

# SAMANTHA'S

*Proposal*



RUTH DANIEL

# Samantha's Proposal

By Ruth Daniel

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## PROLOGUE

“YOU WHAT?!” Samantha Barigha stared astounded into her best friend's face, or rather, what used to be her best friend, the incredulity evident in her tone.

Gracie made a pout. “Please be happy for me. This means so much to me.”

Obviously, Samantha thought, making efforts to keep her expression neutral.

Gracie wasn't one to take discouragement. She didn't think anything mattered as long as her mind was set on something. And this was one something.

She pouted good-natured, one of her strong winning points. “I thought you'd understand. You know how important this is to me. I just want you to be happy for me.”

Sighing more out of exasperation than comprehension, Samantha darted a look at the figure sitting strangely ramrod straight in her living room. “What can I say, you already brought him to my house.” Taking Gracie's hand, she studied the huge diamond spotted on her middle finger, and forced a smile she wasn't quite feeling. “You really want this, don't you?”

“But I want your blessing first.”

Not wanting to be the spoilsport, Samantha gave her friend a hug. “Congratulations, Gracie. I'm really happy for you. I just wish you'd told me earlier. Two years feels like a betrayal.”

Gracie drew back from the hug. “I'm sorry. I just didn't want you talking me out of it. And he's so cute and funny, and...”

Holding up a hand, Samantha laughed. “Okay, I get the gist.” Though truthfully, she didn't. “I suppose I have to be a friend and support your decision. But are you sure, Gracie? I mean, marriage is such a big step and you two have been apart for two whole years. A lot could have happened. Who's to say he doesn't have a wife with children hidden away somewhere? Or maybe he's a criminal or a psychopath looking for a rich, single and vulnerable woman to dupe. Or worse.”

Gracie stepped back with a frown cringing her brows, making her look older than her thirty-five years. “And you are supposed to be my friend. I thought you'd be happy for me. I guess not.”

Samantha mentally rewound and reached for her friend's hand. This wasn't what she expected on returning from work. She prayed this was just a joke. “I'm sorry. I'm still a little stupefied, that's all. I hope it works out for you, Gracie. Really.” She hugged her friend, not wanting to dampen the excitement of her friend.

“Come, let’s go back before he thinks we're conniving how best to chop off his head for dinner.”

Gracie gasped. “Samantha!”

But Samantha was already laughing, holding off the nibbling fear that this could well be a big problem for both of them. Eventually.

## CHAPTER ONE

THE JOG ought to have helped. It didn't. Rather, she'd spent the last hour ruminating on what Gracie had told her. *I'm getting married*. She could have laughed it off as a joke except Gracie went after what she wanted with unapologetic vigor, including picking a random guy to marry. How had she allowed her friend to become so obsessed with marriage?

Okay, so maybe it wasn't her fault. After all, Gracie had a mind of her own and a strong will that none could match.

*Pick a random guy to marry*, Samantha scoffed out loud. *Who did that in this part of our world?* Then shrugged when her companions turned to stare at her, even attempted a smile.

The exercise was supposed to help. Who was she kidding? Gracie was getting married and that was that. Her means may not be neat or applause, but she'd achieved her ultimate goal; landing a husband. That had been all she thought about the past five years. Congratulations should be in order except she knew if it didn't work out as she knew it wouldn't, it was definitely going to blow up in her own face. Gracie tended to be misguided sometimes, and she always had to step in to clean the mess.

But as far as Samantha Barigha was concerned, this was the highest form of careless. How could she stoop so low to pick up some guy she didn't know, invest so much in him because she wanted to marry him? Sending him abroad to study was a risk too high. What if he never returned to Nigeria? Or even decided to renege on their agreement?

For Gracie, it wasn't about the marriage, it was about the trend of being termed as 'married'. That was all she cared about.

Samantha Barigha was not impulsive. As much as she was well into spinsterhood, according to her mother, marriage was not a solution to her. If she had to get married, it wasn't going to be her doing the propositioning. Gracie hadn't felt any qualms about doing

that herself. A lady of her status shouldn't be chasing for companion like it were a career goal.

*Samantha Barigha, propose marriage to a man.* The thought was sickening. She paused to catch her breath, waving at her companions to continue without her. But they stopped also and not wanting to hold them up, she raced them instead. No need kidding herself on this morning's jog, she concluded. It had been a complete waste of time that had only pumped her adrenaline into action mode. And by the time they got to her house, she thanked her companions, hoping to be ready for her mother's visit.

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SAMANTHA UNCORKED the bottle of water and drank straight from the bottle, enjoying the feel of the cool trickle down her throat. It was an indulgence she allowed herself; a bottle of chilled water at 7am every day. It was something her mother would frown at but that was if she was around to throttle her, right? Right this moment, she was permitted to indulge.

She felt the weight on her before she could react and ended up choking back on the water when her eyes cleared enough to register it was her little sister, Rita.

“Good morning...”

She glanced down at her outfit and did not groan, to her credit when Mrs Aisha entered through the kitchen.

So much for wanting to be ready to face her mother.

“Good morning, Mother.” She managed to smile at and stroke Rita's head, not at all ready for what was sure to come. She recognized the pattern like a second skin. “You're very early, Mother.”

Rita cautiously climbed down, already sensing the all-too-familiar dance that was bound to take place. “How was your exercise, Ms. Samantha?”

“Very healthy.” She responded hesitantly.

“Mother has a meeting this morning, and she didn't want to be late.”

Before Samantha could respond, she felt the bottle yanked from her grasp and a piece of cloth thrown at her.

“Wipe that look off your face, Samantha Barigha. You look like you just saw your worst enemy.”

If only that wasn't how she felt!

Samantha pasted on a false smile and succeeded in holding back a grimace. It wouldn't do to give her mother any more ammunition than she already had. She also did not roll her eyes, much as she would have liked and closed them instead.

“You give birth to a child and the gratitude you get is resilience and indifference in attitude. This child won't be the death of me.”

When she didn't hear any further sound, she chanced opening her eyes and groaned inwardly. Her mother stared down at her with an all-too-familiar expression that never failed to inspire fear in her as a child. What Aisha Barigha didn't realize was that she was an adult now, and she'd become immune to it. She repressed the urge to wince, not at the impact of the look but to avoid sticking out her tongue and making silly noises.

“I'm sorry, Mother.” Samantha handed the rag back to her mother. “Thank you for helping with the cleaning.”

Aisha turned her back, going towards the kitchen and threw over her shoulder, “Gracie came by the Villa and introduced her fiancé to me. Very handsome boy he is too.”

Samantha covered her face with her hands. No matter what she did, it always came down to her state of unmarried. All Gracie had to do was get engaged and her mother picked on that. She knew where this was leading. But she chose to ignore the in-between notes underlying the announcement. “Yes, she brought him here.”

“Well, she doesn't have to worry about marriage anymore. The daughter I get is the one who can't even be bothered.” Her mother continued from the kitchen.

She knew she would never hear the end of it. She should have gone to pick Rita from the Villa yesterday. This scene could well have been avoided. For a time, at least.

Yesterday's case went on way longer than expected and on returning home, she'd found Gracie waiting at home with her fiancé. That news alone. Yeah, she couldn't go to the Villa in that state. Perhaps, she should have managed it after all.

Her mother appeared a short while later and shoved a glass of something greenish at her, ordering her to drink. All of it.

Knowing Aisha Barigha, she didn't bother questioning the contents and held her breath, gulping down the entire contents in the glass. And grimaced at the taste.

“Mother, what was that?” Holding the glass away from herself due to its vile smell.

Mrs. Aisha yanked the glass from her,

“It's merely pawpaw leaves and the barks of mango tree cooked in dogoyaro.” She went back to the kitchen, muttering, “You'd think I poisoned her from the look on her face,”

Samantha knew it was futile to say anything and although she knew what the medicine was for, she didn't care to educate her mother that there were modern drugs that could replace it. A wave of nausea passed quickly enough before she even felt it.

She rested her head against the couch and closed her eyes. Only a little more time, a few more minutes before her mother would leave, Samantha thought. She could afford to endure a few minutes.

"... always working and forgetting that a woman's place is at her husband's side," Mrs. Aisha stood facing her daughter, arms akimbo.

Samantha opened her eyes to look at her mother out of polite compulsion than personal desire to do so.

"Even Gracie is getting married and you don't seem to care." Mrs. Aisha continued and moved off to adjust a throw pillow and dust invisible dirt off the television. "It's a wonder the media have not taken up the story that George Barigha's first daughter is still single."

Samantha forced her head up and managed not to roll her eyes. It wouldn't do to remind her mother that Gracie was three years older than her. No good came from arguing, especially with Aisha Barigha. Smart thing to do was let her rave on.

Aisha picked up her purse and slung it at the crook of her arm. "You look very thin. I just wish food was your problem, then we'd know there's a solution."

Barely holding from laughing out loud, Samantha got up. "Thank you, Mother."

Taking her cue, Aisha walked to the door with her daughter beside her. "Professor Okon's son just got back to Nigeria. Perhaps, it's a blessing. I have been invited to the welcome party next weekend. You're coming with me, so I can introduce you. A good that will be. I hear he's already taking over his father's school."

Putting on the required smile, nodded and opened the door for her mother. Aisha touched her daughter's head, checking her temperature. Ensure you bring Rita home early so I can get her ready Monday morning.'

The sigh escaped before she realized it was logged there, "Yes, Mother. I'll ensure she doesn't watch more than one episode of Game Shakers, and she will finish her homework today."

Aisha hesitated briefly, "Think carefully about your life, Samantha. You are no longer as young as you think." She nodded as though affirming something to herself and stepped out.

Propriety demanded she waits till her mother's car drove out of the gate before she closed the door, heaving a huge sigh of relief as she rested her back against the door. The scene

was over, and she felt depleted much more than when shed been jogging earlier. One encounter with Aisha Barigha always did that.

“Are you okay?”

Samantha opened her eyes and stared at her sister. The smile came naturally. This was one face she loved seeing. “Yes, yes I am.” Pushing away from the door, she took Rita's hand, “What do you suppose we do today, hmm? I wonder, maybe we could go to the park and pick every single dirt there. What say you?” Looking down to see her sister's reaction.

Rita giggled. “Okay. Can we get ice cream and burger for the grasses too?”

Feigning pleasant shock, Samantha placed a dramatic hand on her chest. “Why, yes! We wouldn't want them to starve.”

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A good read. It helped. A little. But its Monday and all shed tried to ignore before came flooding back. It was a hot morning and even with her AC turned on, she could feel tingles now and then from the heat outside her window. The heat wave did nothing to alleviate the feelings of confusion she felt.

Samantha stared absentminded at the construction work going on, barely noting the fast-forward pace hurrying images moved in a disorganized chaos, masons artistically creating a structure from concrete and brain work, hands hefting things from blocks to bags of cement. Her mind was miles away from her present location. All she could think about was the look of pure excitement both on her friends face and her voice as she announced her engagement. Worse was that gleeful expression of triumph as she recounted how they'd met and the circumstances leading to the engagement.

Maybe it was ill of her, but she couldn't imagine her friend being happy in that marriage. Marry someone you have to pay to accept you; how low was that! Even for Gracie, it was a shock. And wishing it didn't work out was just her looking out for her best friend. Okay, maybe it was very selfish thought.

Her mother had gone on and on the entire weekend whenever she called about Gracie's engagement and how Samantha was determined not to settle down. At least, shed managed to evade another meeting today by dropping off Rita at school instead of taking her to the Villa. But you can only evade Aisha that long. Just thinking about her mother projected her on her phone. There, on the caller ID was her mother's photo.

Until her mother came to terms with her decision, she planned to avoid any confrontation. More of that had been going on lately. Perhaps, that was the reason she was putting off



getting to the office. She knew the loads of messages waiting for her, not to say the whispers by her staff. Yeah. It promised to be a very long and busy Monday.

It wasn't such a bad idea though, Samantha thought. Instead of waiting around for you to get a ring, wouldn't it be more logical to do it yourself? White people did it all the time. And this was the twenty first century. It would be so nice to be the one to set the tone of the marriage contract.

Samantha shook her head. What was she thinking? She was not a desperate woman: She was a wealthy, successful young woman. She had a job that kept her busy and passions that demanded her time. Of course, she was happy. She didn't need a man. When one comes along, fine, but she was not about to go seek out one.

She jumped before realizing the sound was coming from outside her window. Struggling to calm herself over the blaring of a car horn from behind, Samantha wound down her window slightly to peer at the cement coated face at her window, the source of the knocking sound shed heard.

“Excuse me, ma'am, but you have to move your vehicle.” The man said in perfectly articulate English.

She blinked once to clear her mind and heard the blasted horn again. This time, embarrassment had her stuttering an incomprehensible reply, whatever it was as she glanced at her side mirror and saw the truck behind her. The driver was yelling abuses and insults at her.

Before she could fumble with her keys, the man at her window gave her a polite smile, I'm sorry about his language. Referring to the driver of the truck, but you really are blocking the entrance. Perhaps, if you could just move your car a bit forward. He glanced at the truck as the driver muttered obscene curses at people with no conscience.

Feeling shyly chastised by the driver of the truck, she turned the key in the ignition and realized for the first time she was packed in front of the gate of an ongoing construction work. She put the car to park just a few yards in front and glanced at her side mirror as the cement coated man guided the truck full of cement into the compound while chastising the driver to stop shouting and heaping insults, sounding almost annoyed and irritated.

Samantha glanced more fascinated at this stranger who was more than his physical appearance. Intrigued, she watched him take a step to follow the truck as it disappeared into the gate, then hesitated. Glancing towards her car, hesitated again and almost decisively, he ambled towards her car.

In an unconscious gesture, she glanced at her rear view mirror to ensure she looked presentable, then paused to wonder why she was going to all that trouble over a total

stranger, someone whose job was only dependent on how much an employer was willing to pay for a hard day's work under hot blazing weather.

She was more than fairly attractive, had realized that when she was growing up. She had a mass of surprisingly soft hair which she kept hidden all the time under wigs. At 5feet, 7inches, she was very comfortable with her height and never got into trouble even as a teenager. At least not willingly. She couldn't be accused of being thin, rather, she filled out perfectly in all the right places. She maintained the body by avoiding skipping meals and two hours' weekly jog around the estate area. Definitely, she presented a healthy, happy and successful front.

She sat up straight becoming self-conscious of her appearance. Even though her clothes were designer, they made her look more serious and businesslike than the impression she wanted to give to this stranger.

The stranger stopped by her window and asked in a concerned voice, "Are you lost, ma'am? Perhaps, if you need direction to someplace..."

She shook her head more at herself. What did she expect? He must have misinterpreted her action because he leaned slightly away from the window with a frown furrowing his brows. What a banged up job she was doing!

"I mean, I'm not lost, she started to explain "I just..." Then shook her head. What was she supposed to say as her reason for being there? "Never mind."

His frown deepened, "Are you sure?" He asked again, then glanced back towards the gate, "I will be going back to work then." Turning away.

"Wait." She called, not at all certain why but then, she wasn't deaf to not have heard clearly how meticulous his speech was. He clearly had a certain level of education? And ma'am? She wasn't that old!

He paused and turned back at her.

"What's your name?"

He contemplated, and she could see it on his face. "Mark."

"What time will you get off work?"

This time, she watched uncertainty and unease flicker across his face. "5pm?" His gaze darted back to the gate, "But I really do have to go. My job is on the line here." Sounding almost annoyed.

At whom, she wondered and didn't delude herself she didn't know the answer to that.

She got out a business card from her purse and handed it over to him with a smile, “Call me when you get off work. I would like to speak with you, if you don't mind.”

He took the card gingerly as if it burned and shoved it into the pocket. With all that dirt on his grubs!

“I really have to go, ma'am.” Already rocking on his heels.

She tossed a smile at him “Okay. I'll be expecting your call.”

Not sure if she was imaging it, but she thought she saw him smirk in derision as if to say *not on your life* and with a brief incline of his head, hurried away.

She hoped he'd really call. Telling herself she was just curious about him, how he spoke so well yet did an odd job wasn't to fool herself in the least.

It was just as well he had not called. She wasn't quite sure yet what kind of person he was, and she'd had her mind set on getting him a job. She scoffed. Anyone could learn to speak good English perfectly these days. Why did she think his case could be any different?

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She retrieved her debit card the attendant at the petrol station and got back into her car. So much work had been piled up at work, she couldn't tell what exactly made her leave them all. Her sole thought had been going home. It was Monday. That feeling had never been this strong before. Not that she was ditching her work, after all, she had tomorrow with just an appointment and enough time to report in the cases that were closed.

Gracie had told her she was stopping by to give her some news. Exactly what she didn't want, another reminder that her best friend was getting married. Who knew, Gracie might end up talking her into dating one of the groom's friends. And have her mother look gooey with satisfaction, no doubt.

She noticed him just as she was about to pull out. He was coming towards her with a keg half-full with diesel and although he looked immaculately dressed in gray slacks and sharply pressed blue shirt with just a hint of ruffle here and there, her thought went straight to her purse. What cash was left was no more than was enough to buy a child a snack bar. Maybe she could just hand that over to him, she thought, reaching into her purse already.

She turned at the knock on her window and wound down the glass just slightly.

“Good evening, ma'am.”

She blinked and completely wound down the rest of the window. He smiled shyly and looked uncomfortable as she continued to stare at him in open-mouthed flab. He scratched his head and looked away from side to side.

She recovered enough to stutter, “Uh, you are, ... oh my, how did you...?” Then waved her hand as if to clear her mind and asked more coherently, “You are the one who helped me earlier today, aren't you?”

He chuckled nervously and scratched his ear. “Yes.”

She swallowed. Definitely more handsome than she'd thought. Without the half a bag of cement coating him head to toe, he was more than good-looking. His face had an arrogance about it, which didn't intimidate her, rather, made her want to be around him, to see how much of that arrogance could hurt and how much was false.

“Are you...? Do you...?” Making a vague wave of her hand, she focused her senses on the more important question. “What exactly do you do?”

Obviously embarrassed now, she watched him scratch his head and nod. “I work as the opportunity presents itself.”

Not a very forth-coming person, she thought. And they were holding someone up. She realized when there was a loud blast of horn, accompanied by a man's voice yelling for her to move her car, or he would move it for her. It was with her fender in mind she drove forward a little and gestured for the stranger to enter. He lifted the can he held, and she pushed the button to open her trunk. After he'd settled inside the car, she pulled out of the gas station.

“Just so you know, she began, I don't make a habit of picking up strangers, especially men.”

He nodded, “I don't make a habit of entering pretty women's cars either.” Not without a smile.

She chuckled and relaxed some. Maybe she should have stopped to question if the voice that told her to pick him up was friend or foe. “I didn't get your full name.”

Looking a little relaxed himself, he leaned backwards “Mark Grinder.” Of course, she held herself from bursting out in laughter. And he noticed the half smile hovering on the side of her lips. It was him laughing that did it. She couldn't hold back anymore.

When she regained enough equilibrium, she glanced at him and caught his gaze on her. Suddenly, her palm gripped the wheel and successfully hid her discomfort, her heart beating faster.

There was an uncomfortable silence up until she got to the T-junction and glanced at him for direction. He pointed to the left, and changing gear, swung too forcefully, causing a lot of blasting of car horns and screeching of tires against asphalt.

He must think she was always this reckless. If only he knew!

“Left.”

She was quick to spot the U-turn and this time, slowed enough to glance sideways before making the turn.

They came to a part of Abuja she'd heard of but never been to. Okay, truth be told, they'd left Abuja and we're now in the outskirts. She drove through a road under construction and finally entered into Jabo village. He directed her to a smaller route with cramped buildings on either sides, stores, hawkers, half-naked children running across the road like it was normal, too many people which did not fit into one's description of life in the capital city. This was inner-city right before her. Several of the houses were made of local wood or zinc. If she had been told this place existed in Abuja, she wouldn't have believed.

“Take the second road on your right.” His voice, barely audible.

*I must be kidding, she thought. I know nothing about this person.*

After the turn, he pointed to a spot just ahead. “That's my stop.”

Parking the car at the designated spot, she didn't turn off the engine and took a breath, not allowing herself to think, “What other jobs do you do?”

Taken aback by the question, he answered without meeting her gaze, “I'm a private school teacher.”

“Are you married? In a relationship?” Ridiculously, she shook off the feeling of shock she felt at her own question.

His expression was more revealing. After a while, he reluctantly supplied. “Neither.”

“Okay, good.” And not stopping to allow herself to think, she started. “I'm going to make you a proposition.” She shook off the voice of reason.

“I'm rich and you obviously could do with the allowance. I'll make you an offer for a small favor in return. I want you to marry me. Ignoring the shocked look on his face. I'll pay you an allowance monthly and you can choose what model of car you want. I'll buy you a house and establish the business of your choice for you. All you have to do is agree to the terms I'll draft out and we could be married in a week.”

Then she looked at him.

He sat there with his mouth agape, staring at her in stunned disbelief, then began to laugh. She frowned and wondered why he was laughing. Maybe he thought she was joking.

Realization dawned on him that she wasn't sharing a joke and the mirth disappeared, replaced by a dark rage that made her wince, the full impact of her blab catching up with her. Oh, God, what had she just done?!

"Explain." He growled low.

She cringed back in her seat. He looked like he was about to wring her neck. She didn't know this person or how far he'd go when angry. Make that furious. How far...

"Well, go on." With barely restrained urge, his eyes glued her to the seat, the fire and ember in his eyes more intimidating than his physique.

Samantha opened her mouth to speak and found her lungs cramped. Her phone rang at the that moment, and she made a strangled sound when he reached for it before she could. He turned it off and threw it to the back seat.

"You don't want to mess with me, *lady*." His voice low but no less menacing. "I demand an explanation and I want it now!" The note of finality jeering her to a stutter.

"I am... I..." She swallowed and seeing his eyes, turned to stare out the window and for the first time, she noticed the number of people whose gazes were fixated on them. When she turned in shock to his side, more people were beginning to gather closer to the car than polite and staring curiously at them.

She didn't think her embarrassment could get any worse. Well, it just did.

His gaze followed her, and he seemed to notice it also. More people were stepping closer, and she turned a pleading look at him. It took the whole of three minutes before he nodded jerkily.

"There's a place just ahead."

This wasn't what she'd expected. She'd hoped he'd let her go, but she did owe him an apology, not quite sure what to tell him that would qualify as an explanation without really going into the details of the why.

With not quite steady hands, she pulled into the road and drove forward with his direction.

## CHAPTER TWO

HE WATCHED her out of the corner of his eye as she parked the car, her hands still shaking and her pupils slightly glassy as she gazed ahead into nothing. From looks, you'd think she was the victim of his ferocious needs. You only had to know the full story to understand it was the other way round.

He shook his head. He'd tried to think of what could have prompted her to open her mouth and offer such insult to someone she didn't know. Enough sense had been pounded into him by his mother not to be stupid. It clearly failed to keep him from entering this mess. If he had declined her offer, right now, he'd be home resting and planning his tomorrow.

"I'm listening, *Lady*." Some edge had crept back into his voice despite schooling himself he needed to calm down to assess the situation.

She tried and failed to keep her hands steady and folded them on her lap.

One other thing his mother had taught him was to treat a lady right. Maybe this one fell short but a lady all the same.

Bringing his full attention on her, he ignored the way she squirmed in her seat. He might as well keep his gaze scorching to gain the upper hand.

Alright, He began "We'll do it this way; I'll ask you a question and you answer straight to the point. Agreed?"

She nodded jerkily.

"Let's start with your name; what is your name?"

Her voice croaked, and she cleared it, then supplied, 'Samantha. He didn't notice her pause before she added reluctantly, "Barigha."

He nodded. Progress. "How old are you?"

She turned to him sharply and seeing his own gaze, simply fell back to the seat and with a resigned sigh, she told him simply, "32."

He did a mental trek backwards. That could be a motivating reason, but he shook it off. He meant to be stern and kept his gaze burning. "What do you do?"

Relaxing a bit now, she waved her hand absentmindedly. "You have my business card."

Irritated, he bared his teeth in a show of anger. "Answer the question."

The tone of his voice set her on edge again. She cleared her throat before answering. "I'm a lawyer."

Interesting, He thought. He's yet to look at the card shed given to him. "Who do you work for?"

She swallowed slowly, "I own a firm."

"Living with the family?"

"No," shaking her head. "I own a bungalow at Wuse II."

Real money. Anyone who lived there either was a millionaire or a call girl. Her car was just a statement. He should have known. A young, attractive and wealthy woman always posed a challenge to the opposite sex. Not a wonder she was single.

An important question. "Are you a Christian?"

She smiled to herself. "Yes."

He doubted that, "You obviously were not listening to *Wisdom*, or we wouldn't be having this conversation."

She scoffed, "Don't I know that!" Sounding miffed.

He raised a brow. A backbone on. Definitely a fire cracker when you can find the right buttons to push.

Taking in a deep breath, she released it and turned to face him. "Look, I'm sorry for what I asked of you. I hope you will forgive and forget this scene ever happened."

He began to laugh and he noticed she had stiffened. What she didn't know was that his laughter was not one of amusement but incredulity and unbelief. Forgive and forget. Just like that. Act as though it never happened. Very cushy.

"I'm serious, Mr. Grinder," Frowning, "I apologize for putting you in a difficult position as we don't know each other, but I would appreciate it if you didn't mention it to anyone. Are we clear?"

He simply stared at her. She must really be dumb, but he didn't voice it out, rather, he gave her a hard look, which although she didn't flinch as he'd expected, he saw the uncertainty clearly etched in the depths of her eyes.

"You, pointing a finger at her, "... are obviously not very smart."

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With the way Gracie stared at her, Samantha felt they were about to go into a long chat. This, she was not going to do. It was too early after that embarrassing scene to want to talk to her nosy friend. For Gracie was nosy indeed. Too much rode on her sanity to avoid a confrontation.



The sigh of relief was unconscious when her phone rang. She didn't even pause enough to find out who the caller was first.

“Good evening, ma'am. There's a Mark Grinder on the line to speak with you.” Stacy, her secretary said.

Surprise made her pause but catching the look of inquiry on Gracie's face, she forced herself to sound cheerful, “Okay,” Later, she'd berate herself for agreeing.

There was a short static noise and his voice came up, none too pleased, “Hello?”

Forcing a smile not to encourage Gracie's look, “Samantha Barigha here.”

There was a short pause. “I'd hoped never to speak to you again but I forgot my diesel in your car.” He sounded miserable.

She bit her lower lip as the insult stung, “I'm sorry, but I'm busy right now. Tomorrow, perhaps. Can I give it to you on my way to work?”

“No!” He said, not at all pleased with her answer.

Shock and despair cloaked her face and Gracie caught it well enough, jumping up from the couch. What had she gotten herself into? 'I can't come now... '

“...you'd better find a way because I'm not about to let my phone stay switched off until Her Majesty decides when it's convenient for her.”

Now, she felt the full impact of what she'd done. How had she put herself in such a fix? How had it happened? She placed a hand on her forehead “Mr. Grinder, please. Listen, ...”

“I did and I regret it now.” A pause, “Thirty minutes.” And the line went dead.

Samantha felt like crying. And she never cried, at least not so easily. She fell back unto the couch and Gracie placed a sympathetic hand on her arm. When did things get so irrational with her?

“Work issue?” Gracie asked concerned.

She shook her head. Only if it was! That was her turf. She knew how to handle her turf.

At Gracie's prompting, she told her of how they'd met, leaving out the embarrassing scene of her proposal completely.

Gracie frowned. 'If you gave him a lift, why is he so angry for forgetting his property in your car?'

Gracie was not stupid; many non-flattering things but certainly not stupid.

“You know what? Give me his address, I'll take it to him.”

But even as Samantha gladly did, she knew it was a huge mistake.

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She knew it was him when she spotted him. How, he could not tell, but she knew because she waved at him and packed the car. She was out of the car before he crossed the road to meet her. The trunk door opened, and he went first to retrieve his diesel before she came face to face with him.

This one was flashier. Taller by a few inches too. She looked like a model on a run way with her black slit skirt and pink designer chiffon top neatly tucked in. The hair she made could probably pay for his mother's medical bill. Her shoes screamed a thousand dollars. And dollar lately was expensive!

This was awkward. He felt strangely assessed and managed not to fall on his face. “Good evening. Gracie, right?”

She nodded and looked around, not at all surprised at the environment, like she'd expected it. She gave him a smile that clearly said, *'You'll do.'*

Mark began to wonder why he'd accepted the ride. He'd asked for it and now, it was returning to him in good measure, pressed down and shaken together.

She inclined her head towards where he'd appeared from. Shall we?

Yep. And definitely running over it was coming back to his bosom. He'd asked for it all right.

Seeing no choice but to see to the end of what had started, he crossed the road, very conscious of her a step behind him.

She didn't comment or make any of those girly noises even when a rat nearly ran into her. Nope, she appeared quite intrigued and happy. Obviously, she did this kind of thing every other day. The environment did not perturb her one bit. He quite remembered the shock he'd seen on the other ones face at seeing the place, like it was impossible. Very few people knew Abuja had an inner city in the inner city, although compared to the others of its kind, it was like a haven.

He was trying not to think of what this visit meant. After turning one down, they'd sent reinforcement. She really didn't want to give up. And this one was more brazen. What lady followed someone shed never met before to his house and not care?

“I'll get a chair.” He said when they arrived at his house. A public, single room apartment in an L-shaped building, his room, facing the narrow entrance they had come through.

He unlocked his burglary gate and returned with a plastic chair. Not very cozy but it was what worked for him. He excused himself and went to the room at the extreme end to the left and knocked. Morris, a middle aged man and also his caretaker poked his head out.

“Abeg, give me chair.”

“You get visitor?” Glancing over Mark to stare slack-jawed at the sight seated in front of Marks room. “I ...” He stammered, then, disappeared back inside.

Mark grabbed a hold of the plastic chair as it appeared at the doorway, and handed him the phone.

“Thank you.”

He left Morris standing in apt awe at the picture of class and sophistication sitting in his compound. He didn't blame the man. The lady Gracie looked like a male fantasy.

He settled down across from her. She really made a dashing picturesque, sitting there and looking like a something out of a Forbes magazine.

“Mr. Grinder,” She began 'I'm going to be very straight with you.”

Very assertive personality too. Oh, boy!

“I look out for my own and you've obviously upset my own.”

Cried to her mother, did she? Well, he didn't care one bit.

She gave him a small smile, “Let’s do it this way. I'm going to ask you a few questions. You'll provide me with the right answers. Can you do that?”

Clearly, these women were spoiled. He tampered down on the rising anger. It simply would do no good getting angry. And so, he sat there and nodded, just for the sake of it. He didn't think his no would mean anything to her anyway. She clearly had a mission here.

“Tell me about Mark Grinder.”

Feigning disinterest, he shrugged simply. No need getting angry and showing it.

“What’s the highest educational degree you have attained?”

She would not be dissuaded, it seemed. “BA.” Then at her inquisitive look, he reluctantly added, “Law.”

The smile she gave didn't reach her eyes but clearly, wheels were turning in her head.

“Gone to law school yet?”

Easier to answer now. "Working on it. I got the form."

Her nod was an approval and the smile did reach her eyes this time. Wonderful. You clearly have a plan. "That's a bonus-point in your favor. What do you do presently?"

You'd think this was a job interview!

"I teach." And decided against telling her the other jobs he did, which her colleague had seen him do. He wasn't sure what they'd discussed and what was said about him. Yet. But he would get to it. He hoped to get that piece of information out of her.

"Say you have an opportunity to do a better job, what's your plan for law school?"

He shrugged, "Work and school."

She clapped like she'd gotten her answer. "Smart mind you've got. Do you have a family?"

He didn't want to drag any of his siblings into whatever sick game they were playing. So he opted for omission of the entire truth. "Yes but they're not here."

Let her think what she will!

"Good." She said satisfied. "Because we wouldn't want our little secret being blabbed and gossiped about."

She saw the anger he barely held back and gave him a senile smile. This was one dangerous woman that was used to getting her way. She knew how to use her tools of war well. A man stood no chance against that.

But he did. He didn't care for over-bloated ego in a woman. She seemed to register his thoughts and grinned.

"I'll cut you a deal, Mark Grinder. I'll not only drop your name with the Chief Judge of Nigeria. I'll get you the letter of employment. Special classes are arranged at the high court for personnel staff. That should provide you the platform to start a decent life."

He was too happy to register how insulting the last part sounded. But when he spoke, he smothered the joy and kept his voice and expression flat and bare of emotions. "What's your game?" The anger succeeded in creeping into the tone of his voice.

That only seemed to please her. She obviously derived joy from doing this. It could well be a hobby for her.

"You date my friend, at a very discreet level, of course."

