

Materialism meets love on a one-way street

camaa pearl

BOTTOM BELLE

A FORBIDDEN, INTERRACIAL LAGOS LOVIN' NOVEL



BOTTOM BELLE

A Lagos Lovin' Novel

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TITLES BY CAMAA PEARL

Lagos Lovin' Novels

Gaga Crazy (Zoya & Manir)
Bottom Belle (Chiluba & George)
Goody Bag (Zena & Lékan)

All of Me Trilogy

Every Step I Take (Fifi, Book 1)
*Every Move I Make (Summer 2024)
*Every Breathe I Take (Winter 2024)

Yoruba Demons Billionaire Club

*The Complete Guide to Becoming a F*ck Boy (Summer 2024)

Standalones

Escape (Lola & Onahi)
Call Me Jemila (Jemila & Jidenna)
** Nine Hours Till Five (Funmi)

Flawed Perfections Novels

** First Impressions
** Crossroads
** Romantic Illusions

Short Stories & Anthologies

Velvet Tamarind (*in the Hell Hath No Fury: An African Christmas Romance Anthology*)

Keeping Mima (*in the Roses Aren't Red Anthology: An African Romance Anthology*)

In Another Life: A Complete Short Story

***The Lady of the House (*in the Nights at Club Nova: An Erotic Romance Anthology*)

* - Dates are susceptible to change

** - writing as Margaret Adetimehin

*** - writing as Temi Nenyé

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PRAISE FOR CAMAA PEARL

Gaga Crazy: A Lagos Lovin' Novel

“Get Ready for a roller coaster ride of emotions!”

Maggie Smart, Author of *Beyond Now*

“...flaws and all, I need a Manir in my life.”

L. Leigh, Bestselling Author of *The Lekki Club*

“Read it in one sitting.”

Glory Abah, Author and Creative Writing Coach

Bottom Belle: A Lagos Lovin' Novel

“Love this story a lot.”

Grace Omojola, Goodreads Reviewer

“Just one word: mind-blowing.”

Ejuh Rejoice, Bambooks Reader

“Splendid!”

Temitope Adeniran, Book Critic & Goodreads Reviewer

Goody Bag: A Lagos Lovin' Novel

“Everything you'll want in a romance novel: entertainment, romance, steam, friendship.”

Rosemary Okafor, Author of *Akwaugo*

“A perfect end to a beautiful, beautiful series.”

Nelly, Goodreads Reviewer

“Beautiful, witty, and sexy read.”

Adesuwa Oman Nwokedi, Bestselling Author of *The Marriage Class*

Call Me Jemila

“Jemila and Jidenna's story will get you on different emotional stages.”

Aderonke Olubanjo-Adestosoye, Bambooks Reader

“I loved it a 100% and will definitely recommend.”

Aminat Sanni-Kamal, Author of The Smith Women Series

“Jemila and Jidenna’s story is that of a love that is enduring.”

Yetunde Ebosele, Goodreads Reviewer

Escape

“A breath of fresh air.”

Stanley Umezulike, Author of Ties That Bind

“An awesome read.”

Youcee Anaekwe, Goodreads Reviewer

“This book got me out of my reading slump.”

BooksXwine, Book Reviewer & Bookstagrammer

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Titles By Camaa Pearl](#)

[Praise For Camaa Pearl](#)

[Contents](#)

[Playlist](#)

Acknowledgements

[One](#) - Arrangement Point

[Two](#) - Run of Show

[Three](#) - Aesthetic Approvers

[Four](#) - Haute Couture

[Five](#) - Atelier 34 Threads

[Six](#) - Hard Components

[Seven](#) - Invisible Avatar

[Eight](#) - Avant-Garde

[Nine](#) - Pattern Paper

[Ten](#) - Running Stitches

[Eleven](#) - Prick Stitches

[Twelve](#) - Blend Mode

[Thirteen](#) - Bias Binding

[Fourteen](#) - Open Platform

[Fifteen](#) - Appliqué

[Sixteen](#) - Archival Fashion

[Seventeen](#) - Fetish Fashion

[Eighteen](#) - Solution-Based Thinking

[Nineteen](#) - Du Jour

[Twenty](#) - Bonding

[Twenty-One](#) - Little Grand

[Twenty-Two](#) - Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design

[Twenty-Three](#) - Raw Edge

[Twenty-Four](#) - Live Shows

[Twenty-Five](#) - Finger Press

[Twenty-Six](#) - Good Girls Socialize

[Twenty-Seven](#) - Wearing Preference

[Twenty-Eight](#) - Boyfriend Jacket

[Twenty-Nine](#) - Placement Dots

[Thirty](#) - Noticeable Alteration

[Thirty-One](#) - Alternating Twists

[Thirty-Two](#) - Flammability Test

[Thirty-Three](#) - Abrasion Resistance
[Thirty-Four](#) - Cut Some Slack
[Thirty-Five](#) - Bleeding
[Thirty-Six](#) - End Out
[Thirty-Seven](#) - Melting Point
[Thirty-Eight](#) - Grading
[Thirty-Nine](#) - Seam Finish
[Forty](#) - Future State
[Forty-One](#) - Continuous Improvement
[Forty-Two](#) - Slash and Spread
[Epilogue](#) - First Looks
[A Letter To You](#)
[Camaa's Recipes](#)
[About Camaa Pearl](#)
[An Excerpt From Goody Bag, Lagos Lovin' #3](#)
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For my Mama Mia.
And you, who always make something out of nothing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Canga". The letter "C" is large and loops around, with the rest of the name written in a cursive style.

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Lastly, thanks to me! For not giving up and seeing the bigger picture.

PLAYLIST

Obianuju—Efya
Runaway—Corrs
Belle—Omawumi
Nwa Baby—Flavour
Wild Enough—Elina
Oliver Twist—D'Banj
Alors on danse—Stromae
How To Love—Lili Wayne
Heaven Sent—Keyshia Cole
Sexy And I know It—LMFAO
The Edge of Glory—Lady Gaga
Lagos Party Remix—Banky W.
Ashawo—Naeto-C, Wande Coal
It Must Be Love—Don Williams
Chop My Money—P Square, Akon
Nothin' On You—B.o.B, Bruno Mars
Come And Get Your Love—Redbone
Lady Revisited—Somi, Anjelique Kidjo
Billionaire—Travie McCoy, Bruno Mars
We Found Love—Rihanna, Calvin Harris
Some Broken Hearts Never Mend—Don Williams

[Listen to the full playlist here: bit.ly/bottombelleplaylist](https://bit.ly/bottombelleplaylist)



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*Lagos women... they dress like no other. They love haute couture.
They look the part, they get fashion.*

—Penny McDonald

*The older you get, the more you realize that it isn't about the
material things, or pride or ego. It's about our hearts and who they
beat for.*

—Anonymous

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ONE

ARRANGEMENT POINT

Chiluba

MY BEST FRIEND IS ABOUT TO sell me to the highest bidder. The place is filled to the brim, as finding a spot to park is taking longer than it took us to get here from the mainland. There are some empty spots, but RESERVED is boldly written on them.

I had turned off Ozumba Mbadiwe Street into a nameless cul-de-sac that turned out to be a hidden gem. You can live in Lagos all your life, visit every nook and cranny but still get shocked at what you see in the same Lagos at night. I'm a living example.

How come I never noticed this spot? How come?

From the look of things, I think it's an extremely private restaurant and bar frequented by high net-worth individuals, because the cars parked are not the regular cars I see on the highway.

I poke my tongue lightly into my cheek and inhale a long breath, waiting for a couple getting all lovey-dovey to crossover. "Move..."

Zoya's chuckle is low. "Please don't hit them."

"They should leave the road so I can find somewhere to park," I hiss.

Having being jilted less than a month ago triggers this irritation at seeing the

lovebirds.

“See,” Zoya starts.

I turn my head in the direction she’s pointing.

“They’re moving out.”

Without hesitating, I navigate to the spot, eager to reduce the amount of fuel I’d otherwise waste. The fuel subsidy crisis might be over, but fueling stations are not nice enough to make fuel available without stress.

“Are you sure this is where we’re supposed to be?” I ask, parking my Toyota Camry in a spot that’s about a minute’s walk from the entrance. This does not look like the business setting or close to anything I’d imagined for this rendezvous.

“Calm down, babes. I’m sure.” Zoya buries her face in her phone, a crease marring her brow as she types.

“What is it?” Stretching my arm to the back seat, I pick a bag that’s always in my car, bring out a handy-makeup purse and begin touching up my look. First impressions matter.

“I’m letting him know we’re here.”

I pout at the mirror, shut it, then glance at Zoya, who is resting her head on the headrest, staring forward. “Has he responded?”

“Jeez.” She turns her head to me, a wry smile curving her lips. “You’re worse than Zena.”

I snort, disregarding her comparison of me to her kid sister. “Has he?”

“Not yet.”

Tossing the makeup bag to the back seat, I lean into my seat, arranging my chin-length bob weave, making sure it’s properly arranged, not sticking out or anything. “Ah, are we going to sit here or go inside?”

Zoya sits up, peering into the growing darkness. “Which do you want?”

“I want to stretch my legs. Please let’s go inside.” Picking my large, chalk pink, Kate Spade tote bag that’s worth over a hundred dollars, I notice she’s peering into her phone again, smiling. “Him?”

“Luba chill now.” She scoffs, tired of my questioning. “It’s not him.”

“You don’t understand.” Opening the car door. “I need to know what we’re getting into.”

Zoya laughs as she steps out, speaking to me over the roof of the car. “Now it’s *we*? Since *we’re* going by that now, please prepare a ten percent cut for me in this whole thing *we’re* about to get into.” She meets me on my side of the car, looking chic in a navy-blue belted shirt dress, a D&G bag I wish she would stop carrying, paired with metallic gold, strappy heeled sandals.

“Who is *we*?” I ask as we make our way to the building. “The *we* is for this scenario, not for the main thing. Every kobo here is important.”

“You love money. Too much.” Zoya ambles beside me, occasionally glancing at her phone.

“It is necessary for survival, and you know this. I just told my accountant to increase costs for the modeling expenses for ARISE Magazine Fashion Week. And Àbèbí has to increase the number of designs for our next collection. On top of all these, the economy and exchange rates are not helping matters. I need all the kobo I can get.”

“Is it that bad?” There’s concern lacing her voice.

“I’ll get him tied. It will be a thing of the past.” Forcing a smile as we approach the main door.

Having won Fashion Brand of the Year at the last ARISE Magazine Fashion Week, there’s no slacking. I’m in so many waters, I wonder how I’ll keep everything running without the help of my colleagues.

“If there’s anything I know you do best, it’s working things out in your favor. You’ll do fine.”

That statement means a lot, coming from Zoya. I started working—making money—before I clocked nine, then by grit and determination in my teenage years they crowned me a beauty queen. Learning to tailor in my early years gave me an edge, so when I saw what I could offer the market, I started my fashion line and at every point, I try to stay ahead of the game. It was a straightforward choice for me when it came to choosing to go to the university or not. I already had all I needed to survive and succeed in life—high school education, a technical skill, my social skills, and most of all, believing in my ability to succeed without attending a university. And if I could tie the knot with a rich man, that would be the icing on my cake.

While I was making those decisions, my beautiful, big-brained friend here chased her dream of becoming an architect, following in the steps of her father. I am proud my mother inspired my career choice, not the wimp she says is my father.

Well, Zoya returned from completing her masters in the UK over a year ago and has been performing magic in the Nigerian architectural space ever since. Her return was perfect timing for me because I needed her to introduce me to her uncle, a top personnel in Silhouette, the number one African fabric producer in the whole of West Africa, which makes them the kingpin of Africa's fabric industry.

Sometimes I wish I chose the straightforward way—after high school, complete university, struggle to get a job, marry that rich man and everything will be alright.

Wishes can't sustain ambitions and dreams. They only slow you down.

My pressing reality is how to pay the employees who rely on 34 Threads to fend for themselves and their families in the coming months. That's if I'm not out of business by then.

Last year, I made a—eish... I made an investment that went south, and I've chosen not to dwell on it, but to look for solutions. Expand my horizon. And what better way than to partner with the kingpin of the industry?

I tried doing it on my own, without Zoya's help. Sending proposals and follow up emails but I never heard back, maybe because I didn't send it to the right channels or because it was unsolicited or... because they don't do things like that. Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter anymore. I have taken the bull by the horn, pulled strings I can pull, and some might call it nepotism, I call it networking, because I can back my talk with progressive, profitable actions.

The moment we're cleared by the security guard, providing IDs and member name we're here to meet, we walk to the bar and settle on high stools. A song where the ladies keep saying, *be my, be my baby* plays in the background, and if this were a house, I'd say we're in the communal living room, or waiting room. A bartender asks if we need anything, but we decline, absorbing our environment.

Zoya glances at her phone now and then. Sometimes she types, responding to messages. Even though I'm sure I'm not showing it, I'm too nervous to do anything. I hope it's her uncle she's chatting with and not who I think it is.

"You have everything ready?" She looks up, breaking into my thoughts.

"Yes." Sighing. "Even though I told you to help me proofread it and—"

"I did. I proofread it."

"I don't trust you these days." Her playful aghast expression has me

clarifying why. “You are crazy about man.”

“Excuse me. Just because I wasn’t there when Funsho behaved like the a-hole he is, doesn’t mean I’m not always there for you.”

“Yeah, yeah... we’re finally getting around to do this after...” I let that hang in the air, smiling cheekily and she gives me a *I’ll change this setting if you don’t show your gratitude* look. “Thank you.”

She grins smugly. “You’re always welcome.”

“How’s it going with you guys?” I point to her phone.

“Which guys?”

“Manir, silly. When are you introducing us?”

“Whenever you’re ready. And stop making it sound like we’re dating or something. He’s just a friend.”

“Friend?” I scoff. “The man you met for the first time, that you were kissing up and down. Same man you went to visit at his place how many days ago. Toh. Okay oh. Just a friend.”

“Luba!” she says in a stern whisper, her gaze darting around. “What is your own now?”

“That’s how it starts.” I smile, rapidly raising my brows thrice, till she can’t hold back. She returns the smile.

Barely a month ago, she met this guy she has been chatting with online for over four years and next thing, boom! They’re shoving tongues down each other’s throats in his car. She’s visiting his place, engaging in things I don’t want to know.

It amazes me still, because between the two of us, Zoya is a good girl. In fact, the original virgin Mary church girl. If anyone should exchange saliva the first time they met someone they’ve been chatting with for years, it should be me, not her. The kiss must have been so good, because days after telling me what went down, she was asking how she could break up with her boyfriend.

“It’s just weird that you’re so into a guy you’ve been chatting with for years and you’re the only one not seeing the signs. Anyway, when are we getting the wedding invite?”

“Wedding invite? Luba.” She lets out a small laugh. “Don’t lose focus. We are here for business.” Before burying her head into her phone.

I’m not losing focus. You are the one losing focus. Since whatever she’s doing

on her phone is more important than chatting with me, I turn my gaze to the people who walk into the room. Three expats—middle-aged men. They exchange greetings with the bartender, and one locks gazes with me, but I break it immediately, not wanting to call unnecessary attention to myself. I'm here for business, not unsolicited advances.

Sweet Caroline is playing as I scroll through my phone, subconsciously opening a message I've been ignoring all day.

09:14 AM

Funsho: Hey babe, I'm missing you.

I dreamt about you and woke up with the hardest boner ever.

I know I messed up big time, but I think I still love you.

06:59 PM

Chiluba: My middle finger gets a boner when I think about you.

Chiluba: Stop texting me.

"Did you make this?" Zoya thrusts her phone in my face.

I have no choice but to stare at the younger replica of her wearing my design, my mind off the message I just sent.

"Hmm hmm."

"I knew it was you. Make one like this for me too *nau*." Pursing her lips, she scrolls down her screen, before looking at me. "You always give Zena the best."

"Because she's in school and brings loads of customers."

"Do they have the money to pay for your designs? You're missing out on clients, not using me as your model, oh."

"Ah, see you. They pay and pre-order selections we're yet to design. Besides, it's mostly men you hang around."

"And those men have wives, girlfriends, daughters..."

I widen my eyes at the opportunities I've been missing, and she grins broadly.

"You see?"

"You have a point. But Zena has this thing about her. Girls want to be in the same league as her." She created a mysterious world of her own and outsiders are eager to be like her.

"Speaking of Zena, has she ever told you she has a boyfriend or something?"

Boyfriend? “Hmm, no.”

“A crush?”

“Probably... Why?”

“If I say I don’t worry about her, I’m lying.”

“Worried? That she’s over twenty and not boy crazy is something you’re worried about?” I scoff, looking around, then returning my gaze to Zoya. “You want her to get pregnant by one—”

“Pregnant? Who’s talking about that?”

We both stare at each other.

Then she adds, “You know she doesn’t tell me personal stuff.”

Which makes me break into a polite smile.

Everyone knows Zena prefers me to you right from time Zoya, I savor the thought, not wanting to sound smug when she’s being open and vulnerable.

She presses her lips. “I just want to know what’s happening to her in that regard.”

Placing a hand on hers, I find hers are cold, so I rub them gently. “She’s fine. If she has any issues, you know she’ll come to me, and I’ll definitely tell you about it.” There’s no sistership I’ve experienced that beat being a sister to the Ainabe sisters.

“Thank you.”

“I know. We are all we have. We need to look out for each other.” My phone chooses this special moment to ring. It’s my half-sister calling. She never calls with good news and though it’s always urgent for her, it’s never urgent for me.

“You won’t pick?” Zoya gestures to the call which I’m cancelling.

“Nope. Please check if he has arrived.” It’s been over eight minutes since we got in. Time is moving slowly. It feels like ages.

“He’ll message once he’s here.”

“I thought we had fixed a time. The fact that we’re not meeting on a weekday or in an office does not—”

“He’s a busy man. And I’m his niece, whom he’s indulging.”

I give a small, frustrated hiss, hunching my shoulders. “Why do you have to make sense?”

She smiles cheekily.

“Okay then, no more phones.” I look pointedly at hers, then back at her, a forced tight smile on my lips. “Let’s talk about my birthday prep.”

Zoya lets out a soft, halfhearted sigh. “What about it? You have it all planned.”

I clear my throat, waiting for her to spill what she knows.

“Zena told me.” She says in her defense.

I shrug. “And you couldn’t ask.”

“I’m sorry. You know my exam is this month—so close to your birthday...” She’s almost squirming from the penetrating indifferent look I’m giving her. “We’ve discussed this before—”

I cover my mouth before a snicker escapes. “I know. I just wanted to pull your legs, since you didn’t bother asking for an update.”

“I’m so sorry. Work has been crazy. How’s preparations coming?”

I do a small shimmy on my stool, remembering my recent visit to the venue with the event planner. “So good, I’m beginning to wonder if I’m dreaming. Will Manir be coming?”

“Manir?” she scoffs. “We’re not even sure I will make it.”

“You better make it.” My tone threatening her of the unbelievable things I’ll do to her if otherwise. “So...?”

“I’ve invited him. He’s yet to give a definitive answer.”

“He better make it, because I need to vet him.”

“Luba...”

“Hmm, I’m just saying. I’m sending a broadcast to everyone on my list days to the D-day save my exes.”

We chuckle and I continue breaking down plans for my big day. I’ve booked the monthly spa and massage I indulge in, because a lady must pamper herself to be pampered. And there’s my hair to fix, I need to update my lace frontal to a three-sixty lace frontal sew-in weave.

Zoya opens her mouth to say something, but her phone vibrates on cue and her threat dies there. Her eyes go over the words on her screen and she looks up, smiling at me. “He’s here. We are to meet him at the outdoor restaurant.”

“Hmm.” I scoff, hating that I have to *jump* because *he’s here*. And how did he bypass us? Because there’s no *outdoor* restaurant from where we came from.

“What?”

“He has been here all along? Making us wait?” I want to understand what the time we’ve spent waiting has been for. Was he making up? Or dressing up?

“Do you want to know the truth?” Zoya asks, putting her phone in her purse and zipping it.

“Uh-un.” I nod, graciously getting off my stool.

“He doesn’t know I am here with you for business.”

“Zo...” Willing my body to move even though my mind was backtracking. Why did she have to do it this way? I knew it! When she directed me to this place, I knew something was not clicking. And the timing. It was off.

She looks back at me, waving me over. “Come on.” When we’re side by side, she continues furtively. “I told him I wanted to see him and I’m bringing a friend along. He hangs out here most times.”

“So, he doesn’t know why I’m—we’re here?”

Zoya clamps her lips together, shaking her head as she gracefully leads me to the outdoor restaurant.

“Zo...” I catch up with her again, whispering furtively. “He will not like this. It would look like an ambush and—”

Zoya stops and I stop too. “Don’t worry. You’re in expert hands. Uncle George is understanding, and I’m his favorite niece. Just follow my lead and turn on your charm.”

I suck the insides of my bottom lip, eyeing her with a fondness I hope tells her I know this was the best she could do with the pressure I’d mounted on her to make this rendezvous happen. “You are so going to pay for this.”



TWO

RUN OF SHOW

George

Two hours earlier

I FLASH A BROAD GRIN AT the array of cameras pointed at us, while holding a pair of giant ceremonial scissors poised to cut the red ribbon, my body going with the motions of the day. *I need a drink. A strong one.* I can't count how many ribbons I have cut in my lifetime, but when I cut these types of ribbons, I get emotional.

It reminds me of the past when Mirabel was with me. She enjoyed events like this. Giving back to society. I used to be all about the money—what was this going to give us back in return? While she was opposite. I learnt from her that giving back to society is a strategy that keeps giving. Since she left, I've been looking beyond the long-term financial benefits to Silhouette—I think of how to better the communities that aided my rapid growth and expansion across West Africa.

"Today, we celebrate life, we celebrate creativity, and we celebrate the founder of Silhouette Industries and Designs." The Lagos State Commissioner for Commerce Industry and Cooperatives pointedly smiles at the cameras focused on us, a hand holding up the ribbon as we launch our first tailoring plant in Yaba, Lagos. "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

I cut the ribbon and the applause from the watching audience makes me smile, beaming with pride. My personal assistant, Dáre, offers me a fresh glass of wine and whispers in my ear. “You’re to close the event.”

Raising my wine glass, I begin, “On behalf of Silhouette Industries and Designs, we would like to thank each of you for taking time out of your busy schedule today. Thank you.”

With everyone taking pictures, catching up on who is who, the Commissioner corners me, grinning. As we shake hands, my brain threatens to produce a smirk, but the child-like joy on her face wipes it off.

“Thank you,” I tell her.

Smiling, she shakes her head. “It is I who should be thanking you. And thank you for the invite. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

She obviously wouldn’t have missed it, not after receiving that promising cheque for her other projects.

“Thank you, Mr. Van Cleef.” She continues, “This is indeed a way to get our youths active and build a lucrative career in fashion design. A lot of small businesses and entrepreneurs will start from here and it’s all thanks to you.”

For lack of what to say, I smile, nodding as she continues her one-sided chat about creating more conducive environments.

She’d been so adamant about launching the project, now she is talking about the State doing more for the people and how fashion is going to be one of Nigeria’s greatest sources of revenue in the nearest future, even bigger than oil, and how Silhouette can be the catalyst. *What happened to the State’s budget for your office?*

I couldn’t have been happier when I spot Dáre walking up behind her.

“Excuse me.” Dáre says when he finally gets a chance to break into her monologue. “I’m sorry to steal him away, but I need Mr. Van Cleef over there for photo ops.” He points to a spot by the banner, where other dignitaries and pillars of the community are standing.

“If you don’t mind.” I toss an apologetic look her way without waiting for her permission and begin walking away, following Dáre’s lead.

Dáre fakes a cough, covering his mouth as a small laugh escapes him. “You looked like you were going to drop if I didn’t rescue you sooner.”

Moot, pulling the lapels of my jacket. “Thanks, Dáre.”

A minute later, I am not so thrilled about his rescue because after the photo

ops, a fashion celebrity has me in a two-way discussion—at least it is better than the one with the commissioner—about their big plans and how I can join.

I'm tempted to ask if all this is all necessary, but I've done this before and will keep doing it. A beautiful media personality asks for an audience and Dáre tells me it's part of my itinerary. I reluctantly indulge her. As she wraps up her questioning, about work-life balance, future projects, my eyes roam the room, seeking Dáre.

"That will be all." I nod, walking towards Dáre whom I'd spotted speaking to a Silhouette executive. Dáre notices my approach, mutters something to them and meets me halfway.

"What else?" I ask, watching the room, hoping no one corners me with more business ideas. I'm mentally done with today's event.

Dáre grins, glancing at his phone for my synced to-do list. "You're all done."

A sigh of relief washes over me. "Please get me out of here."

Dáre places a discreet call and after I greet a couple more people, he stylishly whisks me out of the celebration, leading me to a tinted Land Cruiser parked on the street.

"You did well," Dáre says as he gets in from the other side of the car.

"As expected."

"Beyond actually."

"Thanks. What's next?" Dáre is a hard worker. There's always something to do till 7 PM. Good thing my day starts at 11 AM.

"I'll say meet up with a warm body for the night. But before that, Zoya, your niece, you're to meet with her around six." Dáre taps the shoulder of Mike, the driver. "Deviant, please."

Pulling my jacket together, I get my comfy on my seat, watching as the streets of Yaba go by in slow motion. We come to a stop at a traffic light. From the corner of my eye, I see Dáre scrolling through his phone. I should check mine for messages, but all I want to do is shut myself from the world and reminisce good times with Mirabel. "Remind me why I hired you and what your job duties are?"

He turns to look at me, smirking. "To make you productive and happy."

"Productive, yes. Who added happy?" By my window, two adolescent boys appear, one holding a plastic bottle filled with soapy liquid, the other with a local squeegee, made of wood and plastic.

“Me.” Dáre chuckles.

I turn to him, raising a brow.

He shrugs. “I had to.”

“Are you insinuating I am not happy?” Turning my attention to the boys, I watch as an angry driver shoos them away. “First, do you have two, five hundred notes?”

Dáre stares at me puzzled. Then he notices the boys outside and nods his head. “I’ll handle them. Mike.” He leans forward tapping the driver, then hands him a couple of bills, pointing to the boys outside.

“Ah...” he sighs contently, taking his seat. “We should do more of that.”

“More of what?” The light turns green and we’re speeding to the Third Mainland Bridge.

“Charity. It makes you happier. And of course, more out of networking outside work.”

“Hmm.”

“True, George. Have you seen your pictures lately? I compared them to four years ago and the difference is glaring.”

I promoted Dáre to be my personal assistant four years ago because the lady before him couldn’t stand my need to push myself over the edge. He came in not knowing what he was going to be dealing with.

At first, he tried playing nice, walking on eggshells, and refusing to call me George. But after he found me slumped over my desk, we had a tough discussion. It was just three weeks into his new shiny role. The doctor said it was stress.

“Sir.” His eyes were glistening with unshed tears as he sat by my hospital bed. “I will not let you work yourself to death. I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing this for me. For my family.”

“Oh.” I sat up, staring at him. “So you have opinions.”

“I do.” His smile was wavering. “And I am letting you know that yes, you call the shots, but I am going to be more than a personal assistant to you. I’ll be your manager, as long as you want me.”

From that night at Bloomfield Hospital, the dynamics of our relationship changed. He became a son to me. The type of son one has in their old age. A son you allow to get away with things because you know he is watching out for you.

“Dáre, people change over time. And thanks for your service.”

“It’s my pleasure. I spoke with Nosaze earlier and he gave me the permission to help you reclaim your youth.”

Reclaim my youth? I burst out laughing and Dáre smiles. *These boys.* Nosaze is my only son, a brilliant professional athlete, corporate lawyer, and chartered accountant. Unlike other sons who want their fathers out of the way, Nosaze wants me to live for as long as I can.

“You help me spoil the kids and it’s cheaper that way.” Was the reason Nosaze gave for why he needs me to live longer.

Reclaim my youth? That’s something. But... maybe with this youth reclaiming stuff, I might find another purpose in life that will give me boundless joy. Although I’ve survived over fifty years golden, building Silhouette has in some ways deprived me from living the life I’d intended for myself. With all the children out of the nest and not having a partner to motivate me... the reclaiming my youth idea is beginning to make sense in my head.

“Do you have a plan for this youth reclaiming ritual you and Nosaze have in mind?”

Dáre grins knowingly, his lips almost touching his ears. “Yes, I do.”

“Want to share?”

“It’s very easy and simple.”

“Why are you going around in circles? Just say the words.”

He squints at me. “It’s kind of harsh. But because I want to channel Nosaze’s energy—”

“Say it Dáre.”

“You need to get laid.”

Wow. Wow. Wow. Is this the same Dáre speaking? The young man I promoted four years ago. Telling me to get laid? Kak! Everyone has opinions about my sex and dating life. Even Dáre.

Do they think I am numb to arousal? That I have forgotten what it feels like to plunge into the warm, moist, vaginal walls of a woman?

“No offense, George. I rarely see you hang out with women.”

Incredible. Trying to play dumb, I say, “I hang out with my daughters.”

“There’s that, but you know what I’m talking about. The ladies, they circle you, yet I rarely see you take an interest in any one of them. It’s like they don’t

exist to you. After all this hard work, a man should be able to find comfort in the arms of a woman.”

Dáre, the strong desires are here. And they are here to stay. Also, I do feel guilty being with someone else. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

His eyes widen at my confession, narrows. “When?”

“Like I said, I don’t kiss and tell.” He knows my schedule, so I’m assuming he’s trying to piece together when I find time to get off.

“Hmm...” He folds his arms, staring at me in awe, slowly nodding his head. “Is it someone I know?”

“Dáre, I don’t have time to keep a woman. Besides, I’m an old man—a grandfather.” Who wants to get stuck with a middle-aged man when there are young bloods all over town. I know friends—married ones too—who keep women. It’s not my style. If ever I decide to settle with another woman, it will be on my terms, me and no one else. Being married for over twenty years gives you this urge to be selfish and not want to share.

“I knew it.” Smashing a triumphant fist into his palm. “You need to hang out —”

“I’m going to hang out with my niece right now.”

He grunts in frustration. “That doesn’t count. You can get any girl you want in Lagos.”

“You’re forgetting the age factor.”

“Lagos girls wouldn’t mind. I’ve heard a couple murmur behind us that you’re hot. And you don’t look over forty.”

Me? Hot? That’s horseshit.

“And these are young girls in their prime.” He continues. “Even the ladies in the office have it hot for you, but I wouldn’t advice going for them. You’re a white man living in Lagos with the money to spoil any girl of your choosing.”

“Interesting. I never noticed all these qualities about myself.”

Dáre laughs.

I smile. He could have just said I am a boy with a penis so I can shove it where I like.

“Okay. You win. However, I wouldn’t want you getting entangled with the wrong ladies. Since you’re not looking for anything serious, I can help you organize girls. I help erm... forget about it.”

Oh. Now you have my full attention. “Help who?”

“Nothing sir.”

When Dáre says sir, he’s pulling an invisible barrier between us, reminding me I’m his boss and shouldn’t be discussing things like that with me. Sorry Dáre, we crossed that line today when you said all I need is a warm body for the night.

“Come on Dáre, tell me.”

Clearing his throat, his gaze skims to the rearview mirror and I notice Mike nod at him. “I help Alfred organize girls.”

Horseshit!

Dáre, the man who couldn’t tell me no the first few weeks he started working for me is a pimp on his days off. I give a dry laugh, but his face remains straight.

“You’re serious.” It’s not possible. Dáre pimps for notorious Alfie?

Dáre breaks a smile, but his voice is loud and distinct. “It’s nothing serious. For parties and stuff. Not every time though. I think you might be interested in his next event.”

Alfred is a longtime friend of mine. A self-made Nigerian billionaire from selling the artwork of roadside artists in rural areas to galleries, museums, and billionaires around the world. Extremely notorious in his dealings, but one of the realest people out there. He got lucky buying and owning huge shares in a chain store spread across Africa, making him one of Nigeria’s best kept secrets.

“I don’t want to say I’m proud of you, but it’s.... fascinating.”

Dáre gives a knowing smile, nodding slightly as he looks out the window. “I really think you should come. It’s at his private beach house on Snake Island.”

“Hmm. Are there snakes all over the island?”

He turns to look at me but laughs when he notices I’m only pulling his legs. “You’ll ask him for an invite?”

“I’m considering it.”

“It’ll do you a lot of good. Heard it’s relaxing and invigorating out there.”

“Hmm.”

“But you’ll need a plus one to keep the other girls at bay.”

I raise a brow.

“It’s just me.” He shrugs. “I don’t trust the girls that’ll be out there.”

“I thought you help with his girls.”

He smiles. “You’re my priority. Alfred and his needs are non-existent.”

“It’s good to know that your loyalty lies with me.”

“Always.”

My phone vibrates and I finally pull it out from my breast pocket. All this talk of finding a willing warm body is nothing but talk. My iPhone screen comes on. There are other messages, but I skim them till I see the ones sent from Zoya.

6:48 PM

Zoya: Hi Georgie!

I’m at The Deviant. Please let me know when you arrive.

6:56 PM

Zoya: I’m here with a friend, I hope you don’t mind.

“Zoya has a friend with her. Please make extra arrangements.”

Dáre clicks his tongue. “I think you niece is setting you up.”

Shaking my head, I ignore his comment, going through other messages.



THREE

AESTHETIC APPROVERS

Chiluba

I SCAN THE OUTDOOR RESTAURANT SETTING. A whiff from expensive cigars teases my nostrils as we navigate the path. It's quite private, with potted palm plants demarcating each section. Orange lights in the plant pots illuminate the surroundings, casting a warm glow that sends a relaxing vibe to the senses. Each section slash private cove has two low wooden round tables, two single-armed raffia-like chairs and a two-seater raffia-like couch. Standing, you can see who's in which section, but when seated, you hardly know whose section is next to you.

"That's him over there," Zoya says, beaming with a smile.

Over there, where? Where?

"Looking cute, like a silver fox," she adds.

That's when my gaze lands on the lone figure who looks relaxed, in his element, lost in his thoughts. A solemn "Yeah..." is all I can get out as I place one foot before the other like a robot. Silver fox is an understatement. He is the Ultimate Silver Fox.

White men are not my thing. Like never rang my bell, but this... This white man is hot!

Sizzling!

From Zoya's explanation and descriptions, I was expecting an old haggard white guy with an ego the size of the American map, but the unsuspecting silver-gray haired man with pink shirt sleeves neatly rolled up, his light blue jacket skillfully hanging on the couch and a leather office bag by his feet looks like a classy kempt A-list Hollywood actor, oozing all the things I love at once—wealth, power, and sex.

Zoya's eyes sparkle with adoration when we arrive at his table. "Good evening, Uncle George." She says with the familiarity of a spoilt niece.

George? Sounds too sweet for this man who, change his pink shirt to black will look like a member of the Italian mafia. It won't surprise me if Silhouette is a front for an underground gun and ammunition crime ring.

Zoya's greeting slightly startles a calm *Uncle George* who looks up to find her and a warm smile envelopes his face—face dusted with a neatly groomed silver-gray beard. He gets to his feet, and I am not disappointed when I notice he's slightly taller—okay not slightly. I'm five-eleven, he looks six-four. It's so cool because most men fall short beside me.

