



The Malik Billionaires 2

OUR MARRIAGE
OF
CONVENIENCE

L. L. LAKO

‘M, DO YOU WANT TO KISS ME?’

Misbah blinks. ‘Excuse me?’

‘You have been staring at me as if you want to kiss me. Is that what you want?’

‘Reana, where is this coming fro-?’

‘Answer the question, Misbah.’

L. L. LAKO

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The Malik Billionaires: Book Two
(Volume One)

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This book contains Nigerian pidgin words and phrases which have been italicized. There is a glossary at the end of the book with translations and explanations of the pidgin words and phrases.

For all my readers.

1

MISBAH MALIK

The evening harmattan wind carries a lot of dust and chill. The chill penetrates my thin shirt fabric, aiming right for the bones. Slightly worried that the dust might irritate my eyes, I knock on the heavy metal door more urgently.

The sound of the latch comes through. The door opens wide.

‘Thank God you’re here. I’m starving.’

As always, her familiar scent hits me first, followed by the thought of how lovely she looks. Casually put-together in a long green top, dark jean trousers and a fashionable cap, Reana dimples prettily as she steps back to let me in. Against her coffee-and-cream skin, her full, unpainted but gleaming lips are curved in a slight smile. Then again, they almost always seem to look that way. I know for sure that she’s excited about something though, by the sparkle in her large, expressive eyes.

‘Sorry I’m late.’

‘And you forgot your key again. If you’ll make me open the door for you every time, you might as well return the key.’

‘Sorry. You really should learn to check who is at the door before opening it, Ree. That’s what this peephole is for.’

Reana grins, ‘and that concludes the chastisement portion of tonight’s entertainment, folks.’

‘I am serious, Ree. This isn’t a safe area.’

In bare feet, Reana’s head reaches up to my shoulder so she has to tilt up her head slightly to look into my eyes. ‘You worry needlessly.’ As if the discussion is over, Reana turns on her heels. She precedes me down the short, dimly-lit corridor to the living room.

The living room always looks cheerful: overwhelmingly so, in fact. There are throw pillows and knickknacks in bright, clashing colours. This place makes me think of a nursery school classroom. As usual, it is in slight disarray. Books are piled high on a bookshelf in the corner of the room. It suits Reana to the ground. Reana never learnt how to use a bookshelf properly. Maybe she simply doesn’t care.

The long, glass-topped table in the centre of the room has a pack of *Whot* cards for our game.

Slipping on something, I catch myself, but only just.

At my slight sound of distress, Reana halts. She walks back to me. With a sheepish smile, she kicks a teddy bear with one ear out of the way. ‘Sorry.’

‘About the door, what if it was someone with nefarious intentions? Would you open the door without checking first?’

'M, darling, don't be a bore. Now, as you can see,' Reana gestures towards the long table. 'All is set for tonight. We'll eat first.'

With a sigh, I push my worries aside. 'You look great tonight.'

She laughs, 'thank you.'

'But, there's something ... more. New scarf?'

'New something. Did you bring food?'

Surprised, I peer into her eyes. 'Ree, you said you were going to cook.'

'Aw, I thought you were going to bring the food.'

Ah! I relax. 'Reana, you know that twinkle in your eye always gives you away.'

Her fake look of horror turns into a mock pout and then soft laughter. Reana returns from the kitchen a moment later with a large tray.

Grape juice! 'Reana, my one true love, marry me.'

'And make you grape juice every day for the rest of our lives?'

'That goes without saying.'

With a fond headshake, Reana serves us Couscous and meat balls.

I take a large gulp of juice and sigh. 'So, are you going to tell me why you're in such a good mood tonight?'

Reana giggles. 'I met someone. He's handsome. He dresses really nice, like you.'

She puts a meatball in her mouth. 'He has swag and a nice car. This one has class, unlike that idiot, Garba.'

'Ree?'

'I know, I know.' Getting my meaning, Reana sighs. 'I just met him, I know. But he's really kind, I swear.' She smiles. 'His name is Eric. He calls me doll.'

Great! Knowing my job, I nod, 'happy for you.'

'Cool. So, I invited him to Femi's wedding tomorrow, and he said he'll be there.'

'Wait, I thought we were going together.'

'Yes, yes, of course. I invited him along as, like, a second date. I really want you to meet him, M.'

It is quite painful for me to deny Reana anything. It is just about impossible to do so when she aims those large, brown pools right at my soul, just as she's doing now. Ignoring the funny feeling in my gut, I nod once more and shove a ball into my mouth.