It wasn't difficult to keep his expression blank. That was what he felt anyway.

“Of course you'd have to wait a few months, say three to four and you should have saved enough to move from this place to an apartment in town.” She saw his face and only smiled, unperturbed at his expressionless look.

“I drive a hard bargain, Mr. Grinder. You will have to show that you care for her. Don't forget, I hold your employment in my hand.”

He lifted his brows in mockery at the threat. Surprise wasn't what he felt. He'd expected no less from her, she definitely looked the type who fought tooth and nail to get what she wanted.

She got up, “Don't look so serious, Mark. It is a good deal. You wouldn't get a better one from me!” Then smiled.

He'd thought so.

Keeping his face bare of any flicker of emotion, the wheels started turning in his own head. The job was a good deal. Nobody said he had to add the dating part. He was going to get enough contact at the High Court to deflect her threat. An opportunity for him to finally get his dream of one day becoming a judge already in place. The deal couldn't get any better.

He'd play this game. Oh, he would. And enjoy every minute of it. Yep. Every single minute of it.

He got up and took her hand in a handshake Deal. And even managed to dredge up a smile.

“I'll see you in three months, then.”

He refused to tell her that the phone they'd been communicating with wasn't his. His battery was flat and that was why he'd insisted on getting his diesel back, so he could power his on.

She gave him a look. “Don't hurt her, Mark Grinder. You don't want to mess with her. Or me.”

A second warning. That was swell. He'd keep that in mind.

“Get your papers ready. You'll get a call this week.”

He nodded, resolving to call her when his phone was powered up. He certainly didn't plan to let a little slip jeopardize this opportunity.

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Samantha smiled into the file and picked up her phone on the third ring. The smile deepened when she saw the caller ID.

“Someone is very emotional right now.” Her younger sister, Rita's voice came loud and clear.

“Good afternoon to you too. This is Barrister Samantha Barigha from Samantha Consults. How can I help with the emotional?” She asked in the same playful tone as her sister.

More child-like giggles followed by the clearing of throat as Rita assumed a more serious tone, “I'd like to sue my mother, please.”

Samantha held herself from laughing and kept up the same tone. “On what charges, may I ask?”

Maintaining the same tone, Rita said, “For abandonment and the use of insulting words on a minor.”

She noted the laughter behind the words and asked more seriously. “What is it, Rita?”

Giving up the pretense, Rita replied in her normal tone. “My lesson teacher is sick, so she can't take me for the extra lessons today. I called Mom and she asked me to remain in school and would pick me up after work. But I am walking down towards...”

Alarmed, Samantha sat up. “You are walking on the road alone?”

She hesitated, “No, my friend Leila is with me and her brother. We were going to get to your office and ...”

Samantha groaned. Her office was several blocks from the school. “What were you thinking, Rita?” She closed her eyes, as her heart rate slowed to normal. “Where are you now?”

Getting up, she began moving to the door as her sister looked around and told her.

“Okay, stay there. I'm coming to pick you up. All of you.”

Samantha didn't mutter. That's what she would have liked to do now.

About an hour later, she returned to her office, well exhausted from answering questions from three vibrant children.

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He found himself in front of her office building before the plan could take root. The past two months had him thinking on what to do to teach Samantha Barigha a lesson. Mark Grinder was nobody's plaything. If she thought she could throw money in his face to let him quiet, she obviously wasn't as smart as she looked.

The past two months have been very fulfilling. He'd just started the classes last week, having paid part of his tuition. Plus, the bonus of working in the office of the Chief Judge of Nigeria. How cool was that?

He showed the security his ID, and they let him through the gate. He wasn't sure what to do or say to her yet but it would come to him. All through his stay at the high court, he'd gathered enough information about her work and quite impressively, she was a terrific lawyer. Maybe with as many flaws as politics could taunt on anyone.

One thing he'd also learned about her, she despised politics in the courtroom. It was the reason she'd started her own law firm. To her credit, he did admire the wisdom in that.

He noticed the building first. It was a towering six storied building. She occupied the first floor. He'd done an estimate of how much the place cost; close to fifteen million per year. This lady obviously had the cash to afford it. Not a wonder shed listed all of those things for him.

The receptionist greeted him and asked him to sign in, "Please."

The offices were neatly lined in two rows with the aisle in the middle. She had a strong workforce, he'd read in her file. He'd not guessed how strong. There were at least thirty he could count and each was busy with case files. Some were making calls. One of them picked up his jacket after a call and dashed past him towards the entrance. He'd picked up a scent, it seemed.

Mark shook his head. He'd underestimated the lady's wealth. One person was dozing off with clusters of paper everywhere, her head rested in deep sleep over some papers.

Maybe he should rethink his plan. He'd heard rumors at the High Court about Barrister Samantha Barigha being in her father's shadows. She won every case she handled. The one case shed lost had been because her client had lied to her, and he'd heard that she was very careful and selective of the cases she took on since then.

He paused at her secretary's door, seeing the sign on the door to his left with her name on it. The secretary was so engrossed in her work she did not notice him. Just as well. He needed to think.

She raised her head up and saw him. And smiling, he went over.

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Samantha frowned and looked up from the case file shed been reviewing all day as her secretary rushed in looking shell-shocked. Her frown deepened. Stacy knew better than to rush in like that. It was also the first time she looked rattled. Stacy never did.

She cocked a brow, keeping the anger at the interruption at bay. It was easy. She'd never let anger make her react negatively, especially at her staff. It was one of the things she'd learned to be a lawyer. Anger makes you lack the right attitude to respond and react to a case.

"What is it, Stacy?" She asked when Stacy continued to stare at her in shock.

The question jolted her enough that she rushed on without thinking. "Your fiancé is here to see you."

Quickly, Samantha lowered her lashes, avoiding eye contact with Stacy. She was not going to let her staff know how shocked she was as well. This couldn't be a joke. You don't pull pranks on Samantha.

Smiling up at Stacy, she forced herself to sound normal. Is that why you are shaking? Let him in.

## CHAPTER THREE

SHE WANTED to go out to see who was pulling such an act, but she didn't want the scene in front of her staff. Better to do it in the privacy of her office. The person had better be one of her brothers. She didn't think anyone else had the gut to try that with her.

Her thoughts were cut off when she heard the knock and in walked Mark Grinder.

She went very still in her seat. She'd prayed and hoped that episode was behind her, had spent days reprimanding herself until she felt reprimanded enough. Then her self-pity had ended, and she almost succeeded in not thinking about him at all. Almost.

"Hello, Samantha." Coming towards her with a knowing smile across his face, "Missed me?"

Standing in front of her, he bent now, barricading her with his both hands on either side of the chair. 'I've missed you. I couldn't stop thinking about you.'

Still dazed and dumb-founded, she blinked. Twice. And pushed against him to stand up. He easily stepped back, looking around her office. Not on earth would she be intimidated in her own territory.

'What do you want?' Her voice sounded strange to her own ears.



His gaze drifted back to hers and smiled, 'I realized we got off a bad start and I came to speak with you.'

She frowned deeply. Making it obvious. She wasn't sure what he was getting at, but she supposed he was right. They did get off wrong.

For the first time, she noticed he was wearing a black suit. Probably coming back from the school where he taught. She knew nothing about this person and yet, she had almost spent the rest of her life with him. Now merely thinking about it, she shuddered.

He was still looking at her. Waiting for her to say something: anything.

“About what, exactly?”

He began to laugh and before she could form a coherent thought, he spoke, “You should have seen the look on your secretary's face when I told her I was your fiancé.”

Not funny at all. She'd seen the look on Stacy's face. It had been surprise and disbelief.

“... she didn't believe me at first.” He continued. “I had to pull the act to get her to respond.” Then he stopped laughing and looked at her intently with a slight frown. “It was almost like she thought it was impossible for you to have a fiancé.”

His fingers barely touched her face and she jumped back. Nobody had ever done that to her before. Nobody had ever made her feel the sensation that had prompted her to want to respond. Her skin tingled from where he'd touched and not to encourage him, she kept from placing her hand there.

This was not a game she wanted to play. She would make him go very far away and explain to Stacy it had been a joke.

Or not. She didn't owe Stacy any explanation.

“I want to take you out for lunch. He murmured; his face, mere inches from hers.”

Samantha resisted the urge to meet his gaze. She was too overwhelmed to look at him, instead, her gaze reverted to the laptop keyboard blinking on her table.

“Thank you, but I...”

“I just want to talk, that's all.” He closed the distance and she jumped back skittishly. Understanding the sign, he stepped back. “I told your secretary I was taking you to lunch.”

Her heartbeat was still racing despite the non-committal shrug she gave. It really wouldn't hurt. She thought.

With the jigs her heart was already doing, she didn't think it was a good idea. But then, they would be in public and nothing could go wrong. He must be reasonable enough.

And of course, she didn't want her staff to think being engaged was an idea too alien for her.

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“The weather is cool for a walk.” He told her as they stepped out of the gate.

She nodded.

She'd been awfully quiet since they left her office. He hadn't meant to touch her. The urge had been too strong, and he'd wanted to feel her pulse to confirm why she was so uncomfortable around him. Well, now he had the answer. And the answering need of his own.

They headed towards the restaurants a few blocks from her office. He'd never been there before, always thought it was out of his league. Then. Now, he could comfortably take her there because he'd found out it wasn't as expensive as he'd thought. And he could afford it now.

They walked on in silence. This wasn't what he'd had in mind. In fact, nothing he'd had in mind had worked so far. And he enjoyed just walking beside her in companionable silence.

Halfway to their destination, she stopped. He did the same and glanced at her. Seeing she didn't take any step farther, he went to her, wondering what she was thinking about now.

“What do you want?” Her voice held a note of firm resolve.

He sighed. Nothing was going as he'd planned. Paying her back for the insult kept backfiring.

“You.” He said simply.

She laughed but it lacked mirth. Done your own thinking, I presume.

He didn't bother lying. “I did. But I haven't stopped thinking about you as a person.” That was true enough.

She was smart enough not to argue that point and instead, repeated her earlier question.

“I want you. I could do with the cash too and the other incentives but beyond that, you intrigued me and I want to find out more about you.”

Not exactly what he'd had in mind yet again. And he'd been telling her the truth. As much as he wanted to play her at her own game, she'd captured his attention, most especially after seeing her again.

She boldly looked him in the eyes, "Why?"

He thought she knew the answer to that question but wanted to hear him say it.

"I don't make a living doing this sort of thing. I think you know the why."

She shook her head. "I changed my mind. It was impulsive to begin with and it's not what I want or what I'd settle for. I'm sorry I dragged you into it. But I no longer have interest in it. Good day, Mr. Grinder." She started to turn.

He grabbed her and with more force than he'd intended, pulled her against him. Momentarily, he lost track of what he'd intended to say as her eyes grew larger, and she tried to avoid collision by placing her hand firmly between them.

He shouldn't have done that. Same way he shouldn't be doing what he was about to do next.

Tilting her chin upward, he captured her mouth in a kiss that left no room for resistance, taking them both by surprise. His hesitation was brief as he tasted that first sweet essence of her, knowing that he was a goner. If he managed to keep his head above his heart, he might just find the will to stop.

Oh, she pushed in futility against him. It did not take much effort for her to give up the fight. Lesser effort for her to respond, tentatively at first, then, her hands moved to circle his neck. She responded, like she'd never been kissed before, more like a school girl receiving her first lesson. It pleased him to no end to be the one teaching her, tantalizing her senses with first subtle, then demanding tug of her lips. The need to capture her very essence into himself had him tittering on the edge of sane phenomenal bliss.

She seemed to pull him into herself, not that he was protesting and the way she wiggled to get closer emanated a growl of approval from him. Possessing her mouth in an age-old tango too natural to deny, he twined his tongue with hers, giving as much as he took.

The blood roared in his head and her heart beat rapidly he could feel it rhyme with his. He plundered her senses, and he heard her moan in response. His body reacted violently, and he went very still, staring at her face, with half-closed eyes, realizing what had just happened. She looked dazed as the desire in her eyes slowly ebbed away, awareness causing her eyes to widen in shock and surprise.

Swallowing, he let go of her and stepped back seeing as her eyes cleared, and she became aware of their environment. Embarrassment had her lowering her gaze as she stepped back, turned, and started back in the direction of her office.

“Samantha.”

She didn't turn but kept her head down and continued walking. He hadn't planned for any of this. Nothing he planned had worked. He'd only ruined it farther by embarrassing them both. Kissing her had never been part of his plan.

Turning to go after her, he felt the vibration of his phone and reached for his pocket. It stopped before he could answer it and closed his eyes. The Chief Judge had given him six missed calls. How swell.

And he'd been making out on the pavement of a major road. He'd exceeded all forty-five minutes of his lunchtime. He contemplated going after her, wondering at this rate, the reception he'd receive. The vibration of his phone had him changing direction. He needed to return to work. He wasn't sure how his missing his boss calls would translate.

And now feeling guilty, he knew he had to apologize to Samantha for what he'd done.

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Oh, what had she gotten herself into? What had she done to herself? Why did she have to suffer for a mistake that was past? How could she get past it?

Samantha never made mistakes. She was too reasonable a person to find herself in compromising situations. She'd trained herself for it. But lately, she found herself entrenched in enough of them to last a lifetime.

She'd prayed never to see him again. Two months that prayer was answered. How glad she'd been.

The dread of meeting him some place public and having him embarrass her had seemed more and more far-fetched as weeks rolled by, and he didn't suddenly appear. She should have counted on it, been more prepared to see him. What had she expected?

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she'd meant to skip lunch before he'd shown up at her office. She'd wait till she got home before eating.

A slight knock came and the door opened.

Not bothering to lift her head, she pretended to be asleep. Her secretary hesitated, then dropped something on the table and left. The moment she heard the soft click of the door behind Stacy, she lifted her head, noting what had assailed her nose. She groaned and reached for the bag. Stacy was a God-sent. Just what she needed right at the moment.

As she lifted the pack out of the bag, a paper fell out on the table. Ignoring the paper as the payment receipt, she opened the pack then darted her eyes to the paper again. That did not look like a payment receipt.

She dropped the food and reached for the paper. Her hands trembled slightly when she opened it.

*I may have had a lot of things on  
my mind but insulting you  
was never my intention.  
I apologize if my actions may  
have made you uncomfortable.  
Mark Grinder.*

She balled the paper about to fling it far away, then grudgingly smoothed it over and placed it on her table. He'd apologized. It didn't make her feel less embarrassed thinking about her own response to him, but at least, he had the good sense to apologize.

She buzzed the intercom and seconds later, Stacy appeared.

“Please, call Mark Grinder and tell him I'd like to see him.”

Stacy hovered in the entrance before she closed the door and left.

Samantha sighed. It was becoming a habit seeking out trouble. She could just leave well alone sleeping dogs lie.

Her stomach growled again, reminding her what was most pressing. She uncorked the bottle of soft drink first before diving for the burger. She was just finishing off when her secretary entered. Stacy dropped a folded paper and left.

*One Mr. Morris answered the call  
and said he'd let Mr. Grinder know of  
the contact immediately.*

Buzzing the intercom, Stacy entered almost immediately. “Your note is very encrypted.”

Stacy stepped farther into the room. “I used the number he called the office with two months ago. He doesn't seem to be using that number anymore. But Mr. Morris, who answered the phone said Mr. Grinder was at work.”

Still at work? Teachers never left school premises for lunch.

“Thank you, Stacy.”

When the door closed behind Stacy, she put down the remainder of the drink. She knew absolutely nothing of this person. How could she be so certain that he'd not lied about his other job? But she knew.

Powering on her computer, she began to type.

Mark stood on the sidewalk contemplating going home and wanting to see Samantha again. She was becoming an itch he couldn't shake off as easily as he had planned. Could it be because of the still beauty that held him entranced each time he pictured her?

Sometimes while working, he'd find his mind drifting to that first time he met her. He couldn't believe two months had gone by, yet her face kept popping into his mind at unsuspecting moments when he should be busy working.

Seeing her again today had momentarily robbed him of his breath. She wouldn't know what beauty lies in her. She was all shades beautiful in a quiet kind of way. His heart recognized the risk of getting involved with her. And yet...

The kiss had been a mistake. At the thought, he smirked. And I really don't want to see her ever again, came a sarcastic response to that thought.

Yes, the kiss had not been planned but boy would he like to do it again! All his rationalized and planned speech flew out the door when she stepped out of her office. An odd feeling of dread had thumped at his chest, tugging and pulling his heart to run the other way. Wouldn't that be the best solution for him?

Look at him, standing by the roadside and thinking how to steal another kiss from a woman who didn't share the same feelings for him as he did for her.

But he was wrong. He had felt the heavy and erratic beat of her heart when he pulled her closer. Her pulse had skittered, and she had responded like she would like to devour him as well. If she hadn't made that sound, jarring him back to consciousness, would he have ravaged her right there on the road? How far would he have gone to have her for that one stolen moment?

Could it be possible that she was over 30 years old yet untouched? The thought had hunted him since she left him that afternoon standing by the roadside.

The slight horn of a car brought him out of those disturbing thoughts. He frowned at the black saloon car parked in front of him as a huge man in a black suit stepped out from the front seat and opened the back door, gesturing for him to go in.

He recognized the man as a security aide to a very wealthy and influential man, the reason he was standing by the roadside indecisive.

His sighed. It would be futile to refuse. The first time they had come to pick him up, he had refused to go with them. Two burly looking men had picked him up off his feet and roughly deposited them into a tinted black Sedan.

“She's your daughter.” Mark accused immediately the door was shut firmly behind him, and he faced the stock of a man sitting in his massive chair, which belloyed his height; George Barigha, businessman and the richest black man in the world.

The huge table dominating a section of the space was obviously made to intimidate those who dared come into the office.

The office was sparsely furnished, a single portrait of the city's skyline hanging on the wall and the filing cabinet neatly tucked into one unobtrusive corner. What clustered the huge table were mostly files and the computer set at the left end of the table.

His gaze returned to the man whose gaze was just as piercing and knowing. He wasn't a small man- was quite tall with a huge rounded stomach, a kind of norm for most rich Nigerian men. What was that saying he heard, 'if you want to know a rich Nigerian man, look at the size of his belly and the tone of his skin.'

The eyes reminded him of Samantha. That was what gave the man away. But this man's slightly gray hair and the hard-penetrating glare directed at him was nothing as sweet as his daughter's.

Mark hardened his own expression. He wouldn't let this man intimidate him. “You told me she was your niece.”

“Yes. But I didn't ask you to kiss her. Your job was to befriend her and watch over her.” His eyes were the only indication that he was angry.

Mark didn't cringe. He should have known the watchdogs trailing him would report back to their boss. “So, are you going to fire me? I've still got a normal day job, you know.”

George Barigha gave him a lopsided grin. “You think Gracie was the reason you got that job? Far from it. She doesn't have that kind of influence.”

Was it fear or dread he felt? “What do you mean?”

“Let's just say that Chief Justice Forase owes me a lot of favors. You are just one he's fulfilled.”

He knew how influential wealthy people could be. He just never experienced it first-hand. It was not something he was thrilled about.

“You didn't follow my orders.” George informed him with a hard stare.

To play it down and not appear timid, Mark grinned like a typical cad. “I think you know that I don't always take orders. Besides, she didn't mind the kiss.”

Maybe, he shouldn't have added that part because the man's eyes grew dark, and he rose to his full height, a predator about to catch a prey.

“I'm sure you know how innocent she is. She's never been touched before.” His eyes pinned Mark to the spot, “Until you.”

Mark didn't know if he should respond or not. What he felt was acute anger and disgust. Samantha was not a child and her father had no right to have such an information about his daughter.

“And because you touched her, our deal changes.” George said, reaching for a file on his table.

A slow, painful dread gripped his heart. He should have known that men like George Barigha never fought fair. They fought with claws and fangs.

George threw a file in front of him and stated simply. “You must marry her.”

Mark flinched, taking a step backward; anger and fear pushed him to respond without thought. “That wasn't what we agreed on.”

“You changed the wager the moment you touched my daughter.”

“You can't do this to her. She doesn't deserve to be bullied into anything.” Mark clenched his fist, his eyes dropped to the floor.

He violated the rules. He knew that. Keeping his hands to himself would have saved him the cost on his emotions. And he had not thought beyond the moment except to get a taste of her. He had not considered how her father would react. All he'd responded to was his hormones. Now, he'd trapped himself. And her. She didn't deserve this- not his game her father was playing with her life. And because his head was down, he missed the gleeful and triumphant look on the man's face as he lowered himself back to his seat.

“No. It is you who is doing this to her.” He replied sternly, cloaking his expression of joy.

Cornered and knowing George spoke the truth, Mark forced his gaze up to face his nightmare. “What is I refuse? Is there no other way to save her this entrapment?”

“I find another who best qualifies to be her husband.” He stated matter of fact.

Mark's response was immediate. “No!” And quickly composed himself. Anger wouldn't help him win with this man. “I'll do it.” He swallowed, wanting to have a little solid ground. “But it'll be my way.”

Eyes narrowed at him. “And what way is that?”

“Allow me to win her heart first. She has to have a choice to fall in love with me on her own terms.”



George regarded him closely. After a brief silence, he asked. "You realize that you have to give up your dream to become a judge, don't you? I told you how much she stays away from politics and judges get dragged into enough of them."

Mark swallowed heavily. This was worse than a life sentence. He was given no choice. But he'd rather lose his choice than watch her father trade her off to some other man who would be in it for the gain. He had too much integrity. Which was why he'd rejected the check. But he was beginning to care for her, too much so that he was willing to give up a lifelong dream just to have her.

He made a resolution in his heart. He wasn't going down without a solid promise. 'You can't meddle ever again.'

George Barigha actually smiled. "You have my word on it." Before Mark's relief could suffice, he added. "Only after the wedding."

This fight was far from over. They'd meet again. He knew it in his gut and was not looking forward to that next meeting. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he retrieved it to check the text message. It was from his neighbor, telling him one lawyer woman wanted to see him.

His jaw clenched. It could only mean Samantha had tried to reach him. He should stay away from her to think through how he was going to start getting ready to winning her. In his heart, he was psyched she wanted to see him. The smile that slipped on his face was unconscious but George Barigha saw it. And guessed the reason for it.

"I believe this meeting is over." Mark said, eager to leave and get to Samantha.

"You have eight months to carry out the deed. Or..."

That he deliberately left the statement hanging didn't scare Mark so much this time. His happiness was to see Samantha even if he never got to have her.

With a slight incline of his head, he gave George a salute and left.

George leaned back in his chair with a satisfied grin.

∞ ∞ ∞

Mark entered the office just as Stacy was going out. He hoped Samantha was still around.

"Hello, Stacy."

Stacy stopped and looked at him, then smiled. "Good evening, sir."

She sounded pleased to see him. And 'sir'? That was dandy. "Is the boss still around?"

"Oh yes, sir. I believe you got my message?"

“Yes. Morris called me. Thank you very much.” He began inside.

'Sir?'

He whirled around to face her.

“Perhaps, you should drop your personal number with me, sir, for emergencies. Boss wasn't pleased with the response I gave.”

Interesting. “Okay.”

She gave him her phone, and he dialed in his number.

“What’s she up to at this late hour?”

Stacy shrugged, then caught herself. “She doesn't make it a habit expect it is very important case she has the next day.”

Turning, he paused. “She has a case tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Stacy glances at the darkening weather.

“Have a good evening, Stacy.” He managed a smile.

“Oh, you too, sir.” She hurried on.

Suddenly, his mood wasn't so cheery.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SHE WAS putting her things in order when she heard the knock. She'd already told Stacy to go home. Out of habit, she avoided keeping her staff longer than appropriated their work time.

“Stacy, what are you still...”

Her throat constricted and her heart leapt to her throat. She wasn't prepared for the impact he had on her. Even now, her heartbeat which had slowed just a second ago was thudding so loud in her ears.

She knew next to nothing about this person, and they were alone in her office after shed sent the last of her staff home.

Not a very wise thing to do, Samantha.

He hovered at the door as if uncertain whether to enter or not. Never again would she stay on longer than the last staff leaving. If she were to be in trouble right now, the security at the gate may not hear her scream.

Shaking her head. Things like that didn't happen to her. In fact, she was almost sure Mark was not that kind of person. But as a caution, she picked up her bag.

“If you're closed for the day, then, I'll just go.” He said uncertainly, looking at the floor.

Whatever doubt that lingered in her mind disappeared. But she didn't move forward as she should. Even from the distance, she could feel the pressure in her pulse move more rapidly than she could have thought possible. He was a stranger, she shouldn't be feeling such irrational pull for a man she barely knew.

“We can talk outside.” She said conscientiously. He nodded and stepped out as though he'd just been handed a green card.

She sighed, both in relief and exasperation. She never knew how to react around him and could never guess what he'd do next. Like when he'd kissed her. That didn't seem like he'd planned it. The look on his face afterward had made her feel like the instigator.

Picking up the file that had kept her this long. She followed him out, locking her office behind her.

She met him at the reception area. Very wise of him to choose somewhere more open and closer to the rest of the world.

He was standing impatiently but not irritably. He wore a suit still today. Black. And he didn't look like a teacher or one who did odd jobs for extra money. He looked like he belonged in the professional world.

She handed the blue folder to him. He eyed it suspiciously before taking it. Then opened it and skimmed through in less than a minute, his face completely expressionless. When he finished, he handed it back to her, his expression giving nothing away.

What did she expect? That he'd just agree and that would be it?

“What time will you get off tomorrow” His voice gave nothing away.

Blinking twice, “Uh, I'm not sure. I have a case in court.”

“What time?” This time, there was enough irritability injected in his tone that she paused to consider before supplying an answer.

“5:30pm.”

“I'll be here tomorrow. 5:30pm”

He left her staring dumb-founded after his retreating back.

Really, what had she expected? She could take a whole course and not understand him. One minute he was angry and shooting daggers and the next, he was acting like nothing happened. What complications that make up one man!

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She was exhausted. That much was evident. And angry. That, she hid very well. She could never allow herself to show angry. But this particular case had slipped from her because she'd been too distracted to listen to counsel that her client was not being completely truthful. In fact, 70% of the story her client had told was a lie. Absolute lie.

How she'd felt embarrassed when the prosecuting officer had shown clear evidence of all the crimes her client was not only accused of but was found guilty of. If only she'd had all of those evidence, she would have bluffed her way through. She couldn't work with a client who didn't trust her.

Never again would she let herself get carried away by personal dilemma that shed mess up a job. Shed allowed herself to get distracted enough to lose a case. It was with sheer dignity shed left the courtroom with her self-respect still clinging.

The prosecuting officer had asked her what was on her mind. More than one person had repeated the question to her. If only she could tell them.

That lesson was learned a long time ago when she lost her first case. Her father had called her and given her a thorough talking-to, her mother, a complete dress down. Now after six years running her own firm, shed lost a second case.

Having realized her client had lied to her, shed given up and handed the case to another lawyer with the last shreds of her dignity still in place.

First thing the next day, she would send the part payment to the lawyer now handling the case.

True, she could win any case but what she didn't like was a client who didn't tell the truth. Every lawyer dreaded meeting such a client. She knew how many guilty persons whose cases had been won because they trusted her to do her job and told her everything, including some details shed have otherwise wished differently.

The prosecuting officer had told her to confront her client, but she didn't want any part of it anymore. Somehow, she hoped the woman was jailed for a long time to come.

Not very friendly thought but she didn't care. She wasn't exactly feeling friendly at the moment.

If she hadn't been too engrossed in thought, she probably would have noticed the deep frown on Mark's face from behind Stacy's desk or the look he sent to Stacy who was sitting at the visitors' seat. But both jumped up immediately.

Mark was at the door before she reached it, taking her bag from her limp hands as he ushered her into her office.

She turned at the entrance towards Stacy who was a step behind. "Please, clear out my car. I don't want to see any file on Rita Okoye at all." Then she let him lead her in.

Plopping down on the seat, she closed her eyes. Her body felt like noodles. She tilted the chair backwards and closed her eyes.

Mark's hands were taking off her shoes, then she felt the gentle massage. His hands were soothing and instead of the tingles and hot feeling of want, that he always made her feel, she felt languid. If only he would do that to her stiff shoulders too.

The soft moan escaped before she realized.

His hands were suddenly no longer massaging her feet. Chancing a glance, she saw he was no longer kneeling but standing and staring down into her. In anger, and something else.

Wisdom had her pulling her chair up, and she sat up, feeling the ache in her neck more pronounced than earlier. Rest would do it. She wouldn't ask him for help in massaging her tensed shoulders and equally aching back.

"Have you been waiting long?" Attempting to lighten the mood through conversation.

"No."

His monosyllabic response wasn't what she expected, and he didn't look like he wanted a conversation. His tone was chilling. And he didn't inspire communication of any kind at the moment.

She didn't meet his gaze and felt pinned to the spot with his towering over her in his full height.

Her hands became clammy as she became fully aware of him. The air warmed with unspoken desire begging for release. She deliberately kept her eyes on the floor. His gaze poking holes into her and literally sweltering her.

It was in that state Stacy knocked once and entered with an armful of files. She hoped none of them belonged to Rita Okoye. She may likely burn them if she laid eyes on any.

Stacy laid the files on one side of the table and stepped back. "Is there anything else, ma'am?"

Before she could reply, Mark's voice came in a strangely authoritative tone. "Go home, Stacy."

Stacy's gaze swung to him in shock and then, back to her. Samantha herself wasn't sure what had suddenly made Mark feel assertive. This was her domain. He had no right to insert his authority in her turf.

But not in front of her staff.

And so, more coolly, she said, without lifting her head. "Please, go home, Stacy."

Hesitantly. Stacy finally left, and she raised her head up at his.

"What was that all about?"

His look deflected her weak attempt at being stern. "You don't look capable of doing any more work today." Then he turned his back on her, "Get your things."

He left, leaving her wondering what in heaven's name she'd gotten herself into for the millionth time since meeting him.

Right, he was though. She was not feeling compelled to do anymore work today.

Favoring the flats over the heels, she grabbed her bag, locking the office behind her. When she'd had a good night's rest, she would think of what was what. At the moment, home called to her.

By the time she appeared out front, he was nowhere in sight. It was just as well he'd gone. She couldn't bear seeing him at the moment. She'd go home, have a nice dinner and take a well-deserved nap and probably wake up 12noon tomorrow. Probably forgo the jog tomorrow too.

She saw the car light flash twice and blinked, looking to see the occupant and blinked again. Too tired she'd been not to have noticed the Hummer jeep parked beside her car when she'd pulled in. But more surprising was to see Mark at the driver's seat, his expression blurry through the windshield.

Tentatively and curiously, she walked over the passenger side as he wound down the window.

"What... How..."

He didn't smile. His expression was hard. "It's my boss'." At her disbelieving look, he sighed but his tone nonetheless remained the same I got a new job. "I'm picking up something for him."

Strange that she believed him, but she wasn't about to let him off so easily and continued to stare at him like she couldn't and wouldn't believe a word he uttered.

His jaw set, and she took pity on him and smiled.

"Get in, please."

She glanced at her watch. "Can we talk tomorrow instead?"

'Too busy tomorrow. Just get in.' Reluctantly he added, "Please."

"Mark,"

"I'm not keeping you." Sounding angry, "Let me drive you home."

Ridiculous that she felt like laughing. Instead, she forced an edge into her voice. "I can drive."

He turned and looked at her. She almost squirmed. "My car..."

He didn't have to do anything to have her give in. With just a look, he shattered her resolve to stand her ground.

She shrugged. "I guess I can take a cab out tomorrow."

Samantha sighed and sank deeply into the seat. It was a comfortable feeling that brought a half smile to her face and made her want to sink into sleep just briefly. At least till he arrived at her home.

Mark Grinder was definitely not a person to play with. For one thing he was easy to trust; he had a personality that bespoke absolute trust. On the other hand, he was commanding in a take-charge manner, that makes you want to depend on him to handle things just right.

Both characters in one man was charming except shed never had any reason to think of such before.

One indulgence, she supposed, she could be allowed, at least this once. She never had to do so before and it really wasn't so bad. But she knew she'd have to do serious thinking now and make major decisions as soon as shed rested.

Maybe instead of thinking of marriage, she should have thought of friendship first. He would so make a wonderful friend to have.

"Please don't fall asleep on me," His voice was a murmur, "I don't know the way to your house."

Quite reluctantly, she sat up, realizing they were a way to the area where she lived. He had a good memory to remember her vicinity.

After giving him the address, she shook the feeling of sleep aside. They were just two minutes away from her house.

Her thank you was cut off when he inclined his head to the dashboard and her heart fell, recognizing the file for what it was. His expression was unreadable. Not an easy person to deal with.