"*Mijn lieve.*" His deep, cultured voice has a vague British accent to it. *Hmm...* "You're looking well." Cheek kissing Zoya thrice.

With him looking this fresh and cute, I hope he doesn't fall prey to the rampant kidnapping going on in the country. Worse is him falling prey to Lagos babes using juju to tie men down.

Zoya gestures to me when he withdraws. "My friend Chiluba, Luba."

When his affectionate, smiling eyes land on me, I want to melt into a puddle. His eyes... they're a penetrating sea green duo, set to bewitch anyone who—

"Chiluba," he says with a curious gaze, causing a tremor to run through me.

What was I thinking of before—smile Luba. Luba.

"Lovely dress," he says.

A confused smile is the best I can afford as a strange tingling sensation grips my body like a vise.

Lovely dress—Was that for me or Zoya?

Chee-loo bah. He'd called me by my full name. Didn't opt for the straightforward, simple nickname Luba. And I think he noticed it, the tremor.

It takes a nudge from Zoya for me to stretch my hand for a handshake when

he was going for a cheek kiss or hug. I don't know which. But all the same, his compelling woodsy scent hit me, and I know it's something from Tom Ford. You can never go wrong with Tom Ford. If I had let him go through with the cheek kiss or hug, he'd intended, Zoya will denounce me as her friend here. And now.

Better safe than sorry.

His eyes are strikingly odd when he withdraws his hands, now staring at me with a rather wry smile.

Did I hurt his pride? Do something wrong? Is he making a private joke about me?

"Welcome." His smile, now polite and slightly apologetic. Minor smile lines around his eyes and forehead speak of luxury, comfort, and good life. If this is what being rich and old does this to the skin, sign me up!

"Young ladies..." He gestures to the vacant seats around his table. "Please have a seat."

Zoya and I follow his order.

Young ladies. Yen, yen, yen. Why did the way he say it sound so condescending? Is it because he's Zoya's uncle? Because I know his type has *young ladies* fawning all over him, and he would not call them *young ladies* in that tone of voice.

"What will you have?" He asks. I notice he attempts raising a hand but puts it down as an afterthought. "The food here is so good and fresh. The drinks too. You should try... Um, ignore my chatter. What will you have?"

"Anything."

"I'm fine, sir."

Zoya and I say simultaneously.

Hmm... I should have waited for Zoya to speak. She said I should follow her lead. See me botching things up.

He smirks. "Sir?"

Whitened teeth almost blinds me.

"Call me George."

"Um I—" My gaze darting from him to Zoya. If I see Dangote today, I won't call him Dangote. I'll call him Mr. Dangote or better yet, Alhaji Dangote. Now calling Zoya's uncle by his given name out loud, without titles to put a barrier between us, sounds too intimate. When this happened in the past, the men were

trying to get something from me. Uncle George right here, doesn't even know I'm about to present something that will interest him. I need to keep it official.

"Don't mind, Uncle Georgie, he thinks he's in the Netherlands."

"I still insist on George." He gives a firm nod that tells me it's my only and final option. "So, you'll be having...?"

"Cocktail works for me." Zoya says, then turns to me.

I give a firm nod. I'm learning new power tricks from Uncle *Georgie*.

"Okay. Try the food too." He encourages with a smile, twirling a hand in the air. A waitress appears by our table with leather bound menu books, one for Zoya, one for me.

That was fast.

As I flip through the menu book, I spare side glances at matured and attractive *Uncle Georgie* who is busy on his phone. What would he have looked like when he was younger? Strange, but I like him. *Hmm, just like other girls on his matter do.* I doubt his wife is in Nigeria. Is he like those expats who have wives in their home country, but come here to bamboozle unsuspecting girls? Or is he the type that tells it as it is? I have a wife back home, but I have needs.

A tremor runs through me at my wayward thoughts, and he locks a gaze with me, smiling.

I smile in return but catch myself in time, returning my gaze to the menu. What am I doing? I was just judging the man and now I'm smiling with him? Let him not think I'm some easy lay trying to get his attention. *Hmm...* Not in this life. I choose my men and I don't dig older men.

If he's making me think about sex, then I need to get laid soonest—

"I'm sure you'll like this." Zoya's voice pulls my attention to her menu book. We place our orders and Zoya resumes mundane talk with *Uncle Georgie...*

"... and the family?" she asks.

"You know how it is." Uncle George relaxes in his seat, a hand on his knee. "Everybody doing their own thing."

"Lucky you. I'm sure my dad is tired of having us at home with him."

"Your dad's the lucky one. He still has you in the house with him."

"But he's rarely home." Zoya complains.

Uncle George nods in understanding. "And Zena?"

“It’s her service year. Youth Service.” Zoya repeats.

Uncle George nods.

“She graduated last year.”

“Oh.” His eyes flickering with complete understanding. “She’s grown up so fast. I can recall her sneaking off with sugar cubes when she came to visit, acting like we all were not in the room watching her.”

Zoya chuckles while I give a courteous smile, repressing my impatience to get to the reason we’re here.

“She has grown up.” Zoya says in defense of Zena. “No longer the little girl smuggling sugar cubes for her ant friends.”

This sounds like a fun family reunion, but not why we are here. Zena is my girl, any day, but this was not why we came Zoya! We didn’t come to crack old jokes or tell family tales. If I pinch Zoya’s thigh so she can get to the point, that’s not a bad idea...

After plotting how to do it without being seen, Uncle George’s voice stops me from acting out my thoughts.

“So Chiluba?” he begins, posing the question to Zoya, sending brief glances my way as he speaks. “How long have you been friends? You look... familiar. I —”

“Yes, she is.” Zoya cuts in, after noticing the look I tossed her way. “I’m sure you saw her during the funeral.”

By the funeral, she means her mother’s funeral. That was like some twelve years ago. Zoya and I have been friends since childhood. Experiencing life together, always having each other’s back. I can’t say I met him during her mother’s funeral though.

“Oh. I thought as much. You have a striking presence, Chiluba.”

“Thank you, sir—uncle George.” Or should I say *Uncle Georgie*?

“George.” He insists again.

“And she’s also in the fashion and fabric design world.” Zoya pitches.

Finally! Fi-na-lly!

Finally saying something that tallies with why we’re here.

“That’s interesting.” Uncle George’s eyes light up when they reach mine, adjusting on his seat. “How have you been enjoying the industry?”

How have I been enjoying it? “Oh well, let’s just say I’ve been living my dream. By the way—” I sent your company a proposal is what I want to say when Zoya aggressively cuts me off.

“Uncle Georgie is into the industry too.” Zoya beams, smiling at me.

Excuse me? I know. That’s why we’re here. Duh.

She blinks and it triggers my brain into action. *Uncle George is understanding... Just follow my lead and turn on your charm.*

This is the lead? Eish! I’m slacking.

“Oh wow.” I turn to face him. Trying to sound as ignorant as I can be, and I think he is buying it because the words that come out of his mouth are unbelievable.

“I am. Have you heard of Silhouette?”

I gasp, feigning surprise before tossing my face to the side to stare at Zoya, who is enjoying this act. She is smiling innocently and even nodding. I never knew my friend had it in her to pretend. Wow. Wow. Wow. Turning back to George, I continue the farce. “You work with them?”

“No silly,” Zoya plays along. “Uncle Georgie built the empire. He is the owner.”

My eyes go round. Like for real this time. I thought he was like a managing director there, sort of like a top executive. And seeing that he is not disputing what Zoya just confirmed—I’m so going to kill her once we leave here—I am honestly in awe.

O M G

Zoya has been playing it cool. She didn’t let on that her uncle, *Georgie*, is the owner of the biggest Ankara wax printing firm in the whole of West Africa, with factories and farms scattered across Africa and Asia.

I see you Uncle, I see you.

“Okay...” I look at a bashful grinning Uncle George who is almost shy that I’m floored. I’m sharing a table with an icon. “Mr. Geo—”

“George or Uncle George is still fine.”

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea.” Giving Zoya a death stare. She is grinning like a witch who just performed a successful ritual. “She didn’t tell me about—I thought—”

“It’s alright Chiluba. Silhouette is an entity on its own.” Uncle George says,

his apologetic smile like a doting father to his child who didn't know better. "And I am an individual like you."

The waitress chooses this moment to return with our drinks and some finger food, including the ones Uncle George insisted we try, placing them on the table with utmost care. Once she leaves, Uncle George resumes our discussion.

"What are you into? School? I remember Zoya mentioned... fashion and fabric design world?"

"I'm not into school. It's not my thing." I smile, taking a sip of my espresso martini, waiting for the usual expression people have when I tell them I chose not to go to the university.

Pity. Disappointment. Contempt.

Those are the top three on the list.

I get it, people expect everyone to follow the standard carved path in life, and when they see someone making it in the world without following that established path, they assume the worst.

"I'm guessing you made this dress you're wearing?" His voice sounds introspective.

"I did." Forcing a smile at his unexpected response. This whole meeting is going too slow for my liking. "I went to a vocational school instead of uni. I am a fashion designer, CEO of 34 Threads."

"Good for you." He nods.

You don't sound impressed. You look bored.

Zoya has set me up for failure. Why would she organize this meeting and not tell him what I do? I wish we can go straight into the business of the day. all this dancing around the topic will not help me achieve my purpose for this meeting.

"Chiluba is pretty good at her craft." Zoya presses. "And she has brilliant designs that sell out before they hit the public space. She has been going for fashion shows in Paris for the past..." darting her gaze to me, "three years? Yes, three. Was on the 2010 list of 25 under 25 CEOs."

Okay... that's enough Zoya. Stop exaggerating. I have only been to Paris once. Just one fashion show.

"Interesting." He takes a sip of his drink. "What materials do you work with?"

Ehn? I smile.

That worked like magic. He wasn't interested like seconds ago and now he's interested in what I use to create my designs. Keep it going, sister Zo.

"I use African prints and fabrics."

"That's what I'm talking about. I don't understand why the designers of today create designs with western prints when the future is African prints."

That's what tickles your fancy? "I am enthusiastic about African prints. I use them for bags, shoes, earrings. Name it."

He grins, raising his drink, his eyes burning into mine. "You are the future." Bringing down his drink, he leans forward, his gaze skimming my body. It's as though he is undressing me. "I love what you did with the fabric."

Love what—Oh, he meant my patterned Ankara gown.

I let out a nervous smile, brushing a hand on my knee. His gaze is unsettling, and I wonder if Zoya notices any of it. "Thank you."

"I know a few people in Silhouette Designs are coming up with great, futuristic African print designs and fabrics." Leaning back in his seat. "If you don't mind, I can pull a few strings here and there, and you can be a brand ambassador."



FOUR

HAUTE COUTURE

George

“THANK YOU... UNCLE—GEORGE.” SHE SMILES and I know it’s not a sincere one because only her lips are moving while the other parts of her face are still, including her eyes. Becoming a model or brand ambassador is not what she is expecting from this meeting and I’m suspecting there’s more to this casual meet up Zoya planned for us.

Chee-loo bah...

Sounds nice.

Sounds familiar.

What’s the meaning? Africans and their names. There’s always a story behind a name before the meaning here. Mira had to explain the importance when we had Nosaze—the one God has chosen. While I gave Imelda—powerful fighter—because of how she fought to stay with us, Mira named our last baby, Adesuwa—amidst wealth.

But now this... Chiluba lady—whatever the meaning of her name—the way she moves, it’s like there’s slow jazz music being played and she’s in sync with it.

There’s this natural curiosity to touch her gown to see if what it promises is

real. But I know better than to do that. There's something about her... her deep brown eyes... it's there... and it's pulling at me. It's an underlying sexual attraction. A magnet. It's inviting me and I know better. Even though the thought of touching the fabric is innocent, my mind has moved like light to areas it shouldn't be moving to.

Chiluba has done a splendid job of not just designing her dress but in wearing it and not letting it wear her. She hasn't pulled down the hem, neither has she adjusted the plunging v-neckline that offers a teasing view of her firm breasts where a lariat necklace rests. If the v-neckline was a few inches wider, she would have gone from classy to trashy. She controls the dress, not the other way around.

If I touch the dress, just the place around her hip, to see if it's real, will she give me permission to touch—earlier in my career, I worked with enough models to know some girls pad their bodies to fit into the cloth instead of the clothes fitting them. And if I touch her waist, will she be open to me exploring her firm—No? No. No, George!

Fuck. My dick twitches.

Dáre has planted a seed in my head and it's growing.

Fuck.

This is Zoya's friend. I need to spell it out in my head so there's no confusion. *Chiluba is your niece's friend.*

Niece's friend.

The one your heart skipped a beat for the moment you laid eyes on her.

Zoya clears her throat, my attention turns to her. She looks contrite, a faint smile playing on her face. "Uncle George... this is a setup."

I raise my brows. "A setup." Snorting, I take a sip of my martini. Just like Dáre had predicted, Zoya was indeed setting me up. Do I really need an intervention? It's been a while since Zoya and I caught up, things have not been easy for the last eight years but—did Nosaze put her up to this?

"No. No, no Uncle Georgie." Covering her mouth as she almost chokes with laughter. "Not that type of setup, o."

"Hmm?"

Successfully dabbing her mouth, Zoya clasps her hands on her lap. "Chiluba is thinking of how to partner with you."

Thinking? I notice the nudge Chiluba gives Zoya under the chair and I almost

smile.

“Chiluba wants to partner with you.”

Partner with me? The guts. That’s some nerve, actually. What does she have to offer? Turning my gaze to Chiluba who is smiling courteously. I can see behind that smile. She is bursting with words she wants to say. Just like my Imelda, she has a mind of her own.

“Partnership?” I ask, prompting her to speak, but Zoya is all talkative tonight.

“She has been on my neck to set up a meeting with you. And I know how busy things are for you... and I didn’t want this to be all serious. Just to let you know she has ideas—brilliant ideas—you might be interested in looking into. Like I said, her designs are spectacular, so is her keenness for details and her fashion sense is superior.”

Impressive pitch, but what does the lady have to say for herself? If Zoya wasn’t here, I’m sure all the niceties holding the young lady back will be gone. She would have gone for my jugular, letting me know what I’ll be missing—just like other dreamers that approach me—if I don’t partner with her.

I might consider it and there’ll be so much at risk.

A fascinating character. That’s who she is. A strong, confident one.

“I’m interested alright.” Nodding my head, I look at Chiluba, waiting for her to pick the gauntlet.

What do you have to say for yourself?

“I have a folder in my bag. Would you like to see that now or maybe some ___”

“Uncle George,” Zoya cuts in, giving Chiluba a placating smile—the two have been acting like cat and rat since they came in—before turning to me, clearing her throat. “This is just a hangout. I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“It’s fine.” These two are acting good cop, bad cop, like I haven’t spent most of my life raising three children who wanted to get more than the allowance they were given. “Sounds interesting.” I flick a wrist to let Chiluba know she can go ahead.

“Oh.” Zoya sighs, grinning. “Thank you for understanding. I don’t take you for granted. But I’m sure if you’re interested, you both can schedule something more... business like?”

Never in a million years will I expect Zoya to be this prepared to blindside me. I don’t enjoy talking business when it’s not time for business. But this one

time, in my whole fifty-four years, I'm interested in seeing a business plan without scheduling a meeting or passing it onto the team in charge of such.

"It's alright Zoya. Let me hear what she has planned for this... partnership." I turn to Chiluba, wearing what I hope is an encouraging smile. "Please go ahead, Chiluba."

Chiluba glances at me, her hands hovering on the bag she has on her lap, and I tune up my smile a notch. I must have looked intimidating, because after the smile, she releases a sigh before pulling out a folder made of monochromic fabric.

If Zoya thinks because she's family, she can help her friend climb up the ladder, she better rethink. This is business. A legacy. Not some child's playground.

Chiluba isn't a child. She's far from it. She looks so confident and sure of herself. When they walked in, it took me a while to notice my niece was walking before her. *The friend...* Something in me was excited to meet her because her fabric pattern and design choice spoke volumes. And when I noticed another part of me stirring, I had to turn away to speak sense to myself.

"Personally, I wouldn't like to bore you this evening..."

Chiluba voice fades and turns to a lilting rhythm in my head. I'm tempted to ask if she sings, or maybe that's something I can find more about if we—she offers me a file and I blink, accepting it.

Dáre. Kak!

A man's grief doesn't mean he stops thinking or acting like a man. All I need to do is lean back, close my eyes, concentrate on her voice and a fine erection is what I'll have.

"As you can see here and here..." she leans forward, moving her short hair behind her ear, pointing on the document, flipping pages, making her point.

My eyes, on their own accord, move to the space between the fabric I was admiring earlier. I keep responding with *hmm hmm...* to everything she says, like I'm listening when my mind is on her breasts—beautiful orbs.

Blemish free breasts. Although the cleavage gives an ample view, it still leaves much to my imagination. What's the color of her nipples? How does she wear the gown even though she's leaning forward, the supple looking orbs are not tilting to the side? I can imagine how they would glow under the orange light of my room when she drips arousal oil on them, and I tell her to massage them

with her trim-manicured nails. The space between them is wide enough to make my mind conjure the image of sliding my erection between them...

As she leans back in her seat, my eyes go with those orbs before rising up to meet her deep brown eyes and our gazes lock.

Eikel.

I swallow. Blood pounds in my ears, threatening to flow down to my crotch.

Not happening.

But she continues, like nothing is amiss. And I nod, feigning interest when in truth, I didn't listen to a full sentence of all she'd said.

Thank God... It's all in my head.

"... besides that, I would like to be the lone distributor of the imitation Wenour Wax Print. I have other design ideas that would ensure it sells out before it's released into the Nigerian market. Every August meeting in Igboland and all weddings will use this fabric for *aso ebi*. So that's a two in one deal for us." She shrugs, making my eyes dart to her chest one more time.

Fuck. Two in one? I didn't hear the first part and I don't think I understand the second.

Is she thinking I'm like other men? That I'm listening to her only because of her body? That wasn't what I was thinking when I first set eyes on her—I was admiring her choice of clothing. But right now, if she thinks I'm into her body, she might not be wrong, because for the first time in the longest time, blood is insistent on rushing down to my crotch without me willing it to.

Clearing my throat, I look straight at her. "I don't think the Nigerian market is ready for that."

Horseshit.

I didn't listen to anything you said. Was busy ogling you.

Zoya is busy texting on her phone, looking giddy, not contributing to our conversation—she has done her part, leaving Chiluba to play her part.

Her gaze narrows, considering my response. "Can you give me the opportunity to prove you wrong?"

I would really love for you to, but I fear I'm not in the right state of mind. And with everything my mind has done to you, you're safe on your own.

Zoya's attention is now on us, and I'm pushed to be nice. I shouldn't be nice. I need to be straight with her.

I didn't listen to everything you said, but I believe you've got a great idea. Enormous potential. But I can't help you because you're my niece's friend.

That's more horseshit.

I can't help you because I am having thoughts I shouldn't be having.

Complete mind fuckery.

Dirty thoughts.

You're like a daughter to me. You are a daughter to me.

"Hmm." I nod, moving to sit on the edge of the couch. Tapping the document I'd subconsciously dropped on the table, I look up at the eager faces before me. "I think I should give this a second look."

A smile spreads across their faces and they exchange glances.

"And... since we didn't intend this meeting for business, like Zoya suggested, we can schedule a time to discuss business in a more business setting."

"Oh." Chiluba's face doesn't betray her true emotions, her hands do. They are not still.

Is she excited? Nervous?

"I think that's a good idea." Zoya consents, putting her phone in her purse, before moving to the edge of her seat. "I'm sorry for hijacking you, Uncle Georgie." Wearing a meek smile to placate me for her dubious act. "And thanks a lot for your time."

"So..." Chiluba drawls, smoothening her hair with a triumphant wide smile.

Pulling out a business card from the side of my briefcase, I hand it to her. "Here." She accepts it, turning it this way and that as I speak. "Call my PA. He will schedule a meeting at my earliest convenience."

Licking her lips, Chiluba nods. "Thank you." Then she slips the card into a side zip in her fashionable bag and collects the documents on the table.

I busy myself on my phone, so I'm not tempted to gaze at what I have no business drooling or thinking over.

I'm not some old guy who messes around with young girls. I'm a father. My last daughter should be around Chiluba's age, if not older. And even though I'm warming up to the idea Dáre shared with me earlier, I'll be looking for a more matured woman. A divorcee... or a widow. Not some young girl wet behind the ears, who thinks the world is about her having fun and throwing tantrums when

she doesn't get what she wants.

The evening progresses with Zoya and Chiluba having side discussions, with Chiluba smiling cautiously at me sometimes.

Kids.

You know you were not thinking of her as a child when she innocently leaned forward to show you the document.

More reason I shouldn't encourage her to have anything to do with me. *Will she even be interested in the idea of having me as a partner?* Hmm... I swirl what's left of my drink, watching the girls banter.

She did not react when she caught me staring, which means she is used to being stared at. She is at ease with the effect she has on my kind. That spells out multiple things, with the highest ranking one being that she knows the power her body has and is not against using it.

I've seen how some of my friends—married, separated, divorced, widowed and single ones—complain about their girlfriends and their spending habits. Some are even happy to spend on them. And I've heard the lengths some girls go through to have men like me. I don't give them room, so they can't touch me. But encountering Chiluba has me reconsidering my stance on the issue. She is pretty, no doubt about that, but will also be high maintenance.

When it's time for me to leave, Chiluba turns, and our eyes meet. She brushes a stray strand of hair from her face. "Another thing I haven't mentioned to you this evening is that I have sent a proposal to Silhouette, but I'm yet to hear back. I will really love to have a go at this idea—with your help, I mean. Can I please get your direct contact?"

"Don't worry." I smile, hating myself for withdrawing myself from this young woman's dream because of a new weakness I just discovered in myself. "My PA will ensure everything is set. I need to leave now; you ladies can have anything extra on my tab."

"Thank you, Uncle George." Zoya smiles, getting up to hug me.

"Please, don't hijack me like this next time." I whisper into her ear.

She giggles, withdrawing. "I'm not promising."

"Thank you, Mr.—Uncle George." Chiluba says, flipping her hair before clasping her hands together. The innocent position causes her breasts to jut forward, and I mentally tap myself to concentrate.

"My pleasure." She doesn't stretch her hands, so I continue. "I look forward

to our meeting.” I smile, then walk towards the exit accessible by only premium members of The Deviant.

Dáre is beside me within seconds, his energy contagious. “I told you she was setting you up.”

Shaking my head, I indulge him by listening so him rant and rave about how smart Zoya is. “And that looked like a good one, too.”

The moment we settle into the car, he asks, “So, what’s the plan?”

“If anyone called Chiluba, or anything related to 34 Thread comes up. Please ignore it.”

Chiluba is trouble. I don’t want to bite more than I can chew.

“I-What—”

“I don’t want to know anything about it.” My tone sends the message to him and his countenance changes with an understanding. “This is an order.”

“Okay, sir.”



FIVE

ATELIER 34 THREADS

Chiluba

NO MATTER THE TYPE OF MACHINES I invest in or the ones available at my disposal, whenever I'm in The Sewing Factory, a subsidiary of 34 Threads, nothing beats sitting down on a stool and pedaling a sewing machine. The soothing, rhythmic humming of the machine helps me relax so I can put my thoughts into focus. For me, it has been therapeutic since like forever. It gives me control. Complete control of how fast or slow I want to work. I can pause everything in my life to focus on making a beautiful stitch while organizing my life.

Àbẹbí, my in-house co-designer, and Nathan, the production manager, have been softly laying it that we're running out of fabric. Some investments I made last year have emptied my pockets. Thus, making me scared of incurring more overhead costs. The plan was to upgrade our website, purchase top of-the-range machines, which would increase production, make designing easier and our end-to-end processes running efficiently. But as much as Àbẹbí loves she can now design with a tablet that has a pen, Nathan needs fabric to put everything out.

Once this Silhouette deal goes through, these anxious thoughts will be a thing of the past. It will be a win-win situation for Silhouette and 34 Threads.

Thank you, Jesus!

I didn't know I'd been sitting on gold all along. God knew what he was doing when he made Zoya, and I friends years ago. But really, how come she never mentioned that tidbit of information all these years? Just, *I'm going to visit my cousins*. If I had an uncle as hot as George, I'll also keep him away from others.

The thread breaks from the tension I'd created from my excitement, and I fiddle with the machine, pulling out the cut thread.

Uncle George, or is it, Georgie? I smile, threading the machine as I recall his look from that Saturday. Uncle George has not stuck to his plan. With our impromptu meeting over that weekend, I was thinking he will be eager to speak further about my proposal. The said PA is yet to give me anything tangible.

My phone rings. I glance to find Zoya is calling.

Perfect. The person I need to speak with right now.

"Hey babe," I say as greeting, "what's up?"

"I'm good. Just leaving work. And by the sound of the machines, I'm sure you're in your second office."

I smile, signaling to Vivian, my favorite seamstress, to take over. Getting up, I pick up my phone and remove the measuring tape from my neck, hanging it on the sewing machine. Zoya loves calling this place my second office because I spend more time in The Sewing Factory at Ilupeju than in my boutiques at Ikeja.

"I'm not happy with you, you know." Making my way to my cozy office.

"What did I do?"

"You forgot to add, *again*."

"Jeez... What did I do again?"

Is it really her fault? She has tried the best way she knows how to and even commissioned me to make new dresses for her as punishment for the embarrassment—near-embarrassment—she put me through.

Just follow my lead.

Not wanting to overwhelm, I decide to divert the discussion, at least for now. "You've not been following up with my birthday plans. And you know I really want you to be there."

"My exams—"

"I know you have exams. You're not the only one that went to school *jor*. Please... you know this is the big twenty-seven. I'm entering my late twenties. Eish, I'm getting old."

“Aren’t we all?”

Sighing, I sit on the couch in my office. “We are. It feels like yesterday when I wore that crown.” I had stars in my eyes. Felt I could do anything.

Lifting my legs off the floor, I place them on the couch before tucking one of the colorful Ankara throw pillows between them.

I kiss my teeth. “I need you there oh, because I don’t have one bobo that will ginger me.”

“Zena would be around?”

“Now that you mention her, please turn this to a conference call.”

“Don’t burn my credit, oh. I’m the one that called you *nau*.”

“Calm down *jare*.” I grin.

She dials Zena, who picks instantly.

“Sis...” Zena drawls.

“Luba is on the call.”

“Hey Luby!” Her voice takes on life and I almost feel sorry for Zoya.

“What’s up Zee?”

“I’m bored to tears. NYSC is a scam.”

“Stop complaining.” Zoya starts. “It’s an opportunity for you to meet people. Focus on that and you will not be bored.”

“Maybe she’ll bring husband back home,” I add and Zoya joins me in laughing.

“Whatever.” Zena clears her throat. The joke didn’t go down well with her. “What’s happening?”

“I want to take permission from your *mom* requesting your presence at my birthday, in person.”

“Chiluba.” Zoya drags my name like I’m full of drama.

Eish, I’m trying to be respectful here. I’m asking your sister to travel all the way from Osun to Lag for my birthday. “That’s permission granted, right?”

“You know you don’t need me to give Zena permission to leave her place of primary assignment.”

“I’ll consider that a yes.” I grin. “Zee baby. I’ll send something to your account to help with your movement. Thanks a lot for the planning.”

“Thank you, Luby.” Zena scoffs. “Finally, something to take me out of this godforsaken place.”

“I’m glad I can be of rescue. And now that we have that out, can one of you please supply me with the direct phone number of *Uncle Georgie*?”

“You’ve met with him already?” There’s no masking Zena’s excited voice. “Isn’t he the cutest? Too bad he’s my—”

“Wait. Luba?” Zoya’s voice was low, but it did splendid work shushing Zena. “So, it was Zena who told you about him and not like you read about him in one special magazine like you claim to have done.”

Hold it, Saint patroness Zoya. “I actually read about him in a magazine.”

“Liar.”

I did! “That was after Zena told me about him.” I wasn’t thinking about a company like Silhouette coming to my rescue, but when over one call, I’d complained to Zena about my money problems, she planted an idea and told me her uncle works with Silhouette. I developed the idea into what it is today, a tasty proposal.

“I should have known. Jeez. Luba...”

“Enough. Enough. The deed has been done. Now I need a phone number because I still haven’t been able to get through to him.”

“Call his PA. He gave you his card.”

“You’ve met Uncle Georgie?”

“Finally did last weekend. Thanks to Zoya who didn’t know how to set a proper meeting.”

“I tried and last I checked, you were extra grateful.” Zoya counters. “Even with all the threats.”

“I’m glad you’ve met him.” Zena says. “Sis, I need to go to bed now.”

“It’s just past seven,” I complain. I love spending time with both sisters.

“It’s this town. There’s nothing to do and by 6:30 PM everybody has gone home. To bed. Every day is a routine. It makes me feel old.”

“I feel so honored being the one breaking you out of the routine.”

“Zena, that’s the life.” There Zoya goes again. “You prefer this Lagos stress? I’ve been loitering in the office since five, waiting with my colleague for traffic to reduce.”

“Big sis, that’s the only life I’m used to.”

“Okay...” I start, “Let the babies go to bed. Aunties want to talk adult stuff.”

Zena giggles, bidding us good night, even as I reassure her of the alert she will get later tonight or early tomorrow morning.

I sigh, already missing Zena. “Why exactly did you call me again?”

“Hallelujah. You remember I’m the one that placed the call when you were just gallivanting and dominating the call—call this, do that. My birthday this. Oh that. Like we will not celebrate another birthday next year.”

“Thank you, Madam Zo.”

She sighs fondly. “Was just checking on you. It’s still not a crime to do that, yeah?”

“Aww... thank you. So, what’s up? How about the phone number?”

“You know I shouldn’t be doing that. I’ll be breaking his trust in me.”

“He’s too cute to be angry with you.”

“Cute?”

Did I let that slip?

Silence meets her question.

“Don’t tell me you’re tripping for him.”

“Me?” There’s no way I should be thinking about him. But I have. Over the weekend. Not about how cute he looked with his sleeves rolled up, exposing his arms or how he sometimes taps his knee when reflecting and processing his thoughts. No. I’ve been thinking of... how great our partnership could be. “Have you seen me spend time with old men? *Abeg*. They don’t have my energy. Can’t match it.”

Funsho has been sending me messages non-stop, but I don’t want to wear Zoya off with his gist. His problem is not my problem.

“And Uncle George is young, o. Quite active for his age.”

“Hmm. Please Ehizoya. I need his number like yesterday.”

“I’ll send it after this call—”

“You’re the best!”

She chuckles. “Find a way not to let him know I gave you oh.”

“Okay. Okay.” *Like he won’t know how I got it. If he asks, then he is older*

than I imagined.

“Please. I’m serious here, Luba.”

“Alright, just send it.”

“I will.”

“Thank you.” I say, cracking a smile.

I am about getting off the couch to return to the sewing floor when my phone vibrates with a message from Zoya.

Yes! Yes! Yes! I do a victory dance and when I’m exhausted, I blankly stare at the phone number on my screen. How do I go about this? A text? Call? It will be strange calling him unexpectedly. Personally, I don’t accept calls from strange phone numbers.

6:21 PM

Chiluba: Hello, it’s Chiluba.

There’s an emergency.

Please call me back once you see this.

I’m back on the sewing machine, sewing discarded fabric together, thinking of what to do with the phone number if he doesn’t call back. *I should have asked for his house address—*

The buzzing of my iPhone 4S alerts me to an incoming call. It’s Uncle George’s number! I get off the stool, stretch my back, take a deep breath, then accept the call as I walk to the privacy of my office.

“Hello, good evening, George.” My voice is firm and all business.

“Good evening Chiluba. Anything wrong with Zoya?”

Of course, you must be calling for Zoya, not my welfare.

“No.” *Such a caring uncle.* “It’s just that there’s something wrong with your personal assistant’s adeptness.”

He sighs.

I envision him in another shirt with sleeves rolled up because it’s the end of the day. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh. He hasn’t told you?” There’s a bite in my voice I can’t hold back. “I’ve been trying to reach out to you, but he’s been deflecting my calls.”

“I told him to do that.”

Ehn? Oo chimoo. Narrowing my eyes, trying to make sense of why he would do that, I gently sit my ass on the couch I’d been happily throwing jabs with my friends earlier. “Oh wow.”

“Is that all? I have a busy day.”

“Why would you tell him to do that?” I hate that my voice is awfully tense and low as I ask him these questions. “Did I do anything wrong? Is it because Zoya—because we didn’t organize or arrange an official meeting to meet with you?”

“None of that. Personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons?” My voice rises a notch. “I thought we were getting along fine?”

“Chiluba, it’s not you, its—”

“No, don’t do that.” It’s not like I’ve never been turned down in my life. But this feels different. I knew we had a vibe going on Saturday. “Please don’t. What do you want?”

“Want?” His voice sounds incredulous.

Like I can’t give him anything.



SIX

HARD COMPONENTS

Chiluba

I SHRUG. “I KNOW HOW THESE things go.” Let’s see if he would fall...
“It’s because I’m Zoya’s friend, yeah?”

Is that a choking sound from his end? Which of the ambiguous meaning of my question did he pick up on?

“Chiluba,” he hesitates, “what are you insinuating?”

“Nothing. I just want to know if there are other ways I am not seeing... other ways I could have used to get through to you.”

A long sigh comes from his end, and I close my eyes, praying he doesn’t turn out to be the man I initially assumed him to be.

“I don’t function that way. And that’s not the right way to do things.”

A breath I didn’t know I was holding unfurls from my chest, causing me to feel lighter. I swallow, conjuring words, tossing them, sieving through the remnants.

“George, I know you like me.” He didn’t look like he did the other evening, mostly indifference, only lighting up when we spoke fabrics. But has any man not liked me?

He scoffs. “Chiluba—”

Yes! A smile escapes me. “It will be our little secret. Don’t worry, I don’t roll with elderly men. I only need you to really look at what I’m proposing. Organize a meeting for me to meet with your team and—”

“You’re blackmailing me?”

I can feel the smile in his voice. “I’m a desperate woman and you have what I need.”

“Uh huh. And what is that?”

“A business partnership.”

“Alright.”

Alright? “That’s it? And you’ve been avoiding me?”

Another deep breath from his end. “I’m tight for the rest of the week. Are you available this weekend?”

“Sure—I mean yes.” Getting up, I begin pacing my office, excited at the opportunity to pitch again. And... confirm if indeed he’s that composed and good to look at a second time around.

“Good. The Anchorage, Radisson Blu.”

“Radisson—what do you take me for?” Comes out of my lips before I think through my words. I must be dreaming. Stopping in my tracks, I look heavenward briefly. “Are you serious?”

“You’re no longer interested?” He sounds genuinely concerned.

Eish. This man doesn’t know who he is messing with. Uncle or no uncle, I will not take this kind of insult. Meet you at Radisson Blu. *Ināanukwa m!*

“I thought we just had an understanding. Because I want to partner with you, of which will profit you, I should come to your hotel room?” *Ahūla m ekwensu.* All men are the same! All men are scum! How did this conversation go from partnership discussion to hotel room?

“Hotel room? I never mentioned a hotel room in this discussion.”

“Then I was born today.” I scoff, resuming my pacing. “Isn’t Radisson Blu a hotel?”

I hear stifled laughter from his end, and I wish, oh God, I wish I was right there with him so I can strangle him, laughing into those mesmerizing eyes of his.