After the meal, Reana brings us mugs of hot cocoa. 'It is rather late.' She sits, facing me across the table. 'Maybe you should stay here tonight.'

'Are you sure your new boyfriend won't mind?' I pick up the cards and shuffle.

Reana dimples. 'We're only talking. Eric's not my boyfriend yet.'

'Sounds as if you'd like him to be.' I deal out the cards.

'We'll see. Anyway, we're a package deal, right? You're non-negotiable. He should know that from now on.' She drops a two-plus. 'Pick two.'

Hiding the pleasure her words give me, I pick two cards from *General Market* with a grunt.

'Why did you arrive late anyway?'

'This and that,' I hedge.

Reana says nothing, which means she can see what I'm trying to do.

I look up, find her watching me intently, and release a sigh. 'I had an impromptu date with Lola.'

'Ah.'

'We broke up.' I return my attention to my cards.

Reana watches me in silence for a long moment. She places a hand on mine with a firm but gentle pressure. 'What happened?'

With a sigh, I recall the pain of the experience. 'I found out she was cheating and confronted her about it. According to Lola, I am emotionally abusive, because I neglect her. Someone else was more willing to be there for her. She went with him.' What I do not add is that Lola also accused me of cheating with Reana and using our close friendship as a cover.

Reana gives a sad headshake. 'I am so sorry, M. You did not deserve that.'

I wave, showing that it does not matter.

'One day, when we met at your place, she cornered me and accused me of shifting your attention away from her.'

I look up in surprise. 'You never told me this.'

'Why would I? So I could ruin your precious relationship?'

I suppose there's no point in covering stuff up. 'Lola did mention something to that effect as well.'

Reana gives a short laugh. 'She thinks we're lovers? That does not surprise me. Her behaviour bothered me at the time. You were in one of your moods during that period and that was the only reason you were distracted. She did not know and she did not care enough to ask. That was when I knew she wasn't for you.' Reana goes silent for a long beat. 'She cheated and then blamed you for it. I'm sorry you're hurt but I am glad she's out of your life.'

'I'm not hurt.'

With a sad smile that implies she knows better, Reana repeats, 'I am sorry, M.'

Knowing that there's little point in further denial, I lift her hand and press it to my cheek in silent gratitude. 'If I'm going to sleep here, I am not sleeping on this torture foam you call a sofa, not again.'

'We'll figure it out. I got an inflatable pad a few days ago. You can help me try it out.'

'Sounds comfortable.'

Reana snickers. 'I told you I'm thinking of buying another house in a better area. Until then, I don't want to buy any real furniture for this place. The mattress is a good compromise. It can serve as a sofa too.'

I drop a 5-star. 'Pick three. I keep telling you, Ree, move into my place. It's more than big enough, it's safe, and it's more comfortable for hangout dates.'

'I keep telling you, Mister M, I am good, thanks.' Reana picks three cards from the *General market*. Her words do not surprise me. Ree has to do everything by herself. She especially does not accept help from men.

'Yeah,' I reply absently. The thought I've been pushing away all evening comes back. 'Ree, tell me the truth.'

She looks at me, curious.

'Am I emotionally abusive ... or neglectful?'

Reana's eyes soften. 'Don't let her words get to you, M. I know what neglect looks like. I grew up with it, remember? Do you honestly think I'd keep you around if you were the slightest bit like that?'

That makes sense.

I raise my mug to Reana in a toast.

We talk and play cards till late into the night. After Reana agrees that I'm the winner, we inflate her new mattress.

2

REANA OLOWO

Misbah and I awoke early this morning and said our prayers.

Feeling rather sleepy, I decided to return to bed for a while. With Misbah, I don't have to worry about being a terrible host.

He doesn't count as a guest. Besides, he can find his way around the house.

An hour later, a terrible but familiar ache in my lower belly cleared my eyes of any lingering sleep. I rushed to the bathroom and had a purge. There, I saw what I should have known. My period had arrived.

This always happens to me. I don't know why it had to come today of all days, when I have to go to this wedding thing. I would prefer to stay home, eat whatever sugary stuff I can get my hands on, watch sappy movies and sleep.

Stepping out of the shower area, I wrap a dry, red towel around my body and stick my head out the bathroom door.

The room is empty.

Good.

I turn the key in the lock to be safe; M hasn't learnt to knock yet.

