouldn’t have broken my trust, Lanre. The least you could have done was give me a heads up.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She eyed him warily.

“I know you don’t believe me but I am sorry. Forgive me?”

“Whatever. Try it again, I won’t take it easy on you.”

A slow smile crept up his legs. “Come on. Let me take you out to lunch.”

“I can’t right now. I still have a lot to do.”

Lanre picked up a sheet of paper that displayed one of the few marketing strategies for the new product. Right under it was her file for the restaurant and flower shop. “This looks pretty good. You launch in less than two weeks.”

“Yeah.”

Erinma shifted the file to the edge of her desk and placed the product samples on it.

“So do we schedule dinner?” He got out his phone. “I’ll have to move some things around but I want us to spend some time together.” He cupped her jaw, this time she was willing. “Let me make up for my senselessness.” He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers briefly.

“I can’t have dinner. Destiny is coming over.”

He glanced up at her. “How is she? It’s been a while.” He placed the paper back on the table. “Is she still reeling over her job?”

Erinma chuckled to herself. “Yeah. She’s good. She needs to kickstart her love-life, though.”

Lanre raised a brow. “Why is that? I thought you said she didn’t have time for a committed relationship.”

“Maybe things have changed. I know she loves her job, but a part of her wants to be settled.”

“Is she still seeing the mystery guy you told me about?

“I don’t know for sure. I think so,” she said as she stood. “I have some free time right now for some ice cream if you’re game?”

He smiled and nodded. “Sure.”

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CHAPTER 25

ERINMA

Erinma took her time in the bath. When Destiny said she was coming over, Erinma had closed earlier so she caught up with her best friend. It felt like ages since they saw each other and conversation had piled up.

After a long soak she slipped into a pair of shorts and one of Lanre's old jerseys and walked barefoot to the kitchen. She grabbed her Plant Mister and moved to the spider plant in the living room. Her house plants needed her attention. She remembered a quote by Charles Spurgeon she'd read somewhere online: *Evil things are easy things: for they are natural to our fallen nature. Right things are rare flowers that need cultivation.*

And life needed to be cultivated for steady progress to be made. She grinned to herself as she remembered something Mr. Moses had told her: *God dey always check to see if we dey move. E wan make sure sey we dey comot fruit and we dey bloom plenty. Each time E see progress E go comot more from us/prune and prune. E know say we fit grow more and more and we fit bear fruit wey plenty.*

And for the next few minutes Erinma followed the footsteps of God. She took care of her plants. Inspected and spoke to them. Cared for them and made sure they were receiving enough nutrients and sunlight.

*Light Your fire in my heart
Keep the flames burning
Make me as pure as gold*

Let me stand till the end

Erinma hummed to 'Light Your Fire In My Heart', a song by Daniel Nwachukwu in HGC choir as she busied herself in the kitchen, chopping onions, tomatoes and peppers to make some kind of concoction sauce. She loved his songs. They were ethereal and touched the depths of her soul.

Your Words are like water

You purify every part of me that isn't like You

Purify me as You want

Sanctify my heart, make me whole

I'm available, Lord

I'm available, Lord

Use me...

Already, the pasta was boiling. Soon the smell of her sauce filled the kitchen and all that remained was Destiny making an appearance.

Her doorbell chimed an hour later.

"Baby love!" She approached Erinma and hugged her close. "It's been so long! Feels like ages we last saw each other." Destiny took a step back and handed Erinma a large gift bag. "A gift for my bestie!"

Erinma peeked inside the bag, thrilled to discover a bottle of her favourite perfume and a box of chocolates, along with other goodies. "I'll manage this one for now. It's great to see you."

Destiny chuckled and swept her dark tresses to the side. "You look good, babes. That our boyfriend is treating you well."

"Well enough for me to want to slap him."

"Slap *ke*? What happened?"

Erinma waved her hand. "Long story. Do you want something to eat? I just cooked spaghetti and prawn sauce."

"Sounds yummy. I'm starving. Let's gist while we eat because this gist is too sweet to pass up. Let me quickly use the restroom, before my bladder bursts."

"Aren't you coming from your house?"

"I had to go somewhere first!" She yelled over her shoulder as she dashed to the restroom.

Destiny's phone chimed with an incoming message and Erinma was curious to know who her best friend's secret admirer was. She craned her neck to see if her friend was about to leave the toilet, then picked up

Destiny's phone and sat on the arm of her couch. One leg up to her chin, one on the ground, ready to toss her phone on the table so she didn't think she was spying on her.

Even though she obviously was.

She entered Destiny's long and overused pin, but it didn't work. Not planning to give up, she tried another of her friend's pins. Destiny always rotated the pins just in case her brother contemplated stealing her nest egg. She did the same with her bank pins. Erinma breathed a sigh of relief when the phone screen displayed Destiny's home screen—a photo of her best friend dressed in the airline's suit-like uniform of a black skirt and brightly coloured Ankara jacket in red and yellow with a yellow neck scarf posing in front of a Safari Flight.

The text was from a Sweet Lover.

Erinma laughed quietly to herself. *Which one is this anonymous 'Sweet Lover'?* Destiny hadn't been in a relationship in a long time. Always going on about how her job didn't give room for a serious relationship. Except for the time she'd almost dated a passenger before discovering he was married. But if her friend was thinking about starting a new relationship with someone, she had to be sure this guy was worth her friend's heart.

Her gaze dropped to the waiting text and she tapped it open.

Can't have enough of you, baby.

I need to see you. Come over when you're done.

Meet me at the usual spot. XOXO.

Erinma smiled and raised her head to look up at nothing in particular. Clearly, the guy was smitten with her friend. Again, she listened to her friend and yielded to the temptation to read some more of their convo.

Sweet Lover: Had a long day. How was yours? I miss your kisses.

Destiny: Day was cool. Hung out with a few of my colleagues.

Went sightseeing.

Ran into some cute boys. Heart-eyes emoji

Sweet Lover: No man better set his hands or eyes on you. You're mine.

Destiny: And yet my ring finger is completely bare.

Sweet Lover: You know how this thing goes, Deedee.

Got to go.

We'll finish this convo some other time. XOXO

Was it purely coincidental that Destiny's secret admirer signed off the same way Lanre did? Erinma rubbed her eyes. Was she seeing properly, or had fatigue made her vision blurry and her mind foggy? She re-read the message. Then, as if on its own, her thumb backtracked the long thread as far as it could go, catching the in-between lewd comments and obscene photos.

Sweet Lover: Your friend is making me wait again.

I'm desperately hungry for your touch.

Destiny: You know I'm not in town.

Will phone sex do?

Sweet Lover: Yes, but you owe me.

Erinma didn't want to be right. Not even when her instincts told her to look up the guy's number. The phone slipped from her grasp when she did. It landed with a thump as it hit the floor. *No, no, no. It can't be. It's not possible.* Lanre was Destiny's *Sweet Lover*?

She struggled to breathe as panic gripped her.

God, is this really happening? This can't be happening!

A door opened in the distance and she could hear the water running into the water closet. Footsteps announced Destiny's return to the living room. Erinma looked up at her long-time friend. *It has to be a mistake.*

"Where's the food?" Her gaze narrowed. "Is that my phone on the floor?"

"How long have you been sleeping with Lanre?" Erinma didn't recognise her voice—it sounded cold and detached.

Destiny looked at her with wide eyes. "What do you mean?"

Hot rage rose up Erinma's throat as her body shook from pent-up anger over the last week. "Are you deaf? How-long-have-you-been-sleeping-with-my-boyfriend?!"

She lifted her hands and clasped them together. "Erinma, calm down."

Erinma grabbed a vase from the table and smashed it to the floor. "Don't tell me to calm down!" She screamed. "Just answer the question!"

"You can't understand."

“What?”

“And if I explain it, you wouldn’t make sense of it.”

Erinma pressed her trembling fist to her forehead. Her whole body was visibly shaking from rage. “Is that card you’re playing right now?” She gritted out. “That I wouldn’t make sense of how insane this is?! Of course, nothing you say would make any sense!”

Destiny released a breath. “You’ve had it easy your whole life. You don’t know how hard it is out there with no one giving you a boost in the right direction.”

“And parting your legs for my boyfriend was the best way to move forward? If you were having issues why didn’t you come to me?!” Erinma wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I have never for once turned you down. I have always treated you as more of a sister than a friend!”

And this was her way of repaying her?

Her best friend brushed glittery tips of her fingernails across her forehead, hovering over a small red pimple over her eyebrow. “I’m sorry. It’s not something I planned to do.” Then Destiny dropped her hands and strolled to her handbag on the floor. “You’ve always been too good and soft, Erinma. Your man needed his bed warm and he offered me the job. It was nothing more than a paid transaction.” She reached for her handbag. “I warned you a long time ago that Lanre wasn’t good for you, but you didn’t listen. The boy doesn’t love you, Erinma. And it’s not like he’s in love with me either.”

“How can you open your mouth and say such rubbish?”

“What? That he doesn’t love me or he’s not in love with you?” Her friend looked down at her toes and then back at her. “A man who loves you won’t cheat on you, talk less with your best friend.”

“What?”

Has this girl gone crazy? Why was she talking like she was immune to their heinous debacle?

She shut her eyes. “Obviously, Lanre is a dog but I didn’t expect you to be...” she pressed her lips together, letting the words fall away. She was not this person. She didn’t stoop to hurling expletives.

“I’m sorry.”

Tears welled up behind Erinma's shut eyelids. “Why did you do it? Does loyalty mean nothing to you?” She looked at the person she once considered a friend. “Does our years of friendship mean nothing?”

“I can’t undo what I’ve done. I was drunk the first time it happened. We bumped into each other at Purple Lake. He insisted on driving me home. Things got out of hand when we got to my place. The second time it happened, I was in my right senses but he had pictures...a video of us.” Tears streamed down her best friend’s cheek, and she looked up at the ceiling to try to stop them. “He was going to come up with a lie. I knew once it got to you it would be the end. I couldn’t lose on both ends. My family needs my support and they depend on my salary.”

“So you chose him over me? Over our friendship?”

“No. I chose my survival. No matter how much you believe you’d understand, there’s no way you can understand what poverty means.”

Erinma slumped into a chair, her head pounding. She didn’t need to ask her out. She watched mournfully as her former friend picked her bag and saw herself out. She didn’t know how long she sat there. She gave in to the tears until it hurt to breathe and her eyes ached. When she looked out the window, the backyard was completely dark.

She stood and went in search of her phone. She got his phone number from her contacts.

CHAPTER 26

ANDREW

*A*ndrew. H-hi. I'm so sorry to disturb you. Could you please come pick me up?

He gave her a sidelong glance. When she called him in tears, asking him to come get her, he panicked. He was off work today. He had the day off. Fortunately, Auntie B had stopped by from a naming ceremony and offered to stay with Bella. All the while he drove to Erinma's place, he couldn't help but worry. He didn't know what condition he'd find her in.

At first, he half thought she had been in some kind of domestic accident or something tragic had happened to a family member. But as soon as she'd stepped out of her house in colour block joggers, a pink oversized sweater that drooped over her shoulder, and a white face cap—like she'd thrown random things together and couldn't be bothered. He'd looked her over and found no sign of an injury.

She entered the car quietly and faced the passenger's window. There were no frantic calls from relatives or inquiries about a family member's well-being. Leaving him to assume that whatever had her crying was more on the emotional side.

And then she started talking to herself.

He couldn't make out anything she said.

Andrew tightened his grip on the steering. Why was it that most of his interactions with her involved her being emotionally hurt? And why did she

always seem to be alone in it? Surely, someone like her wouldn't be lacking in the friend department. As far as he knew, she was approachable and easy to talk to. He felt at ease in her presence and he knew she was comfortable around others, irrespective of her scars.

The female automated Google Voice informed him that he needed to make a turn in the next few kilometres, but there was traffic ahead. Possibly this was a good time to strike up a conversation?

Andrew swallowed. "Hey..." He returned his attention to the road after a glance at her. "Are you alright?"

She burst out laughing "No. Not at all"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm still processing and making sense of it all. In the long run I'll be fine, but right now it's just so crazy."

"Trust me, there are a lot of crazy things happening in the world right now. Nothing surprises me."

"Lucky you, I guess. No matter all that's happened to me, I don't think I'm so immune to the bad things." With a slight tilt of her head, she glanced at him. Her red-rimmed eyes, a painful sight. "What's crazy for you is completely off for me. I still get surprised. Maybe because I never expected it to happen to me."

He bobbed his head, taking her ambiguous response as an easy letdown. He tapped the steering wheel with his fingers. He tried to quell the urge to park the car by the side of the road and gather her in his arms. Tell her everything was going to be okay and she was going to be okay.

Not only was that a stupid idea, but it would be misconstrued. Andrew chewed on his inner cheek. It bothered him that he was worried about her.

God, what are You doing to me here? I don't want this. I don't want to feel this way. She's engaged!

Just when he thought his feelings would die down, Erinma spoke:

"My boyfriend. He—" She took a deep breath. "I don't think we are together anymore."

He tightened his hold on the steering wheel. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't think we can ever be okay after this."

What? "Wait. First things first; are you okay?"

"Would you be okay if you found out your best friend is having an ongoing affair with the person you're getting ready to spend your life with?"

That question hit too close to home. He swallowed hard. "Of course not. I could never be okay with it." He tried to calm his nerves. The thought of someone doing that to her made him want to punch the person. "Is that what happened to you?"

"Yeah."

"And you just found out about it?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and gazed down at her legs. "Accidentally. It's been going on for so long and I had no idea. No clue." She chuckled to herself. "Gosh, I feel so stupid right now. How could I not have seen it coming? There are always clues."

"Not all the time. Sometimes the other person is such a good pretender that you believe everything they say."

Erinma gave out a laugh that sounded more like an unladylike snort. "I don't think anyone's that perfect. Even actors retake scenes several times before they get it right."

He couldn't think of a sensible comeback to that.

She tipped her head back as fresh tears spilled down the side of her face.

All too soon, the ride was over as he put the gear on park at her destination.

Erinma made no move to exit the car.

Across the street, college kids stood in front of a barbershop.

"Are you—"

"Thanks for—"

She bowed her head and Andrew simply stared at her. Waiting on her to speak.

"I was going to say thank you and apologise for disrupting your evening," Erinma said.

"You didn't disrupt anything. And it was good to see you again. Only not in these circumstances."

"Likewise."

"You came here to see someone?"

"Yes. "She nodded. "A friend from work."

A he or a she? No matter the weight of the question on the tip of his tongue, it was none of his business. She was hurting from a broken relationship. But still...

He cleared his throat, praying for the right words. "Erinma, I know this is completely off, coming from someone you barely know and it may sound

cliché, but I know how you feel. I've been there before. If you ever feel like talking about it, I want you to know I'm available."

He needed her to know that.

Her first genuine smile all evening fell on her lips. Albeit a wobbly one. "Thank you, Andrew. I appreciate the offer." She opened the door and got out. "Tell Bella I said hi."

"Will do."

She made a sharp turn towards the building and disappeared behind the gate. Andrew tossed his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes.



He couldn't get her sad expression out of his head. Those big brown eyes of hers lacked joy. He didn't know the full story of the breakup, but after everything she'd been through she didn't deserve a cheating boyfriend. He fought the rising rage within him.

Please, God, help her. Let her come out strong after everything.

Andrew doused his worries by cranking up the volume of 'Speak to Me' by Koryn Hawthorne. Somehow, he hoped the lyrics of the song touched him in some way. He had experienced betrayal firsthand. Especially coming from someone you loved. Or thought you loved.

Till now he hated what TJ had done to him.

And with those emotions, it made it easy to put himself in Erinma's shoes.

When he returned home, Bella was already asleep in her room and Auntie B had crashed in the Guest room. His stomach growled at the smell of his mother's 'village rice' hanging in the air. He wasn't hungry, though.

Only thoughts of Erinma took up space in his head.

With a quick glance at the wall clock, he guessed Kalu should be awake. He was most likely preparing his notes for a Bible study session. He sent his friend an email and set up his laptop for a Skype call.

"What's up, man? You good?"

"I just dropped off a client." Andrew rubbed the back of his neck.

"Okay? You don't look so good. Talk to me, bro. What's going on?"

And it was Andrew needed notwithstanding the possible ways his best friend would spin his words back at him. It didn't matter much to him at the moment. He just needed to get a couple of things off his chest. He told him everything about Erinma Roberts. He relayed the evening and how she looked like a broken woman.

"That's horrible," Kalu said.

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Tell me about it."

"This is no coincidence, you know."

Andrew frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The both of you running into each other, it's not a mistake. I mean, I know she'll definitely get over it and all, but I think there's something happening here."

"Happening where? *Abeg*, no bring that talk here. Keep your hunches and speculations to yourself."

Kalu laughed. "Then why did you call me?"

"To air my thoughts."

"And you don't want any form of reply?"

Andrew shook his head, certain he looked like a petulant child from his friend's viewpoint. "It's not an option I want to explore."

"Okay. I'm just going to say this once and you can draw your own conclusions. Cool?"

"Whatever."

"I can tell that you care a lot about this woman. Which is good. You haven't shown any interest in the opposite sex. I believe what you've been through could help her overcome what she's currently going through. But how can you help if you haven't helped yourself? That's if you're willing to help. It doesn't have to be anything romantically inclined, but maybe this is a way for you to heal that open wound that you've refused to let heal."

Andrew clenched his jaw. He was talking about TJ.

"Just one mention of her name and you want to hit someone. Guy, you need to calm down and get over this."

"Easy for you to say..."

Kalu sighed and clamped the back of his neck—something he did when he tried to ease his nerves and relieve the tension within. "I get that you're still pissed. But remember what the Bible says, *don't let the sun go down while you're still angry*. You've seen many suns come and go. It's a miracle you're still alive to let this go. It's high time you did. We've come a long

way together, bro. I appreciate your friendship and how you've helped in the past. But I've watched you suffer for far too long and it's past time I speak up. I don't want to keep seeing you like this. Elusive and defensive."

"What do you want from me, Kalu?"

"Talk to me—brother to brother—what's going on?"

Andrew clasped his hands and rested his forearms on his knees. "TJ's dad. I met with him a while back. The day I sorted the loan I took. He says he wants to have Bella in his life even if TJ doesn't want any part of it."

"That's great, man. What did you tell him?"

Andrew shrugged.

"I think you should consider it." Kalu smiled. "It's about time the man realised you're one of the best men I know." He looked at his smartwatch.

"Gotta go. I need to get some rest before the next meeting."

"Thanks, man. I'll talk to you later."

Kalu made the V sign with two fingers. "Peace, Bro."

CHAPTER 27

ERINMA

Erinma had learnt that no one could be prepared for horrible incidents, but even Jesus knew who was going to betray Him. Still, the pain. Could anyone ever be prepared for such betrayal? How long had Lanre been cheating on her? And with her best friend?

Why did You let this happen, God? Haven't I been through enough?

Erinma's stomach twisted and she felt sick. She wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested her jaw on her knees.

If Lanre left her, she wouldn't have anyone. What if no one else showed interest in her? What if it was all a mistake and he amended his wrongs?

Was she capable of forgiving him?

Definitely not right now that she wished something horrible could happen to him.

She squinted as white headlights appeared in front of her. She hadn't noticed the gates opening. Odavwaro jumped out of the car as soon as it parked, looking cute in an ivory kimono blouse over blue jeans and kitten heels and rushed to her side. Erinma immediately felt bad, hoping she hadn't interrupted a date.

"Sorry I should have called first."

"No. It's fine. I should have gone food shopping since."

"Oh... I actually thought you were out on a date."

“What? Because I’m dressed up? No. My mum has been on my case like forever. She thinks I need to always be dressed ready to meet the man of my dreams anywhere I go.” She waved her hand. “Forget that. What’s up?”

The concern in her voice unleashed another dam of tears Erinma hadn’t known existed—thinking she was all cried out.

Odavwaro wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “Erinma? What happened? Are you okay?”

She shook her head. She wasn’t fine. She was far from it.

Odavwaro ushered her in and led her to a sofa. Erinma tucked her hands under her thighs to halt the shivers raking her body. Her friend squatted in front of her.

“Erin, what happened?”

“Lanre is cheating on me.”

“Oh my...Are you sure? Maybe it’s a misunderstanding.”

She rubbed her arms. “I saw his messages with Destiny.”

Odavwaro slanted backwards. “Wait,” She held up her hands. “Destiny? As in your best friend, Destiny?”

“Do you know any other Destiny?” She regretted the instance when the snarky reply ran off her lips. “I’m sorry.” She pressed her fingertips to her forehead. A headache building. “I’m just a bit out of it.”

“It’s okay, dear. I understand. You’re in shock. It’s expected that you feel this way. Tell me what happened if you’re up to it.”

Erinma gave a quick retelling of Destiny’s secret boyfriend and how Erinma was curious enough to search through her best friend’s phone. Both of them made sexual advances and flirted with each other.

“Odavwaro, how? How could I be such a fool that I didn’t notice sooner?” She buried her face in her palms. “I’m such an idiot!”