Clearing my throat, I continue, as I am now on a roll. I need to set him

straight. “See George, you are actually not bad looking.” My calm, controlled voice belittling the rage boiling in me. “But old men like you are not my type. It’s okay if you like me, however when it comes to business, please, please, please—I wasn’t born yesterday. I’m not some hungry chewing gum girl, infatuated by empty promises. This is business.”

He is chuckling.

Like for real. He is.

Argh! This is funny, eh?

“Are you done ranting?” he asks.

No, I am not! I pause my pacing again. *I’m not, I just started*, staring blankly at the wall. I’m sure my heavy breathing is enough answer for him.

“Chiluba, I live at the Anchorage.”

“You live there?”

“Yes.” He chuckles. “If you’re going to be this fun when we meet without an audience, I’m so sorry for avoiding you. Like I said, if you’re up for it, I can make time for this weekend at the restaurant.”

“The res-restaurant?” *I thought you said Radisson Blu. Why are you toying with me? Is this something you do for fun?*

“I’ll be counting the minutes to till we meet again. Goodnight.”

The beeping sound that signals the call has ended brings me back to the present.

What just happened? What game is he trying to play?

Meet him at the restaurant, and from there he would head to his room to see something, and just like he has been avoiding me, he would have his way with me and then I will be on the total ban list.

Radisson Blu, my ass!

Old scallywag trying to access a fresh blood like me.

If I’m up for it...

I’ll never be up for that. Never! *Anuofia...*

I am a queen. And queens are not up for such. They control things. Not the other way around.

Ignoring the other side of my brain that’s excited he didn’t deny his attraction to me, I walk to the bathroom to ease my bladder, still glaring at my phone. The

door handle doesn't give when I try it the second time, and in my mood, I'm tempted to kick the damn thing to the floor.

I try again, only to look up to see an A4 paper on it.

**Currently
Out Of
Service.**

Argh!

What nonsense? I can't use the bathroom in my office? Turning to the second bathroom door, I try the handle and it works fine, but that's until I try to flush and tissue paper soaking up my pee stares back at me.

Almost stomping my feet, I get out of the bathroom and find a bowl in the sink. It takes four trips—four bowls of water from the sink to flush to my satisfaction.

Argh!

"Şolá!" I call out as I make my way to the sewing floor. I know 34 Threads is struggling to stay above the waves, but we've not cut cost on operating expenses yet *nau*.

"Madam Chi." Şolá appears before me, smiling at first, then bemused at my expression. I must be a sight.

"What's happening?" Because words struggle to form, I point. "The bathroom."

He scratches the back of his head, looking apologetic. "The plumbing in one bathroom is bad and I've been trying to contact the plumber."

"It's not one. It's both. The water—it is not flushing." I grunt, forcing the words out. "The second bathroom is not flushing."

"Ah..." He looks at me like I've grown three heads.

"Şolá, what is it?" Folding my arms, I expect something that has to do with funds.

"The miscellaneous money will not cover the cost of doing both."

"Did you send an invoice that was rejected?"

"No ma, but—"

“See, I’m having a bad evening.” Make that day. Week self. Because I’m only just finding out George has been avoiding me. “I’m sorry if I’m sounding a little off, but please get these bathrooms back in order. How would the night shift people ease themselves if the bathrooms are not functioning?”

“I’m sorry ma.”

“No need. Just do it.” I begin walking back to my office, but his voice stops me.

“But the accountant—”

The protocol for invoicing and all that is to send your bill to the accountant, the accountant sends it to me, then I approve it and everybody is fine. This is an emergency; it can’t wait until tomorrow. Happy seamstresses equals happy dresses. “I’ll send him a message.”

He stands, waiting, but I wave a hand. “I’ll place the message. Go...” Gesturing for him to continue whatever he was doing before my tirade.

Scrolling through my phone to fulfil my promise, it vibrates and before I check who is calling, in my excitedness, I hit the answer button, and the call screen disappears. *George calling back?*

But the voice that comes through is one I’ve been avoiding since the weekend. “Aunty Chiluba, good evening ma.”

I hold back a frustrated sigh. “Good evening, Nneka.” Trying to sound more cheerful than I feel.

“How are you?”

“I am fine. And you? How is everyone?”

Her sigh is one that foretells the sad story she’s about to tell me.

“Nneka, what is it?”

“Maama said I should not tell you, but things are getting bad here already and I think I should let you know.”

“How bad is it?” As usual, she rarely calls with good news.

“Very bad.” She sighs again. Sniffing? “*Daadi* is sick. He just woke up with this pain on his left side and he couldn’t move or see clearly. People from church have come to pray for him, but nothing is happening yet. He’s still laying on the bed and cannot move. They say it is stroke. Maama has bought all the drugs they prescribed, and everything together—I don’t think it is working.”

Nothing will work because the devil has come to collect his own.

I swallow. “Hmm...” Pretending to ruminate on her report. My blood brothers and sister will never call me in this type of situation. It’s because Nneka is only fourteen and doesn’t know the havoc the man ‘we’ call *Daadi* committed in the lives of his first family. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, auntie.”

“Don’t worry about it, okay? I’ll call Maama.”

“Okay auntie.”

“And be a good girl.”

“Yes, auntie.”

“*Ehen*, do whatever she tells you to do, *kwo*?”

“Yes, auntie.”

Ending the call with Nneka, I walk briskly to the privacy of my office to put a call through to my mom. The woman who, after everything life threw at her, using this man she calls her husband, she still stands by him. Even when his family members ganged up against her, when the man was acting like a child that didn’t like his new toy, she was still in support of him.

“Hello ma.”

“Chiluba...” Her greeting threatens to thaw my frozen heart.

“Maama, yes or no, that is the only answer I want right now. Did you or did you not spend part of the money I sent to you last month on that man?”

“Chiluba, to forgive is—”

“Ehn ehn. Maama, don’t start that one with me today. Ahn ahn. What is all this nonsense now? I sent money for your upkeep and the children’s upkeep. Nothing about that man concerns me. Nothing about him should concern you, too. But no, you choose to carry everyone’s problem on your head.”

“Chiluba *biko*—”

“Ehn ehn. I’m going to send you another one this weekend, if you like, spend it on him. Don’t take care of yourself.”

To be sincere, I don’t know if I am sending it for her or for him because I know she will still spend it on him. There is this thing about people you love and you just sometimes wish you can shake sense into them.

“I am taking care of myself. Thank you, my daughter.”

“*Toh*. I have said my own. If you like, spend it on him.”

“How are you? How is Lagos and your business?”

“Fine. Fine, ma.” I have nothing to say. I just want to go back to a sewing machine and stew about everything that has happened within the last thirty minutes—the last eight months. I wish I can travel outside the country, not to run away from my problems but to have a breath of new air. But I’m broke.

Stupid broke. Running on fumes.

My account doesn’t have to be empty for me to be broke.

I swallow, pressing my lips together, holding back tears of frustration. “I wanted to greet you.” My voice sounds foreign to me because I feel hollow on the inside.

“Thank you, my daughter. God bless you and the work of your hand. May you not beg or borrow. It is well with you...” Her prayer continues and I answer ‘amen’ with my mouth but my heart is thinking of how much I love her... wondering what kind of love she has for the man she’s with and how she can find a place in her heart to care for someone who after years of neglect, abandoned her and their four children to follow another woman. Only to return years later with another child and a wheelbarrow filled with irritating *sorrys*.



SEVEN

INVISIBLE AVATAR

Chiluba

“NO. NO. NO, NO!” SLAPPING A hand on my table. *Why? Why now?* It is almost twenty-four hours since I got that call from my half-sister with the first bad news. Now this.

I hear approaching footsteps and I look up to find Àbẹ̀bí scrambling into my office, curious, wondering what caused my outbursts.

Pressing my lips together, I make a suppressed guttural groan. *Calm down, Luba... Calm down...* I can be dramatic just like people say, but there is always a reason for it. Like now.

“What is it?” Àbẹ̀bí asks in her slightly American accented voice, looking from me to the desktop I’m glaring at.

Poking my tongue into my cheek, I blink multiple times before blowing air through my mouth. “Have you checked your email this afternoon?”

“No...” she drawls, carefully walking to my side of my table so she can see what has me in a twist.

I stare in despair at my laptop screen, navigating with my mouse to the top of the email. “Come. Come and read for yourself.”

She stands behind my seat, breathing heavily down my neck, muttering the

words to herself as she skims through the email delivered less than five minutes ago. On a normal day, the hot breath she's blowing down my neck will irritate and I'll even excuse myself so she can sit and read, but today doesn't feel so normal.

Her mutterings stop abruptly. "They're-they're-they're canceling on us?" She stutters, standing upright. "This is insane. Wh-wh-why would they do that?"

Didn't you see their reason in the email? "I thought we came to an agreement that the extras we sent were to be placed on our own tab?"

Dress 'n' Tees is a top clothing store in the country, and we help them create separates for their private labels. We've been working with them for a year now and they're one of our best sources of income. They've been keeping us afloat for the past months because they make huge deposits when placing a request.

"And now they're saying we made errors with th-th-th-theirs, sending more Smalls and using our Mediums to replace theirs. How is this norm-normal?" Àbèbí walks to the side of the table, then folds her hands. "That's, that's pre-prespoterous!"

She almost bit her tongue pronouncing preposterous, and it makes me smile fondly at her. Àbèbí stammers whenever she's emotional—excited, anxious, angry, name it. She told me it was worse growing up, but her parents, bless their souls, had enrolled her for speech therapy when she was younger. It helped a lot, but sometimes, the words don't come as fast as she wishes them.

Glaring at me, she places a hand on her chin. "What's funny in this situation? Why are you laughing?" Her serious, thoughtful gaze tells me I'm not taking this situation seriously.

"Àbèbí, it's pre-pos-te-rous."

"Whatever." Waving the arm she had under her jaw and returning it to be folded on her tummy. "You know what I'm trying to say."

Nodding, I push back my chair, staring at the screen again. All playfulness and lightness gone. Back is the ever-increasing worry, the nagging voice in my head telling me how different this story would have been if I hadn't invested in —*hmm mmh. I need to think of a solution. Not wallow in had I known and what ifs.* "I can't deal with them. This is beyond me. I'm not working with them again."

When she is calm, she asks, "Are we going to accept the stock when they send them back?"

Shaking my head but answering, “Yes.” *What other choice do we have?*

“Luba.” She moves closer, placing both hands on the table's edge, leaning forward, her accented voice an octave louder. “We were banking on the funds from them. What do we do with the returns?”

Questions upon questions that I have no answer to.

Looking away, I glance at my open door that offers a glimpse of the sewing floor, the sound of running machines, and quiet banter going around. Something in my heart flutters.

What if I lose everything I have dreamed to life? These people depend on me. John walks by, smiling, and I remember what led me to hire him as the head tailor and operations manager whom the seamsters and seamstresses look up to. A Business Administration university graduate I met during an outreach I collaborated with my church, for youths interested in learning a skill. He'd been so helpful, so when I found out months later he was still unemployed, I hired him.

Àbẹ̀bí clicks her tongue, drawing my attention back to her. “And they were doing so well with sales.”

“They were.”

“You really don't want to work with them again?”

“I don't.” Getting up from my chair, I walk till I stop in front of her. “They are too flighty and picky. We need people that trust us, not people that don't trust themselves.”

“So, what's the plan?” Àbẹ̀bí looks like she needs me to toss a rope, or give a sign that we will recover from this scary—hole, that is trying to bury all our dreams alive. “I'm yet to see any bundle of fabric for them to work on.”

“Don't worry, I will sort all this out soon. Just,” I straighten her shoulders, “Do what you do best. Keep designing.” I offer a smile I pray doesn't betray the queasiness in my tummy. If ever there was an entrepreneur's nightmare, it was letting go of employees, because the company cannot afford to keep them anymore.

Àbẹ̀bí looks me in the eye, concern lacing her voice. “Luba. How are you?”

“I'll be fine.” Forcing another smile, trying to avoid her gaze. “I'm working on something.”

“Do you-do you need my—”

Withdrawing my hands from her shoulder, I turn her to face the door. “You're

only paid to design here.” Placing my hand on her shoulders, gently pushing her towards the door. “When I need therapy, I’ll find a therapist.”

She chuckles, enjoying the push because she’s leaning into it, and I smile warmly.

“About the Arise Magazine Fashion Week.” She turns to face me. “We’re covered. Just need to confirm logistics regarding who would drop off the clothes at the Federal Palace Hotel the day before the event starts.”

Àbẹ̀bí... you’re a lifesaver! “And the models? Do we have enough? And can we cover their costs?”

“Yes, we do. Yes we can.”

“You have someone who will do justice to the Jellosimi gown?” I don’t want to worry, but there’s a lot to do at once.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got this.”

“Time to go,” I announce when we get to the door, and she’s still chuckling.

“One more thing, someone from MTN reached out about the Lagos Fashion Design Week in October.”

“MTN is sponsoring it?”

She shrugs.

“Okay Madam.” She turns and mock salutes me, before heading to her office.

I shut the door, lean on it, and look up at the ceiling.

Thank God rent is covered for the next year. Breathe Luba, breathe... Ten, nine, eight... zero.

As I countdown to mellow my heart rate, I think of the alternative who’d pissed me off yesterday with his suggestion. I’d spent the night tossing and turning our conversation from one angle to the other, wondering if he’d said hotel room or not. The conversation escalated so fast, I saw red. All my insecurities unleashing—the way people assume I am a bimbo or figurehead, who follows men for money.

Would it be so bad to meet him there? What if Zoya gets wind of it and starts thinking otherwise? Zoya is not like that. Nah...

Sighing, I make my way to my table, pick up my phone and send him a message, hoping he doesn’t respond so I can graciously bow out of the fix I’m putting myself in.

4:17 PM

Chiluba: Saturday, what time?

Zoya needs to be aware of this latest update. *Yes? No?* Would she be following me for the meeting? Am I supposed to invite her since she introduced me to him? How do I start the call?

Hey babes. Remember your Oyibo Uncle George we went to see?... Yes, that one... I think he is propositioning me... You don't believe it?... Same here... if you don't mind coming with me for a meeting with him at the hotel so you know—or should I just focus on whatever happens and wait for whenever his people respond to me?

I dial her number, still contemplating how to start the conversation. It rings three times before she picks.

“Hey babes, what’s up?” Trying to make my voice as light as can be.

“Oh... thank God.” She’s breathless. “You called at the perfect time.”

I’m glad I did. “What’s happening? How is work? You got the promotion?”

“It’s not work. It’s...”

Has *Uncle Georgie* called her, telling her everything we discussed yesterday? Confirming to her I’m a loose girl? I know people disapprove of our friendship—Zoya is a church girl compared to me. *Eissh.* I’m losing track of this conversation. “I didn’t hear that. Speak louder.”

She sighs. “It’s Manir.”

Oh. Your social media boyfriend that is practically your boyfriend, but you’re deceiving yourselves saying you’re not dating. “What about him?” I sit on my chair, swiveling it left and right.

Should I tell her about Uncle George? I think I should confirm if the Radisson Blu stuff is true. It’ll help me know what I’m walking into. *Should I?*

“I don’t know if I’m making the right choice, but I think I like him and I’m having thoughts of maybe—don’t laugh, o—dating him.”

I giggle.

Okay... this is a wonderful distraction.

My giggle turns into a full laughing fit.

Zoya doesn’t need to add my issues to her plate. She is having relationship issues already and I’m the least of her troubles. I’ll tell her how the meeting went

down.

She hisses. “I thought I told you not to laugh.”

“I’m sorry.” I say, trying to catch my breath. “*Shebi*, he’s just a friend? What is—what is happening?” I ask as new laughing fits threaten to consume me.

Zoya is obviously not in the right frame of mind for me to tell her about her uncle and me.

“Nothing is happening. And that’s the problem.”

“My candid advice to you is to enjoy the attention while it lasts.”

She hisses. “I don’t know why I bothered calling you.”

“Babe. I called you.” I chuckle.

“Duh. Simple advice you cannot give. You’re laughing.”

“Zo, I can’t tell you who to date or who not to date. All I’m advising you to do is... to do your research well and let him work for *it*.”

Since that’s what most Lagos men are concerned with these days. They talk about needing an independent woman to spend the rest of their lives with, but none of them wants a steady relationship where the lady is progressing. Only to *chuk* their penis inside *toto* they know.

“Eww.”

“I trust you now... you’re a good girl. If you let your pant drop, *kperere*, make sure he has worked for it so at least you don’t feel used when it’s done and—”

“Thank you. Thank you.”

“What? You asked, I’m dishing.”

“Ehn... I get the picture, thank you.”

“You still haven’t done *it*?” I grin, wondering how this lady holds on to control. I’ve seen pictures of that Manir guy and oh! That visit she went for the other day, I would have lost my virginity with him, were I her.

“You know I’m waiting for the right person.” She giggles. “Wedding night things.”

I said the same thing growing up, but at age nineteen I had my first experience. *Hoo la la*. I’m not changing that for anything.

“Don’t worry. I’m here to cheer you on.” What are friends for? “That’s why I need to vet this guy, o.”

“Sorry for dominating the call.” She chuckles. “Like I was the one that placed

it.”

“It’s all right.” Picking a blue marker.

“So, why did you call?”

“What? I can’t just call you out of the blue?” I smile, tapping the marker on the table. *When all these dies down... I will tell you why I called.*

“Are you sure?”

“I am. By the way, I sent Zena the money.”

“You spoil her.”

“Rich aunty vibes.” We both laugh.

“How is your mom? Hearing from her?”

My high spirit dampens a notch. “Yes. I spoke with her yesterday and she’s doing fine.”

“Okay...” she whispers. “I need to go now. Madam Nelly is heading my way.”

This might later bite me, but I don’t want to plant an idea in her mind that I’m not even sure of. There is Àbẹbí, and my entire staff I need to consider.

Good thing I don’t have man troubles like Zoya. What I need now is a man with a bag load of money, ready to help me nurture my business not some insecure boy, posing as a man, like my recent ex, Funsho.

Funsho—daddy’s boy, serial entrepreneur, wanna-be politician, and CEO of one of the happening clubs in Lagos—he was all about the fact that I love money and my passion too much and that I’d accomplished enough to relax and spend time with him. Let him take care of me.

Spend what?

Take care of who?

He knew how passionate I was about this life before I agreed to be his girlfriend. He thought spoiling me with my love language—gifting—will change my mind about things, but everybody knows my middle name is Chiluba ‘Money’ Immaculate Ndukwe.

My love for money differs from the reason you love money. You haven’t seen what my eyes have seen or felt half of what I have felt. Oh... the things I’ve done to avoid the game, so it doesn’t affect my relationships.

At this point in my life, there’s no need being in a relationship because some

men I've dated in the past, like Funsho—I don't know why I'm attracted to his type—they see me as a threat. Either I'm too ambitious or... I don't have their time. Aren't they supposed to be my solace?

My comfort place?

But after a long day at work or time spent travelling, they expect me to visit them, cook for them and have sex with them. When all I really want to do is skip the cooking part and just have sex.

Sex is an exercise I doubt I'll ever tire of.

The first boy I had sex with did a great job and yes, all those romance novels Zoya and I read—*ewish*, empowering erotic romance novels—taught me most of what I knew. They painted a picture of what an experience should look like, and I've experienced the erotic part, I just need the romance part so the experience will be supercharged.

All these thoughts about sex have me moving uncomfortably on my seat. It's been over a month since Funsho. I need to get laid ASAP. Or should I go for breakup sex?

Mba. No.

What of George? He likes you, o.

I cover my mouth with my hands, stifling my giggle. *Before Àbẹbí comes in here, asking what has me twisted again.*

Mr. George is not such a terrible option, just that I don't want to call the paramedics when I'm done with him.

My phone vibrates and I pick it up from the table.

Talk of the devil.

5:12 PM

Zoya's Uncle: Surface Bar & Grill, Radisson Blu Anchorage Waterfront.

5PM.

Dress code: Whatever you like.

An exhilarating tremor runs through me as I read the message repeatedly, but I shove it aside. Even though I am allergic to poverty and have not slept with a man for assistance, I will not start now. I will not let my fear of being broke control me.

My mind drifts, against my will, to the time our eyes met after he complimented my dress. To the times I knew his eyes were guzzling me up like a drink handed to him after a long day in the desert. Or maybe it's me overthinking it. The man had a deadpan expression for most of the evening.

Hmm... I'll have to play him to my tune. In this partnership, I need him more than he needs me. I need to know how and when to play my fiddle, so I have him dancing to my tune.

I know just what to do!

Grinning, I sigh, sitting up. Now that I've thought my strategy through, it's time to think of what to wear. Something that will have his head spinning. He'd have no choice but to say yes to everything I say.

Nothing ashy, simply classy.

He's more of a fabrics guy so...

Aha!

I make a mental note to check the display room after work. Let's see if there is anything—silk or satin—that will work magic and have the man changing his mind about working with me.

Yeah!

It's going down this weekend!

OceanofPDF.com



EIGHT

AVANT-GARDE

George

TUCKED IN THE CORNER OF THE waterfront restaurant with orange and cream throw pillows stacked on both sides of the three-seater outdoor chair, my heart beats faster in excitement as an African Princess draped in an elegant floor-length flowing magenta lilac fabric walks out to the deck behind a waiter. The slit of the gown starts mid-thigh, making her legs look even longer. And in silver six-inch heels, she looks like she's drifting in space. Her hair is loosely packed up, exposing her beautifully arched and glossy neck that reflects radiance under the evening sun.

With the help of the wafting cool breeze from the waterfront, each step she takes makes the magenta fabric mold into her skin. Hips swaying to music, her body secretly plays. The keyhole neckline of the fabric leaves out ample cleavage, and it's enough for me to conclude she loves flaunting her breasts.

They are beautiful. She should be proud of them.

Heads turn as she passes by and my heart beats furiously, like a rock concert has taken control, knowing she took her time, carefully selecting each piece of her outfit to meet with me.

"Thank you," she murmurs to the departing waiter as I rise to welcome her.

“*Mijn lieve.*”

When I place an arm on her satin-smooth shoulder that blends so easily with the satin fabric beneath my fingers to exchange cheek kisses, the fresh, sweet, heady scent of lilacs hits my nostrils, sending a measure of blinding arousal through me, and clings to the air.

To take my mind off the unexpected arousal clawing at me, I focus on her scent. *Different from the one she'd used last Saturday. Must be a mood thing.*

As we sit, I detect anxiety beneath her natural looking makeup and flawless façade. “Thanks for honoring my invitation.”

“And thanks for having me.”

We smile and her words start taking on another meaning. *Harboring such thoughts about this young lady is not healthy!* “Are you interested in placing an order?”

“Just drinks.”

I raise a brow.

She smiles, highlighting a small crease at the edge of her lips. “For now. We’ll eat after.”

“Works for me. White wine?” I ask, pointing to the bottle I’d been nursing before her arrival. “This one is sweet.”

“Alright.”

While I pour from the bottle into a balloon wine glass for her, she wastes no time setting up to present her idea or, if I recall correctly, ideas. She brings out a folder from her bag and hands me a light file.

Leaning back gracefully, she folds her hands on her knees. “I updated some information from the last time.”

So much class oozing from her, yet there’s this telltale sensual wildness she exudes. It’s the perfect combo every sane man craves, a lady in public but a courtesan in private.

“You did...” Nodding slowly as I raise my head from the document, my eyes meet her unblinking stare. *Oh Luba... This is not right.* I am a grown man, not a young boy who can’t control his hormones and senses around an attractive woman. “Give me a moment to peruse, and I’ll share my thoughts.”

After several sips of wine and flipped pages, I know with a tweak here and there, we have something grand to present to the market. It’s promising... And

the name? That's something I'm deeply interested in.

"Lucid by Silhouette." I nod, offering her a proud and unflinching glance. "Remarkable." Closing the file.

It is subtle, but I notice the euphoric sigh of relief she heaved. In the guise of sipping her wine and enjoying the beautiful sight of the infinity pool before the waterfront, she had been examining me while I browsed the file.

"You said you sent this to the company?" I ask, handing her the document.

She nods, accepting the document. "Yes, I did. I mailed the documents to the head office."

"Please send the electronic copy and—"

"George."

The firm sound of my name on her sinful lips stops me in my tracks. I instinctively widen my eyes in appreciation.

"No more games, please." She continues, unconscious of the effect she has on my senses. "If I'm sending it to you right now, I need you to give me the email address of your business development officer or something. Zoya isn't here for you to play nice. You said it is remarkable and I believe you see its potential. If it's something you're not interested in at the moment—because I need it implemented as soon as possible—let me know, so I can look for an alternative, interested partner."

A fresh form of respect for her grows as her unblinking eyes dares me to play her for a fool again.

Impressed, I pick the bottle of wine and begin refilling her wine glass. "First you ambushed me." She tilts her head slightly to the side as I list her atrocities. "Next you tried blackmailing me."

Her eyes twinkle with mirth.

"Now you're threatening me."

She chuckles softly, the sound merry and wholehearted. Makes me feel that outside this setting, if we ever get to know each other beyond this, it won't be as contained as it is now.

"It's not a threat. I go for what I like." She picks her refilled wine glass. "Thank you." Then continues her rationale. "And I believe the same applies to you."

"Hmm." I glance at her, then the file on the table. "For me, not every time."

But in this case, I think it's well deserving."

"I'm glad we're on the same page. Excuse me." She types on her phone, then hands it to me. The screen shows an email being composed. "Please insert the email addresses, including yours."

She's playing tough.

Accepting the device, I input the information and hand it back to her. She scans it. Smiles. Types some more, then looks at me.

"Please confirm you received it."

A flickering gaze to my phone confirms I have.

"Now I need you to please respond to the email and give... give them an ultimatum to get the ball rolling as soon as possible." Speaking in an equitable and utterly reasonable tone, like she has a gun to my head. Just a little show of weakness I refused to admit to and she's acting like a lord over me.

"And you say this isn't some sort of blackmail?"

Her mouth edges up in a half smile but her worried eyes make me wonder, why the hurry?

A mobile device vibrates.

I watch as she looks at her phone and smiles.

When she looks up at me, the twinkling brightness of her eyes becomes something I always want to remember. I want to store it up in a bottle and look at it on days when I feel depressed or lonely.

Since we met, I've been thinking... a lot.

About my life. Dáre's comment... and about Luba—Chiluba.

"So, when do I come in to sign the papers and do all the paperwork?" She asks, placing the proposal files into its folder.

"Not so fast."

She stiffens, her expression changing so fast—like a sunny day that has been attacked with dark, gloomy clouds. "What is holding us back now?"

Us... "I understand you have an idea of how business works—"

She scoffs. "Have an idea? Please don't insult me. I've been running my company for over four years."

"I'm sorry. That came out wrong." *Just like the thoughts I have about us...*

She gives me a pointed look, pursing her lips.

“Ah-em.” I clear my throat, refilling my wine glass. “There are several eyes that’ll need to look at the documents. Plus, my lawyer—our lawyers need to go through whatever you present. Risk assessment. All of that.”

A new light comes to her eyes as realization dawns on her. “Oh... yes.”

“I’m sure you’ll understand if things don’t go as fast as you expect. But I assure you, the processes will be fast and smooth.”

“Hmm...” Her expression is skeptical.

“On my word.”

She sighs in acceptance. “Cheers.” Raising her wine glass with a straining smile that does not reach her eyes.

I raise my wine glass, smiling, observing her as she takes a long sip. There’s a weariness in those eyes I want to understand. I’m tempted to push, but now is not the time.

Turning my head to the view of the Lagos lagoon, a calmness envelopes me and I want to share it with her. Maybe it can do her some good.

“Look.” I point to the lagoon beyond the infinity pool. The setting sun, with a fiery deep orange glow, strikes light rays into the water, giving an outstanding silhouette of Lagos Island, using the buildings as backdrop to the shimmering, burning water.

She gasps. “It’s beautiful.”

Observing her, I watch the sinking, burning glow through her eyes. She’s smiling serenely at the view. Her exposed skin glows wherever the sun kisses it, leaving a golden honey-like appearance in its wake. Skin so sexily smooth, I want to run my hands on them, then breathe in their fragrance.

Clearing my throat, I pick up my glass of wine. “Now that we’re done with business, can we move on to another interesting topic?”

“Topic like?” She turns to me, a residue of her sunset lit smile still on her lips.

I can’t hold back my smile as I relax into my seat. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Is this an interview?” She smiles coquettishly.

“First time we met, I was curious about you on a personal level. But we were a crowd.”

“By crowd,” she smirks, “you mean your niece was present?”

“Are you intentionally trying to make this difficult for me?”

“Do you find anything difficult?”

I laugh, already finding pleasure in this banter. “You’re a true Nigerian. Answering a question with a question.” I look at the water, blanketed by darkness. *How time flies*. She doesn’t seem in a hurry, so we can enjoy our company further. “Ready to place that order? Cause I’m famished.”

“I am.”

Signaling a nearby waiter, we place orders for *suya*, *dodo*, salad, and some cheese. Once the waiter leaves, I continue from where we left off. “I’m still curious about you. Please tell me the basics. Let’s start from there.”

She traces a finger over the rim of her wine glass. “Let’s see.” Her eyes take on a wistfully reminiscent look. “I am the second of four children. My mom is a tailor and a seamstress. I ushered for a while.” She smiles as she explains the concept. “Not in church. I always looked for events where I could dress up, wear high heels and help guests. I always made sure I attended classy events and with time...” She shrugs. “It was only natural for them to assign me to those types of events. A guest noticed me, signed me up for a couple of pageanttries. At nineteen, I won the Miss Amity. Saw what I could offer the industry. Started my business when I was twenty. And... you basically know other stuff about my business.”

“I do. So... is there any man in the picture?”

She sucks in the inside of her mouth as she smiles. “You’re not subtle, are you?”

“Life is too short. How else would I have been successful building Silhouette from ground up?”

She smiles faintly. “I can’t believe we’ve been answering questions with questions.”

Have we?

“I’m getting better with age. I had to learn it from my wife.” I smile fondly. “She taught me how to be more Nigerian than I would have ever learnt on my own.”

She nods, locking her gaze with mine. “How is she doing?”

Um... “Zoya didn’t tell you?”

“The only conversation we’ve had about you is of her introducing me to you.”

You didn’t discuss my personal life? Zoya didn’t tell you about my wife?

She makes to take a sip of her wine but pauses in motion, staring innocently at me. “Um... am I missing something? Are you okay?”

I blink. “No. It’s fine. It’s not her place to tell you.”

She cocks her head to the side, her ear to me. “That...”

“I’m a widower.”

Singed, she quickly drops her wine glass on the table, leaning forward. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Thank you.” I force a smile. *Don’t feel guilty because you’re spending time with another woman and enjoying it.* “She died in her sleep. Cardiac arrest.” Staring blankly into space, my eyes on her, trying not to feel. “Nothing we could do to save her.”

It is when I feel her comforting hand on mine that I blink back into focus.

She smiles courteously, her voice a notch lower and understanding. “It is fine if you don’t want to talk about it.”

Pulling my hand from hers, not wanting pity, I wear a grateful smile. “It’s been over eight years. I’m over it.”

The waiter returns with our orders, I guess he senses the melancholic mood because he is reluctant to set the table. I flick my wrist for him to assemble the meal. When he’s done, I tell Luba she can start on her meal, while I take a long gulp of my drink.

“I’m sorry I brought that up.” She’s gazing at me with something akin to understanding, not pity.

The little blessings. “If we’ll be spending more time together like I’ve imagined, then it was inevitable. Don’t feel sorry. Go on, eat.” I gesture to the meal.

She wants to object, but I soften my tone with a smile. “My wife’s passing... I see it as something that makes me question life and the complexities that come with it.”

“I know. I kind of understand how you feel. My father was absent for most of my life. We all knew where he was, but he was never there for us. Except for our education which was all he was concerned about.”

Nodding my head so she can keep talking, I signal that I’ll dish the meal onto our plates. With her telling me about her roots, I’ll get to know her beyond the public persona I found online.

“When things got hard for him at work, he would leave the house early and return late. He was not to be approached because he was always in a mood. Not drop a penny for my mother like other men do, and still expect food to be on the table. I know this because I am the first girl child and my mother sent me on errands to ask neighbors for salt today, pepper tomorrow.”

She picks a piece of *dodo*, chews, and swallows.

“When things got harder for them, he left us to live with another woman who, according to him, brought out the best in him. My mother drained his spirit and some things he uttered then, they were just...”

Taking a sip of her wine, she sighs. “She had a baby girl for him, but after some years, she left him for another man. He returned home to my mother, with an extra mouth to feed.”

She shakes her head, a wry smile playing on her lips. Her gaze touches everywhere but never meets my eyes. Fingers making an oscillatory motion on the rim of her wine glass.

“I wanted to hate the little girl he brought home. But she is innocent in all the happenings. Still innocent.” She gives a brittle small laugh, looks into my eyes, and pauses, tilting her head to the side. “Why am I—did you—”

“I’m listening. Please continue.” Pouring fresh wine into my glass.

She sighs, leaning into her seat, the hand holding her wine glass stretched to the side. “I don’t want to ruin this evening with talk of my family.”

“Everyone has one, eh?” An ironic smile curves my lips. “With different shades.”

“We all do.” She agrees, leaning forward to take a piece of meat which she gracefully chews.

“Please, tell me more. Your half-sister?”

Staring at me knowingly, a faint smile traces the shape of her face. “They say she looks like me.” Her eyes take on a distant look. “She’s so innocent that she calls to tell me her father is sick. Trust my mother to be the one there for him when even his family members supported him going to live with another woman.”

“Hmm.”

Dropping her wine glass that’s begging for a refill on the table, her expression becomes straight. “Her constant devotion shows that when we love who we love, there’s nothing we can do about it. Even when we fight it.”

Silence envelopes us, and I follow her gaze to the lagoon beyond. A cruise boat with colorful lights blinks in the distance.

“I’m sorry your father was not there for you.”

“Don’t be please.” She turns to face me. “It has made me the woman I am today. I don’t enjoy waiting on a man, or anyone, for that matter. I don’t expect anyone to do anything for me because that gives them power over my progress. If I like something, I get it. I will not twiddle my fingers waiting for a sign from heaven.”

“That’s a good perspective. But sometimes you need to let other people help you.”

An immensely smug grin circulates her face. “I am doing that now. I am asking for your help.”

Looking at her from the top of my glass, I smile. “This is not asking for help. This is a partnership.”

“It is. But still asking for help.” She moves to take a piece of her food but freezes in motion, whispering furtively. “Oh my God!”

“What is it?”

She raises her head. “I just figured that I want the love my mom has for my dad.”

“Hmm.”

“Yes.” She grins, picking up her wine glass to drink, but pauses again. “Only this time, I want it to come from both sides.”

“If that’s what you want, you’ll get it.”

“Hmm. Says an old wise man.” Her eyes twinkle, inspecting my reaction. “Thank you.”

Me? Old? Dat meisje met haar lieve trucjes. “And if it’s any consolation, I believe I can help with that.”

She gasps dramatically, placing a hand to her chest. “Mr. George, permit me to say that I am lost.”

“Oh no, you cannot be lost when you’re with me.”

She giggles, and it sounds glorious, reminding me of the wicked things I’ve done with her in my mind. Of wrapping her with the flowing fabric she has on with her wearing nothing underneath. When she takes a deep breath to calm herself down, the innocent rise and fall of her delicious, formed cleavage taunts

me. *It can never be. Just friends... most likely.*

"I like that you're free." I tell her, looking into her eyes.