I'm not so modest as to be troubled if he ever saw me naked, but I'd prefer to avoid that during my period. Carefully, I pick out my previously selected clothes. My ensemble consists of black lace lingerie; a ball-style gown in an *Ankara* fabric; the matching head piece tied in a fashionable knot; and a lacy white veil around my neck. After arguing with myself, I decide to wait till we get to Misbah's before applying my make-up. I hold the make-up kit in one hand, along with my glittery high-heeled sandals and gold purse.

On my way out of the room, I stand in front of the cheval glass for a few seconds and then nod in satisfaction.

Misbah is sitting on a sofa, scrolling on his work tablet.

As usual, seeing M brings me a familiar surge of pleasure, making me feel a little less blue.

He looks up with a smile as I walk in. Beneath the quick, charming smile is a tough, headstrong nature. I would know as I've butted heads with that stubborn rock several times.

Misbah hardly shows his hard side, though. Brown, dreamy eyes on dark chocolate, a sneaky cologne, an impressive physique and a heap of charm makes for a very potent mix on people, especially unsuspecting females. 'Hey, sleepyhead,' he winks. 'I thought I'd let you catch some while I-'

'Work, I know.' I try to return his smile, I really do, but from the arch look on Misbah's face, I do not quite succeed.

'Are you okay?' His voice lowers. With a concerned frown, Misbah puts his tablet away and stands.

‘Yeah, I’m good.’ Still contorting my face in an effort to smile and getting a little frustrated with myself, I nod. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Your special bed was surprisingly comfortable. I slept like a baby.’

‘I know. You farted in your sleep.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ M sounds insulted.

I dump my stuff gently on a sofa. ‘Twice, in fact, but there was no smell so ...’ I shrug. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell your next girlfriend.’

I straighten slowly, turn around, and am a little startled to find Misbah standing right behind me. I put out my hand. ‘Do you mind moving back? You need to learn to stop invading my space.’

Remaining in place—why do I bother? He never listens—Misbah hands me my favourite mug with steam rising from it.

Taking a sniff of the hot cocoa, my eyes widen and my breath quickens.

‘You are welcome.’

Ignoring him, I sit on a short stool, take the first, hot sip and close my eyes to savor the burn of the liquid going down my throat. I open my eyes with a sigh.

Misbah is now sitting on a sofa across from me. He is watching me with a smirk he probably thinks I can’t see.

‘Thank you. I really needed this.’

Misbah nods. ‘I don’t fart in my sleep.’

His solemn tone makes me smile.

Misbah nods with satisfaction. ‘What’s up, Ree?’

‘M, it’s nothing you want to know, trust me.’

His smile turns into a toothy grin. He leans forward in his seat. ‘We don’t keep stuff from each other, Ree.’

I beg to differ, but now’s not the time to bring that up.

I place the mug on the table. ‘Okay. I got my period and my belly hurts. I am not sure if I want to cry or throw up: probably both. Instead of going to a party, I want to stay indoors for the whole day and just gorge on chocolate. I promised you I’d go with you to this wedding though, so I have to go. Oh, and I have a stupid pimple on my cheek.’

Misbah stays silent for a moment. ‘It doesn’t sound like you’re fine.’

‘No, I am fine.’

‘I can call and cancel.’

‘I would prefer to cancel for sure, but we won’t.’

Misbah nods again, as if he is processing this just-gotten information. ‘You look like you’re about to cry.’

‘Wow. Thanks.’

‘No, I didn’t mean-’ His eyes narrow. ‘Wait, this is a thing, right? You become more irritable on your ... um ...’

‘Period. Yes.’

‘Hm. Despite the pimple, you look stunning.’ Misbah says it as a matter of course.

‘That makes me feel a little better. Would you like breakfast?’

‘You can cook in your ... condition?’

‘You can pronounce the word, you know? Period, period, period.’ Taking pity on Misbah, I stop repeating the word when I see him cringing.

‘The “condition” is not a grave illness, Misbah. Yes, I can cook. Again, I would prefer not to, but you’re here and you hate to cook, so the task falls to me, doesn’t it?’

‘Are *you* hungry?’

I shake my head.

‘I’ve already had Cornflakes.’

‘In that case ...’ Moving to a sofa, I lean back, close my eyes, and enjoy my beverage. ‘When you’re ready, we can leave for your place.’

Misbah goes silent. He continues working on his tablet, but I feel his gaze on me every few minutes. If I were to guess his thoughts, I’d say he’s trying to get used to knowing about my female workings.