“Hey, that’s too harsh. You’re not a fool. And definitely not an idiot. The only fools are the ones who did this to you.”

Erinma thought back to the times he complained about them not spending time together like before. How she kept denying his requests to sleep with her. “This is my fault. I’ve destroyed another relationship. First, it was Noelle and her family. Now this. Maybe I should have just slept with him.”

Yielding to temptation because of love doesn’t make the action right. It is equally a sin, Beloved.

Then what could I have done right?

Nothing. I’m with you, Erinma. I’m caring for My garden.

But it hurts. It hurts so much.

Her gaze found Odavwaro's, watching her intently. "There's something wrong with me, right? Because I keep messing things up."

"There's nothing wrong with you! This is all on Lanre and Destiny. I can't believe he did that to you!" The crease in Odavwaro's brows deepened as she frowned. "And Destiny? What kind of rubbish is that?"

Images filled her head of the two of them together. Hugging. Caressing. Lip-locking. Her mind punished her with those hurtful thoughts repeated in an endless loop with tiny interjections of Noelle's face and Erinma just wanted to scream for it to stop. "Please, can you give me some water or something bitter?"

"I have bitter lemon in the fridge. Would that do?"

She gave a nod. "That's fine."

Erinma took the glass and brought it to her lips, downing a small portion of the bitter lemon. The tangy, and lemony sweet taste caused her to shudder.

"Thanks." She wrapped her palms around the cool glass and stared into the distance.

God, You're seeing me right now. What should I do?

"Listen to me, sis. I know how much this hurts but you're going to get through this. It's so easy to stay in a funk. But you have to snap out of it, Erinma. That's harsh of me, I know. But God doesn't want you to be like this. In this state. He has work for you. And the earlier you bounce back, the better. Use this pain to mock the devil!"

Erinma could only nod.

"Let's pray."

Odavwaro took Erinma's hands. "Father, this is Your daughter. Your princess. She's in so much pain and she needs You. Like the disciples invited Jesus on their boat, please step into Erinma's heart. Please, take away the pain and let Your peace and love embrace her heart. In all circumstances You said we should give thanks, and so in this particular situation where hearts are crushed and our spirit is weak, we give thanks as we await Your will to be done in this situation and make it all work for Your daughter's good in Jesus' name we pray, amen."

"Amen."

Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.



When her phone rang again, she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In the presence of strangers.

“Sorry about that.” Her phone had rung three times since she arrived at Jordan’s house. Without thinking twice, she turned on Aeroplane mode on her phone. She needed breathing space and Lanre’s calls coming in every minute weren’t helping matters. She hadn’t spoken to him yet. Day by day she mustered up the strength to get out of bed after a restless night. The nightmares weren’t helping.

Knowing Lanre would police her around town, she’d spent the last two days at Odavwaro’s house and working remotely. It was a good thing Odavwaro’s home address was unknown to him. Jordan had called one of those days, requesting a meeting. Erinma agreed and suggested they meet at his home. It was also a chance to meet his wife.

“It’s okay if you have to take your call. I’m aware of how busy you are.”

“No. It’s not important. The person will call back.” Erinma dropped her phone back in her bag. “Where were we?”

“Okay, as I was saying, opening a restaurant has its ups and downs. Running a restaurant entails numerous financial risks and personal sacrifices. And a lot of hard work. I’m not just talking about physical exertion, but also mental and emotional strain. If you want us to do this, we’ll have to give it our all.”

“I’m aware of that,” Erinma stated. She’d done her homework and knew in some ways what to expect; both the good and bad.

But why couldn’t I see their betrayal coming? Was there some kind of research she should have done to have foreseen this? There had to be signs...but how could she have missed it?

Erinma felt like she was going to be sick. “Sorry, but may I use your restroom?” She barely managed to keep her voice even. She didn’t miss her hosts’ exchanged glances. *Could they tell there something was wrong with her?*

Bisola stood. “Yes. I’ll show you the way.”

Erinma took out her phone and followed Bisola.

Tears rushed to her eyes as Erinma entered the restroom past their orange-walled laundry room. She took her time. She mostly spent it sitting on the toilet seat, rehashing their text messages in her head.

Which was only pathetic and self-punishing.

She turned on her mobile data, navigated to the browser, and typed out: *signs your boyfriend is cheating on you*. There were dozens of results, and Erinma chose the one that appealed to her: You missed the signs? Ways he cheated on you.”

As she read, bits of memories jumped out at her: when he smiled at his phone and brushed her off when she asked, saying it was a silly Tik-Tok video, the password on his phone while she was in the hospital recovering, his private work-related calls.

They were all there—the signs—and she had missed them.

Tears burned her eyes. At the very least, they weren't married yet...

How had she not seen it coming? How could she have missed the warning signs? *Help me help us*, he'd said. Meanwhile, he was helping himself with her friend. How could he do that to her? How could either of them betray her?

She yanked out a roll of tissue and blew her nose. Folded it and blew once more. The edge of her nose was sore from hours spent wiping snort and fallen tears. Her gaze made contact with the mirror and she despised what she saw. All that was left was a sentimental song in the background to crown her self-deprecating state.

She looked broken. Her stomach churned at the thought of them laughing behind her back while flirting with each other. Erinma's chest burned hot. Was this how it felt to hate someone—her heart pounding, heaviness in her chest and anger screaming in her ears? She wanted to hurt them both for what they did to her.

She ripped a wad of tissue and blew her nose, wishing all her sorrows and heartaches of the previous months could be expelled in one or two blows and her life could gain a semblance of normalcy.

But her scars were both her stories and memories combined. They were her new normal.

She washed her face and moisturised her skin, making sure she didn't look half as terrible as she felt. She pushed the door open, stepped out of the toilet, and turned slightly to close it. Her gaze dropped. How long had she been in there? Fifteen? Twenty minutes? She grimaced at her

unprofessionalism. Already tendering an apology in her head, she jumped when she saw Bisola.

“Oh my god!!”

Bisola immediately looked repentant. “I’m sorry I stuck around. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Erinma raised a brow, her hand on her chest. Bisola quickly corrected herself, “Not beside the door.” Bisola tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Just around the corner.” She sighed. “I wanted to ask if you’re okay. I couldn’t help but notice you’ve been a bit off since you came here.”

“I’m not exactly at my best today, but I’ll be fine. There’s just a lot going on.”

“Would you like to talk about it? Does it have anything to do with the restaurant?”

“What? No. Not at all.” Erinma didn’t want them to think she was messing around about their potential partnership. She had to curb her personal issues and put her game face on.

Bisola didn’t look convinced. “Personal, then?”

“Not really.” It was bound to be public knowledge at some point. “I-er,” she forced a breath out. “I called off my engagement.” Mentally broken up, that is. If she faced Lanre, she wasn’t sure of what she was capable of.

“Oh, dear. I’m so sorry. How are you? Are you all right?” She tapped her palm against her forehead. “Stupid question. Of course, you’re not okay. Is there anything you need? Comfort food? Some ice cream?”

Erinma shook her head, touched. “I’m okay. I don’t need anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine.” She pinched her lips together and shook her head. “No. I’m not. But I don’t want you and Jordan to think I’m not vested in this. I am.”

“You realise you don’t have to do this right now, right? You could postpone it to another day. Jordan would totally get it.”

Erinma gave a genuine smile. “Thank you, but I need to focus on work. If I caved to my emotions, I might just end up eating ice cream all day. Working is preferable.”

“Do you mind if I hug you?”

“You can.” Erinma gave a single nod.

Bisola leaned down and wrapped her arms around her. “I’m here if you need to talk, though.”

Erinma was moved by her kindness. Another round of tears threatened to fall but she didn't let it. She was tired of it. "Thank you."

They returned to the living room. Erinma kept her phone on silent and tucked it into her bag. All thoughts of Lanre shoved to the back of her mind.

"I apologise for the interruption." She slapped her hands together. "This is the property I'm interested in." She handed them the folders and instructed them on which page to flip to.

Bisola's eyes widened. "That's a beautiful location. Isn't it, baby?"

"Yeah. The lease is also a lot." He cocked a brow at Erinma. A simple gesture that said a lot.

"We can fix a time to scope out the property and the area. I've spoken with two potential investors who I believe would be interested in this. I thought about taking out a loan, but that would only be plan B if our investors pulled out. Jordan, you are coming in as a partner. There won't be a restaurant without a skilled chef. We just need to wow the investors with our plans."

He nodded. "I have a list of purveyors who I still have a good relationship with. They offer the best of the best and you can rely on them for fresh products."

"Okay. Can you get in touch with them?"

"I'll do that. Another thing is, we must stick to our budget. I'm speaking from personal experience here. I concentrated on other areas but had little operating costs to run the restaurant."

Erinma nodded. "Duly noted, which means we're on the right track in terms of knowing what to avoid."

"Is it casual or fine dining?" Bisola posed the question.

Erinma glanced at Jordan. "What do you advise?" She took the glass from the table and took another sip of the mimosa, loving the tanginess of the pineapple.

Jordan leaned back against the headrest, rubbing his beard. "It depends on the target market."

"I want us to cater to both the average diners and high-class; white-collars and blue-collars. We're talking about people aged twenty-five to forty-five. We hope to catch the interest of families, couples and singles. With the flower shop right next door, we could host singles and couples events on special days like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day events where children could treat their mothers. If we could get more female clientele

clamouring about it, it would be great for us. If we strategise properly we could even become a buzzing spot for visitors to Lagos.”

“That sounds great. Is that possible?” Bisola threw the question at both Erinma and Jordan.

“It does sound good. In that case, we can make a special reservation for those who want some level of panache. But I will suggest we scope out the competition. Regardless of how unique our business concepts are, we will face competition from other restaurants. We should also consider their menus, services, and pricing.”

“Okay, so look for direct and indirect competitors.” Erinma took some notes on her iPad.

“Exactly. The idea is to seek out where we would be in advantage and focus on that.”

“Alright. What about Menu? I’m thinking we should add Sushi and Vegan to it.”

Jordan nodded. “That can work.”

“I know. You made a great Ratatouille dish way, way back.”

Bisola rubbed her husband’s back as a show of solidarity and something pinched in Erinma’s chest. Lanre should have been by her side, cheering her on and forming a relationship with her new business partner and his family. Instead, he had broken her heart. And Destiny? Hatred bloomed in her chest over her best friend’s betrayal. Ex-best friend. How could she be warming her boyfriend’s bed just to gain societal and work favours? Erinma ran her thumb across her forehead. Another headache was building up.

Jordan cleared his throat. “So, the name. What are we looking at?”

“Definitely not Food is Ready,” Bisola chipped in, wrinkling her nose.

Jordan looked at his wife. “Why? I thought you loved that name?”

“I do. But it was kind of local. Unexciting. Besides, that was your old name. Out with the old, in with the new. I think we need a name more modern and retro. What do you think, Erinma?”

Erinma thought they looked cute together. Strong even after the mistakes Jordan made that could have destroyed their marriage and family. But they were seated together. Holding hands momentarily. Overly affectionate with one another. “I agree. Let’s bounce off some names amongst ourselves.” She took out a list from her folder. “I compiled a couple of names off the top of my head. But of course, we can scrap it and come up with something better.” She gave the list to Jordan.

“Food culture?” Jordan glanced at Erinma. “Seriously?”

Bisola shrugged. “I like it.”

Jordan shook his head and focused on the paper. “Start Sweet?”

“I thought it was catchy.”

A minute later he shook his head. “I’m not sure about any of these names.”

“That’s fine. We can consider it some more and jump back to it.”

Jordan nodded. “Thanks.”

“Decor?”

“We want a concept that projects what we want to communicate to our potential customers. I plan to get in touch with a few interior designers during the week. Feel free to link me up with whomever you have in mind.”

“But we haven’t acquired the building yet.”

“Forward-thinking,” Erinma quipped.

“In that case, I think I’ll take a step back from that one.”

The ladies exchanged a look before laughing. They went on like that for another two hours, deliberating on all of the important and basic factors required for the start-up. They had talked so much about the restaurant that they hadn’t even touched on the flower shop. But that would be another day. As it was, Erinma was dog-tired and in need of her bed, hot chocolate, and possibly binge-watching some episodes of the Ari Mato show.

“This was fun and tasking. I look forward to our next meeting. I’ll keep you abreast of updates made. When I set up a meeting with the investors, I will need you to show up ready to convince them why they need to jump on this business deal.”

“I’ll be ready. With all our front and back, I believe we’re on to something great.”

Erinma grinned. “Glad to hear it.”

He slid his hands into his pocket and then brought them out again. “In case I haven’t said it before, thank you for everything. I don’t take it for granted that you’re putting so much hope in me.”

“Let me walk you to your car,” Bisola offered, sidestepping her husband. Together they walked in silence and Erinma knew Bisola was probably thinking of a way to phrase her words. Because after hours of talking with no lull moments and becoming acquainted with each other, it wasn’t so hard to find what to say. At least Erinma thought so.

They stopped next to Erinma's car. "Thanks again for everything."

“You’re so welcome. And Erinma, if you ever need to talk about anything at all, please feel free to call me and we can fix a hangout.”

Erinma nodded. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

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CHAPTER 28

ANDREW

“**A**ndrew. Well now, this is a surprise. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting long. I’ve been tied up with meetings.”

“Not a problem. It’s understandable, sir.”

Mr. Jacobs bobbed his head and ran a hand down his silk tie. “I didn’t expect to see you here so soon.”

God, I hope I’m not making the wrong decision here, Andrew thought. However, the sense of peace that flooded his mind and spirit shortly after, bolstered his decision.

“I’m here concerning our last discussion.”

The older gentleman sat up. “Oh...I’m all ears.”

“I’ll let you see Bella. But I have conditions.”

“I expect as much.”

“You can only see her under my supervision. I’m sorry, and I don’t mean any disrespect, but I don’t know you enough to leave my daughter with you.”

“That’s a bit hard to take in, but I understand. One can’t be too careful with everything happening these days.”

“Another thing is, I don’t want you to shower her with gifts. I know you’re her grandfather, and that’s the role every grandparent should play, but I’ve raised my daughter to be content with what she has. She receives

presents and rewards when she's earned them and at the appropriate time. I wouldn't want these principles to change now that you're in the picture."

Andrew had given it a lot of thought. Prayed about it.

"I don't want Tito to come up in conversation with Bella. If Tito is still unwilling to build a relationship with her daughter, that's up to her. But I don't want her mentioned to my daughter."

Mr. Jacobs frowned. Andrew had anticipated his displeasure in this. "And if Bella asks about her mother? Am I to make up a story? Or would you rather I declare her mother dead?"

"Not at all, sir. No lies. I believe God will give you the wisdom on how best to handle the situation, but I don't want to put Bella through any unnecessary pain. What would she think if she knew her mother chose to abandon her?"

"Tito has had a tough time since her mother left." He sighed, rubbing his brows. "However, explaining that to a child is not an easy thing to do. I guess I can see your point."

Andrew remained silent, leaving the older man to his own musings. So far, the meeting was going well. He was relieved that Mr. Jacobs could see things his way and they could avoid any conflict or drama.

This is all on You, God.

"So when do I get to meet her?" Mr. Jacobs asked.

For the next couple of minutes, they discussed a suitable day and time that didn't clash with either of their schedule and Bella's schooling. Five weeks was the best they could come up with.

"I'll take my leave, sir," Andrew said when they were finished. He rose to his feet.

"Andrew?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm glad you came to this decision on your own. It would have been bad for Bella if I had pursued other actions."

The rest of the words remained unsaid. Andrew knew it could have gone west for him. Mr. Jacobs could have gone around the system, bribed a few officials in the right places and gotten his way—leaving Bella in the middle of an unnecessary tussle. Andrew was happy he went with God's plan.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity," Mr. Jacobs said.

Andrew gave a single nod. "Take care, sir."

"And you as well."



Kalu's words had stayed with him since their conversation. The idea that he could be of help to her appealed to him more and more as he thought about it. All the while he'd known her it was rare to see her smile.

One thing he knew: her beauty wasn't just her appearance. Most important was the person she was inside, which alone made her gorgeous. If that was the only reason Andrew got close to her, he would accept it. All he wanted was to keep watching her smile the way she had before the fire.

Andrew smiled to himself as he remembered her grooving to a Kirk Franklin jam. He would give her more of that if he would.

He breathed out. A long time ago, he'd only been interested in a woman's body. And now it wasn't that Erinma's body had lost its physical appeal with her dips and curves, but Andrew was drawn to her selflessness. Her kindness and generosity. Those were the qualities he would want in a woman. And if he had to choose, he'd go with Erinma.

Unfortunately, she was out of his league.

"Daddy!"

"Coco!"

He opened his arms and squatted as Bella ran into his arms. He pressed a kiss to the side of her head. "How was school?" She still looked prim in her navy-blue pinafore and white shirt. Andrew was proud she got that from him.

She wrinkled her nose. "Boring."

He chuckled. "How so?"

"Motunde wasn't in class."

He frowned. "But Motunde isn't one of your friends."

"Yes, but she always tells silly jokes that make the whole class laugh."

"So she's a comic relief?"

"If you mean she's like the class clown? Yes, she is."

"Yup!" Andrew stood up straight and tapped her nose. "Means she has value."

Bella looked thoughtful. "Hmm, maybe."

They went to the car, the sun beating down on his back. He unlocked the doors. "Let's get some ice cream."

She gazed up at him. "Really?"

"Yup. Don't you want some?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "What are you up to? Are you dying or something?"

"Get that silly thought off your head."

"But we only get ice cream when I do my..." she stopped, shook her head and smiled broadly, exposing her white teeth with meat stuck in between her teeth. "Never mind."

He placed his hand on his hip and the other on the roof of the car. "Spit it out."

She frowned then turned her head and spat on the ground.

He grimaced.

She grinned cheekily. "I've spat it out."

Andrew narrowed his eyes. "I know what you're doing." He opened his car door. "Get in, jor. That was disgusting!"

He spooned some toffee ice cream into his mouth.

"Did you remember to say thank you to the woman who sent the burgers?"

"Er...I completely forgot. I'll tell her the next time I see her."

Erinma's laughing eyes popped in his head.

He cleared his throat. "Bella, I spoke to your grandfather today."

"Grandpa ThankGod," she said, referring to his dad.

"No. Your mum's dad. He would like to meet you."

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "And my mummy? Is she meeting me too?"

A lump had lodged in his throat. He shoved the ice cream into his mouth and swallowed, forcing it down when he swallowed. "No."

"Oh." She lowered her eyelashes.

He took her hands in his. "Hey, I need you to know this; no matter what happens in life, God will never leave or forsake you. Even if your mum isn't in the picture, God's with you. All the time. Believe and hold on to that, Bella."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Would you like to see your other grandpa?"

"Yeah."

"Finish up your ice cream and we'll head to the Cinema."

She perked up. "Really?"

He winked at her.

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CHAPTER 29

ERINMA

The meeting had gone well, and only a few weeks after the product launch, everyone was satisfied with the development. It had exceeded their expectations, and judging by the statistics and evaluations, a large number of women were pleased with their purchase. She smiled as she recalled the women who had won product gift packages.

“And who the hell are you to make those decisions? Know your place!”

Erinma’s steps faltered at the raised voices outside her office. Voices she recognised all too well.

“You can’t keep me from seeing her!” Lanre said.

“As you can see, she’s not on the seat. I can’t have you wait in here,” came Odavwaro’s calm reply.

“Watch your tone, Odavwaro. I can be here if I want. I don’t need your permission to see my wife.”

Erinma pushed the door open. Lanre stood an inch away from Odavwaro, staring down at her. She looked between them.

“I could hear your voices from the hallway.”

“Tell your secretary to butt out of unofficial matters! I came here looking for you and she has the guts to tell me to wait outside.”

“I’m sorry, but when I walked in, I noticed him looking through the documents on your table. When I told him to wait for you in the sitting area, he started shouting,” Odavwaro explained.

“It’s okay, Odavwaro. Thank you. You can leave now.”

Odavwaro tossed him a stern look and strode out. Shutting the door behind her.

“You really need to put that lady in her place. She can’t act as if she owns the place.”

Erinma walked to her desk and dropped her phone and iPad. “Why are you here, Lanre?”

He immediately sobered up, the annoyance slipping from his face. “Doll face, why aren’t you responding to my messages or returning my calls? I’ve been worried.” He took a step closer to her, cupping her face. “What’s up with you?”

She shifted away from him, folding her arms. “Have you spoken to Destiny?”

“About what?”

She felt a burning sensation in the back of her throat. This wasn’t where she planned on having the discussion, but if this was where it needed to happen—she would brave it. Erinma fixed her gaze on him. “She didn’t tell you I found out about your secret relationship?”

He stiffened. “What relationship?”

Her fingers twitched. “Do you really want to lie to me? I saw your flirty text messages with her.”

He raised his hand. “I can explain...”

“Explain away... give some fantasy story of how you’re not cheating on me with my best friend.”

"It's not true, Erinma. I wasn't cheating on you. Yes, we kissed once. But that was it. You could check my phone. I have nothing to hide."

Just the thought of them sharing a kiss made her want to throw up her breakfast.