"It's this wine you keep piling me with."

"Your laughter is refreshing."

She waves my compliment away. "Fair enough. Now it's your turn. Tell me about yourself." She takes a sip of her wine. Eyes introspectively watching me over the rim of the glass.

What can I say about myself? That you've made me a randy goat?

She drops the wine glass on the table. "You know, when you invited me for this meeting, I thought I would be fighting your hands off me."

I raise my brows instinctively. *The only thing keeping me from you is guilt and concern for your friendship. You're too good for my soul.*

"Yes." She continues, words easily flowing from her. "Like who has one-on-one business meetings in hotels besides... you know who and..." She sucks on the inside of her cheek, a habit I'm coming to love. "Conferences don't count."

"The Anchorage is a second home for me."

"Hmm-mm."

"The house gets very boring and lonely sometimes, and I enjoy the... white noise. It gives me a sense of purpose. And... it is easier to commute from this location."

She looks behind us, up at the tall building, nodding. "It's indeed a lovely home."

"Don't patronize me, young lady."

"I'm just saying." Smiling, she slightly raises both hands innocently. "I'm just saying. All you need to say is thank you."

"Thank you." I smile back.

"So... about yourself? How did you land in Lagos? Please don't give me the business story."

I grin. "What's more to say? I... I love Nigeria."

"That's a good one." She points at me, thoughtfully pressing her lips together. "Try... if it's not a touchy topic, how I met my wife?"



NINE

PATTERN PAPER

George

IT'S BEEN A WHILE I TOLD anyone this story, but it's refreshing thinking about it. Mirabel was sent from heaven. An Erasmus scholar, new in the system with dreams we planned and fulfilled.

"We met during our undergraduate years in Amsterdam. Fell in love." I smile fondly. "According to my other Nigerian friends, she gave me *if o*. But I believe it was love."

"*Efo?*" Her eyes twinkle with mirth.

"Vegetable. The Yoruba word."

She begins laughing, and I smile because her laughter has the power to make me do so, even if the joke is on me.

Placing a hand to her chest to calm herself, she confesses, "I'm so sorry. I couldn't hold it. Your Yoruba sucks."

I click my tongue, smiling as she struggles to maintain composure. "After spending over thirty years in this country. Hmm."

"Thirty years?" She leans forward, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Over." *By some months.*

“Wow.” Leaning back in her seat, a long-manicured nail tapping the table. “Still, you need a tutor.”

“Want to take the role?”

“As delightful as that sounds...” She picks a piece of *suya*. “Unfortunately, I am Igbo, not Yoruba.” Placing it in her mouth.

“Ah... that’s true.” The million and one tribes and ethnicities in Nigeria, with Lagos being the most ethnically diverse state. “But you’ve lived in Lagos all your life?”

“Yes, I have.”

“You should understand the language...” Logically speaking.

“I understand the basics, including the curse words. I am a fake Lagos girl. And not everyone who lives in Lagos knows how to speak Yoruba.” Leaning forward, she loudly whispers, a hand to the side of her cheek like she’s passing on sacred knowledge. “There are people like me. We are not language savvy, except we’re competing.” She drops her hand, smiling.

Smiling at her theatrics, I ask, “Do you speak Igbo? Or—”

“I’ll say I’m an... advanced Igbo speaker.” She leans back gracefully.

“Hmm.”

“I know enough to communicate, but not enough to understand idioms and proverbs. How about you? Do you speak a language besides English?”

“Dutch. I speak Dutch.”

“Hmm.” She sizes me up from head to toe to head, a curious glint in her eyes. “Netherlands?”

“Right.”

“Yeah. Amsterdam...” Realization dawns on her and she picks her glass of wine. “How you met your wife... leaving your country for Nigeria...”

“I did. But I spend at most three months there, every year.”

She nods slowly, then smiles mischievously. “Tell me something in Dutch.”

Grinning, I make to pour myself more wine, but notice it’s the last serving. She gestures I go ahead, and I pour it into my glass cup.

Tell you something in Dutch... I swivel my drink, observing her. The corners of her mouth creases in a coy smile. Somewhat flirtatious. Is it intentional or am I getting sentimental?

Tell you something in Dutch... There are so many naughty things I want to whisper in your ears.

And good things.

The naughty ones can't be said for obvious reasons.

I want to tell you good things, like how you make me feel alive. About how, in my first months of grief, all my senses were numb. Shut down. How I've never considered dating and risk falling in love with the possibility of betraying my wife or losing someone else dear to me, until you.

Tell you something in Dutch...

I can tell you how much I'm looking forward to another evening like this. With the moon and stars watching from above, the waters before us, and easy banter and laughter flowing between us.

All natural.

Encompassing.

I sigh, taking a sip of my drink. "I won't tell you the meaning."

"Would you write it down so I can find it out by myself?"

Hmm... "No."

"Then what's the use of telling me? I won't be learning anything."

"For you to... bask in the language's beauty?"

"You're not changing your mind?"

I shake my head.

She shrugs. "Tell me."

"Je hebt zulke mooie ogen, ik wil erin verdwalen. Ik vind je leuk... En ik vind je lekker."

We stare at each other for a while before she nods slowly, a smile teasing her lips.

"Okay..." she starts. "That sounded like it's coming from the soul. *Leuk*... You like the way I look?"

"Nice try." I smile. "Close, but that's all I'm saying."

"Hmm. I'll figure it out." She smirks. "Thanks for the compliments and back to our earlier discussion?" Smiling politely. "How you met?"

"Oh... yes. My friends believed she cooked up something for me to eat. But

what they didn't know was that I had been going after her in my own way, signing up for similar classes. Showing up at events. It was much later in our relationship, when she'd said yes, that she introduced me to the Nigerian jollof rice and vegetable soup. She met my parents. Lucky for me they were open to having a daughter-in-law from an entirely different continent."

It had been nerve wrecking for Mirabel and I. Wondering if we would have to elope. I was the first man in my family to fall in love and want to marry a woman of color.

"I visited Nigeria during a summer break, and I knew this was where we were going to live. She had the idea for Silhouette and together we launched it, at first, sourcing fabric from outside Africa hoping to do everything right here with time. We got married... had three beautiful children... and enjoyed over twenty blissful years of marriage."

"She must have been a phenomenon."

A rock. She was my rock. "She was. Her passing made me realize that with life, death is inevitable."

"Hmm."

"And death, when it doesn't happen to you, gives you more reasons to enjoy life and see the beauty in it. Can I say something sincere?"

"You haven't been sincere all evening?" She teases.

"It's about meeting you."

"Go on."

"When I saw you walk in with my niece, I felt an energy I haven't felt in years. It made me remember life and how fickle it is."

She nods slowly.

"Chiluba, I want to spend more time with you because you make me feel at ease."

She blinks, her expression closing up.

"This has nothing to do with our intended business. And I'm not asking for anything indecent. God forbid. My youngest daughter is your peer, so don't think about that. I've thought this over. Fought with myself. But I guess it's best I give in—that's if it's what you want. All I'm asking for is your companionship."

Why is she not saying anything? Just watching me with those beguiling eyes.

Making me feel like a teenager asking a girl out for the first time. Is this some mind game trick?

“Mr. Van Cleef—”

“George.” I correct her.

She bestows a tight smile on me. “George. This request? I’ll like to think about it. Spending time with you... and you said companion?”

Laughing nervously, I try dispelling random thoughts forming in her head. “I’m not asking you to be my nurse or... Or babysitter. I’m only saying I enjoy your company and would like to spend more time with you.”

No, that’s not all I want to say.

How do I explain this?

Funny how I’m struggling to find the right words to say to a girl younger than my last child.

“Say I have an event and I want to go with someone. Can I call on you?” She really doesn’t like the idea of spending time with me? “It will be an opportunity for you to network as well. It’s a good deal for both of us.”

She folds her arms, observes me for a splitting second, then looks away. “What’s in it for me?”

“You get to see a side of the industry you’ve never experienced. I get to spend time with you. I know a couple of places off my head I’d love to show you.”

Turning her head back to me. “And this won’t affect our partnership—Lucid?”

I press my index finger on the table. “Lucid is not dependent on this. Matter of fact, I have no say in Lucid being adapted by Silhouette. It’s the team’s choice. I can only act as a catalyst to speed their actions.”

“Hmm. I have a growing business to run. How often and how long will this last?”

“It will not be a lifestyle. There will be trips and I can’t promise—I don’t know for how long. I see something Chiluba...” At loss for words, I lean in. “Chiluba, I see a passion in you I want to stoke. Please.”

She leaves me no choice, but to beg for scraps of her time.

“I’m not committing fully.”

“I will—”

“Let’s just see at it goes.”

I widen my eyes in surprise as her words seep into my head. It’s not what other ladies granted the offer will do, but *let’s just see at it goes*, coming from her as me ready to moonwalk into the waterfront.

Sitting back, I raise what’s left of my drink in a toast to our agreement. “You won’t regret it. I’ll make it worth your time.”

“Your word.” She picks a perspiring glass of cold water and as she places it on her lips, her eyes stay on mine.

Every gulp she takes sends tasing shudders down my body.

Godverdomme! Godverdomme!

Get over it! You’ve found a compromise. Spend time with her and stop thinking of things she can or does not do.

She looks down at her phone, tracing the outline of her lips with her tongue.

So innocent. And so sexual.

Shit.

I turn my eyes away, calling myself all the shitty names I can think of in Dutch.

“Um...”

Returning my gaze to her at the sound of her voice.

“I have another meeting I need to attend.”

Another meeting? We’ve only spent—I glance at my watch to find it’s a few minutes past eight—three hours!

When was the last time I felt this comfortable with a lady? And yet, selfishly want more of her time?

I don’t want her to go, but the gentleman in me wins. “Is it close by?”

She ignores me for a second, her head buried in her phone. When she glances up, I raise a brow.

“I’m sorry.” She gestures. “I’m trying to book a ride. It’s not so far.” She buries her head back.

While she arranges her bag and tinkers with her phone, I set my office bag on the table and pull out a small jewelry box.

I shouldn’t be doing this. It might send the wrong message, but it is simply to apologize for my nasty behavior. Something I’ll do for my daughters. I’m not in

any way trying to buy her affection. No. I'm not trying to buy her affection. Although I've heard friends with side pieces, say they gift them to keep their attention. Luba is not a side piece.

She's NOT MY SIDEPIECE.

LUBA IS NOT MY SIDEPIECE.

This is a token. An apology.

"Chiluba."

She looks up from her phone and her curious roving eyes lands on my offering resting on the table. When they narrow in confusion, I rush to explain.

"It's a gift. A piece offering of sort." I push it forward. "F-for-for my earlier actions."

Her confused expression stretches into a wide appreciative smile as she reaches for the box. She is grinning from ear to ear. "Thank you, Mr. Van Cleef."

Huh? What's happening here?

I watch as she opens the box with an infectious childish gleam that causes me to smile.

"What do we have here?" Her excitement is like that of a child who has just been given a Christmas present after being naughty all year.

Using her middle finger, she pulls out the delicate necklace piece I ordered from Pandora the moment she agreed to the meeting.

She turns the piece from side to side, a bright smile encompassing her face. "Sterling silver." She looks me in the eye. "Nice taste."

"Huh... hmm. I'm glad you like it."

"I do... Thank you." She stores the silver necklace in the box, carefully places it in her handbag, and her phone beeps.

She glances at it, then back at me before pursing her lips. "My ride is here."

"Okay." I grin. "Time to go."

It's ten minutes past eight as we walk to the entrance. I can't help but watch as she gracefully moves, hips swaying. The back of her gown has an open back that begins low on the curve of her ass with two dimples peeking. Her flawless skin sings her praises, telling me she takes good care of herself and doesn't want less. Good thing she isn't immune to being spoiled.

Catching up with her, till we're walking side by side, I ask a question I should

have asked while getting to know her better. “Our conversation got so intense, I never thought to ask, where do you stay?”

“On the mainland... *Ogudu* GRA.” She smiles. “I doubt you know that place.”

“You’ll be surprised.” I know it’s somewhere around *Ketu-Ojota* and I don’t think I’ve been there. *It’s never too late to explore Lagos city.* “Do you drive?”

“I do, but I’m having car trouble. It’s at the mechanics.”

“Oh. Driving in Lagos must be stressful.”

“I enjoy it. Just not the traffic. *Eish.* I can’t stand it.”

Distant traffic sounds—cars with broken exhaust systems, honking cars—hits my eardrums as we step outside the doors of Radisson Blu. The sound change is jarring, bursting the bubble we created by the waterfront and reminding me I’m still on earth, not some heavenly place with sensual evening companions who know what they want, tease with their smiles and express childlike appreciation for spontaneous gifts.

The valet attempts to attend to us, but Luba smiles, waving him away, showing him her phone. Guests get into their rides as she checks her phone screen to confirm the plate number of her ride.

“Thanks for honoring my invite and for sharing a part of yourself with me.”

She glances askance at me. “Thanks for inviting me. How soon do you think your team will share feedback?”

“Two weeks, give or take. Don’t worry about it. You have my word.”

She nods, looking toward the incoming cars before turning back to me with a bright smile. “I want to believe you’re a man of your word. Thanks for the gift too. I look forward to the magic we can create together.”

Immediately, my mind conjures a family with Luba in it. And I blink it away.

She is looking peculiarly at me. Have I said anything wrong? Did I do anything inappropriate? “What is it, Luba?” *Shit. Luba? How did that leave my mouth?* “I’m sorry about—”

“With everything we’ve shared tonight?” She smiles wryly. “It’s fine. You can call me Luba or Luby.”

I sigh, relieved I can call her Luba and that she’s seeing me as someone other than her friend’s uncle. “Alright.”

But she’s supposed to be your niece’s friend.

Silencing the warning bells in my head, I ask, “What had you looking like that?”

“I was wondering if it’s ideal to invite you to my upcoming birthday.”

“Hmm.” Putting my hands behind. “And how old will the birthday girl be?”

She shakes her head, a wide, sunny grin on her face. “Twenty-seven. I have a party planned and I...”

I notice when it’s dawns on her as her voice trails and her excitement comes to an abrupt pause. She doesn’t need to voice the last part, it won’t work.

“I understand.”

“Yeah...” Nodding her head slowly. “Hmm. But I’m open to gifts. No one will say I’m not entitled to them now, would they?” She grins knowingly at me. “And since you have good taste, I’ll be expectant. That’s him.” She points to the approaching car, clutching her purse and bag tighter.

“Thanks again.” Placing my hands on her smooth shoulders to cheek kiss her, on the last cheek kiss, my lips brush her lush sensual lips and for the fleeting second it lasts, it feels oh... so good. A small breathless whisper escapes her, and I’m tempted to dip my tongue between the seams of her lips. We withdraw so fast, it’s as though it never happened.

“I’m sorry—”

“I’m sorry—”

We both rush to apologize, and she forces a smile... “It’s fine. Thanks—I need to go now.”

In a flash, she’s in the car. Shuts the door. And I can only mutter “Bye” to the closed door. She doesn’t give me a second look.

I stand there, hands in pockets. Gazing as her ride slowly drive out of sight. Being her best friend’s uncle is the last thing on my mind.

Licking my lips like a schoolboy, I taste the sweet wine with the haunting scent of lilacs still in the air. That is what she is to my senses... a mixture of sweet wine and fresh, heady lilacs.

I can’t deceive myself. I want more of that. More of the kiss. The sighs. Deep sensual breaths of pleasure... That’s what’s in my head. And the promised excitement of seeing her again.

I’ve never felt more alive in years.

Did she feel what I felt when our lips brushed? Did her heart race so fast, she

was wondering someone else was thumping on it?

The lingering imprint of her lips remains in my head as I make my way to my suite, long after she'd left.

Maybe I shouldn't have given her the gift.

But I just wanted to give her something.

It wasn't planned.

But it feels good knowing that I mindlessly selected an apology gift, and the recipient loved it. If it's any compensation to my guilt-ridden heart, I buy things for my children and Zoya—yes, Zoya. Zoya is my niece, and her friend is my friend. It doesn't matter if the joy I felt watching her open the gift box surpasses anything I've ever felt when my kids or Zoya call to thank me for the gifts I send them.

Neither does it matter that I feel extra excited being around her or talking more than I usually do.

Is this how men with younger girlfriends feel?

I'm so sure Alfred will have an answer for all that's going on. Might even give me lessons on how to proceed so I don't make mistakes. He's the notorious one. Married with a girlfriend.

Luba is not my girlfriend...



TEN

RUNNING STITCHES

Chiluba

I'M A BADDASS! THE SAUCE! ANYONE that comes after me is a counterfeit. A photocopy! No one can do it like me... *Veni! Vidi! Vici!*

Stepping into my dressing room, I burst into azonto dance moves in front of the mirror—acting like I’m making up, dusting my shoulders, giving facial expressions as I clear the path, make a fist, then punching the air. “Yes!”

Shimmying and sashaying, careful when I have to be, I get out of the evening dress *Uncle George* couldn’t take his eyes off. I apply coconut oil on my face, pick a facial wipe and begin cleaning off my makeup.

The evening didn’t go as I expected, it went even better. All I wanted to do was look sexy, wear a *strong face*, talk business, and get out. But... I shrug, tossing another used wipe in the bin, curiosity got the best of me.

As I wipe my lips, I pause, recollecting how a simple miscalculation of cheek kisses brought us to almost making out in front of the hotel.

The sudden jolt of pleasure... and the thrill of knowing I’ve never been with someone like him. What it could be like—hmm mm. I will not spend the rest of the night evaluating my reaction and thoughts during that moment. I’ve done that during the ride home...

Done wiping with facial wipes. I step into the bathroom to use a cleanser and toner for my face, my mind still on the array of emotions displayed earlier in the evening.

Now that I know his wife is late, he has three children... *I want to spend more time with you... And I'm not asking for anything indecent... All I'm asking for is your companionship.*

What is wrong with me? *Let's just see at it goes...* Just like that!

Why am I considering it? Because he is different? Seems like a good man?

Dabbing my face with a towel, I step back to my dressing room. I pick a simple mid-thigh navy-blue satin nightgown with lace around the neckline, and as I pull it over my head, I gasp in pleasure at the sheer coolness on my skin. My satin bonnet is next.

Ah... people have access to simple luxurious materials like this but don't realize they do.

It's only natural for me to feel attracted to George. He is good looking. Having anything to do with him will be dangerous, considering my relationship with Zoya. So yes, tick that. He is dangerous. A forbidden apple.

Um... what else makes him appealing? Oh... Power! He doesn't flaunt it, but it oozes from him—it's in the way he carries himself. The way he talks. And even in his gaze. Like he can see through you, strip you bare and not touch you.

My pussy twitches, reminding me of his constrained sexual confidence as he spoke about not wanting anything indecent to do with me. Has he been living a celibate life since his wife passed?

He talks like a monogamist, but I've met loads of Lagos men, even pastors who have side chicks. Have approached me to join their harem. George, being of a different race makes him no different and I don't know his exact age, but he looks like he's in his early forties. Very appealing...

It's no longer Uncle George?

My phone vibrates and I pick it, climbing into bed, with my air conditioner on full blast. I intend to read through a couple of magazines before I fall asleep, watch the latest episode of KUWtK, Ice Loves Coco and 2 Broke Girls but I've got messages from work... Zoya... My heart beats faster when I see his name. He sent it minutes ago.

8:44 PM

Zoya's Uncle: Arrived at your destination?

Was he thinking of our evening together? Of how time flew without us noticing? *Oh Luba, come off it! He's just being a gracious host.*

8:56 PM

Chiluba: Yes, I have.

Zoya's Uncle: The roads must be clear.
How is your meeting going?

Chiluba: Meeting? I had one with you.

8:57 PM

Zoya's Uncle: I thought you left our meeting to catch another meeting.

Catch another meeting?

Oh my God, I chuckle, burrowing deep into the duvet. I've been caught in a lie.

8:58 PM

Chiluba: I'll need to teach you some things.

Zoya's Uncle: I'm eager to learn.

Chiluba: I have a meeting was code word for; I need to go now before this beautiful thing turns into something we might both regret.

8:59 PM

Zoya's Uncle: That's brilliant.
Who came up with that idea?

Inventress Chiluba.

I laugh till I'm coughing, tapping my chest.

8:59 PM

Zoya's Uncle: I should try using that during business meetings.

09:00 PM

Chiluba: Please don't.
It's strictly reserved for people like me.

Zoya's Uncle: I feel left out.

09:02 PM

Zoya's Uncle: What are you doing?

Zoya's Uncle: When's your bedtime?

09:05 PM

Chiluba: (¬_¬")

Anytime.

09:06 PM

Zoya's Uncle: Sorry about that. Want to know how long we have to chat before another meeting comes up.

OK, Uncle Georgie has a good sense of humor.

09:06 PM

Chiluba: I'm in nightcrawler.

Zoya's Uncle: I'm a morning person.

Chiluba: 😊

It's called early bird.

Zoya's Uncle: I thought that was for the adage.

09:07 PM

Zoya's Uncle: ??

Chiluba: It's the twentieth century.

😊

Nobody says that.

Zoya's Uncle: I must really take a class with you.

Not just for hand-me-down Yorubas but for common slangs.

09:08 PM

Chiluba: I'm tempted to take you on, but I don't come cheap.

Zoya's Uncle: Name your price.

Chiluba: Tempted to. Not going to.

Zoya's Uncle: How can I change your mind?

Chiluba: Let it be.

09:14 PM

Zoya's Uncle: Would you like to come with me for an event tomorrow?
I'll understand if it's too soon for you.

9:15 PM

Chiluba: What type of event?

Zoya's Uncle: A private event. For relaxation.
Since I can't spend your birthday with you, want to spend the day with me?

9:16 PM

Zoya's Uncle: I doubt anyone you know will be there.

Chiluba: We don't know who I know you know.

Zoya's Uncle: It's a private event.

Chiluba: What do you mean by private?
And where is this one happening?

Zoya's Uncle: Snake Island.
At a friend's beach house.
It's a beach event.

9:17 PM

Chiluba: Who were you going to take?

Zoya's Uncle: I wasn't going.

Chiluba: Why change your mind?

Zoya's Uncle: You.

9:18PM

Chiluba: I've got church to attend.

Zoya's Uncle: You're a Christian.

That's good.

Does your service end before noon?

Chiluba: Yes.

9:29 PM

Zoya's Uncle: Please share your address.

I'll send a car at two.

In less than twenty-four hours, George and I have exchanged more text messages than I did with my ex-boyfriend. If I had known answering his message will lead to this, will I still have responded?

With three drops of perfume oil on my inner wrist, I gently rub both wrists together and run it over my matching Ankara print short sleeve kimono shirt, shorts, and white bandeau, then by my neck. I spray a Maison Margiela Replica Beach Walk fragrance for added effect, luxuriating in the feeling it gives, like I'm already walking on the beach. There... That should work. Turning from side to side, I've never loved myself more. Besides a couple of stretch marks on my ass cheeks, which I'm learning to love, I'll never trade my body for another.

Hmm... Should I tie the shirt or let it hang open? I muse, staring at myself in the mirror. After several poses with my beach hat and purse, leaving it to hang open wins. The bandeau exposes reasonable cleavage that doesn't call attention to my breasts but adds to my fashion style. A blend of femininity and sexuality.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I left George at Radisson Blu and now I'm prepping myself to meet him. The only reason I accepted to be his plus one for his event is because I don't roll in his circle and finding fresh blood at his event won't hurt.

Oh... when I was a Beauty Pageant contestant, men, young, old, powerful, and the likes used to dote on me. Wives and girlfriends used to hate on me. But now that I've switched to being a full-time entrepreneur, it's like I'm in a different world. No time to schmooze and rub shoulders if it isn't for business.

And with my birthday knocking in days, maybe this could be a birthday gift to myself. Snagging a man who will give it to me in bed, dote on me while I accept my gifts and pose for the cameras.

Bloggers—especially fashion bloggers—are looking forward to my birthday because they would have something to post on their digital and print pages. Who wore what? What wore who?

And... I need to give them something to talk about besides using my dating life for content. Since I started ushering at fifteen, deceiving people I was eighteen, I learnt the power of appearances and the media. Any media is good for business.

When George asked if I had lived in Lagos all my life, I didn't know whether to say yes or no because I count the three months I spent in Abia state when my family moved, as vacation. That was shortly after I became one of the Most Beautiful Girls in Nigeria, winning the crown for Miss Amity.

I was having a taste of the life I had only dreamed of. Brands were coming left and right to have me sign deals with them. "We just need her photograph, holding the product."

Agencies booked me to feature in music videos. I was one of the best video vixens for the duration my career lasted. I don't want to think about the time before I got the opportunity to contest in the beauty pageant because... those were dark times. Maama's sewing and kerosene business was not providing as much as it used to. We were late on rent, and the man she calls my father returned home with an extra mouth to feed.

To help the family, I did some things I'm not proud of. Times I would rather not think of. It will remind me of nights I silently cried to bed wishing death upon my father, so I'll know I didn't have one. Asking God why he made my father so selfish... and why Maama prayed for him to return home.

It's not like I don't forgive him for all the wrongdoings he did while I was growing up—abandoning us and leaving Maama to cater for four of us—but mehn, I'm following in his footsteps. I don't bloody care about him.

He would never have a direct taste of my money from me. Never. He can act all loving for all I care, but I'll never fall for his nonsense the way Maama does every time. Maama would accept all the sewing and tailoring jobs she could, and I and my eldest brother, Chido, after school, would take turns on her second machine, in the cubicle of our one-room apartment, sewing till our backs hurt. Before attending the vocational school, Maama taught me all I needed to know.

I've been poor. I know what it feels like. And I never want to experience it again. I am so allergic to poverty that my personal account balance cannot be less than half a million in a month. Anything less than that, I'm broke.

I'm grateful for Zoya's family. They were my haven when I left Abia State and returned to Lagos. It wasn't a matter of if Zoya would help me, it was a matter of when will you be arriving. My agent had called me for a video shoot, and I lied I was in Lagos.

"But they said you left Lagos."

I hissed over the phone. "Don't people travel to do stuff anymore?"

"I need to see you this weekend."

Getting into Lagos, I roomed up with Zoya and started attending events and networking. She enjoys living through my eyes, and I love sharing my experiences with her, but there are some details I didn't share with her.

Her dad frowned upon my sudden lavish lifestyle but warmed up to me after we had a chat about the fashion and media industry. Even more when the news broke that I was nineteen and not twenty-two, as I had told them when I was contesting for the crown.

It was through Zoya's family I reminded myself of who Chiluba Immaculate Ndukwe, irrespective of her age, was. She was the girl who stood by her friends when they lost their mother. Same girl who supplied kerosene to their house so she could join them in the kitchen to cook and take some of it for her siblings back home. One who made dresses for her friends. And loved reading books not meant for her age. Bold enough to move around with them, only when she's torn the covers off.

The boys came... then the men. The men threatened the boys while the boys irritated the men. That first season in Lagos, on my own, I broke the vow Zoya and I had about waiting until marriage. I needed to try what I had been reading about.

Benjamin...

He was cute. One twenty-four year old KPMG guy like that with friends in the music industry. I had gone for the video shoot my agent had booked me for and he was there. He was the one sponsoring the video shoot.

After much eye contact—which looking back now, I'll call it eye-fucking—he stepped up to me. Later that week, we went on our first date at his place, a boy's quarter apartment in his parent's house.

Nineteen-year-old me, who was a recovering poverty-stricken Lagos babe, was so excited at the thought of having a cool ‘rich’ boyfriend. I told Zoya about it, but she warned me not to go.

I did.

Six weeks later, I found out Benjamin had a girlfriend who lived in the UK.

I ended things.

It wasn’t the best experience for a girl who was trying to believe in love. But with the sex, I don’t regret what happened between us. He did a decent job—I’ll always say that. However, he could have done better by maybe waiting till our third date or fourth date. Because after that experience, whenever a guy tells me to come visit him, what I automatically think is, *he’s going to ask for sex*. It doesn’t get any better if they mistakenly find out I contested in a Beauty Pageant.

My phone vibrates, then beeps with a message.

1:42 PM

Uncle Georgie: The driver has arrived.

Someone must be excited to have me around because their driver is here earlier than planned.

OceanofPDF.com



ELEVEN

PRICK STITCHES

Chiluba

“D’YOU KNOW HOW MUCH OF A distraction you are dressed like that?” George smiles, approaching me with two flute glasses filled with pale yellow liquid. “You’re adorable.”

Wearing a white shirt with two undone buttons, sleeves neatly folded to his elbows, on pastel green shorts that complement the wavy hair on his legs, he is sex walking on two feet. When was the last time he had sex? What does his penis look like?

“Thank you.” Accepting the flute glass he extends to me, I send the unwelcomed thoughts to the darkest corners of my mind, wondering what’s in the glass.

“Champagne.” He offers, putting a hand in his pocket, standing shoulder to shoulder with me.

“Ah.” I take a sip while studying my environment, the bubbles from the drink tickling my throat.

We’re at a semi-private dock in Victoria Island and a handful of people keep arriving in different rides. Booming masculine laughter travels through the air as men meet and greet each other and subconsciously, I look for familiar faces.

None.

Is this what we're here for? Just stand around by the water with boats in the distance? I thought the rich knew how to party. And... this is no island.

I don't want to ask questions because I don't want to seem uncultured.

George is telling me about his first time in Nigeria when a squeal from a new set of young ladies arriving the scene causes me to turn and a gentle breeze from the ocean causes my long weave to fly about. It ends up sticking to my glossed lips and on the tip of George's drink.

"Oh... so sorry."

"It's fine." He's smiling, taking out the strands from his drink.

Why did he choose to stand so close?

"What's happening?" I ask when I notice a group walking to the gangway that leads to the speedboats.

"We're taking the speed boats to the island."

I should be sketching designs with Àbẹbí, planning on how to present Lucid's business plan to proposed stakeholders, instead here I am, cavorting with the ultimate silver fox of Silhouette.

George and I maintain an unspoken distance for the duration of the boat ride. I take selfies, make videos, and began getting irritated by a couple of girls who keep squealing, tossing Yoruba, left and right.

One even has the effrontery to walk up to George and, from the side of my eyes, I watch as they engage. It is obvious the girl is thirsty for his attention. *She better watch her step before I send a dart to her throat.* George shakes his head. Smiling, he runs his hand through his hair and after seventy-two seconds, the girl walks off. I was keeping count.

Occasionally I'll catch his eyes on me and he would smile, nodding, before turning to look into the water.

I don't need to be told we have arrived our destination as there are beautiful, artfully arranged coconut trees lining the coastline. White sand is waiting to usher us to the private beach that leads to a white magnificent beach house, with little tents scattered before it.

Whoever owns this must be filthy rich. Someone I'll love to be friends with.

I look to George's whose beautiful silver-gray hair is tousled, making him look extra appealing, like he just got out of bed.

Why so fine?

People are already at the venue. Loud afrobeats music pumps from an unseen speaker, but it can't swallow the occasional shrieks of people riding ATVs in the distance, or people playing volleyball by the beach and those swimming in the pool in front of the house.

Following George's lead, I accept another flute glass of champagne, taking note of our surroundings. We're around hundred if I'm counting heads, twenty percent from a different race and sixty-five percent being ladies. Most ladies on the island are in two-piece bikinis that leaves nothing to the imagination. They look so cute and dolled up for the event that it's so fake, I want to throw up my drink.

Uncle Georgie stops in front of a tent. "Here's our cabana for the duration of our stay."

I'd seen a couple before we stopped at this one. It's a cabana no doubt—a thatched tent with white drapery around it—but it's got a double chaise lounge bed with pillows. A tray full of fruit laid out in the center. There are raffia baskets with artsy magazines on the side, a transparent beach cooler filled with bottled water and a stylish lamp for nighttime. When I run my hands on the white luxurious fabric of the chaise lounge, my brain immediately does the math of the cost.

Chei!

If you don't know someone who has these types of properties, you will live your whole life believing they only exist in movies.

I smile, looking up at George who has been observing me. "It looks... cozy."

One side of his lip curves into a charming smile. "I'm glad you like it."

"Van Cleef!"

I turn to find a slender dark-skinned man hopping off an ATV, walking up to us, grinning from ear to ear.

George grins, bracing himself for the tornado of an individual about to hit us, legs spread wide. "That's Alfred. Our host."

Alfred has shiny black hair that immediately tells me he uses some sort of dye cream to keep it that way because although his purposeful, confident stride makes him look so young, the wrinkles on his forehead tells a different story. If I'm to put him in a box, he looks like Hakeem Kae-Kazim, the British Nigerian Actor.

“Van Cleef.” He calls out again when he gets to us, grinning with complete, glistening white teeth.

“Alfie...” George says fondly, clasping hands with him.

“Who is the lovely damsel?” His eyes roam my body the moment his hand is free from George’s, like I’m an object. “Are you...” Shooting a wicked grin in George’s direction. “... playing with my girls?”

From the looks of things, Alfred is a bully who enjoys inflicting embarrassment. He is pretty loud for a man of his stature. How did he amass such wealth with this attitude?

“She’s my guest,” George says calmly.

I take a sip of my drink, studying Alfred’s reaction.

His eyes widen and this time, when they land on me, they settle on my face.

“Chiluba,” I tell him, crossing my free arm over my abdomen. I’m not shaking him.

Mba.

“Chiluba... Igbo, right?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do?”

“Entrepreneur. I’m a fashion designer.”

“Hmm.” He smiles thoughtfully, glancing at George. “I see where he snagged you.”

George smiles back, folding his arms, obviously proud that this Alfred guy is taking a liking to me.

“You’re a beautiful girl, you know?” Alfred adds.

George’s proud grin widens as he tells Alfred, “She was a beauty queen, did some pageantry.”

I wish I’d warned him of the effect that had on some men.

“Oh really? What a catch!” Alfred grins, giving me another once-over, a twinkle in his eyes. “Queen Chiluba, welcome to my... little slice of paradise. Please don’t be shy. If there’s anything, and I mean it—George is a dear friend—if there’s anything at all you want that you can’t find here, just let me know.”

“Thank you.” My voice sounds light and innocent, but what I project with my eyes tells him to go to hell with his offer.

“Ọmọ to rewa.” His eyes graze my cleavage. *“Ma worry. À ma toju é. À ma tun bà é jẹ.”*

Who do you think you are?

Wo! I will slap you and you can do nothing to scare me.

Do you think I’m some cheap whore? Available once I’m done with your friend?

George clears his throat and Alfred’s attention returns to him. “Thanks Alfred.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I wanted to welcome you back. I don’t know why you stay away for too long.”

“Besides the kids, there’s nothing here for me.”

“Because you signed off your position?” Alfred taps him on the shoulder. “Oh come on...”

Tuning their conversation off, I walk backward till I’m sitting on the edge of chaise lounge. Signed off his position? What does that even mean? Last night, he’d said only his team members had a say. He could only act as a catalyst.

A squeal captures my attention and I raise my head, watching as young girls, the age of Zena—if not younger—walk around in two-piece bikinis flaunting their asses. There are also girls my age and some elderly women here. I don’t know if they are here with their husbands or without them, having the time of their life. One thing is for sure, this party is not a respectable family gathering or one for networking. And George invited me.