Her surprised gatekeeper opened the gate for her at her first knock, and she entered, clutching the file tightly in her hand and gave an incoherent explanation about her car when he asked.

Right before the gate closed completely, she saw Mark drive away.

Curious enough as she was, she didn't bother with food or rest first, but sat at the edge of her bed and opened the file. When she got to the last page, she closed it and picked up her phone to call the one person she should have called when it had all started.

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He'd been so glad to have a short reprieve from his boss. He'd have time to attend the classes he'd missed and file those documents piled high on his desk. That is, before his boss arrived from his vacation.

Lately, he had been doing a lot more thinking about where he'd go from this job. He never had the illusion that he'd be with the government when he went to school to study law. He imagined owning several law firms and growing to become judge someday. Not that he was complaining about his job.

The past few weeks have been hectic. Sometimes he felt like taking a breather, not that he would be denied, of course, but he could imagine the number of calls the Chief judge would give him at intervals to run errands, if not outright asking him to come to the office. It would be a wasted leave anyway.

He would have love to take off just by himself for a few days and sort out some things, probably go check on his parents also, see how his father's health was. All that flew out the window when he got the call days ago. Thinking back, he should have avoided the call and returned it several days later.

The phone rang in his pocket before he sat down. He couldn't help the grimace that had slipped out when he saw the caller ID. It emitted a groan from him. Of all calls he was expecting, this, he'd prayed he wouldn't receive. The call was the reason he was still standing in the sun at 2pm, in front of Justice Mohammed's house.

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He'd been outside the gate since 11am. The gate had been locked against nonmembers of the household. Not surprising. The gate keeper had told him of the rule; Judge Muhammad did not entertain visitors at his home. He was very strict about that. And so, Mark sat under the shade of one of the fir trees outside and almost hiding the huge building which provided enough shading to ward off the worst of the heat.

His mood hadn't elevated since the Chief Judge had called him a week ago. And he'd probably and up missing today's class as well. He'd been so happy when the Chief Judge had told him he would be spending the next one month in Peru for official purposes. He'd thought he'd been able to make up for the classes he'd missed.

Then the call had come in before he could settle in for the day.

“Good morning, Sir.”

“Good morning, indeed. You have to be here to know the time difference.”

Mark ignored the insult. “How was your flight, Sir?”

“Beautiful, my boy, just beautiful.” With just a hint of mirth.

Mark had come to know what that tone was. The Chief Judge had not spent the night alone. He shook his head.

“Mark boy,”

Mark winced. He could never get used to being called boy.

“I have a small errand for you.” Of course. Already putting the time frame he'd used to run it and get ready for class later that afternoon.

“... Justice Muhammad Ibrahim is handling a case in two weeks. The hearing is the last Saturday of this month.” There was a short pause.

Mark thought he had an idea where this was heading, but he clamped his mouth shut.

“In the last drawer at my desk, there's a folder with the name credit unit on it. My PI got that information. I want you to go through it meticulously, then gather evidence against the prosecutor. You'll find all the basic information you need there.”

There was a considerably longer pause before the judge continued, “The office of the Admin will give you Judge Mohammed's home address. After you've gathered the evidence, you mail me a copy, then send a hard copy to Judge Muhammad.”

A sudden nauseous feeling began to assail him as he listened to the chief Justice. Small errand, he'd said.

“You must go to him yourself, Mark boy.” Definitely a very small errand. Mark mused. “Is it clear enough?”

Mark shook his head in disbelief but answered, “Yes, sir.”

Almost as an after-thought, “Boy?”

Mark stifled the urge to drop the call “Yes, sir?”

Justice Muhammed is not a very friendly fellow. Remember that.

And now, a week later after the Chief Judge had given him the go-ahead to send what he'd gathered so far, he was halfway from melting in the heat. For despite the shade offered by the beautiful ornamental trees that were lined in perfect order outside the house, he was sweating profusely, and in the company of a camera man lurking around, obviously looking for a juicy story to feed his ambitious ego.

At 3:15pm when the gate opened to someone driving out from the compound, the gate keeper noticed him and taking pity on him, invited him to wait in the security house. Explaining that the only way to see the Judge was to approach him immediately he drove in, otherwise, once he entered into the house, it would be impossible to see him. The car that had gone out earlier returned with a boy from school.

He dozed off at a point because he awoke at the sound of the horn outside the gate, praying that it was the judge. It was already dark out and his entire body was screaming in protest at the uncomfortable position he'd rested his head when another car got to the gate.

“That's him.” The security told him as the gatekeeper opened the gated and a Prado Jeep drove in accompanied by two police vans.

Mark was intercepted by the security who jumped down from their trucks before he could reach the Judges car.

“Sir,” He called as Judge Muhammad stepped out. “Sir, please, a moment.”

The Judge didn't even turn to acknowledge him. Well, he'd been warned. Then, one of the security officers elbowed his stomach. The pain that shot through his loins had him doubling over and clutching his stomach to reduce the pain as he fell on his knees. The pain, so blinding as another officer hit him from the back with his gun. He felt the excruciating pain along his spine, and ached backward. Nothing in his difficult life had been quite as painful as the merciless beating he got.

The last coherent word he uttered was a prayer under his breath as an idea occurred to him.

“There's a rumor that you've been compromised, sir. And I know who started it.”

Before the next expected blow came, the Judge turned. He signaled that they stop and Mark struggled to his feet, the pain blinding as his head swam. He shut his eyes and the pain lessened.

The Judge was staring at him now, his mouth in a thin line but otherwise, his face was bare of expression.

He swallowed the bile that rose to his throat down and tried to speak. His voice was croaky. Clearing his throat, he willed his quavering body to calm.

“A reporter has been loitering outside your gate since I got here this morning.” Now he could understand the rumors better. This man was as hard and unfeeling as a man could get. It was his last case that had brought those rumors that he'd been compromised.

“And why did you decide I care for this information?” The judge asked.

Somehow, Mark knew he'd gotten through. “The Chief Judge sent me.”

His brow shot up slowly. “The Chief Judge is a pig. Suddenly, he remembers me because I'm presiding over his son's case.”

Bingo. Mark could like this man. The Judge looked him over, “So he got a new errand boy. I wonder why skirts don't last long as his personal assistants.”

The Chief Judges reputation with young girls has already common knowledge. How his wife and children handled it was a pity.

“You seem like a smart boy.” The Judge assessed. Then stretched out a hand.

Clumsily, Mark took a step forward, eyed the guards who looked ready to box him and wisely stretched his aching arm to Justice Mohammed without a step further. The Judge took it and handed it to his assistant, a miniature-looking man Mark was noticing for the first time.

Marks sigh of relief was audible even before the Judge turned to his security.

“Take care that that reporter does not disturb my home again. He turned and walked towards the house.”

Mark was joyous as he headed towards the gate, still holding on to his stomach with his other hand resting on his back. The security had already preceded him out, and he began to feel sorry for the reporter if he was still there. But this was Abuja, everyone hustled and bustled for themselves. Besides, it saved him from further beating, didn't it? His only prayer was that the reporter would not be out there by the time the security showed up.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Samantha frowned at Opus Clinton. She wasn't a malicious person but right now she wished he would disappear and never return. For a lawyer, he could really be a pest when he chose to be. And he'd been attacking her client quite maliciously.

She glanced down at Sandra Kufre, who was staring straight ahead, quite unseeing. Not only were her in-laws suspicious of her for the death of their son, they'd decided to ensure they wiped her clean of every penny.

Samantha's brows creased ever so deeply, willing herself to be calm. She didn't want to get on the Judges bad side and patiently waited for the prosecuting officer to finish his ranting, for that was indeed what he appeared to be doing to her and her client.

Feeling pitiful for the poor Mrs. Clinton, having a husband like that. Opus used to be one of the best lawyers she'd come across and often enjoyed the courtroom when they were on opposite sides. But right now, she could almost wish it was Chibuzor Nwanyibe. And she never wants to see him again!

He smiled satisfactorily as he concluded and the Judge turned to her. "Counselor?"

Sandra grabbed her hand just as she was about to get up. "I'm in need of fresh air, Sammy. Please."

Smiling wanly, she laid an assuring hand on the one gripping hers and squeezed gently. "Thank you, Your Honor. My client has just requested for reprise as she's in need of fresh air due to her obvious condition."

Mr. Opus got up. "My Lord!"

"Sustained." His voice had just a hint of anger "Request granted, Counselor. This case is adjourned for fifteen minutes." Everyone stood up as the judge left, pausing to speak with a chamberlain and pointed to the crowd before going into his chamber.

Sandra smiled at her. "Thank you, love. What would I do without you!"

Samantha laughed, "That's melodramatic of you. Well, let's see, pretends to think. You'd probably have your in-law's ears tied together and give them all a spanking."

Smiling, "True." Then winced when she made eye contact with one of her in-laws whose hateful gaze was directed at her. Samantha felt sorry for her friend.

"Sandra, ..."

Sandra waved it off, "It doesn't move me anymore. I just want this case closed, so I can start preparing for my baby." Tapping at her huge stomach. "This guy here is as strong-headed as anyone of them. He's got his dad's streak of it."

Laughing despite herself, Samantha helped her up, "You mean your stubborn streak of it."

Now she grinned broadly. "I'll be in my car, Sam."

Nodding, Samantha's eyes went to the in-laws who were staring daggers at Sandra's retreating back. One would think they'd at least be sympathetic as she was carrying their child.

They didn't care for the man who died nor for his unborn child, all they were fighting for was the money that Effiong Kufre had left behind; cash in abundance. Not once, according to Sandra did they visit except to get money and go back. Suddenly, he was dead, and they accuse the wife of poisoning him.

Samantha shook her head. Sweet Sandra. She was selfless, very accommodating and one cannot help but like her. Why, she'd walked her way right in Samantha's heart despite her resolve to keep clients in their category and not get personal. Sandra had managed to win her way into Samantha's heart.

One had to be hardhearted not to like Sandra. The only client whom she'd befriended.

The family she ended up in was too hard-headed to realize that Sandra was the sweetest person to know.

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He hadn't planned to be so early but when he'd found out she had another case the same day, he found himself in the courtroom before he could think of all the reasons not to.

To say he hadn't thought of her would be a lie. Every day had ended with the thought of her lulling him to sleep, and he always awoke with vivid details of the dream she dominated.

The power of the mind.

Maybe he should just drop the file on her desk and disappear before she noticed him, he thought. He couldn't be sure she wanted to see him. After all, she had not tried to reach him, so he assumed she had changed her mind.

It was just as well. He wouldn't settle for less himself. Samantha glanced up and saw him before he could slip the folder down in front of her.

"Oh, it's you." She said breathlessly, her breathing hitched.

It seemed like he wasn't the only one who had been thinking of the other person. He could still make a clean escape, but decided again that would be the coward's way. Besides, he wanted to congratulate her for the way she handled the plaintiff. The man was a swine.

"Hi." Okay, so she wasn't the only one breathless. He'd imagined seeing her again several times but none had prepared him for the meeting in person.

A clerk approached them, "Justice Muhammed would like to see you, sir."

He smiled and thanked the officer. He'd expected it. The judge's eyes had been on him several times during the proceedings.

"You know Justice Muhammed?" She asked incredulously.

He grinned "Not personally. Through my boss."

She shook her head and gathered her things. "I won't keep you from," she smiled lopsidedly, "... your boss' friend."

Oh, he'd missed her. That hint of rough edge about her, he'd missed it. But he kept that to himself. 'I have something for you.'

Her brows shot up inquisitively.

He swallowed the sigh, "Where can I meet you?"

When she didn't answer or change her expression, he released the sigh. "I'll only be a minute to know what he wants then, I'll meet you. It's really important."

She bit her lower lip in a contemplative and indecisive gesture. The sweet play of emotions on her face was the high point of his day. He didn't think thinking could be so captivating.

Her gaze slipped to his, and she blurted, "The cafeteria."

He smiled, knowing her, she wouldn't have wanted to go there, but she obviously didn't want to be alone with him.

"Okay," he agreed amicably and watched her escape.

Yep. That was most definitely an escape.

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The chamber was very spacious. A table was set in the middle. If he knew anything of furniture, he would have known it was Victorian. The wall was painted a dark brown and the lights looked ancient but functional. The left side of the room was dominated by a

huge shelf with large volumes of books. Behind the Judge was another shelf with similar volumes.

A decanter of half-filled dry gin sat on the table that was almost bare of items except for a few stark of books on one side, the decanter and two glasses, a pen and an open file. The room was very neat and had just a hint of air freshener.

Justice Muhammed had his eyes trained on him, evaluative. He didn't mind. He was used to it. Many a bunch of rich folks have taken such interest in his person. Not minding was a point in his favor. After all, his new job came as a result of Gracie's assertive personality. All he had do was stand and be assessed.

"I thought I recognized your face. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge stood up, "What's your name, boy?"

The tone brought a smile to his lips. It was just the tone he was used to with the chief judge. 'Mark Grinder, sir.'

"What kind of name is that? You are one of those people publicizing Western culture in our country."

Now he smiled more. "Not really, sir. Well, my father was deaf when my mother met him. He was the guy at the local mill and everyone called him grinder. Somehow, the name stuck. My father was mute and uneducated. And when I was enrolled in school, my mother told them my surname was Grinder. Not very well-educated, my mother."

The man began to laugh. Mark never thought the story funny, but he'd learned long ago to be merry over anything. And the story did sound ridiculous now that he thought of it.

"Smart woman, your mother. I have something to laugh about each time I remember you."

Foolishly, Mark grinned. "Glad to help, sir."

The judge critically studied him now. "What are you doing working for that old womanizing addict?"

Mark paused with a ready answer and considered the question and its implication. He didn't approve of his boss lifestyle; neither was he willing to rat about it to the first ready ear he met.

"Well, sir, I'm trying to get my degree in law after years of graduation and with his influence, I get to attend the special classes for the senior staff. I'd hoped to be judge one day so, it's a good place to work."

The judge considered the answer. “That's a smart mind you have there, boy. Don't get entrenched in his dirty businesses.”

Mark took the warning in good spirit. “I appreciate the advice, sir.”

“Well, nice chatting with you, Mark.”

Taking that as his cue to leave, he thanked the judge and left, remembering his meeting with Samantha at the cafeteria. Mark realized for the first time since first meeting the Justice Muhammad that the man didn't have a trace of accent. Quite incredible for a Northerner.

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Samantha concentrated on her next case, which was immediately after the one on remiss. She was ready for the case but couldn't shake off the feeling that she was missing something. She never made mistakes. All her notes and evidences had been thoroughly checked and verified.

She considered Sandra Kufre's case, not at all different in this part of the world where a man's wealth always preceded his wife and family. Amazingly, Africa was best known for upholding family values.

If only they knew!

Sandra was going to win the case. She was certain of it, but she wondered about the in-laws and what else they might do when the child was born. So far, they didn't care. Maybe they felt threatened since it has been confirmed that it was a baby boy. Legally, all rites, and based on customs of the culture, would go fully to him. As a sneer, that could have sparked off envy.

First things first.

Mark approached her. Her breath hitched. Nothing had prepared her for meeting him again. After almost two months, she should have known she couldn't just escape it.

He smiled at her but didn't sit until she waved to the chair opposite her.

“I didn't know you were that acquainted with Judge Muhammad. That must have been an interesting conversation you had.” She observed.

“Yes, it was. And I'm sorry for keeping you from your case. I'll be brief and get out of your hair.”

She wondered. He always managed to get just a tad under her skin. And not in an annoying way. But she schooled herself enough of her indulgence with him. She had to



settle it with him once and for all. He opened a file he'd come in with and passed it over to her. She barely glanced down.

"I did some homework and I'm sure you already know this but the Chief Judge insisted you critically examined this case. Mr. Patrick has in the last couple of months..."

So engaged was she in her private thought that it took her a moment to register what he was saying.

"Justice Forase is your new boss?"

"Yes. Mr. Patrick has been involved in a series of illegal activities..."

She shook her head. She knew zilch about this person. "So, you're here on the Judge's orders."

It took him a moment to answer. But when he did, it was with a smile, 'Yes.'

Later, she would consider what that meant. Right now, there was something else she needed to clear. "Look, Mr. Grinder. I understand you had some ideas about us,"

"I understand..."

"Let me finish, please." She heaved a breath and released it, willing herself to handle it professionally.

"I can't settle for less than I contemplated. I'm sorry I dragged you into such mess."

She saw him shrug, hoping he'd say something to alleviate the mood. He didn't seem bothered or angry, just plain nonchalant.

"I gathered as much when I didn't hear from you. Truth is, I don't think I would have gone ahead either. I have a lot to settle before I can contemplate taking on further responsibility."

She almost, almost inquired what he meant. His proposal had said almost as much. He'd said it would be on his own terms and she'd have to change her name. These two had prompted her to consider the wisdom in what she was proposing.

"So, we are okay, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know about you but I wish we could forget about all of that and start over. I could use a friend"

The smile came before she could stop it. "I'd like that."

She listened to him give her details she already had and some she didn't know about and thought, they just might make good friends.

She was the one who exclaimed and his eyes went to the wall clock, getting up before he'd begin any apology. It was quite a show watching her precede him out of the cafeteria and ordered his mind to remember they were just friends now before his eyes strayed to her shapely form walking briskly off. He had no idea how sexy and elegant that was.

He let out a yowl and glanced at the smiling lady heavily pregnant who'd jabbed him and felt guilty having been caught staring at Samantha. For a pregnant woman, Samantha's client was just bursting with energy. She was already matching steps with Samantha.

“Who's the cute guy ogling you from behind, Sam?”

Samantha laughed, “Sandra, you get the most absurd thoughts in your head.”

“Well, if you're not interested, since my baby papa is no longer here, I could take him off your hands.”

Samantha turned and barely spared him a glance then started laughing again, “Who, him? Really Sandra, you need to cool off.”

“I would love to, but they never let me drink anything cold.” Wielding the bottle of water in her hand like a weapon.

Mark was quite enjoying Sandra and what show she presented.

“Give him a chance, Sam. He's very cute.” She said and with flourish, she preceded Samantha into the courtroom.

He averted his gaze and hurried past Samantha but not before he saw the deep crease of frown on her face as her step slowed.

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“For a woman carrying their child, they have maligned the wife of the deceased and have forcefully seized some of their joint properties, not realizing that the couple have equal shares of these properties. My colleague doesn't know this, thinking the house solely belongs to the deceased. As the defense has been my client for many years, I drafted the legal documents on their behalf.”

She passed a copy of the property document to the officer who handed it to the judge.

“The business owned solely by my client have been attacked by anonymous vandals a few days after my client was supposedly threatened by one of her in-law to hand it over.

“Let's not forget that she was also harassed on the day of the deceased funeral by the mother of the deceased and called spiteful names. My Lord, the deceased's family denied my client the use of her marital name...”

“Objection, My Lord. The defense decided to change her name.”

“Exactly.” Samantha put in, “after the first attempt by her husband's family to confiscate her personal properties on the grounds that it belongs to their son.”

“Overruled.” The judge announced. “Proceed, Counselor.”

Samantha hid the smile well, “Thank you, Your Honor. Due to the numerous threats, my client came to my office one day barely restraining hurtful tears to seek counsel as to her personal property. I gave counsel to change her business name to her maiden name. This, I handled personally, ensuring all legal work was taken care of.”

“My Lord, if I may.” Mr. Opus got up.

Samantha merely glanced at him.

“Counselor?”

She nodded to the judge in assent.

“You may proceed, Counsel.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

Samantha sat down and watched the hatred in his eyes as his gaze fell on her client. He'd turned the case into a personal vendetta. He used to be a good lawyer. She couldn't imagine what changed.

“Your Honor, my colleague advised her client to change her marital name over a small family misunderstanding.”

She grabbed Sandra's hand before her client could do something rash. “I'll take care of it.”

Sandra relaxed some.

“Counselor?” The judge asked.

She stood up with a smile. She already knew what the judge would say about that.

“That wasn't wise now was it?”

“Your Honor, my counsel was only a result of the physical attack on my client.”

“She attacked us with a pitch fork.” One of the in-laws shouted.

Knowing her client, she shot her a look and reluctantly, Sandra shrugged and settled back down.

“I will maintain decorum in the courtroom.” The judge's tone was enough warning.

Mr. Opus hissed at one of his clients and told him to be quiet. It was a lost cause for them. Samantha thought.

“Your Honor, my client was physically attacked in her own home as the witnesses testified earlier. In defense of herself and her unborn child, my client picked up the only available weapon to ward them off. Whatever injuries incurred were just a result of a tormented wife and mother.

“Very important also to note, My Lord, is that the will of the deceased and my client clearly states that all joint property be handed down to the child if one or both parents should incur an accident.”

She handed the will to the officer and waited as the judge read through, his face poker-like, he glanced up at her.

“That will be all, Your Honor.”

Sandra clutched her hand tightly. The grip was firm. It hurt. But she wouldn't say so, rather, she smiled assuredly. The waiting was the most strenuous part for the judge to give the final verdict.

One didn't take sentiments into the courtroom. That was the downfall of Opus. He needed to draw the line between case and sentiments. If it had been any other lawyer, she would have asked Sandra if they'd had a misunderstanding before. With Opus, one didn't need to have had any previous dealings with him before he showed his other side.

The Judge cleared his throat and Sandra's hand tightened on hers. Everyone looked on expectantly.

“Counsel?”

She got up. “Your Honor.”

“You verify that this will is original.”

“Attested by the Chief Judge himself.”

There was a low murmur as an official shouted, “Order in court.”

“So, what is your client's plea?”

“She's not asking for any part of the joint properties, but for her personal properties be left alone and for the family to stop harassing her.”

“And the will was signed by both parties?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Thank you.”

She bowed slightly and returned to sit.

“Having seen evidence and heard the testimonies of witnesses for the defense and the prosecution, I hereby give this verdict.”

There was suddenly a chilled silence in the room.

## CHAPTER SIX

“THE COURT rules in favor of Mrs. Sandra Kufre. And her marital name be given to her unless she otherwise wishes it. The deceased's family are hereby restricted from any form of contact with the defendant unless otherwise appealed to in a court of law by the defendant. The family is charged to return every pin, nail or hammer taken either forcefully or without the consent of the defense. And the will is honored.” The gavel sounded. “Next case in five minutes.”

As they all rose, Sandra grinned at her. “Told you I would win.”

Unable to help it, Samantha began to laugh, 'And I did say you didn't need my intellectual expertise in the courtroom. The pitch fork could have done the work very nicely.’

“Thank you, Sammy. I just wish you'd consider marriage.”

Samantha winced inwardly. The only time she did, she muddled it up.

“That cute guy has been staring at you since the sitting like his world revolves around you.”

Samantha turned about, “Who, Mark?”

“I don't know him, Sam but you obviously do. Give him a chance. He just might be the one.”

When Samantha frowned, she laughed, “And you're not getting any younger, Sam. Now, I have to go take care of my sweet-pie right here. We're almost due. And mother is coming the day after. I have to go look like I've been lazing in bed all along. Else, she'd pull my ears. You're the best, Sam.” And off she went.

Samantha frowned at Sandra's back and turned to search for Mark. All through the seating, she'd felt his eyes on her. In here, she couldn't risk betraying herself or her professionalism by petty indulgence.

After a futile search with her next client approaching, she got up to greet them, just in time to see Mark enter the judges chamber.

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“Tell me, boy. What would you rather be doing right now?”

Mark paused halfway into the room, considering the question from all angles and finally dredge up a smile and a response, “Dozing off on a beach in Aruba, with my personal assistant giving me update on the current state of my million-dollar multifaceted company.”

The judge’s brow rose “That’s a big dream on a small body.”

“It helps me sleep with a smile, so, I try to keep it alive.”

He accepted the glass the Judge offered him but didn't dare take a sip. The content smelled strong enough to knock a strong person out if not minimally consumed. As sturdy as he was, getting to even halfway there, the state of drunkenness gave him the shivers.

The Judge was a very tall man. Huge more like, he had a permanent bitter scowl on his face that brought on wrinkles each time he laughed.

“I like you, boy. I'll leave an offer open to you, when you're ready to ditch the Chief Judge, I'd take you on as my assistant.”

Mark carefully put down the glass before his hand could give way. For nearly four years he'd been looking for a job, a good one that could help put him on the right track of a dream he'd nurtured since childhood and now that he had one, another offer was being thrown at him. But smart, he was. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate the offer.”

“You are a smart one to be careful, Mark Grinder. But my offer is a genuine one.”

Not certain how to respond to that, he simply nodded, glancing down at his feet.

Mark wasn't a strong Christian, but he recognizes a miracle when he saw one. He'd lost count how many places he'd sent in an application, but he could remember how many of them called back for an interview. Each time he'd called back, they told him they'd already taken the people they wanted. Giving up had never crossed his mind.

Oh, there were times he simply wanted to move out of the city to some other place where standard of living was minimal but the gleaming hope that it wouldn't matter where he went, grace always located you at the appropriate time. That and the knowledge that when your human abilities fail or aren't enough, grace kicks in, had cultured his mind into heeding the urge to remain. Besides, his two siblings were schooling here in Abuja. It didn't take much of a genius to make the decision.

“What’s on your mind, Mark Grinder?”

He wouldn't lie. Neither was he obligated to tell his thoughts to a stranger. “Just thinking.”

“Pleasant thoughts, I hope.”

Mark caught himself before the shrug sufficed. “It keeps me happy.”

The judge sighed, “Sit down, Mark and tell me what you think about the case of Credit Unit versus Onu Patrick.”

Mark sat but his mind was made up. After all the errors he'd had where Samantha was concerned, he was more than willing to call a truce. He wouldn't disintegrate what little friendship whose fragility bordered on a nickel of understanding. If not for himself then for her sake. Neither of them had been prepared for the upheaval their initial actions have resulted.

Mark's one thought was in ensuring he didn't let slip any word or phrase or suggestion that would place Samantha on the advantage. In the short time he'd encountered her, her person had clearly affirmed someone who took pride in her work, put in a lot to get to where she was and wouldn't appreciate an interference, any interference that might make any case she handled be compromised.

That, Mark thought, would be the worse he could do to her.

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It wasn't the Chief Judge she was angry at. No. The Chief Judge always got what he wanted and cared less who he trampled on along the way, no. It wasn't him. And to think she'd actually just considered a truce with him, Samantha fumed.

Meticulously and with a carefulness that made her ground her teeth and almost gnash them, she packed up her bag, offered a frozen smile at her client and left the courtroom.

On the outside, one would merely see a successful lawyer walking off with her victory but on the inside, the blood churned in her vein, she had to blink to clear her vision for the fiery heat in her eyes.

She won the case, of course. It was a good case to have won. The polite nod and half-inclined smile were a complete farce though. He had no idea who she was, obviously. Even that excuse did not mellow down the deep-sated fire of burning fury she never allowed herself.

Barrister Samantha did not get angry. No, sire. She never did. Except since meeting one Mark Grinder, a beast had been unlocked, and she never maintained enough measure of

calm before he was pushing her into blinding claws of volcanic eruptions. Lucas would laugh at such cliché. He called her a sassy after an event she'd rather never remember again when she'd been fourteen.

The front of calm triumph suited the people who greeted and congratulated her as she made her way to her car. It was after all, a thing of great joy.

Winning a case was as satisfying as putting a guilty man behind bars. Right now, she wished a cell could be made for one special candidate, one that had lots of rodent infestation, all kinds of diseases and infections let loose and a maximum-security team mounting the doors as the culprit is chained hands and feet.

That culprit would be Mark Grinder. And the day he was released would be eternity too soon.

She slipped behind the wheel, not deterred by the sound of her name coming from the person who'd been racing to keep up with her. Calm, she was. Yes. That was why she sat in the car, waiting for the air condition system to cool up the car some and even spared a glance through the window at the person calling and looking at her in feigned innocent and puzzling expression. When she felt the heat evaporate to be taken over by the cool air, she wound up the glass and slowly pulled out of the space, not bothering to look back at the person staring perplexed after her.

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You never knew what to make of a woman. Mark thought. And you never knew what to do with one either. They always amazed him.

Well, his mother had. His sister, who knows? He wasn't exactly with her 24 hours of the day nor months on end. But he knew Deborah was too smart by half. He knew it was a weak thought but it helped not to think of his baby sister as anything but perfect.

He paused at the secretary's office, waving her to sit before she began with pleasantries and inquired softly if Samantha was on seat. Pausing outside her office, he allowed Stacy to inform her boss of his presence.

It was pretty appalling and quite amusing to see fumes of rage boil into volcanic calm while she maintained an air of outward peace. The desire to pull her out from under that factious malady to crumble had eased, giving way to complete perplexity at the complexity of the feminist race. A sad fact but only if it could be effectively maneuvered away from what could certainly result in a fix, Mark hoped the masculine sect would survive long enough to comprehend the dictates of the womanish essence.

On a note of complete innocence, Mark waited patiently for the secretary to excuse them, wondering why Samantha had gone from friend to foe in a space of two hours. She hadn't spoken to or with anyone who might have told her something that got her angry except of



course her opposing colleague at the court. The case she'd won earlier was what could have been a catalyst for her sore, not the right term though, mood. Her second case had proved more fun with client aggravation compared to the previous one.

He felt a nagging fear cripple up his spine as he eased the door closed behind him.

Samantha was sitting straight-backed behind her table although outward appearance stated welcoming demeanor and yet, the shards of fire shooting at him through those honey beautifully-enraged eyes made him search his memory for anything that might have happened in the course of the hearing that could have engaged her innermost fury which was directed at him.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Grinder.”

Uh-uh, he thought. It took him long enough to finally figure she was really, uncharacteristically ticked off at him.

“Uh, do you have a minute, Ms. Barigha?” Deciding to play her game if that would appease her.

It didn't. But the mock gaze that roved him from top to bottom finally did get under his craw. “You are in my office, aren't you? Sit down, Mr. Grinder.”

His stomach waged a war between tug and tumble as he finally lowered himself into one of the seats facing her, trying to remember his last conversation with her and what could have set her off.

She folded her hands on the table and leaned forward, all businesslike.

“I'm going to say this once and hope we understand each other. I built everything I own out of hard work, perseverance and because I'm frigging good at what I do. No case I ever won came as a result of bribery or man's definition of favor. I decided to give you the benefit of doubt.”

He felt the fear give way to flickers of dawning understanding. Or so he thought.

The phone rang, and she ignored it, didn't even glance at it. “You may think you've got some insight into what we do because you are around doing odd jobs for the Chief Judge but common sense should tell you that people like me do not like anything or anyone to interfere with the hard work, we put in making a case successfully won.”

It was like a slap, the insult. Especially coming from her. But he hid it well enough. Eruption would do them both no good. He would always be nothing to her but someone she'd fooled herself with, and she wouldn't allow herself to see he'd really wanted but friendship from her. From when he'd first met her.

“Tell me, Mark Grinder, why were you really sent by the Chief Judge? To spy on me not to mess up the case or you had your own agenda? Did you think it would win you brownie points after I'd told you I was no longer interested in the proposal?”

Hiding his feelings well, he asked in a voice he wouldn't believe was so calm and normal, “You've beat about the bush long enough, Ms. Barigha. And I really did come to find out why you were so angry after winning a case that big. So, tell me, Ms. Barigha, why are you mad at me?”

For someone who was so heated in his veins, his blood and hackles precariously high at the moment, his voice and the delivery of his speech was excellently stage-managed.

“I would, as soon as you tell me what you went to see Alhaji Muhammed for right before the case.”

Full, precise and exact comprehension had him jerking his head to confront her steady scrutiny and all he saw was the cold anger reflected there.

How could he explain to her that he'd thought about her all through his conversation with the Alhaji and his resolution not to betray her. Obviously, they were still a long way from trust.

He opened his mouth to explain but shrugged instead, seeing she had not thought him incapable of stooping to any level to get to her wealth. How wrong she was. Her success challenged him to be a man and work twice as hard as she did to comfortably call her a friend in any social gathering without speculative glances.

She nodded, “I thought so.” Taking his silence as guilt. “I thought after all, money wasn't what you were after. How wrong I'd been. I don't ever want to see you anywhere around this environment, Mr. Grinder. Have a good day.”

The dismissive words hurt more than the insults. Standing up slowly, he let his eyes poke holes into her. 'I let myself believe you weren't stupid after all by dismissing your earliest blunders when we first met. I see now the worms too thick that muddle your brain, too much to see what's right in front of you.’

“I did not apply for a position in your life, you asked. I did not seek out the judge, he called me. Into his chambers. The second time. He tried to get my opinion on the case but I thought I respected you too much to do that to you.”

His voice was cool but with an underlying layer of just angry mad. “My homework yielded better, more incriminating details about the prosecutor. This is not the first time he had tried to blackmail an institution into granting him a loan. That was proof alone to win the case hands down. But you didn't see that in my report, did you?”