"So you're saying you never texted her?"

"I did. But not like you think." He shifted on his feet. "There's a guy in my office who likes Destiny. You won't know Temofe. But he's been on my case to introduce him to your friend but she's been ghosting him. So he used my phone to chat with her."

Erinma gaped at him. "Do you really think I'm a fool?"

“What exactly did your friend say? Did she accuse me of hitting on her? Baby, she’s only jealous and trying to break us up.”

"I need you to leave my office, Lanre."

"What? I've explained everything to you. What else do you want?" Erinma shook her head. She wasn't buying it. "Are you going to take her word over mine?"

"To think. I need time to myself."

"There's nothing to think about here. We've been together for five years." He cursed under his breath. "It's been five years! I stood by you when you were going through hell. I didn't stray. I was there! And now you think you can toss me aside because I slipped once? I'm suddenly not good enough for you?"

"You cheated on me, Lanre! How am I supposed to take that? Besides from Destiny being my best friend, how do you think I feel that you opted for another woman to satisfy your pent-up sexual desires? How do you think that affects my mental health?"

"Your mental health?" He sneered. "Are we seriously trekking up that hill? What about mine? You women are always playing the victim all the time. Tell me who held my hand while I watched you turn into a zombie. How long did I have to cajole you to talk to me? What of those times you kept mute about how you felt?" He tossed his hand in frustration. "Do you think I was cool with seeing you turn into this version? Don't I deserve some sympathy?"

She stared at him, stunned. "Why are you making this about you? I'm the one hurt here—"

"Oh, right!" He jeered. "You're the victim. I should do right by you. Blah-blah-blah." He pointed a finger at her. "You can't end us. I should be the one doing this, not you dumping me."

"Then do it. Break up with me. If it would make you feel better as a man then do it."

He blinked at her.

"Go ahead, Lanre. Request that I return your ring. We both know this relationship isn't what it once was. Things have changed. We've both changed."

He ran his hand over his hair, disturbing the smooth waves. It was then she took in his whole appearance. His usual starched shirt was rumpled beneath his dark suit. His forest green tie askew.

"Were there other women besides Destiny?"

Lanre simply nodded. "A few. Yes."

Erinma continued, "Do you love her?"

He scrunched his face to a frown. "What? Destiny? No." He blinked. "I don't think so. Maybe I was infatuated."

The words stung. "Do you still love me?"

"I do..." he shook his head. "I did. It's not like before."

Erinma pressed her lips together. She composed herself. "Then let's end it. I don't think I love you as I used to. And this was even before Destiny."

"Doll face..." He took a step forward.

She turned her back on him, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry for everything."

"I'm sorry, too."

Minutes passed and the door opened and shut.



Her parents' disappointed expressions when she broke the news to them hurt her more than the fact that she and Lanre had broken up. Her mother was convinced that no one would want to marry her. Her father, on the other hand, had retired to his home office.

Her phone vibrated in her hands, and she looked down. It was a WhatsApp notification from Andrew.

Andrew Cab Guy: Good afternoon. How are you today?

I'm kind of like outside your office building.

Sitting in my car.

Thought to check up.

Erinma: You're kind of like outside or you're outside?

Andrew Cab Guy: I'm outside *covering face emoji*

I'm sorry. I could have called but ...

I thought seeing you would ease my worries.

Considering the last time we saw...

Plus you weren't at church on Sunday.

I could leave. I mean no bother.

Sorry if I overstepped.

Erinma looked up from her phone and around the room, which held the sales and marketing teams. The department heads were exchanging demographic data about how their products were performing in the market.

Erinma: I'll inform security and the front desk to let you up.
Give me ten minutes, please.

Five minutes later, Erinma excused herself from the meeting and asked Odavwaro to sit in, take notes, explaining to her EA she had a visitor to attend to. Odavwaro complied with a look that said, *'is everything okay?'*. Erinma nodded and walked out the boardroom. She would explain later.

Phone pressed to her ear she made the necessary calls. It was strange how she anticipated seeing him. Liking the thought of his coming to see her. Erinma was glad she'd gone with the white jumpsuit her sister had brought back from her trip to the UK. She'd paired it with pink suede heels. Should she touch up her lip gloss?

She shook the bizarre thought away. Why was she looking to look good for him?

She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. Still tasting the mild taste of tangerine. No. There was no need.

She waited by Odavwaro's desk. The elevator doors opened and out walked Andrew. He looked unsure. As though he was uncertain if he was welcome or should be there in the first place.

Erinma offered a smile, hoping to reassure him. "Andrew. Hi. How are you?" She captured how handsome he looked. Today, he was dressed smartly. Black trousers, a white shirt, dark grey jacket. Completely different from a regular T-shirt and jeans with the on and off face caps. If she ever suspected that he was buff, those doubts flew out the door now. His wide shoulders made the jacket fit snugly to his body. No one could guess he was an occasional cab driver.

He dug his hands in his front pockets. "I'm good. And you? How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine, actually. Doing good."

"Are you saying it twice to convince me or yourself?"

She hiked a brow but couldn't help but wear a grin. "I'm fine. Not 100%, but I'm okay." Conversations drifted to her from the halfway and she was

fairly certain the meeting was close to over. She didn't need to rouse gossip amid her employees. "Let's step into my office." She led him to her office and gestured that they sat in the sitting area of the space. Well aware of his musky scent that filled up everywhere he went. "You look nice." Did he have a date? Erinma ignored the pinch in her chest, recognising it for what it was: jealousy. "What brings you here?"

He shifted in the seat, dropping his hands on his long legs. "As I said, I came to check on you."

Awww, that's sweet of you.

She bit her lip. "Thank you. How's Bella?"

"She's fine. They are on mid-term break so she's with my aunt at her house."

A knock on the door and Odavwaro walked in. One swift look at Andrew and her gaze back on Erinma. No facial expression to reveal her thoughts. "Sorry to interrupt. You have a video conference with the UK branch managers in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Odavwaro. I'll be out soon."

With a single nod she was out the door.

"I've seen you. So I should get going." He stood and she did the same. She wasn't eager to have him leave yet.

"We broke up."

His eyes roamed her face. "Are you okay?"

She shrugged. "I'm fine. It was bound to happen."

He gave a single nod. "I'll tell Bella you asked after her. And she says thanks for the Burgers."

"Please do. I'm actually impressed that you came all the way here to see me," she said as they moved towards the door. That action in itself spoke volumes. *Wait a minute.* Erinma shot a side-long glance at him. *Does he like me?* Her stomach flipped at the idea and possibility. Isi's words from the other day playing in her head. It was both thrilling and scary at the same time. She told herself not to read too much into the friendly gesture. He was a Christian. They attended the same church. Given the traffic in Lagos, it was normal for him to drive all the way here to see her.

Who am I kidding?

He stopped. "Actually, I was hoping maybe you would like to hang out sometime."

"You mean... a date?"

His eyes widened and Erinma almost pinched herself for saying the D word. Why was she acting like a silly schoolgirl when she was around him?

“I—I don’t mean any disrespect or anything. I was going to refer to it as a date. I mean,” he gestured at the two of them, “I’m not exactly date material.”

She tilted her head to the side. “You aren’t?” No longer concerned about what she said earlier, she was more interested in how the tall, muscular man in front of her was all nervous and slightly insecure.

“No, I mean.” He let out a sigh. “I’m out of your league.”

“You are?”

He opened his mouth to further explain himself then stopped. Blinked. “Wait a minute... are you teasing me right now?”

Erinma laughed. “Took you long enough.”

He looked up, avoiding her gaze but she caught the smile working up his lips.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to spoil your game.”

He glanced down at her. A smile full blown now and she had to stop herself from ogling. “My game?”

“I’m assuming you’re trying to ask me out?” Her brows drew together. “Unless I’m mistaking your shyness and nervousness for something else.” *Please don’t let it be for something else.*

A shy smile appeared. “You aren’t mistaken.” The smile vanished as if something had just occurred to him. “I don’t mean any pressure at all. You just ended a long-term relationship. I can understand if you aren’t interested in jumping into another one so soon.”

“Well, I guess you won’t know if you don’t ask.” She smiled. “Over to you. I’ve helped you halfway; complete the task.”

His gaze held scepticism but he said, “Erinma, would you like to hang out with me?”

“Yes. I would love to hang out with you.”

“Okay.” He took a backward step. “I’ll call you so we can fix a date. Thanks for meeting with me.”

“Thanks for coming to see me.”

“I’ll see myself out. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Erinma bit down on her lip and grinned. Did what just happened really happen? Andrew asked her out?

The door to her office opened and Odavwaro hurried in. “Who was that?!”

Erinma turned and strutted to her desk. “Andrew Madu. The cab driver I told you about. He asked me out.” *Sort of*. He hadn’t specified it was a date. But it had to be.

“Wawu. The guy is handsome, though.”

Erinma smiled sheepishly. *That he is*.

“And did you say yes?”

“Of course.”

“Better.” She dropped her notepad on the desk. “Heard from Lanre?”

“No. It’s over.” She’d also given him back his ring via courier. It was best that way.

“And Destiny? She’s been calling here like crazy.”

“I blocked her number.”

Odavwaro sighed. “So, you’re accepting a date with another guy?”

“We’re hanging out.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“We’re just hanging out. I’ve physically broken up with Lanre. I just have to do it emotionally.”

“Emotionally break up? What’s that exactly?” Odavwaro glanced at her watch. “Anyway, you’ll explain later. You have a meeting now.”

“Right.”

CHAPTER 30

ISIMEME

“Party of four wants to meet with you, Isimeme. Table ten.”

Isi looked up from her chopping board. “Me? W-why?”

Chef Dodzi simply stared at her with his hands crossed against his chest. His usual bored expression on display.

Okay. *Obey without question.* That was one of Chef Dodzi’s rules in his kitchen. Of course, Isi followed all his requests, no matter how overture they were, with minor complaints. If she wanted to keep her job, she needed to keep her mouth shut and dutifully follow his orders. “I’ll go there as soon as I’m done chopping the vegetables for the rice salad.”

“Someone else can handle it. Get out of my kitchen, Isi.”

Ugh! “Yes, Chef.” Isi laid the knife on the chopping board and crossed to the wash area and washed and rinsed her hands to reduce the rich oniony smell.

Of course, when Chef Dodzi told her customers were requesting to meet the chef who had prepared their lunch, she assumed he was bluffing. Nothing like that had occurred since she’d started working at the restaurant. Chef Dodzi was not amused by such displays of pleasantries. He hardly ever smiled. Having him as a boss for the past several days brought back memories of living with her uncle whose personality was nothing short of cynical, domineering and inconsiderate.

But this time it was different: this was her job on the line and Chef Dodzi had threats to back up his cold demeanour. Constantly reminding her that if she dropped the ball or slowed them down, she was out. She removed her chef's hat and reattached stray hair strands that had escaped the bun.

"Don't waste time on chitchats, Chef. Accept compliments, smile, and get your ass back here."

She nodded once. "Yes, Chef." Sometimes Isi felt like she was in Gordon Ramsey's kitchen, except without the cursing and excessive drama.

Isi wiped her hands against her hand towel and pushed through the double doors of the Kitchen.

What was she going to say?

Rarely did customers ask to have their chef make an appearance to see who made their meals. Isi thought that only happened in the movies or maybe abroad, where everyone was all cultured and appreciative of their meals. Not necessarily so in Nigeria, where people ate and left the restaurant immediately when they were done.

Isi wiped her wet palms against her dark pants. Her boss had said it was a table of four who had requested her presence. If she hadn't already known they enjoyed the food, she would have been worried.

No matter what time of day it was, the lighting in the restaurant was dim to give off that cosy vibe. It wasn't a restaurant she would choose for a romantic evening with a man. It was a bit too drab for her. But Isi's job was behind the scenes. Not to criticise the restaurant's decor.

Loud laughter drew her attention to patrons seated around the centre of the room. A wave of relief washed over her when she saw Nelly and Erinma in the small group. She smiled as she walked over to their table. Smiling and saying 'hellos' to a few other patrons on the way to her friends.

The first to notice her was Nelly and he mouthed 'surprise' at her.

Her heart started against her chest.

Be still beating my heart...

His warm gaze stayed on hers, tingling her nerve endings. She was yet to sort through her feelings for him—though she was pretty sure which side they tilted to. But more than that, she still needed God's approval, which was more important than any physical attraction she felt towards Nelson Banwo. Regardless, her attraction to him grew stronger by the day, and she yearned for him to be more than a friend.

God, I'm waiting on You. Help me with this.

She put those thoughts aside and smiled as Nelly rose to his feet at their table and gave her a one-sided hug.

"What are you guys doing here?"

"We came to support you," Nelly said with a wink.

"Actually, we came for a business meeting *and* to see you," Erinma said.

"Awwwn, you guys," Isi began, then her gaze shifted to the man in a white polo shirt. His eyes were already on her and she felt like she'd met him before, but couldn't remember where or when.

"Isi, you already know Jordan, but haven't been formally introduced." Isi waved and Jordan bowed his head. "Then the Aremelu siblings, HRH Prince Adeniran and his sister, HRH Princess Sade. They are one of our good friends. Guys, this is Isimeme. The chef who prepared the food you couldn't stop raving about."

Prince and Princess? HRH? The man looked refined with an air of aristocracy even if in a brown pinstripe suit and a light blue shirt. The woman... not so much. Dressed down in jeans and a tunic top, she was beautiful with her ebony skin tone but also looked athletically built with well-toned arms, like she could win a hand wrestling match against a guy effortlessly.

"Nice to meet you, Isimeme," Princess Sade said.

The awestruck moment broke and she realised she'd been staring. Isi raised her hand and waved. "It's a pleasure to meet Nelly and Erinma's friends."

"Same here. And it's all true when I say your lamb chops were a-ma-zing."

Isi laughed and shifted her gaze, her smile faltering when it clashed with Prince Adeniran's own. *Why is this guy so familiar?* His lips twitched and he raised a well-groomed eyebrow like he knew something she didn't know. Annoyed, and slightly flustered, she looked away. Isi had a feeling he was no prince charming.

"Are you guys done with your meeting, or do you have enough time for dessert?" Isi asked Erinma.

Erinma glanced at her watch. "I actually have another meeting scheduled in an hour. I have to leave now."

Isi turned to Nelly.

"I'm still here for another thirty minutes. I'll order dessert if you're the one making it."

"It's not my jurisdiction. But I'm sure it would be equally delicious." She glanced at her watch. Yikes! She'd been gone for ten minutes. Dodzi would have a fit. Already, she could imagine his icy stare boring into her back as she worked. "I have to head back to the kitchen. It was a pleasure meeting you, Princess Sade and Prince Adeniran."

"Bye." Princess Sade waved at her. Adeniran simply nodded, but gone was the smirk: his expression now stoic and unreadable. Isi frowned. The gnawing in her chest told her she was missing something regarding that guy.

Nelly stood. "You close at nine, right? I'll pick you up."

She reached up to place a palm on his chest, but stopped short. They weren't alone, and she wasn't interested in being the centre of attention. She shoved her hands into the large pockets of her chef jacket. "Nelly, no. You don't have to do that."

"I don't like the idea of you heading home so late. I know you're Miss Independent and I respect that. Let's just say it would make me feel more comfortable if I took you home. Pretty please?"

She bit down on her lip, holding back a smile. "Okay. Only because you asked nicely." She turned and walked back to the kitchen, feeling pumped for the rest of her shift.



She tossed her head back on the headrest and turned to look at Nelson. "I need to soak my feet in water and fall asleep."

"Work was good?"

"Mm-hmm. It was. The highlight was seeing you guys." She pointed a finger. "But don't make it a habit coming to see me."

He chuckled. "I won't. I just couldn't resist this one time." He glanced her way. "You looked very attractive in your chef getup. Just wanted to add that."

Isi laughed. "You need to check back later in the evening when I have stains of all sorts on it."

"No matter what you wear, you still look beautiful. That I know for sure."

She smiled to herself. Glad to be hidden within the darkness of the car. "Any update for the restaurant?"

"So far so good. Niran is down with it. Sade still wants to think about it. She said to give her two days to mull over it."

"I know this is going to be a success. I can feel it."

"That's reassuring. Make sure to call Erinma and let her know."

She closed her eyes, relishing the coolness of the car and how her body was going all mush over the leather seat. Prince Niran's face popped in her head and suddenly she remembered where she knew him from. He was the guy in front of Erinma's office. He was in one of the convoy of cars that almost ran her over.

"You should consider moving in with Erinma. She wouldn't mind." Nelly broke into her thoughts.

"I don't want to bother her."

"Bother Erinma?" He snorted. "You talk like you don't know your friend. I'm even surprised she didn't bring it up herself. She's probably been occupied with the wedding and business deals."

Isi frowned a bit. There was something up with her friend. Isi hadn't spent much time with her since she got her job. She would have to remedy that soon.

"How long have you known Prince Niran?"

"A couple of years. We all attended the same secondary school; me, Niran, his sister Sade and Tito. You met her at the launch party. Remember? She's a lifestyle influencer and publicist at J. Jacobs Consulting."

"I remember her." The lady who had her curvy figure pressed against him in an overly intimate hug. She still hadn't said anything to him about it yet. They were just friends even if she secretly yearned for more but knew she shouldn't. God's blessing was still pending. "Wait, so how did you and Erinma meet?"

"Work. I had to pitch a business idea to her and I guess we just flowed. Things were chill between us and a friendship formed. I owe a lot to her."

"How so?"

"She believed in me. My dad's company had crashed due to mismanagement. Long story short, the company closed and my dad ended up owing a lot of money. My mum and sisters got kicked out of the family

house and my dad took off. I was in school at the time. When everything happened, I had to return home. I stopped school to support the family. I took side jobs to keep us afloat. When I heard Proud Belle was looking for a website designer, I put in my CV. She took a chance on me when there were hundreds of other qualified candidates. I'll never forget the favour."

"That's Erinma. Always taking a chance on people. It's a gift."

"Gift or not—it's a trait I want to emulate."

"She's done so much for me already, I don't want to bring it up. Promise me you won't mention it to her. If she asks on her own, that's fine."

"I promise."

He linked his fingers with her. Isi glanced at their intertwined fingers and looked back at the side of his face.

CHAPTER 33

ERINMA

“What happened between you and Lanre?” Somto asked. “I was watching you guys at the launch party and you seemed off. I’m sorry I’m just asking.”

“I understand.” Her sister had been busy with meetings and speaking engagements.

“What did he do?”

Erinma chewed on her lip, perusing the outfits her sister had brought her on her latest trip to Canada. “I don’t think it’s a good idea telling you.”

“Why? Because I’ll finally break his head like I’ve been dying to do?”

“Sis!”

“*Biko*, talk.”

“We broke up.”

Her sister screamed and howled like a bangee. “When? And you’re keeping this hot gist to yourself. Better sit your ass down and spill everything. Don’t leave out a single detail.”

Erinma set her clothes on the bed and sat next to her sister. “Long and short story is he was cheating on me.” She sucked in a breath. “And with Destiny.”

“What?!” Somto jumped to her feet.

Thinking about it...talking about it, still stung. It was like reopening wounds that hadn’t fully healed. Watching the band-aid ripped off as the

smooth white surface of the injury gradually turned red and then started to bleed.

All that was left was an infection if it wasn't dressed.

Erinma waited a few seconds for her sister to process that piece of information then delved into how she made her discoveries.

"All this while he's been seeing your best friend?" Somto bit on a finger and stomped her heel against the hardwood floors. "You could have told me sooner I would have organised some *area boys* to mess him up. And that girl, I feel like beating her black and blue till she forgets her last name. Useless baboon! I knew she was a fluke. Always looking out for herself."

Erinma scoffed. Her sister was being benevolent. What Erinma had and wanted to do was much worse: get her sacked from the airline, taint her name on social media as a backstabbing 'baboon' (as her sister called her), get her blacklisted to all the top hubs in town and discontinue her discounted rates of some of PB's facial products.

An exhilarating feeling washed over her as she plotted the many ways she could hurt her ex-best friend, and just as quickly as it came the emotion died off.

Erinma knew the devastation a job loss would cause to her family. Erinma didn't have the heart to let others suffer for what one person did. It wasn't her style.

And so all Erinma summoned the courage to do was block her and leave her emails unanswered and unread. She didn't know if that would have any effect on Destiny, but for the time being, it felt good doing it.

"I'm sorry, Erin." Her sister settled back on the bed and pulled her into a hug. "I'm so sorry." Somto pulled back. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"I don't buy it but I'll accept it for now. Have you told Mum and Dad?"

"Yeah. Mum didn't take it too well."

"I'm going out with a guy. Not Lanre."

Her sister's eyes bulged. "For real?"

Erinma laughed. "Yes."

"Tell me everything."

She told Somto everything she knew about Andrew Madu: his daughter, cab company, and other little details.

"He's the owner of BAM Cabs? That's good. And how does he feel about you? Anyway, when I meet him I'll know."

"He's a sweet guy. What I love the most about him is that he adores his daughter.

"This feels like all those romance novels I used to read on my Kindle."