“I know...” My ears perk at the sound of Alfred’s voice. “To think I was counting the days my last one would actually get married, so I have the house to myself.” He complains. “Now I want her back home.”

“But you have your wife.” George takes a sip of his drink.

So, Mr. Ọmọ to rewa is married and living with his wife, yet he has the guts to look at me that way. I don’t blame him; I blame the woman who sticks with him, knowing he is two-timing her.

“Nothing beats having the kids at home. Or getting them to smuggle fried meat for me.” He makes a strange-sounding little chuckle, then looks my way.

Is this where I laugh? Do you expect me to laugh at your pathetic dad joke?

He continues, looking at me as he explains, as though willing me to laugh at his dry, boring joke. “My wife doesn’t let me eat what I want because of my

health. After paying the doctors a hefty sum on retainer, they would not let me enjoy my life.”

“In essence,” George’s firm voice causes Alfred to turn his attention back to him, “you don’t miss the kids.”

“I do. I do.” Alfred bursts into his annoying, strange-sounding little chuckle. “If I can’t have them at home, then I can as well have fun like this.”

George offers him a polite smile. “We both have varied reasons for wanting them back home. The kids I come back for don’t have my time. Too busy for their old man.”

Alfred gestures with his hands, opening and clapping as he doles out wisdom. “Life. You have to find something to fill up your time.”

“I’m thinking of going on a boat cruise in April. Tour the world for a couple of months—”

“Oh, a spring cruise. That’s perfect. But...” Alfred stalls theatrically to make his point. “You shouldn’t do it alone. Except you have,” he waggles shaggy brows at George, “an arrangement I know nothing about.”

I roll my eyes.

It is surprising how some wealthy people don’t have the instinct to care for their bodies. You would think that with the money at their disposal, they would at least groom a prominent feature of their face. Thank God his teeth look pristine.

“There’s no arrangement.” George smiles in that charming way I am beginning to adore, even though I’m mentally at war with him. “Just an old fella who wants to take advantage of the time he has in life to do things he wanted to do when he was younger but was too focused making an impact that he never got to do them.”

“Ever so philosophical.” Alfred chuckles, tapping George’s back. I notice some girls walk by, casting curious glares at me.

“Chiluba...” Alfred calls, gesturing that I join them.

Don’t get familiar with that name.

Reluctantly, I put my empty champagne glass on the floor and get up, still fuming on the inside. The period I worked as an usher and contested for the crown, trained me to smile heartily when my heels hurt badly or when I know my attire is utterly ruined and more so, if a guest has said the wrong thing to me. Too bad I’m the guest here, but instinct is kicking in.

“Queen.” Alfred winks, his high predatory gaze on me. “Please take care of Van Cleef. His fist...” He chuckles, and George smiles, gazing at me. “So tight, he doesn’t take care of himself. But with you, change is sure.” He ends with a wry grin.

Gross. Old man just told me to have sex with a fellow old man so I can take care of him since he doesn’t take care of himself?

Eish!

What have I gotten myself into? And what did he mean by his fist being so tight? George is the stereotypical selfish *oyibo* guy? Or that his penis is always hard and ready to go?

“Alfred...” I drawl, dragging the *f r e d*, a broad and false smile on my lips. “I can’t.”

His gaze is stunned. Questioning. Wondering at my audacity at his serious joke.

I continue, explaining the logic behind my response. “See, I need to be taken care of.” I hold on to George’s bicep with both arms, leaning into him until my breast are touching his arms. “Tell him Georgie. Don’t I need to be cared for?”

Oh God... his biceps are so good to be true. I press them on impulse, tilting my head to look at George with a truculent, mischievous smile. The dazzling shards of pleasure that course through my body from our contact unsteady me, but I hold on to my charade.

George smiles ruefully, shaking his head at my... rudeness.

“Thanks for the suggestion, Alfred, but we’re doing fine without it.”

Alfred turns a stupefied gaze to George, and receives a nod from that corner, leaving his jaw slack with wonder. “Ah... Van Cleef.”

George shrugs, grinning.

“One minute please.” Alfred gestures to follow him.

“I’ll be right back.”

I let go of his arm and watch him join Alfred, some distance away. They engage in a muted conversation where one of them will look at me, turn to talk, hands in pocket, chuckle, fold arms, look at me, turn to talk, on and on, for more than a minute. Wonder in Alfred’s eyes. Something I can’t put my fingers on in George’s eyes.



TWELVE

BLEND MODE

Chiluba

I'M LAYING LUXURIOUSLY ON THE CHAISE lounge, my beach hat covering my face, arms spread wide, when George returns to the cabana. I hear the grin in his voice. "That's the owner of Reenact Galleries you just blew off."

"Whatever. He deserved it. Acting all..." Folding my arms and shaking my head at the things he'd said. "Insinuating stuff."

I feel the chaise lounge dip with George's weight by my ankles. I hear the same grin still in his voice. "You don't like the idea of us being together?"

Men! "Am I not here with you?"

"You know what I am talking about."

Oh Lord... save me from men acting like teenage boys. I blow a breath. Take my hat off my face and sit up, folding my legs to the side. George is watching my every move.

"That's it. You want to have sex with me because that's what you see me as. A sex—"

His brows snap together. "You know that's not how it is. I don't want to have anything sexual to do with you. If I did, that would have been on the table the moment I agreed to help you—"

“Tsk. Oh, come off it, George. Partnership. That is what we are doing. You’re not helping me. If I needed help, I wouldn’t be here. I’ll be at the bank, accepting the loan they keep begging me to take. Not sitting here, listening to you and your friend talk about missing your children and how I’m going to enjoy being passed around your friends once you’re done having your share of me.”

“What? Where did you get that from?”

“Oh. I forgot.” Dramatically tapping my hand to my forehead. “You don’t understand Yoruba.” My fists are on my sides, pressing into the chaise lounge, my irritation at their *boys* talk encouraging me to go on. “And we’re yet to get a tutor for you.”

“I do.”

“You do what?”

“I understand Yoruba. Even though my speaking is bad. I understand the language.”

You... you understand? His confession knocks the wind out of my boat. I squint, tilting my head away from him—why didn’t he react when Alfred was spewing those rubbish—then back to him.

“Luba, what is it?”

“Why did you...” My voice is too low and foreign for my liking, so I clear my throat and try again. It is firmer. “Why didn’t you react when he said those things in Yoruba?”

“What things?”

What things? Ehn? About you caring for me and him spoiling me? Passing me around like something to be used and had.

“Can you take a deep breath and let’s talk this through?”

Visibly shaking with anger, I manage to look at him. I want to hate him, but all I see on his face is this calmness... ease... the need to understand. And I don’t want to be understood. I want to feed on this anger consuming me. Enveloping me. Cloaking me.

Why did I agree to come here in the first place? Because he listened to me last night? Made me feel like he wanted to know the real me? I feel some sort of connection to him?

Haha! Connection indeed.

Zoya and Lucid are the only connection we have.

Moving till I'm on the edge, I stop when he asks what I'm doing.

"I'm going for a walk."

"Give me a—"

"I don't need you following me around while I tour this *slice of paradise*." Pasting a naughty, nasty smile. "I'm a big girl." I confidently begin strutting away.

"Chi—"

His frustrated whisper fades with the evening wind as I put my sunshades in place. My weave flies all over the place—too bad I left my hat on the chaise lounge.

Let him stew.

Thinks after plundering me with sweetness and kindness... that after sharing with him what I went through, growing up... that he and his friends can make jokes about passing me around. That I'm one woman who'll lay, spread eagle for him, to do whatever he wants with my body.

Argh!

You will know you have entered one chance when that happens.

Or because of the little trinket he gave to me from Pandora. I don't care what he wants or why he suggested coming here. Him bringing me along is an insult.

I hiss, pulling at my kimono jacket.

Men. So predictable.

I was even thinking because of my relationship with Zoya, it will take a while for him to get this bold but no.

You don't like the idea of us being together.

Look at them. Old men, trying to take advantage of the time they have left by using younger ones. I can't even get angry with George because he doesn't have a wife. But he has a daughter my age. I doubt he'll be happy seeing her running around *a private beach* playing catch with one of his friends, in nothing but a two-piece bikini.

What? I narrow my eyes, staring at a woman in the distance, making out and giggling with a guy old enough to be her grandchild.

What did I agree to? Coming to an island I can't leave on my own. I didn't even ask when this *event* will be over. All that's left for it to turn into an orgy, is for these randy lot to start humping each other.

I slow down my pace. “Ouch!” A shoulder bumps into mine, startling me. *Watch where you’re going!* I find familiar female eyes pinned to mine, expecting a fight. I’m in the mood for one.

“I’m so sorry.” The girl apologizes in a hush, thin voice, a waning nervous smile on her features.

She looks to be Zena’s age. *What’s your story? Why are you here with these disgusting men?* I want to ask her, instead, I tell her, “I’m fine.”

Circling around me, she bends to pick up the ball that had caused her to bump into me in the first place.

For a second, I stare at her retreating form as she joins the others she’s playing volleyball with, before finding a secluded spot on the beach to myself. Sitting down on the sand close to water, I watch waves form and crash. Crashing into each other sometimes. When I scoot till my legs touch the water, I gasp at the coolness.

The wind picks, tossing my weave in my face and I squeal, chuckling as the water flows high than before, cooling my ass.

By the time I’m done separating my weave from my face, the water has moved up again, flooding my shorts and panties. Oh my God! I chuckle again as my body relaxes.

Parting my weaves into two from behind, I begin braiding them into two long pigtails.

“Hi.”

I turn to find the lanky girl who had hit me earlier as I make my way back to the cabana.

What. Do. You. Want?

“Hi.” Forcing a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes.

“My name is Ese.”

“I’m Chiluba.”

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

Nodding, I swallow. What should I say in response? Thank you? She doesn’t give me enough time to think my answer through as she rushes on.

“Would you like to join us?”

Huh? “Join who?”

“Oh.” She tucks her bobbed fringe hair behind her ear. “I saw you watching us earlier, and I thought you might be interested in—”

“I don’t play.”

“It’s a simple game. I can teach you.” Her head and hands move every time she speaks, making her bobbed fringed sway with the motion.

What’s the big deal about letting my guard down and having fun? I’m here already. “Give me a moment. I’ll join you guys.”

Ese claps her hands, excited to have convinced me. “Alright. I’ll hold a spot till you get back.”

Arriving the cabana, I can see and feel that someone has thoroughly missed me because George drops the book on power he’d been reading, his expression apologetic. “I thought you would like this, but you clearly don’t look like you want to be here—you’re wet,” he announces, like I don’t know.

“I’m okay. I think I just made friends.” Standing to the side, wanting to check my phone for anything I’ve missed and return to the girls.

He doesn’t believe me. “Just say the word. If you don’t want to be here, I’ll order for the speed boat to take us back.”

“It’s fine George. I’ve got this.” Bending to rummage through my beach bag for sunscreen and my phone. “I have a volleyball match to play.”

“You’ve got this, but your voice is dripping venom, like you’re about to scream at me for bringing you here.”

“That’s because you didn’t paint the complete picture.” I stand up, lathering sunscreen on my legs, arms, and midriff.

“Hmm.” His eyes trail the movements of my hands. “What’s this picture looking like to you?”

“It looks like the rich people in Lagos decided to have a hangout to show off their latest concubines.”

He bursts out laughing and it’s something rare. I struggle not to show it, but he must have caught the laughter in my eyes, because he reaches out to me, holding my hand. “To be sincere, most of them are married to the ladies here.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Moving me closer till I am standing between his legs, he begins subtly

pointing out different couples. His essence permeates my senses and I visibly relax.

“... yes, some other ladies you see out here were brought in for entertainment. While some men are without their wives, some couples want to try new things. Others love the privacy and togetherness. We’re assured there are no media people here.”

“This is so shady.” Shivering as I lean into his warmth. “And sad.”

“Variety is the spice of life.”

I pull out of his embrace, not wanting to analyze the feeling of safety I felt within them or how my cold and wet state makes me feel his warmth more than I should.

“What are you doing?” he asks when I drop my phone in my purse.

“Well, since variety is the spice of life, and there’s still an hour before sunset, I can’t sit here all day looking pretty when I have new friends and a game to play. I’ll see you... around.”

He grins knowingly, moving to get off the chaise lounge. “You think I’m going to miss out on watching you play?”

Checking my nail, I shrug. “I’ll make it fun for you.”

Turns out Ese is a popular actress’ daughter and an IT analyst at a bank. I knew those eyes were familiar! I laughed more than I’d done in a while, forgetting the responsibilities I shoulder. Not caring who was who or did what with who.

I watch another sunset with George and this time around, I hear the hissing sound of the water as the sun makes its descent. George makes sure I have my plate or glass filled with something.

7:14 PM

Funsho: Hey

7:15 PM

Chiluba: STOP TEXTINGGGG ME!

7:15 PM

Funsho: Come back to me.

7:23 PM

Chiluba: Where are you?

7:23 PM

Funsho: I'm home.

Wanna come over?

7:24 PM

Chiluba: Go to the window.

07:26 PM

Funsho: I'm here

07:26 PM

Chiluba: I need you to

Chiluba: J

Chiluba: U

Chiluba: M

Chiluba: P

07:27 PM

Funsho: You play too much.

07:30 PM

Funsho: Any plans for your birthday?

07:31 PM

Funsho: Bby

Funsho: ??

Funsho: Talk to me

07:33 PM

Funsho: I can help plan something.

Your first birthday with me.

07:36 PM

Chiluba: Thanks, but no.

I've got big plans.

You're not invited.

As darkness descends, color changing LED lights from the beach house and the cabanas adds a colorful ambience to the beach. The actual party starts with booze floating around. Soothing jazz music accompanied with beach sounds lulls the senses. Minutes later, a screen I had not seen rises before the swimming pool and an old movie, titled Dirty Dancing, starts playing.

“Never seen it before.” I tell George, shoving a fistful of buttered popcorn into my mouth as we lay on the chaise lounge.

“It’s a 1980s movie.”

I enjoy every bit of it.

Before the speed boats takes us back to Victoria Island, Ese finds me and dares me to run into the black ocean with her. I look at George, but he’s shaking his head.

Grinning, I take off my kimono jacket, handing it to him.

Squealing, Ese, and I run into the cold black water squealing in delight, ending the night way better than it started.

“I’m fine, George,” I tell him the moment I get into his waiting car at the dock. He said his PA would be driving him home in another. I shivered all through the speedboat ride and he had to hug me close. It felt good and was becoming familiar.

“You’re sure?” The fluttering lights from moving cars in the dimly lit street gives him a roguish look as he leans one hand on the car's door.

“Sure.” I smile for his benefit. It’s ten and I need to get home, even though he offered to book a suite for me to stay overnight instead of driving to the mainland. It’s Sunday, the roads are free. I’ll be home in a minute.

“Wish you didn’t go along with Ese into the water, but I can see you had a good time.”

“I did.”

“I’m sorry for—”

“George... it’s fine,” I smile. “I need to go home and change to something comfortable.”

“Send me a picture when you’re home?” he tells me in a concerned voice.

Closing the door, he knocks on the window, waving me goodnight. Our gaze holds until the car creeps away.

I didn't clarify if the picture should be of me arriving home or of me in my nightwear. But I grinned while hitting send, sending the latter.

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THIRTEEN

BIAS BINDING

George

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Every step I make on the treadmill resounds in my ears.

Like the resounding silence from her end today.

It's been days since I heard from Chiluba and almost a week since the beach party. Somehow, she keeps drifting into my thoughts. What would it be like to be with a girl like her?

I need to get her out of my mind.

Stop thinking about her.

Chiluba Ndukwe.

Would it be a bad idea to spend personal time with her... just one more time? The beach party had been an innocent invite to know her outside business. Thinking of it now, that was nonsense. I have not known her within the business scope. Just me wanting to spend time with someone I cannot have anything to do with.

Shocking how when she was in my embrace during the speedboat trip back to Victoria Island, this overwhelming need to protect her came upon me, I wasn't even thinking about sex, but the moment she sent a faceless picture in that

simple nightie, I had an instant hard-on.

We never spoke about it since then. Just business. *Please send an updated version of this. Hello George, can you please confirm this?*

But seeing her one more time... oh no. It will be best if I completely forget about her. My mission with her is done. I'm going to guide her in this partnership with my company, right?

So dumb, George. Dumb.

I need to forget those deep brown eyes that speak volumes to me. And those breasts I long to watch bob while sliding and pounding—my phone buzzes and I look down to find it ringing.

I press the power button on the treadmill to pause my run.

Panting, trying to catch my breath as I match my pace with the slowing treadmill, I pick my earpiece, plug it in before accepting the call coming through FaceTime. Even though the gym is empty, I'd rather not have our conversation aired in public.

"Hello Nosaze."

The image of my son seated in his office on a late Wednesday evening brings a smile to my face.

"Hey dad. How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"I'm good. Exercising?"

Tossing my head to the side, slightly heaving. "Need to keep fit."

"Keep that heart pumping for us." He chuckles fondly.

"What's going on with you? How is the US?"

"US is fine." He narrows his eyes, curiosity coming over his features. Could have been a perfect likeness to me, but he took his mother's skin color, curly hair from mine and his mother's combination, which he cuts low and black eyes. "I'm calling regarding the document that's flying around. What's the hurry?"

"That?"

Nosaze is the perfect son. Best any father would ask for if they weren't scared about continuing family's legacy. We talk about everything and anything. Thanks to Mira for pushing him when he was younger to get his degree, he is a lawyer for Silhouette, and I don't see why I shouldn't discuss the importance of getting things right with the agreement.

Picking my hand towel on the treadmill's rail, I wipe the perspiration oozing from my forehead. "It is important. Call it my new pet project." Nosaze's eyes widen with interest. "I need you to look into it and ensure it is ready to be signed by next week."

"Hmm..."

That's a pregnant *hmm* if I ever heard one. "What is it?"

He moves papers around, reads something, then looks back into the camera. "It looks similar to what Imelda has been speaking to you about, but fully fleshed and much more realistic. There's a launch event to be fully funded by Silhouette? And partnership that they handle the creation of these... collections?"

What's your angle? "Yes."

"Isn't that too much for them?"

"They're giving us the name and identity. Something we'll pay millions to an agency to come up with. They've saved us time and will generate money for us."

"Hmm..." He glances down at what I believe is the document.

"Questions?"

He looks up, wearing an unreadable look.

"Concerns?"

Leaning back, he places a palm to his cheek. "Nothing. No questions at all." He smiles.

I wish I can read him like I used to when he was younger. "What is it, Nosaze?"

"The lady who submitted the proposal." He leans forward, folding both arms on the table to form a steeple. "I did some research of my own and found out she is the celebrated CEO of 34 threads. Really, on to something big."

I know. That's why I'm indulging her.

"How did you guys meet?"

This is going to be some long talk. Stepping off the treadmill, I move to sit on a bench. "She's Zoya's friend." The words spill from me so easily. "They came around one day, talked about the proposal. I looked at it and thought it was worth giving it a chance."

"Zoya," Nosaze beams, "Such a smart girl."

“Yeah, a beauty pageant runner up.”

“Zoya?”

“No, Chiluba.”

“Hmm.”

“Did some interesting projects while she was crowned, too.”

“Like?”

“A borehole for a community, teaching skills to youths, and other community impactful projects.”

“Impeccable. And such a fascinating character.”

“I have met her, and she’s indeed fascinating. Would really love to see her succeed in this partnership. She’s passionate about—”

“Hold up, dad.”

“Huh?”

“You are interested in her?”

And just like that, I’ve spilled my guts to him. Flashes of guilt at the pleasure I experienced in sharing about her earlier causes my cheeks to color.

“Dad, you like her!”

“Nosa—”

“Dad, no.” His eyes twinkle with excitement. “We must talk about this. You’re blushing—means she’s someone special.”

The guilt builds into a flush of embarrassment, making me feel like I’m some teenager boy talking about a girl. Should I proceed with this discussion? What’s the limit parents should go about discussing their feelings with their kids? Should I tell him how I truly feel about her? And how things will never work out between us.

Smiling, I lift myself from the bench, pick my gym bag and begin heading to my suite, opting to use the stairs instead of the elevator. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I knew it!” He grins like he just got a Christmas toy. “I knew there was more back story to this file being pushed around. When I got the email, with the instruction to look in ASAP, I was like, what’s happening here? Is this Imelda’s consultant? But nah, it was just you all along, dad.”

“You have all your theories confirmed, huh?”

“Yes. You think you could sneak this one on us? When am I meeting her?”

Meeting her? I laugh. “That will not be happening.”

“Dad. This is a miracle. I need to meet the lady making this happen.”

“It’s nothing Nos. It’s not like I...” I trail off, hoping he gets the meaning.

“Oh... I’m so sorry, dad. Do you need my help?”

Help?! I hold my phone to my face, raising a brow at him.

He chuckles.

“What is that supposed to mean?” *I taught you how to get your first girlfriend in high school!*

“That’s cool that you don’t need help in that department.” His lips twitch and I know he is trying to tease me. “How about the other department?”

Good thing I’m at my suite’s door. Unlocking it, I push it open. “Which department? What do you mean?”

“You can still get it up, right?”

“Nosaze!”

He chuckles. “I’m still young and virile.” He says between laughs. “You don’t want to go after her. I was just wondering if it’s because you can’t... um... get it up. You know... in bed.”

“*Kak!* Nosaze. I can have five more of you if I wanted to. I’m in my mid-fifties. Not dead. Shit. Men my age host orgies.”

“I’m sorry, dad!” He lets out a merry, and contagious laugh. But the gleam in his eyes says he still has a lot to say. “Sometimes, I just wonder if it’s the same feeling one gets as they age. Since mom’s passing, I’ve often wondered if we fell from the sky.”

“Oh. Who knows?” I don’t have to tell my son of my one-nighters. Nothing serious. Meeting some matured ladies at events who know what they want and we go about getting it and moving on. “This topic is not open for discussion.”

“Dad...” He grins into the camera. “Don’t miss the point here.”

“Which is?” Confused whether to sit on the couch or divest my clothing so I can take a shower, I go into my room and opt to stand throughout the call, pacing and occasionally glimpsing myself in the mirror.

“You’re showing interest in the feminine specie. That’s something to be excited about for my father. A fresh start.”

What? My own son hoping I start afresh with someone else?

“It doesn’t have to be her dad. I can arrange a girl you can—”

“Nosaze. That’s not how it works.” I stop by the window side that overlooks the waterfront. A small boat drifts in the water with two occupants in it.

“But dad...” His voice is mellow.

I look back into my phone’s screen and his black eyes look more like Mirabel with the raw emotion he’s emitting.

“You’ve been by yourself these years and... I just want you to be happy. And man to man, let’s ignore the fact that you’re my dad. I’ve been wondering all these years how you’ve been finding pleasure in doing stuff. And sex is the one thing God has given to all mankind to enjoy, irrespective of status. Although I don’t know the intricacies of your sex life, I believe sex is best enjoyed with someone we’re emotionally connected to. Since mom left, you choose to deprive yourself—”

“I didn’t—”

“No dad. I’m not done yet. Please hear me out.”

I nod and he continues.

“Since mom left, you’ve deprived yourself this joy. And yes, I get it, you loved mummy. Dad, not so many fathers set the right standard of how a man should love his wife and his family, but you did. You set a standard for how I love my wife. After everything you’ve been through, I don’t want you to suffer when—”

“I’m not suffering Nosaze. This is a choice.”

“I’m still not done speaking, dad.”

“Get to the point.”

“I want you to be happy. And if the joy I saw while you spoke about this Chiluba lady is anything to go by, then I say, go for it.”

“Thanks, Noz.” Offering a small but loving smile. “I’ll put that at the back of my mind.”

He returns the smile. “I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Just like we would have a talk about me having another heir who’ll usurp you and your siblings’ places in the family.”

He thinks deeply for a couple of seconds, then laughs nervously. “If it comes to that, we’ll sort it out.”

“Since you’re being willing and nice to set up your rival for arrival—that was a good rhyme, wasn’t it?”

“No Dad.” He chuckles. “No. Please don’t say that in public.”

Hmm... *set up your rival for arrival*. “Nothing in everything we’ve discussed has changed. I just need your help.”

“I’m all ears.” Placing both arms on his armrest, he stretches in his seat.

“Chiluba’s birthday is this weekend, and I would like to—”

“Gifts. Gift ideas.”

His excitement about this whole situation is baffling. Why is he so bent on seeing me starting a relationship with another woman after Mirabel? I was expecting some reluctance, not this... this unabashed excitement.

“Or do you want to plan the party itself?”

His voice brings me back to the present.

“I know some people like partnering with clubs to promote their birthdays. Is... she a club kind of lady?” Since our conversation about Chiluba began, this is the first time skepticism will color his voice.

“I... don’t think so.”

“Great.” Complete confidence is back in his tone. “So, we can—”

“Nosaze, we met for the first time, barely two weeks ago. Nothing elaborate.”

You’re not even concerned that this lady is younger than me. That they might see me as a cradle robber or that she might be some gold digger of sorts. This—this arrangement Chiluba and I have.

There’s no arrangement.

“Oh...”

“Yeah. She’s a friend of Zoya, in case you forgot that bit.”

“And you like her?”

Taking a long breath and damning the consequences. *I’m not some young boy, wet behind the ears. I like who I like*. “Yes.”

He sucks in air. “That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. So, I can’t attend her birthday party or throw her one.”

“So, we stick to just the gift idea?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Do you have anything in mind? Anything she would favor? Ladies like that have a lot of competitors. And since you don’t want to go with a random babe that I can help you arrange in minutes—”

What’s with these young men around me finding it easy to *arrange girls*? “You keep girls on the side?”

The day Nosaze introduced Angela as his girlfriend, way before they got married, I advised him never to cheat if he wanted to have a peaceful relationship. I hope to God he isn’t—

“Dad! You know that’s not my style.”

“Better not be.” Feeling relieved, I move from the window to power up my laptop.

“So much trust. Hmm, back to your conquest. Do you know what she favors?”

Running a hand through my already ruffled hair, I try to think something up. From her acceptance of the token I had offered when she came visiting the last time, she strikes me as one who loves shiny stones and designer items. She’s not so hard to please.

Maybe I should call her and ask.

Or should I just send money? Everyone loves money.

Change of plans.

I know before Nosaze’s call I’d been thinking of not seeing her again, but I need to do something for her birthday. After that. No more.



FOURTEEN

OPEN PLATFORM

Chiluba

A CALL FROM MAAMA HAS ME continuously saying ‘amen’ to prayers in the wee hours of the morning. As planned, Zena had slept over at mine, so she made breakfast—scrambled eggs, bread, and hot milk—forced me to eat, then sent me off to work.

1:01 AM

Funsho: Happy birthday bby.

I go about my birthday as I would other days, but this day is extra special because of the influx of calls wishing me well, gifts, cakes, and the nagging reality that I’m getting older. With birthdays comes the reality that we can die at any time. Why not live more? There will always be problems.

When the accountant called some days back to remind me of some upcoming debt payments, I almost cancelled this birthday party out of guilt, but then I mulled over about it. Funds used for this celebration are from my personal purse. I shouldn’t feel bad about wanting to feel special that I’m aging... or that I’ve done so much by myself. I don’t care about the pending debt waiting for me. The monetary crisis looming over 34 Threads will not stop me from celebrating my

birthday.

Taking the easier way out by accepting gigs and not being able to call the shots is not how I plan to live the rest of my life. I had done that in the past, when I was finding my footing, being at the disposal of others because I was hungry for more, looking for fame and acceptance. Having a producer try to maul me in between a set sealed the deal for me.

I opened to Zoya and Zena about my plight and we cooked a plan of how I can use my tailoring, styling, and business acumen to craft a fresh path for myself. Zoya had enough funds to drop as capital and I took some loans which, thankfully, I paid back in full—interest inclusive—two years ago. I didn't want to feel indebted to any bank or loan shark when I started. But a few months after being debt-free, I was expanding 34 Threads, and saw the massive investment opportunity. I should have realized it was too good to be true.

So stupid!

I shouldn't have fallen for it, but I did and now—

Stop it, Luba. People have gathered to celebrate your success. Step out there and show them.

"We're here..." Zena sings lightheartedly beside me, pulling me from my reverie.

The chauffeured car stops in front of the hall dotted with well-wishers and paparazzi on the red carpet.

"Thank you," I mutter, smoothening my waist length weave to ensure it's not caught on anything. Through tinted windows, I see a couple of familiar faces and I smile in gratitude. They came out for me.

Me!

Chiluba Immaculate Ndukwe.

This night is going to be great!

At work, when a cake with a picture of me, alongside a black heart box of roses and a vintage floral bracelet silver wristwatch arrived, I knew who it was from.

Was I surprised he remembered my birthday?

No.

Was I surprised he got me something?

Yes!

It made me feel special. My inner child's face is looking up, with eyes closed and lips touching her ears with the joy I feel inside.

We wait till Moji—my event planner—gives the signal, and the chauffeur steps out to open the door for me. Too bad it isn't some boyfriend or someone special, but I'm absorbing all the goodness I can get.

I put one leg out.

Or too bad it isn't a particular wise, white guy. I chuckle at my personal joke. Zena is already on my side of the door, taking pictures, making videos, whatever.

I put my other leg out. Push myself out of the car and the attention of the crowd on the red carpet turns to me.

'She's the one.' 'She's here.' 'Wow!' 'Luba!' 'Queen...' 'So gorgeous.'

The indistinct words float to where I stand, smiling at cameras.

People gravitate towards me, and that's when the bouncers step in. *The hall beside mine must be wondering who I am.* I grin even more. *Zoya has been busy at work lately. Is she inside yet?*

I pose for pictures on the red carpet. Wave to friends and familiar faces. Answer questions for the Gist Lovers Show, before my birthday crew leads me inside the hall. Strains of afrobeats tease my ears as we walk. The recently concluded Arise Magazine Fashion Week has added feathers to my cap. Although at the start of the event, models were bailing out of their fashion houses, mine didn't because I pay my models more than they need. Having experienced life as a model for a brief period, I understand how hard it is to maintain such lifestyle.

Holly Molly! I pause at the entrance, staring in silent amazement at the magic Moji and Zena created. I'll be honest, this is beyond what I had imagined.

The hall is brightly lit with blueish-purple lights. Under the sound of music, guests murmur, laughing at the jokes the MC cracks. Everything—chairs, cups, tables—looks like transparent crystals. Multiple tables that seat five, with three floral alcoves on the sides and one elaborate cove done in green, pink, blush, peach, and gold balloons, in the center.

Moji outdid herself.

"This is lovely!" I grin at Moji and Zena.

They shrug.

Waving them close, I hug them, on the verge of tears.

I know how much I had put into this, and Moji's promise to make it extraordinaire—she nailed it.

“This is lovely. Congratulations Chiluba.” Àbèbí from work says as she passes by, clutching a dish of peppered snail and *moin moin*. “Ah... Zena.” Her eyes brighten as they settle on her. “You are looking good.”

“I know...” I chime, admiring Zena. “See how the dress fits her?”

It is one of Àbèbí's special creations—a long sleeve knee-length white gown with plunging v-neckline. The gown has a stylish vertical Ankara bow on the left-hand side.

Zena is blushing with the attention she's getting. “Thank you.”

Àbèbí's gaze inspects Zena and I'm surprised when she says instead, “Luba, those shoes. I'm getting them after this party.”

“Not happening. Birthday gifts.” I kick my legs up, flaunting my new heels, gold mesh and leather trimmed Christian Louboutin Follies. They're the perfect birthday gift from Zoya. I found out this evening that the Jimmy Choo heels I had gotten to accompany my short black lace gown embroidered with delicate gold beads didn't buckle. Oh... the joy when I opened the gift box from Zoya minutes later.

“They're so lovely.” Àbèbí cries.

I make my rounds, greeting guests. Dancing. Eating. Chatting. I'll catch a glimpse of Zena, then ask if Zoya has made it and whenever she shakes her head, I want to sulk.

Ara by Brymo is playing when I spot Zoya walking into the hall.

“You made it!” I scream, gliding to her.

We chat for a while before Zena comes around. “Luba, you need to give your speech now. The schedule.”

Zena and Zoya flaunt my side as we make it to the birthday cove. That's what Zoya called it and I like it. The birthday cove has a circular black couch with a table that goes round it. It is constantly in motion, giving a 360 view of the room. An ice bucket with champagne, several cakes, fruit, and other edibles surround the table.

Moji comes around to whisper in my ear, “Don't give your speech yet. Just a minute.”

There's a variety of food moving around.

The MC is making everyone shine their teeth.

My girls are by my side.

“Thanks for the gifts wrapped with love and care.” I say to my guests, who have been nothing but spectacular tonight. “You all know the way to this girl’s heart.” The audience laughs. “Thanks to all of you... wonderful people... who came out tonight. Taking time out of your busy personal and professional schedules to celebrate with me. Special thanks to my friends and sisters, Zoya and Zena, for believing in me. If you are wondering who made this hall pop to life,” I crane my neck, looking for Moji, then spot her speaking to an usher, “Moji?”

She turns to look at me, a radiant, sunny smile on her face.

I gesture. “That’s the magician over there. Moji made this happen. Thanks for your hard work on this. Couldn’t have done it without you and Zena’s help.” The audience claps, cheering. “And without further ado, I’m opening the dance floor. Celebrate with me!”

The intro for Party Rock Anthem by LMFAO thunders from the speakers. The hall’s lighting flashes, turning the room into a dancehall in seconds. I dance towards my girls, and we shake our waists, dancing, laughing, screaming.

Alas, well-wishers won’t let me be.

Someone will tap my shoulder and I will smile, walk off the dance floor to hear whatever they have to shout into my ear before returning to the dance floor. Moji escorts me to some seated big wigs from the music and movie industry eating away while some popular low budget actresses maintain deadpan expressions at their dry jokes.

Guys check out Zoya and I grin, wondering if she’ll take them on. After a while, she excuses herself, heading for the bathroom.

“We’re still sleeping over, right?” Zena asks, scrolling through her phone as we walk off the dance floor to cool off. I’m sure she has a planner or something that’s helping her keep everything in check on it.

“Of course, yes!” As I sit with a drink in hand, I glance at the entrance and see new familiar faces. *Latecomers!* “Ah, see, my friends have arrived.”

“Which friends?” Zena asks.

Yes, darling. I’m not heading into my late twenties without a bang.

“Don’t look. They’re at the entrance.” I nudge her shoulders the other way as I notice from a side glance that two broad-shouldered men are scanning the hall,

looking for me.

I'm right here, babies!

"How do you expect me not to look when you tell me to see who has arrived?"

I hiss in frustration at Zena's intentional blockheadedness. "Please pretend we're having a serious conversation."

"Ladies..." a baritone voice says, causing me to smile. I turn and I'm staring at Kólá and Bánjí. They're both elegantly dressed in kaftans. Kólá in black with thin white stripes while Bánjí's is gray.

"I'm sorry we're late. Traffic." Kólá says as an explanation.

I shrug it off. Kólá and I are in the fashion industry. He's focused on men's wear while Bánjí, the special plus one guest he promised to bring along, is a senior manager with a telecoms company.

Not bad looking in person... I smile as Kólá does the introduction, holding on to Bánjí's eyes.

His eyes hold mine. Bold. I like that.