Her eyes widened in shock as realization dawned on her.

“You were too distracted not to realize pages five through eight were missing from the report I gave you. Neither did you notice everything else I left for you to see, you already knew and had.” He leaned over at her huge, puzzled eyes. Good, he was hitting home.

“So, you see, Barrister Samantha Barigha, your wealth means absolutely nothing to me.” He straightened. “Thank you for reminding me never to over step my limit when it comes to people like you.” Then, smiled sadly and left her office before she could fully process all he'd said.

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She put down the phone and stared ahead into listlessness, a mirage of images and scenes flashing across her mind and turning her vision blurry. A little pride, that was all it took. One moment of misguided inarticulate assessment and you put yourself on the hanger.

He had not lied. Not at all. The evidence he'd kept from her was what could have the thrown down the entire case and that singular evidence he'd withheld from her. The Chief Judge was not particularly pleased with Mark for disobeying his instructions but it only meant he was someone willing to do the right thing despite the instruction from above. Here was a man whose heart warred and won over counter forces that didn't benefit others. Here was someone she could actually trust.

The call shed put through to Judge Muhammad had only proved worthwhile. While the judge had been aware of every detail of the case, he'd wondered why she had not used them.

This was the worst mess shed done since meeting Mark Grinder. He was but an unsuspecting victim in the drama shed started.

Yes, Samantha Barigha knew well enough not to blame anyone but herself. Gracie getting married didn't entail she had to also do the same. Gracie was simply being Gracie. So much for being too Barigha-ish to stoop so low.

Samantha knew fixing this particular mess wasn't going to be easy. She had misjudged Mark and, in the process, insulted him as well.

Having had to break off two engagements already, Samantha was just as fed up with men who always referred back to her money. So many would have been traumatized to have been engaged to money lovers like Luke and Osbourne, but they'd both taught her not to be weary of men but to know when his intentions were obviously misguidedly placed on her pocket.

She sighed and rested her head on the desk. What had she done?

If only getting the answer was that simple. So predictably simple. Every single evidence had pointed to him being right, and she had been too angry at him to have seen it. He had no reason to have lied to her. Why had it taken her so long to realize that?

If Mark had wanted to get into her good grace, he was too smart to do something so obvious like manipulating a case she was handling. Besides, he knew he didn't have to try too hard to get to her.

This was that moment to make it right between them. Mark was too nice a person to suffer for her mistakes.

She'd gone through all the files Mark had presented her. It didn't take a genius to see what he'd done. All he'd given to her bore the resemblance and screamed of the Chief Judge. She realized that Mark never lied to her. He'd been nothing if not completely honest with her.

It may take her sometime, but she had to come to terms with the fact that this was one person who didn't need to pretend or lie to her to get anything from her. She owed him for all the mess shed pulled on him. If he wanted to get even, he could threaten to go to the media. Even the call to Justice Muhammed had not placed him on the guilty plane shed assigned him to.

Mark Grinder, she'd discovered had never lied to her. Not once that she could claim. So, what to do and how to fix the mess.

Samantha Barigha wasn't judgmental, as a rule and also her job requirement. A slip was not permitted in the world where she lived, but since meeting Mark, all shed managed to do was make matters worse than their second encounter. He must think she was professionally inept and socially unstable.

She had to make it right. For him. He didn't deserve all that shed heaped on him. They barely knew each other! Who did such wicked things to someone they barely knew?

Her reality had always been men wanting to get a taste of the Barigha wealth. They never stopped to think that she made it on her own. Her father's influence only helped her get the start-up capital she needed to open her own firm. She did not get any special favors from her father. Her family could testify to that.

And now the one person who had been honest with her, she'd messed it up. Big.

She was a believer, and she knew only good things happen to her. If Mark was supposed to be in her life, shed definitely find a way to make it right. And maybe it was time to stop letting her mother get to her. It had gone on too long-her mother always nagging her about marriage. It didn't bother her before. Gracie's engagement triggered her into thinking just maybe, her biological clock might be running a little too fast.

If she was going to get married, it would be the right way and it would be what she wanted, not because of pressure from her mother or her best friend.

Right at the moment, she had a friend to apologize to.

But an hour later, Stacy told her he wasn't taking her calls. After calling for the better part of twenty minutes.

Maybe she could give the Chief Judge a call to find out everything she could about this Mark Grinder in his employ.

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His neighbor was right behind him as he unlocked his door. And not wanting to be rude, Mark let him walk through before closing the door. Now wasn't the time he wanted company. His mind was back at that courthouse and his later encounter with Samantha, the object of his now depressing mood. No matter what he did, it always came back to their first encounter. She never saw past that day.

And it was all her fault!

Why was he the one suffering for it?

Mark hung his jacket despite the urge to fling it. The violent streak he felt towards the situation didn't sit well in his bowels. A gag. A throttling mucus clogged in his throat. An annoying buzz in his ears. An irritating itch on his skin. One he couldn't stop thinking about and wanting with a greedy longing not justified by reasons and excuses he'd given himself to stay away from her.

It always came back to him wanting to see her. That was where the problem lay.

“Na wetin dey do you?” Mr. Morris asked.

Really what he didn't need at the moment.

He loosened his tie and tossed it onto the bed. His mind was still on the conversation he'd had with Samantha at her office. An angry bile rose within him. He was tired of her insults. Every time he had a conversation with her, it always got his hackles up and ready to burst.

“Guy,” Mr. Morris halted his move to take off his shoes. “Wetin happen for work?”

Mark shook his head, which had a two-fold meaning. “Nothing from work. And I'm fine.” He quickly added. Then spoiled it by yanking off the shoes with more force than necessary.

“I see no problem.” Mr. Morris commented. “Tell me.”

Mark sighed. Morris was like an annoying brother who didn't care that you might not appreciate his nosing into your business. Although they weren't of the same age or background, Morris forged a bond of friendship with him. And he was the caretaker of the house they lived.

He undid the cuffs of his shirt and decided to tell after all.

“I met a lady.”

“Ah!”

“It's not what you think, alright?”

“I talk anything?”

Mark shook his head, “Anyway, it was five months ago. I was working and she showed up...”

It wasn't very hard recalling the details that had led to this day. And his temper was not much alleviated as he remembered Samantha's accusation. If he wanted her money, he sure wouldn't have had to meet her to steal it. And to think he'd considered starting afresh to get to know her. Why did he ever think someone like her would want to be friends with someone like him?

“So, na wetin you go do now?”

Mark laid back on the bed. “Nothing. I will do nothing.”

Morris leaned over him. “You sick? How you go say nothing?”

Mark looked closely at his friend. He could swear he saw wires working in that head. You never trusted people's reaction. But Morris had proved as not only a friend but a trusted one.

He could be trusted to keep a secret. This is the closest to a friend he'd ever had. Besides, there was no chance that Morris would know who the 'lady' was, was there?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ONE WOULD THINK Saturday was work-free.

Not if you work for High Chief Justice Forase, a man who couldn't differentiate between work-time and personal time. He managed to have fun even in the midst of work and had termed Mark a bore for being too serious always with work.

Mark stood patiently at the parking lot and watched the car pull in. He hesitated just for a second when the Chief Judge struggled to highlight with more energy than usual. It wasn't

quite unusual, really. It only meant he hadn't gone home since yesterday. His work clothes from yesterday were stinking. For a man of his caliber, he was quite the drunk. Although Mark had never seen or witnessed him drink to stupor, he'd been pretty close to it just last week.

He began to wonder whose unfortunate daughter had warmed the old mans bed. Thankfully, he didn't have to witness firsthand the Chief Judge make fool of himself after sharing his thought of not being a part his entourage whenever he went on such miscellaneous escapades.

Mark waited as his boss stepped out smelling of alcohol and strong floral perfume which didn't do justice to Mark's already nauseous stomach. It was convulsive the smell that assailed his nostrils. He thought he'd be immune to such feeling of gagging on his own vomit. Whatever did go on between his boss and those university girls, he didn't want to think about especially when his little sister was a student also.

Mark managed not to wrinkle his nose at the ugly smell as the Chief Judge chuckled, then choked but was able to bring it under control before anyone else could detect it.

Barely quelling the urge to shake his head, Mark watched the older man walk into the building, and he set about to remove the stigma of whatever promiscuity that his boss had engaged in from the car, then went to the office to bring out fresh clothing. While his boss changed, Mark stayed outside, wondering if it was a good idea to bring up last night.

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Giddy was the better adjective to describe how she felt. Not even her mother could put her off, her usual rambling couldn't dampen it. The sudden surge of inexplicable joy bubbling in her heart was indescribable. Her mother was so busy trying to rile her up, though she couldn't let her succeed, not at such a rare occasion when all she wanted to do was hug and give her mother a loud, smacking kiss.

“Mother,” Although impatient, she managed to sound quite calmly. She patiently waited by the door with Rita eagerly clutching her hand.

“Go, I'll meet you there.” Mrs. Aisha said.

Samantha began to suspect her mother was trying to avoid someone at the courthouse. It wasn't everyday her mother refuses a chance to introduce her to some prospective suitors. Every opportunity, she utilized especially the courthouse, where she insisted had a whole stream of young and successful businessmen flock in and out. It would be so nice to find out who, or what was getting at her mom for a change. That could remove the limelight from her even if just for a few minutes.

"I'm not a child, Samantha." Her mother said, irritably. "I can find my way to the courthouse without you to act as my chaperone."

Seeing as it wasn't going to change her mother's mind, Samantha sighed. "Okay, mother. You know my meeting is not going to take long, and we have to be at Aunt Fatima's wedding early to help take care of things."

"The money we sent should be enough." Mrs. Aisha replied angrily. "We don't have to get our hands dirty for them to know we were there."

Samantha immediately regretted mentioning her aunts wedding, wanting to escape before she got a reminder that she was yet to grant her mother the privilege of organizing her own daughter's wedding. "We'll be at the Chief Justice Forase's office, Mother." Quickly stepping out of the house with her sister.

Thank God for mercies that she missed whatever her mother said. It wasn't everyday she escaped a confrontation with her mother. She meant to celebrate this small victory.

With just a few minutes to spare, she took her time settling in her car and ensuring her sisters seat belt was secure before pulling out of her house.

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It was unusually hot outside the office but Mark didn't feel like going back into his office. The frown deepened on his face. He didn't want to be around when she arrived. Better to tell his boss he needed to use the restroom on the first floor. Then, his boss would badger him with questions like, 'what happened to the one in your office?' And his reply would probably be, 'The plumbing is bad and the entire place is flooded.' That would have the old man looking at him skeptically, not believing his lie.

He had too good a record to spoil with a small lie that even didn't sound believable. Better stay and face her. After all, he didn't owe her anything.

Suddenly, he felt angry all over again. How could she believe he'd sabotage her case? True, he wanted to be in her good graces, but as a friend she could trust. She had no idea the things Justice Mohammed had said about her.

The prickles of sweat that suddenly attacked his palms alerted him of her presence.

For love's sake!

He quickly released the top button of his shirt, wondering why he didn't forgo the jacket today. It was Saturday, after all. He turned away when he spotted her from the other end.

"Mark, ..."



Quick steadying breaths and a small prayer later, he turned to face her, more in control and forced a polite indifference into his voice. “Ms. Barigha.”

She bit her lower lip, “Listen, I...”

“Look, ...” Not giving her any chance to ruffle him further, “... personal vendetta aside, the Chief Judge has an engagement in an hour's time and I assured him you'd be here in time, so thank you for being prompt.” He paused, giving her an odd look when he saw the disappointment on her face.

He set his jaw. This was what she wanted. He wouldn't allow himself feel guilty about his response. “I'll let him know you're here.”

He led her into his office, he indicated for them to sit, barely glancing at the child with her. He didn't want to spend another second in her presence, so, he quickly went in to inform his boss of his appointment.

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Samantha puzzled over Mark's attitude, knowing that he was angry at her but not sure how to go about apologizing when he was obviously trying to avoid her. She kept her smile in place and let him lead her into his office. It was very spacious with his corner at one end and a waiting area at the other.

“Mark, please...” He paused, his hand about to open the door to the Chief Judge's office but did not turn around.

“I'll let the Chief Judge know you're here.” Cutting her abruptly and before she could form a coherent reply, he disappeared into the office.

She blinked to clear her mind and thought this was obviously not the time or place to engage in such a conversation. Especially with her baby sister present.

Two could play this game then, Samantha thought, and she schooled her features into her professional mask by the time he came out to announce the Chief Judge was ready to see her.

She gave him a polite smile and nodded, “Rita, be good.”

Rita nodded in sweet innocence. The single gesture melted her heart before she turned to face Mark. “Keep an eye on her, please.”

Without guile, she noted the look on his face as he seemed to register the little girl's presence for the first time. Mark's eyes whipped to her with shock as she turned her back to him and went into the Chief Justice of Nigeria's office, with a huge smile in her face. Little did she know that she had left a bug in his throat too big to swallow.

The child sat demurely in the waiting area and brought out her smart phone. In what felt like a millennium, Mark stared at the face he could not get out of his mind, so focused on the activity on her screen.

Mark refused to believe what he saw as he stood there, watching the preteen -obviously, repeatedly swipe at the phone's screen and then gave a triumphant 'whoop!'

Curious, he approached her, careful not to scare her. She didn't seem to notice him as he came closer to her. Unsure what to say to her, he simply stood there watching her.

"You know, it's very rude to stare." She said without looking away from her phone.

Completely flabbergasted at her comment, he chuckled, thinking how very much like Samantha she sounded. He decided to brave a step and sat down, putting as much distance as he could between them.

Thinking of what to say, he said the first thing that came to mind. 'You look a lot like your mom.'

She gave him a side look. "You've met my mother?"

He considered his answer very carefully before responding. "Yes, I have. But I didn't know she had a child your age."

She looked at him fully now and sighed. "I don't think you've met my mother. If you can act this nervous around an eleven-year-old, one look from my mother will have you running for cover."

Feeling amused now, Mark scooted closer but maintained a civil distance. "I'm curious, how is it Samantha never mentioned you?"

The child stopped pretending not to be interested in talking to him and gave him her full attention, turning slightly to face him. "Miss Samantha doesn't need to tell the whole world that she has a baby sister that is eleven." Almost as an afterthought, she asked very curiously. 'You know miss Samantha very well?'

Not sure how to answer that, he asked instead. "Why do you call her Miss Samantha and not mom?"

She rolled her eyes and gave him a 'dumb much?' look. "You don't expect me to call my big sister just 'Samantha'. Besides, mother will have both our heads if I call Miss Samantha 'mom'."

This child must be very good at play-acting. She sounded so sincere and innocent. He couldn't believe what she told him when what he was seeing spoke so loud and clear.

“So, Miss Samantha is not your mom?”

The look she gave him was one of pure disbelief and rolled her eyes, shaking her head as if to say, 'didn't you hear anything I said?'

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“Thank you for coming on such a short notice.”

The Chief Judge patted her back in paternal hug and stepped back, going round to sit down and indicated for her to do the same.

“Of course, I had to come. Who turns down an invitation to see the Chief Justice himself?”

That got a bellowing laughter from him.

Samantha was glad for the easy flow of the conversation, but she knew she was not called here to make small talk. In fact, she had a feeling she knew exactly why she was here.

“How is your father” He asked.

She shifted uncomfortably. “He's doing fine.”

“I take it your mother is doing well too.”

This time, she tensed a bit and decided against asking why exactly he had called her and stop the chitchat, answering instead, “Mother is fine. She'll be here soon.”

“Hmm.” He rubbed his chin, and she noted the change instantly, eager to get this conversation done and over with.

The Chief Judge leaned on the desk, looking very serious. 'I want to ask you again to come work with us.'

She'd seen this coming and kept her smile in place. “Sir, it's kind of you, ...”

“This time, we want you to become the foreign minister, ...” And continued when she made to speak. “We have already discussed it with the president, and he has agreed...”

Samantha felt like heaving a long sigh of boredom. She knew where this was leading to. With the upcoming elections and every chance that the incumbent president might win again, they wanted someone who would give the least of headache, someone they could control from behind the wall while they achieved their objectives through her. The present foreign minister had recently begun some collaborations which have not met the approval of certain political godfathers. Samantha would not become the puppet they want.

Besides, she was making a difference every day to better the lives of those in the inner cities. She did not need the taint that politics brought.

“I'm truly honored to be considered for such a position, sir.”

“...and you should really take time to think about it before you give me an answer.” He cut her off again.

Samantha clamped down the urge to scream and give him a vivid description of what he should do with his offer.

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“How do you know Miss Samantha?” The preteen asked curiously.

Feeling put on the spot, Mark raked his brain for an answer without many details. “Well, I work with the Chief Judge, ...” He pointed at one of the portraits across the wall, ‘...and we meet a lot at the courtroom.’

“Oh.” The single syllable came out as disappointment. It was obviously not the answer she'd expected to hear because she went back to her game.

When he worked at the private school before meeting Samantha and everything had changed, Mark had come in contact with a lot of kids, innocent, sassy and rude, introverts, and the list continues, he had no idea where to place Rita yet.

Hoping to capture the child's attention, he said cheerfully, “But she is a great friend.”

She gave him a brief look. This made him to press on. “What game are you playing?”

What, with how she was barely giving him the time of day, he doubted she'd answer him.

Politely, she replied, “Word Cookies.”

He smiled, “I love that game.” For a child to be playing such a game, he suddenly discovered that he admired her courage to tackle a game like that. “What level are you at?”

She had clearly not expected Mark's show of interest. She said almost with a puff of her chest and a grin, “Master Chef, Level Eight.”

Wide-eyed, Mark decided to exaggerate a bit, “Wow! I barely passed the Novice stage.”

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“Are you quite sure you won't consider this?” The Chief Judge asked Samantha.

She smiled, seeing that she had at least got him to hear her out. He had seized to pressure her into accepting his offer. "I'm very sure, sir. Politics is not something I plan to venture into."

He sighed. "I guess it's your decision. But if you should change your mind, ..."

"I'm certain I won't, sir."

Samantha knew this was not the end of this discussion. Sooner rather than later, he would bring it up again. He would keep trying until he retired. And that doesn't mean he'd stop. Knowing he had just a few more years in active service, he wanted to secure a place in politics so that he could always have a say. It was all a game to them. If she decided to go into politics, which was unlikely, she would go through the legal process. And that would only be because she wanted to help more people.

She thought of Mark. He had been a good friend and it was about time she put into motion her motivating reason for agreeing to see the Chief Judge on such a short notice.

"Sir," picking her words with utmost carefulness. "Mark Grinder is your personal assistant?"

This brought a smile to the old man's face. "Yes, he is. The best staff I've ever had."

Samantha frowned. "But he's a lawyer."

"Yes."

"With a degree!"

This got his attention, seeing that she wasn't just making small talk. He stared at her for a long time before answering, "I'm aware of that."

Oblivious of the curious look the Chief Judge gave her, she took a deep breath. "I have a proposition with regards our conversation earlier, sir."

Calmly, he kept his gaze steady on her and prompted her to continue.

"I would like for him to be promoted to do actual legal work which doesn't undermine his level of education or person."

The Chief Judge kept his gaze mildly curious. "What exactly do you want?"

Not prepared for the question, she racked her brain and said the first thing that came to mind. "For him to head a unit, sir."

He didn't reply immediately. He stared at her in a way that felt he was considering her request and deciding how to give her an answer that wouldn't appear derogatory. "That's quite the miracle you're asking, isn't it? He's only been here, what, eight months."

Objectively, she held herself rigid and stated instead, “You offered me a political position- a high one at that, when I have no political background.”

He regarded her quietly. She schooled her expression to one of mild interest, giving him no chance to read what was actually on her mind.

Finally, he said almost resigned. “I won't promise anything more than that he'll at least have a corner office.”

The sigh of relief Samantha released felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulder. “Thank you, sir.”

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“My sister is very good at this game.” Rita said

“I'll bet she is. She's very smart.”

Rita's chest puffed proudly. “Yes, she is.”

Mark felt a painful squeeze in his chest. This had to be Samantha's daughter. The resemblance was uncanny. “You look just like your mom.”

She frowned the way only a child could pull off. “Everyone says I look like Miss Samantha and a little like my dad.”

“Your father?”

The pressure in his chest increased. Samantha was once married? Or was it just a love affair that didn't end well? Or was the child completely brainwashed? She kept referring to Samantha as a sibling. These days, it was okay to have a child as a single woman. Why would Samantha go through the trouble of trying to hide it? Or could it be a one-time promiscuous experience several years ago which had resulted in a baby?

Wanting to test further the extent the illusion has been created for the child, he asked, “So, where is your mom now?”

“Who's asking?”

Mark turned abruptly to the woman who looked at him in a very condescending manner, not bothering to disguise the unpleasant expression on her face. The immediately saw Samantha and Rita's facial features on her.

Nervous, Mark stood up, feeling his palms suddenly damp. “Good morning, ma.”

Ignoring him, she turned to Rita, “Where is your sister?”

“She's still in her meeting, Mommy.” Rita answered in a subdued voice.

“That child is going to make me wait on her!” Angrily, she looked about the office until her eyes landed on him. “Who is he?”

Mark had been insulted before. But never like this. And to a child. He'd never been looked down like this and felt angry at this show of disdain on his person.

“He's Miss Samantha's friend.” Rita said, giving him an innocent smile. And he was keeping me company.

She subjected him to another insulting once-over and although her expression didn't change, she asked him simply, “Who are you to my daughter?”

How does he answer that?

“I...”

“Mother.”

The single word came as a much-needed escape. He didn't know he'd held his breath till he heard Samantha's voice.

It was not a pleasant look that mother sent her daughter, Mark noted.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Not an episode, please.* Samantha prayed. She wondered why she thought bringing her mom here had been a good idea.

“You look lovely as always.” The Chief Justice told her mother.

“I'm sure you don't know my name.” Her mother said to him, not attempting to smile.

“Don't bother with fake pleasantries.”

Samantha turned an apologetic look at Mark. She knew he had had an encounter with her mother already. She needed to take her mother away from him. Fast.

“My meeting is over, Mother.”

“I hear this young man is your friend.”

Samantha's back stiffened. No. Please, no.

With a great force of will, she turned to face her mother not bothering to look up 'Yes, Mother.'

'How is it that I haven't met him before?'

Lord, no, please.

'We are just friends, ma.' Mark answered instead since it was obvious that the atmosphere was about to explode.

She could feel tears coming already.

'Why? She doesn't look like a wife material?'

Involuntarily, Samantha's mouth dropped open, shocked out of her shell for the first time at her mother. Her mother was literally trying to sell her off to the first prospect that walked by.

She turned to look at Mark to signal for him not to respond and saw he looked just as shocked as a did, but she could see the muscles tense. He was very angry. Samantha couldn't say she had ever seen him that angry before.

Samantha gave her mother a pleading look, 'Mother, please...'

It was absolutely possible to hate your own child, thought Samantha. The look her mother gave her was that of pure hatred directed at her own child.

'I don't remember asking for your opinion.' Aisha directed her attention back to Mark.

'Well, you didn't answer my question.'

Despite his anger, he smiled at her mother, 'I do like your daughter, ma. I just don't think I'm of the class to ask her out.'

Samantha shook her head. His innocent answer was not at all innocent. He didn't know anything about Aisha Barigha. He had never...

'Take a good look at yourself.' Aisha said to her. 'You don't know that by being so busy with work you're pushing away every possible suitor forgetting that a woman's place is to be humble so that a man can look and see a wife material that can bear him children.'

Samantha covered her eyes as hot tears stung her eyes, 'Mother, please...' Choking back tears that fell anyway.

'Whenever I introduce you to young men, they always end up marrying other younger women. You think you're getting younger? When you hit menopause and no man wants to look at you anymore, is that when you'll cut back on work and start looking for a husband?'

'Haba, Hajiah!' The Chief Judge tried to intervene.



Mark took a step towards Samantha hugging her stiff body. How could she justify her mother to him? How could she tell him this was really the woman who gave birth to her?

'Alhaji, this girl is very ungrateful. If I kept such high standards, would I be married today?'

'I know how you feel, Hajiah.' The Chief Judge said, trying to mollify her. 'It's their generation to like being pursued.'

'God forbid that she came from my bowels...'

'Let's get you out of here.' Mark whispered to her.

Samantha tuned out her mother's voice and nodded against his chest. He extracted her bag from her limp hand and led her away, the Chief Judge still trying to calm her mother down.

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Mark kept driving. He didn't have a specific direction in mind. He wanted to get her as far away from the scare that was her mother. For a mother to openly embarrass her child, a grown adult who no longer lived with her was unheard of.

He chanced a glance at her and his jaw hardened. He could tell this wasn't the first time this episode occurred. It felt too natural to have been a one-time event. Having to see her tear up was just unbearable.

Why would her mother humiliate her so openly? It was just too much.

All the years he searched for a good job, then, doing odd jobs to keep his siblings in school, settle his house rent and take care of his parents, he had never encountered anything like what he'd just witnessed.

She was huddled in the passenger side, clinging to the door, his heart bled. He knew Samantha to be a strong woman. This was not a side he thought he could see. It grieved him to see her hurting so.

He stopped the car and helped her down, making sure to keep her face hidden from curious stares directed at them. He led her to sit on the stump of a tree, keeping her within his peripheral view, yet maintaining a distance that allowed her some space as he too needed to walk off his growing anger.

She buried her face in her hands, her sobs growing louder now. It pained him to watch her cry. It tore at his heart that someone could hurt such an amazing woman.

With his hands in both pant pockets, he strolled away to cool off some steam. It all came together now- it began to make sense why she had proposed to him, what her sister has

said. After several years of nagging from her mother, it was no wonder she'd sought any means to get married. He could find no fault with her reasoning. If he had agreed to her proposal then, this incident never would have happened. He probably would have fallen in love with her anyway because she was such an exceptional woman with a large heart.

Making sure to keep her within view, he kicked himself over and over again for not agreeing to marry her. Samantha deserve better than to be bullied into marriage.

At that thought, Mark sobered. She deserved no less than a real proposal. He would make sure she married for love whether he was around or not.

Disconcerted by the thought of her marrying someone else, Mark started back to where she sat, as she looked around for him. Her tears were gone but her eyes were red and puffy.

He retrieved his handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her. She blew her nose, dabbing at her eyes. Their eyes locked as he lowered down on his knees in front of her.

'I'm sorry.'

Her heartbeat stopped and picked up rapidly as he offered the single apology.

It wasn't his fault her mother was so vicious with words. She should have prepared for it. She should have guarded herself from being hurt by her mother's tongue, should have been used to it after all this time, but nothing had prepared her for the humiliation. It was barely working trying to mend a broken friendship with Mark. He didn't deserve to be put on the spot like that. This was one step too far her mother had gone and it was about time she stopped these scenes from happening. Mrs. Aisha Barigha was about to wake up from the illusion that she still had the right to run her daughter's life.

Mark touched her face, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the leap in her stomach, yet not sure what to do with it.

'I am truly sorry for what happened back there.' He said in a whisper, causing goose pimples to rise on notice.

Samantha refused to open her eyes, lest the dream shatter. She ducked her head slightly, opening her eyes. 'It's not your fault. I shouldn't have broken down like that.'

'I will not be such a gentleman with the next person that will put it a tear on your face. Do you understand?'

Hope leapt up within her and she nodded. Suddenly feeling shy from his scrutiny, she ducked her head again.

'Look at me,' He prompted softly.

Her heartbeat quadrupled and her breathing changed. Butterflies did a concert in her belly. 'I'm fine.' She did not want to start what she would lose the nerve to finish.

Mark gave her a lopsided smile. 'I can see that.' Rubbing his thumb against her cheek.

Samantha registered the signs. She couldn't let him do anything out of pity. That was something she needed to establish. She would not subject him to make any decision out of pity.

With a bravado she wasn't feeling, she leapt up. 'I'm fine, really.'

He was still kneeling down, his brows raised in inquiry.

'Race you to the car.' Not sure where that came from, she hesitated only briefly, seeing his expression change to amusement before she took off.

Unknown to her, Mark stood up, a contemplative smile on his face. He stood there with a grin on his face before he began walking after her.

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'You have a beautiful home.' Mark observed out loud as she put the car to park and stepped down.

'Thank you. Did my mother return to the house?' She asked gatekeeper.

'Yes, Madam. She come carry small madam things.'

Mark's attention reverted to her face when she chuckled, shaking her head. 'Thank you, Kevwe.'

'I just see your mother face like this eh, na im me sef arrange.' The gatekeeper said demonstratively with his Warri accent.

Mark shook his head, holding back the laughter. But Samantha did not feel such any such inhibition. She laughed carefree and that gave him more joy than he'd ever felt in her presence. Her laughter was sweet and infectious, and he wished he could always make her laugh like that.

'You're so funny, Kevwe.' She told the gatekeeper, leading Mark into the house but not before the gatekeeper gave him an I've-got-my-eyes-on-you look.

Ridiculously, her mother still kept a grudge. Moving her sister's things out of the house was so juvenile. If anyone was permitted to be angry, Samantha only reserved that right. Being humiliated was not something she'd had on her to-do list today.

She gazed at the empty wardrobe in her sister's room, the room she'd decorated alongside her baby sister. Her mother's intent was to make everyone miserable. Why punish Rita for

a fight that had nothing to do with her? They both usually looked forward to spending time together every weekend.

She joined Mark back in the sitting room. He was staring at the pictures on the wall. He looked fascinated at the trophies on the half shelf, a look of intense wonder on his face. She recognized the one he picked up with reverence and smiled, moving to join him.

'You have no idea what this means.'

'I know. I won them, remember? My passion remains with these kids, even after they have been placed in homes and given the right attention. I want to know that they enjoy staying where they are, and they are doing well.'

He put down the trophy and for a long time, he stared at her graduation photo framed on the wall. His gaze flickering between her and the photo, a thoughtful frown on his face.

'You bloomed with age.'

It was so unexpected that she felt herself flush although that could not be possible with her complexion. Mark hit the mark with his description. She had actually bloomed and glowed with age.

'Are you blushing?' He asked incredulously. 'I'm sure you are used to compliments like that.'

No words came. Compliments were normal experience for her but coming from him made all the difference.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them, each absorbed in their thoughts. It was a defining moment and they both recognized that.

'I want to apologize for any prejudice I had about you. You're a good friend to have.'

Her heart fell. This was not what she'd expected, but she also felt relief. Mark was truly a good friend to have. It's taken a considerable amount of time to come to such a realization, and she was glad he felt the same way. This was what she was ready for- to have a friend not a lover or a husband.

'Thank you, Mark. You are a true friend I never knew I had too.'

His open smile softened her heart further. It transformed his face into boyish delight. That was a smile she'd like on her baby. She didn't dwell on that thought though.

'We were on our way to a wedding but since my mom obviously has changed her mind, would you mind being my plus one?' Samantha wasn't usually impulsive. She found out otherwise being around Mark.

He opened his mouth to respond, then looked down at himself, offering an apologetic smile.

'You look great, Mark.' She assured him sincerely. She'd admired him when she had arrived at the Supreme Court that morning seeing how his muscles punched at the sleeves of his jacket, his broad chest was clearly visible on the shirt he wore. He was perfectly sculptured and wouldn't change anything on him. It had made all her nervous about talking to him.

'I don't have to any gift to present.'

She looked at him with a smile. 'Neither do I. Come on. We'll pick something on the way.'

He looked dubiously at her, admitting defeat but happy to do so.

## CHAPTER NINE

Mark got a one-bedroom apartment which had a separate bedroom, the kitchen, and the sitting con dining area. A balcony faced off to the city and made for a beautiful view.

Samantha took time off work to help him move. It took all four days, Mark's former caretaker and friend with his wife, Mark's siblings- Deborah and Goodluck including Samantha and himself to move his things and clean up the new apartment.

He refused to let her buy anything for him despite her insistence to purchase furniture for the sitting room. His friend and siblings convinced him to let her buy the furniture as a gift from a friend, and he relented, tempted to thank her in a way he shouldn't even contemplate.

They spent the first day painting and the second to clean out the old apartment and clean up the new one. Seeing Samantha in an apron and a feather duster brought to mind certain thoughts that shouldn't be. It was not easy for him to focus on much of the work as he couldn't look away from her. She made cleaning seem like fun. It was the one time he wasn't much in control of his feelings around her and embarrassingly, his friend had been forced to nudge him to get a move on because he'd stopped working and was engrossed in watching her.

The second day, they paused working and sat on the freshly scrubbed floor and ate rice and catfish pepper soup which his friend's wife brought for them. Afterwards, they continued moving furniture and other items into the house.

The truck arrived with dark green furniture including a brand-new set of kitchen fixtures, a beautiful gleaming wooden dinette set and dishes.