I did tell him not to ask.

When the drink finishes, I wash the mug.

Misbah is on his feet when I return. ‘Come here.’

I halt a few feet from him. ‘Sorry?’

‘I said come here.’

Frowning a little, I go to him. ‘What’s this about now?’

Misbah surprises me by pulling me close. He wraps his arms tight around me in a hug.

At first, I stiffen in surprise. Then, I relax and return the embrace. I nuzzle my nose into the crook of his neck and draw in his scent. ‘That feels really good.’

‘What was that?’ He steps back.

‘You smell amazing. How can you smell like a million bucks after using my boring soap?’ I bend gently to pack my stuff.

Misbah collects the purse and the make-up kit from me, leaving me with the shoes.

‘Your soap isn’t boring, and I didn’t use it.’

‘You didn’t use my soap? What did you use this morning?’

‘I haven’t had a bath yet.’

‘Wow.’ We move towards the front door. ‘You haven’t had a bath, and you smell like that. That is so unfair.’

Misbah gives a low chuckle.

I remember something. ‘Wait.’ I narrow my eyes at him. ‘Misbah, you used my toothbrush again, didn’t you?’

He shrugs. ‘I had to use something.’

Every time.

‘I have told you to stop using my brush.’

‘If I can’t find a spare brush, I’ll use yours.’ Misbah shrugs again, unbothered.

‘Next time, bring your own toothbrush.’ With a hiss, I insert the keys in the door-lock and turn.

Outside, the chill of the morning is harsh, while the sun is just starting to peep. We hurry to M’s Jeep parked in front of the house. Thankfully, it has not been stolen.

‘I always find it interesting that you never worry about this huge car in this unsafe area.’

Misbah glances at me with a boyish grin. ‘Is the unsafe area the reason you insist on driving that embarrassment you call a car?’

The laughter erupts before I can stop it. Feeling a loud pang in my belly, I wince and massage the spot lightly. 'I beg, don't make me laugh this morning.'

M opens the car door for me. He waits till I'm seated before placing my stuff beside my feet. Then, he gets in the driver's seat and switches on the heater.

I glance at him. 'That was sweet of you. The hug.'

'You looked as if you needed it.'

You have no idea.

Once driving, Misbah glances at me in that strange manner.

We move past small, fenceless bungalow houses similar to mine, that are packed closely together. A bunch of area boys leaning against an abandoned car stare at us pointedly as we drive by. Soon, we reach the main road.

M glances at me again.

'Darling, spit it out or keep it to yourself but please, watch the road.'

Misbah remains silent for a beat and then sends me another glance. 'I just wondered something. Well, a lot of things.'

'I know. You have it written all over your face.'

He clears his throat. 'I mean, we never talked about that stuff before. I just never thought about you in those terms.'

'You mean you never thought of me as a woman. Now, you do.'

'It isn't that I never thought of you as a woman. I mean, you're clearly a female ... woman. It's just that you don't ... put yourself forward.'

'Meaning that I don't call attention to my breasts the way your girlfriends do.'

'Hah.' Misbah erupts in a short laugh before going quiet for another moment.

'Does it always bother you like this? Every month?'

'Yep. You should know that this strange vibe that we have here this morning, is why you did not know about it before today.'

'Nonsense. I am glad I know one more thing about you. But, you know, sorry that you have to go through ... all that.'

'Yeah, thanks.' I turn my face to look out the window as we gradually enter into an exclusive part of town.

This area is as far from my place as can be, but it is the kind of neighbourhood I am very familiar with. I spent the first part of my life in one such neighbourhood.

Dwarf trees line the middle of the roads and the side pavements. The houses are really mansions with lots of spaces between them.

I always have trouble believing I am such good friends with a man who owns a home in an area like this. It shows the kind of person Misbah is. If M weren't the nicest person ever, if he did not have a beautiful soul that shines through in his character, there is no way I would be caught dead with him.

'That's why you've cancelled some of our dates, isn't it?'

I smile to myself. No one can accuse Misbah of being slow.

'You didn't have to, you know.'

I remain silent, looking at our surroundings. We come to an even more exclusive area where there are only trees and no houses. At the end of this street is Misbah's place. The block part of the fence is only about three feet high. Above this, there are metal bars that taper out with electrocuted barbed wires on top.