"A gigantic bird told me someone was celebrating her birthday today." The deep timbre of his voice is low but audible above the loud music. "You look lovelier in person."

"Thanks for coming."

"It's my pleasure."

"Meet Zena."

They turn to Zena, masculine interest lighting up their smiles.

"Hi Zena," Kólá says.

Zena response is to cast them a blank but polite smile that says she's not taken by their looks, and they shouldn't be interested in her. "Hi."

Bánjí moves to sit beside me, saying in a hushed whisper, "Is she Queen Zo?"

"No. That's Zoya. Her sister."

Zoya is active on Twitter with over a hundred thousand dedicated followers. She posts viral tweets and gives savage replies.

"Is she here?"

"She is. She's around here, somewhere."

“Happy birthday, Chiluba.” A thin, hush voice says, and I turn to stare at Ese.
Awwn... you made it!

What was I thinking sending out broadcast messages to people on Wednesday? Was I scared no one would make it?

Getting up for a side hug, I thank her for coming.

“You said this was a small get together.”

I shrug, grinning smugly. “It’s small.”

“This is a big jam. And it’s lovely. I said to make a quick stop to wish you happy birthday in person.”

“Oh, thanks Ese.”

I make quick introductions and as we converse, Zoya returns, hips swishing. Another round of introduction ensues. Zoya recognizes Kólá from a fashion event I invited her to last year. How wouldn’t she? I was trying to match make them. Kólá believes he needs time with her, but I doubt it’s possible now that her twitter billionaire boyfriend is in the picture.

“I thought you were going to miss out on this.” He grins.

“I’m here.” She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. Zoya has been acting flighty all night, watching the entrance now and then.

“Excuse me. Ladies.” We look up to find a young man in formal attire. “We need the celebrant on the red carpet.”

Shooting pleading eyes to Ese, I wince. “Please... I’ll be back shortly.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll be here for another ten minutes or so.”

I grin, handing my purse and phone to Zoya. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m coming with you.”

We head out together, moving around guests, stopping to make small talk in-between. The turnout is amazing, considering the fact that I wanted this to be an intimate, private affair.

“Is it Manir?” I ask, wondering who might request my presence on the red carpet. “Is he scared of coming inside?”

“You wish.”

I chuckle. “You need to let me vet this guy. I don’t want anyone breaking your heart.”

“My heart is safe and secure where it is.”

Outside, on the red-carpet, I notice people gathered around a car with its hazard lights on, taking pictures from different angles. It is confusing, trying to understand what is going on.

Did someone bash their car? Was this person coming for my—no, leaving my birthday drunk? Why did this person park here? There's enough parking space to go around. This is the red-carpet section for crying out loud! Maybe it's some popular person who decided to crash my party but popular or not, there is a parking space.

"Is this what needs my attention?" I ask rhetorically, staring suspiciously at the car on the red-carpet.

"Happy birthday to you..." A saxophone belts. I turn to the side to find a saxophonist, blowing with all his might as he walks towards me. "Happy birthday to you... Happy birthday..." He keeps playing.

Okay... Clapping, I smile, turning a puzzled look to Zoya. "Talk to me babe. What's happening here? You set this up?"

"Just like you." She grins, swaying to the saxophonist's tune. "I am lost. But I'm enjoying the show." She points to the spot where the car is. People in front of it have cleared. "That's the latest Range Rover Sport. There's a bow on it." A small smile on her lips. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

A bow?

How did she see that, and I haven't seen it yet?

Casting a glance at the said car, which true to Zoya's inspection, has a red bow on it.

Which one of my boyfriends or exes will do this? No one has gone this all out for me before. This is a grand gesture of sorts.

Why am I overthinking?

It's not like it's been said that it's mine.

"Miss Chiluba?" a baritone voice calls, causing Zoya and I to walk in the car's direction. The hazard lights are still blinking, so I can't see his face, but he is looking like a bodyguard in a dark suit. He presses a hand to his ear, then nods. "I have a package for you. One moment please."

He turns in the car's direction to get something from it. The saxophonist has moved on to singing Stevie Wonder's *Happy birthday to ya... Happy birthday...*

"Know him?" I murmur for Zoya's ears only.

“He looks familiar. One of your boyfriends?”

“Nope.” Shaking my head. “Don’t know him.” Grinning. “But I don’t mind flirting with him a bit.”

Zoya sucks air between her imaginary gap tooth, a habit she is fond of whenever she has nothing to say, since we were girls.

He returns with a bag after turning off the car. “Happy birthday, ma’am.”

Ma’am? Do I look that old? I’m just twenty-seven.

All the expectations and hope of maybe flirting with him for tonight disappears. It’s hard to be excited to try something with someone new when he calls you ma’am.

Accepting the bag, I peek inside to find some designer boxes. A phone? Perfume? Shoes?

“Luba...” Zoya whispers furtively.

Ouch!

I look up from the sting of Zoya’s pinch. *What...* I almost snarl.

My gaze follows hers to the guy who is holding out another gift. “Thank you —oh.” It’s a box. A box that I know what’s in it. And I’m suspecting who this is from.

Handing the bag to Zoya, I watch as the man opens the box and a lone key shines brightly amid light wrapping paper.

I don’t know how my hands are not twisted before me, but Zoya gently shoves me forward to accept my gift.

“What is that?” I ask the man with an air of importance.

He nods towards the Range Rover Sport. “It’s yours.”

Are you kidding me? Is this really mine?

Maama! The latest Range Rover!

In white. Perfect for any outfit I decide to wear.

“Luba, accept the key. Come on.”

Yes. Yes, I’m trying.

I know Zoya is excited because she is a mini car freak. I don’t know if there is ever such a word as that, but my friend here loves cars but doesn’t enjoy driving them.

Picking up the keys, the man encourages me to unlock the doors, which I do. Dragging Zoya behind me, we make a beeline for the car, with me singing, “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

“Do you know who sent them? The gifts?” Zoya asks as we check the car out.

The number one person on my guess list is your uncle, but I will not be the one telling you that. “No idea. But it’s a gift!”

I don’t have enough time to see Zoya’s reaction, but I can feel her happiness flooding into me. This is what life should be like. I love this life and I will not change it for anything!

“Mine,” I murmur, staring into the car in awe.

I cannot afford both cars at the same time, I’ll sell off my Toyota Camry. Or maybe I’ll just give it to someone to drive as a taxi and collect money every other day.

Hopping into the driver’s seat, I lean back as the leather accepts and conforms to my body. The man in the dark suit stands by the door, going on and on about the car.

“Wow!” I look out the window to find an awestruck Zena. Kòlá, Bánjì and Ese are not far behind.

“You like?” I ask Zena.

“It’s lovely. Who gave this to you?” Zena, blunt as ever, asks in awe as they join in the inspection of my new car.

“I don’t know.” Laughing at my newfound fortune. “A secret admirer?” My eyes meet Zoya’s with a knowing smile.

“Luba, Luba!” Kòlá begins. “We’re turning up tonight. The Club.” His gaze flickers to Ese, who is no longer in a hurry to leave.

What did I miss while accepting my gift? Did she tell him where we met? It’s their first-time meeting, so I doubt they would have talked about that yet...

“Bills on me.” Kòlá announces.

I’m not letting that slide. It’s been a while I went clubbing. Getting down from the car, I take pictures with friends and well-wishers. News spreading around is that a secret admirer has gifted me the car.

The moment we return to the cove, Zoya raises a toast. “Farewell to Funsho.”

I giggle, raising a toast too. “Cheers to the good life.”

Zena looks down at her phone, then raises her head, a wicked grin in place. “Are you ladies ready to get wild?”

We arrive at the club in two cars, Kólá’s and my Range Rover. Ese is still with us. Her ten minutes has turned to an all-nighter. I watch her lean into Bánjí. A lot. And the besotted guy he is, he welcomes her body on his. She is fun.

While Bánjí orders shisha, Zena takes a corner seat, sipping on one glass of alcohol all night, until I dare her and Zoya to dance with me.

“I didn’t invite you guys to be school nuns on my birthday.” I scream at them, dancing between Kólá and a random guy. Ese has colonized Bánjí, and he is happy to have her on his side.

The *shisha* Bánjí ordered appears. We take turns sucking the pipe, laughing as our inhibitions reduces. Soon, Zoya and Zena step on the dance floor, displaying moves like no tomorrow.

After an hour plus at the club, we agree we need to eat something edible. All we had eaten during the birthday party has disappeared with all the energy we’ve expelled.

We are a bunch of giggling heads as we drive around Victoria Island looking for a restaurant opened late.

“Don’t worry, I know a restaurant close by.” Kólá assures us.

It better be. “Please, any restaurant works for me.”



FIFTEEN

APPLIQUÉ

Chiluba

OUR SEARCH FOR FOOD LEADS US to a restaurant in Lekki Phase One. Zoya, Zena, Ese, and Kòlá remain in the cars, while Bánjí and I enter the restaurant to place the orders.

Although it's past two in the morning, there are some people in here eating, trying to get it on with their partners.

"What's up with you and Ese?" I ask as we wait for servers, moving like zombies in the wee hours of the morning, to pack our meal.

"What?" Bánjí asks, distracted by whatever he is doing on his phone.

Coming in here together was a strategic move on my part—to gauge what's happening. I invited you to my birthday party to see if we can kick it off... end up in bed together... But here you are, tripping for a girl who follows old men for a living.

And George? He is not old?

George is different. He is not married. And even though I sent that picture to him, he has maintained professionalism throughout our subsequent discussions.

Ese's actress mother, according to the media, has been pimping her daughter to older men since she turned sixteen. Not that I expect Bánjí, Kòlá, Zoya and

Zena to know who Ese truly is. She easily blends into her environment.

“Chiluba?”

“Nothing.” I lean on one foot, folding my arms. “It’s none of my business.” Turning to look at the sluggish servers. They had better not mix up our orders because that’s when I’ll get really pissed.

“Is it Ese?”

Widening my eyes, I act as though I’m surprised. And he takes the bait.

He shrugs. “I like her. There’s something about her I can’t put my hands on.”

I spare a languorous, sexy smile, eying him. “You want to smash her? Hit and run?”

His mouth hangs open and slowly turns into a smile as I continue.

“I get it. She’s a fine girl. Has that childish-innocent look going for her?”

“She does.” He nods slowly. “Not as fine as you.”

I scrunch my nose. “*Abeg*. Don’t play that card on me.”

“Chiluba, it’s true.”

“*Ehn*. That’s why I told Kólá to invite you so we could get it on, but you’re going for my friend.”

“It’s not like that between—”

“Hmm mmh. I’m just letting you know my mind. I wish you both the best.”

“Ah... We could—”

“Don’t even mention what I think you want to mention.”

He chuckles, raising both hands in surrender.

The restaurant’s door bells jingle. I swivel around, hoping to find an impatient Zena, Zoya or Ese—only if she’s a witch and has figured we were talking about her. To my surprise, I find Osaze.

The tall, towering Osaze.

I turn my head to the counter where the servers are. Bánjí is stepping forward to accept our order.

Or maybe it’s someone that looks like him? But this guy looks built like Osaze, Michael’s friend, and associate. They’re the big boys of ‘Lagos,’ who believe they’re God’s gift to Lagos babes. Daddy’s boys slash sweet boys because they’re from money. I’ve met him only a handful of times and there was

no denying the underlying sizzling chemistry between us.

“What is it?” Bánjí asks when my gaze keeps darting from the meal bags he is checking to the other side of the counter.

“Nothing. Just tired.” Covering a yawn.

I must be sleep deprived to conjure up Osaze at a restaurant like this. He’s not one to visit restaurants by this time of the day. Too prim and proper was the reason I didn’t encourage him chasing me over two years ago. Michael was more... fun. In the fast lane. The guy I wanted then.

“Done?” I ask Bánjí.

“Yeah.” He lifts the bags containing the packs of our meal.

We turn to leave, and I lock gazes with Osaze’s lookalike. A familiar charming smile takes over his features as he takes long and limber steps toward me.

Could it be? Slightly squinting my eyes.

“Chiluba?”

Yes! He is the one! My sixth sense never fails me!

“Hi...” Feigning ignorance as I contemplate my reaction to Osaze’s lookalike.

Bánjí lurks like a bodyguard besides me, trying to understand what’s happening. He looks like a caricature of himself, trying to stand straighter, widening the arms carrying the bags. “Know him?” He eyes Osaze’s lookalike with a polite scrutiny.

“It’s me.” Osaze smirks, gesturing. Looking too alive for this time of the day. He should be in bed.

“Osaze?” Craning my neck up to him. He’s a professional basketball player. One of the tallest guys I know. Several inches taller than George.

He grins slowly, his dreamy eyes lighting up. “I mean, how many do you know?” He opens his arms for a hug—all dressed in jeans and a shirt that hugs his chest—I can see every pectoral muscle’s movement. “I saw Zoya outside.”

Walking into his arms feels natural. The fresh smell of his cologne hits me. “I knew it was you when I laid eyes on you. I just wasn’t sure.”

“Happy birthday,” he breathes into my neck.

“Thank you.” Withdrawing from him, I check him out. The dreamy eyes are still there but gone is that feeling that he is the same man I met, one... two, three

times in the company of Michael. Life has replaced him with a man who knows what he wants and will do whatever to get it.

His eyes examine me, too. And I can tell he is still interested in me.

After all these years... Must be a hit a run thing too and I don't mind.

"Um..." I turn to find Bánjí, still holding the bags of our food. "Since you guys are... good, I'll wait outside."

"Oh. Bánjí meet Osaze. Osaze, Bánjí."

They mumble responses to each other and Bánjí makes a comment about the crew eating outside, but I'm the birthday girl, before leaving Osaze and I catch up.

"How did you know it's my birthday?"

He smirks. "Was your birthday."

Shrugging, I nudge him with my shoulder as we wait for his order to be packed. "It's my birthday. I say when it happens. Still is my birthday."

He gives a small laugh, folding his arms on his tummy. "Luba..." he says fondly. "What's new?"

"Progress?" We both chuckle. I fold my arms, feeling self-conscious. Has anything changed since we last saw? "There are some things that have to stay the same. And you?" Taking a step back to visibly inspect him. "You have changed. That I must say." My eyes meet his, and I project all the salaciousness I can into my expression. "I would really love to catch up."

He spares me a rueful little smile. "There's a lot that's still the same. Like me remembering your birthday and sending you Facebook messages you don't respond to."

Guiltily... Smiling, I cover my face with one hand. "There are a thousand messages waiting for me to read on Facebook." I drop my hand. "If I had known you were one of the thousands, I might have read them."

"Hmm. I never had your phone number."

"You know why."

I had my sights set on Michael. It wouldn't do to pit two friends against each other. Memories of stolen moments cloud my senses. The first time I met them at a fashion event, where Osaze was his attentive, slow self, while Michael was more active, making jokes and suggestions. It wasn't until the second meeting, where Michael invited me to watch them play basketball, that I saw Osaze in

action. I was yet to agree to being Michael's girlfriend. The third was when we travelled to Dubai as a group.

After what feels like a century, he reaches for my hand. "And same here." Using his thumb to make soothing motions. "We can catch up tonight."

Oh... An excited shiver runs down my spine. Thank God Ese has taken Bánjí's attention from me. Osaze is a much better package, packing enough for two. My pussy clenches at the promise of what's coming.

Birthday sex! Birthday sex! Best day of the year. But... I squeeze his hands, frustrated at the turn of events. "Unfortunately... my friends are out there waiting for me."

"Yeah." He grins mischievously. "I stay around this area."

You don't get it. "Maybe I'll visit one of these days? Or you visit me or..." 34
Threads needs you now more than ever! You shouldn't be thinking of a man. Haven't you had enough of relationships? "Tsk. I don't know..."

"How about... you visit me tonight?"

Pursing my lips, I tilt my head to the side, contemplating his offer. I really would love to go.

Like, birthday sex!

Shaking my head, I scan the junk in his trunk and man... Osaze is packing. "Hmm... My friends are out there. We were club hopping."

"How about we go out there and you tell them it's a wrap? We head to my place? Except you were with that guy—"

"No. No. He's my friend."

Osaze smiles smugly at my confession before stepping forward to collect his order. He returns to me, bag in hand. "My place? Tonight? Something for the birthday girl?"

"That's fine by me."

Chineke meh! I just tossed my friends aside for this piece of meat. I hope it's worth it.

His hand circles my waist as we walk out of the restaurant, and I lean into him. "So... you'll tell your friends you'll be coming with me?"

"Pronto." I grin.

The girls are not happy to see me go but Zoya understands the history between Osaze and I. In my dating history, he was on the list of my almost-

boyfriends but I had to go for the other friend. Zoya agrees to take my new car home while I hitch a ride with Osaze.

It's as though my hunger for food melted into thin air when I met Osaze. Before leaving my birthday crew to join Osaze, in record time, as I catch up with them, I shove about five spoons of rice into my mouth, eat my meat and drink water to push it down.

"So... how is pro b-ball going?" I ask for lack of what to say as we resume the journey to his place.

"Going smooth. We're training for the Olympic summer games."

Olympic what? I tap his arm. "You're kidding..."

He grins widely as I watch him, using one hand to control the steering wheel. "You've not been staying updated?"

"I've not. Wow! That's great news. Congratulations."

"Thank you. We played the AfroBasket last year and qualified for Nigeria's first Olympic Basketball game."

"You guys are doing the most with the little given."

He shrugs, leaning forward. Light from the streetlamps casting dark shadows on his face. "We are."

Let's take this discussion to warmer waters. "Is that why you've been going around Lagos at midnight, looking for girls to take home to catch up on...?"

I need to be sure of what I'm getting into. Even though it's stupid of me to be asking now that we're far from my friends.

He laughs, relaxing into his seat. I admire the confidence he exudes, so in control. A man like Osaze, although from money, understands what it's like to chase a passion. He should be able to level up with me. What was I thinking, not going for him back in the day?

"You know me or used to know me. Some things are still the same."

What's with this play of words that we keep going on about—you've changed, you're the same?

"I didn't think of this when I agreed to... this. Help me clarify; are you by any chance married?"

It just seems too cool... too good to be true stumbling upon him on a night like this. My eyes dart to his left hand on the steering wheel but there is nothing there. No ring. And no faded ring sign. How come a woman hasn't snatched this

guy yet?

“You’re safe from drama with me.”

“Hmm.”

Within five minutes, we arrive at his place. It’s a modern-designed bungalow.

“Yours?”

“Serviced apartment. I have it all to myself.”

“You look like someone who loves their privacy.”

He turns off the ignition, turning to me with an intimate, radiant smile. “I do.”

Summer Olympics!

I’m busting at the seams to share my excitement of this big catch and fish I just landed.

George.

Where did that thought come from? Why am I thinking about him right now? Hmm mmh.

Osaze opens my door, I step out, following his lead into his place.

“Would you like a nightcap?” He places the bag from the restaurant on his center table and begins bringing out his meal, while I leisurely admire his space. “Or we go straight to business?”

I pause, turning my attention to him. “Business being?”

He puts a fork between his teeth as he opens his meal. Nothing has looked more sensual than that simple act.

“You join me for this meal, while you answer questions like...” He takes a forkful of his meal, pondering his question, while I walk towards him. “Did you eventually, somewhere behind the scenes, attend a university while you’re out here deceiving us?”

Are you kidding me? That’s what you want to talk about when I’m fighting off the thought of an older man so that I can actually be with you?

Some things have really not changed. I struggle not to let my disappointment show. Instead, I step closer to him as he gulps water from a bottle and place my hands on his shoulders.

He pauses when I slide them down slowly. Our breathing is loud and audible from the sexual tension forming. The outline of an erection is forming in his trousers.

Scoffing, he drops the bottled water on the table, spreading his legs out as my hands reach his crotch. "You know, I invited you with innocent intentions?"

Just like George invited me to Radisson Blu with innocent intentions. And the private beach party too.

"You invited me at three in the morning to see your place." Moving around the couch, I sit on his lap, grinning into his eyes. My lips are so close to his, I can feel his hot breath on them. "No ulterior motives?"

This nonsense between my brain and George needs to stop. My body needs to experience what a younger man can give to me, which I'm sure *Uncle Georgie* can never match up to.

"No ulterior motive in mind." He leans forward to kiss me, speaking in between kisses. "Just." Soft kiss. "Wanted to..." Soft kiss. "Catch up." Another kiss, this one is moist, on the left side of my lips.

"I had ulterior motives." I grin against his lips, biting his lower lip. "Birthday sex."

"I've always imagined you to be wild."

Wild? I let his word fade away. Soaking myself in the moment. He didn't mean it in a bad way. Just—

"If we are doing this tonight." His tongue asks for permission.

I sigh, granting him access. He is gentle, sucking my tongue, his hand going around me... feeling me.

"No holds barred."

"Huh?"

He pulls back, looking into my eyes. "We're going all the way."

"Yeah..."

Gently, we stretch out on his couch and resume kissing. Moaning, I thrust my pelvis into his and he reciprocates. He goes for my breasts, and I sigh with sheer pleasure when he frees them. His tongue works magic on them, while my hands go to work between us. In short time, I have the button of his jeans undone.

As I struggle to access the bulge in his pants his hands work up my thighs. When he finds my center, I pause my actions, closing my eyes at the intrusion. He strokes it and I scream, "Ouch!"

"What? What is it?" His voice is thick with passion.

"Your nails."

“I’m sorry. I can cut them off.”

And let the fire die?

“No don’t. Just be... be gentle. Use the angles.”

“I’m sorry.” He brings his head for a kiss, and we light up the cooling embers till it resumes burning.

When he finally strokes my *pussy*, it’s way better than before. I moan, thrusting my hips against his fingers. I forget all about his erect penis, as he works magic on my *pussy*. My butt cheeks tighten as I explode into a thousand pieces underneath him.

Dazed, I watch him with heavy-lidded eyes as he pulls away. *Is this the end?* He pulls his trousers off and I grin, widening my eyes when he reveals his penis.

I have seen a lot of penises. But Osaze is taking the crown for king-size penis.

Hoping he knows how to use such a massive tool of destruction; I shimmy my pants off, then touch myself to confirm I’m moist enough to accept him.

Thinking of him entering me has my *pussy* producing more juice in anticipation.

“Come here.” I grin, biting my lips, but he has other plans.

In one swift motion, he lifts me up from the couch and I can feel the heat coming from his engorged member. He didn’t even give me time to feel him up.

“You good?” he asks.

I must have whined out in frustration. “Condoms.”

“In here.” He moves, his hot penis occasionally tapping my ass as we make it into his bedroom. Gently dropping me on the bed, he rushes to his bedside, muttering inaudibly.

From my vantage point, I watch his ass muscles play. I can’t wait to grab them while he takes me missionary style.

And that’s what I do when he returns sheathed.

Panting. Moaning. Grunting.

We go at it like animals. The intensity raw. And primal.

Wanting something different, I push him off before going on all fours then inviting him to slam into me.

Ugh... I sigh when he slides into me from behind. He listens to instructions.

And he knows how to use his penis too.

I bet George doesn't listen to instructions. He directs—no... No. NO!

This is wrong. Why are you thinking of George while fucking another guy?

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SIXTEEN

ARCHIVAL FASHION

Chiluba

“MORNING CAME TOO FAST.” OSAZE MUMBLES on my back.

Just like you did. I laugh, adjusting till my back is on the bed.

“Good things don’t last forever.” I smile wryly as he pulls me to his chest.

He runs his hand up and down my back, his chest vibrating with every word he says. “So, your designs won’t last forever?”

I bite his nipple, causing him to jerk. “No sarcasm around me, young man.”

He chuckles, rubbing his chest.

I watch with female satisfaction as his penis waves, thickening, becoming erect.

Gosh. It is magnificent. And he knows how to make use of it.

He acts indifferent to his budding arousal, watching me with those dreamy eyes. Osaze is not the drop-dead handsome kind of guy. He’s those innocent looking guys you friendzone because they are too good at heart. Then one day, you find out not only are they good at heart, but they’re also good in bed.

What went down earlier shows how much I missed these past years. If I had gone with him instead of Michael, would we still be together? This slice of

paradise we're enjoying, would it be— *slice of paradise*... Where have I heard that word?

"And how has the fashion industry worked for you. I remember you were trying to get us to buy from your collection for our girlfriends after that fashion event. From what I see online, you're doing well for yourself. Are you enjoying it?"

"I am... It is something I never dreamed about. And now that I have it, I will do anything in my power to keep it."

"I like that." He reaches for my breasts, testing their weight. "Drive."

I grin, leaning into the coolness of his touch. "We all need that."

Placing a hand on his chest, I travel its length and breadth, my fingers dancing over his defined abdomen. After a while I spend some time on his navel. *Slice of paradise*...

He laughs when I make thrusting motions in his navel. "That's ticklish."

"Oh... then let's look for something that's not ticklish. Something more... serious?" Slowly, I move my hands down to his crotch, skating around his straining erection.

"Hmm..." he moans when I take hold of his aching erection.

"You like that?" Tightening my hold, I sit up, intent on making him lose control.

His breathing is forced as he looks me in the eye. "If you continue with this, you might not get off this bed today."

"And who told you I want to get off it?" I smile suggestively, beginning a slow and steady motion, sliding up and down his straining, hardened penis.

He lets go of all form of control, closes his eyes, and lay back as I hand-stroke him. His thigh muscle soon starts contracting but he suddenly pulls out of my grasp.

"What's wrong?" *You loved what I was doing!*

He palms his throbbing erection, controlling his breath, before turning to face me. "It's Saturday Luba. I want to make breakfast for you. Or we can order in."

"Hmm. I was enjoying what we were up to."

"I was too. But..." His lips curve with a lazy smile. "I want to feed you."

Sucking air between my teeth, I shrug, looking for the silver lining in our situation. "Anything you want to do, do it for the birthday girl."

He grins. "Breakfast, coming right up."

He gets off the bed swiftly, and I almost cry, watching his enticing, jutting penis go.

"What are we having?" I ask from the bed as he pulls on clean underwear.

"I think I have bread... and eggs?"

"Tsk. So basic."

He grins, pushing his legs into a grey tracksuit bottom. "What were you expecting?"

Laying on my tummy, I place my jaw on my tented palms. "Pancakes, crepes scrambled eggs... the British breakfast kind of thing."

"Not today." He pauses, looking pointedly at me with those dreamy eyes. "Some other time, maybe?"

Now that's a trap. I can't answer that! And you know.

I wear a brilliant and meaningless grin, waiting for him to change the topic or say he's joking, but he just stares, waiting for my response.

Osaze, this is fun and maybe it might turn into a thing seeing I'm not in a relationship, but you're not my kind of guy.

I swallow, changing my position to a sitting one. "Um, what were you doing at the restaurant—like before we met... What were you doing before you went to the restaurant?"

He shrugs, sitting on the bed's edge. "I was working late. Returning from work..."

"On a Friday night, Osaze. When people are returning from clubs, you're returning from work and acting like it's a normal thing."

"Well, how do you think I can afford this lifestyle? Or play a sport that the federal government doesn't sponsor? My parents can't bankroll everything. I need to bring something to the table."

"I'm not judging you." I reach out to touch his thigh. "You're doing great." He turns to look at me and I smile mischievously when he holds my hand in his. "Now I know why you don't have a girlfriend."

He scoffs. "And who told you I don't have a girlfriend?"

What? You're joking... How come?

My emotions must be all over the place because his response is a self-

depreciating smile. “It’s nothing serious. She hasn’t said yes and... we’re still going with the flow. But if you say yes, I’m yours.”

Pulling my hand from his, I flop back on the bed, eyes on the intricate POP ceiling design. “You are confusing me man. You’re not in a committed relationship but you’re in a relationship. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Like an open relationship?” Looking back at me. “No. I will never consider that.”

I recline on my elbows, studying him. “Hmm.”

He smiles. “I didn’t bring you here last night to talk about my relationship or lack thereof.” Leaning over, he tugs my cheek. “Don’t bother your head. I’m off to prepare breakfast and to say thank you for a wonderful night.”

It goes both ways.

He stands up, goes to his wardrobe to select a round neck. “Wear this before I change my mind.”

I’m grinning when he walks out of the room, and I notice how his tracksuit bottoms ride low on his waist.

My elbows give and I fall back on the bed. Back to staring at the POP ceiling.

I’m beyond blushing. When we went at it last night, with the pace with which we started, I thought we were going to end everything within three minutes. But he surprised me. Slowing it down, we kept at it for close to an hour. Sweat pouring from him onto me, even in the air-conditioned room. It was like a slice of paradise I’d never tasted. Sex has always been fun for me, but last night... that was another level.

Slice of paradise... Where did I hear that word recently?

Frustrated that the word keeps coming to me with no clue as to its origin, I pick my bag from the side of the bed—Osaze had been thoughtful enough to bring it in earlier.

Eish! I left my friends and followed man in the middle of the night. Chuckling, I bring out my phone. The clock reads 10:53 AM. Besides the birthday messages from yesterday, there are new messages.

02:45 AM

Zoya: How is it going over there?

I can turn the car around to pick you up.

03:11 AM

Zoya: I'm going to bed but will set my ringtone to the highest in case you need me.

Zoya is so sweet. I smile, quickly typing a message, to let her know I'm doing great and had a good time with Osaze.

08:18 AM

Ese: I had fun last night.
Thank you!

Meh... And thanks for taking Bánjí off my hands.

07:22 AM

Funsho: So many well-wishers it's taking you longer than necessary to figure out who sent what?

08:40 AM

Funsho: Which was your fav? Rihanna's Rebelle or the Range?
Rebelle is your late Valentine gift ☺
The Range is a proof of how badly I want to care for you ☺
I'll be back from UK soon.
Save my thank yous ☺
Happy birthday Mi Amor.

I read Funsho's message three more times, shaking my head at his sense of entitlement.

Save my thank yous. Mstchew.

Zoya and I had a feeling he was the one that sent the gifts. If last night is an indicator, I've moved on. And if he wants his gift back, it will be tough, but I'll willingly give them back. Conflicted between dropping my phone and going to join Osaze in the kitchen a new message drops.

10:57 AM

Uncle Georgie: Good morning birthday girl.
I hope you enjoyed the celebration.
Call me, soon.

Why?

Why!

Why is George bothering and badgering my head? Is it not enough that I am already thinking of him as someone other than Zoya's uncle? And that last night... last night, I did the forbidden. I panted, *George, George*, in throes of passion. How was that even possible? He encroached my slice of paradise!

Slice of paradise... George! His friend had said that!

Argh!

George, George, and Osaze had carried on with his slow thrusts... If he heard I called out a different name, he didn't act like it. And now he is over there frigging making breakfast for me!

I guess it's something he does for girls he meets late at night when returning from work. Yes. Girls he would prefer making breakfast for, instead of fucking them when they blatantly offer it.

I can't do this. I can't.

"Should I bring it inside?" Osaze calls from the kitchen.

No, I can't. I should leave now, before he thinks we're a thing.

Getting up from the bed, I scan the room for my clothing.

And why did—George... why did he send a message? Who told him we are now best friends? Why is he concerned about my birthday? Call him soon? Why is he set on ruining my personal life? Secretly hanging out with him without Zoya's knowledge is not enough, now he must come into my sexual life too?

But it's not his fault that you're thinking of him every second. Comparing others with him.

Whatever.

Damn him.

Damn you, George!

"Breakfast is—Are you okay?"

Turning to look at Osaze, something breaks in me, and I know I seriously cannot do this to him. No matter how much he tries to deceive me that he has a girlfriend somewhere who he is waiting for, something strongly tells me he is talking about us—me and him.

"I hope he makes you happy." He'd said that day in Dubai while we were all

touring the city. Zoya had flown in from UK. He'd added with that self-depreciating smile. "I'll be here waiting if he doesn't."

"Hmm."

"Can I get your phone number?"

I grinned, knowing his type. "Facebook is all you'll get."

With care, Osaze drops the tray of bread and fried eggs which threatens my nostrils with their savory smell on the bed and pulls me into his arms.

"Luba, you're crying." Wiping off something from my eyes.

Was I crying? Really crying?

Something is wrong with me. Something is awfully wrong with me, and I need to fix it. Am I getting older and dumber?

Smiling feebly, I brush his hands off and in that same motion brush the care and tenderness emanating from him. "It's nothing." I sniff, forcing a fake smile. "Just... something to do with work."

"Oh." He narrows his eyes, taken aback.

I'm not lying. Am I? George has to do with work. Am I lying?

Oh God, I'm lying to myself.

I've been catching feelings for my friend's uncle and been trying to dead it by ignoring it. But I've just been lying to myself. After a splendid night with Osaze, all I am thinking about is George.

"Are you sure?" Osaze tilts my head to gaze into my eyes.

"Things are not going as should be and sometimes it just gets to me. I think I need to leave the bed before I embarrass myself any further." I make to move from the bed, but he holds my arm.

"It's Saturday Luba."

I look up, chewing my bottom lip, looking for what to say.

"Is it that serious? Should I drive you there now?"

"No." Shaking my head with an almost brave smile. "I'll call my taxi guy."

He nods, accepting my choice. "But you'll have breakfast first."

Why did I agree to come home with him, when I know he has a soft spot for me?

"Breakfast, huh?" he presses.

I really want to say no, but the pleading look on his face—as though he knows I want to run away—makes me change my mind. “Sure.”

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Glamour is something the women of Lagos do inimitably; their dresses come in fabrics the colors of the rainbow, their made-up faces are immaculate, and their nails—long and sculpted—are covered in jewels the colors of the ocean... They're not messing around.

—Eleanor Morgan

You can't substitute material things for love or for gentleness or for tenderness or for a sense of comradeship.

—Mitch Albom

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SEVENTEEN

FETISH FASHION

George

“HOW WAS THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION?” I ask the moment her call comes through, four hours after I sent her a text message to call me.

“It was good.” Her voice sounds withdrawn, but I ignore it, chasing the high I feel whenever we talk.

“I really wanted to be there—”

“It was best that you were not there.”

“Is everything alright?” I watch the Lagos lagoon from my perch on the loveseat on my balcony.

Silence.

Controlled breathing.

What’s going on?

“Did you get my gift?” My gaze darts from the lagoon to the glass of wine on the stool before me. “I told them to add one candle stick so you can blow it without stress.” Instead of picking the glass cup, I play bring my legs up and play with my toes, counting them. “Did you?”

A resigned sigh comes from her end. “Did I what?”

“Did you blow the candle?”

“Candles weren’t the only things I blew.”

Images of her pouted lips blowing on something different has me licking my lips as blood surges to my dick. I straighten my legs. *Who am I hiding my arousal from?* My voice goes a tone lower. “What other things did you blow?”

“Do you know what it means to blow?”

“You’ll be amazed at the things I know. Tell me about these other *things* you blew. I’m interested.”

“You’re sure.” There’s a strange note in her voice.

How do I explain this? “I want to live through your eyes. If it’s creepy for you, I can back out.”

“Why?” She hesitates. “Why do you want me to share my sex life with you?”

“We can change the topic. It’s not what I had in mind when I told you to call me.”

“Hmm. But you want to talk about sex. You don’t have the libido to go through with it?”

I smile, taking a sip of my wine.

My voice splits the silence between us like a knife. “For a while, grief ruined my sex drive, that I had no idea how to get it back. And when I got it back, it’s been lacking. Until you, *schat*. You intrigue me. All I think about when I’m with you is sex, but I feel too guilty to act on it. And when you’re out of sight, all it takes is the thought of you. That day you challenged me to confirm I like you, I couldn’t. Because it felt wrong.”