"You still read?" Back in the day, Somto was an avid reader of mystery and suspense novels. Erinma had never been able to borrow any of her books.

Somto shrugged and leaned back on her hands on the bed. "When I have the time. It's mostly business books these days. That's about the only thing I can stomach."

"I'm glad I still have time for gardening."

"You always make out time for what you love. And you know you have my full support at the Flower shop and restaurant. If you need anything let me know."

Erinma hugged her sister. "Thanks, sis."

"Talking about this date... have you picked out an outfit?"

"I actually have." She stood and hurried to her wardrobe.



"Towambe?" She said as he parked the car in front of a dark brown building with a thatched roof reminiscent of a village house. What kind of establishment was this? Questions plagued her mind: had she made the right decision to hang out with him? He hadn't called it a date, but did he have expectations on how said 'hanging out' should go? Was he one of those men that expected something in exchange for a night out? He didn't appear to be that type of guy but looks were deceitful.

"Have you heard of the place?"

Erinma wrung her hands together and shook her head. She was nervous. Could he tell she was nervous?

"It's not so popular, but it's a cool spot. Quite a number of people chill here."

"What exactly do they do?" There were a lot of restaurants and nightclubs, given the city's dense population. She wasn't so adventurous to want to explore even a quarter of them.

He smiled. "You're about to find out." He got out of the car and came to her side to get the door.

"Thanks."

"Relax a little. I'm not leading you to a slaughterhouse."

"Why do you think I'm not relaxed?"

"You've been twisting your hands in your lap for the entire ride. And, if it helps, I'm equally nervous."

Sha gave a small smile. She'd agreed when he called a few days before, asking to take her out on Friday after work. Her emotions were a cocktail of nerves and excitement. She'd replayed his visit to her office so many times that it had made her nervous. She didn't understand why he would want to hang out with someone like her, as much as she felt at ease and herself when she was with him. It had to be her money. It couldn't be because of how she looked.

So, what was it?

Pity?

If it was, she would scratch her eyes out.

Together they walked past the gate and Erinma was surprised to see that the parking space in the building's compound was already filled up at 6 p.m. A head start on the #TGIF craze. Her stomach grumbled as the tantalising aroma of skewered meat and barbecue chicken permeated the air. She'd skipped lunch, another sign of her jittery feelings over her date with Andrew. At a distance a group of women dressed in traditional Yoruba attire were dancing joyfully to a live Yoruba band, complete with talking drums, *sekere*, *ashiko* and the likes. Something she'd learnt during her time with Lanre. She'd learnt a few things about his culture. Especially after all the *Owambe* parties, they'd attended back in the day.

There had been so many of them. Erinma had a wardrobe stuffed with aso-ebi's from most of his friends or relatives' weddings.

"You enjoy listening to Yoruba live bands?"

"Sometimes. They have deep meanings. Their highlife's are good too. I've been in Lagos for a long time. I also have a few Yoruba acquaintances. I guess one way or the other we all get to know a little about each other's culture since we're all living together—either through hearsay or marriage.

Erinma didn't dispute that.

Andrew led the way up the concrete stairs to an open office situated on one side. The other side was a long hallway with kids bustling around. A

signboard advertised a stage play. *Japa 101*.

"I thought it would be fun to take you to a stage play. There's a play showing in a few minutes so we could see it." Andrew said, his eyes locked on hers.

She arched her brows. He was surprising her by the minute.

"I'm not sure if you like plays or you prefer going to the movies." His brows furrowed. "Do you prefer going to the movies?"

Erinma smiled and shook her head. "No, this is fine. What's showing?" She looked back at the signboard.

"A comedy. A couple and their grown kids who struck it rich and moved from the village to Abuja with plans to relocate and all the drama in between."

"Sounds interesting."

"They usually show a couple of plays every Friday through Sunday. I used to come here but stopped a while back. Got busy with starting up Bam Cab. Funny, a passenger was also talking about this very play."

He passed his debit card to the cashier when it was their turn to buy a ticket. She watched him as he spoke to the person. If he looked good at church and at her office, he looked even better in a black kaftan. His beard had been neatly trimmed. And he smelled fantastic.

She wouldn't like it if he was doing all this out of pity. Lanre cheating on her had dented her self-esteem but she'd repeated plenty pep talks before her date with Andrew. And she knew she looked good. She wore high-waisted black jeans, black sneakers and a vintage top. He'd told her to dress casual, so she did.

Tickets in hand, they proceeded to the barbecue spot and ordered some fish and chicken.

"I've always wondered if taxi drivers always know a lot about their passengers. We have phone conversations, and you guys hear everything we say. You guys are like priests," she said to him while their order was being processed.

He chuckled. "Trust me, no one is making any confession to us."

"They aren't directly confessing to you. But you eavesdrop as they talk about their personal affairs. It's not like you're covering your ears."

He took their order, and she grabbed the drinks.

Bopping his head to the music, he chose a table for them not far off from the band. This time they were playing some contemporary music. Erinma

had to admit that the music was actually good. It wasn't loud and overbearing. Just sweet, cool music for those who rather have a relaxing Friday night after a stressful week. Erinma preferred this over loud heart-thumping music, sweaty bodies, and the alcohol stench.

"No, we don't cover our ears," he replied, continuing their previous conversation. "Maybe some do, but I don't," he clarified.

"Tell me some of the worst things you've ever heard."

"You don't want to hear them."

"Come on! Tell me."

"You don't want to hear this while you're eating," he insisted.

"I don't gross out easily."

Andrew shook his head. "Someone once left an old man's soiled diaper in my car."

"What?!" Her eyes bulged. "Ugh! That's disgusting! How did you get it out?" She shook her head. "No. I don't want to know. Please, don't tell me."

He grimaced. "I'm not even going to retell it."

"Tell me something else. Something good."

He picked up a piece of chicken with a toothpick. "What about something embarrassing." He popped the piece into his mouth.

"On your part? Even better." She, too, dug in. The next minute he said something that had her laughing out loud. Then he went ahead and told some more, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"You sound cute when you laugh. You should do it often."

She concentrated her attention on the few people who rose from their seats to dance to the music. "Thank you."

"And this time around," he said, grabbing his drink and bringing it to his lips. "I'm the one flirting with you. So it doesn't take you too long to figure it out." He drank, tilting his head back.

Her lips parted. Her mouth went dry from his words. She'd done something similar when she teased him in her office. He was only paying her back. That's what she chose to think. But she felt warm all over at the possibility that he was flirting with her.

She cleared her throat but her voice still came out breathy, "I love HGC. Don't you?" She needed to sort through her feelings.

"Mmm. Me too," he said. "I enjoyed the last couple of teachings. Very solid."

"Yeah. It gave me a lot to think about."

“Likewise.”

"I was studying the book of Revelation. What do you think heaven smells like? I may be biased, but I think it smells like flowers. Maybe flowers and food."

He helped himself to another chicken piece. "You talk like you love flowers."

She bobbed her head. "I do."

"I haven't given much thought to what heaven smells like. I just want to get there first and then I can be wowed."

"I plan on opening a flower shop," she said. She found it easier to say this to Andrew than she had to her ex-boyfriend. The thought made her sad. "It's going to have a restaurant on the side."

"Really? That's awesome."

She shrugged like his acknowledgement didn't make her feel good, even if it did. "Well, I have plans to take a floral design class. I really want to give this new business everything I have."

"Won't it be stressful?" He arched his brow, concerned. "Juggling CEO and launching a new business?"

She locked eyes with him briefly and looked away.

"You can be free with me. I think we've established that so far."

She blew out a breath. "Of course. It should be. The truth is I'm not so confident I can mix the two. Right now I feel the need to start this. I'll be hands-on as much as I can be. I'm certain things will fall in place as I go."

"You're fearless. I think that's one of the many things I like about you."

The many things?

A tingle slid down Erinma's back as she took a long sip of her orange juice. His words caressed her damaged ego.

Soon, it was time to watch their play and Erinma loved every bit of it.

The show ended two hours later. Erinma hadn't laughed that hard in a long time. She and Lanre hadn't been to a comedy show in a while. But when they had, she had just as much fun. Thinking about her time with Lanre made her heartache. They were once close, which made what he did hurt more, but she couldn't deny he'd been good to her. That they had been good together, once upon a time. Andrew took a call while she excused herself to use the ladies' room. When she returned, he had a troubled expression on his face. Even when they walked back to his car, he smiled at her but appeared uneasy.

He should just spit it out, she thought. Growing uneasy with his demeanour.

“Is everything okay?” She inquired in the car when she buckled her seatbelt.

“I’m sorry. I need to pick Bella up before I take you home. Hope that’s okay with you?”

She laughed. That’s his problem? “Of course. You don’t even have to ask.” She hadn’t realised she’d been holding her breath until she breathed easy.

“It’s just that Aunty B needs to get somewhere and—”

When she placed her hand on his, the zing that shot up her arm didn’t surprise her. Evidence that she was attracted to him. “Andrew, it’s fine. I’m cool with it.”

He gazed at her for a few seconds. Then said, “Okay.”

She drew her hand from his warmth and folded her arms. “Aunty B is your aunt?”

“Yeah. On my Dad’s side.”

They made small talk, discussing the play till they got to Aunty B’s home, which was about twenty-minutes drive away, and he dashed in to get his daughter. All of a sudden Erinma felt nervous. She looked out the window and saw Andrew walking towards the car with a girl by his side. The girl nodded as he spoke. She had seen this play out before at a distance. Only now she knew him and she was about to meet his daughter.

“Good evening, Ma,” Bella said as she climbed into the back seat.

“Hi, Bella. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“I’m back,” Andrew said as he took his place again beside her.

Erinma smiled. He locked the doors, started the engine and put the car on drive.

“What happened to your face?” Bella asked.

Erinma swung her gaze at Andrew’s.

“Bella!”

“Hey, it’s fine.” Erinma turned in her seat to face Andrew’s daughter. “I was involved in a house fire. I didn’t get out in time so I had a lot of burns on my body.”

Her brown eyes widened. “Fire did *that* to you?”

Erinma bobbed her head. “Mm-hmm.”

"It must have been painful."

"It really was."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Er—Not anymore. It mostly hurts to think about it, but I'm getting better at that." And it was true. It didn't hurt as much as it had to think about it."

"Okay, Bella. Take your tab out and watch a movie."

"Okay." Bella took out her tab, stopped abruptly, then faced Erinma. "Oh! Thank you very much for the chips and burger. My dad said to tell you but I forgot." She gave a big grin.

Erinma chuckled. "You're so welcome." She readjusted herself to face the windshield.

"Hey," Andrew began in a low voice, and Erinma shifted her gaze to him. He looked at her briefly and returned his eyes to the road. "I'm sorry about that."

"Oh," Erinma waved her hand. "It's fine. We're good. Your daughter is charming."

"Tell me the truth, you mean she's nosy."

Erinma laughed. "Noooo. She's precious. She has some of your features. I like her."

Andrew smiled. "I like her too."



"How did your first date go?" Her sister hit the nail on the head as soon as Erinma answered the phone.

Erinma rolled her eyes and sat on her bed. "You like gist too much."

"I need some spice in my life, baby sis. I have a meeting in about twenty minutes so, *biko*, start talking."

Erinma grinned. "Actually, it was really good. We went to an open-air location. It's called Towambe. We ate some barbecue and watched a stage play. We talked a lot. Everything about the evening was amazing." *Everything about him is amazing.* She still couldn't get over how much thought he'd put into the date, not settling for a fast-food restaurant or a nightclub so they could get the jiggy with it.

"Did he kiss you?"

"Somto!"

Her sister chuckled. "Why are you calling my name? Answer simple question."

"No. He didn't kiss me." She paused. "But I half wanted him to." Erinma admitted. "He's a really nice guy, Somto. But what if he only wants us to be friends?"

"Then you move on with your life. No time for tears."

Erinma groaned. "True. But what if he wants more?"

"Then it's good. I just don't want it to be another Lanre issue."

"What if I shouldn't even be in a relationship?"

"Erinma, you're overthinking things. Slow down. It's one step after the other. Look, relationships are risky, and they require trust. If you can't trust yourself, or him, then you shouldn't be in a relationship. You need to know what you want. And don't let what happened with Lanre get the best of you. You deserve the best. You always have. I have to go. Love you, sis."

"Love you too."

"God, what do You think about Andrew?"

Her phone beeped and she looked down at the screen.

Andrew Madu: Hey.

How are you?

Me: I'm good.

Andrew Madu: Would you be free on Saturday?

Her heart raced.

Me: For???

Andrew Madu: Hanging out with me again.

Erinma bit her lip.

CHAPTER 34

ANDREW

Andrew's gaze swept over her outfit which consisted of a pink T-shirt, white jeans, and white low heels. She was casually dressed but his heart couldn't stop pumping at the sight of her. Minimal makeup and her bob hair kept everything simple and easygoing, but her eyes and lips were features he could camp in. He made himself look away from them. She was stirring up emotions in him that he hadn't felt since TJ.

"Is everything okay?" She looked down at herself and back at him. "Am I dressed properly?"

"You are." The last thing he wanted was for her to feel insecure. "You look beautiful," he said assuredly. More than beautiful, if that was possible.

"Thank you. I'm blushing on the inside."

"That's part of the things I want to achieve. Anytime I'm with you, all I want you to do is smile."

As if on cue, her lips lifted in a genuine smile. "So, where are we going this time?"

"Somewhere nice. I'm hoping you like it as well. Shall we?" He looped his arm, and she slipped her hand over his. He had spent two weeks planning this date more than spending time with her alone. He looked forward to the look on her face when he took her to the place he had in mind.

"I'm sure I'll like it. Maybe I'll like you as much as I already like Bella."

He chuckled. "Are you serious right now? I have to compete with my daughter for my date's affection."

"So this has transitioned from a hang out to a date?"

He didn't fail to notice the way her gaze skittered to his lips and then back to his eyes. *This is getting dangerous.* He had to restrain himself from looking at her mouth. "I don't know how else to refer to you, Boss Lady."

"Don't worry. I think you're getting there." She winked at him.

Andrew opened the car door for her, slammed it shut, and went to his side. His heart pumping at the prospect of spending another couple of hours with her.

"Good day, everyone. Hello and welcome to the Taster Session. This would last for two hours, after which we would have a first session in two weeks if you decide to continue with the pottery classes."

He cast a sidelong glance at Erinma. The look of excitement and fascination squeezed something in his chest. With it came the fear that his joy wouldn't last. He killed that thought and refocused on the pottery teacher. She introduced the class to the equipment in front of them and explained the pottery technique they were to start with.

Some minutes later, she went around the room looking over work done and correcting where necessary. When she came close to Erinma, the corner of her lips tipped in a polite smile and she bent low and spoke to her in soft whispers, gesturing at whatever mould Erinma was working on. Erinma's face bloomed to a smile and she nodded.

The instructor straightened up and turned in Andrew's direction. She nodded at him, came close and commented on his hand movement and how best to handle the clay. After she moved on to the next student Andrew glanced over at Erinma, there was contentment on her features as she worked.

"Psst!"

Her hands froze. She turned to him. "What?" She said, trying not to smile. "It's rude to distract the potter."

Andrew smirked. "I thought it was 'don't distract the driver'?"

She rolled her eyes and went back to work.

Oh, but he wasn't giving up. Her eye-roll only encouraged him. "Hey, pretty lady. You're looking too serious over there."

She turned to him. "Is this how you picked up girls when you were in secondary school?"

He shrugged. "I was a shy kid back then. I didn't really understand why girls were into me," he said, rubbing his chin.

She snorted. "That's very hard to believe." She glanced at his clay work. "You're making a mug? That's cute."

"Thanks." *I guess.* Andrew stared at his poor attempt at a mug. The handle was crooked, and the rim happened to be a little too wide. It looked more like a funnel. Even Bella could do better. She was the creative one. "I feel it could use a bit more work."

"Baby steps, Mr. Madu. This is your first try."

"What exactly is that supposed to be?" He said, eyeing her weirdly shaped object.

"Isn't it obvious? It's a bowl."

"No, it isn't."

"Are you my hands? I know what I'm making."

Laughter lurched out of him. "Babe, Nope! That looks more like a soap dish." It occurred to him he had just used an endearment for her. It astounded him how easily it came from his lips.

Her mouth fell open, and she took a quick glance at the teacher. Andrew should have guessed she was up to no good, but he wasn't fast enough to dodge the dirt brown mud/clay she smudged on his cheek.

"Did you just—?"

Mirth danced in her eyes as she pressed her lips tightly together.

He rubbed his cheek against the inside of his wrist. "If I catch you *ehn*...I'm so going to pay you back."

"I'd like to see you try." She faced her funny-looking pottery.

Smiling to himself, Andrew resumed focus on his mug but it was half-hearted. The smile on her face shifted something in his chest. It made him look forward to the rest of the day and other ways he could keep that smile firmly fixed on her face. Once the session was over, Erinma enrolled for future pottery classes. Andrew opted out. He was okay getting his hands dirty doing dishes and laundry. They took a stroll around the building and into the shop, which held a variety of earthenware and ceramic products.

Erinma tugged on his arm and pointed. "Look at that."

It was a quirky-shaped vase, light brown and circular with a hole in the centre. "Do you want it?"

She held up her debit card. "It would look great at His Garden. That's going to be the name of the flower shop. Pampas grass or lovely dried

flower bouquets would complement this. I can already imagine the beautiful dinnerware. Once we settle with the design, we can pick those out. We met with the owners and are working on finalising the lease.” She clapped her hands. “Jordan and I are meeting with Eliana next tomorrow to discuss her concepts for the restaurant and flower shop. Thanks for telling me about her.” She bit her lip. “I keep asking her if the work is too much—doing facelifts for both places, but she keeps reassuring me she’s on top of it.”

He’d texted her about Eliana—Bella’s teacher at HGC—mentioning she was an Interior Designer and could come useful in the future. This was after Andrew had spent his spare time searching about flower shops and restaurant set-ups.

During the week she had told him more about her grand plans for the restaurant and flower shop. He’d been amazed, further agreeing to his drawn-out opinion that she was a hard worker and dedicated to bringing success to whatever she touched. It further made his plans for them at the pottery barn more appropriate than he could have hoped for.

“If she says she has it covered, then you need to relax.” It was their turn, and Andrew extended his card to the cashier.

“You don’t have to do that. I have my own money.”

“I want to,” he simply said.

“Okay. Thank you.”

After the purchase, they walked out and Andrew opened the passenger door for her. He got in the driver's seat. "Hope you're hungry."

"Very. I won't lie as I moulded the clay I was imagining it was a wrap of Amala."

He laughed. "For real? Time to fill our tanks up."

"How many wraps of Amala can you eat, *sef*?"

"Why do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "Just wondering. I mean.. you're so...big and tall and.."

"Handsome?" He supplied.

Another of her eye rolls. "You wish?"

He gaped at her one minute, then wrapped his arm around her shoulder and leaned down to press his lips against her head the next. Whispering in her ear, "I'm handsome and you know it." A couple passed by them, the woman grinning and the man acting aloof to what was happening—that they were playing love in front of a pottery barn.

Was it right to feel this close and connected to someone on such short notice? The way she acted with Bella in the car, indulging her innocent and probing questions. Watching Princess Zora with her when Bella handed the phone to Erinma so she could watch. It had weakened his defences even more.

And he'd wanted to kiss her.

Caroline was right; his daughter was a key point in him ever finding a woman who would be good for the both of them.

Andrew warned himself to cool down. Too fast and he could scare both of them. Especially when he had no idea what she thought of him or if they had something legit going on between them.

Because he had never experienced this before. Even with TJ.

"I reserve my comments."

"What?" He had got lost in his thoughts.

"About you being handsome."

"Hmmm...okay *nau*." His hand slid down, hovering on the small of her back and trailing his fingers up her arm. He felt the goosebumps break out across his own arm. As she looked up at him, his thumb caressed her elbow as he studied her profile.

God, have mercy. He wanted to kiss her. *Badly*.

Andrew wondered if she felt it too. He wished she would stop staring at him like that with her pretty brown eyes. The curve of her full lower lip. Her laugh lines when she smiled. Light and teasing—he wanted more of it.

Everything about her was incredibly beautiful notwithstanding her fears and insecurities because they only made her human.

He swallowed and cleared his throat. "C'mon, I need to feed you. Let's go get some food."

They got into the car and he drove them to a cute Chinese restaurant within Ikoyi. After they ordered he tried to distract himself from staring into her eyes and getting lost in them.

"Tell me about her. Bella's mum," she said.

That was 100% a distraction. "Why?"

"Because I see you're still hurting."

"How can you tell?"

She reached out across the table and touched his face. "Here," she touched the corner of his mouth. "And here," then touched the sides of his eyes. It always tightens when you're angry."

He reached out and held her hand. He was comfortable with the way her small hands fit snugly in his large ones. "She was the first woman I could say I fell in love with. But she didn't return my feelings. Not in the way I'd believed."

"And how did you come to know that she didn't?"

"As I said, she didn't love me the way I wanted her to."

"How did you want her to love you?" She asked quietly.