‘I mean, I imagine you’d want to be alone, but I could also bring you chocolate and help you out around the house and ... stuff.’ Misbah stops the car in front of the gate, taps a few times on his tablet and the gate slides open quietly to let us in.

I turn to him sharply wondering if he’s trying to make a joke out of all this.

He looks perfectly serious.

‘How do you know I might need all that?’

We go down the paved driveway flanked by Masquerade trees with the occasional Hibiscus breaking the monotony of the Masquerades up till the front of the house itself. Another word for this house is *palace*.

He shrugs, ‘Nike was quite vocal about ... all that stuff. I took her a care package once or twice.’

‘Hm. You were such a good boyfriend to her. I wonder why she left.’

‘She didn’t leave, Ree. I told you I broke up with her.’

‘Right,’ I return, tongue in cheek.

‘Here we are,’ Misbah steps out.

Without waiting for him to come around, I open my door and step out with my baggage. ‘M, would it be okay if we didn’t talk about this anymore? I feel quite uncomfortable talking about it.’

‘Ok. You don’t have to be shy with me though, you know.’ Misbah collects some of my stuff and lets us into the house.

‘Uh-huh.’ The scent of pine hits my nostrils the moment I enter the house behind Misbah.

Hardwood floors gleam in the anteroom. We take off our shoes here and proceed straight into the living room.

A huge, white, semi-circular leather settee decorates the room. It looks luxurious but I know just how comfortable it is.

A snow-white rug sits in the centre of the living room. White ottomans with brown stripes rest at several points in front of the curved couch.

Only Misbah can use white so liberally without worrying about stains. This is probably because he treats dirt as his mortal enemy.

I especially adore the nature painting scenes hanging on the walls. My favorite is a waterfall with a clear, almost serene lake at the bottom of it.

Misbah takes my stuff up the stairs and I go with him.

Right beside his room, is a room I use whenever I stay over here. That’s where we go first.

Misbah drops my stuff on the armoire, while I sit on the large, soft bed. ‘I have to go and get ready. Excuse me for a moment.’

I wave him away. ‘Take your time. I am just going to stretch out here for a bit.’

‘Don’t stretch out for too long, Ree. I’ll only be ten minutes. Fifteen, tops.’

‘Okay.’ I struggle to hide a yawn.

Misbah shoots me a look before leaving.

I fall asleep on the same spot and awake only when Misbah, fully dressed, opens the door. ‘Are you—Reana? Are you sleeping?’ Shock covers his face.

‘What? Don’t be silly.’ With my face averted guiltily, I hurry to the bathroom. ‘Just give me five minutes.’

Twenty-five minutes later, we leave for the party.

3

MISBAH

I remind myself to slow down as we approach a bend since I don't want to get us killed.

It was only a few months ago that my brother, Omar, and his lovely wife, Yesmin, had a car accident. The horror of that is fresh enough to make me cautious in spite of my irritation.

I can't believe Reana made us late.

Actually, I can believe it. This isn't the first time.

She was supposed to get ready while I was getting ready, not sleep off. As if that wasn't terrible enough, she had to spend another twenty minutes on makeup.

For goodness' sake!

Then, she'd had the nerve to claim she had been fast about it. Fast? I'd hate to see her take her time with it.

The worst part of it all is that I can't even fight with her because of her ... woman thing.

By the way, who'd have thought?

She was right this morning. I've never really thought of Reana as a woman before today. She has always just been Ree, my super chill pal.

Since this morning, I've definitely become very aware of her femininity. I'm slowly noticing things about Ree that I never noticed before. It was as if she clicked a switch in my brain when she told me about ... that womanly stuff.

God, why can't I say the word?

I've suddenly noticed her long legs. It's now as though the lips that are always puckered are particularly awaiting a kiss from me. On and off, I've caught myself wondering whether her waist would fit in my palms.

It all makes me very uncomfortable. Why would I be thinking of my best friend like this? It makes no sense.

Releasing a sigh, I come back to myself as we arrive at the city Polo club where the wedding is taking place.

The security guards at the gate ask for our names, consult a tablet, give us a car tag and let us in.

Finding a free, shaded spot near a large tree, I bring the car to a gentle halt. With a glance to the side, I see Ree leaning her head against the window. She's sleeping again.

Gently, I nudge her shoulder.

She comes awake with a start. 'What? Where?'

Strangely enough, her sleep-thickened voice brings me a kind of pleasure that, when it comes to Reana, is forbidden. I struggle to keep my tone casual, 'who? Why?'

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