“I’ve always guessed you liked me. But not sexually. That’s news to me. You cover it so well.”

What was I thinking, unleashing my thoughts at her like that? Now she’ll be thinking I’m some sick old pervert.

“You want to talk sex? I’m game.”

“Chiluba—”

“I’m serious. Because last night, while I was having the best birthday sex ever, guess whose name I was moaning?”

“You don’t have—”

“Yours.”

I blink.

Is this a good sign or a bad sign? Part of me is excited at her revelation. Another part is pissed that she had sex on her birthday and believe it's the best.

"Nothing to say?" Her voice draws me from my thoughts.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" It is irrelevant to me if I choose to go after her. She is the one I'm interested in. Her decision controls all that.

"Must I have a boyfriend to have sex?"

"So, you don't."

"I don't. What about you? Since we're having a tell all. How's your sex life? Don't give me that, I have no sex drive stuff. You're a walking sex symbol."

Smiling, I look for the right words to explain my stance. "My sex life has never been the same since... Yes, I have sex. But it never seems appealing. Once I'm... into it, it feels good and sometimes, I feel like my old self, but I really have to force myself to get in the mood."

"What was your old self like?"

"Fun? Wild? Spontaneous?" Running a hand through my hair, I feel hot and flush. I've never been this open with anyone, even the ladies I've engaged with in the past.

"Meaning?"

"No one has made me feel alive during sex."

"*Eziokwu*. You enjoy BDSM? Beating people during sex?"

"No. No." I let out a short, mirthless laugh. "There's more to BDSM than the sadism and masochism parts. That's what's popular but there are a million other kinks."

"Oh..."

"Yeah." Shrugging, I take a sip of my wine, talking to her like she is right beside me. "I won't tell you what I like—they're not scary—I keep telling myself to try them with someone else. Open up. Let them know. But I always feel it's too soon. I need to wait. Like I'll be betraying her memory. I don't know how to feel."

In reality, I haven't felt the urge to venture into my type of sex in the eight years since my wife passed. We were young when we met. I had been with only a handful of women before her. We—she indulged my fantasies. It's not something I want to do with a random lay. It will feel forced.

All I have is sex when I meet up with women. But... I want to fulfill my fantasy with someone I have a connection. And with time ticking, I feel like there's no point in even trying anymore. It's so bad that when I find someone attractive, I stay as far away from them as possible. I don't want to lose what could be a great friendship."

I look at my phone's screen to confirm she's still with me. "Luba, naturally, I'm a caring man. I don't want to lead you on, and you eventually stop talking to me because you'll figure I don't want to make a move."

"You don't want to make a move, because?"

I rub a spot on my forehead as I accept my weakness. One I never knew I had until the demise of my wife. "I enjoy watching my partner, dressed, and undressed. Touching themselves. Getting wet in all kinds of ways. Just knowing they're mine and being so sensual. As much as you're the first lady I've felt this pull for the first time since Mira, I don't think it's proper."

"So, your fantasy is watching your partner pleasure themselves?"

I take a long gulp of my drink. She is not screaming and calling me a pervert. "Yes."

"With this fantasy of yours, you'll love watching a woman with toys?"

"Toys spice things up."

"Ah, Georgie..."

"Chiluba. This is between the two of us. I just want you to know what you'll be in for if we ever cross that line, which I don't want us to ever cross."

"I know, I know. Wow..."

"What is it?"

"I feel like I just stumbled into a George Van Cleef Sex Life 101 tutorial."

I smile. "It was nerve-racking while it lasted. Don't put your mind to it. Call it an old man's babble."

"You're not an old man."

I'm not?

Something warm and fuzzy builds in my chest. I have no right feeling this way. Here is a young girl, living her life, trying to navigate it and I'm getting thrilled because she doesn't see me as an old man. "I won't let that get to my head."

"Really, Georgie." She hesitates. "Actually, the first time we met, I saw you

as an experienced mature man who had dark secrets and runs an underground mafia.”

“What?” I laugh. My heart flutters at her praise. “The mafia?”

“Actually, an Italian Mafia.”

“I’ve got a gun. Maybe that could suffice? Help support that dark image you have of me.”

“Oh sure, it will.”

Silence ensues and a million thoughts run through my head.

What are the chances that she’s my second chance at happily ever after? But what if I lose her? She’s young. She wants to enjoy life. See the world. Build a legacy. That’s what I can help her do. Build that legacy. Worship her with my eyes as I spend more time with her and not allow room for anything else. It should be easy. With what I have planned.

Lies.

Liar!

It will be hard.

Her full round breasts alone, which she finds every way to leave on display, might cause my fall. I can’t count how many times, in the past weeks, I’ve imagined her unveiling them, putting on a show. Swaying as she unveils them. Her nipples... would they be hard little dagger points or engorged? Will they be so sensitive that they will harden upon exposure? And when I eventually get to touch her warm breasts, reshaping and molding them to my satisfaction, would she love it?

“What’s on your mind?”

Her voice causes me to take a long, deep satisfying breath. “You.”

“What about me?”

“How lovely you are.”

“Hmm.”

“I don’t know if you’ll find this offensive, but you’re increasing my libido. Sending me into sex overdrive. Fuck...” A mirthless self-derogatory laugh escapes me. Closing my eyes, I palm my face, pushing my hand all the way back to my hairline. “Pardon my French. All I think about when I’m close to you, even now that we’re talking, is how to help fulfil your dreams to make you happy while thinking of how to get lost in you.”

“What if I told you the feeling is mutual?”

“Chiluba.” Opening my eyes.

“I told you. I recently had sex with someone and all I thought about was you.”

“Chiluba.” *You are adding fuel to this frigging firework waiting to explode when I want to keep you safe.*

Safe?

Is that a word I want to associate with the thoughts running through my head when another thing I’m thinking about is shoving my dick into you while watching our bodies move in a mirror above us?

“What do you sound like in bed? Um, like, how would you rate your sexual prowess?”

“Chiluba.” *Never have I met a lady who is as blunt as you. Do you know what all these things you’re saying... these questions you’re asking... do you know what they’re doing to my brain?* “Stop playing with fire.”

“I thought we had an understanding?” She sighs. “Now you’re playing coy.”

“I don’t think we should talk about that.”

“Oh, but I’m intrigued.”

“We shouldn’t.”

“We’re not doing anything wrong. Only chatting. One matured adult to another. I love having sex. But with people I like.” She clears her throat. “Last night, the guy I had sex with was my ex’s friend. I went like a month without sex before him. He was the next best choice since my current ex. That one got me a car in my name for my birthday, thinking he can buy me back. Sex with him was good, but I’ve had better.”

This feels so wrong. Shaking my head, confused at her confession. “Why are you telling me about your sexual escapades?”

“Don’t you want to be a part of my list?”

“You keep a list?” *If I ever choose to be with you, I’ll be the last name you add to the list.*

She laughs.

I let out a relieved sigh.

“I don’t keep a list. Sex is a beautiful thing I engage in if I find an interesting

and willing participant.”

“Am I interesting?”

The line goes dead.

What the hell?! Is she playing a game? What if she was recording our conversation to share with her friend?

Getting up from the loveseat, I storm inside my suite, only to freeze as a thought hits me.

I so desperately want her to find me interesting. But am I willing?

I run a hand through my hair. Bite the tip of my thumb and scroll through my call logs, then dial her up.

“Hey Georgie,” I can hear the smile in her voice, “I ran out of airtime.”

I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding, nodding my head as I pace my suite. It was a mistake crossing that line with her. We shouldn’t have gone that far. I’m to blame. So eager to get a fix.

“Sorry about that.” I clear my throat. “The reason I asked you to call was because I wanted to ask where you were with the Lucid proposal.” The way my brain resets to business talk marvels me. *Am I scared?*

“My lawyer is going through it. Silhouette is approving it.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“How long will it take before the launch? What did you all settle on?”

“I’m looking at a year. But 34 Threads will be done with her part within four months. We’re sticking with launching it either Spring next year or Summer. I’ll prefer Summer, so it doesn’t clash with the big four shows.”

Why would she want to delay her dream? “What are those?”

“You don’t know about New York, London, Paris and Milan?”

“Their fashion shows?”

“Yes. I missed this year’s because of some...” Her voice trails off, then picks again. “Issues. I got some magazines though. I intend to be there next year. At least two locations. We should take notes, then launch ours.”

I like the sound of that. *We*. It’s been a while since I’ve been part of something without feeling like an outsider. And with Chiluba, I want to be on the in.

“You’re smart.”

“I know.” She chuckles, causing me to smile.

“I wish I knew you before now. We could have attended your shows together.”

“Oh.”

A mini version of the gift I have Dáre putting together pops in my head. “Call it a birthday treat. I think you should see some historical places connected to the Nigerian textile industry.”

“Abeokuta and Abia state? I’ve visited them, learnt more about the Àdìrẹ and Akwete fabrics.”

“You know your fabrics.”

“For Àdìrẹ, I enjoy creating *bou bou* gowns and kimonos with them. I’m from Abia state, so Akwete is my thing. I once did a collection with the Akwete fabric. Sold out before I put it on the market. Modelled it in Milan two years ago.”

“I see why you want to partner with Silhouette.”

“Fabrics matter in fashion design. That’s why I want to create something new with Silhouette. Something unique. With a touch of the past.”

Her passion for her craft pulls me closer to her than ever before. “Have you visited the Kofar Mata dye pits in Kano?”

“Like Kano state in Nigeria here?”

“One and the same.”

“What’s special and unique about it?”

“When I first came to Nigeria, it was one of the historical places I visited. It is one of the oldest and last of their kind in Africa. I think that the way I see patterns and my visits to the dying pits influenced some early Silhouette designs.”

“I’m sure there were no Boko Harams, kidnappings, and bombings when you visited.”

I chuckle, remembering my trip with Mira. She also had her fears. “One issue or the other has always troubled Kano. Then it was the Muslim-Christian fights.”

“It’s the same thing happening now. I am not visiting whether for the pleasure of it or for business purposes.”

“Does China, Netherlands or somewhere outside the country work for you? Since you’ve seen what needs to be seen here.” I mumble the last part to myself.

“You want to travel with me?”

“Is that wrong?” *I only want to show you I appreciate your passion. Show you the link between your world and mine. There’s a lot we have in common.*

“Tsk. I thought—”

“We can talk about it another time.”

“Yeah. I have to think about it. Remember,” she gets cocky, “I’ve got this big deal coming through with Silhouette.”

You don’t have to remind me.

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EIGHTEEN

SOLUTION-BASED THINKING

Chiluba

EVERYTHING IS GOING FASTER THAN I planned or imagined. *Lucid by Silhouette, Designed by Chiluba of 34 Threads*, is going to launch with a fashion show next Summer!

Somebody hold me!

Touch me!

I'm headlining my event.

Oh, my... It's feels like yesterday Zena told me about her uncle. And now, look at Àbẹbí and I, working from a makeshift office in Silhouette's head office on Lagos Island. This can only be God, strong determination, and connection.

George and I... we've been playing it cool. The day I got back from Osaze's place, when I put a call through to him, I wanted to lash at him. Tell him to go to hell. But it took a different turn when we started talking about candles. Sex. And our sex lives. After that glitched conversation, we've been playing it cool. And I've not seen him still.

Except for occasions where I email him for guidance on how to deal with Silhouette staff and individuals, we've maintained a cordial relationship. Not for my lack of trying.

I tried tempting him with a lunch date to thank him when the project got approved swiftly, without delay. That was about two weeks ago. His response?

“I’m busy at the moment, but I’ll make it up to you. Congratulations Chiluba, you deserve this.”

One time, I saw a name copied in correspondence, Adesuwa Van Cleef and my heart started pounding. I was so tempted to ask Zena or Zoya about the name, but decided against it. It’s none of my business who is who. I’m here to fulfill a contract and make the best of my time.

When I meet Dáre, the guy who’s supposed to be George’s PA, I feel like I was being scrutinized up close, but I pay him no heed. He came to get my signature on some files and that was it.

I spend my night and days poring over fashion books, magazines, and videos. I don’t have time for KUWtK, my favorite shows, hanging out with friends, and even Zoya. That one doesn’t bother self. Last I heard, she and Manir are already a thing, attending *ówàmbè* together.

Once I’m done with this project *ehn*, Lagos will be tired of me. The vibration of my phone alerts me to an incoming call from Maama. *Ooh... This woman doesn’t give up.*

“Won’t you pick?” Àbẹ̀bí asks, pressing her lips together.

Maama has called me thrice in one hour. I know what she wants to say. It’s a conversation we rehearsed over the weekend.

“Your father wants to speak with you,” she’ll say.

And I’ll respond with, “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

According to Nneka, he is feeling better. The money I sent to Maama obviously did something for him. I’d have preferred he died. But no, he is trying to get through to me through Maama.

I’m not interested.

I’ve got more pressing and urgent matters at hand. Not me listening to some self-serving, selfish individual. Of what use?

“Hmm?” Àbẹ̀bí eyes me with a somber look as the phone resumes vibrating on the long aluminum table we share. She understands, to some extent, my family dynamics.

Sighing, I answer the call, place my phone to my ear, prepared to do some hmms, yes and okay.

“Maama the mama.” I grin, forcing my tone to sound flippant.

“Chiluba...” she drawls fondly.

I chuckle, the heaviness in my heart seeping away as our discussion progresses.

Okay, maybe picking her call isn't such a bad thing.

“So, when are you coming?”

Coming to where? “Maama, you know I’m busy.”

“Ehn, I know. But Easter is here. Even the president will go on holiday.”

“Tsk. I can’t.” The 5 by 7 frames of fabrics on the wall looks fascinating than ever before. “There’s a lot on my plate.”

She chuckles. It is patronizing. I don’t like it.

“Immy... Immacu.”

I roll my eyes at the nickname. What she was thinking when she named me Immaculate, I don’t know. I’m sure it was *Daadi* that did it. Or those evil sisters of his.

“Don’t worry, food will be plenty here. Just bring yourself down. Even if is for two days. Your Daadi will be happy.”

Happy? How does that concern me? When did our happiness ever concern him?

“So, when are we seeing your brake light?”

“Maama. I’m not coming.” I stare blindly at the frames on the wall, fury boiling in me. “Let him come to Lagos. In fact, I will send him transport fare.”

“You know Daadi just recovered and he—”

“I don’t care.”

“Forgive him *nau*. Immacu, he is still your father o.”

“And I said, I don’t care. He made his choice a long time ago and I’m making mine now.” I send an apologetic glance Àbẹbí’s way, before returning my gaze to the wall. Two fingers tap on my forehead while I cautiously lower my voice. “Like I keep telling you, I have forgiven him, but he and I, we have nothing to discuss.” Standing up, I begin pacing the room. “What do we want to talk about? Is it the bicycle he did not teach me how to ride? Or the talk we didn’t have about boys?”

“It happened. He’s sorry.”

I freeze. “You too?” My voice rises a notch and the subtle sound of rubber preventing glass from hitting glass lets me know that Àbẹ̀bí has left the room.

“Chiluba. He wants you to spend time with him this Easter.”

“And I’m not interested.” I force out through clenched teeth. “I’m busy Maama, I’m busy.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll relay your message to him.”

Yes, please. I sigh, letting out a loud breath, wringing my hand.

“How is business? How is everything?”

Now you want to make it look like everything is okay.

No!

Everything is not okay.

Get that bloodsucking man out of your house! I love my mum and my siblings but...

“Business is fine.” I look down at the hand I’m wringing with anger and consciously relax it. Clearing my throat and choosing to be the dutiful daughter, I close my eyes. “I got that contract I told you about.”

“Ah! You see? Thank you, Jesus!”

“Yes.” Opening my eyes. I move to the seat I’d evacuated. “Thank God.”

“Master Jesus at work. You used that oil I sent you, *ehn?*”

Oil?

Oh. The one you sent through the bus park. Where is it, self?

“Now is to bring husband home. Don’t worry. God is already doing it for you.”

“Yes ma.”

“Husband, that will love you, whether or not you fine. That will take care of you like egg and give you beautiful children.”

Here we go...

“Don’t rush it, oh. All is God’s timing.”

“Yes ma.”

“Don’t worry, I’m praying for you.”

“Thank you, ma.”

“Please, I know you don’t want to, but please think about the Easter visit,

okay?”

Working on Lagos Island has its perks. It was easy for me to say yes to David’s invite to see *Safe House* at the Silverbird Galleria cinema after today’s fiasco. His message came an hour after Maama’s call.

David and I have known each other from way back. I’m two inches taller than him. With very fair skin and great fashion sense, he is one of my favorite pals. We first met during my short-lived career as a video vixen. And since then, we hang out from time to time. Over the space of six years, he has done well for himself. He currently heads a top record label. Hanging out with him tonight, is all preliminary talk for Lucid—I want to sell him on the idea of fashion and music on the runway. Wet the floor for the future. If it includes watching a movie after a long day at work, why not?

Watching Ryan Reynolds acting as Weston, a CIA trying to prove himself and Denzel Washington as Frost, an ex-CIA turned international criminal, makes my heart beat in staccato at the stunts they perform as both men are trying to stay in control of the other.

When Weston loses everything, including his girlfriend whom he was trying to keep safe, I know he is going to go rogue. My heart tugs at the final scene where his girlfriend sits alone at a café in Paris. Love endures all things but, that only happens in movies and books.

How can I forgive someone who lies to me about his occupation? Sitting at home all day, doing nothing, when the truth is he’s CIA?

The cinema’s lights come on and I’m back in my world. It’s past ten and the crowd has dispersed. Just another weekday with a handful of working class Lagosians in the cinema’s hall. I spot a man in a suit, wearing square eyeglasses chivalrously ushering a lady out of their front row seat. They’re both wearing wedding bands. *So sweet.*

“Ready to go?” David asks, looking up from his phone.

My bad. I pick my purse from my lap and begin moving out of the row.

David holds open the cinema’s door with one hand, our empty bags of popcorn and plastic bottles in the other. “Where to from here?”

“Thanks.” I smile, walking out of the hall. “Home.”

“No now.” A sidelong glance at him reveals he’s tossing the bags and bottles in a trash. He falls in step beside me. “Let’s get something to eat.”

At the mention of *eat*, I discreetly move my tongue around my teeth to find any sticky kernel as I contemplate his suggestion. “Tsk. I’ve had a long day.”

“More reason why you should take me up on my offer.”

I shake my head as we join three other people waiting for the elevator. It dings and we all step in, David beside me. He’s on his phone again. The moment we make it out of the elevator he continues pressing me.

“My friends are not far from here. Let’s just relax with a bottle or two.”

After much convincing, we head to a restaurant and bar on Adeola Odeku, where we catch up with his friends, Big ‘Khay and Tolu. They are big boys in the Nigerian music industry too—promoters and talent managers.

As his name implies, Big ‘Khay—short for Big Ikenna—is a chubby giant, married to an actress turn banker with two kids. His marital status doesn’t stop him from cracking lewd jokes. And he keeps brushing his nose when he speaks. He doesn’t tickle my fancy.

But Tolu... If possible, I want to score with him tonight. He’s got the poise of a charmer. Slender in form, a quick-witted mind, and a dimpled smile. He doesn’t say much, but whenever he does, we burst into laughter. His sidelong glance whenever Big ‘Khay and David argue over soccer stats sends direct messages to my *pussy*.

It’s unfair that since my birthday, my *pussy* has only been getting artificial action. I’ve not orgasmed from penetrative sex, nevertheless, there’s something about being in bed with another human. It will be fun if they allow toys on the bed with them, but so far, no man has felt comfortable with the idea of having toys in bed.

I’m nodding my head to Efya’s cover of Obianuju when David and Big ‘Khay excuse themselves to say hi to a mutual friend. Tolu takes this as cue to scope me.

“So...” His legs twitch under the table as he spares a grin. “Fashion design...”

I already know where he is going, but I let him continue. It’s going to be a tad disappointing that someone, as promising as he is, holds on to such ideas.

“Is that not a tush name for tailors?”

I knew it! Fine boy with rotting senses. All hopes of scoring with him

dissipates into nothing.

“No, it’s not.” I take a sip of my Smirnoff ice. It’s my second bottle and maybe it’s getting to my head, hence why I’m rattling off the difference between a tailor and a fashion designer in a cryptic tone. “They do different things. The names alone tell you what they do, but,” I cover a belch, “I’ll tell you. Fashion designers design everything. From fabric pattern to clothing style. While tailors are the ones who sew. Anyone can be a tailor, but not everyone can be a fashion designer. It’s very simple and logical.”

That seems to piss him off. The rest of the evening, he doesn’t talk directly to me, nor do I.

It is almost ten when they walk me to my Range Rover. Big ‘Khay keeps dragging his jeans up every time. I shake my head in exasperation, wondering why he’s wearing a belt but choose to discomfort himself. Apparels, when worn, should be a part of the body. The body itself is an apparel on its own, why struggle with an external one?

“Nice ride,” Tolu commends, tapping the bonnet.

“Thank you.”

Tolu and Big ‘Khay walk off after bidding me farewell, leaving David and I standing by my car in the dimly lit parking lot.

“You’re going home?” he asks, smiling.

No, I’m going to the farm.

“Yes,” I answer with a smile, toying with my key ring. “Thanks for inviting me out.”

“Hmm. When am I going to see you again?”

Yes, I know David likes me. No man has not, not liked me. But that doesn’t mean I’m available to all.

I shrug, grinning knowingly. “When we meet to discuss the event, I told you about.”

“*Ehen?*” His eyes hold mine, saying things he would not say with his mouth, and I crack.

“You know this, Dave.” I sigh. “It can’t work between us.” Not because there’s one oyibo somewhere that is playing ten-ten with my head. “I’m not ready to commit. There’s so much happening, and I need to put my head in the game.”

David nods in understanding, a pained smile stretching his lips that turns into a chuckle. “Number what am I?”

“Number one thousand.” I joke.

Gently, he holds my hand, stopping the jangling noise of the keys I’d been playing with. “I’m not joking. How many of us are on the line?”

Scrunching my nose, I feign thinking, then smile, shaking my head. “I’ll have to check my list. It’s long...”

“Loo...ba.”

I chuckle, loving the unique way he calls my name. Stylishly, I pull my hand from his hold.

It will be so easy to take him to my bed, like I wanted to do with Tolu, but it will ruin our friendship. I value our friendship than his illusion of us dating. Somewhere deep down, I know it will not last. So what’s the use of dabbling into it when we are friends?

“I’m not joking oh.” He warns, trying to take my hand in his again.

“David, stop it.” I slap his hand away. “Tsk. I need to go home. Long day tomorrow.”

He sighs. Narrowing his eyes at me with a smug smile, he stretches his arms out making a come here, motion. “Oya, give me hug.”

Dragging my legs, even though in my heart, I’m skipping to him, I walk into his arms.

The drive home has me planning, scheduling, and thinking about 34 Threads and Lucid. Working with Silhouette fabric and pattern designers has Àbẹbí and I in a knot.

Okay, mostly Àbẹbí.

She is the one that has to tweak some designs. Or start some afresh. I mostly dream big, give suggestions, and run 34 Threads and its subsidiaries from Silhouette. It’s not time for Nathan to come into the picture, but soon, once these early stages are over and confirmed—my phone rings and my heart races when I see the caller ID.

“Hello George. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re running from me.”

His soft chuckle carries on through the speakers and I smile.

“I’ve been working from yours and I’m yet to catch a glimpse of you.” I add. It must be the drinks.

How many did I end up having?

Almost three.

Most likely the drinks. It has loosened up my tongue.

“I’ve been busy setting things up.” He sounds excited. Lively. “And I have other businesses that demands my attention.”

“Hmm. Too busy for me or avoiding me?”

“Busy. But now that I’ve cleared my schedule. I’ve got time for you. What do you say about an adventure?”

I honk at a driver who pulls out without looking. “Sorry about that. You said something about an adventure?”

“Yes. You’re driving. Heading out?”

“Going home. Hung out with some friends after work.”

“Oh. That’s good.” He hesitates. “About the adventure. Do you have a valid Schengen visa?”

I blink. *Why are you not asking me who I went out with? Where did I go to? Don’t you care?*

“Yes...” It’s my turn to be honked at. I grumble, maneuvering my car into the street that leads to my apartment. “What’s happening?”

“You mentioned not attending the major fashion shows, and I did some digging. In the Netherlands, there are some private African fashion shows that will interest you. Not only that.” He holds back for a second like he is dangling a juicy piece in front of me. “I spoke to some contacts and they’re happy to give a private tour around the Vlisco factory.”

What!

“Calm down, Chiluba,” he chuckles.

I didn’t know I had screamed out loud. “Are you pulling my legs?” I say more calmly, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’m staring at two VIP tickets my friend flew in from New York to hand-deliver to me. And my schedule is clear for the second... third week in April.”

My eyes pepper me as his voice surrounds me in the car. “Are you serious?”

“As serious as a heart attack.” I can feel the warm smile in his voice. “It’s the rest of your birthday gift.”

“Georgie...” Hot sudden tears slip down my cheek as I bring the car to a stop

in front of the house. “This is so... so...” I place my arm on the steering wheel, then lay my head on it. “Thank you...”

“Are you crying?”

“Hmm mmh.” I lie, letting silent, inexplicable tears flow.

What?! No man. I repeat. No man has ever gifted me with something like this—support for my business or a chance to increase my knowledge without me asking. I’ve gotten many gifts in my lifetime, but none is as special as George taking time out of his schedule without me asking, because he wants to support my business. And he is not even interested in having anything sexual or emotional to do with me.

Oh God... I sniffle.

Creatives know the best inspiration is gotten from exposure. It could be exposure to emotions, to people but most especially exposure to places and nature.

“You had better not be crying.”

Laughing, I sit up, ignoring my tear-stricken face.

“Because there’s more.”

“More?”

“Do you have a Chinese visa?”

I shake my head before remembering it’s a call. “No, I don’t. But the Netherlands is fine.”

“Hmm. We need to rectify your visa issues because I want to show you the world.”

I smile, recalling a detail. “One week. Isn’t that a lot of time?”

“I enjoy time spent with you. Except it makes you uncomfortable—”

“No, no. It’s fine. It’s just the... um... the exhibition?” *So, you can be this mellow?* I almost laugh at myself.

“The exhibition has been running since January. We can attend say three days. Then the Vlisco factory. The fashion show, tour the city... and whatever you want. Have you ever gone on a business vacation?”

Vacation? Who does that when there’s money to be made? “No... but doesn’t that happen in Summer? Vacations I mean.”

“Those who don’t have the resources wait till then.”

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NINETEEN

DU JOUR

George

“EVERY TIME I PLAY WITH YOU, it seems I get worse. You want to get an eagle, huh?” Alfred shades his eyes in the sun as his gaze follows the golf ball’s path through the horizon, over the lake, while I keep my balance after my tee shot.

A successful nod from the Caddy makes me smile, and I return to a proper standing position. Turning back to Alfred, who has walked up to me, I pat his shoulder. “It’s practice, my friend.”

He holds back a chuckle. “Practice?” Shaking his head as we walk to the golf cart.

We’re playing twilight rounds at the Golf Course and are on the seventh signature hole. Although it is peaceful and relaxing, with fewer people on the grounds, we’ve lost two balls already. The first was courtesy, Alfred. While the second was by his feminine escort, who was excited to swing a real-life golf club.

I hop into the golf cart I share with the Caddy. “Yes, practice. You need to do more of that.”

Since my last conversation with Chiluba, telling her of *our* travel plans, I’ve

been doing everything in my power to distract myself from bringing the date closer.

This is not normal.

Wanting to be around someone so bad that you spend all your free time conjuring different scenarios for when you meet. It's like I'm crushing on Mirabel all over again. I thought I had gotten used to being lonely. But that night at the beach gave me a taste of what it could be like between us.

The world feels different when you meet a soul that resonates with yours. I thought it happens only once in a lifetime, but... my desire for connection and intimacy has skyrocketed since the beach experience.

When I think of her... her passion. Her determination. Her experience. There's this irresistible drive and longing to know her more. It makes me believe all the pain of losing Mirabel will go away if we progress in this game we're playing. It's like I need the physical intimacy so much, that I'm willing to believe the lies my aging brain tells me.

Contrary to Alfred's statement, it looks like I'll be tallying a par for this hole. My cart arrives at the spot where Alfred's ball is, a reasonable distance behind my ball. When Alfred arrives, his escort is not looking so eager as she was earlier. Most likely bored.

"Still in the game?" I ask, for his ears only, darting a gaze to his escort, who is busy pressing her phone in the cart.

"I am." He sends a swift look her way before facing me with a confident, cocky grin, sizing me up. "She's just edgy and bored. Maybe after two holes?"

Makes nine holes. I shrug. "Your call."

"And I must say, you're looking completely different from the man I played with the last time."

My response is a nonchalant nod as I calculate the position I'll be taking to get the ball into the hole.

"Tell me Van Cleef."

I look at him.

A smile curves his lips, as he upturns his club, leaning on the clubhead. "How is the beautiful damsel from the beach party?"

Beautiful damsel? Chiluba? "She's doing fine." *What is your game? Why are you asking?*

“Ah!” He gives a short, knowing, mirthless laugh. “You are still in contact with her. Are you guys...” Wagging his brows in excitement.

Alfred... I shake my head, smiling at his boyish act. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I can’t believe we are this old and he gets excited, talking about a girl in the same generation with our children.

“Van Cleef...” he drawls, still grinning. “That lady must be rewiring all your internal engines.”

With the things I’ve thought of, with her playing the lead role, she might as well have.

“Ah, ah. You’re turning red.” He points, laughing. “Am I correct?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Wrong.” Gesturing to the ball. “Please play.”

“You’re joking?”

I dip a hand in my pocket, deciding to confide in him. “No. She’s my niece’s friend.”

He tosses a look in the cart’s direction, confirming his escort is busy ignoring us and the Caddy out of earshot, before walking closer, a smirk on his face. “I thought you guys were—”

“We’re not.”

A worried frown replaces his smirk. “You can’t get it up?” he whispers.

Godverdomme! Not you too!

Calmly, I reply, without a bite in my tone. “You don’t have to touch a work of art to derive pleasure from it. Beauty can be admired by just glancing at it.”

“Now you’re a poet?” Alfred scoffs, sizing me up.

“You should know better. You deal with art.”

“That’s why women marvel me.”

“The way you change them shows how much you value them.”

He shakes his head in denial. “That’s not the point here. What’s happening between you and the girl? Chi... Chi... Chi girl.”

He struggles to recall her name, but I don’t bother helping because I don’t want him remembering anything about her. Alfred will... Oh! *Godverdomme*. I need to protect her from him. They don’t move in the same circles, but now that she’s with me, their path will cross.

Alfred continues, not sensing my inner turmoil. “I could swear on my life that

you both had that glow the day I met her. And it's still emanating from you."

"Want to swing that club? We're losing daylight."

He nods, swings his shot, and I see myself winning this hole.

As we walk to my ball, without thinking it through, I blurt the question in my head I believe will make him cautious with Chiluba. "What do you think about her meeting the kids?"

He turns to me with a blank look.

I add for context. "Chiluba."

He pauses, intently narrowing his eyes at me. Putting a hand to his jaw, he considers my question, then shakes his head, dropping his hand to the side.

"You want to introduce her to your kids? That's not something you do."

Huh?

"George?" He folds his arms, smirking as he studies me. "I have to teach you about this type of thing when you run a multibillion-dollar company?"

I let out a small laugh, licking my lips, then glance at the sun, setting on the horizon with a rich, reddish-brown, sepia tone.

On a serious note, how would Nosaze feel if I introduce Chiluba to him? He sounded cool on the phone about everything, but would he be comfortable if I had her around me? And with the display Imelda put during our bi-weekly family call when Nosaze joked about having a stepmom. Hmm.

"I don't know." I shrug, blowing air through my mouth. "You tell me." Is it too soon? I don't want to scare her away. "I just want her to know I have only good intentions for her. She makes me happy, and I want to spend more time with her."

"Van Cleef, this is not how people keep their small chops."

I raise a questioning brow at his choice of words, and he waves his hands as an apology.

We resume our walk to my ball.

Alfred shoots a glance at the sky. "Looks like this will be our last game."

I nod.

Then he calls out to his escort and the Caddy. "You guys, join us. This is the last swing."

I know this thing with Chiluba is not a forever thing. Just an opportunity I

believe will... help me move on. Find beauty in life. The Lucid partnership has a lot to do with why she occasionally reaches out to me or even asks to have lunch with me. To her, it's nothing more than business. Without Lucid, I doubt she would ever consider spending time with me. Maybe it's time I use this partnership to the fullest. I'm eager to learn more about how this game is played.

Arriving at the ball, I waste no time swinging my club. It goes straight towards the hole. Nearly misses. Then...

I punch the air as the ball enters the hole.

A par!

Grinning, I turn to Alfred, offering him a firm handshake. He keeps his hand clasped with mine before wrapping one arm around my shoulder and I do the same, clapping his back.

"Great game." He grins when we pull apart.

"Thanks." I clear my throat, looking him in the eyes. "So, how do I let her know I have good intentions?"

He gives a bubbly laugh. "She's your first real small chops in Lagos *abi*?"

"Alfie, I don't want you referring to her as that."

He smirks cockily. "I understand."

"Go straight to the point. No name calling."

He snorts, handing the club to the caddy as we walk to the carts. "What you're trying to give her is assurance."

I guess so.

"And the first way to a woman's heart is to make her feel special. With these young girls, they feel special with gifts. Next is not begging them to want you, no... you want to leave bits and crumbs, so they do the calling, thanking and begging. I have a UniLag girl in a Black Onyx serviced apartment at Victoria Island. She's at my beck and call. Forever grateful and indebted to me because I helped her with her housing problem." He shakes his head. "It's just that when they become too comfortable, they become boring. You know that hunter and prey stuff is no longer there."

Alfred has a new girl every time I meet him outside professional settings. I don't bother with their names when they're introduced. And I'm not surprised he does this because of the thrill of the hunt.

We are two different and unique men—I enjoy the reward of the hunt, while

he lives for the hunt.

Sighing, I confess. “I sent gifts for her birthday.” Even though I’ve been fighting it, I’ve been hunting. But do I want to enjoy the reward?

Alfred pats my shoulder as we stand before the carts. He waves the Caddy to ride with his escort while he gets into the driver’s seat of my cart.

“Sent gifts you say?” He grins, firing up the engine and begins driving us out of the course. “You did well. Now you are speaking their language. Spoil her.”

“I’m open to gifts. No one will say I’m not entitled to them now, would they...”

She’d mentioned it herself.

I’m going to spoil you with gifts. The man you’ll would spend your life with will have a lot of making up to do, because just like I’m quietly coming into your life, I’ll quietly walk out of it. The distance between us will be a memory we’ll savor as we ripen.

Alfred continues. “If possible, give her the funds to take her friends out. Or if you want to spend time with them, invite them over. Everyone will end up happy and satisfied.”

“Chiluba is not that type of girl. She has dreams and ambitions. No time for frivolities.”

Alfred hisses as he makes a turn. “All of them are the same. It’s the same thing they say about us, but they don’t see it in themselves. What they say about their dreams and plans is absurd. Imagine an undergrad telling me to open a salon for her as a business. How much will that bring in a year as profits? All of them are hungry. Do you think your daughter will spend time with old men like us because she’s ambitious?”