He locked eyes with her. "Deeply. Passionately. I wouldn't have done anything less." His eyes lingered on her lips and he felt his body go hot and cold simultaneously. It had been a long time since he'd felt this way to the opposite sex. He needed to kill it...*fast*.

"So what happened?"

"She was in love with my best friend. I was too blind to see it. The way she treated him differently. Teased him. I thought it was just friendly banter. But it turned out she was trying to get to him through me."

"Andrew—"

"It's past. I don't like talking about it." He realised he might have sounded a little harsh. "I'm sorry if I sounded harsh."

"Do you still have feelings for her?"

He shook his head. "No. That ended a long time ago." Should he tell her who Bella's mother was? No. It was probably better that he didn't. And maybe too early to bring up exes and failed relationships. He didn't want to hear her talk about her ex.

"You need to let go of the past. What she did to you... It hurt, still hurts, but you can't let that stop you from moving on." She unfurled her fingers from his and wrapped them around her arms. "You know what I'm learning? That love is vulnerable. It doesn't matter if it's love for a parent. Or a friend or partner. Love always demands a price. Not everyone is required to feel as deeply the way you do, but what matters most is how you feel and how God is shaping your heart to be more like His."

"I'm trying to let go of the past. That's why I asked you out. There hasn't been any other woman who has made me feel this way."

"When was the last time you were in a relationship?"

"A serious relationship? Eight years ago. Bella's Mum."

Her mouth twisted like she was asking, *and you haven't been in a relationship since then?*

"I haven't," he confirmed.

She sat back. "I find it hard to believe that a guy could stay that long alone."

"Not when you have a daughter like mine who keeps you on your toes." He smiled and lifted his glass to his lips. When their food came they spoke in between bites of well-spiced barbecue fish, potatoes baked in butter and mixed vegetables.

"Was it hard raising Bella?"

A much miniature version of Bella crossed his mind. He laughed. "You could say that." He scratched his eyebrow. "I had no idea what to do. Family members were there for me. Aunty B, Caroline, she's my best friend's sister, she helped out too. Both women have been on my case to settle down. I had a bad blind date a couple of months back."

Erinma wrinkled her nose. "That bad?"

"Hor-ri-ble."

She covered her mouth, laughing.

"Go on. Laugh at my expense." *I love seeing you laugh.* "Anyway, that happened and that was the end of Caroline setting me on blind dates."

"Well, I've never been on a blind date. Lanre and I met at a concert." She grew silent.

Was she still into him? He wondered. The thought didn't gel with him at all.

She leaned forward, resting her arms on the table. "What about your mum?"

"She lives in Enugu with her husband. It's kind of complicated. Long story short, my parents never got married. She had me. They had issues they couldn't resolve and went their separate ways. I'm cool, though. That's life."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Thanks. Even though you don't have to be sorry." He smiled. "How come you don't post personal photos much on social media? I looked you up," he confessed. "I even followed you on IG."

"You did?" She got out her phone. "What's your handle?"

He told her and observed as her fingers flew across her screen and she beamed. "I followed you back."

"So, you didn't answer my question."

She put her phone away. "I'm not comfortable putting myself out there. Not yet."

“Why not?”

“I’m not completely insecure, but I don’t need people bad-mouthing me.”

He frowned. “People did that?”

“Why are you acting surprised?” She took a deep breath. “Anyway, I wasn’t going to put myself through that again.”

“A lot of people could benefit from your story... your bravery.”

She laughed, surprised. “I’m not brave.”

He scoffed. “You are. CEO of a multinational beauty company? You are. I watched a few of your speeches online. You are a great orator.”

She bowed her head.

“How did you feel when your dad told you that you were going to be CEO?”

She smiled. “Ecstatic and overwhelmed. Nervous. I was eager to prove to him and everyone that I could do it. It wasn’t like they had such high and unrealistic expectations for me. I needed to do it more for myself.”

“And you feel satisfied with everything you’ve accomplished?”

“I do.”

The hours went by till they left. When he got her home he wasn’t eager to let her leave.

“Thanks for today,” she said.

“You’re always welcome.”

She smiled shyly.

"I'll be honest with you, after I had Bella I got involved with other women. Not anything deep but I was hurt." Shame filled him. "It's not my proudest moments but that part of my life ended a long time ago. I just thought I should let you know."

"Did those dates make you feel better?"

"No. Only made me realise how selfish and callous I was. I wasn't only hurting myself again, but I was hurting those women as well."

He hoped he was spoiling his chances with her because of his silly actions of the past. So he risked his next question.

“Will you go out with me again?”

“Are you asking me out again?”

He traced her face with his thumb and catalogued the different skin variations in his mind. “I am.” He pierced her with a look.

“I would love to go out on another date.”

Then he cupped her face, leaned close to hers and captured her lips for the briefest of moments. He didn't want to let go as he tasted her soft lips. "You're amazing, Erinma. So beautiful. I don't know what it is about you that has me lowering my defences." His eyes grazed her lips once more. Then he cleared his throat, "I'll walk you to your door."



Erinma

They walked past the gate, the short span of her front gate to her front door and stood before each other.

"Thanks again."

"If you keep saying that you're going to make it harder for me to leave."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and she shuddered at his touch. *Why do I keep shaking like a leaf at his touch?* Clearly, there was some level of physical attraction between them. Should she even be feeling this way when her ended relationship with Lanre was still fresh?

Her eyes failed to meet his, afraid of what they might see: pity, sorrow, shame on her behalf? Was he doing all this because of Christian brotherly love? Or maybe he felt bad for her?

Erinma wasn't interested in exploring any of that. Not from him. But he had kissed her. A heart-stopping, tongue-twisting, toe-curling kind of kiss. And on their first date. Wait. Were they on a first date?

"You didn't clarify if this was a date or a friendly outing."

Andrew smiled mischievously. "I think that kiss in the car made it obvious."

Her breath caught. *Okay...*

"Do you want to come in?"

"I'd better not."

The heat in his eyes and the way her stomach fluttered, as a result, backed up his stance.

She took a step forward. The pull to tiptoe and fling her arms around his neck overwhelmed her. The sweet pleasure of it made her toes tingle.

As if reading her mind, his lips covered hers and she welcomed his warm lips. Opening herself to receive more from him. As much as he was willing to give. Because something told her that this night would hold deep reflections for them, and would determine what happened between them in the future.

She almost wanted to pull him back when he stopped. Tears formed in her eyes.

“Erinma...”

Her heart wouldn’t stop beating wildly.

He frowned, pulling back. “Are you crying?”

“Yes.” She grinned. “You can call them happy tears.”

“It had better be because I’d like to kiss you from now and then.”

She stroked his thick, curly beard with her fingers. "Let's see how it goes."

CHAPTER 35

ANDREW

“I hate pineapple toppings on a pizza.”
“Why?” Erinma bit her pizza.

He grabbed a napkin and wiped the smudge of tomato sauce on her chin. She smiled her thanks. “When it’s not salad that I’m eating. I have an ex who’s a vegan. Don’t know if she still is.”

“What was that like?”

“Stressful. At some point, it was painful watching her eat vegetables and funny-looking food. It took time, but I adjusted. Started eating some things she liked and it wasn’t so bad. She was crazy about veggie burgers. Instead of meat it was black beans, carrots, breadcrumbs, brown rice—” he stopped himself, all of a sudden realising what he was doing. “But give me fried meat anytime of the day and I’m in.”

Shut up, Andy. Why was he talking about Tito? He was surprised he could still remember the recipe.

“I think people who choose to be vegetarians are brave. Forfeiting all that red meat.” She shook her head and took another bite. “Thank God for Bella.”

He knew she was referring to Bella’s large all-inclusive appetite.

“Yeah.” He loved how she spoke easily about his daughter; chipping her into conversations like she didn’t want *him* to forget her. Even Bella had taken a liking to her once she discovered she was the ‘burger lady’. It was

clear Erinma had a way with kids. When he told Auntie B about his date, she had almost blocked his ears and given him muscle pull with her scream and tight grip on his arm.

Andrew sat back and observed her. She looked pretty and carefree in a print maxi gown and a black head wrap-thing and sunglasses. Again, he applauded himself for taking them to the park for lunch on a Saturday.

“I knew there was something up with you. The way you’ve been acting and Bella has been singing the ‘burger lady’.” Auntie B had wagged a finger at him. *“You must bring her over when you’re done with your date. I want to meet her.”*

“What’s the rush?”

“If I had my way you would marry tomorrow.”

Auntie B agreed to watch Bella if Andrew would bring her over—which was part of his plans.

“How’s it going with the side biz?” He asked.

“Good. Lawyers are drawing up the contracts. And we should be set to lease our beloved location in a matter of days. I’m so excited.”

“You should be.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

“Can I ask a few deep questions?”

“Go ahead.”

“How did you feel after the fire?”

She chucked the last bit of her pizza in her mouth and dusted her hands. “That I could have died. Why didn’t I die? Instead, I familiarised myself with surgeries and half-fighting to stay alive. I had to learn burn terminologies like debridement, early excision, escharotomy and skin graft. When I heard what happened to my mum’s gardener and his family, I wished I had died as well. I saw his wife pass out. The daughter was in my bedroom, caught in the smoke. The father rushed in trying to save us but didn’t make it. If I wasn’t in that house none of that would have happened.”

“Baby, it wasn’t your fault.”

“But I took sleeping pills. For a long time, I’d struggled to sleep at night. I took sleeping pills before I went to the room, I was addicted. What if I’d slept off and we both died? What if I wasn’t taking those pills and I got to her earlier?”

“Hey, no. Don’t think about that. We have to believe God knows best about this. Please believe that.”

She gave a small smile. "I know. It took a long time but I know that now."

"Do you still feel you should have died?"

She shook her head. "Months of therapy sessions, close friends and family and deep reflections with God made me think otherwise. I'm grateful to be alive. I only want to live life doing what pleases God." She grabbed a bottle of water from a cooler. "I moved out of my father's house and told myself I was going to look after Noelle. Be responsible for her like she was my own. But God had other plans for her." She tipped her head back and drank her fill. "Anyway, I developed this phobia of driving at night. I didn't want a driver or someone else to be close to me." She chuckled. "Now that I think about it, the whole thing may seem a bit far-fetched, but that's the way I felt."

"No one can blame you for how you feel."

"My therapist said the same thing. Besides, I wouldn't have met you."

Andrew didn't want to imagine how hard things must have been for her. On the flip side, he could see God working in her life. And that He had brought them together? It was a major blessing for Andrew.

"Can I ask you one deep question?" She asked.

"Yes, you can have all my money," he joked.

"Ha-ha-ha."

"Just kidding. You can ask me anything." He helped himself to his fifth slice of pizza.

"How did you get the money to start your company?"

"I sucked up my pride and took out a loan from my ex's dad. I got my licence, imported five cars, serviced them and hired well-trained drivers. Given the state of the economy we employed preferably graduates looking for work. Three years down the line, and a few bumps here and there, things were looking up. I finished paying off my loan a few weeks ago."

"Wow." She looked stunned. Impressed even. "That's amazing."

"God has been good to me."

"He's been good to you and I both."



“Let me give you a tour.” She nodded. He took her hand and showed her the kitchen, Bella’s room, the guest bedroom and bathroom. For the master bedroom, Andrew chose to return to the living room while she walked in. He didn’t have anything to hide and his room was always kept clean and organised, even still he wasn’t going to be in the same room with Erinma. Not with the way he felt about her and how she stirred him.

The last couple of weeks with her were nothing short of amazing.

“Very impressive room. Not a single thing out of place.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you some kind of OCD patient?”

He barked out a laugh.

“I’m being serious here.”

Inhaling her flowery scent, Andrew’s arms encircled her waist.

“What does the B in Aunty B stand for?”

“Beatrice. But just call her Aunty B or Mummy. She’s not really into the name.”

He watched her close her eyes as he leaned close.

“Hello in this house!” Aunty B called out.

Andrew pressed a kiss to her forehead and drew back with a wink at Erinma’s wide eyes.

“Daddy!”

Bella hugged his legs. “Hey, Coco. Did you enjoy the elder's fellowship with Grandma?”

Bella swung her head from side to side. “No! It was boring. All they did was pray, talk about children and the hospital.” She clasped her hands together. “Please, don’t let me follow her again.”

“I heard that,” Aunty B said, sounds coming close to the living room.

“Bella, have you greeted Aunty Erinma?”

He watched as Bella and Erinma greeted each other. Erinma lowered herself to Bella’s height to hug her.

“Aunty B, this is Erinma Roberts. Erinma, this is Aunty B. She’s my mum, aunty, and biggest cheerleader.” He went behind Aunty B and wrapped his hands around her neck.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, Ma.”

Aunty B swatted his arm but was all smiles. “I’m happy to see the woman who has my son grinning like this.”

“Ah, I can’t be the only reason he’s smiling like this. Not when he has you and Bella in his life.”

Aunty B gave a pleased nod. "Please, sit down. Let me prepare my catfish pepper soup for you all."

Erinma stood. "Let me help."

Aunty B shook her head. "*Mba*, I work alone."

He frowned. Didn't she say she wanted to teach her how to cook his favourite meals? How was she going to do that with that attitude?

"Mummy, are you sure?"

"Very. I'll call you when I need you to help me serve."

When Aunty B left, she turned to him and asked, "are you sure she likes me?"

"She does. She's just being mischievous."

Erinma stood. "Maybe I should still go there."

"No, hold up." He rose up. "I'll check on her." He turned to Bella. "Coco, keep Aunty Erinma company."

"Okay, Daddy."

As he made his way to his kitchen, he couldn't help but wonder what was running through Aunty B's mind. One moment she was thrilled about him settling down, the next moment she was scrutinising his choice. What was her deal?

Making pepper soup wasn't hard, but Aunty B could have used that as a one-on-one to get to know Erinma better.

He squelched the uneasiness snaking its way in his stomach. Erinma was a good woman. She was nothing like Bella's Mum. Irrespective that they had the same similarities of stemming from wealthy homes. Erinma wasn't spoiled or full of herself. Where it mattered, Erinma had all the qualities of a woman he could fall in love with. And judging from the way his heart kept skipping when she was around, he wasn't far from taking that leap.

Satisfied with his analogy and conclusion he entered the kitchen. Fresh basil leaves, habanero pepper and onion lay on the countertop. A clean pot was already on the gas burner waiting to be lit. She was throwing in the uda seeds, uziza seeds, alligator pepper and calabash nutmeg to be ground in the blender.

"Why didn't you want her to help out?"

"You like specific ladies."

His brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't she the rich woman you were staring at the other day?"

"Yes." He answered reluctantly.

Aunty B sighed. "Just be careful, Andrew. I don't want to see you cry again."

"I won't."

Andrew grabbed a drink from the fridge and headed out. Bella sat near Erinma, eyes on Bella's iPad.

"What are you two up to?"

Bella glanced up. "I'm showing Aunty Erinma my Princess Nora videos. She loves Princess Nora!"

"Scoot over and let me sit next to her."

"Don't bully her," Erinma complained as Bella did as he said, going the extra mile and heading to her bedroom.

"I'm not bullying her. If she can't take it she'll tell me." He threw an arm over her shoulder. "Besides, I already told her she could have anything she wanted if she behaved today."

She whistled. "A blank cheque? That's a hefty price to pay."

"You're worth it."

Erinma opened her Instagram account to reply to some messages and like some posts, she'd been tagged with. One of the posts made her smile. Andrew leaned in close to take a look and almost choked on his drink.

Erinma laughed. "It's funny, right? She's wearing one of Proud Belle's facial masks while in traffic and driving. Her caption read:

It's only in Lagos traffic that you can get a facial and get your nails done. Nothing beats #proudbelle one of a kind sheet mask. And just like that, I'm ready for a hot date with #omar #realestatemogul #sexydatecalling #whosafinegirl

"This girl is crazy wild. And so ingenious. Look at the next picture."

She swiped across the screen and it was a tall old dude with dreadlocks.

He coughed. "You know Tito Jacobs?"

"Yeah, she was even at Proud Belle's anniversary and launch party."

"You guys are friends?"

Erinma shook her head. "More like acquaintances/work colleagues. Why are you asking?"

"Sorry, I need to cough."

He stood and walked out.

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CHAPTER 36

ERINMA

Had the last few weeks happened or she had imagined it? Her phone beeped.

She woke up to his text:

Good morning, beautiful. Had a lovely time last night. Most especially loved seeing you smile. I pray you have a great day. Cheers. A.M.

She grinned wide.

The text was sent at five in the morning. They had spoken yesterday afternoon after he dropped his client off in Osun state. She was busy at work and they had to cut their conversation short. She smiled to herself. Erinma wanted to do something for him for a change since he'd planned all their dates. And she had the perfect idea.

There was a paintball arena she'd scouted and she wanted to take him there.

But first she had a date with Bella and a pottery class.

She went about her devotion on her couch with a stunning view of her garden, a hearty breakfast of French Toast and coffee and tending to her garden. After which she took a long soak with lemon and orange bath salts. Giggling to herself as she thought of Andrew sniffing at her neck.

Erinma was deciding what to wear when her phone rang.

The agent was calling her.

“Hi, Aremu,” she chirped.

“I’m just going to go straight to the point; the property is no longer available.”

“What?” Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t understand. We were already processing it. The lawyer was drawing up papers to be signed. What happened?”

“I tried my best, Miss Erinma. But as you know in this business, cash is king, and everything else is secondary. The owners have already agreed to it.”

No, no, no! This couldn’t be happening. “But we were supposed to make payment today. Can you please speak with the owners again?” She shook her head. “You know what? I’ll contact them myself.”

“There’s no point. The people already paid.”

“Then let them return the money! We’ve been deliberating on this property for weeks! I’ve had my eye on it for months and now that we...” her voice trailed off. There was no point haggling with the agent. He wasn’t the one to blame. It was his employer.

She forced herself to stay calm.

“Do you know what the other people want to use the building for?”

“Guest house.”

“But I thought they liked what we were going to do with the place.”

“They did. I guess the money swayed them more.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m really sorry. I’ll keep an ear out for the specs you want.”

Tears blurred her vision as his words repeated in her head. “Yeah. Thanks.”

She dropped the phone on the bed. “God, I don’t understand what’s happening, but I trust you’re in full control. I need You to take control. I need You to fix this. Whatever is happening here I trust Your plan will prevail. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.”

After her prayer she felt a bit at ease. She sent a text to Andrew explaining what happened. She was surprised when she got a call from him five minutes later.

“Andrew?”

“Baby, what’s wrong?” He said groggily. She regretted texting him. He needed to sleep. “Babe?”

“I got some bad news from the real estate agent.”

“What did he say?”

She took a deep breath. “The property we wanted to lease is no longer available.”

“What? Since when?”

“As at last night money had changed hands. He called me this morning to break the news.”

“Where are you now?”

“Home. I’m going to call Jordan and the partners, let them know what’s up.” Lord, You’re in control. Take control.

“I’m coming over.”

“No. You don’t need to. Coming over isn’t going to solve anything. And you need to rest. What time did you get in from Osun?”

“Seven.”

It was ten a.m. “No. Stay back. I’ll come to you later in the day.”

“I don’t mind driving down.”

“Andy, I’ll come over.”

“You sure? I want to be there for you. We can rub minds.”

She smiled despite the rocky start to the morning. “You’ll be more helpful when you’re alert and lucid.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. See you in a few hours.”

Her phone rang again.

“Good afternoon, Dad.”

“Hey, Erinma. Are you busy? I need to see you.”

She frowned. Her father never asked to see her unless it was work-related or there was an emergency. “Is everything okay? Is Mummy okay?”

“Everyone is fine. It’s about your new business.”

Her stomach tightened. “I’ll be at yours shortly.”



“Tell me more about your plans.”

Her mum hadn’t told her what her father wanted to discuss. And that was one thing about her mum; she pretended to be uninformed when in fact she

and her father both sat down to deliberate on matters. She only wanted her father to be the one to action it out.

Her gaze snapped to him. Was he being serious?

“I’m interested in it. Have a seat.”

She did and told her father everything she and Jordan had in mind. The flower shop, the restaurant. The ideas she and Jordan had spent hours brainstorming on to arrive at what they and their silent partners thought was an excellent business.

“Interesting,” was what he said when she was done.

“That being said, I guess you’ll be relieved to know the property I had my heart set on has been snagged by another person. After all, you didn’t want me doing this in the first place.”

Dad frowned. “Who took the property?”

“I don’t know. All I know is they want to use it as a guest house.”

Her father appeared thoughtful.

“Dad, I know you don’t completely believe I can do this, and sometimes I don’t either.” Her father stared at her. “However, I need to do this. I want to believe in myself again and trust I can make this work. I’m going back to the drawing board and I’m going to sort it out. My EA is already on it as well. She’s getting in touch with another agent.” She had called both Isi and Odavwaro on her way to her parents’ asking them to join in prayers as well. It might seem like a small matter—not worth disturbing God about—but Erinma needed all the help she could get.

“Do you honestly think you would be able to balance Proud Belle and your new business? Or you want to step down?”