He felt a fist clamp over his chest. With every single thing she did, she couldn't know how much more drawn to her even her laughter made him.

During the period he set up and moved into his new home, he got to spend more time with her. As if by mutual agreement, others always seemed to disappear, leaving only both of them alone. She'd ask him questions about his childhood, and he'd tell her all the troubles he caused, climbing their neighbor's mango tree and almost falling off in a bid to hide when the owner unexpectedly arrived earlier than he'd anticipated.

He told her about his parents, how they ensured he finished secondary school before his mother's salary became too meager to pay for his West Africa Examination Council (WAEC).

Although she talked about herself, it was mostly herself as an adult. She did mention she had a friend who never failed to get them both into trouble in his attempt to keep her out of the sea of depression.

Their friendship grew as time went by. They would chat after work and tell each other about their day. If he felt anything more than friendship, she didn't know, but he would be glad to find out he wasn't the only one having extra feelings for the other.

There were times they'd go out for lunch between work hours, and he'd catch her watching him with a wishful expression on her face. He always said something funny to avoid the awkward silence sure to follow had he chosen to act on the look on her face.

Sometimes, she called to ask for his opinion on a hypothetical case, and he was thrilled she would take his thoughts into consideration.

A few times, they'd go see a movie with his brother and sister, never alone. Sometimes, he watched her hide a giggle when the character was being naughty. He cherished every single second they spent together, whether alone or in the company of his siblings. If he thought there was a chance it could be different between them- just a man and a woman, no social status in-between, he would have asked her out. And remembering the reason he could not do that only made him want it more.

Could he survive watching her fall in love with another man?

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Samantha could not believe Gracie. After paying fifty thousand naira for her chief bridesmaid dress, accessories not included she suddenly wanted to change the colors for her wedding?

She stood far away from Gracie to breathe properly, watching as her friend freaked out over the wedding ensemble, she'd chosen just last week. Her friend had guffawed and talked non-stop about the dress just last week when she paid and now, it's suddenly too ugly? What was Gracie's problem?

She told herself Gracie was suffering from bridal nerves but changing a fifty-thousand-naira dress to a hundred and twenty thousand naira one was just too much. Samantha was rich, very rich, but she was not stupid. A dress worth a hundred and twenty is only worth the amount on paper. It won't be written on the dress.

If Gracie was vain enough to want to compete with an actress for wedding of the year, that was her problem. Dragging her bridesmaids' dresses into that fight for fame was not just bridal nerves but plain stupid.

For the next six hours, they entered five bridal shops, looking yet again for the perfect, most expensive wedding dress for her friend. Each time she thought they finally found the one, Gracie suddenly remembered another shop that had the dress and so, Samantha had simply followed.

She texted Mark to explain the situation. He replied that he was very busy but would send a rescue party, with several smiley faces. It relieved her to laugh and for the rest of the shopping spree, she had held onto his promise to cook her dinner himself. With Deborah's help, of course.

Mark wasn't a very good cook. That was the only imperfect thing about him but to her, it made him undeniably male in her eyes.

She counted to a hundred and back several times, praying that Gracie would get tired with all the fittings, but she was not. At the end of the day, she had been too exhausted to argue over the bridesmaid dresses promising to pay for all six ladies instead. At least, Gracie has been considerate enough to let the dresses for the bridesmaids remain at fifty thousand naira each.

Samantha had paid for the new bridesmaid dress, including the newly selected ones for the other five, still reeling at the fact that Gracie has made her spend that much.

When she finally met Mark and his sister later that evening, she had eaten every last bite of the food given to her, then curled up on the sofa to sleep. Mark offered to drive her home, and she asked him to take her car back to his house instead of calling a cab.

She understood him not wanting her to spend the night at his house. Even though they were just friends and did not want to take the relationship further, they were still a man and woman and Deborah have gone back to school after helping him cook, which meant they were alone in his house. That, Samantha thought would have been a night they both would have regretted.

Watching him out of the corner of her eyes, Samantha pretended to be engrossed in the meal she was preparing. She was glad that his sister was chattering beside her, and she knew she had to stop thinking of the brother. But now and then, her eyes strayed to him, so deep in concentration he was hammering nails into the cabinet with his brother, Goodluck that he would never guess she was watching.

But that wasn't true because a few times, shed caught him watching her too, and shed forced a smile to ease the quivers in her stomach. Her heart, she couldn't seem to do the same. The flips she felt each time her gaze met his was just a testimony that her heart was being disobedient.

She let her attention focus on the meal she was cooking. This was her first time to cook for a male that wasn't related to her. She wasn't a terrific cook, but she wasn't bad either. She could handle a meal just as well as any responsible woman, although her major talents didn't include cooking. It was just that not only were there a lot of people waiting for the food to be ready but that she didn't want to make any mistakes because of Mark in particular.

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“... older brother doesn't like much pepper in his food.” Deborah was frowning at her.

Samantha shook her head to clear it. She had been too caught up in her thoughts she hadn't realized shed poured in all the pepper in the dish.

“Oh.” She said as she quickly scooped a spoonful of the contents back into the plate. “Sorry, my mind wandered a little.”

Takes the dish and covers it in one corner, “You've been doing that a lot around my brother.”

Caught off-guard, she stopped stirring the pot and looked at Deborah. “You've noticed?”

Deborah smiled, “He has too, if he's not dumb. And I know my brother is not.” She said convincingly.

Self-consciously, Samantha's gaze shifted to the pot. Of all things to do! He'd been watching her a lot, and she wasn't a fool not to have noticed. It also meant he'd been noticing her reactions around him.

So much for hiding her feelings!

She stirred the pot a last time and covered it, muttering under her breath that she needed to use the bathroom and excused herself. She had no idea how long shed be in the bathroom, but she didn't plan to come out until shed cleared her head.



Mark watched her go. He wanted to follow her but he restrained. It wasn't in his place to chase her each time she excused herself and hurried out of a room. As a grown man, he ought to have some equilibrium and order as to what he felt. With her, he didn't seem able to do that.

He put down the hammer and dusted his hands, told his younger brother he'd be back and called to his sister who was watching the boiling pot like a mother hen. She hesitated and glanced at the pot.

"I mean, now."

He wasn't authoritative but at times when his feelings clouded his judgement, he tended to scare his siblings. His brother glanced up at him, looking puzzled. Deborah shuffled out of the kitchen while he followed behind with heavy strides.

One thing he didn't want was his siblings scaring off Samantha. If his heart didn't seem to co-operate, he still had much common sense to respect her. He respected his friendship with her too much to tolerate his siblings' interference.

Out to the balcony. He said a little harshly. She glanced at him nervously and opened the door, stepping out onto the balcony. He followed and closed the door behind him. She held unto the railing as if for dear life, and he almost swore, then biting his lips, stared at the city laid out prettily before him. For one thing, he was most grateful for the house he'd got for free for six months. It afforded him enough time to put his life in order with the new position he'd been given at work. Of course, he owed it all to her.

Deborah looked uncertainly at him, "Brother, I'm sorry."

He glanced at her as if seeing her for the first time. He had not meant to scare her. His face softened, "What did you say to her?"

Looks guiltily out to the city, "Nothing really, brother. I just told her she always looks nervous especially when you're around."

He eyed her. He knew his sister never lied, but he didn't believe her. And that's it?' He asked pointedly.

She looked at him and shook her head guiltily. "No, brother. I told her you've noticed it too, and she said she needed to use the bathroom."

He sighed. He shouldn't expect his sister to advertise him, but he wished she hadn't said anything to Samantha. Theirs was a friendship under patches. They were just trying to get comfortable with each other.

Grabbing at the rails, he gazed out to the city. "We're just friends, Deborah. Just friends. Don't ever talk to her about anything like that, about both of us."

She placed her hand on his. He glanced down at the hand. “She likes you, brother.”

“I know.”

“Then marry her, brother.”

He pulled his hand out of her grasp and pushed back, chuckling shakily. “It doesn't work that way, Deborah. A man has to be established before thinking of marriage. Besides, she is wealthy. Very wealthy.”

Of which, that was the major reason he couldn't imagine himself winning her hand. He'd wondered what would have happened had they finally gone through with that contract shed suggested.

Sympathetically, she sighed, “If you know her at all, then you should know she wouldn't use that against you.”

He smiled, a crooked one. “I know. It's not as easy as you think; marriage. It's a commitment for life. You don't get into because you like someone. It takes patience,”

“Which you have, brother.”

He chuckled nervously, “And sacrifice,”

“If anyone can define that, it's you.”

He smiled down at his sister “It's different, okay? A man like me doesn't just go around proposing to a woman like her. It's just that way.”

She pouted, “It's unfair.”

He took her in a tender hug, “It's unfair, yes. But its reality.”

She wrapped both hands around him, “Maybe when you have enough money you can marry her, yes?” Gazing up at him hopefully.

He laughed, hugging her more tightly, “Maybe.”

Maybe indeed. He knew she wouldn't mind, but he also knew she was too good and kindhearted for her own good. If he were to ask her to marry him now, shed do it and it would be out of pity. He couldn't subject her to that simply because he could not stop thinking about her.

Deborah suddenly pulled out of his hug, her eyes bright, a mirror of her smile, he muttered an “Uh-uh” right before she went nuts.

“I can share my bed with someone in the hostel and I will cut down on all my expenses at school. I'll also look for a babysitting job so it doesn't clash with my timetable. I'll tell Goodluck to stop asking for money too, he can take care of himself anyway.” She grabbed both his hands, her eyes alight with excitement “You can be able to save enough money and become rich quickly so you can marry her.”

He wished it was that simple. He had never seen his sister this thrilled about an idea.

Taking her both hands in his, he smiled but his tone was serious. “No, Deborah. You will not get a bed mate. Why, that bed is too small for you.”

She opened her mouth to protest.

“No, you are not getting a job either and do not say anything to Goodluck.”

Her face fell, and he took her into a hug. “It's not as simple as you think, Debbie.” His eyes closed. “It's just not that simple.”

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Something was not right. She sensed it the moment she entered the kitchen. The stove was switched off and her assistant was nowhere in sight. Neither was Mark. Only Goodluck was gathering the debris of the work they'd done.

She opened the pot and heaved a sigh of relief, switching back on the stove. How could she have been so careless, leaving her stove on as she left her food still cooking? She hadn't expected Deborah to check the pot of course but at least an eye out would have been nice.

Watching Goodluck as he cleaned the work place spotless of dirt, she smiled. They were so alike. Goodluck could as well be Mark at a younger age; from the strong chin to the neat haircut. It was obvious he worked out although she would not say the same about his brother whom she doubted wasted precious time doing exercise. He also looked fit enough even underneath his clothing.

What was she doing after telling herself she wouldn't think of him that way anymore? It was something she planned to do consciously for her one sanity.

“Where did Deborah go?” She asked more to stop the troubling thoughts. She'd already suspected both brother and sister might have gone out.

“Out, I think.” Goodluck replied as he arranged the tools in a cabinet and shut it noiselessly. “Both of them stepped out a couple of minutes ago.”

She nodded. That he'd noticed she didn't mention his brother was obvious enough. They were supposed to be just friends. Why couldn't she always remember that?

“Did she turn off the stove?”

“I did.” He said in a self-conscious tone. “I wasn't sure when either of you would be back, so, ...” He shrugged and looked down at his feet.

She liked him already. It was just like Mark would respond. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she said softly, “Thank you.”

Nodding, he started to leave. She didn't realize when she called him to stay. He hesitated, glanced at his feet, then the door just a foot away.

“Please.”

After what passed for a heartbeat, he walked back to stand at the extreme end of the kitchen leaning against the counter. She smiled at him and he looked away nervously. It was easier for Deborah to be around her than for the men, it seemed, she never understood why Mark still seemed self-conscious around her.

“We haven't officially met yet, you and I.”

He chuckled nervously. At least he was responding.

“Deborah tells me you're in your final year.”

He smiled, looking down at his feet nervously. He nodded his response.

What was it about these two brothers around her? She could understand Goodluck was not used to her or maybe being around a female but Marks was different. She really wanted to get to know them and did not wish to make them, especially Mark, feel intimidated by her success.

Instead, decided to try another tact. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

Nervously, he laughed, “Not exactly,” She prompted with her brows “No, I don't.” Shaking his head.

She smiled. “It is rare these days to see a young man who doesn't have a girlfriend.”

“Mark doesn't.” Immediately, he bit his lip, his jaw set. “I'm sorry. I wasn't supposed to say that.”

She smiled some more. She had been trying not to think about that but now that she had her answer, she was more than glad to have her doubts put away.

“It's okay.” She said, “I already know that.” She didn't know when she said it out loud.

Turning to her pot, she chewed her lower lip, reprimanding herself, picked the spoon, opened the pot and stirred. She needed to keep her emotions in check before she said something she didn't plan to.

Wanting to encourage him to stay some more, she turned enough to say, “since my assistant is not here, perhaps you could step in for her?”

He glanced at the door and seemed to debate for a second, then nodded. “Okay.” Coming towards her.

She smiled. At least it was progress. “Hand me the largest bowl, please.” She said, pointing to the covered bowl within his reach.

He did. And so, they worked keeping the conversation at a neutral level which seemed to encourage him.

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There was no small stir at the office when he arrived. A typical racket was going on; two politicians were at each other's neck; one was shouting at the top of his voice, heaping curses and was being restrained by several people, while the other was surprisingly calm except for the wrinkles and stains on his shirt.

Mark glanced at his former boss, the Chief Judge, who simply took his bag from him and slipped past the ruckus unnoticed. He knew. When it came to politics, keep your hands away, as a lawyer. If you value your job.

He entered his office, being made an admin officer, it afforded him his own office and a chance to practice law as well. A double blessing.

Somehow, he found himself standing at the door to his office, unable to go in and ignore what appeared to be a major disagreement between party members. It had to be that it was because the scene was taking place in front of his office, he told himself. It was perfectly rational that he'd want to know what was going on.

Esther, from finance was standing at the other side close to the staircase, watching with some other ladies, and filming the scene, no doubt to upload on social media later or sell to the press. He found out she was a greedy money-loving person the first day he met her.

He told himself he was not avoiding her. He knew that was a fat lie. If she'd pressed her advantage over him when he was but a secretary, what would stop her now, when he was a boss himself?

They'd send him a secretary, he'd been told. He wished they would let him choose one himself. He certainly didn't need Esther's kind working with him.

The office was empty, he noted. The other two persons who shared the large room demarcated to make for three cubicle office had yet to report in. Shaking his head, he put down his bag and plugged in his laptop to charge.

Drawn back to the scene outside, he paused at the entrance, noting that the crowd was thinning. Some people led the first man away, his voice still throwing curses and insults over his shoulders. Everyone went back to minding their businesses.

A young man picked up what appeared to be parts of a mobile phone and handed it to the other man, whose frown mirrored the wrinkles on his clothing. Politics, he thought, was simply too dirty a business.

The young man glanced over at Mark, smiled a greeting and walked away, leaving an embarrassed, ruffled older man to fend for himself. Instinct told him to close the door and go start work. After all, it was none of his business. Whatever had been the cause of the fight certainly did not concern him.

But that wasn't true, watching the man try miserably to smooth out the rumples. He was human after all.

Taking pity on the man he recognized as Senator ThankGod, the representative of Akwa Ibom state constituency, he offered whatever assistance he could.

Clearing his throat, the senator looked up at him as if seeing him for the first time, Perhaps, um, stuttering, he tried again. "I think there may be something inside to help, um, put you in a presentable form."

Senator ThankGod looked past him into the office, not that he could see much as Mark was blocking the view in, not able to bring himself to open the door too wide to attract attention.

He seemed to debate for a moment, glanced about, then seem to have decided. Nodding, he looked about again at the now empty balcony. Mark stepped aside to let him in, closing the door more out of habit than to distract attention.

"The bathroom is the door to your right." Almost facing his office, he thought. But he liked it that way. It almost felt like a private room for him alone. And he got to use it as often as he liked without brows being raised by his colleagues.

Leaving door open, as the Senator entered into the bathroom, he took the phone that was only in parts and sat down at his desk. By the time the senator came out looking more put together, Mark already had assembled the phone and powered it back on. The screen was cracked and the phone could use a new case, he mused, as scratches ran along the back, obviously from when it fell and legs kicked at it. People need to keep their temper in check, he thought. Especially in public environments.

The senator stood uncertainly at the door to his cubicle. That makes two of us, Mark wondered to himself. For the most part, his shirt was better and the stains gone.

Almost clumsily, he handed the phone back, and seeing it back on, the senator seemed to sigh in relief.

“Thank you.” He said softly.

Mark nodded, now feeling sorry for the man. He turned to stare at his office and made a small prayer of thanks that it was neat.

‘Please, have a seat,’ He heard himself say before the thought even formed, “... just to get your bearings before you leave.”

“I’m going to be the talk on social media this week, isn’t it?” Senator ThankGod sighed, looking dejected.

He doesn’t look the kind to be out fighting in public, Mark thought. But it’s not usually written on the face, either. Yet, he felt a deep-sated need to help.

Mark sighed. It seems Esther would finally get her wish. He would have to take her out and pay her to delete that video. He prayed he wouldn’t regret that decision when she decides to jump him for more money subsequently.

“Excuse me a second.” Mark left the Senator looking forlorn. *I shouldn’t regret this*, he muttered to himself even as he made his way to the HR office. She saw him and closed the door in his face. He opened and saw that it was empty, her colleagues hadn’t yet resumed.

“What do you want?” She asked in her meanest voice.

Esther was a fifty-something year old woman, whether single or married, one could never tell because she made herself very much available for everything and taking bribes had become her alias. Her looks had dwindled but she refused to acknowledge that the days of her youth were behind her, hence she competes with the younger women in the office in everything.

“I want that video deleted.”

She scoffed at him. “For how much?”

*I better not regret this*, he muttered to himself yet again. “5k,”

She raised her head and eyed him to the ground. But he had not finished his sentence.

“And the file you’ve been hounding me for.”

Her eyes perked up just as he knew they would. *Oh boy! This better be the right thing to do, Lord*, he thought.

She pulled out a sheet of A4 and scribbled on it, passing it to him with a huge smile. He accepted the paper, then looked at her. “You delete it the second I send this money.”

Her smile was calculated but genuine. She tapped at the screen and dropped it on the table face up. He could see the delete button below the video feed. At least she knew he wasn’t going to play her.

Mark quickly opened his bank mobile app and sent the five thousand naira, her phone registering the credit alert instantly.

Her eyes widened and she deleted the video, passing him the phone for confirmation.

“Tomorrow.” He told her. “A delivery person will bring it to your house. I don’t want it traced to me.”

“I’ll send you my address.”

When he returned to his office, the Senator was hovering by the door and moved aside to let him through.

“I spoke with the person that filmed it. She has deleted it.”

Relief flooded the man’s face as he sat on the chair in front of him. A gratified sigh escaped from the man's lips as he sat on the chair in front of him. Relieved and apprehensive at the same time, Mark went round his desk and sat down, seeing the man relax a bit.

“What's your name?” The senator asked.

Mark found himself smiling. And relaxed. “Mark Grinder.”

The man’s brows shot up. “Two foreign names, just you.”

Smiling, Mark was relieved not to have to relate the origin of his surname. “My parents fault, sorry.”

He saw the mouth curve in a smile. “On the contrary, it suits you.”

Possibly, if he were a white person, he would have blushed; a crimson one at that. He managed to smile shyly.

“Thank you, sir. It’s the first compliment I've received for my name.”

Humbled, the senator smiled warmly, encouraging. “Are you a lawyer, or you just work here like others?” He asked, waving at the office.



He opened his mouth to say the latter but ended up saying instead, "I'm a lawyer by profession."

There was something akin to respect in the older man's eyes. Maybe he imagined it, Mark told himself as the senator got up abruptly.

"Thank you very much, Mark Grinder." Taking Marks hand in an amazingly agile grasp. He removed a wallet from his pocket and gave Mark a card. His card. With his home phone number on it. 'Call me. Anytime. For anything.'

Mark merely nodded, too stunned to speak.

"Well, goodbye, Mark Grinder."

It was just that he was tired, he deceived himself. He simply couldn't believe what had just happened. But by God, he needed ...

## CHAPTER TEN

"Why aren't you calling?" Samantha inquired jokingly. She was in a mood that had almost never been a part of her life growing up; ecstatic. She blamed it on everything but her mother. Ridiculously, her mother still held a grudge. Ridiculous as it sounded.

She munched at the cracker taking the last of the fruit juice to wash it down.

It was impossible not to laugh as he paced about in her kitchen, looking like a panther, jerking nervously like a frightened kitten all at the same time. Amazed at her own voice as the laughter bubbled, and she couldn't hold it back, taking the glass to the sink.

Holding back the urge to say something to embarrass him, she covered the tin of biscuit and set it back in the cupboard, anything to do to avoid watching him. As fun as it was to, she was beginning to feel that pull at her breast. He seemed huge in the room, and she flagged it off as being that it was the first time a male had entered into her home, her kitchen ever.

Truly, she had gone a step, not only bringing him into the house but inviting him to sit at her kitchen which he hadn't done.

She sighed, fighting to keep from letting her thoughts shifts in the wrong direction. This was not going to go that way. They were just friends and she was okay with that.

Placing the glass back into the cabinet, she slammed the door forcefully, bringing him out of his reverie. It did nothing to soothe a temper that was already rising.

His eyes narrowed, zoomed in on her, to be precise and her heart skipped a beat, making her huff in disgust at such silliness. He was watching her now, and something crossed his face she didn't feel strong enough to interpret. Folding her hands across her chest, miffed at herself, she turned away. Irritably, her pulse quickened much to her annoyance.

He seemed to have forgotten he'd been pacing just a second ago. His gaze on her was burning her inside out. She didn't like it. One minute she was laughing, the next, her mind had wandered and now, everything in the room seem to go blurry, the air was crackling like electric current and her palms were damp. Her whole body was ablaze with heat. If only she had kept her mind from veering.

The one thing Mark had always reminded himself was that all they had was friendship he wouldn't get carried away by whatever feelings he may have for her. A man's hormones were subject to his will. A man didn't let his hormones decide.

The sheer joy he felt when he heard her laugh just a moment ago! It was such a beautiful sound. But something had changed her mood. He couldn't really say out loud what he thought had changed. He knew. And that annoyed him as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

He could feel the sweat forming at his forehead. His gaze, he glued to the floor like an architect would admire a piece, just, so he wouldn't look at her. But his mind kept seeing her. She looked so breathtaking standing there, completely oblivious to the wicked thoughts racing through his mind.

He should not have thought they could be friends without her affecting him. In a matter of fact, she had had him hooked since that first time he laid eyes on her. He'd sunk down with hook, line and sinker into those mesmerizing eyes and that innocent, mystic air she carried.

His hands involuntarily balled into fists. He felt like hitting something just, so he wouldn't use those hands to do whatever his mind was conjuring. If she got just a glimpse of it, shed run screaming.

'You should go to your room, Samantha. I'll find my way out.' His voice was barely concealed by the raging of his male ferocious need.

He wanted her to leave. But she didn't. She stood there. He needed to clear his head. That was a fat chance if she stayed in the same room with him. His body stilled against the onslaught of blinding lust. His breath was ragged. She still stood there. He refused to look at her. It hurt to. How could she be so pretty standing there, shocked and dazed? She had no clue, no idea what it was doing to him.

Samantha. His voice came out a growl, an animal-like sound that was barely a restrained hunger for what he couldn't have.

Her steps were light. He felt her as she moved towards him. And cupped his face.

The feel of her hand on him sent heat all over his body and sweat unlike any he'd ever known, broke out of him, not excluding his palms. The desire to pull her in and ravage her was so powerful.

He wanted to push her away. He should push her away. She had no idea the thoughts on his mind. She didn't know what that innocent touch was eliciting. If she had any idea how dangerous it was for her to touch him, she would run the opposite direction. For her sake, he took a step backwards, but she didn't let go. She held onto his face firmly in her hands.

He heard her speak but could not make out the words. Her breath was like a soothing balm on his face even as his body maintained the heat that had enveloped him. He turned his head slightly to look at her and saw she was almost glowing, a soft smile on her face making her look ethereal.

"Let's go for a walk.," She said and used her hands to wipe off the sweat on his face. "The fresh air would help us both."

She took a step back and left the kitchen.

*She looks so calm and in control while I'm raging hormones.*

Mark wasn't sure how long he stood there. His thoughts were jumbled at the moment. He took a long breath to calm the pounding of his heart. By the time he stepped outside, the gate was wide open, and she was standing outside.

"The walk," He muttered to himself, "... is exactly what I need."

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Wonderful, yes! Jubilant, yes! Excited? Thrilled? All yeses. Name the happy word and she was it. Not once in her life had she met a man more in control of himself.

She hugged herself. This has been an adventure indeed. She had never experienced anything so real, tugging and at the same time exciting. Without looking backwards, she knew he was behind her and prayed her emotions were not advertised on her face because she was having a difficult time containing it.

Her walk took her to the large children's playground the estate management had set up a few years ago. Samantha had only brought her sister here a few times and now at 11 years old, Rita had told her she was officially too old for that playground and innocently requested to go the park only. Her baby sister was growing so fast she could barely keep pace.

Sighing contentedly, she opened the gate and barely missed a ball that came flying at her head. She didn't bother turning to see whether her companion was following because she knew he was some steps behind. A few curious eyes followed their progress.

It was a nice place. And noisy. Children running, playing and shouting at the same time. It was funny some tricks the kids played on each other and every so often, on their guardians.

Mark sat at the other end of the bench well away from her. After what happened in her kitchen, he didn't know where they were anymore.

Where the thrill came from and the pure sense of peace that settled over her, she wasn't sure. She smiled her thanks into heaven and patted the bench beside her, beckoning him to shift closer. His eyes darted around. He did a lot of calculating before he deemed it fit enough to shift closer but avoided body contact.

His back was as stiff as a board and his jaw was set, his gaze, on the buzz of activities in front of them, all to avoid looking at her.

The wonder of it all, that she could be this calm after an ordeal that had left her really shaken. This time, she didn't hold back the smile that touched her lips.

Caution. She heard the word as if in a whisper. She needed it.

Blowing out a deep breath, she gazed at the children running around, avoiding the adults as calls were made to go home.

“Mark...”

His head snapped up, but he didn't look at her. She decided to tell him a little about herself.

“I come from an extended family.’ She began, wringing her hands not out of nerves, but this part of her life, few people knew about. “My mother is only one of many wives.”

The warning came a second time, *Be careful*.

“I was scared at first because my mother's marriage is not a very good example. So, I decided to wait until I knew what I really wanted of a marriage. That's why I'm still single. I don't regret that decision at all.”

He glanced at her, but she was already looking at the scene as one-by-one, parents and nannies packed up their charges and left. It was getting slightly dark, the light.

“I'm sorry for the mess I created for both of us, Mark.” Now fully conscious of his gaze on her, she searched around for a diversion. “I'm not a pitiful woman in need of a

husband.” Her voice was surprisingly calm. “I made a mistake. I accepted that and moved on.” She remembered the warning, sighed. “We have moved on. Whatever happens is up to us. I want you to know that I’m not in the habit of making stupid mistakes.”

Under a strain she couldn’t recognize, she suddenly felt tired. She had so much to say but the warning came again. She didn’t expect him to say anything, yet, she wasn’t surprised when he did.

“I never want to hurt you, Samantha, or give you false hope.” He said it so soft, but she felt the pull deep in her heart, realizing that he was about to take steps in doing exactly that.

“I’ve never wanted a female this much before.” He gave a shaky laugh. “Maybe because I’ve never been this close to a woman.”

She stilled herself against the next words she was sure to hear.

“I respect you and value the friendship we have.” Then paused a bit and amended. ‘Had.’

She bit her lower lip, repeating to herself that she was not going to cry nor feel guilty. She had already apologized.

“I don’t know how we got to where we are today. So much has happened and I don’t think I can continue like this.”

Samantha held back the tears, telling herself she wouldn’t cry; not for him, not to him. If he didn’t want anything more to do with her, she could rest easy that at least, she apologized.

“I thought I could do it. I failed you as a friend and for that, I’m sorry.”

The tears that began burning her eyes stopped. These were not the words she’d expected. Her heart leapt to her throat in dreadful anticipation.

He went down on one knee as a security man started walking towards them. He took her hands in his, her heart went out to him as she saw the uncertainty in his eyes. “I may not be able to give you a house or buy you a painting worth a million. But if there’s a chance we could be more, I’d like to see where it’ll lead to. If you’re not too objected to being seen with me, that is.”

The security man, seeing the gesture, stood, then turned and started back to the gate.

“I’m sorry for scaring you the way I did back there. I’m sorry for acting like a lustful teenager. I’m probably out of my league here.” He laughed at himself.

Samantha held herself still, looking shocked. It wasn’t faked. She just did not want to misunderstand his intentions.

Absently, he rubbed a thumb against her knuckles, making her shiver from the sensations he elicited. He didn't appear to register it, and she was glad for that.

“We have made mistakes in the past, and we are through that. I realize I wouldn't be here now if not for those mistakes. So, do I have a chance to win your heart, Samantha?”

She went very still. This countered what she thought he was going to say. She already had an answer, one she couldn't bring herself to say, reminding herself that this wasn't a marriage proposal. Yet.

Forcing aside the fears and doubts, she put a smile on her face which didn't reach her eyes. He must have noticed it too because his hold on her hands tightened and in his eyes was fear. Of rejection. Of not being good enough.

She closed her eyes and she gave him her answer.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

She felt a barrage of emotions. How much she had tried to rein in her heart. She was over the top in love with him, and he wasn't even helping. He was always on time when she needed him and gave her space when she needed the time alone.

Not knowing would have been nice. That she knew was the difficult part. If only...

She thought she recognized the signs. Being too practical and reasonable, she had ignored them by rationalizing every action rather than take it for what it was. Now, it was too late.

Smiling up at him as he opened the door for her. As she stepped out of the car, she clutched her purse to her chest as people literally stood up and stepped out of their stores to watch them.

His old neighborhood. How odd. That he'd once lived here. She'd driven him here before. That day had set everything else in motion for both of them. Things hadn't ended well that day. But it was different now. Now, he was courting her. And she saw a side of him she'd only assumed. He wasn't the overzealous type, but he was very committed as a Christian.

Their shared passion for the Lord was one thing she was very grateful for. He told her it was his faith that kept him alive. The same can be said of her. Her faith meant everything to her. Her love for God was her most compelling force.

He led her through the narrow walkway which was barely wide enough for a comfortable walk and rounded a corner. She kept reminding herself that she wouldn't throw up and embarrass him.

The place was not overly dirty but it felt like things were crawling on her skin. And this had once been his home up until seven months ago.

When they finally arrived at his former place of residence, several kids who had been playing stopped and ran to hug him. They were all dirty from playing in the sand but Mark did not seem to mind. That only endeared him to her.

Mark ruffled a child's uncombed hair which undoubtedly had all kinds of insects in it, pinched her twin's cheek, tweaked a boy's nose and picked up the little infant at his feet struggling against the older children to get his attention.

The child grabbed at his nose with his sand-stained hand, laughing when Mark tickled his tummy and he let go.

How could she not love him more!

Adults began to come out of their houses when they heard the noise. She noticed how free he was with them. Although he told her he had kept to himself mostly except for Mr. Morris, his caretaker, she could tell that his neighbors had a fondness for him.

A slim woman with a bulging stomach stepped out of her house she immediately recognized as Mr. Morris' wife, a huge smile on her face and an amazing kind of authority despite her slimness, pushed others aside and gave him a motherly hug.

Samantha stood slightly away from the chaos mostly to get out of their way lack of desire to be a part of it.

Here, she thought, Mark had a family he had no idea of. A family that loved him. He obviously did not know that before.

She watched. That was the only thing she could do. Watch. It was like meeting her step siblings at the villa. It was a family reunion born out of love and understanding despite being just neighbors and not relations.

Mr. Morris appeared, carrying an empty bucket with a worn yellow towel that had seen better days slung carelessly over his shoulder. He was wearing a knee-length short and a white singlet. On seeing them, dropped his bucket and ran to them, giving Mark a brotherly hug.

She could not help the smile that came to her.

Some neighbors began to look at her with open curiosity. She quelled the urge to curl up someplace and hide. Even the children were looking at her curiously, one of them braved it enough to touch her bag.

It was Mr. Morris' wife who approached her. "Welcome, Miss." Then she turned to Mark and scolded him in a manner only a mother would use on a misbehaving child. "Did you forget you brought a guest?"

"Mama Odi don dey blow grammar." One of the neighbors teased in Pidgin.

The two women began bickering good-naturedly.

Mr. Morris smartly extracted his wife, reminding her that she was pregnant. This only made the neighbors tease her some more.