“No. I’m not stepping down. I can perform my duties as CEO while also running the restaurant and flower shop. If it gets too much for me, I’ll let you know. I promise.”

“Then you have my full support.”

She was confused. “What?”

“I have a property in Ikoyi. I purchased it a long time ago. It’s not like the building you had in mind but I want to lease it to you. If you make a success of this venture in the next five years, you can have the building. If not, you shut it down and focus only on Proud Belle. Those are my terms. Do we have a deal?”

You won’t fail, God’s still, calm voice assured her.

“Do you already have it in the back of your mind that I would fail?” Erinma asked her father.

Her father frowned. “Not at all. I believe you are capable.” He sighed. “I don’t want you putting yourself through unnecessary stress or feeling you’re not good enough. A flower shop is a totally different line from Proud Belle. I know how hard I worked to build Proud Belle up from nothing. It was tough and your mum and I suffered along the way. I’m here now only by the grace of God. What I want is for you to have a good life after all my hard work.”

Erinma smiled. “And I’ve had a good life so far, not counting what happened with the fire and Noelle and her family. Somto and I are very grateful.”

“I know you’re grateful. You and Somto are God’s special gift to me. You two have made me proud since the day you were born and haven’t stopped.” He sighed. “I was disappointed when your sister didn’t want a part of the company. And you came up with the idea of starting your own company. I felt like I failed.”

Erinma stood and moved to kneel by his side. “You didn’t fail, Daddy. I wasn’t going to tell you that way. Lanre just did *amebo*.”

He laughed a little then sobered up. “How are you doing since everything with Lanre?”

Erinma smiled. “I’m fine, actually.”

“Are you seeing someone?” he squinted his eyes at her.

“I am.”

She chuckled at her father’s look of surprise.

“Tell me about him.”

“His name is Andrew Madu. He owns Bam Cabs. He has a daughter he adores and he’s a very special man.”

“As special as your father?”

Erinma laughed but nodded.

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“He loves God?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“He doesn’t make you feel bad about yourself?”

She smiled, shaking her head.

“When do I get to meet him?”

“Soon.”



“Hey. I’ve missed you.” She welcomed his embrace. It felt like they hadn’t seen each other in a month, not a week. It had been a long week dealing with the pre-construction approval and building permits, the construction work, interior designer and finally getting work started in the small bungalow tucked away in a street off cobblestone road in Ikoyi.

“How was your day?” His voice rumbled in her ear as she pressed her head against his chest.

“Long and exhausting. But I’m feeling better now that I’m in your arms.” She lifted her head, gazing up at him. Her heart brimming over with love for him. “Have I told you I love that I can be free with you?” She wanted him to see her in her totality. Expose herself. Be naked and ashamed.

“You don’t have to say it. I see it.”

She smiled.

“I’m so happy right now. There’s still a long way to go, but things will fall into shape. Already, I’m working with Nelly to build a website for both places and Tito is going to help create some buzz about it. In just a few weeks we’ll be set.”

“Erinma...”

“What?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

An ominous feeling hit her stomach. “Okay.”

“I once dated Tito. You said you guys are work colleagues.”

“Tito?” Then it dawned on her. *Wait.* “Tito Jacobs? Daughter of Mr. Jonathan Jacobs of J.Jacobs Consulting?”

He blinked. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

She stepped back a bit, mirroring what was already happening in her mind. “I know Tito. I just find it hard to believe you two dated. She usually goes for...” her voice trailed.

Andrew's jaw hardened. "Handsome rich dudes?"

"No offence but yes." Then it hit her on the head. "She's Bella's mother?"

He nodded.

"Oh wow." She blinked hard. "Why are you all of a sudden bringing it up?"

"I felt you needed to know. After I saw your Instagram feed and realised you two knew each other, I felt I had to."

And he had to tell her now? When she was going through a lot? She shook her head. *I can't deal with this right now.* She needed to have her head in the game.

"Are you okay? Are we good?"

She smiled sadly. "Not really."

"Then tell me what I need to do. How do I make things up to you? Do you need me to reassure you? I will. Just tell me what I need to do. I'm willing to do whatever I have to do to make us work."

"You don't have to convince me. You don't need to do anything." A doubtful expression marred his features. "I can offer you friendship right now."

"I'm confused."

"I don't...relationships are not what I should be focusing on right now."

He bristled. "I don't understand. What are you saying?"

She ran a finger over her lip and Andrew followed the hand movement. The urge to kiss him made her tummy flutter. "I care about you but I don't think we should start what we can't finish."

His shoulders slumped. "You don't want to be with me?"

He shouldn't want me.

Releasing a deep breath, she yanked the wig off her head, allowing him a glimpse of who she was now. "This is me." She felt the heat of his gaze over her head. She kept her eyes lowered to the floor, not wanting to see what was there. "This is what I look like."

"Is that supposed to change something? Is it supposed to change how I feel about you?"

Her eyes snapped to his perplexed and slightly angry expression.

She was starting to get annoyed at herself and that she still battled with insecurity. Annoyed at him. Annoyed at the situation. *Why does it have to be Tito?* "Shouldn't it?"

It was only a half-glare before, but now it was full-fledged. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that," his deep voice said angrily.

Slightly embarrassed, she wore her wig back on.

"What's all this for? Is it Lanre? I thought you two broke up."

"No. Lanre and I are never getting back together. I have no idea what he's up to right now. This is about me." How could she explain? "We're different, Andrew."

He closed the space between them. "Where is all this coming from? Look, I know we don't move in the same social class; you rub shoulders with the high-flyers. I'm just your average cab man. But that doesn't mean I won't love you as a man should. I don't care if you make more money than me or if you have over a million followers. All I want is you."

His words made her weak. Her knees were jelly-like. She backed away from him, bumping into the dining table.

"Love involves taking risks and being vulnerable, of which I have been both to you."

She tried to put some space between his words and her heart. "You own your own cab company, Andy. You're not an ordinary cab driver. Why are you looking down on yourself?" Did he really believe it had anything to do with who he was or the size of his pockets?

He shook his head. "That's not what I'm doing. Look, Erinma, don't do this."

"You have big dreams. You're going to do great. I believe it. I believe in you." Her words sounded cheap and nonsensical. Not at all, she should be saying when her man had just said he wanted her.

"I know that. That just slipped out!" He rubbed his forehead with his fingertip. "I'm sorry...it's just," he looked at her, his face torn. "I don't need a motivational speech right now."

Erinma averted her gaze from him.

"Erinma, I believe in my heart that God brought us together for a reason."

"What if that reason was just for us to help each other heal? We have no more use for each other."

He flinched.

She could read his profile, *how could you say that?*

Erinma observed him swallowing visibly. "But what if God says otherwise? Are you just going to run off like a coward? Because that's the

vibe you're projecting."

"You can call me whatever you want. But we shouldn't go further from here," she said. She just needed to leave his space, his presence. The more time she stayed, the less convinced she was that she was making the right decision for both of them.

He gritted his teeth. "I don't get why you're acting like a martyr. You can't keep trying to make others happy at your expense. And you can't force something that's not meant to be."

"I agree. In the same way, we can't force a relationship between the two of us."

"Erinma..."

"I've only been with one guy for five years. I don't think I'm ready for another relationship and the emotional stress that comes with it. I'm sorry."

She saw the tears in his eyes and they broke her.

"I don't want to be out of you and Bella's life. Can we at least still be friends?"

"No." One simple word that hurt her. He glared at her. "No, I don't want you in my life or Bella's. I won't be friends with someone who abandons the person they care about because things are tough or they can't let us work things out! We've both been through difficult times, but that doesn't mean we should settle for less for the rest of our lives."

Settle for less? Erinma didn't even want to think of what that meant regarding him with another woman.

He read her, knew what she was thinking. "You misunderstand me; I have no plans of settling with another woman. Erinma, I love you. God, I love you so much." He cupped her cheeks. "Baby, I want to be your man. When you get back from being Boss Lady at Proud Belle and the restaurant, I want to be there for you. Hearing about your day. I don't want anyone else to be my woman or Bella's stepmother. I want you. I will always want you."

She cupped her hands around his, relishing the warm feel of his touch. She forced herself to move and yanked his hands away from her face.

"I'm sorry, Andrew."

"But you're not sorry enough to fight for us. To believe that God brought us together."

"If God wants us to be together the only person here fighting that happening is you," he said quietly.

She reached for her bag on the couch.

“Please, tell Bella I can’t take her to the pottery class.”
He said nothing as she walked out.
She didn’t cry till she got home.



The woodsy scent with a hint of vanilla drifted to her. The Queen of the Night was in full bloom, displaying her glory even if in the absence of none, her scent infiltrating every space it could reach. Erinma stared at the white flowers that had earned their revered name by blooming only at night. She remembered asking Mr. Moses why it was only at night it chose to bloom when no one else could see or smell it.

Na so God do am, he’d said.

Ergo: God does as He pleases—He was, after all, the Creator of beauty.

But was she going to let her fear get the best of her?

I see You as beautiful, My Brown Rose. It’s time to bloom.

Are you just going to run off like a coward? Andrew’s voice hissed at her.

Hot tears burned the back of her throat. Was she a coward for not wanting to get hurt? She walked back towards the house but thought to sit on the patio.

Her doorbell rang.

“Hi, Isi. Come on in.” Erinma heard Odavwaro say when she opened Erinma’s front door.

“Hey, girl. How are you?” Isi asked, walking over to where she sat, her eyes fixed on her garden.

“I’m barely holding back the tears.”

“What happened? I thought things were going well with the restaurant and flower shop.”

“I ended things with Andrew.”

Both girls stared at her.

Odavwaro was the first to break the silence. “Why? You said it yourself that he’s a good guy. Ticks all the boxes. So why break up with him?”

“I thought things were going well with you guys,” Isi said with a frown.

“His baby mama is Tito Jacobs.”

"And so?" Odavwaro said.

"Tito... name sounds familiar," Isi said. "Wait, the same Tito at the launch party?"

"Yeah. She's a popular influencer in Nigeria. But with the way she's going she might just drown her career." Odavwaro cocked her head. "I still don't get why you broke up with Mr. Sunshine and Rainbow."

"Don't you ladies get it? It's going to be another Lanre situation again. He will remember me for who I am, with all my burns and insecurities. When he realises Tito is better, he'll get back together with her." Erinma swiped at another tear. "I can't go through that again. I should end it now."

"Let me get this straight," Odavwaro started, hands on her hips, "you broke up with him because you are afraid of what might happen in the future, even if it never happens?"

When Odavwaro said it like that Erinma's reasons sounded stupid. Immature.

"That makes no sense!"

Isi's head bobbed. "I concur."

"Have you seen a picture of Tito? She's a very beautiful girl."

"Beauty is vain..."

Isi interjected, "but a woman that fears the Lord shall be praised."

Erinma frowned. When did they become best friends behind her back? "Don't quote 'The Proverbs 31 woman' for me."

Odavwaro sat on her other side. "Don't let your fears get the best of you."

"You guys weren't there as he spoke about his vegetarian ex like she was some kind of fun, yuppie babe. Tito is a fun person. Did you see that post she made about Proud Belle? Our facial mask sales went through the roof."

"That's why she's an influencer. They are supposed to be entertaining, sweet and a teensy bit out there. Just that some people take their madness to another level," Odavwaro reiterated.

"It's more than that. Tito is beautiful. She gave Andrew his first baby—"

"And you'll give him his next couple of kids, big deal," Odavwaro said.

"I really don't see what the issue is, Erinma. Has God said otherwise about you two?"

"No." God had pretty much been quiet about it since she left him.

She believed she did the right thing. One day he would want to make up with Bella's mum and Erinma wouldn't be in the way of their happiness.

God, I did the right thing. Didn't I?

Isi laughed and Odavwaro joined her.

“Why are you guys laughing? It’s not funny.”

“But it is,” Odavwaro said matter-of-factly. “We totally get it now. You’re jealous of Tito.”

“I’m not.”

“Erinma, you need to be sure of your feelings for Andrew and fight for your man. That’s all I’m going to say on this.” Odavwaro stood. “Isi, care to join me inside for some small chops and juice.”

“Ah... yes, please.”

“You and Nelly are dating now?” Erinma heard Odavwaro ask Isi.



As the weeks passed, the flower shop and restaurant underwent renovations. Erinma immersed herself in her work at Proud Belle, while also supervising the work at Ikoyi to ensure they were going to be open and ready in time for the soft and grand openings of the restaurant. Already she was making arrangements for some of her plants to be moved at the appropriate time.

“Nelly is here to see you,” Odavwaro informed her over the intercom.

“Let him in, please.”

Nelly walked in with his iPad. “Hey, CEO. What’s popping?”

“Hey, Nelly. I’m okay. Have anything for me?”

He raised his iPad. “You know I do.”

Minutes later she had chills running down her back. “Nelly, this is beautiful.” Erinma stared at the logo designs with exquisite colours. “I love them.”

He swiped a finger across his forehead. “Phew! ‘Cause this was a lot of front and back.”

“I want it to be perfect.”

“There’s no such thing as perfect.”

“You are entitled to your opinion.”

“How are things with Andrew?”

She flicked her gaze at him. “What do you know about Andrew?”

“Only the tidbits Isi shared. She’s very concerned about you two. I wish she would be that concerned about us.”

“What did she say about Andrew?”

Nelly smirked. “And here I thought you would be interested in my happiness.”

“Nelly.”

“Nothing I can remember.” He grabbed his iPad from her hands. “See you later.”

Workflow continued for another ten minutes till she picked up her phone and considered calling Andrew. Something she had done several times but she chickened out. She shook her head and tossed the phone on her table. It was best she focused on work.

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CHAPTER 37

ANDREW

With a groan, he sat upright in bed and raked his fingers through his hair. Why did he just stand there? Doing nothing while she ended their relationship? Because he couldn't force her to do what she didn't want to do, and he couldn't force her to be with him. If she wanted out, the choice was hers.

There were days when he wanted to call. Days he wanted to drive over to her office or hoped she would call and ask for a ride.

However, none of those things happened. He wouldn't call her. She'd chosen this. He had to accept it.

On Sundays, he attended the first service and was high-tailing it out the door with other parishioners so he didn't get to bump into her. Emotions warred within him; see her or don't see her.

What made the decision easier was knowing Bella missed her and he couldn't put his daughter through the pain of losing someone she looked up to as a mother figure. Aunty B, once he told her they weren't dating any longer, kept her opinions to herself.

His attempts to watch an action movie on Netflix had failed. Erinma wouldn't leave his thoughts.

God, help me out here, please. He couldn't go through this again.

He heard the doorbell just as he returned to the living room after his shower. "*Wetin happen, Mike?*"

“One madam dey look you. Em talk sey na Bella mama.”

Andrew frowned. *“You sabi the woman before?”*

The security guard shook his head. *“I neva see am before.”*

“Okay. I dey come.” He shut the door. He didn’t want to believe it. Head in a haze, he moved to his bedroom. Throwing a rumpled shirt over his head and slipping into shorts, he went out the front door. Was it possible? Andrew shook his head. No, it can’t be. He hadn’t seen her in years and all of a sudden she was here? He quickened his pace to the gate, eager to put an end to his curiosity.

“Where em dey?”

His security pointed at a black sports range rover. He took slow steps to the car and the driver’s window lowered.

“Hello, Kelechi.”

His stomach tightened. *“TJ. Why are you here?”*

She turned off her engine and got out of her car. *“Can I come in? I have a little emergency.”*

Andrew catalogued her appearance. She had changed. Added weight in all the good places. Before he got side-tracked, he frowned and jarred his thoughts away.

“How did you even know where I live?”

“Can we have this reunion somewhere else? Preferably inside?”

He glared at her before turning around and walking back in. He heard the click-clack of her heels on the ground. When they were a safe distance from his gateman’s eavesdropping, he faced her again. *“What are you doing here, TJ? Don’t let me ask again.”*

She shifted on her feet. *“Why? Aren’t you happy to see me?”*

The smell of her alcohol breath hit his nostrils. *“No. Not now, and especially not when you're drunk.”*

She giggled. *“Oh, come on Kelechi. I’ve only had two drinks. Okay, maybe three,”* she said, raising three fingers, *“but I’m not drunk.”* She peered behind him. *“Aren’t you going to let me in?”*

“Hell, no.”

Her eyes bulged. *“Wow. Kelechi said a bad word.”* TJ cocked her head to the side. *“Has anything else changed about you?”* Andrew clenched his jaw at her brazen look as her eyes swept over him appreciatively. *“Maybe some other time. I need to pee.”*

His frown deepened. *“What?”*

She kissed her teeth. "I said I need to pee. Make use of the ladies. Wee-wee."

He quirked a brow. "You came to my house to pee?"

She shifted her weight. "I was in the neighbourhood and I decided to stop by. Now can I pee?"

"Pee outside."

"Kelechi!"

With a glance at the plunging halter neck bodysuit and black high-waisted jeans, he could picture the scenery she would give up if she took his flimsy advice. It didn't matter that it was late at night. The streetlights were on. Anyone passing by could get a good look at her. Andrew distanced himself from the imagery by blinking hard. "Fine. You have three minutes. Down the hall, second door on your right."

Scoffing, she flew past him and he heard the door slam shut seconds later.

He justified his actions by telling himself he was doing it for Bella's sake. That it was degrading for her mother to use the side of the road as her toilet, and that no part of him wanted her in his house. Or that her sudden presence hadn't jolted something in him, only he didn't know what it was.

"Daddy?"

He spun around. "Go back to sleep, Bella," he almost growled.

Bella rubbed her eyes wearily. "I heard voices. Is someone else here? Is Auntie Erinma here?"

He heard the toilet flush and panic seized him. "No, Coco. Go back to bed." He placed both hands on her shoulders, guiding her back to her bedroom. "There's school in the morning."

"But I heard someone talking."

"Bella—"

"Hello, there," Tito said behind him.

He felt every muscle in his body stiffen at the voice. Hands still on his daughter's shoulders, they faced the intruder in their home.

"Hello. Good evening, ma," Bella said.

Andrew felt like he was caught in the middle of a bad reality show. Or a nightmare. He shot a warning look at TJ.

TJ grinned. "You must be Bella. I'm TJ. An old friend of Kele—," she chuckled, "I mean your dad's." She extended a hand. "Nice to meet you."

Bella looked up at Andrew. He manoeuvred a smile from the stiffness in his jaw. "It's okay."

"Nice to meet you too," Bella said, taking her hand.

"Let's get you to bed."

"Okay. Which room is yours?"

"Not you," he gritted out.

She grinned cheekily at him. "I know. Just pulling your legs. Good night, Bella. Sleep tight. Don't let *ojuju calabar* bite."

Andrew turned his back on TJ and literally pushed his daughter into her bedroom.

He softly closed the door behind him a few minutes later. Andrew took his time tucking Bella in and deflecting her one million and one questions: *Who is she? Does she know Aunt Erinma? She's so pretty; is she going to sleep in our house?*

To all of her questions, Andrew had simply replied, 'Go to sleep, Bella.'

He returned to the living room, half-hoping TJ would notice the tension bouncing off him and leave. But nope. She sat on his sofa, flipping through a teddy-yellow photo album. He recognised the album she was holding. Bella's first birthday party. He remembered how Aunty B and Caroline had encouraged him to throw a party. For Andrew he hadn't seen much to rejoice about: he was broke, had a baby and was depressed after the woman he loved walked out on him. Celebrating was hardly on the agenda. Neither was being a single parent.

Family and close friends had pooled their resources and thrown Bella a sweet birthday bash complete with all the trimmings. Even if Bella couldn't recall anything that went down that day, it served as a reminder for Andrew that he had family and friends who cared about him.

Reminiscing about TJ had no place here. Right now. He strode into the room. "I'll take you home." He was already reaching for his keys.

"What? And leave Bella all alone?"

He stopped in front of the front door and shut his eyes. "All of a sudden you care?"

"Right..." she mumbled. He could hear her close the bookbound album.

"Don't worry. I'll leave."

"I can't let you drive." He walked over to her and took her keys from her hand. "It's not safe."

“Then I’ll call a cab company. Wait, you own a cab company. You can call one of your guys to give me a ride.” He stayed mute. “Don’t worry I’ll pay. I know my presence irritates the hell out of you.”

God, why is this happening right now? Why do I have to deal with this? He squeezed his eyes shut and did a countdown to five. *Breathe easy, guy.* “It’s late. Why don’t you just crash here for the night and leave in the morning.” *God, please don’t let me regret this.*

“Are you sure? I don’t want to stay where I’m not wanted.”

“I won’t lie. I don’t want you here, but out of respect for your dad and that you’re Bella’s mother, I’m trying not to be selfish.”

“So you’re doing this out of pity.” She plopped back down on the sofa. “Plus when did you and my dad become so cool that you’re helping him watch me? I guess money can buy a lot of things.”

“No, TJ. It’s called mercy. There’s a difference.” He tossed their car keys on the console table. “You’ll sleep in the spare bedroom. Obviously, you need to sleep off this childish behaviour.”

She took off one of her stilettos. “Just because you’re older doesn’t give you the right to talk down on me.” She removed the other one. Andrew wondered how she managed to walk in them. “You can’t stop me from walking out of here.”