Mark's hand unexpectedly rested on the small of her back, sending a surge of electricity up her body and although she tried not to react to it, she let out a soft moan before she could stop herself. He glanced at her sharply and cautiously removed his hand.

Turning to the crowds, he made the introductions. "These were my neighbors and like a family to me; Mr. Morris and his wife, Paulina, Chucks, Dominion and Carol, and Madam Gift."

She pushed her reaction to Mark aside and said "Hello", grateful that her voice was cool and friendly enough.

He turned to her but avoided meeting her gaze. She knew he was also affected. Continuing with the introductions, he said, "This is Barrister Samantha Barigha. She's uh, my friend."

Putting on a smile as they shook her hand mostly clumsily, she wasn't prepared for the shock that made her pause midway shaking Ms. Carol, a very fair lady, obviously well-educated who said before taking her hand in a gentle handshake. 'You must be one of George Barigha's daughters then, the richest black man in the world.'

Mark laughed, as did the others. "Carol, you need to stop reading so much." Mark said amidst laughter.

Samantha relaxed a little but there were tied knots in her stomach and the smile she dredged up was now hurting her mouth but nobody noticed, not even Mark. Possibly, if he hadn't been laughing so much, he probably would have.

Mentally, she gathered herself together and shook off the unease before he'd notice. This was another part of her she didn't want people finding out as they often changed agendas and start asking for loans which they hope her father would give them. She had prayed that Mark wouldn't find out until she was ready to tell him herself.

"I bin dey think say I go bath finish, wear better cloth before una go come reach." Mr. Morris said as his wife shoed him to go and put on some clothes.



“Caretaker, do come buy drink for visitor. And your tenants too.” One of the neighbor's teased him as he caved in to do his wife's bidding.

As they walked towards the seating area where chairs were being set out for them, Mark saw the look on her face and inquired quietly. She shook her head and put on a smile, using hand gestures to encompass the numerous people surrounding them.

She wouldn't spoil this for him.

Drinks were quickly served as they sat down and Ms. Carol went to her house and brought out some wine glasses.

As she poured a drink into Samantha's glass, she gazed at Samantha with a thoughtful frown on her face.

Samantha willed her hands not to shake as she hid her face in the glass. This was definitely woman who sort the internet as if it were basic food.

If Mark was to find out about me, Samantha thought, it wouldn't be this way.

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They were watching a movie in her living room. Mark's hand was draped over the couch touching her lightly. Deborah had gone to his house to get her clothes, having agreed with Samantha to visit every weekend and have a girl-to-girl time.

Mark had checked his watch and told her to hurry back. He had been checking the time since she left. Samantha glanced up at him again. She did whenever he checked the time.

She laid a hand on his resting on her shoulder. 'She's fine, Mark. She's not a child. And its daylight still.'

He grumbled, “She's wasting time. Before you know it, it'd be dark, and she's a girl, young and naive about a lot of things...”

Samantha smiled, “You've being grouchy. The 'girl' she air-quoted, isn't a child anymore and you don't watch over her while she's on campus, do you?”

She saw the chagrin look on his face and laughed. “Give her a break. She may have met someone and eloped with him to Vegas or Paris. I hear weddings are easier there.”

He could not help it and began to laugh. She always made him to laugh when he least expected it. His arm resting on her shoulder felt a charge flow through into his body, and he politely moved his hand away. There was no use tempting them both.

He knew his sister had only been gone less than forty-five minutes. How could he expect her to be back so soon?

He picked up the television remote and flipped through the channels. "This one's not funny."

"Yes, you would know because you've been watching the TV and not your phone."

Feeling reproached, he put down the TV remote. Every day, he wondered how it was possible she was in his life or the reverse. She was wealthy, successful. And to top it, she was an amazing person. As much as he's decided not to take advantage of her, he couldn't stop her each time she bought him something or sent money to his siblings at school.

Shaking his head, this is neither the time nor place to dwell on that, he reflected. Yeah, he'd done a lot of thinking since he started courting her. The money he had saved up could afford to buy a ring, he thought.

Again, not the time nor place.

She picked up the popcorn bowl and deposited it on his lap, laughing when he winced and bared his teeth at her.

The front door creaked open and before either of them could react, it closed with a loud bang and a teary-eyed Gracie walked in, dumping her bag on the floor and reached for Samantha who quickly got up and took her in an embrace.

Mark didn't have time to react to any of it, he just sat there watching.

Samantha took her weeping friend to one corner making sympathetic sounds, stroking her head lightly as she cast him a glance.

He should excuse them. Why he still sat there was beyond him. Gracie pulled of her friend's arms, causing Samantha to step back with caution but not out of arms reach.

"The bastard is already married." Grace shouted.

The alternating look of horror and sympathy on Samantha's face should have warned him that he couldn't stay there, but he found himself unable to get up and leave.

After spending my money on him for two years! Gracie paced.

He noted that Samantha tried not to react but also saw now that she was deliberately avoiding his gaze. He should leave now but his limbs didn't respond.

"It's a few days to my wedding and I find out the bastard is already married and has a child."

Huh? He really should give them some privacy. This was a woman to woman issue. His presence would only irritate Gracie even the more.

Now that he thought about it, he had avoided all her calls and text messages and has not been able to bring himself to tell her that he quit the favor she had asked of him.

“I picked him up from nothing, washed him up, spent my hard-earned money on him and his thank you was to go marry a white girl and have a child.” She laughed bitterly, then glanced at him, he saw, for the first time. Her face changed into a furious frown.

“You're dating him now?” She asked Samantha who neither responded nor reacted to her outburst.

“Forget about him, Sammy. This is who you are seeing that you didn't want me to know about.” Nodding as if she suddenly understood. He is just another dirty old rag I picked up, hoping the stench of poverty could be washed out of him.

Samantha darted a look at him in confusion.

“That day I went to return his diesel, I made a deal with him to go out with you. It's the reason I got him the job with the Chief Judge so that the reporters wouldn't find out he is just a dirty old rag.”

Samantha's eyes were pleading with him that the accusation was false, but he looked away, unable to deny that fact. How could he explain to her now that he had never had in mind to follow through with her friend's proposal?

“The same dirty old rag.’ Gracie said scornfully. “You had your own scheme, I see. That's why you refused taking my calls or replying any of my messages. You already had your own plan in place.”

Balling his hands in a fist, Mark got up quietly not meeting either of the pair of eyes trained on him. He simply should have left when he had the chance. It was too late now. The damage was already done.

“Mark?” Samantha inquired softly.

How could I deny the accusation? She wouldn't believe him anyway.

The door opened, admitting his two siblings. For the first time in a long time, Mark swore.

They stood just inside the door, Goodluck carrying his sister's bag. They quickly assessed the situation and didn't step further into the room. He had no wish to drag his siblings into this mess. Why did they have to be so in time?

Gracie's eyes zeroed in on the two at the door, and they narrowed in suspicion.

Samantha she was wringing her hands, her eyes fixed on the floor. For nothing else, she hadn't wanted his siblings to witness this either.

“Brother?” Deborah inquired uncertainly.

“Well, well, well,” Gracie's voice dripped with sarcasm. “He didn't just come alone, he packed his entire family into the scene, played right into your large, soft heart, Sammy.”

Mark gave her a warning look but to her credit, she didn't cower.

“I should give you more credit than my ex fiancé. You appeared more real than he did but a rag all the same.” She looked him up from head to toe. “You should take your little family of rags and find a nice laundry to wash yourselves. Oh, I bet you can't even afford that.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Goodluck take an angry step forward. Quickly, he shot him a warning. Reluctantly, Goodluck stepped back.

“Now would be a very good time for you to take your minions and leave. Samantha doesn't get angry. Trust me, you don't want see otherwise.”

Samantha walked past him to the door and held it wide open, looking straight at her friend. “Now would be a good time for you to leave, Gracie.”

Gracie's eyes widened in shock. Samantha chose to ignore it. “All of you, please.”

How could he have done this to her? To his siblings?

“Sammy,” Gracie said casually.

Samantha ignored the plea and repeated more firmly. “Now is the best time for all of you to leave.”

Frustrated, Gracie shot him a look and picked up her bag, storming out of the house.

He saw the fear on his sister's face reflect in his brother's, then beckoned for them to leave.

“I'm sorry, Deborah.” Samantha said, “You too, Goodluck. This is between your brother and me. I hope you remember that.”

How could she still be thinking of others in such a situation? Did she never tire of being charming?

He stepped in front of her and lifted his hand to touch her face. She jumped out of his reach. From where could he begin to apologize? How could he begin to justify himself? In a manner of minutes, all the hope he had was slipping away.

He tried again pleading for her to give him a chance to listen.

She stepped out of his touch. “Don't touch me, Mark.”

The moment he stepped out of the door, she closed it with a soft click.

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She wouldn't cry, Samantha told herself. She wouldn't give them that satisfaction. Oh, God!! She wouldn't. Of all things to do, not that. Even feeling sorry for herself was not the answer. She couldn't cry. No, she was not going to cry.

Bolting the door, she went into her room and knelt down to pray. It was the only thing she could think of. It was the only thing she needed. Right this moment. In the place of prayer, she could allow herself to cry, not for the pain. In fellowship.

In prayer, she could cry herself out. She was allowed to weep in prayer to the One who has all the answers, not to some human with pathetic ability to cause harm, to cause pain.

She prayed for the broken, bitter woman who had once been her friend, who had turned vicious against the onslaught of the lustful flesh, craving for what she didn't have and hurting others in the process. Once, once Gracie had had a kind heart. Once. It all seemed so long ago. Rocking on her knees, she prayed fervently for the heart that had grown so bitter to be healed.

Not only in love with him!

Her body buckled feverishly.

Only one thing mattered to her now; If it was God's will for her and Mark to be together, everything would work out, everything would fall into place. It didn't matter what anyone else said.

She prayed for him- the shock on his face when her friend began to make the accusations. And the pain. The anger. The fear when he tried to touch her: fear of not being good enough, but hope that it wouldn't matter to her.

She prayed for his siblings as well. The bond she'd formed with his sister and all the fun they had together, it was like having another family she could lavish attention on. And his brother. He'd only started to relax around her.

Such anger and bitterness in her friend. What could have caused it?

When she was done praying, she wiped her face dry. She heard the quiet caution. In the morning, the same warning had come to her while she prepared to go to work and again when her friend had burst into the room and began to weep, she'd heard it again. Now, she understood what it meant.

Switching off the light in the bedroom, she took her car key and her bag and left the room. She turned off the television set in the living room and took the bowl of popcorn to the kitchen.

What she needed, she thought, locking the door behind her and hurries to her car, was sound counsel.

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Not feeling inclined to get up and answer the door, Mark looked up as Deborah eased the door open slightly and peered into the room, seeing him sprawled on the bed, she closes it and went to him, a look of concern her face.

He didn't want his siblings around him, not the way he looked, not with the way he felt. But always, they showed up to check on him, his brother had been coming in twice a week and his sister, every weekend. They were the only ones keeping him sane and on his feet.

'Brother.' She implored softly, sitting at the edge of the bed. 'You really need to eat. You've grown very thin.'

He saw the tears well up in his sister's eyes and pulled her in a hug. 'I'm fine, really.'

But they both knew he wasn't. They'd never seen him like this before, not even when he struggled through school, working to pay his tuition fees and still taking care of the family. But then, love has that effect on someone, didn't it? Especially when you feel like your heart has been ripped out and it was all your fault.

"I'm fine, Debbie." He tried to assure her in a croaky voice.

She pulled away slightly to look at him. "But you need to eat. It's been 3 weeks. The Chief Judge came back while you're sleeping and said we should take you to the hospital."

His lips twisted ever so slightly when he tried to laugh. But it came out as a croaked cough.

The Chief Judge had been calling daily, asking him to go to the hospital for check-up. He simply couldn't bring himself to tell him that his situation wasn't a medical condition but a result of his foolishness.

Deborah laid her head on his shoulder. "Samantha picked me up from the hostel today and took me out. She bought me a nice dress and shoes and a shirt for Goodluck too. He didn't want to go with us, so, he said he had to come here early, so he could do your laundry."

His heart constricted. Nothing could excuse what he did to her, yet, she kept her word to his siblings and have been in constant communication with them. He already warned them not mention him for any reason to her except she came outright and asked.

How could he not love her? To him, she was the only which through his male ego had lied to her and lost. Probably forever.

After avoiding his phone calls the first eight days, he'd stopped calling, resorting to sending her long apology mails and text messages daily, almost hourly. Pathetically and hopefully, he'd gone ahead and bought a ring the next day after that unfortunate incident.

He'd been to her office, and she'd instructed her staff to tell him he was not welcome there. He could not summon the courage to try again seeing after her staff embarrassed him. The next day, at the office his colleagues had commented on his parlor and by the fourth day, his supervisor had granted him leave until he fully recovered from what ailed him. He'd found himself on the bed ever since, getting up on Sundays to go to church and then disappearing even before the service was over to avoid people asking him questions, ones he couldn't explain.

Deborah smoothed out the wrinkles on his forehead. "I'll bring your food, Brother. Try to eat at least half of it, please. For her sake. If she were to see you like this..." leaving the sentence hanging.

He pulled her ears as she jumped out of the bed. "When did you get so smart?"

"Since you turned the baby." She giggled.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Samantha stepped into the dimly lit room and seeing the figure sprawled on the bed, her heart went out to him. When the Chief Judge had told her, she hadn't brought herself to accept that it could be true. The body on the bed looked lifeless. That wasn't a good sign. She rushed to the bed and touch his arm lightly.

He jolted up, looking like he'd just seen a ghost. He looked like one; pale and frail.

She wasn't a bad person. Nothing should prompt anyone to cause someone else such pain.

No one told her, not his siblings. The Chief Judge had only told her the day before and up until she'd prayed about it, she had not had the courage to face him.

Gently, she touched his cheek, and he closed his eyes, murmuring something about ghosts and hallucinations and his mind conjuring up images. He didn't believe he was the one.

“Mark.” She called softly.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked straight into her eyes. Into her. She shivered and his eyes widened as he realized she was really there and not in his imagination.

He reached out for her, seeking reassurance, a comfort, a touch, and she couldn't deny him that. She couldn't be angry at him, not when he looked like a walking corpse. Her heart thudded and skipped as he pulled her into a fierce, frantic hug.

Crushed against him, he deftly cut off her air supply. It was with great effort that she pushed herself away to catch her breath. His eyes pleaded for her not to go and it seemed like he was trying to say something.

Blinking back tears, she took off her shoes and climbed onto the bed to get more comfortable and this time she was the one who pulled him in for the hug. She held him to herself, her heart beating thunderously. She had not meant to cause him pain. Of all things she had expected him to feel; regret, guilt, shame, anything else but pain. It ripped at her heart to see him like this.

Oh, it hasn't been easy staying away from him. Several times, she had wanted to reply his numerous text messages and mails. She had not felt physically fit to see him without breaking down.

She didn't shed tears unless it was necessary. But seeing the misery he was in, tears spilled from her eyes to his head, but he didn't feel it.

Three weeks he had been in this condition. No amount of spite should ever make someone cause such pain to another.

His breathing was calm now. She willed her heart to obey too. Steadily, hers resumed to its normal beat. She stroked him gently to comfort. She offered a simple prayer for his heart to be healed and his strength restored. His ragged breath on her as he said, 'Amen.'

Outside his bedroom, his brother, sister and mother stood. His mother had arrived a few days ago, Deborah told her, and with the warm reception she got from the older woman, she was glad that his mother probably did not know the reason for her son's ailment.

She tried to pull away and heard him murmur a protest. A lot of things she put on hold to come see him and although she wasn't leaving because of them, she thought she needed the space to get herself back in order. It wouldn't do to go see her father in such disarrayed state.



Very slowly she pulled away and made the singular error of looking into his eyes, eyes that now held a glimmer of hope in them.

Samantha bit her lower lip and with deliberate slowness, eased back to sit at the edge of the bed. His eyes bored into her as if willing her not to go away.

“I have to go,” Mark. She managed without her voice breaking.

“Samantha.” He croaked, placing a hand over hers, as if the singular action would change her mind.

With caution and with a great patience she would only use on a hysterical client, Samantha expounded. “You are weak, Mark.” Her tone was no longer gentle. “You’ve been hiding here the past three weeks when I was the one who got hurt. I was the one who was betrayed. Who are you hiding from? I don’t want a weak, spineless man, Mark.”

His eyes widened in shock. Shock was what she felt too at her statement, and yes, she didn’t Mark to be intimidated by her for an reason, otherwise, she would have no respect for him and she didn’t want that. No, never.

She realized she’d hit home. Mark’s eyes drifted down and his jaw ticked. She didn’t mean what she said as an insult, she hoped he realized that.

“You made a mistake and you come here wallowing in self-pity.”

He couldn't meet her eyes and when he spoke, it was very softly. “I’m sorry, Samantha. I didn't mean to hurt you. I never planned to go through with your friend's proposal anyway. And I probably should have told you, ...”

“Save it, Mark.” It simply was too much for her to bear. “I didn't come here to have you apologize. I'm here because I heard you were sick. Obviously, you didn't tell them that's a lie.”

Then she got up.

Mark quickly grabbed her hand, kneeling on the bed and looking helpless. He knew exactly how to get her attention.

“I love you, Samantha. Please, believe me.” He cradled her hand. “I love you.”

Quietly, she took his hand off hers. She'd prayed. That's why she had the strength to push him away. “So does every child I feed at the orphanage, Mark.” She picked up her phone. “If you want to apologize, you know where to find me. I won't be the one to come to you for it.”

This wasn't the Mark Grinder she knew. This was a broken shell of a man in a pitiful condition, and she was not going to be a fool to anybody.

“You have to eat the food they bring to you, Mark.” She added as an afterthought. “I won't feel guilty if anything happens to you. I'm the one who was betrayed by two people I care about. Yet, I'm not starving myself.”

Not waiting for a response, she left before she could weep or break down in front of him.

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She was shown into the private sitting room by a man she didn't recognize from past visits. Certainly, he was a new employee and wondered what might have happened to the other man who managed to remember each person's birthday and sent presents.

The woman that came to greet her was well into his sixties, in a purple Chinese dress, and with a flair of short auburn Bob wig. Samantha immediately recognized as Lucas's mum, Mrs. Victoria.

With a bright smile, Victoria Barigha caught Samantha in a warm motherly hug. Victoria still had her love for expensive perfumes. The fragrance was extraordinary.

“How are you, dear?”

Unable to help the smile that came, Samantha sighed happily. “I am great, Mrs. Victoria. Very great.”

Obviously. Victoria observed. 'You're glowing.'

“Realizing you've got someone's heart is enough to put springs in your steps.”

“Oh!” Delighted, Mrs. Victoria sat down, pulling Samantha beside her. “You must spill all, child.” Then, she laughed at herself. “Oh! I didn't just call you a child, did I?”

If her older brother of 36 was still a child, what was her own 32 but a toddler? Samantha mused. “Well, Lucas said you still call him a child.”

“Don't pay any heed to that boy. The day he's no longer a child to me will be the day the Lord calls me home.”

Mrs. Victoria was such a bundle of energy. Samantha had missed her so much. The times Lucas had smuggled her out of her mother's house to his were some of the best childhood memories she had. This woman had been a solid rock in all her father's disasters.

A servant entered with drinks and discreetly left.

“While we wait for your father, let's gossip a little.” She leaned over in conspiracy.

“Gossip about whom, exactly?” George Barigha's voice echoed in the room and Samantha quickly stood up.

“Good evening, Father.”

His eyes narrowed at his wife. “I hope you've not been feeding her with false information, Victoria.”

Victoria laughed. “Oh George! She's a lawyer. Information is good for her.” In an almost dismissive manner, turned her attention to Samantha. “Sit down, child. Your father's manners are always lacking. He might forget to tell you to sit back down.”

Samantha glanced at her father for permission. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he sat down. She wasn't afraid of him. Neither was she as nervous as their last meeting.

“Tell me, Samantha,” George Barigha began as his wife poured a drink for him. “How is the firm?”

Samantha allowed herself a sip from her glass before answering. “Very well, Father.”

“I expect no less. You are extending soon, I hear.”

She smiled. Her father didn't file out compliments very often. “With Lagos doing so well, we're looking to start up in Port Harcourt and Uyo. Someone is already looking into a space for us in Uyo.”

He nodded in approval. “I have some good buildings in Uyo for lease.”

As successful as he was, his children really didn't want to have any business dealings with him. “We're buying.”

“It's what I would expect, of course. Soon, there would be no more lands to buy. It's better to acquire as much as you can now.” Then, he looked a bit pained as he asked. “How is your sister?”

Samantha smiled. “Rita is doing great. She'll be writing her Junior WAEC next term.”

“So says your mother.”

That was a brush-off if she'd ever heard one. Her mother and father were like oil and water. They never mixed well.

“Chief Justice Forase told me you rejected his offer. That was a wise decision and I told him so.”

Samantha looked up sharply. She'd anticipated a reprimand. “Thank you, Father.”

“I don't see a ring.” He said reproachfully.

She looked at her bare hands. She remembered what she'd told him the last phone conversation several months ago. He'd bought the news, and the silence of the reporter

who had taken a neat shot of when Mark had kissed her on the roadside. An incident she'd been glad her father had quickly intervened and killed its publication.

She'd told him she and Mark were dating, letting him believe they were quite serious especially after more shots of them together were taken at different occasions. You never knew where the paparazzi were hiding.

"We had a slight misunderstanding." An understatement. Telling him the truth would have been worse than humiliating. But then, nothing escapes George Barigha. He probably had Mark's background checked long before her second meeting with him.

His brows rose ever so slightly. "I and your mother barely speak to each other. Doesn't mean she's no longer wearing my ring. And there's Victoria..."

Victoria Barigha started to laugh, "I quite put up with you, George. You should hand me a medal."

Samantha saw her father smile and the besotted expression on his face. Victoria would always be her father's heart. Her father still loved his wife. Deeply. She had put up with him through his good and sometimes, worse escapades. She had been through it all and still stayed at his side- his first lady come what may. His weakness was that he liked women too much for his own good.

"I hope he's not weak. A misunderstanding is not the end of the world."

He has tried apologizing. "I just need time to sort out what to do."

"I hope so. I wouldn't want a weak son-in-law." He unlocked his phone. "Now, about your work, what's the progress report?"

Switching gears automatically, Samantha opened the Word document on her phone. "Based on the report I sent to your mailbox yesterday, our client base has quadrupled in the last year, mostly as a result of the Osborne vs NCC case we won, which increased sales for the Osborne Corporation, and streamlined our potential to high-powered clientele. Now, that doesn't mean that we're not taking on lesser cases, it just simply means that I have appointed new managers to handle the two divisions, which leaves me more time to visit Lagos and eventually, the other offices when they're opened."

And so, they continued, Victoria pouring drinks and father and daughter talking business and successes.

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The Chief Justice entered the room, followed by Senator ThankGod. Mark had spent the time since Samantha left reflecting on what she'd said. Yes, he'd been a coward. He'd

been afraid that he'd lost her already, afraid that his fear had come to hunt him. He simply hadn't realized the pain would be so unbearable.

Justice Forase sat on the single arm chair while the senator sat on the bed.

Mark sat up. He had guests. Distinguished guests at that, and it was time he began acting more civilized. After they'd gone, he could go back to his misery. He got up from the bed.

"Welcome, sir. What can I get for you?"

"What happened to you?" The senator asked.

"That is exactly what I've been asking for the past two weeks." Justice Forase said with the decided reprimand an elder can give a child.

"What happened to you?" The senator repeated the question.

Mark sighed. It was time he told them the truth. The Chief Judge had been to see him on more occasions than his usually busy schedule allowed. Plus, his colleagues have called several times that the senator had been asking of him too. And so, on these thoughts, Mark narrated the story, leaving out the part about Samantha's proposal, including only that of her friend. At the end of his tale, the Chief Justice was roaring in laughter and the senator was deep in thought. But it was the Chief Justice who spoke first.

"Now, I see why you always avoid contacting her whenever I ask you to. You bribe Esther to do it for you."

He was embarrassed at himself. What good had it done, keeping it to himself? She'd called him weak. Perhaps, he was weak. Maybe, if he'd told someone, he might have gotten a solution.

"You were wrong." The senator said finally. "Your way of saying you were sorry was wrong."

Mark looked up. He'd done what he could. He'd had little hope that she'd forgive him.

"You went to see her once, and gave up." The senator continued. "How did you expect her to take you seriously and believe you were truly sorry when you didn't make much effort?"

"I called, texted and emailed her so many times and got no response." He stated defensively.

"Women are creatures who bask in attention. Undivided, jealously-guarded attention. Your presence means more than any sugar-coated word you can construct and send through the air."

Feeling guilty now, Mark looked away.

“You made a mistake, so, go to her and apologize like a man.” Justice Forase said. “If you had spent half the time you've been wallowing in self-pity pursuing her, she'd likely have forgiven you already.”

It wasn't as easy as they made it to be. She'd said she didn't want to see him. He didn't want to force his presence on her. After all, they were worlds apart.

“I didn't realize your solution to problems is hiding, boy.” The Senator regarded him coolly. “Are you going to do the right thing and fight for the one thing that can make you happy again?”

He should have thought of it. How did he expect to go back to business as usual when she wasn't going to be in it? Could he ever find the kind of joy and laughter she brought into his life? How was he going to function properly knowing that she could marry someone else someday and be happy without him while he continued to suffer the pain of losing her?

So, he nodded, in answer to the senator's question.

“Don't expect her to make it easy for you.” The senator told him. “What is worth having is worth fighting for. Do you think she's worth fighting for?”

Yeah, she is. He didn't know how he had survived without knowing her before.

The Chief Justice gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Remember why you didn't give up all your life to make something of yourself and put food on your family's table. Remember that your siblings are the reason you accepted the job offer from her friend even though it had a ridiculous curve.”

He remembered. Oh, he did. And it was time he showed himself that money shouldn't intimidate him. The two men sitting down here in his bedroom could have sent 'get well soon' cards because of their status or even ignored him. But they were here. For him. Because they cared and believed in him. It was time he had a little more faith in himself.

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Unsmiling, Mark walked straight to Stacy's desk, summoned a small smile for her and asked to see her boss. After all the lecture he'd received a week ago, he was not going to give up without a fight. And fight, he would.

“You know she doesn't want you here, right?” She asked.

“Don't tell her I'm here, Stacy.” He said quickly to her protest. “Just tell her anything to get her to come out.”

Stacy's brow shot up. "You know boss doesn't like to be lied to."

He smiled at that, knowing how true that was. "This one's good for her."

She studied him thoroughly, looking for any sign that he might be here to cause trouble. "I'll do what I can. But, ..." she added sternly, "I will call security the moment you upset her."

He nodded at that. He felt better knowing there was someone looking out for her. Touching his pocket to assure himself of the lightweight there, he felt confident that if she said 'no', he'd simply come back again till he wore her out. One of them has got to give, and he didn't plan to be the one. He'd stopped deceiving himself she was too out of his league. She saw those in her league before she approached him. So, he definitely had a chance.

He stepped forward when she appeared from her office, followed by Stacy. Her face was contorted into worry lines and quickly transformed to annoyance when she spotted him. She darted a look at her secretary who quickly scurried behind her desk to get out of the line of fire.

"She was simply following my instructions." He attempted to clear the secretary of guilt.

Her frown remained in place. "You've got a lot of nerve coming into my office and giving my staff instructions."

His brows quirked up. "Would you rather I'd barged into your office? I'm rather convinced that only the dramatic seem to get your attention where I'm concerned."

She sighed and folded her arms across her chest, her gaze steady on him. This woman was made of sterner stuff. He'd failed to recognize that before.

"What do you want?" She looked him over and added, "You've recovered well enough."

He smiled a bit. "Your visit did the trick, thanks."

But her gaze didn't waver, and she repeated more firmly. "What exactly do you want?"

He took a step towards her and saw her eyes narrow in warning. He hesitated only a second and moved in till he was kneeling in front of her. The confidence had always been there. He just never used it, he noted. He didn't feel fear, just a sense of anticipation.

"To apologize." He said, looking up at her, so strong, yet fragile. "I'm sorry for causing you pain, for lying to you. I was weak, like you said and that almost cost me you. But I won't make that mistake again. I'm not giving up without a fight."

Her expression didn't change. "I'm not fighting you, Mark."

He nodded, understanding her meaning. “No, you're not. The fight is between me and Gracie...”

“I cut off that relationship. For now,”

He felt relieved. Good. “Having a friend like that!”

She lifted her brow slightly. “You are one to point fingers.”

He smiled at that. “A man stands a better chance than she does.” When he saw her gaze remained disinterested, he continued. “I messed up big. I should have told you the truth when we became friends. You shouldn't have to find out the way things turned out. I meant to tell you...”

“You had plenty of opportunities to do that.”

She wasn't going to make this easy on him. Instead of being discouraged, he felt he needed to keep pushing. “You're right. I had plenty of opportunities to tell you and didn't. I never thought about her following through with her scheme anyway. But I wanted to teach you two a lesson that you can't always have your cake and eat it. Not everybody can be bought with your money.”

Something crossed her eyes. Shock? Puzzlement?

“Yes,” he said it as if to answer her unspoken question, “It's the reason I came back. And I was glad to find out you'd changed your mind. But your friend wasn't to be dissuaded. I tried to ignore her as much as I could. At some point, she began to call me names- nasty names. And threatened to revoke my employment.”

“If you hadn't come along, I wouldn't have known the length she'd go to accomplish evil.”

Thank God, then. “Well, I'm glad something good came out of this whole ordeal.”

She was silent, gazing at him. She was so beautiful, he thought. I have to do right by her. I can't lose her. Not after I've found her, no.

He tried to collect his thoughts. He needed words, words she like to hear from him. Could he confess all and leave himself vulnerable to wide emotions, emotions out of his control?

“You're taking up my work time, Mark. If that's all, then, I have to get back to work now.”

He grabbed her hand, standing up before she could run off. “I'm sorry, Samantha. You didn't deserve any of the things I did to you. You're a good person. Perhaps, I should have used that to my advantage and told you the truth. I know you would have understood.” Rubbing her middle finger softly, and thought of the box in his pocket. “I hope I'm not too late to receive forgiveness. I'm truly sorry for hurting you.”



Momentarily, he let go of her hands and retrieved the small box from his pocket, opening it. "Will you marry me, Samantha?"

She glared at him, not the ring that shone in radiantly at her. "You really have guts coming here for this." She waved carelessly at the ring. "You think by declaring undying love, that I would say 'yes' and all is right?"

His whole body tensed. "I've apologized, Samantha. If that's not enough, then, I'll walk out that door and never bother you again."

He couldn't tell where the ego was rising from. Unfortunately, he'd had enough insults at the hands of her and her friend. He'd come to apologize, and she was ridiculing him instead.

She laughed. "What peace of mind that would give me."

Mark stilled himself against the sudden chill that attacked his spine. And closing the box, he shoved it recklessly into his pants pocket and walked away from her, every vein in his body standing taut, while he struggled to block the burn of a tear from spilling. If she'd taken a knife to his heart, that would have been a mercy. Her words had burned, and he wasn't sure he'd recover this time.

He heard his name and only managed to pull his features into a scowl as he turned to face her. She was progressing towards him, and he didn't think he could stand her being close to him without committing a crime too great for a pardon. But he stayed his feet. Heads were already popping out of cubbyholes to stare curiously at them.

"You arrogant, stubborn Grinder."

The tears she could not hide were his undoing yet, he clamped a tight fist over his heart not to be moved by it. She'd just neatly ripped his own heart and the blood was gushing everywhere. Why were good manners so ingrained in him?

"You think you can just come here and toss around marriage proposals and storm out without a by-your-leave? And expect me to fold my hands and like a lady of genteel breed, bat my lashes and say, 'yes, sir, I'll marry you'?"

She stood in front of him now, thumping and pushing at him as a lone tear slid down her face. "You arrogant Grinder. You usually go around town proposing marriage to unsuspecting women and disappear?"

Grabbing at her both hands, he clasped them tight in his and said calmer than he was feeling. "I said I was sorry. That wasn't enough for you. I proposed marriage. You laughed me to scorn. A man can only take so much." Keeping her hands yet restrained as she struggled to free them, so she could use them again.

Unable to extract her hands, she used her legs instead. “You go down on your knees as a proper gentleman and give me a reason to want to spend the rest of my life with your arrogance for company.”

That's it? That was why they were fighting in the middle of her office? She couldn't tell him that and had laughed at him instead?

Mark smiled then. “You simply had to ask.”

She tried a wobbly smile which caused more tears to slide down her face. “You never asked anyone how this is done, did you?”