He slapped his hands on his thighs. “Right. You always do what you want, regardless of what others may think.” He stood up and went to the kitchen. He returned with bottled water, which he handed to her.

“Not all the time. I’m not always selfish.” She uncapped the bottle and took a sip.

Taking his seat in front of her, he averted his gaze to anywhere, or anything, but hers. Keeping his face expressionless.

TJ yanked off the long hair weave to reveal neat cornrows. She combed the tail end of her weave with her fingers and delicately draped it over the arm of the sofa as if it was a prized possession. “She’s beautiful.”

Andrew locked his gaze with hers.

“She looks a lot like me when I was her age.” She leaned back, making herself more comfortable on his sofa. She rubbed her arms with a wistful look on her face. “I was young and stupid at the time. I messed up. You must be relieved that you didn’t put a ring on this finger.” Her eyes bulged. “Wait, Kelechi, you’re 34. Why aren’t you married? Is it because of me?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” He wasn’t in the mood for a drunken confession. Didn’t think he could handle it when his heart and emotions were all over the place. He couldn’t get Erinma’s look of betrayal out of his head. It was all his fault. It was all his fault that she was sad again. “You should get some rest. And I need you to leave at 6:30.” That was just before Bella woke up. He got his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll set an alarm to wake you up.” Wait, that didn’t make sense. “Give me your phone.”

She opened her purse and gave it to him.

“I’m sorry, Kelechi. For everything.”

He maintained eye contact with her phone, navigating his way to the clock icon.

She hiccupped. “Oops...squeeze me.” She giggled. “I think you’re right; I’m,” she said, bringing her index finger and thumb together, “a little drunk.” She stood abruptly and staggered a bit.

Andrew sprang to his feet.

“Ooh! Superman to the rescue,” she giggled. “No need to save me, love. Show me to my room and let me sleep.”

Hesitant, he wrapped his arm around her waist to keep her steady—not needing a casualty in his house. He led her to the guest room. His last bus stop was outside the door. Dropping his hands, he took a step back from her.

“You thought you weren’t good enough for me, while all along I was never good enough for you. Or even Kalu.” She patted his chest. “Good night, Kelechi.”

The next morning he knocked on the door at exactly 6:32. He knocked three times. When she didn’t respond he walked in only to find the bed shabbily made. No TJ. He pulled out his phone from his back pocket and saw the message notification.

Thanks for everything. TJ.

CHAPTER 38

ERINMA

"I can't believe Ari Mato will be there for the grand opening. I sincerely love that woman," Somto raved. "I was practically salivating the last time she interviewed that hot fitness trainer. Ah, Erinma. That guy was a knockout! It's quite unfortunate that you missed it."

Erinma chuckled as she perused another rack of clothes, unable to decide on a dress. "Don't let mum hear you say that. She would think you're backsliding."

"*Abeg*, that's Mummy's business." Somto places one hand on her hip and the other on the clothing rack. "You know why Ari Mato will honour your invitation? Because you bounced back after everything. That woman loves you."

"Hmmm. And I was thinking it's because she wants my expertise in floral arrangements."

Her big sister turned all serious on her. "Erinma..."

"My life is a testimony. I've heard you say that countless times."

"But you—"

"And I believe it. I do."

"Then live it out."

"I'm trying to. When I look at my scars, it reminds me of God's saving grace. I'm alive because of Him."

Somto's eyes got teary and the sisters hugged. "This is so good to hear." Her sister drew back. "I've been waiting for you to be the woman I knew before, only better."

"Thanks, sis."

A beautiful emerald dress caught Erinma's eye, and she walked over and grabbed the hanger. They were out shopping for Erinma's photoshoot. Erinma had finally decided to do it—take charge of her life and shove her insecurities to the side. If not totally, but at least to a large extent.

"That dress would look good on you." Erinma quipped.

"I don't think so. I was thinking more for you."

"No way. Where would I wear it to?" Her sister's mouth said no, but her eyes and body language were already snapping up the size and mentally putting it on. "You know my life is mostly triangular—house, church, work. Family gatherings here and there."

"And so?"

"That outfit would suffer in my closet."

"Well, I'm getting it for you." Erinma dropped it in her shopping basket with the pair of nude kitten heels she'd picked.

Somto kissed her teeth. "Why are you stubborn like this?"

"Chuks would appreciate the outfit on you. You know he's always looking for an excuse to take you out."

"Honestly I don't know why. He acts as if he's forgotten how challenging it was for us to get to where we are. If he wants to spend time with me, we can do so at home rather than gallivanting about town trying to act like twenty-year-olds."

Erinma shimmied her shoulders. "Maybe he's trying to spice things up a little."

"He should spice up my account, *abeg*."

She laughed, her gaze falling on a dusty pink dress that caught her eye. Its cinched waist and pencil skirt would suit her perfectly. The only issue would be the too little bust region. But she would find a way around it.

"I want to try on this dress." When Erinma reached for it, another hand snatched the hanger from the rail.

"Oh, you were also interested in that dress?"

Erinma took a step back, more surprised than annoyed. "It's fine, you can have it. There should be another one."

"I doubt it. This isn't some local shop in America where they sell the same clothes in batches. This boutique only sells one-of-a-kind outfits."

"Is this girl okay? Sorry, please we took the dress first." Somto stretched out her hand. "*Biko*, please hand it over."

A stunned look came over the woman's face as she stared at Somto. "Sorry?"

"You saw her take the cloth first. Don't play smart with me," Somto said. "You think you're better than us because you've travelled. Please, go abroad and buy your clothes and hand that dress over."

"Gosh, Somto, leave her alone," Erinma whispered to her sister. To the lady, Erinma said, "I'll find something else."

The lady's gaze darted to Somto and she scurried off. The lady's long weave slapped Erinma across the face as she turned, moving to another section of the boutique to where an older man stood, taking her place by his side. The man dropped his hand on her lower back. Somto hissed. "Instead of her doing something tangible with her life, she's following Aristos."

Erinma sighed.

"Why did you let her take your dress?" Somto snapped at her.

"Her hands got to it first. What was I supposed to do? Drag it from her hands? I'm not going to stoop low to do that." In the same way, she'd decided not to stoop low to hurt Destiny. Hurting her would hurt her family. Erinma decided to let go of her anger, and praying for her would have to be the way to do that. Praying she would finally come to her senses and come to know God.

"There should be another of the dress." Erinma stepped forward and checked for another of the dress. There wasn't any. Deflated, she set her mind on finding another dress. It took a few more minutes but she decided on an off-the-shoulder midi wrap dress in deep red.

"That's perfect," her sister said after she stepped out of the changing room.

"You think?" Erinma asked, turning to look at the back in the mirror.

Somto blew a chef kiss. "They will eat you up," she said in Igbo. "Very perfect, sis."

"Thank you." There was only one person she wanted looking at her as if he wanted to devour her wouldn't be there. And they weren't on talking terms. She'd sent a message asking about Bella and he hadn't replied. Tears

stung her eyes. It hurt like crazy. “I’m going to change and select a few more dresses.”

“Lucky you that you can shop for slim-fitting clothes. In four months I may not fit into any of my clothes.”

Erinma drew back the curtain, her head peeking out.

“I’m pregnant.”

Erinma squealed. “Somto! Oh my gosh, congratulations!”

“Thanks, dearie. I’ll wait for a little before I tell Mummy. Let her stew small.”

“I’m not there o.” She changed and stepped out.

“How are things with Andrew? You still haven’t gone back to him.”

Erinma shook her head. “It’s been a month already. He’s probably moved on.” The mere thought almost killed her. Another woman with her man was not okay with her. “He might not want to see me.”

“Get in touch first.”

“I sent messages to him but he didn’t respond.”

“Then call him.”

“What if he doesn’t want anything to do with me?”

Somto’s eyes softened. “Then at least you’ll know you tried.”

The time on her smartwatch inferred that she was almost late for her appointment. “I’ve got to run. I’ll see you later.” She rubbed her sister’s stomach. “Bye, baby. Auntie loves you.”

Erinma made it in time for her photoshoot. She changed into a long white trouser suit, donning a short black wig and walked out to the studio. Erinma had chosen a couple of songs for this occasion. The new her. ‘You Say’ by Lauren Daigle was one of them. The lyrics touched her deeply.

*I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I’m not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up*

*Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low
Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know*

The photographer nodded. “Ready.”

Erinma smiled. “I was born ready.” She sat and leaned back in the chair provided for her and struck a pose. She was proud of her skin. Unashamed of her burns because they were more than just memories for her; they would always be there with her. They were who she was. Her scars, intricate and beautiful as they were, belonged to her.

Beauty was more than celebrating flawless skin, or pretty face and body. For Erinma, it was now about celebrating the beauty in her scars because they were a beauty of God's goodness.

It was time for the world to see her come out boldly coming out on her terms—not because she needed to give a presentation—unafraid of her scars because this was who she was. And she was owning it.

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CHAPTER 39

ANDREW

When she called to see if he would be home, he'd almost said no. Bella was going to be with him but he had changed plans. After Bella met with her maternal grandfather, he dropped her off at Aunty B's place. She almost threw him out for disrupting her beauty sleep (as if). She stopped when he told her his reasons.

"Be Careful," was all she said.

When the doorbell rang, he stood and walked briskly to it, yanking it open. The quicker they talked, the better.

"Hello again, Kelechi."

"Tito."

She walked in and took a seat. He sat across from her. Today, she was sober and better dressed in black ripped jeans and a red off-the-shoulder long-sleeved top.

"What brings you here again?" He cut to the chase.

"I came to apologise. I treated you badly all those years ago."

Andrew pinned her with a look. Was this for real?

"This should come as a shock to you, after all these years."

He kept his mouth shut.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. I was in a bad head space." She frowned. "I'm still in a bad head space."

"Have things gotten worse since we were together?"

She laughed. “Obviously.”

Andrew blew out a breath. He couldn’t act indifferent. She was Bella’s mother. “Talk to me, Tito. Why are you like this? I know you don’t have daddy issues. Is this about your mum?”

Her expression took on a menacing look. “Don’t even go there.”

“Then what do you want me to say? I need you to talk to me, TJ. We had a thing. It didn’t work. It doesn’t mean we can’t have a civil conversation with no strings attached.”

“It’s not something I want to talk about.”

“TJ—”

“What do you want to hear, hmm? About how my mum left me with my dad when I was only five? I didn’t come here for that. Neither did I come to get a lecture. My dad does a good job with that.”

“Then why did you come here?” *Again*. Was this going to be a new habit for her: showing up in his life whenever she felt like it? “I can’t have you showing up here anytime you feel like it. Bella shouldn’t have to go through that.”

“You’re a good man, Kelechi. I’m sure you’re a great dad to Bella. No doubt you would have been the best husband. If only I had said yes.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. If things hadn’t happened the way they did he would be married to TJ and maybe they would have had an unhappy marriage and made each other miserable in his process of trying to help her.

The truth was no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t make her happy.

And so he didn’t respond. This was his moment to listen anyway.

“You asked why I came over...because you’re the only guy besides Kalu who has treated me like you cared. I knew how much you cared about me. I just couldn’t love you the way you did. And I truly am sorry for that.” She took a deep breath. “I’m still in love with Kalu. He’s still the love of my life. The first time I saw you guys, you were walking out of a neighbour’s house. You were good-looking too, but Kalu had all of my attention. I tried everything to get him to like me: asking for his help all the time—and with the silliest things, I dressed up pretty, I searched for tips on how to make your crush fall for you. Even so, none of them worked. Not even when I confessed my feelings to him. And then I heard guys rethink their decisions when they see the girl they like with another man, and so... I thought I

could make him jealous if I got close to you. I chose to settle for you; the next best thing.”

Andrew raked his hand through his hair—he hadn’t had a haircut recently. This was a lot to process. For years he’d told himself he didn’t want to know her side of the story. Settled for being kept in the dark and pushed forward with his relationship with this best friend. This...it floored him. But he couldn’t tune out now.

If your wounds don’t heal they can never be scars, Erinma had said to him.

TJ sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “You were great. You made me feel safe. When you proposed I knew it was a mistake. I let the charade go on for too long and I was going to hurt you.” She cocked her head. “Does Aunty B still hate me?”

“She can’t hate who she doesn’t know.”

She swept some hair to the front.

“What are you thinking?”

“What I think doesn’t matter.”

“It does.” She laughed at herself. “Maybe I was obsessed. But it gutted me when he left for America. When I heard he was going I went to meet him. I beg him to stay. I asked him why he didn’t want me. He said it didn’t have anything to do with me, that it was all on him. He was never going to be in a relationship and he wanted to serve God. And he told me to stop hurting you.”

Andrew proposed to her two days after Kalu left for the states. Although he would have preferred if his best friend was by his side as he popped the question to the woman he loved, Kalu hadn’t been supportive of his decision and wouldn’t come clean. Wondered at his sudden disposition towards TJ. Andrew delayed...thinking deep and hard about his choice. Two days later he knew he still wanted TJ to be his wife and was as confident in vowing himself to her alone for the rest of his life.

Hearing her say the words broke something in him that he wasn’t aware of.

“I did the same thing my mother did to me; I walked away from you and Bella. I couldn’t...” she paused, focusing her attention on her hands. “I couldn’t see myself being there for you guys and acting the roles of a mother and wife.” She looked up at him. “You know, I still wonder what made you ask me out. Back then, the idea of dating an older guy and being

rebellious appealed to me more than the responsibilities that come with being in love.”

“You don’t have to beat yourself up over this.”

“But I hurt you. I hurt you the same way my mum hurt my dad and me. The same way I’m hurting Bella...”

God...

Do it, Andrew.

“I was not going to take that money. When your dad offered me money in exchange to let you go, it was impossible for me. It was years later that I swallowed my pride and asked for a loan for the business. Despite everything, I wanted a good life for Bella. Aunty B encouraged me to do it, and somewhere in my head I knew I couldn’t sufficiently give her that.”

“I know. I just. I’m sorry. I said a lot of stupid things back then.”

He pushed himself to continue, “I hated you when you left. I told myself that I would never get involved with another woman. Hatred and resentment just harmed me more.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t care anymore that we didn’t work. What I do care about is you getting your act right. I believed you could be a better person back then. That hasn’t changed.”

Help me out here, Lord.

Go ahead. Receive your freedom.

“I forgive you, TJ.”

This moment held bittersweet memories. More than that, it was the freedom that broke him free from his shackles.

She gave a wobbly smile. “You’re having mercy on me, a sinner.”

“You don’t have to remain one. I was once in sin but God rescued me. He brought me out of the pit and set my feet on the rock.”

“Good for you.” She shook her head and rose to her feet. “I’m going to keep things as it is.”

“What about Bella? Don’t you want to get to know her?”

“No. Does she ask after me? I know she doesn’t know who I am, but does she wonder who I am?”

“Occasionally. Usually when something comes up at school.”

She nodded. “Are you seeing someone?”

The ache in his heart was still there. “No. Not anymore. You know her: Erinma Roberts.”

“Oh. What happened?”

Andrew shrugged. The pain of it was still heavy on his heart. "I'm not sure. She didn't think I meant it when I said I loved her."

"For what it's worth, Andrew, you deserve happiness. I hope you get it."

"TJ." She turned to face him. Eyebrow raised. "You know your father..."

"I know he's seeing Bella and that's fine. You asked where I got your address from. I hired a private investigator when I learned about BAM. I might not be in her life, but I was curious about her. Don't worry. I used a private investigator only once, so you don't have to look over your shoulders. Take care of Bella." And just like that, she walked out but this time not without returning his heart to him, sore and fractured. It was left to him to hand the broken pieces to God for mending.

Andrew settled back on the couch. Forearms on his knees and he clasped his hands touching the tip of his pointer fingers to his mouth. *What gives, Andrew?*

Despite that, all he could think about was Erinma. He scoffed at himself. *I'm definitely a loser when it comes to this love thing.* Even after everything she said to him, he missed her. But she didn't want him. Wasn't willing to give their relationship a try and face her fears. And no matter how much he cared, he couldn't force her to set herself free. Proof of that was what occurred between him and TJ.

"God, once again, I hand over my relationship with Erinma to you. If it's not Your will then I agree with it. On the other hand, if you want us to be together then make things happen in Your time and at Your pace."

CHAPTER 40

ERINMA

PALETTE EXPLOSION
ONE MONTH LATER...

“I don’t need you to want me, Arinze. I’m good on my own.”

“But I do need you, Bimpe. I want you badly.”

“Please, God, let a man say that to me,” Odavwaro said.

Isi shoved some popcorn in her mouth. “Why are Nigerian romantic movies so cheesy?”

“It’s the screenwriter and director’s fault.”

Erinma bit on her chocolate bar. “Cheesy or not, girls love cheesy mushy stuff.” The girls grunted in agreement. “Why can’t the girl chase the guy? Why is it always the guy chasing the girl?”

“Culture.” Isi and Odavwaro parotted.

“Ego,” Isi said again. “The man can’t take it. His head will swell the size of an elephant.”

“I want my man pulling all the stops for me. Candles, rose petals, music,” Odavwaro shimmied her shoulders.

Erinma chuckled. After weeks of non-stop work, it was time to kick off her shoes.

Nothing like a girls' hangout a day before the grand opening of His Garden and Palette Explosion. This was a new season for her. She could feel it to her bones. Tomorrow promised the start of something new.

You can't step into the new season with baggage from the old.

The words hit her hard. What?

Deal with your baggage. Talk to Destiny.

"You girls, I need to get to the flower shop."

"Now?" Isi asked.

"Yup." Erinma nodded. She got out her phone and sent a text: meet me at this address. Let's talk.

Odavwaro got out her phone. "Should I call a cab?"

Erinma was already on her feet and grabbing her car keys. "No. I'll drive."

Her friends stared at her.

"I'll drive," Erinma repeated. Her heart screamed in protest. She was going to do it. Needed to do it. "See you girls in a few."

His Garden walls were a striking pea-green colour. For the inside, the interior decorator had gone with a four-dimensional flower paper on a long wall and painted the rest of the walls white.

A car parked in front of the shop. Taking a deep breath, Erinma went to open the door.

"Hello, Destiny."

"Hi. I'm surprised you asked me to meet you here." Erinma noticed Destiny had lost some weight. Her lack of makeup made it obvious she was still in a funk.

"How's your family?"

"Fine. They ask after you. My mum told me you sent some food items the other day. Thanks for that."

"You're welcome."

Silence.

"This is a beautiful place. You did it."

"Thanks."

Another round of silence.

"I thought this was a good place for us to talk." Where she was about to birth something new. "If new life is to begin from inside a seed, the seed has to die," Erinma said.

Destiny looked at her sceptically.

Erinma laughed. "I'm talking about plants here. Though the same can be said of Christians. We must die to the flesh to be reborn in the spirit. Death

is excruciatingly painful. But, depending on which side you find yourself in, it opens the door to something new.”

Destiny rubbed her arms. “I’m so sorry, Erinma. I hurt you. We were best friends, and I can’t get over the fact that I hurt you so badly. In hindsight, I guess I wanted to be like you. I thought I could have it all, but all the sneaking around made it glaring that I was wrong. I couldn’t stop myself. I fell in love with the thrill and the money he gave me.” She shook her head. “I was a fool.”

“Yes, you were.” She wasn’t going to sugar-coat it.

“I’m sorry,” Destiny repeated.

“I forgive you.” As she said the words peace settled on her. “I don’t accept your actions. I hate what you did. But I don’t want to hate you. At some point I loved you as a sister,” Destiny looked at her. “Things have changed now and we can’t go back to the way things were.”

Destiny nodded, wiping at her tears. “I get that.”

Erinma moved to her and, at first reluctantly, she hugged her.

Destiny burst into tears.

“Destiny, you need Jesus. All your problems wouldn’t immediately go away, but God promises to carry them. He wants your worries and guilt. He wants your problems. He wants you to trust Him. Most importantly, He wants you. You can’t keep running to a man or woman to help you. This flesh fails. But God doesn’t.”

“Why are you talking to me about this after what I did to you? Shouldn’t you hate me?”

“It’s the same way we feel we don’t deserve God’s love but He loves us still even after everything we’ve done to Him.”

Just like you feel you don’t deserve Andrew’s love...

Her breath hitched.

“Would He still want me after I hurt you—since you’re one of His?” Destiny asked.

Erinma’s heart ached. “Yes.”

“Then I want Him,” Destiny said with quiet conviction.

Tears sprang up in Erinma’s eyes.



GRAND OPENING

Erinma peered around the room and excitement grew in her chest. This was happening! The Grand opening of Palette Explosion was going to be a success. At the smaller soft opening, all the guests openly gushed about Jordan's food, with only a few complaints about the heat level, but they were looking forward to today.

A tall figure caught her eye and her shoulders when he turned. It wasn't him. It'd been weeks since she last saw him and every tall, handsome, espresso brown guy made her heart flip in her chest. She'd extended an invitation to him, hoping he would construe it as a form of peace offering. All the same, he never turned up for the Soft Opening, which was a more private affair. She didn't think he would show up today for the Grand Opening.

Even if... how could she face him after everything?

She was a coward.

Everyone advised her to talk to him. Give him a chance. God, should I? She had asked the question one time too many times. Getting the same Scripture over and over again: perfect love casts out fear. Even God was ghosting her on the matter. He wasn't saying anything about it.

But Erinma had plans for the evening.

This was supposed to be a great day for her. And she was going to make it happen. No matter if she ended up hurt.

She looked around.

The light brown wooden walls and green potted plants that hung in the ceiling added a splash of colour to the space. Beautiful lighting at night would create a warm and inviting atmosphere. Palette Explosion was written in yellow calligraphy across a section of the long wall and the words Start Sweet just below it in black. A black booth was pushed up against the wall, complete with a brown table and black chairs. Each table was adorned with tall white tulips. The ushers had peach roses ready for everyone who came through the door.

Satisfied with the front end, Erinma strolled down the corridor leading to the kitchen and office. She entered the kitchen. "How are things over here?"

"Good, good."

"Need some assistance with food tasting?"

"You can sample the cheese rolls and chilli sauce."

She bit into it. "Oh my God," she mumbled as she chewed and swallowed. "This is incredible!"

He grinned and gave orders to his staff.

Erinma returned to the dining area. People were starting to arrive. When she saw Ari Mato, she dashed to her side.

"Hello, Erinma. You look lovely," Ari Mato commented.

"Thank you. You look amazing as well. I'm so glad you could make it."

"I wouldn't have missed it. It pained me that I couldn't be there for the Soft Opening and also the Proud Belle's launch party. I had an emergency during the party and I wasn't feeling too good on the day of the Soft Opening."

"I'm sorry. Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, and very eager to taste some of today's delicacies." A tall, good-looking man came to her side. "This is Oreos."

Erinma raised her eyes to the man. "Oreos?"

"It's short for Norioghene. He's the set manager on the show."

The man extended a hand. "Nice to meet you, Erinma."

"Same here." Erinma accepted the handshake. "You're both welcome and I hope you enjoy the food."

An usher was waiting to show them to their seats.

Next were her friends.

"This place is gorgeous," Isi said.

"Great job, Erin," Nelly said.

"Thank you, guys." She peered behind them. "Where's Odavwaro?"

"She's coming. She said she needed to work behind the scenes or something."

Her parents walked in.

"Thanks for coming." She pecked her mum and hugged her dad.

"We wouldn't have missed it." Mum looked around. "This place is really something, dear."

Dad nodded. "Very good."

"I've been waiting for you guys. I have to leave now."

Mum frowned. "Where are you going?"

"Mum, help me host. You know you're great at it. I'll be back soon."

"What has gotten into that girl?" Her mother said, perplexed.

Erinma didn't wait to hear her father's reply.



Andrew's brows shot up. Confused. "Erinma? What are you doing here?"

Gosh, she'd missed him so much. Erinma's gaze took a sweet stroll down his neck. She felt her mouth open. His shirt was only partially buttoned, revealing his hairy chest. A chiselled and hairy chest. She wolf-whistled in her head.

"Are you seriously checking me out right now?" Annoyed, he buttoned his shirt up.

She swallowed hard. The lump in her throat refused to leave. Jesus, help me. Where was her self-respect? Should he even be opening the door looking like that?

He gazed down at her, his frown deepening. "Are you okay?"

"I-I came to see you." She cleared her throat. "Can I come in?"

He stared at her for a few minutes, as though debating whether it was worth it to let her back into his world for a few minutes. "Sure." His expression was now blank so she couldn't even decipher what he was thinking.

She stepped in.

"Where's Bella?"

"Sleepover at Caroline's."

"How have you been?"

He crossed his arms. "I'm good. You?"

"Miserable without you."

He looked her over. "You don't look it."

She couldn't help the laugh that slipped past her lips. How much more miserable did he want her to appear with her scarred appearance/scars? But she didn't care. Even with her scars, she knew she was worthy of love.

When he didn't even budge with a smile, she said, "I have missed you. A lot."

He continued to stare at her. Swayed not.

"Can I sit?"

"Knock yourself out."

Erinma sat on a loveseat. "I asked myself what it was about me that made you physically attracted to me." She shifted in her seat. "When a man looks at a woman, lusts after her, he's looking at all of her physical attributes; her curves and all that catches his eye—" She jumped to her feet. "Sorry, I would rather not sit."

She exhaled deeply.

"As I was saying, a man looks at the curves and all the things that make a man want a woman. Somewhere in my warped mind, I imagined that in years to come you would regret making me your choice." A muscle twitched in his jaw. "I couldn't put myself through that. I was looking out for myself and I didn't stop to consider what my actions would do to you and Bella. For that, I'm so sorry."

Taking a deep breath, she took the rectangular box from the loveseat.

"This is for you." She extended the box to him. "Open it." He looked down at the box like she was handing him a box filled with explosives. And it might as well be filled with explosives because when he opened it, it could either explode all over her or he could just take it as it was.

He nudged his chin at it. "What's inside?"

"You have to take it from my hands and open it."

"What if I don't want it?"

"Then I'll leave."

Again, that muscle twitch in the jaw. "Just like that."

"Yes." Even if it hurts like crazy.

Andrew took the box from her and opened it, his gaze fixed on her. She swallowed when he finally looked down. His brows furrowed in confusion. "You're giving me a dead rose?"

"It's not dead. It's a toffee rose."

"A toffee rose?"

"I heard that when you give it to a man it means 'I love you'."

His gaze snapped to hers.

"And that's what I want to say to you. I'm sorry. And I love you, Andrew. You were hurt in the past and I caused you even more pain." Tears gathered

in her eyes. She was willing to lay it all bare for him. “I want to be a part of your life. I want you to be my man, and I want to be your woman. I want to hear all your silly stories about your passengers. I want to take Bella for pottery classes. I want the both of you, and you’re the only man I want.”

He took a step forward, almost closing the space between them.

“I’m sorry for not fighting for us. I’m sorry I let my insecurities get in the way.”

He just stood there staring only at her.

“Please say something...”

His lips curled into a smile. “I feel like I’m on the bachelorette show right now.”

She laughed. Tears flowed down her cheeks as he finally closed the gap and wrapped his arms around her.

“I missed you too,” he simply said.

She smiled against his chest. Breathed in his enticing man-scent. She’d missed this.

All too soon, he pulled away, and she was greedy for his warmth. He cupped her face. “It’s about time you came to your senses. I love you, too.” He leaned down and she rose to her toes to meet his lips. It was a brief, chaste kiss, but full of promises.

“Could you get dressed now? Come with me to the restaurant’s Grand opening. I’ll wait in the car.”

He grinned. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

Erinma couldn’t stop grinning when he emerged minutes later, looking dapper in a dinner jacket, white shirt and black slacks.

“Hello, handsome.”

“You drove?”

“Yeah. I’m doing a lot of new things these days.”

“Like?”

“Photoshoots, driving, giving a man a rose...”

“You did a photoshoot?” He blinked and got into the car. “How was it?”

She grinned. “Liberating. I posted them like two weeks ago. But there’s one I didn’t post.” She handed him her phone and drove out of his compound. “Check my Gallery. I saved that one for you while hoping you would take me back.”

“*Omalicha!*” He exclaimed a few seconds later.

Erinma guffawed.

"I'm proud of you, girl."

"Thanks, babe." It felt so good saying that. They talked and laughed easily, filling each other in on things they'd missed, till they got to the restaurant. The place teeming with a mixed crowd of guests and journalists.

"You look gorgeous by the way," he said as he opened her car door for her.

"I think so too." She was dressed in a navy blue sheath gown. It had a draped V neckline and an asymmetrical hem. She loved how it made her look. But more importantly, she loved how she felt on the inside.

He leaned down and kissed her on the side of her head. His gaze was also drawn to the crowd. "You did this! How are you feeling?"

"Nervous. Excited. Hungry. I'm also happy you're here."

"I'm proud of you. You know, I would have come even if you didn't show up at my place."

"Really?" Erinma eyed him.

Andrew chuckled and kissed her again. "Guess you'll never know."

"You guys should take your lovey-dovey vibes elsewhere."

Erinma turned to see Tito walking up to them.

"Hi, Tito. Glad you could make it."

She looked at them both and smiled. "Thanks for the invitation. Glad to see you two together." She winked and walked away.

"Tito Jacobs! Over here!" A journalist called out.

"What was that about?" Erinma asked.

"I'll tell you later."

"Hmm, okay. Come on." She held his hand. "Let me introduce you to my world."

"I'll follow you anywhere."

This guy... "I love you."

His eyes twinkled. "Love you more."

FOLLOW ISI'S STORY IN [YELLOW HIBISCUS](#)

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NEXT READ...

WATCH OUT FOR BOOK 2 OF THE FLOWER SERIES!

SEE A SMALL SCENE BELOW:

Nelly

“Hi, Nelly. You look awful.” Erinma stated. “Are you okay?”

He shrugged.

“Isi said she can’t be friends with me anymore.”

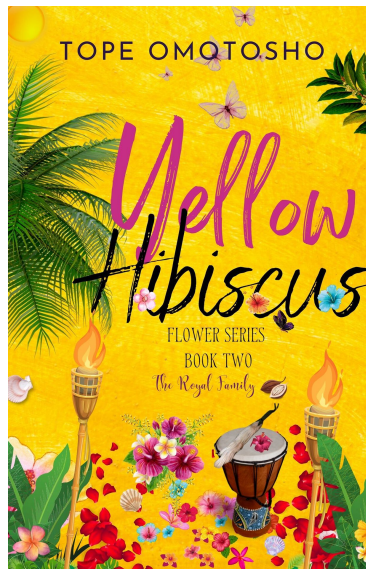
Erinma blinked. “Why would she say that? Did something happen between you two?”

He shook his head. “Not on my part.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

Follow Isi’s story...



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this. I'm delighted that you've decided to accompany me on this somewhat lengthy journey through the lives of several characters, their struggles, romances, and awakening to God's love and heart desire for each of them. I hope Brown Roses gave you a good taste of what's to come in future books.

Initially, there was only going to be one book. A stand-alone novel. I was seriously looking forward to it because I've never written a standalone book before! But the first story birthed five others and Brown Roses is the lucky number one. To tell you the truth, I've never done a six-book series and since I'm a pantser, so I don't plan my books ahead of time. I simply go with the flow and let the Holy Spirit lead me in whatever direction He desires. So planning to write about such a large cast and their individual lives and challenges is daunting. I felt stuck at times while writing Brown Roses and wondered if I was doing the right thing, but God encouraged me to keep writing. This series is so much bigger than me and I'm trusting that God will lead me.

I'm not sure how I got the idea for the Flower Series, but it stuck with me. I've always been fascinated by colours and flowers. I mean, I grew up hearing my mother converse with her plants! She calls the entire process

"nurturing and caring for her plants." And I'm thinking to myself, 'this is so strange.' 'Can they hear what you're saying?' But there's some truth in it. Right now, I'm learning the value of nurturing something you love and care about. This simply confirms Jesus' statement in John 15 about being the vine and we being the branches.

In Christianity, the Gardener is God. He keeps an eye on His own: planting, pruning, watering, transplanting, pulling weeds, and applying fertilizer. He desires that we grow and bear fruit. But He will not simply place us in the sun and leave us there. He is always watching and available to meet our needs and ensure that we are getting the proper nutrients.

For Brown Roses, I believe God wanted me to tell this story about scars (both visible and invisible), overcoming insecurities, and getting a second chance. For me, travelling with Erinma and Andrew in Brown Roses was a memorable experience. It's both difficult and rewarding. I like the idea of a powerful and beautiful woman who doesn't recognize her full potential and needs a hiccup in her perfect life to realize who she is in God's eyes. I've had insecurities for as long as I can remember, and they're not easy to get rid of. Consistent self-talk is required to break free from the bonds of self-doubt and hold on to God's truth about who you are and how He sees you.

If you knew you would live for only a short time, what would you do differently about your life? I think this is one question we should ask ourselves. How would we choose to live our lives if we knew we had two years, three months or days?

Erinma had a lot to deal with. Especially with the guilt of killing a family. And guilt is an enemy weapon used to keep us imprisoned in the lies that we will never be forgiven and that God will not love us. I know that many of us experience self-guilt from time to time for various reasons. The devil has a way of condemning us and making us feel worse about ourselves. The guilt alone will leave you exhausted and depressed. But I admire Erinma for persevering with the help of godly friends and God. All of the challenges she faced only strengthened her. And it gave birth to a greater purpose than she could have imagined.

Andrew needed to let go of his past. His rage and anguish. And it was breathtaking to watch the two main characters work through their problems,

recover, and find their way back to each other. It reminds me of another Scripture: if you have a dispute with a brother, settle it before presenting your offering to God. In this case, they needed to reconcile with their past in order to move forward.

I believe God needed both characters to sort out their issues so they could move forward. And realise that: Endings are better than beginnings. Ecclesiastes 7:8a MSG

You may be going through a difficult time right now, but remember that God is with you and that endings are better than beginnings. This is only the first book in the Flower Series, and I can't wait to meet the rest of the characters. Isi's story promises to be intriguing---well, from what's playing in my head 😊.

If you need to talk or ask questions, feel free to send an email to me. The song sang in HGC by Daniel Nwachukwu was composed by me and I have included it after the glossary. Hope it ministers to you.

If you haven't given your life to Christ and you're ready to do so then say these words, *Lord, I thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to die for my sins. I believe He is the Son of God. I believe He died for my sins and I accept Him as my Lord and Saviour. I repent of my sins. Please, wash me clean with His blood. Accept me as Your child today. I pick up my cross and follow You. Come into my heart and make it Your home. Thank You, Lord, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Yay! Welcome to the Kingdom of God. So happy for you!

Feel free to contact me via email: topeomotoshowrites@gmail.com

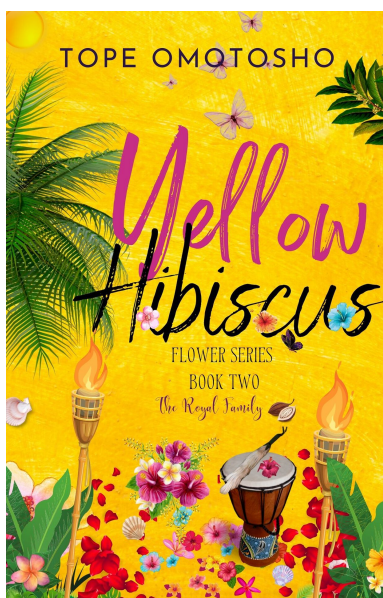
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I would love to hear from you.

Till the next novel,
Tope Omotosho.
Writing God's Heart.



Flower Series Prequel



Flower Series Book Two

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How will you handle rekindling an old friendship like that of Erinma and Isimeme? Will it come easy to you?
2. Are you quick to defend your spouse/fiance even when he is wrong just as Lanre expected Erinma to? What approach will you take in such a scenario?
3. If you could choose, which of the book characters will you like to meet and why?
4. Which event in the book was most similar to something you've personally experienced?
5. Destiny ruined her friendship with Erinma, what would you do differently from Erinma's point of view?
6. We see Isi giving Erinma a message God told her. Has anyone ever approached you to share what they believe God instructed them to tell you? How did you confirm that it was from God?
7. What scene in the book did you feel touched you the most? Why did it make you feel that way? Has something like that ever happened to you or anyone you know?

8. Andrew was the recipient of unrequited love. Do you feel he was wrong to hold on to his anger for so long?

9. What do you feel about Andrew and Bella's relationship?

10. Do you feel Andrew handled his conversation with TJ and Bella's Grandfather properly?

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Tope Omotosho is passionate about impacting the world through timeless wisdom and knowledge found in her thought-provoking stories. Her stories and articles cut across love, relationship and romance in a way that does not deny the relevance of God in our everyday life.

She is a devoted Christian passionate about bringing people to the knowledge of God's true and unfailing love. You can read more about her stories and articles on www.lifegodandlove.com

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GLOSSARY

Yeye – rubbish.

Abi? – right?

Mba! – No!

Yes nau – Yes, of course.

Shoo? – Seriously?

Mami Water – Water spirit.

Okpa – is an Eastern Nigerian delicacy prepared with a special type of beans (Bambara bean).

Pap – Ogi (or Akamu) is a fermented cereal pudding from Nigeria, typically made from maize, sorghum, or millet.

Why nau? — Like seriously, why?

You are doing that guy strong tin o – You're being unfair to that guy.

Abeg, lemme – Please, leave me alone.

Chairman, abeg no vex – Chairman, please don't get upset.

Who self-righteousness epp? – How has being self-righteous helped me?

Abeg – Please.

! na-anụ m? – You hear me?

You sabi play? Something dey worry you! Abeg, commot for here o jare!

– Can you play? There's something wrong with you! Leave this place, please!

Area boys (Yoruba: agbèrò): loosely organized gangs of street children and teenagers, composed mostly of males, who operate on the streets of major cities in Nigeria.

Lasgidi – Lagos State.

I dey, jare – I’m good.

Oga – Boss.

Woman palava – Woman troubles.

Ankara – a type of cotton cloth featuring brightly coloured patterns produced by means of a wax-resist dye technique, associated especially with West African fashion. (from Oxford dictionary)

Desserts get grade o! – Desserts have levels according to taste and how they’re made.

Ehn-ehn – Is that so?

E be like sey you dey look after pikin. You go make sure sey him get all the milk and love from him mama and papa. – It’s just like you’re looking after a baby. You make sure the baby gets all the milk and love from the mother and father.

“Like Bible talk am, Make una dey inside mi, so dat I go dey inside una too. As di branches nor fit bear fruit with en own pawa unless e dey inside di vine, na so una nor go fit bear fruit, unless una dey inside mi.”

— Like the Bible says, Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:4 NIV)

Gìṇì mere ya? – What happened to her?

Tete bi mọ. – Quickly give birth.

Jor, ma binu si mi – Please, don’t be angry with me.

Ma sọ ọrọ isọkusọ – don’t say nonsense.

Kini o fẹ ki awọn eniyan sọ? – What do you want people to say?

Jọwọ, ni sũru diẹ – Please, exercise some patience.

Oun ni ẹgbọn mi ko tumọ si pe Emi yoo gba awọn ọrọ rẹ ni irọrun. – He’s my older brother doesn’t mean I’ll take his words lightly.

Bobo – Guy.

Aristos – A wealthy man, especially married, who has sexual affairs with much younger women and spends money on them.

Yahoo boys – Internet fraudsters.

Aso-ebi – A uniform dress traditionally worn in Nigeria and some West African cultures as an indicator of cooperation and solidarity during

ceremonies and festive periods.

Sha – Nevertheless.

Dem no dey fear? – They aren't scared?

Dun-dee! – Idiot!

God dey always check to see if we dey move. E wan make sure sey we dey comot fruit and we dey bloom plenty. Each time E see progress E go comot more from us/prune and prune. E know say we fit grow more and more and we fit bear fruit wey plenty. – God is always checking to see if we are making progress. He wants to make sure we produce fruit and we are blooming. Each time He sees progress, He keeps pruning. He knows we can grow even more and bear much fruit.

Wetin happen, Mike? — What's wrong, Mike?

One madam dey look you. Em talk sey na Bella mama. — There's a woman looking for you. She said she's Bella's Mum.

Oyinbos – Caucasians.

Japa 101 – Emigration plans.

You sabi the woman before? – Have you seen the woman here before?

I neva see am before. — I haven't seen her here.

I dey come. – I'm coming.

Where em dey? – Where is the person?

Wawu – Wow!

Biko – Please.

Sekere – a melodic shaker; beads or cowrie shells beautifully wound around a gourd, shaken, beaten by fists occasionally and thrown in the air to create a festive mood.

Ashiko – a cone-shaped drum.

Owambe – Owambe is a Yoruba word which translates to "it is there". It is the general name used to refer to parties thrown in Nigeria, especially by the Yoruba people.

Amebo – Someone that likes to gossip.

Wee-wee – Urinate.

Ojuju calabar – Fictitious masquerade.

Omalicha! – Gorgeous!

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LOVE BROKE ME (SONG)

Love Broke Me
By Daniel Nwachukwu

Verse 1

I want to fall deeper in love with You
I want to memorise who You are to me
Return me to that childlike trust
That carefree abandon that trusts in You, Lord
For this heart desires nothing less
Instil Your desires in me
Make me more like You

Chorus

It's only You I want
Only You my heart craves for
All of You took in my excesses
With my weakness You embraced me
If this is love, I don't want it to end
No, no, for this love is reshaping me

Verse 2

If I could turn back the hands of time

I would erase every false assumption
I would tear down the cruel pretensions
I would strip off the pains I cause you
For your love was given to me
Your tears have left me broken
For you chose to love a man like me

Verse 3

It's no longer about me
It was never only about me
For in You I find my life, Jesus
In You is everything I could ever need
So take me, Lord
Take rulership, take Lordship
Be my Shepherd and Saviour

Bridge

Oh, what love is this?
Oh, what love is this?
Give me more
Give me more
Till I want nothing more than Your love

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