Taking her both hands in one, he wiped at her tears with the other. “What assurance do I have that you won't use your hands again should I let them loose?” He asked softly.

She laughed shakily. “If you do it right, I won't.”

Brushing a hand over the top of her nose, he released her hands and retrieving the box from his pocket, went down on one knee.

“Silver and gold, have I none but such as I have this ring...”

There was laughter from around them, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was his if only he did this right, and he planned to. This woman, he couldn't live without.

'I can't imagine a life without you. Trust me when I say that because I tried. It wasn't a good experience. Deborah took pictures.'

Samantha laughed, even as a stray happy tear slid down her left cheek.

“I'm sorry for every pain I caused you. I'm sorry for every arrogant step I took which pushed you away from me. I hope you find this Grinder on his knees less arrogant.” Tears burned and threatened to break him, but he refused to give in. He had to tell her how he felt. He needed to make things right and go home a happy man today. No matter what happens.

'No more lies. I promise to always be honest with you and if it makes you cry, I'll wipe your tears. But this Grinder fellow, is not going to let you walk out of his life again. I love you, Barrister Samantha Barigha. I couldn't do you less than give you my heart. I hope I'm enough arrogance for you to deal with.'

“I have to try, don't I?” She laughed as tears overwhelmed her.

“This is Mark Grinder on his knees, promising to love you for the rest of his life. I guess what I'm trying to say is, will you marry me, Samantha?”

The choruses of 'yes' from her staff almost drowned out hers, but he was attuned to her. He heard her say "Yes". All he saw was her, slipping the ring in her finger and hugged her like it was the last time he'd see her.

From behind, Stacy was dabbing at her eyes, pressing one hand to her chest and all he felt was great joy, for the prize he won- this woman in his hands. She was worth the prize of waiting all his life to meet.

Remembering the person who'd accompanied him, he turned towards the entrance, stirring her that way. "I want you to meet someone."

As they approached the man standing by the reception, he turned to them and offered a genuine happy smile. "I see he cleaned up his mess."

Samantha's laugh echoed through the hall. "You are Senator ThankGod."

The senator took her outstretched hand. "I'm honored to make the acquaintance of the woman who brought this boy to his knees."

Mark cringed, making Samantha to laugh harder. "I've heard so much about you, sir. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"So, where is the celebration taking place?"

Mark darted a look at Samantha, seeing a confirmation of what he'd been thinking about himself. "We have to see our Pastor and inform her parents."

The senator nodded. 'The boy has wisdom but doesn't use it often enough. "Do what you have to do. I'm around till the weekend."

Mark smiled his thanks. "Thank you, sir."

"I'll be informed of any new developments, I trust."

"Yes, sir. I'll let you know when."

The senator focused his attention on Samantha. "It's a delight to meet you in person. I've only met your father once. I believe I now have a reason to meet him again, if I'm invited to the wedding, that is."

Samantha's features stiffened. "Of course, Senator."

As the senator waved them goodbye, Mark looked at her sharply, wondering why she'd suddenly tensed up when she'd been so happy only a moment ago. It was painful to watch her withdrawal. And as he led her back to her office, he prayed all was well.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Her father could not be present for the introduction of the family of the groom-to-be. He'd sent one of her uncles to stand in for him. But whether to be glad to put off explaining to Mark who her father was or be angry that her father could not spare the time to meet the man his daughter was about to be married to, she chose to accept it in good faith. She'd only postponed the inevitable.

Mark was meeting all her step mothers and some of her siblings today. Except for Victoria, and most of the older children who couldn't get away from business engagements, the rest of the family was around at the Villa.

Aisha Barigha was the first to come out of her house to greet them. She shouted They're here. The happy shout was echoed and the others all began to arrive from their houses. Within a minute, they were surrounded by women, young adults and children, hugging and greeting them. They immediately took to Mark and Samantha was very glad for that. She really wanted him to feel a part of the family and that was exactly what they made him feel.

Mark was hauled aside and barraged with tons of questions. And he, bless him, was answering as well as he could. They wanted to know about his siblings and why he didn't bring them. He was asked how fair the Chief Judge was as a boss. They wanted to know what his favorite food was and if he could agree to let them take care of the wedding refreshment. All of that felt overwhelming and just when she began to feel bad for him, he winked at her and happily told the mothers that the wedding was theirs. He was just the groom they could do with as they pleased. That was the winner because they began to hug him again and argue who got to make him dinner first.

"Your hair is messed up."

Samantha squirmed, recognizing the voice even before she turned to face one of her younger siblings. She quickly ran a hand through the hair.

"You're making it worse." She said, miffed. "Come sit, let me comb it out for you. The hair is a woman's glory and must be well-groomed and taken care of at all times."

Bemused and not inclined to refuse the offer, Samantha sat down on concrete that caved in the flower bed.

"Uh, Miss Samantha has fallen prey this time." One of the twins, Rebecca, said.

The teenager frowned at the twins.

Samantha, seeing the twins, Rebecca and Julia, mouthed 'save me', which had them reeling back in laughter.

“I ran the brush through my hair twice before stepping out of the house.” Rebecca said.

And I've been moving around the Villa with a hair brush just in case I see her from afar.' Julia held up said hairbrush.

At the sight of the brush, the teenager dove for it and in a dictatorial voice told Samantha, “Sit still.”

Mrs. Timi Barigha, the teen's mother whose attention had been on them quickly chided the child, asking her to apologize. The implication of her action dawned on the teen. Her head dropped, her hands wringing the hairbrush. “I'm sorry, Ms. Samantha.”

Of course, the teenager only had good intentions, and she was sure, has learned not to be disrespectful in the process. “It's alright, come here.” Samantha tugged her in for a big sister hug, eyeing the twins before she pulled away. “Now, I believe my hair needs you.”

With the teenager now happily brushing her hair, the twins sat on either side of her, her gaze went back to Mark and how he was fairing with her family. All she'd told him was that she was very close to her neighbors, and they would all like to meet him. So far, he was doing so well with them they already appeared to love him.

That was a major deal for her because with ten mothers and thirty-one siblings, it was imperative he liked her family. They maintained one front, loved one another. They might irritate each other sometimes and even have moments of disagreements and fall outs, but they understood they were all in this together and their father was not one to show favoritism.

“... and my editor keeps asking me for juicy stories, more in-your-face personal stories like I work for the paparazzi.” Samantha caught the tail end of the conversation the twins were having.

Rebecca was a reporter, a very good one, but she was tired of the mediocre work her editor refused to change and needed a change of scene.

“He's going to sponsor for these stories, right?” Samantha asked.

“As if.”

Getting inside stories of political personalities was what made her sister go to into journalism in the first place. The downside has been the limited resources available that she was forced to work with. “Have you thought about getting in touch with GND?”

A slight frown marred Rebecca's face. "Father said he was going to phone a friend. I haven't called to get feedback yet."

"Please, remind her how terrible that idea is." Julia pleaded with Samantha.

Samantha loved the twins very much. She also knew that whenever they argued, it lasted the seconds the disagreement lasted and acting as a buffer between the two, you always end up regretting for taking sides.

Rebecca gave her sister a haughty look. "It's not like he's doing any politicking."

"Sounds about as political as the letters in the word."

Samantha had great experience with these two. It was time to call for timeout. They needed to cool off and this argument, looks pretty old between the two. She prayed under her breath for wisdom to settle this amicably.

"Have you tried contacting them yourself?" She asked with great caution.

The teenager finished her task and returned the hairbrush to Julia and dashed off to join the others.

Rebecca nodded. "I did, but they never called back. They told me to hold. I've been holding for three months."

Julia huffed, and Rebecca shot her a heated look.

Okay. It's time to take a different approach. "Why don't you mail me your CV and I'll put up the necessary documentation together and have Sonia submit them at their head office for you?"

The pure joy alight in her sister's eyes changed the atmosphere completely. "Oh, thank you. That would be so wonderful." Then, her face fell. "I guess I should have told you and Lucas earlier."

Julia gave her twin a compassionate hug. "That's why your surname isn't Maduka, it's Barigha."

And just like that, all three sisters began to laugh. This drew the attention of the mothers to them.

"Oh dear" One of the mothers exclaimed. "We've completely forgotten about the bride-to-be."

Hissing, Aisha returned her focus to Mark, "Haven't we seen enough of her face already?"

Wincing, Samantha drew her face away from their direction to avoid Mark seeing her reaction.

“She hasn't changed even though you're wearing a ring now.” This, from Rebecca.

“That's why it's us versus Barigha and his wives.” Julia chimed, hoping to distract their older sister from the gloom that suddenly surrounded her, but it didn't have the desired effect. The twin shared a look and pulled her to her feet in unison, leading her into her mother's house.

They could hear the twin's mother say, “You treat that girl as if I snuck her into your womb.”

“She lacks my spirit.” Aisha said defensively.

“You excuse your errors too much, Aisha.” Another mother said.

Right before the door closed behind them, Samantha turned one last time to look Mark and saw the heavy frown on his face. Why did her mother have to always choose moments around Mark to create her scenes?

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“I'll be traveling for a meeting over the weekend.” Samantha said casually, fluffing the pillow she had fluffed a number of times already. “It's only for the weekend and I'll be back Monday morning.”

Mark paused long enough to notice her jittery behavior but kept his tone light to match hers. “What kind of meeting?”

Shaking her head, she moved to the other side of the bed to fluff and prop more pillows and adjust the duvet, keeping busy and trying very hard to avoid eye contact with him.

Frowning, he stopped typing and watched her. Nervousness, he understood. They were spending the night together for the first time, and no, he was sleeping on the couch, in the living room while his sister and Samantha had the room to themselves. But it wasn't any of that that was making her nervous. He knew she wasn't ready to share what the problem was. Pushing her to would do neither of them any good. And so, he said instead.

“If you're ready for bed, let me know, so I can get out of the way.”

Maybe, allowing her time to sort out her feelings would be best, gathering his laptop and the documents he was inputting.

“You don't have to leave just yet.”

He was granted the perfect excuse when his sister poked her head into the room with a visible yawn. “Deborah might be feeling different.”

Her nerves were getting to him, making him afraid. Had she changed her mind? Was it too soon for them? Was her spending the night a bad idea? Escape from her right now would clear his head and stop the fear, so, he grabbed it with both hands and started out of the room.

“Actually, I’ll be leaving after work tomorrow.”

Unaware that she followed him, he stopped and turned, and she bumped into him. “Do you have to leave tomorrow?”

She wrung her hands, looking anywhere but at him. “Yes.” Her voice was a whisper.

The change in her wasn't sudden. It began after she said 'yes' to his proposal. She always looked scared around him. Was she afraid he might hurt her? Had someone done something to her before?

Perhaps, the time away on her trip was for the better. He couldn't live with himself if she felt obligated to marry him because her mother pressured her.

Reluctant but not willing to stress out this feeling of dread while in her presence, he nodded and even dredged up a smile. “Okay. Goodnight.”

His smile must have done it because she returned it with relief.

“Goodnight.”

When he would have walked away, she touched his hand and before he could react, she tipped on her toes and kissed him on the cheek and fled to the bedroom.

However long he stood there, he could not say but one thing became certain, Samantha had not changed her mind about him. Now, he could sleep and dream well.

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“You've changed the furniture that What's-his-name got you.” Samantha remarked.

She arrived at Uyo late the previous day and didn't note the new furniture till this morning and Rebecca, sitting on the ottoman by the bar was now keeled over in laughter.

“Don't apologize,” Julia said, quickly cutting her off as she would have done so, “The only pest in this room is this thorn I can't seem to shake from my side. Good thing we're not conjoined. Imagine the horror.” She said this with a grin.

Being the peacemaker was all she always did and searched for a change of topic. “How's Lila? Did you get her a mate yet?”

“Lila's last concern right now is a mate.”



“Are we still talking about Lila here?” She teased her younger twin.

Still laughing, Rebecca held her side. “We tried to warn her about accepting anything from What's-his-name and now, he's taken back the things he bought for her.”

Samantha hid a smile, watching both sisters chase each other around, Julia promising retribution when she couldn't keep up with her sister's agility.

Julia had dated a guy from Delta State whose name she forgot before he finished pronouncing it. The relationship lasted a week, when he discovered she didn't even know his name, let alone, cared for him. That was after he had changed her furniture and paid an extra year on her rent, and asked her to marry him. All in one week of relationship. Now a year later, Julia never got around to finding out his name.

Diverting her attention to the room, she noted the additional crafts from her sister's most recent travels. Julia always had a gift for everyone whenever she returned from a trip. Unlike other tourist agents she'd met, Julia collected for herself only things she could give others as gifts- useful gift items. But this time, Samantha noticed the bowl made of colorful threads on the center table. The intricately patterned bowl contained various plastic fruits Samantha had not seen before.

When she picked up one, she recognized, on it was written 'kiwi'. Others she picked up had varying names also. For a tourist agent who traveled a lot, she managed to define moderate and indulgence in her work and personal life.

Beside the bowl, an ostrich was bent over the bowl as though investigation its contents. That was such a beautiful concept. She wondered if their matriarch, Ms. Victoria had anything to do with that. She decorated all the children's rooms who got their own apartments, saying it's the least she could do.

Samantha sighed. Mark had called on her arrival last night, asking about her flight and how she was fairing. She knew he'd sensed the change in her but there was nothing he could do. She thanked God he didn't push her to share. Her omissions were filling a bucket by now, not telling him the real reason why she'd left for Uyo a day earlier than planned. He would have understood, but that would only lead to her telling him the reason for the time to think. All she needed was some time to think and sort out how she was going to tell him what she'd kept secret.

“Someone's moody.” Rebecca observed.

Guilty as charged, she faced Rebecca telling herself this was not the time nor place to think about that. “Not moody. Just thinking.”

Rebecca sat beside her. "I know with the wedding coming up, you'll have a lot on your mind but you do know that the mothers are taking care of everything, right? And we're here for you."

Sighing, she sat down. Rebecca joined her.

"Julia has arranged for a makeover for last time. Ben and Theo will be here for dinner tonight."

"Really? I haven't seen Theo since his graduation."

Rebecca smiled to herself, seeing as her ploy worked. "And of course, Ben is bringing his assistant along. Again."

She could picture it now. She looked forward to being together with her siblings. "After the mess we created the last time we volunteered to 'help' him'," she air-quoted, "I wouldn't let me near my kitchen."

Julia sat down across from them. "I don't know what the big deal is if the chicken isn't sautéed perfectly or the asparagus is not the right size. What difference does it make as long as it tastes delicious?"

"That's because of the three of us, you made the most mess. At least, Nikki was wise enough to admit her culinary skills were a disaster and stayed away from the kitchen."

That day was a disaster. It proved one fact, - African food was less complicated to make. And tastier too. Local spices and Nigerian pepper gave food better taste.

"When's Nicole coming?" Samantha directed the question to Julia who knew everybody's whereabouts.

Julia smiled fondly, "Her flight was cancelled due to last minute fault they discovered on the plane. She'll be flying in tomorrow at 5am."

"I hope she makes it to the airport in time." Rebecca quipped, not without a smile. "Her skills are also lacking in sleeping and waking time."

"She works late into the night." Julia said defensively.

Samantha rolled her eyes. Who didn't? "It's her personal work. Does she have to work so late into the night?"

The twins shared a look, but it was Rebecca who spoke. "You should have seen the look she gave me when I asked her that. She literally buried me to the ground. Julia became her best friend because she didn't judge her like some people. she said."

“Lucas said she threatened to get a restraining order from court banning him from discussing her personal life with her or anyone else. How come she's the most defiant in the family when we've got lots of guys for that?”

The doorbell rang and Julia got up to answer.

Rebecca was watching her even as her mind wandered. Not now. She didn't want to talk to anyone about it. Not about the situation she put herself in with Mark. Not to be reminded that every day the guilt of holding back the truth threatened to break them. What she knew was that she couldn't let the wedding day pass without telling him the truth.

“Why do you always do that? I heard somewhere that too much thinking can turn someone into a recluse.”

She smiled at Rebecca. What a way to put it. And if that didn't jolt her back to the present, she doubted anything else would have. “That can't be a problem with a mother like mine.”

“Did you ever find out why she is so antagonistic towards you?”

She couldn't delve into that either. “That is her problem.” And mentally shifted the subject. “Sonia said she's submitted your CV at the GND office. You should hear from them soon.”

Realizing the deliberate change of the topic, she accepted it. “I hope so. I keep checking my mailbox.”

'Don't give up hope.' GND would be blind not to accept Rebecca's application. She was awarded the best investigative journalist in West Africa. “They can't pass up an opportunity to snatch the best in the field.”

“Absolutely, Sis.” Julia quipped in. “Sam?”

Samantha got up as she saw the man behind Julia, Mr. Ubong Felix, the realtor she hired to get her a good location for her expansion office in Uyo. They'd spoken over the phone and even had one video call.

“Good evening, Mr. Ubong. It's nice to finally meet you.”

He was all smiles as he accepted the hand she held out, “The pleasure is all mine, Barrister. It's an honor to work with you, ma.” Still holding on to her hand.

Samantha, not wanting to embarrass him, yet needing her hand back, was glad when there was commotion at the door, followed by two very familiar voices she'd missed hearing. Out of the corner of her eyes, she caught the twins trying to hide snickers. Mr. Ubong finally released her hand but continued to stare lecherously at her.

The noise grew and the twins squealed, running towards the newcomers causing the raucous. With a visitor here to see her, she could not rudely walk away from him but still wished she was at the door greeting her brothers too.

“She hasn't seen me in what, five years, and she's acting like I don't matter.” Theo, the neurosurgeon and the most beautiful male in the Barigha family said, shaking his head.

“What do you expect? She's got a new man in her life.” Ben, the renowned most talented chef from Africa stood beside Theo, gazing intently at her.

A warm feeling of joy spread across her body when Theo pulled her into a brotherly hug. He was still the most handsome one between the two and although he was an inch shorter than Ben, nobody noticed because he made up well with his stunning looks.

Theo gazed at her fondly, “How's my favorite Barigha doing?”

“Splendid!” Then she looked at him properly, “Better than you too.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Blame it on jet lag. Wait till I've napped an entire afternoon.”

Ben pushed his brother aside, “Move aside, Barigha. The lady's more favorite Barigha is here.” He crushed her in a brotherly hug.

Samantha felt giddy with happiness, hearing them bicker behind her. She'd missed these two very much. Being three years older than Ben and four over Theo, she'd watched them at each other's neck since childhood. Now, over three decades later, it was still their favorite pastime.

“Uh, I still happen to be the most beautiful woman in this room.” Julia said sweetly and had the guys turning to look her over and as if in conspiracy, both shook their heads and returned their full attention back to Samantha, murmuring simultaneously, “Uh-uh.”

Samantha extracted herself and let them argue with Julia, you never win when those two were on one side. She noticed the blonde, Ben's assistant, still standing at the door. She looked like she just wanted to shrink into the wall so no one would notice her.

Samantha jabbed Ben's side, “Barigha men are so unpolished.” She was glad her sisters were quick to remember the other visitor as well and went to help carry the luggage upstairs.

“Louise, right?”

The blonde smiled shyly. “Yes.”

Louise was an attractive young woman, very young but also very devoted to cooking as her brother was. Sometimes, she wondered if Louise's parents were aware that she travels to Nigeria with her boss and if they'd approve of it.

“Don't worry about him. I'll spank him later.”

Louise and Ben looked at her so scared like she'd follow through on her promise. It was almost laughable. “How was your flight?”

The young woman followed her up the stairs, giving her the shortest story ever about their trip. The twins emerged from one of the guest rooms, giving her the signal that that was to be their visitor's room. Then, she remembered her own guest in the sitting room and quickly apologized to their guest, handing her over to the twins.

Downstairs, Ben was lounged casually on the sofa, her guest sitting straight at the dining table where she'd led him to and Theo was busy studying the goldfish in the jar, Lila...

“And thinking how best to dissect it.” Ben teased.

Theo turned and said something in Mandarin. She smiled, knowing that another showdown was about to take place. Ben replied in French and had Theo shaking his head, wondering what to do with his brother.

It was so nice having them here together. Ben had been to the annual meeting last year but Theo, she'd last seen five years ago. His school and then work always was at the busiest around the time they were scheduled to meet, and they understood that saving lives came first before family reunion.

“It's just a minor work I need to deal with, that's all.” She assured her brothers when they began giving her the look.

Ben got up, going into the kitchen. “Don't turn Nicole.”

After a moment contemplating, Theo followed Ben, throwing over his shoulder, “Don't turn Lucas.”

She shifted her attention to the realtor. “I'm sorry for keeping you waiting. I haven't seen them in quite some time.”

“Very fascinating family, ma.”

She nodded, and tactfully stirred the conversation away from her family. “So, what do you have for me?”

They spent 30 minutes, discussing the benefits and disadvantages of the properties he had in mind, showing her pictures and offering professional advice. At the end of the time

she'd allotted herself for the meeting, she'd made her choice and asked for the paperwork to start immediately.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was so nice seeing everyone here again. They were the oldest of the Barigha children and always enjoyed the harmony they created despite the circumstances that brought them together. They remained together, successful and happy.

After much hugging and teasing and some name-calling, Samantha sat back and observed each sibling.

Theo, dressed in a navy-blue shirt and jeans, he gave off a carefree air, had gotten his degree in neurology and practiced in a number of specialist hospitals across three states in the United States.

Ben, the talented chef, he was always so serious. He only ever showed his jovial side when he was with his family. Sometimes, Samantha felt he needed to not be so careful.

Rebecca, always snooping for a story, she wore a black simple dress. Her dream had always been to find the story behind the story and put it out there. She had been digging into the George Barigha story for years but all the mothers were keeping mute about it. The assurance that she would not publish a story about the Barigha family didn't sway any of them. But she never gave up.

Julia, tourist agent and the people's person, wore a multicolored shirt with brown pants. She almost never wears makeup, says there was no need when she'd been wiping sweat off the face every few seconds.

Joseph or Joe as they all called him, was the introvert in the Barigha family. He spoke computer tech, and answered in cryptic monotones. She heard from Julia once that he might have hacked into their father's bank accounts to find out where exactly his monies were coming from. It was once rumored that George Barigha had room where he consulted other beings. Turned out that was just a rumor.

Beside Joe was Lesley, who was more of the opposite of everyone. He was never serious about anything. He missed graduation because he failed most of his courses. And he barely managed to finish because the people in this room refused to give their father the satisfaction to gloat at his mother. He was a professional nothing and leaved off each of his older siblings. But to Samantha, better them than their father. Lucas was the hardest

on him. Samantha thought if Lucas had not taken on the responsibility to always be there for her, he would have turned out exactly like Les.

Nicole was a writer, hated everybody, or at least, pretended to, and was the most private person among them. She was the most defiant and strong-headed of the family. Perhaps, her stubbornness could be attributed to her characters' ability to cross red taped off lines despite police order. She was a very private person and the closest friends she had still remained her siblings, whom she still tells should get off her back.

She wrote gruesome murder mysteries for a living. Samantha only managed to read one of her novels. Her scenes projections were so vivid you could feel the blade of the knife the killer was about to use to amputate or skin a victim. As a duty to her sister, Samantha finished that one novel with her room flooded with bright light. After which, she woke up from a very graphic dream where the killer was chasing her. Ever since that incident, she only purchased the novels and stocked them in her library to show her support for her sister's career.

There was Sonia, sweet baby Sonia, who was estranged from their father. She never wanted to return to Nigeria because of a fallout between her and George Barigha. She worked in New York as an editor at a publishing house. Sonia had once been very jovial up until the year she left for a scholarship in the United States and didn't come back ever since. Nicole spent more time with her than the rest of the family. She couldn't be here, again.

And there was Lucas, her older brother and best friend. They bonded from childhood and most times, she thought he missed a lot of boyhood because he had to always watch out for her. He wouldn't sneak out to go partying because she couldn't do the same. He would sneak into her room to console her when her mother locked her in her room. Lucas, her big brother and best friend.

When things got tough, the Barigha children pulled themselves together. Lucas took the seat at the head, being the oldest of the Barigha children. Stress lines marred his perfect looks. He'd worked very late into the night yesterday, and they missed spending the time together. Now, she could see the effect wearing him out.

He draped his jacket over his seat, allowing everyone to settle in before taking his seat.

“Good morning, everyone. I trust you all had uneventful flights.”

Though others responded with the necessary sounds and appropriate gestures, she raised her brows, gently inquiring about his tone of voice, he gave her a disarming smile, the one she knew worked for the ladies and also closed deals, one she knew all too well and was immune to.

“We are not your clients, Lucas. This is a family meeting.” She reminded him in a quiet voice.

“For the initial part of this meeting, this is a business meeting.” His cocky smile still in place.

“Stubborn Barigha.” She muttered under her breath.

“There is no need to run around in circles, I have in mind Ben's delicious meal he promised.”

That garnered positive responses from others. Ben stood up, gave them a bow before sitting back down.

“Stuff it, Ben. Nicole said. You're not the only one who can cook.”

“I'd say it's certainly better than some, ...” Rebecca said quietly and cleared her throat, leaving the rest of the sentence hanging, except, it wasn't quietly enough.

“What was that?” Nikki was off her chair.

“Much talk about food is making my stomach growl in hungry anticipation.” Theo put in, deflecting some anger from the room.

It took some effort to calm Nicole down when she got started.

Lucas stood up, “Now that we're all settled, I'd like to congratulate everyone for a successful year so far. Theo, congratulations on the completion of your internship in India.”

Theo acknowledged this with a slight inclination of his head.

Lucas nodded to Samantha.

“Thank you, Luc. Hello, everyone. Last year, we discussed starting a trust fund for our younger siblings. Lucas and I have put together some ideas and have opened the account already.” She passed the files on the table to Ben, who was closest to her, and he distributed them to the rest of the company.

“With the account up and running, we would like to inform everyone that donations can start coming in. Anyone who has any questions can get to me after the meeting and if you have any suggestions, we'd love to hear all about it during dinner tonight. Rebecca?”

Rebecca stood up. “I've been privileged to work on this special trust fund project with Lucas and Ms. Samantha. It's a project that can help each Barigha kid to make something of themselves like we did. So far, we have raised about 2.8million in naira, definitely a far



cry from what we have in mind. Now, the idea is for each person to give as they feel comfortable and not impose a mandatory amount.”

Someone made a suggestion and others chimed in. Lucas leaned towards her, “My stomach is more interested in what's been prepared for breakfast than what is going on in this meeting.”

She shot him a disbelieving look, “I believe you just relinquished your birthright.”

“Not to Ben's satisfaction.” He grinned, then focused his attention on others. “Anita Barigha will be graduating from the University of Wales in a few months. She's going to be the first to benefit from the trust fund project. She has been with me during her last holidays, getting to know the structure of the business world. For now, she hasn't decided what she's going to do, to get a job or start up something.”

Samantha was already thinking mentoring program for the kids, trainings, internship at select businesses, so much that could be done to help the younger kids grow up with plans of what they wanted to do.

Lucas raised his hand and everyone grew quiet. “Dad's birthday is almost here. You know, with that trust fund, we can always be prepared for events like this. We need to decide what we're going to do for him this year and who chairs this year's celebration. Venison must be prepared for him.”

“Lucas is being Biblical; I have hope yet.” Nikki rolled her eyes, adding a grin to show she was joking.

“Now, let's introduce the bride-to-be, Samantha.” He was clapping and trying to create a celebration mood, but turns out, he didn't need to.

Ben and Theo took to shouting and hooting, Rebecca and Julia cheering and Nikki, oh Nikki, said and everyone heard it,

“Thank you for saving the rest of us from the marriage talk. It was getting out of control.”

“Amen, sister.” The twins said simultaneously and laughed at their private joke.

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While others filed out, Samantha stayed behind with Lucas. She noticed how often he threw that killer-smile her way and knew it was but a ruse to curb a troubling thought. He'd grown up with the responsibility of always looking out for her. It had been a task teasing her which had never failed to put her in a better mood considering the woman who bore the title of a mother to her.

“You coming, Sam?” Ben asked from the door.

'I'll drive her.' Lucas replied with a half-smile. "It'll be a delight to work my charm on her during the drive."

"Watch out, Lucas. I hear that Mark Grinder is an arrogant fellow." Theo warned behind Ben. Both shared a look and quickly scrambled off seeing the one Samantha shot at their retreating backs.

She relished the moment of being alone with Lucas. It had been a long time since she'd spent a moment alone with him; with him being so busy and her being far away. She'd missed him a lot without realizing they'd rarely been in communication for the past few months.

She sighed and gave him a small smile, seeing that his gaze was on her, watching, checking to see for any sign of stress or abnormality. That was Lucas. He always looked out for her. Something her mother had forced him into because of how she always gave her daughter a tough time.

'Sit down, Lucas.' She said, then, winced. "Sorry."

His eyes danced in merry amusement. "You don't have to apologize, Sassy. You know I like that side of you."

Samantha squirmed in her seat. He'd ever only called her that when he found her amusing. He'd often told her she was born sassy despite her mother's desperation to kill whatever willpower in her.

Sitting close, he took her hands. "How have you been, Sammy? I've missed you an awful lot."

She felt like weeping. She'd missed her best friend too. More than she'd let on. Whenever her mother was acting up, he always charged to her rescue. Once, as a twelve-year-old, he'd yelled at her mother, calling her mean and wicked. His mother had reprimanded him, of course for disrespecting an elder but later, she'd praised him for trying to protect his sister. That day, Victoria had prepared spicy moi-moi for them with ice cream. That had been one of her favorite childhood memories.

Lucas brushed the tear from her face. She hadn't realized her memories were bringing such liquid to get eyes.

They may share different mothers but being the two oldest of the Barigha children, they had always stuck by each other. She had helped him sneak out of the house to attend a party. Maybe, their relationship stemmed from being the first two kids before the extension became a norm. And even when other kids began to arrive, they'd remained the closest of siblings and friends. It only meant she had to share him half the time with the others.

“I'm fine, Lucas.” She wiped her face dry. “See? I'm perfectly fine.” But the attempt to lighten the mood failed.

“I hear she still bullies you.” He sounded angry. “I wish you'd move here where I can keep an eye on you.” Oh, how she'd missed him!

She did smile. “That would be nice.”

Something was bothering him. Having grown up with him, she'd learned to discern his mood swings. But she wouldn't push, praying that he'd tell her at his convenience.

“I got a place for my extension office here.” She injected more enthusiasm into her voice, hoping to draw him out of his melancholy. “The paperwork will be concluded by Monday.”

That brightened his mood like she'd hoped. “That's wonderful, Sam. Uyo is a booming place for business. Why didn't you tell me you were looking?”

The reproach was apparent, but she was used to handling Barigha men. “And miss the show of watching your cute face glow? No way!”

He pinched her nose playfully. “I'm glad. That means you can move here.”

“And chase away all the women in your life, really? They would not forgive me in this lifetime.”

He laughed. She was glad to see they were back to their easy bantering. “This Mark Grinder seems to have put you forth, Sassy.”

Laughing, she let her mind wander a bit. She'd avoided thinking of him all day. Okay, only for some part of the meeting. Yes, he'd made her feel like herself- someone she was only around Lucas. He'd also brought out her toughness. A small smile touched her lips, remembering the events that led to his proposal. Yeah, Mark Grinder had been made for her.

“Fond memories he gives you. I hope they won't interfere with my memories.”

She scoffed. “Fond memories, you? Yeah, right.”

He looked pained, she had to laugh. She'd really missed him. It was so easy being around him. He always inspired it.

Watching him closely, she closed her hand over his on the table. His eyes flickered down only briefly and averted his gaze, avoiding her.

“I'm fine, Sam.”

It was a lame line. He didn't look fine. She'd let the meeting and the presence of others keep her from jumping him for answers. He looked tired, stressed. But that might just be a cover for what was really wrong with him. She knew him too well.

“Obviously, you're fine, Lucas. I'm also allowed to worry about you, you know. You don't get to do the caring all the time.”

He glanced at her hand still covering his. “Why don't you move down here, Sam?”

She squeezed his hand. If he wanted to avoid the conversation, she wouldn't push him. He would talk to her when he was ready. “I'm getting married, Lucas. I can't just pack up and move.”

This time, he looked at her. She almost cried out from the pain etched in his face.

“Last year, it was ‘I'll consider it,’ now, you're getting married. I want you here where I can assure myself that you're safe.” He gripped her hands so tight they hurt.

She didn't mean to be inconsiderate. She wanted to move closer to him more than anything, but she just couldn't. Neither could she spend the rest of her life hiding from her mother. Her mother never had anything kind to say to her or about her, but she'd stay and deal with it on her own terms. She couldn't let Lucas dash to the rescue all the time. What if he was married? Would she call him in the middle of the night to fly to Abuja to rescue her yet again?

“I'm sorry, Lucas.”

He let go of her hands abruptly. “You certainly like having her hurt you.”

The frown that came to her face was swift. “Have you been watching me again, Lucas?”

“You give me more to worry about than the twins in their teens. So, yeah, I've been watching you. And before you ask, yes, I had him investigated. Thoroughly. That's because I don't want to see you get hurt by one more person again. So, go ahead and be sassy.”

He was pacing, his hands jammed angrily into his pockets and looked mighty angry. Suddenly, she wasn't angry at him anymore. She got up and hugged him. It took a minute before he was clutching her tight, making her breath come out in forced puffs, but she didn't care. He cared. That was what matters.

He pulled her away gently, looking into her eyes, her smiling eyes.

“Thank you, Lucas. For caring.”

He looked at her, uncertain of her response. 'What has the Grinder guy done to you?'

Pulling free of the embrace, she laughed. "He's simply been too nice to me." Then her face fell. Simply too nice. She thought of the secret she was keeping from him. She couldn't find the right time to tell him yet.

Lucas pushed her back into her seat. "Too nice' is making you overthink, Sam."

It felt wrong keeping Mark in the dark. So wrong. He's been nothing but honest with her. "He doesn't know who Father is. Father sent Uncle John to represent him for my introduction. I wasn't surprised, and honestly, I didn't expect him to show up. I wonder what business would keep him from my wedding."

Lucas considered his response. "This Mark Grinder fellow loves you, and that much I can assure you that. I don't think it would be change how he feels about you when he finds out about Father."

She already knew that. It's finding the right words and time to tell him that keeps her. And a small nagging fear that he might run the opposite direction once he finds out about her father.

"Is there something you're leaving out?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "It's just that, the second time we met, I sort of proposed to him."

It was hopeless to talk to Lucas about something like this. When she'd been expecting a solution to her dilemma, he was laughing at her predicament instead. Then, she had to admit it wasn't a thing one should tell one's brother, especially overprotective one like Lucas.

"You need to stop keeping company with that overly-bold friend of yours." He finally said when he'd composed himself enough.

He'd told her often to end her friendship with Gracie. "We're no longer friends, Gracie and I. At least at the moment. Anyway, she bribed Mark to ask me out after I'd done my own mess and had him despise me already."

Lucas looked at her with a serious expression. "And you agreed to marry him?"

"Actually, ..." And she launched into the full description of what had happened. By the time she was done, Lucas was laughing so hard and loud that his assistant was peering into the conference room to see what was happening. Samantha frowned. This was not the response she'd expected. A reprimand, maybe. Advice, definitely. But not him laughing at her. Perhaps, they'd grown apart that she no longer knew what his response to such tale would be.

When he'd gotten some semblance of control, he took her hand. "Oh, Sammy, I knew you had it in you. I'm just sorry I missed all that drama." He shook his head, "If I were Mark Grinder, I'd lock you up so that I have you all to myself."

"And scare off all your women? No way. God knows I have my hands full with you as my brother."

He looked at her intently. "You should tell him, Sam. He loves you. It's obvious. He's a nice guy who holds family dearly. Maybe you aren't giving him enough credit."

She thought about it. Maybe she wasn't giving them enough credit.

Mark was a good guy. If nothing else, she owed him this much.

"Alright, get up." Lucas said, dragging her to her feet. "I don't want Theo to finish all that food Ben and his assistant are going to lay out for us."

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Mark was grinning like he'd slept with a hanger in his mouth. He couldn't help it. Today, he was marrying a remarkable lady who was way out his league but was marrying him for who he was and not what was in his bank account. Not that she told him she loved him but if her subtle looks thrown at him were any indication, she was just as in love with him as he was with her.

Senator ThankGod poked his head into the room. Another miracle; the senator and Chief Judge had come through for him by supporting him financially. The bill her family threw at him. Phew. At least he'd gotten everything her family requested for the traditional wedding, which was going to take place immediately after the church wedding. They'd assured him he was fine if the family had any new demands.

"How are you, Mark?"

Unsure of how to answer that, seeing he was so nervous, Mark turned to his younger brother, who was also his Best man, signaling him to stop with the cravat, his eyes falling on Morris who was uncomfortably fussing with his own tie with a deep-creased frown of concentration.

He allowed a smile before facing the senator, "I feel like a schoolboy who just landed a date with the hottest senior girl."

Mr. Morris chuckled, which caused the senator to glance his way for the first time.

"Please, allow me to introduce you to my best friend, Mr. Morris. Morris, this is Senator ThankGod. He's like an uncle to me."

While both men shook hands, the senator made a humph. "I am not that old."

Morris considered the other man and nodded as though the matter was graver although Mark could see he was holding back the urge to laugh.

“Don't worry, Mark.” The Senator said. “I'm here for you. So is the chief judge. Just concentrate on the I do and we'll take care of the rest.”

Mark hoped so. Her family had been most adamant during the negotiation of the bride price. He only hoped they didn't make any further demands. Samantha had assured him that her family wouldn't make ridiculous requests, he couldn't help but wonder at his soon-to-be mother-in-law and whatever demands she might make. And the father-in-law he's yet to meet was another case he was fretting over. He had no idea what to expect from her family.

Of course, he'd rejected all her offers to help financially in the responsibilities due him. He knew she wouldn't let it be until they reached an agreement; he'd agreed to let her pay part of the souvenirs. That and agreeing to her mother's insisting that she and their relatives' take care of the food. And the number of relatives she has! It was a freakish episode of Lost, except, these people weren't lost. They were simply too many that have been by his house the last couple of days.

The senator didn't stay long. He left after ensuring there was no problem with the groom's tux. Almost immediately the door closed behind him, it opened again to admit Carol, his former neighbor, who looked like she'd seen a ghost and had it chasing on her heels.

He raised his brow fractionally and intuitively excused his brother and Morris from the lounge. With the way she was breathing, he figured she'd been running.

“Did you know?” She asked accusingly.

He sat down and indicated she sits next to him. She did, but reluctantly.

“Did you know who she was?”

“I'm assuming the ‘she’ would be Samantha, so, yes, I know who she is.” Emphasizing the ‘is’.

She shook her head. I don't think you get my meaning. “Did you know Samantha Barigha is one of the daughters of George Barigha, the richest Black man in the world?”

He was quiet, unsure what to say. He wondered where Carol's imagination was going to this time. Shrugging, he got up and poured himself a drink from the decanter.

“Mark, you didn't know.” She sounded sympathetic as she stood up. And you don't believe me. She shook her head slightly as she heard footsteps outside. Maybe you should step out of this room and see for yourself. The entire household of George Barigha is

here, plus friends of his in high places. And if that's not enough, step outside to the parking lot and see him with his entourage.

She sounded so sure. Carol was never wrong. She tended to be too obsessed with George Barigha and his affairs. But what she just told him couldn't possibly be true. She was obviously overwhelmed by the sheer size of relations one could have. He knew it couldn't be true. It was true her father had been too busy to attend his own daughters traditional wedding and had sent representatives. And one could have a lot of distant relatives who lived in such proximity, isn't it?

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Carol leave the room.

It occurred to him that he'd never actually checked with Samantha about who George Barigha was in her life. And she'd never volunteered that information either. Was that the foundation they were going to lay for their marriage; lies and lack of trust? Could such a union last? Even if it could, did she love him enough?

The fear he felt was so sudden. She'd never told him she loved him. What if she was just settling because of her mother? What if this was all a marriage of convenience for her? Twice, she'd tried to get him into a contract marriage. It was his pride that made him to change her terms and present his. But she'd disagreed. She wanted it only on her own terms. Could she be just like the man who'd set him up to fall in love with her?

A sick feeling curled his gut, his stomach muscles dragged into themselves. She was attracted to him. He was man enough to recognize that. But she didn't love him. All she wanted was the union. If he thought she felt for him half the love he had for her, he wouldn't think twice about marrying her. But she didn't.

She had a very strong work ethic. She loved challenges and helping people. He knew what made her smile, the strength, and courage. What he didn't know was how the media saw her. Should he find out? What would he find? What was the harm, he asked himself? Crossing to the dresser, he picked up his phone and googled Barr. Samantha Barigha.

The first option that popped up was, Success follows success- Barrister Samantha Barigha takes after her father, George Barigha. Scrolling down, he found more articles with related stories. One in particular caught his attention Is Barrister Samantha Barigha truly George Barigha's daughter? Clicking on it, the full article appeared on the screen, with pictures of Samantha and George Barigha. The frown, which was just starting, deepened.

There were lots more. Samantha Barigha had 31 siblings and 10 stepmothers. She was the first daughter and second child of George Barigha. There were pictures of her with one very handsome guy smiling at her across the table in a restaurant. That image he found very disturbing because she was laughing and had a radiant, peaceful look about her. It was a scene too cozy for him to continue looking at, then he glanced at the bottom of the



photo and saw the write-up; SAMANTHA AND LUCAS BARIGHA. That brought down his hackles but the uneasy feeling of betrayal was beginning to gnaw at him, a tight knot around his neck.

Mark found more articles and pictures with several others, older and young alike. He saw photos of her with her sister, Rita. Suddenly, he felt like the life had drained from him.

All the people at the Villa, the 'mothers' as they asked him to call them, they'd all been mothers truly. They were the other ten wives. He'd met almost the entire family of a great man. But the woman he was about to marry didn't think he should have that information.

That day when he'd received the verdict to marry her, he hadn't thought of the man beyond a regular rich and powerful man who was capable of carrying out his threat. Today, right now, it finally dawned on him just how hopeless his dream of marrying the man's daughter was. He had been nothing but a pawn in the game of the rich. A game he no longer wished to be a part of.

Somehow, he found his way back to the couch and slumped on it, looking and feeling dazed, the phone suspended in his suddenly boneless hand.

"I thought you knew." He heard Goodluck say.

Mark didn't look up. He didn't know how long his brother had been standing there, but he didn't care. He was feeling a gut-clenching tightness in his chest over the betrayal and lack of trust and felt a strong urge to throw up.

"Deborah looked her up and told me." Jonathan continued quietly. "I didn't believe her so, I looked it up myself. We thought you knew. And we never talked about it with you because we know you're too honorable to do otherwise but love her genuinely."

There was a light knock at the door before it opened slightly. "It's time, Mr. Grinder."

Mark didn't reply. It was Jonathan who did. "We'll be out in a minute." The door closed softly.

Mark let the phone drop on the couch and began loosening his tie, much to Jonathan's chagrin.

"Brother, what are you doing?" A perplexed Goodluck asked.

Mark didn't answer but simply tossed aside the tie and undid the top button of his shirt, then another, rolled up his sleeves and started pacing. Jonathan watched him and went to answer the door when he heard a knock. There was a brief conversation but the only thing mark heard was, "We'll be out in just a second."

Just a second indeed, Mark snickered. He was going nowhere. He was done with rich people always thinking they owned his life and continued to play ping-pong with it. He didn't care if they came at him with the DSS, he wouldn't bulge.

"I'm not going out, Jonathan. You best tell them the wedding is off."

Nervous now, he watched as Jonathan imitate him by loosening his sleeve buttons, rolling them up and loosening the top buttons of his shirt, joining him to pace. He almost laughed at the scene. Almost.

"What are you doing?" he asked his younger brother.

Jonathan paused with a frown, "You go ahead and think of what to do to your almost-bride and I'll think of how to tell Mama you've changed your mind."

Mark almost swore, then remembered he was in a church. He'd forgotten the excitement on his mother's face when he'd introduced Samantha to her. The two have been inseparable since the traditional wedding. This news wouldn't bode well with her health. And then, there was Mrs. Aisha Barigha. She would definitely try to ruin his life for dashing her hopes at finally seeing her daughter get married. Either the mother or father would kill him.

But he didn't care. This was between him and Samantha, and she definitely had some explaining to do. She lied to him, pure and simple. He wasn't just going to shrug it off like it didn't matter.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"I'm jealous." Julia clapped her hands dramatically.

"Aren't you always!" Rebecca teased her twin which had all the ladies laughing.

Samantha felt like the only woman in the universe. This was her day. Nothing could go wrong. The veil was pinned to her hair, flowing several yards longer than her dress, diamond sparkling off the bodice of her dress. It was the perfect dress and one of the few things shed allowed her father to pay for. It cost millions and all of her protests were swept under the gutter.

"I'm really glad you're all here. Thanks for coming." Samantha told her sisters who were also her bridesmaids.

Sonia, one of her sisters, who married a white man a few years ago and had not set foot back into Nigeria ever since was her chief bridesmaid, not an easy feat since Nicole had vied for that position since they were little. Samantha and Sonia were closer in age than the rest of the Barigha female children.

She had twelve little brides. That was accomplished because she couldn't say no to all of her cute little sisters. Her ten step mothers were happy with the group they formed, all her brothers were present. All the little ones had important roles to please them, and she finally got her mother what she'd been hounding her for; a big wedding. She had no idea her mother leaked the secret of the wedding to the press. She could only imagine what Mark would say when he found out it was not the small wedding ceremony that they planned for that her mother gave them.

"I'm going to remind myself that you're my sister and not steal you away."

The ladies turned as they saw the brothers enter the lounge. The ladies gave them a disapproving look which the guys defused with teasing remarks about the scene the ladies presented.

"Spying on the ladies, are you?" Sonia accused.

"But I only have one in mind to steal." Theo replied with a smile.

Samantha had the sudden urge to blush. Thank God for her skin color. He was her brother, yet he made her feel like she was the only woman in the room. All Barigha men had that effect of ladies.

He remained at the door as Lucas pushed through the throng of ladies trying to stand between him and her. He was like a giant as he strode purposefully towards her. Taking her hand gently into his, she felt the slight weight of the gift bag, but he didn't let go as he looked down, trying to pull himself together. She reached out her free hand and softly touched his face. Finally, he looked at her, and she could see him struggling to rein in his emotions.

"If not that I had him checked out, I wouldn't be allowing you to marry him today."

"Please, don't let her mother hear you say that." Someone said and had everyone chuckling.

For no reason would she allow thoughts of her mother spoil her mood today. She refused to allow that. Blinking to avoid the slight moisture beginning to form in her eyes, she asked him, "Will you cry?"

He shook his head even though she could see the struggle not to shed tears.

She smiled weakly. Stubborn Barigha men. "I won't either."

He pulled her into an emotional hug. "That's my Sassy."

The scene was so touching it had their siblings blinking back tears and making gooey sounds.

When he finally let go, he gave her a smile. "You are no doubt the most beautiful bride in the world." Touching her face.

He was gone before she could form a coherent reply, with Theo closing the door behind them.

She missed him already. Her only prayer was that nothing would change between them now that she had a new man in her life. All the adventures she had with Lucas were the best things that happened to her as a child. He was always available to make her laugh. His mother even treated her better than her biological mother.

Opening the bag, she pulled out a framed picture. What she saw brought tears to her eyes. A single tear slid down her cheek as everyone rushed to catch a glimpse of the photo. Hoots of laughter filled the room as each lady clutched their stomach to avoid aches. It was a photo of her and Lucas on her eleventh birthday. Her mother had been acting up again and, in an effort to cheer her up, Lucas had taken her to his mother's house, deciding to teach her to make pancakes. The result had been a disaster as they'd both not known how to do it.

Instead, they turned his mother's kitchen into a resounding mess. He was just three years older than her and his mother had been none too pleased with it.

Ordering them to remain there covered in flour and egg and whatever else they'd decided a pancake needed, she left, returning a few seconds later with a camera. With shock on his face and total embarrassment on hers, his mother had captured their expressions perfectly.

Her siblings' laughter brought a smile to her face. That story was still being told to the younger Barigha generation about the exploits of Lucas and Samantha. Of all the days to make her want to cry, it had to be her wedding day!

Then she remembered Mark. She had so much to tell him. She had come to know a lot about him, but she'd been keeping a major part of herself back. By not telling him who her father was, it felt as though a major secret was between them.

"Don't do that." Rebecca chastised.

Samantha shook off the saddening thoughts and pasted back the smile on her face. Anyway, she'd decided to tell him today immediately the vows were said. Before he turned around and saw George Barigha himself.

If only it didn't have to be this way.

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“Be reasonable, Mark.” The Senator said. 'It was only an omission surely. It's no cause for you to throw it all away.'

Mark gave a bitter laugh. “She lied to me. No, she didn't lie. She deceived me.”

“How would you have felt if you'd known? Bolstered?” The older man asked.

It was true that would have changed everything. He probably would not have proposed in the first place. How could he have had the boldness to propose marriage to George Barigha's daughter? But that wasn't the case here. She lied to him. How was he supposed to get past that?

“People are waiting, Mark. They're getting anxious about your lateness. What's your decision?”

He couldn't do it. He couldn't summon the courage to go through with it. This was like one giant sick game. There was no way he would go through with it.

Not wanting to see the horrified look on the senators face, he turned his back and made his decision. “It's off, Senator.”

“Pride and arrogance are a big fall for a man, Mark.” He paused, then sighed when Mark didn't say anything. “Very well.”

Mark was acutely aware of the chilly fear that went up his spine when he heard the door close behind the senator. It wasn't pride. Neither was he being arrogant. For the fifth time since he met her, Samantha had managed to make him feel how beneath her his social status was. And in a very hurting manner.

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The knock on the door interrupted the feminine chatter as a few seconds later, the door opened to admit Pastor Prince, her pastor and also the officiating minister of the wedding ceremony.

The ladies each greeted him. He responded with that famous smile he was known for that had brought quite a number to church and back again. Especially female. Thank God he was already married. The applications would have been endless.

“Pastor, Sir.” Samantha gave a slight curtsied.

She watched her sisters leave the room, then sat down. She wondered what could have brought him to see her. Especially when he chose to stand.

“You look absolutely glorious, Samantha.” He said.

“Thank you, Sir.”

He looked around but still didn't sit. “The groom has refused to come out.”

Her blood grew cold.

“What's going on, Samantha?”

Not sure if she could remain standing, she was glad to be sitting down. “Nothing I know of, sir.”

The Pastor sat down beside her. “He was due to come out over 20 minutes ago. He's not seeing anyone either. Is there something I need to know?”

She heard the gentle note of concern in his voice. Yet, she couldn't think of a single reason for Marks behavior save for nerves. She knew him enough that if it was nerves, he would have called her already. They'd gone past hiding things from each other. Hadn't they?

“I'll go check on him.” She said with the nibbling fear that it might be worse than jitters. She got up, picking what she could of her dress, she could feel her Pastors gaze on her.

“Samantha,” He called when she got to the door.

She turned.

“Wisdom. And patience. You need these two.”

She nodded, remembering that the same words had been ringing in her mind for the past few days.

Her sisters looked anxiously at her when she moved past them, heading for the groom's lounge, rushing after her to gather the dress and veil. She didn't pause or stop until she reached his door and saw Jonathan mounting guard at the door. His shirt was casually folded at the sleeves, and he gave her a worried look when he saw her. That wasn't the look of the Best man. She chose to ignore that minor detail. Mark would better answer her questions anyway. Opening the door, Jonathan let her in.

Mark was drinking. The decanter was almost empty, and he was dressed just as casual as his brother. Her heart lurched. Mark wasn't an alcohol person.

“Mark?”

He turned to face her with a crooked smile on his face. “Just the person I want to see.”

He wasn't drunk, she told herself. But he was close. She went to him and tried to pry the half-empty glass away from him. He lifted it above his head, out of her reach.

"Mark, stop drinking." She pleaded.

He laughed, a harsh piercing sound that had her taking a step backward. This was not the person she knew. And loved.

She sighed and tried again. "Mark, you need to stop drinking. The wedding is about to start. Everyone is waiting for you."

He stepped away from her and his expression became serious. "Didn't you hear? The wedding is off."

Her blood stopped circulating, and she felt for a second, she felt the floor tilt a little. She grabbed onto the table for support. Mark was obviously drunk. He didn't mean it. It was probably a joke. One she didn't like.

"I told the Senator to announce its been called off. I believe you have to start sending apology notes to everyone who bothered."

Samantha needed to sit down but the sofa seemed like miles away. Instead, she held onto the table like a lifeline. That was when she heard that laughter again.

Was the dress too tight? It was cutting off her air supply. She felt the need to be rid of the dress to get her respiratory organs back to life. He was pouring himself another drink. What exactly was going on? What could have happened? They'd spoken on the phone just that morning.

Pulling herself together, she watched him take a swig, emptying the glass in a single swallow and willed herself not to react to the ache she felt. "I'm listening, Mark."

"Good." He put down the empty glass and turned to face her. "Would you like to sit down?" He asked politely and when she shook her head, he continued. "I've lived my entire life priding myself to be an honest person. Maybe I was a fool because I lied to you and almost lost you as a result. Then, I summoned the courage to propose to you and you said 'yes'."

She was quiet as a hunting lion, wondering where he was headed with this.

"I wondered, what did she see in me?" He gave a bitter laugh. "I thought I was the luckiest guy on earth. What a fool I made of myself."

When he didn't continue, she prompted. "I'm trying to catch up, Mark."

He gave her a sardonic smile. "Tell me, Samantha, how good a laugh did you get from it all?"

Her inside was shaking but outwardly, she maintained a calm that a monk would envy. "I'm still not following, Mark. Why don't you outright say what's on your mind?"

He nodded. "Who is George Barigha to you?"

Her heart thudded in her chest. He knew. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "My father."

His lips curved. It figures. "I'm done, Samantha. All of it."

She refused to allow emotions get in the way. "You don't want to marry me anymore," It was a statement.

"Exactly."

"... because I'm George Barigha's daughter."

He didn't reply but the look he directed was nothing she'd ever seen on him.

"Very well, Mark. I accept. I made a mistake not telling you who my father was. What would you have done if I'd told you before?"

He looked right into her eyes. "Left you alone."

She had prepared for his answer but it sounded so cold the way he said it. "Why?"

"Because I've had enough of rich people meddling in my personal life."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"I'm sure you don't." He smirked.

This was not the person she knew who always had a smile on the go. This was a heartless, unfeeling man who was deliberately trying to hurt her.

"So, I didn't tell you. That means I lied?"

"You did."

And he was staring at her, unflinching. "And my sorry is not enough?"

"I haven't heard it yet, but no."

He was putting up a wall, one greater than that of China. "I'm sorry, Mark. I'm truly sorry."

He gave a mirthless laugh. "I thought you were different; we were different." His voice rose an octave. "We were together for over a year. It didn't occur to you that I should know that."



She swallowed. "You're right. I should have told you."

"You had plenty opportunities to do that."

"And I didn't." She took a breath to calm herself, "I'm sorry, Mark. It wasn't that I didn't want you to know,"

"You were afraid you'd wake up one morning and find Id emptied your bank accounts."

"That's not fair." It hurt, his accusation.

He pointed a finger at her. "You should live in my world to know what that means."

He picked up his phone, shoved it into his pocket and left the room. She rushed after him into the hallway where her sisters were huddled together with worried expressions.

"Mark," She called, unable to run in the heavy dress. "You're being unfair to me."

He stopped and turned, which afforded her enough time to walk up to him.

"No, Samantha. You've been unfair to me. Maybe I deserved what happened when I lied to you but I don't deserve this. I thought we've gone past lying to each other."

"Stop being unreasonable, Mark. You're marrying me, not my father."

Her brothers appeared behind him, their gazes flickering between them.

"No, Samantha, there's no marrying going on anymore."

Her brothers looked ready to box him. She shot them a look. "You lay a finger on him and you answer to me." She gave each of her brothers a deadly look, which made them to step back, away from Mark. "Go on, Mark. Why don't you spurt out everything in your bowels? I'm sure that's not the only reason you want out." Her own temper was beginning to rise.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He retrieved it, checked the caller ID and passed it over to Jonathan. "From the moment I saw you, I knew it was trouble talking to you. But you were in the way and the truck driver was getting more and more agitated, so I had to talk to you."

"I can only imagine how disgusted you felt talking to me." The retort was not what shed intended but once it was out, she saw the heat that flashed in his eyes.

"Don't tempt me, Samantha."

"What would you do, Mark Grinder?" Taking a tentative step towards him.

His eyes narrowed and grew a shade darker; she literally felt the heat pulsing between them. "I mean it, Samantha." Watching her progress towards him.

“You're a coward, Mark. You run off at the first sign of trouble.”

“And you're the one always causing the troubles.”

“And if I tell you I love you?” Her voice was very low, for his ears only.

His smile was a smirk and at the same time, seductive. “Then, I wouldn't be the only one to use that line to get what I want. But you know what, you've never told me that before. I just assumed you did.”

Back straight, something in his eyes made her suspicious, and she voiced it out loud.

“You can't say you didn't guess who my father was after all this time. You're too smart not to have discovered at some point.”

He turned his head away, and she recognized it as guilt. “You knew who I was, didn't you?”

He swallowed but managed to face her. “Maybe I did. But you didn't want me to find out, did you? Did you think it would change the way I feel about you?”

A kind of relief went through her body. But it wasn't over. Mark was still very upset and it was her fault she didn't trust him enough to have told him the truth.

He turned from her and totally ignoring her brothers surrounding him, cut through without acknowledging any of them.

“You arrogant Grinder.” She shouted, not caring as tears began to form in her eyes. “I love you, Mark. You turn back right now and let me have my say.”

He turned and appeared unconcerned at the murderous looks her brothers sent him. She wiped off the tears that slid down her cheek.

“You are such an arrogant man, Grinder, always thinking you can have the last say and walk away. Well, you listen to me.” Poking him.

“I am a well-respected woman whether George Barigha is my father or not. I did not build my career because I had a father in high places. I got to where I am because I worked hard and didn't want the world to think I was in my father's pocket. You did not fall in love with George Barigha's daughter. You fell in love with me.” She said, thumping hard at his chest.

He grabbed her hands before they did any major damage to him. “I'm not sure which of them fell for me.”

She tilted her head to look at him. She saw the emotions quickly masked, how he struggled not to show it. What happened to them? They used to be best of friends at

communication. What could have possibly gone wrong? See what spectacle they were making in front of their siblings. And on their supposed wedding day.

“I'm sorry for not telling you about George Barigha. He's not as important in my life as you think. He meets each of his children once a year and it's only to find out if we're still being successful.”

The fight went out of her. She felt limp and if not for his firm hold on her hands, she would be poodle on the floor. “I wanted you to like me for me and not for who my father was. I've been through that line too many times and I just wanted a change. I won't apologize if who I am is not what you want.” She pulled helplessly to free her hands, but he didn't let go.

He gazed at her with a hooded expression. She didn't have the strength for this anymore.

“You can go, Mark. I'll take care of the guests. They will understand the change of plans.”

The pain in her heart was too much to bear. Her chest constricted; it nearly undid her. She really needed Lucas right now. She didn't know anyone could possibly cause her more pain than her mother had. But she was wrong. Mark Grinder could. How did everything become so horribly wrong?

“You call me arrogant when you're so stubborn. I ought to teach you a lesson some time.”

She didn't think she could afford another fight at the moment, too exhausted as she was.

“I'm tired of fighting you, Mark. Please, let me go, so I can send the people home in time.”

He tilted her chin to face him. His expression was unreadable. “I wonder what to do with you. You're not an easy person to fight with.”

Closing the gap between them, he lightly touched her lips with his. Her heart stopped beating for several milliseconds, then lurched when his mouth came back on hers, not in the gentle touch like before but demanding they yield to his onslaught, to open for him. Her body melded into his and amid the layers of clothing, she felt the hardness of his chest, the strong muscles of his hands enclosed around her. She didn't know where his breathing ended and hers started. It was like a roller coaster that kept her teetering on the edge of the unexpected.

As insistent as his mouth on hers, her arms wound round his neck, drawing him in, wanting to get closer. A slight nip on her lips had her gasping, she only felt his smile before he plunged deep into the recesses of her mouth, molding his tongue to hers in a dance as old as time. Small tremors raced through her, and she felt dazed, allowing him to batter her with the sweet rhythm of tongue and lips. She felt tingly all over and had a moment of disappointment when he pulled back with a smile and light in his eyes.

“Barrister Samantha, I wonder what to do with you.” He said, then lightly touched her lips with his thumb, which felt ravaged and slightly swollen. It was a heady feeling when he gazed into her eyes. She felt that everything would be fine. They were fine. Yet she trembled at what else she saw there. His eyes held promise.

“I love you, Samantha. I'll always love you. George Barigha isn't going to change that. You'd better get used to it.” He touched her cheek, “By the way, have I told you how ravishing you look?”

Stupefied, and too stunned to say anything, she shook her head.

His smile was just as ravishing as he leaned in and whispered something in her ear. Her eyes grew round, and she swung to look at him. Oh, God! She thought. The heat started from her toes straight to the root of her hair. And he was still smiling that smile!

Out loud, he said, “Why don't you go put yourself back in order. I have in mind to kiss you again without your family shooting daggers at me.”

She felt her sisters pull her away as they led her back to her lounge. At the door, she turned and saw his eyes were still on her and whatever nibbling doubt that was left after their argument disappeared. She had no idea what had just happened. But she felt elated.

## EPILOGUE

WHEN MARK entered his own lounge, his brother already had his tuxedo ready. As Goodluck helped him into his jacket, he saw Samantha's brothers enter after a brief knock. He'd expected it but not for the impact of actually looking at them. There were five of them.

Each looked like a famous Hollywood star. And the one in front, obviously the oldest, he remembered was the one in the picture with Samantha. He stepped forward.

“Mark Grinder,” Lucas greeted, extending his hand. Mark shook it. “Lucas Barigha. Thank you for not shaming her today.” The others behind nodded their assent.

While Goodluck fixed him up, Mark took the time to study the five brothers of his bride-to-be. How close he'd come to losing her again. He needed to be more careful.

“Since you're the one more eager to clobber me, I'm assuming you're the one who had me followed.”

Lucas lips curved in a smile, a very beautiful one at that. "I should have known she wasn't settling for your good looks only." He said with pride.

"I'd say it goes both ways."

Lucas silently requested permission to help him with his outfit his brother stepped aside. They were silent for a few minutes as Lucas righted the cravat. He could get used to having male company his own age. And an extended family to add spice.

"Be good to her." Lucas said, stepping back when he finished.

Better, he thought. He'd value what precious gift he'd got and make it better for her each day. His hope was that the father would stop meddling in her affair now.

"He doesn't really care about our personal lives, just the business aspect." Lucas said, correctly discerning his thoughts.

He hoped so. "I'd really appreciate that."

All five males were gorgeously sculptured, and he was glad his sister wasn't there because he wondered who would be holding him from killing all five males. Each had a distinct persona that reverberated through the room like ripples of awareness. All five males. Especially the one that was directly behind Lucas, who introduced himself as Theo. There was Joe, Ben, and Lesley. He'd get to know them all because they were going to be family soon.

"Ready?" Lucas asked.

Mark took in a shaky breath and nodded. Despite what had happened, they treated him like family. He was glad that they were with him. With his brother as nervous as he, he wondered how they would have managed it. Their presence was enough reassurance.

He acknowledged his own guilt also, knowing that what he kept from her and his accusations could threaten what they'd built together. He couldn't deny that if Gracie had not approached him with that proposal, he probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to know and love the woman Samantha was. And for that, he would always be grateful to Gracie. She was always a catalyst to their journey and he would have to pay her for the favor, even though her means may not have been credible.

When George Barigha had two men escort him from the bus station only days after he first met her, he had a moment's panic before he was categorically asked to marry Samantha not long after.

The anger that came to him was quick, and he'd lashed out, feeling sorry for her at the numerous people who'd go to any length to pair her off on the most available prospect.

George Barigha had made him an offer. He'd negotiated. And they'd come to an agreement.

But he couldn't tell her the sacrifice he made to have her. He would have to give up practicing law but could continue to work as a desk officer, at least with the option of moving to another department and the hope of promotion every so often. Or starting up a different kind of business for himself.

He remembered part of their last conversation, one aspect that had stayed with him all this time:

*"Why me? Why did you choose me?" He wanted to know.*

*"You're the first one she has shown interest in, ever."* George had told him.

And he believed it.

That was the day her brother, Ben had seen him leave George Barigha's office, and he was pretty sure he'd heard enough of their argument that day.

His eyes lifted and met Ben's, who gave him a knowing smirk, like he also remembered that day, his eyes communicating sympathy and understanding. He felt gratitude that Ben had kept mute about it. But Mark hoped he wouldn't eventually tell his sister.

He took in a deep breath. There was no going back. Despite what George Barigha might think, he was marrying Samantha because he truly loved her and could not imagine a life without her. He only hoped that her father kept his own end of the bargain.

Flanking him on either side, her brothers escorted him out of the room. No matter what happened hereafter, he would spend each day proving his love for Samantha Barigha Grinder, whether there was a George Barigha in the picture or not.

THE END.

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