“Alfie, Chiluba and I met because of a business plan that is projected to make millions before its launch.”

“Hmm,” he muses. “Well, that speaks volumes. Still... she’s a girl. Born and raised in Lagos. They’re all trying to play smart. I wouldn’t want to see you burned, so I would suggest you enjoy whatever you want to get from her and move on. Some of these girls are desperate. You’ve heard of those that use juju to get men?”

He doesn’t wait for my response as he continues.

“Thank God my wife prays for me, and I do my best to be careful. It’s a man eat man world. People think having an affair or keeping mistresses is easy, but it

takes a lot of time and effort.”

Do I need to remind him if ever Chiluba and I cross that line, she will never be my mistress? I hold back a smirk as we near our destination.

“And to keep your mind at ease, I did not get that weird feeling I get from those Karishika girls from your Chiluba the day we met. I’m sure it’s her natural charm that makes her fascinating.”

There’s nothing more fascinating than a lady who owns her sex appeal and her power. *My Chiluba...* “Yes Chiluba, she is special.”

“Van Cleef.” He stops the engine, curiously peering at me.

What? I raise a brow, cocking my head.

“Please don’t tell me you’re considering something permanent.”

Huh?

“Special or not, you don’t know if she has one small boy somewhere that she’s getting married to in the next few months. These girls will do anything for money and the men they claim to love. One even came to collect funds for a wedding from me and I swear to you, Van Cleef, I did the undoable with that girl that night. And I’ve heard stories of men like us whose signatures were forged, their accounts wiped clean. Their pride took serious blows that they couldn’t tell anyone about it for years.”

“Alfie...” A wry, humorless smile is all I can express. His words resound in my head, that I can’t form a coherent thought.

I am not some puny boyfriend, neither am I a father keeping tabs of who she gives her attention to. Chiluba is a classy lady. *Godverdomme*. She is Zoya’s friend. She will never stoop so low to do those things he just mentioned.

“Van Cleef, these are Lagos girls we’re talking about here. I don’t want any of those misfortunes happening to you. You have a good heart, and I’m more than happy to guide you in the way and manner of these things.”

I nod. “Chiluba is...” Biting my bottom lip, I sieve my thoughts for the right word. “Chiluba is an exception.” I wink, my sense of humor returning. “The fairest diamond of them all.”

“News.”

“Oh, I’m serious.” I can’t explain to him how alive she makes me feel. How in tune with all my senses I become around her. The ignition of all of me. “I don’t care. She makes me feel different and like I said, it’s different with her.”

Alfred scoffs. “Don’t underestimate those girls and the things they can do for money. And you are *oyibo* again. Most will jump at the opportunity of getting another citizenship.”

Oh Alfie... I don’t want to talk about Chiluba or the girls you hang out with anymore. They are not cut from the same cloth. Those brown eyes alone. “And if it comes to the money, I’m not afraid. My pocket is deep enough to bear any risk.”

Chiluba is different. She didn’t attend a university like over half the girls Alfred hangs out with but is doing well for herself. Travelling on merit and running a successful fashion design company.

I get off the cart, cordially patting his shoulder. “Thanks for your insight, Alfie.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He grins, stepping out of the cart. “And see, before you do anything with these Lagos girls, please consult with me.”

I cock my head to the side with a wry smile, nodding. “I’m famished.” Then glance to the other cart where his escort casts furtive glances at us. “I think she wants you to herself.”

As I wrap up a hearty Continental cuisine with Alfred and some club cronies—Colonel Gambo and Dr. Abiye—in a private dining room, I send a message to Mike that I’m ready to leave. Colonel Gambo asks if I’m interested in a game of squash next week, but I decline because of my upcoming trip, suggesting a later date.

A privilege of being a member of highbrow clubs like The Deviant and 1935 Golf Club is ability to rub shoulders with the high and mighty in the country.

I get comfy in the back seat of the black sedan, my preference for when I’m not working or trying to make an impression. It speaks volumes, but not as loud as the Land Cruiser.

My phone rings minutes into our ride to the Anchorage.

It’s Chiluba.

She has only ever called me once. And that was to notify me of Lucid’s approval.

Leaning into the door, I swipe the green button, anticipating her lilting voice. “Any good news?”

“Um George?” she hesitates.

Something is wrong. “What is it?”

“I didn’t want to do this via text, because I know you’ve moved a lot of things to make this um, adventure happen—”

“Chiluba, state your point.”

“I need a rain check.”

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TWENTY

BONDING

Chiluba

I FURROW MY BROWS WATCHING THE fading road network of the Murtala Muhammed International Airport through the window of George's Land Cruiser.

"This... is not the way to the departures." Turning my glance to George, who has been silently sitting in the car with me.

"It is not." He confirms, his lips in a half-smile. "We're going to a private hangar."

"Oh, sure." I smile politely, returning my attention to my phone. Pushing a stray strand of weave behind my ear, I pout my lips from side to side, musing.

This is so not going to be a normal flight. Pretend you're used to this. I should have asked for the flight itinerary earlier, but I'd been too busy shuffling things around and checking in with everyone because of this one-week trip George calls work-excursion. When I eventually asked, he said his PA was taking care of everything.

"What do I pack?" I'd asked when he convinced me to come along and not feel guilty for leaving Àbèbí and Nathan to work on Lucid, alone.

"You don't have to."

“It’s a week George. And I just checked. It’s cold over there.”

“You can always go shopping.”

I rolled my eyes at my phone. “On whose card?”

“D’you think I’ll let you spend a dime on a trip I invited you for?”

A grin forms on my face. “Are you serious?”

“Chiluba, when I tell you something, I mean it.”

Hmm?

“Unless I’m joking. You’ll know when I’m joking.”

And that was it. He sold me on the trip. Yes, there’s the fashion lure and the beautiful canals, but a chance to spend someone else’s money without a budget?

Aha!

We collect our suitcases from the car’s trunk, and I walk beside George rolling my Louis Vuitton carry-on bag which my Ferragamo travel handbag rests on. They are gifts from people in my past.

Flight attendants escort us to the airport lounge where we wait to be boarded. They offer a variety of snacks, coffee, and water. But I’ve been feeling bloated all day, so I opt for only water.

A young female attendant stares for too long at me and I can guess what’s going on in her head; I’m sleeping with George as a run’s girl. It will never formulate in her head that I’m his business partner.

Or maybe it’s just my guilt speaking?

What am I doing with George on a leisure trip to the Netherlands when, as of January first, barely three months ago, when the President removed fuel subsidy from petroleum products, I’d canceled travelling outside the country this year?

Hmm... it can only be God. And the prayers of Maama.

Minutes later, a flight attendant drives us in a private sedan to the flight gate and in no time, we’re boarding a private jet. I touch a hand to my tummy through my brown free flowing V-neck gown, glad only an elastic band, high on my waist and elbows gives it the fitting it requires.

“...full bath and toilet is here...” The air hostess shows me around and I follow in her wake, like this is something I do every other Tuesday—take a seven plus hour trip on a private jet that has a convertible lounge, bedroom, and full bath.

Jesus!

The max I've ever done is business class.

Even with Funsho, the last time I'd joined him in New York had been business class.

With enough elegance to make Naomi Campbell proud, I raise my phone to take selfies I'll post on my social media much later.

"What are you doing?" George asks, the corners of his mouth quirked up.

Dropping my hands, I swipe through the images. "Selfies—Pictures, I mean." Looking up at him, I grin.

His eyes take on a thoughtful look. "You think I don't know what selfies are?"

I shrug, going to take my seat as the pilot announces our take off. "Do you?" Looking him straight in the eyes.

He grins, smile lines forming around his eyes as he buckles himself in. "Chiluba..."

I shrug again, grinning widely. "I don't know what you know."

"You'll be surprised at the things I know." His words are two-edged, but I let them slide, enjoying his presence.

Two hours into our flight, the humming sound of the plane's engine relaxes my anxious senses. George is working on his laptop, while I'm reclining, catching up on TV shows I'd missed with my crazy schedule in the comfort of a luxurious private jet. Yes, I forgot to add a luxurious private jet earlier.

A sharp pain shoots through my abdomen.

Eish! I suck air through my teeth, gasping at the unexpected stroke of pain. Placing my hand to my tummy, I look around.

"Are you okay?" George asks, staring at me.

Tightening my jaw, I nod, getting up to look for my carryon bag. Going through it, I find my card of Panadol I'd set aside for the trip. I knew my monthly visitor was coming, but wasn't sure when it would show its face. Feeling George's curious eyes on me, I toss two pills in my mouth, flush them down with water, before heading to the bathroom to check my underwear.

Good news.

It's just a spot.

Another sharp pain, and I wince, blowing air through my mouth as I wait for the pain to pass.

After taking care of business, I drag myself out of the bathroom.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

I was doing pretty fine before, basking in the joy of flying on a private jet for the first and now I feel so grossed out and testy. I just want to— “I think I’ll just lie down.” I force myself to say as I sit down, glancing at him.

Please leave this place right now.

The air hostess had shown us earlier that the lounge can be converted to a second bedroom.

Tears threaten to spill and I blink them away, pressing my lips together.

Closing his laptop, George walks over and squats beside me, taking my hand in his. His hand is warm. I want to place it on my tummy. Maybe that will ease the pain. But—*ouch*... I bite back a grimace.

“Is it something you ate?”

A shy smile traces my lips as I look down at him. As brazen as I am, I’ve never spoken to a guy about my menstrual period. Even the ones I have sex with. It’s I’m not feeling fine. Can’t come. Later. Not this heart-to-heart talk George wants to start.

I try pulling my hand from his, but he doesn’t let go. “Chiluba, talk to me.”

I’ve been doing this for thirteen years; I don’t know why the female body can’t get used to it. Every cycle always hits differently. This one is just being jealous because I am on a luxurious private jet heading to Eindhoven Airport in the Netherlands.

Tilting my head to the side, I let out a whooshing breath. *When e tire you, you go commot.*

“I won’t leave you until you tell me what’s wrong and how I can help.”

“I’ll be—ouch.” Another bout of abdominal pain has me almost doubling over when George lifts me in his arms, striding towards the bedroom. “George, I’m fine.” I whine.

How did he lift me? I weigh 149 lbs and yes, he looks fit but—somehow, I feel little of the pain tucked this way in his arms.

“What’s wrong?”

I close my eyes as the baritone of his voice cascades through my senses,

locking and unlocking some things. “Menses.”

How come, in this state of abject pain, his body warmth where his hands touch my back and leg, feels so good?

“Oh,” he says, carefully placing me on the bed like fragile goods.

“I’m sure you know about that.” I parrot, turning to lie on my tummy. It’s as though my heart has plunged into my tummy because I can feel my lower tummy beating in sync.

This is so embarrassing; the worst period of the year, happening during a private flight with him.

A wry smile tugs at his lips. “I do. I’ll be right back.” He straightens, observing me. “I’ll ask the hostess if she has a hot water bottle or something.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t look it to me,” he says, leaving the room.

Georgie... always surprising me. How do you know about hot water bottles?

He returns empty handed seconds later. “So much for a private jet.”

“How do you know about hot water bottles?”

His eyes flickers with mirth as he seats beside me. “I have children. Two girls and a boy.”

“Interesti—” I freeze when his hand touches my lower back. “Um George? What are you doing?”

“Relax.” He splays his fingers on my lower back. “Take deep breaths and concentrate on them.”

“Hmm.” Closing my eyes, I relax into the magic of his hands as he massages it with the right amount of pressure. My tummy makes growling noises and, to ignore it, I continue our conversation. “Your kids, if you don’t mind me asking, what are their names... what do they do?”

“I can talk about them all day.” I hear the pride in his voice. That’s something every child should have. And from the way he’s massaging my back, he must have had enough practice. “My only boy is a—”

“Boy?” I tease, turning my head to look at him and we both chuckle. I cover a wince, turning my head to the other side, as I feel a bubble moving in my tummy.

“A man then. He’s a lawyer and an accountant. Next is Adesuwa, the social and emotional daughter who’s into Public Relations and... we have Imelda.” He

smiles fondly. “The middle child. She’s the black sheep of the family. Into everything and nothing.”

“Hmm. Not everything is perfect.” I mutter. Wincing as the bubble bounces within my tummy.

“You said?”

“You don’t have everything perfect.” I grin at the walls.

“But I do. My kids are my pride. I didn’t want to have any, but my wife did. I had to—I’m oversharing. I’m curious, what’s the meaning of your name?”

I shrug, closing my eyes in pleasure as he massages a spot close to the rise of my butt. Thank God he realized he was giving too much information.

The meaning of my name? “It means nothing.”

“Chiluba doesn’t mean—”

Oh... If only his hands can burrow deeper and—FRAAAP.

I freeze in embarrassment, tightening my ass’ hole.

His hand stills on my back.

Shit! I can’t see his expression.

“I’m sorry.” I mutter before pressing my lips shut. Waiting for him to speak.

Another bubble rambles in my tummy. It sends blinding pain through me. I can’t help it. I release the muscles of my asshole.

FRAAPAP PA PAP PRA.

My tummy dissolves into a puddle and I feel so good... were I not this embarrassed, I’ll sigh.

His hands remain on my back.

Eish... Is it smelling?

Slowly turning my head to face him, we lock gazes.

He snickers.

A devastatingly shy but self-confident smile spreads on my lips.

He snickers again. “Beauty queens fart?”

Next thing I know, we’re both laughing.

It’s the first time I’ll hear and see him laugh freely without a care.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, wiping off tears from my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“That was something.” He chuckles. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes are bright with excitement. Or embarrassment.

“I’m sorry.” I repeat, before bursting into a chuckle. “You should have left when you got the warning.”

He shakes his head, smirking. “I was coming to terms with you being human.”

“Meaning?” I turn till I’m lying on my side, leaning my jaw on one hand.

“I’m happy I was here for you.”

He places his hand on my hip and I ignore the feeling my brain is cooking up as I stare at him.

“Hmm.” I scrunch my face, still embarrassed he had to witness that.

“Feeling better?” It’s as though he just realized where his hand is and takes it off.

I miss it already.

Getting in tune with my senses, I realize I feel way better than before. The bloating made the usual menstrual cramps worse.

Nodding, I return to laying on my tummy, struggling to get the covers on me.

“Hold still.” He commands and I listen.

“You chose today of all days to be sick,” George teases as he tucks me into bed.

Pouting, I accept him fussing over me. “I’m not sick. It’s just a cramp.” A jolt of mild pain tears through my abdomen as if to mock me, and I curl into a fetal position. When he leans too close, I knit my eyebrows, waving him off. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine before we land.”

He takes a step back.

Closing my eyes, I pretend he is not there, so he can go about his business.

I hear his loud sigh, which causes me to open one curious eye. “Go...” Opening my second eye. “Tsk. Stop watching me in my weakest moment.” I joke, a goofy smile on my lips.

“I’ll do anything to ease the pain.”

“Yikes. I won’t wish this for my enemy if it wasn’t biologically needed for fertility.”

He nods, tucking a hand in his pocket. “Will you eat something? I can get the

hostess to toss something healthy together. You didn't eat earlier. So, you're going to eat?"

"Yes, daddy."

His lips curve into a crooked, charming smile, causing me to smile harder. He turns on his heels, but my voice stops him.

"Please bring my tab so I can watch my shows here."

"Should I close the door?"

I pull the duvet higher, the medication I took earlier already numbing my senses. "And if I need you?"

Something flashes in his eyes, and the corners of his mouth turn up. "Okay. I'll leave it open."

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TWENTY-ONE

LITTLE GRAND

George

THE SUN IS SETTING WHEN THE plane taxis to a stop on the Eindhoven's Airport tarmac. A glance at Chiluba assures me she's looking more like herself.

Custom officers walk right on board, exchanging Dutch pleasantries and proceed to check passports and forms. Chiluba sends a brief, appreciative, self-effacing nod my way, her eyes telling me, *no waiting lines or hassling with luggage? Let's do this again!* Within minutes, the custom officers clear us, getting off the plane.

"Ready?" I observe her as she takes one last look at the space that housed us for the past seven hours. The space I glimpsed the young girl hiding beneath the cover of a grown woman. Like she'd pointed out, I could have gotten up when she gassed the first time, but I want her to feel comfortable with me. Around me. And it didn't stink.

Was just loud and embarrassing to her.

To me, it was an olive branch.

"Yes."

"Feeling better?" Raising both brows.

She smiles impishly, setting her handbag on her carryon. "Yes, daddy."

I chuckle mirthfully when our eyes meet. My heart beats sporadically as she walks before me, her gown gently undulating with each innocent movement she makes. It feels like forever since that first time I saw her in that fitted Ankara print gown that gave ample cleavage view. This gown reveals only shoulder cleavage. Her face is make-up free, unlike the other times we met. And it shows how much she deserves to be treated like a beauty queen.

While massaging her through her cotton layered gown, praying whatever cramp she was feeling would disappear, I knew fear I had not known in a while. *What if something had happened to her and there was no help close? What if...* So many what ifs. It wasn't until I reminded myself I had cared for Mira during our pregnancies, including Aisosa whom we lost during the tenth week of pregnancy—she was meant to be our first—that I got into action.

I had not thought of anything sexual while easing her pain but now the mewling sounds and sighs of pleasure she made are forever stuck in my brain. What was I thinking when I told Dáre to go ahead to with setting up this trip?

You wanted to show off.

It feels good to be home! I smile, standing by the doors of the plane, breathing in the familiar air of the Netherlands. My second home. For a country recognized as the flower exporting capital of the world, the city never smells floral.

Courteous attendants lead us to a black tinted Volkswagen sent from the Little Grand that's under twenty minutes away. I open the door for Chiluba, and she flips her hair to the side before regally settling inside. She tosses a thank you through tight lips, her body stiff.

As I walk around the car to get in, I tug my jacket, pondering what the problem might be. Is the cramp returning? The weather is not—oh shit. The weather. It's chilly. And she doesn't have a coat on.

Settling into the warmth of the car, I suck on my teeth as I glance at her. The rental car we'll be using for the duration of our extended stay is scheduled to arrive tomorrow, but I don't mind taking a walk around town, since our hotel is in the heart of the city. "Do you have the strength for a mini-shopping spree?"

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Can't wait to see how much self-control I have?"

A smile teases my lips. My smart mouthed Chiluba is returning to me. I shrug. "Can't."

Her gaze turns to the streets that on a normal day, where I, traveling alone, I

don't note. All I see are redbrick modern and historic buildings with trees forming an avenue. Everyday people walking down the street. Soon, we'll be in the city's heart. I wonder what she sees.

"Tomorrow." Toying with her fingers on her lap. "I want to settle in first."

"Fits your imagination?" I begin leaning towards her side but pull myself back.

"Hmm." She turns to look at me. "It's good. I'll give my full verdict later."

"You were telling me the meaning of your name." Moving the conversation along. "That it means nothing."

She scrunches one side of her face before relaxing into a smile. "Are we still on that?"

I smile. "Yes. I'm only curious."

"Hardwood."

Huh?

She chuckles at the deadpan expression I'm sure is on my face.

"You're kidding?"

"I'm not. It really means nothing significant. It's the name of a tribe in Zambia. I guess my mom loved the name enough to name me with it. Or she didn't bother because she was focused on getting my father to notice her." She shrugs. "I like it. An aunt said it means *God, keep working*, in igbo, and that it is obvious in my life how much work he has done. I want to believe her, but I doubt that's the meaning."

God, keep working. That's a beautiful meaning. "It's a beautiful name."

"I know." A satisfied smile and a gleam in her eyes tell me how much.

Connecting to the mobile network, I fire off a text to Dáre before I forget what I'd noticed. Just because I'm out of the country doesn't mean he should be lagging in his duties.

I pause while typing out instructions. "Um, would you like to get a local network or connect to Wi-Fi?"

"Wi-Fi is fine." Her eyes lock with mine. "I'm not here to stay."

She's not here to stay. I nod, returning to typing out instructions.

It is drizzling when the car pulls up by the Little Grand. Chiluba tilts her head to the side, studying the nondescript redbrick two-story building in the gloomy

evening weather. The entrance is a single door with a black canopy that has the name and logo of the hotel inscribed on it in white. There's nothing grand about it.

She hesitates. "Is this the Little Grand? Your house?" Turning to me with curious brows.

"Yes and no. This is the hotel we'll be staying." I told Dáre to get a penthouse suite, and he swore this was a steal.

She returns her gaze to the building, staring above the door's canopy where the silhouette of a butler hangs. "Hmm."

"Used to Radisson and Oriental?"

Her gaze returns with a polite smile. "I'm not saying—"

"Don't worry *lieve*, Dáre knows my taste." Eclectic.

Lieve? It was so easy for the word to slip out from my lips. But it feels so nice.

A middle-aged butler appears from the within, welcoming us with smiles, Dutch accented courteous words and transparent umbrellas. Introducing himself as Milan, he ushers us into the building that has no foyer or reception hall. It feels more like a home than a hotel.

For a second while we were seated in the car outside, I wanted to be fearful. But I trust Dáre. And stepping inside this space, I know I am right to. It is an understated luxurious extended stay hotel. My type of place. Home away from home.

We step into a lift with direct access to our suite's living room. The floor to ceiling glass walls of the room gives a panoramic view of the Eindhoven skyline, a glimpse of a balcony with a cozy table for four and some outdoor greenery.

Dáre will get a raise after this trip.

After imputing our fingerprint into the elevator doors, Milan goes around the living space, drawing thick teal draperies over light teal curtains close, telling us about our access to the Little Grand personal sport facilities, and wellness services.

He moves to unpack our luggage, but we tell him we'll figure it on our own from here. He leaves us with a nod and a gracious, "Please let me know if you need anything."

"Hmm." Chiluba moves around the quaint living room, her delicate fingers leaving their mark. Registering our presence into this space. "This is lovely. An

inconspicuous, luxurious hotel. A perfect description of don't judge a book by its cover." Her lingering gaze lands on me before she continues her exploration.

Themed art works hang on the walls of the living room that boasts of a flatscreen TV, a L-shaped couch, vintage wood works and to the left, a dining space for four and a fully equipped kitchen with the works.

"Old world comfort clad in modern materials in a very central location." I add, then begin shedding off my jacket, following in her wake to the other rooms, two things on my mind—the messages I'd sent to Dáre and a bed to sleep.

We find a comfy bedroom done in shades of white, light brown and blue with, silk bedding and a wide window behind the headboard. A closet and a spacious shower.

That's all.

Kak!

Not waiting for her to ask questions, I rush back to the living room, pulling out my phone to speed dial Dáre. Tossing my jacket on the couch.

"Where—" she begins when she reaches the living room.

I raise a polite finger to stop her as the call connects.

I place the phone to my ears, pacing.

"Hey George," Dáre's warm voice begins, "how was your flight?"

"Good. Why do we have one room?"

"One room? That's not possible."

Horseshit. "Do you want to fly down here to confirm that?"

"But how is that possible?"

"You tell me! I told you to get a penthouse suite, for fuck's sake!" I shoot an apologetic glance to Chiluba, who is sitting pretty on the couch, watching my outburst.

I need to calm down... Squeezing my eyes shut, I practice mindful breathing, but I don't stay mindful for long.

"I did George. I did. It's the Little Grand you're in, right?"

"*Godverdomme.*" I mutter beneath my breath, standing still before the glass walls that face the balcony. "If you ask me another bloody question without figuring out a solution, you won't find this puzzling."

“I’m sorry George. Give me a moment. So sor—”

I hang up, placing my hand on both hips, sucking on my teeth. I don’t want to hear how sorry he is. I need to see it! How on earth did he end up getting everything right and messing this up? It was a simple instruction.

“What’s the plan?”

The elevator dings and we turn to face Milan, who is pushing a food cart.

“Give me a moment. Dinner is here.”

Taking long strides, I go to help Milan arrange the table, chatting in Dutch about the quality of the wine and food, while Chiluba hugs herself on the couch, pressing her phone. The aroma of the eight-course dinner Dáre had ordered from Wiesen teases my nostrils, and I have no choice but to go soft at the thought of him.

When the table is set, Milan retrieves a Guts & Gusto bag from beneath his cart and hands it to me, before leaving with a warm, “*Eet smakelijk.*”

Moving to the couch to sit beside Chiluba who looks up from her phone, I give her the bag and she accepts it with curious eyes.

“What’s in here?”

“Want to see for yourself?”

Warmth spreads in my chest at the suppressed enthusiasm she displays as she opens the bag.

She gasps. “Jackets.” Looking up at me with bright eyes.

I nod good-naturedly.

“I thought,” she starts, but stops, leaning to hug me.

It happens in a flash. One minute she’s hugging me, the next she’s some inches away, staring at me in wonder.

I’m still reeling from the press of her body against mine when my phone rings.

Swallowing, I excuse myself, turning from her to the TV screen. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry for any inconvenience this is costing you.”

“What’s the solution?”

“Thing is, they have only seven rooms in the Little Grand and everything is booked. I found a couple of hotels close by—”

“We’re not leaving this one.”

“I knew you would love it.”

“Dáre?” Impatiently tapping my fingers on my thigh.

“I’m sorry. The only other option will be to wait for the next two days. They have a suite that will be available, but for only three days. It wouldn’t make sense to switch rooms in and out and—”

Chiluba waves at me, signaling that I end the call.

I sigh. “Let me discuss with my guest. I’ll let you know.” Turning to her, I shrug. “Can you give me a moment? I’m trying to resolve this issue. There are no available rooms in this building and—”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Aren’t we supposed to discuss *this issue* first?”

“I’m your host. I should have everything sorted.”

“And now that you’ve taken matters into your hands, have you sorted it?”

“But that’s what I’m doing. Will you let me?”

“Oh God.” She mutters, getting up with a huff. Her bare feet slap the wood-paneled floor—making her tight ass bounce beneath her free-flowing gown—as she flounces to the dining table. “Do whatever you want. I’m hungry.” She peers into the dishes on the table before sitting, the view of her apple shaped *derrière* has me feeling tingly.

This is why we need different rooms, I twitch my legs to dissuade the flow of blood to my dick.

She tosses a glance over her shoulder, sitting down. “Are you joining or not?”

What have I done wrong? I’m only trying to do what’s right. Sharing a bed with a guest doesn’t speak well. First, she thought I had brought her to my home, then a run down, hotel. Now it’s like I’m planning on getting into bed with her.

Sighing, I join her on the table, watching her movements as she resumes eating. “So, what do you suggest?”

We’ll be here for a week. I’m not sleeping on the couch.

“Oh,” she pauses, her eyes dramatically going wide. “I can make suggestions?”

“Please.”

“Hmm.” She busies herself with her meal.

“Yes, you can. You can make suggestions.”

She pauses again, looking at me. “I thought you were different.”

“How? What am I doing?” I pour wine for us.

“Doing things without first consulting me.” She gestures to the food. “If this meal wasn’t delicious, I’ll be saying more. But, all I want to say is,” sighing, she leans both hands on the table’s edge. “I appreciate you going out of your way to plan this, but you can discuss with me on what I’ll like or won’t. Thanks for the jacket. I didn’t want to impose after the incident on the plane—”

“It’s your health that’s—”

“And I can sleep on the couch.”

Sleep on what? Gently, I drop the wine bottle on the table. “No, you’re not.”

She balks, tilting her head to the side. Her gaze locks with mine. “Will you?”

I clear my throat. “I won’t, but—”

“We’ll sleep on the bed together.” She resumes eating, like she didn’t just toss a bomb waiting to explode.

Scoffing, I lean forward. “You’re like a daughter to—”

“Will you have any problem sleeping in the same bed with your *daughters*?”

I blink. “No.”

“Then it’s settled.” She shrugs, the movement drawing my attention to her shoulder cleavage, which I have all but forgotten about.

Picking her wine glass, she sips, looking at me over the rim.

“Chiluba, I in no way intended for this to happen. My only offense here is to trust my PA to book a penthouse suite in a hotel. I’m sorry if it’s not up to your expectations. I promise to make it up to you.”

“I love the suite. And I understand. Don’t worry, daddy.”

I force a smile, nodding at her acceptance. I hate it when she calls me daddy in that tone... Horseshit. I don’t like her calling me daddy. I don’t want to be reminded who I am when I’m with her.

It’s no big deal. We can navigate being in the same space for the next few days.

Soon, our discussion moves to plans for our stay, with her double checking the information on the itinerary Dáre curated. By the time we leave the table, my tummy is full and my eyes are closing shut on their own.

She tells me she wants to watch some shows and make a couple of calls while I turn into bed early.

I don't joke with my eight hours of sleep.

Waking promptly at six the next morning, I head to the gym.

Around nine, when I return to the room after a morning walk and a shower, I do a double take as an instant hard-on hits me.

She is awake.

Greeting me.

Looking way younger without her weave on. Dressed in nothing but that flimsy excuse of nightwear which she'd sent in a picture weeks ago, with protruding, hardened nipples pushing against the silky fabric.

Oh... lekker ding...

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TWENTY-TWO

SIX YARDS GUARANTEED DUTCH DESIGN

Chiluba

THREE DAYS GO BY IN A blur of car rides, shopping, exhibitions, museums, and fine dining. George tells me he enjoys driving outside Nigeria because, after all these years, he doesn't understand the art of driving in Nigeria.

He calls it an art.

Haha.

Sometimes he lets me drive, pointing out historic locations. Like places where the Dutch Design Week holds every October since 1998 with over 2,500 designers presenting creative and innovative design concepts and the Phillips Museum. One time, we go on a walk and randomly ended up in a classical music performance.

I'm glad my menses and I have come to an agreement, and she's waving goodbye. George has been a total gentleman, avoiding me when we're indoors, but the perfect host when we go out. If he's not going to act on this attraction tonight, his loss. Glad I brought my massaging wand.

We're at the last exhibition we'll be attending at the Arnhem Museum, themed Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design. It is an exhibition of how Vlisco's Dutch textiles that was born in Indonesia, designed in the Netherlands, loved in

Africa, and desired in the West, became an international phenomenon.

Works from top designers around the world, like Yínká Shonibare, Lucy Orta, and prominent designers who have been inspired by Vlisco textiles are on display, including many of Vlisco sample books.

With George acting as my interpreter, whenever I stop by work that intrigues me, he explains them to me.

Like when I stop by a sailboat with the sails made with colorful Hollandais fabric that brings memories of women's meetings and weddings. Reminding me of home. Reminding me of Maama.

She wasn't happy when I called to greet her happy Easter but she didn't bring it up. I'll visit when I can.

Blinking, my gaze lands on the note beside the sailboat. The Vlisco staff presented it to one of Vlisco's prominent directors, Jan, the nephew of the founder, in 1961. Two months later, Jan made a donation that made it possible to set up a Vlisco museum on the site of the factory.

A museum caption explains that in 1964, a merger with a different brand came about and Unilever enforced it. The combination of both companies was to be called Texoprint. However, in 1970 the name 'Vlisco' was introduced, derived from JP Fentener van Vlissingen & Co. When textile printing machines developed to where it replaced hand stamping, production speed increased by twentyfold, and they delivered the last hand stamped cloth in 1993.

Another frame captioned, *Vlisco Flatters Everywhere*, catches my attention. I smile, taking a picture of a girl dressed in the same fabric as that of the photo corners.

"After the Second World War," George explains, "And Indonesia gaining independence, West Africa became the most important sales market."

"Hmm."

"Originally, most of the fabric produced was for the Dutch East Indies, modern day Indonesia, but after the war, turnover declined, and they had to focus on new markets."

"I can imagine." Moving on to inspect another piece.

"Do you know the full story?"

I shrug. "I'm waiting for you to do the honors when we visit the factory."

George smiles and murmurs for my ears only as we make our way around. "My grandfather worked with Vlisco. My father too."

“Oh.”

On the walls, there are framed colorful fabric designs, like the ones in the office Àbèbí and I occupy in Silhouette Headquarters Office, only this time, much bigger with dates and designer names.

He folds his arms, studying a rendition of the 1977 ‘Village Molokai,’ the handwritten notes and sketches that accompany the design.

“Grandpa was a textile research scientist, while my father was into marketing and sales. I studied production management and later got a MBA because I wanted to be in charge.”

“It paid off.” Looking at him.

He looks at me, smiling knowingly, slowly nodding his head. We resume moving around and although I’m more of a fashion designer, I feel special being so close to seeing the creative part of the fabric design process.

When George attempts to tell me about the step-by-step process of fabric creation as we stand by sample books filled with little pieces of some really old and beautiful batik designs, I laugh it off, shaking my head.

My laughter pulls the attention of other attendees and George mischievously smiles at me, placing a hand on my lower back to move me along. It feels natural and I want more.

What is wrong with me and this constant urge to make him see me?

It’s strange.

Something I’ve never noticed.

Other times, when he introduces me to an associate that’s around his age with the same skin color, I try to imagine being with them, but I get grossed out. However, with George, I want his hands all over me. Under my clothing. Everywhere. All at once.

“Chiluba?”

“Huh?”

“Do you know what this popular chicken and eggs pattern means?” He is referring to the yellow hen surrounded by the heads of cockerels, chicks, and blueish-white eggs, set in a greenish-blue background.

“The fabric looks familiar, but I have no idea.” Folding my arms as I listen to Professor George go on about the fabric. It is obvious textile is his first love.

“It says here that they originally designed it in 1905 and it’s named La

Famille.”

“Let me guess, it’s French. And it means the family.” I glance at the design again, looking at it with a fresh eye. “The chicken family.”

He smiles. “Yes. But without the.”

“Hmm. Chicken Family. There are so many cocks in the picture, though. Very suspicious.”

“You’ve got a naughty mind.”

“How?” I chuckle mirthlessly.

“Most people don’t think about it like that.” He gestures. “They simply believe the hen is a devoted mother for her family.”

“Hmm. Extra devotion to multiple cocks. Look at it.” I wave at the fabric design. “That’s one hen to eight cocks. I’ll need her handbook and list. She must be a busy, devoted mother.”

George stifles a laugh. And I do the same.

“I know what I’m saying.” I defend my thought process. Really, looking at the hen, you can see she is suspicious. The chicks are not looking at her, they are looking at the bodiless cocks. “Poor chicks. They don’t know who their father is.”

He puts a hand in his pocket, still studying the fabric. “Some people say it means the wearer of the fabric has a husband, but she is the true head of the family because her husband is physically useless.” He points. “I think the hidden message is that the *cock* is incapable of pleasing his wife sexually, hence, she is available for other men.”

Hmm... that puts it into perspective for me. I fold my arms, studying the design even more. “Then why did she marry the cock?”

“Why do people get married?”

For money? For love? For status? Because of society?

I swallow. “Everyone has their personal reasons. I should ask you since you have more experience. Why haven’t you remarried?”

My question catches him off guard because he looks at me, like really looks at me and I shrug.

“Your answer will help in putting things into perspective for me...”

He sighs, placing a hand to my lower back again, moving me along, like some little girl. As much as I want to dislike his controlling and somewhat pushy

attitude, I think I'm liking it.

"Lieve schat, I've done everything that needs to be done with a good woman. What's the use of doing it over again?"

His response is unexpected, still it makes me wonder. Why is he encouraging me? From our interactions, even that night we talked about sexual fantasies. That night that when I think back on, I often wonder if I imagined our conversation, but here I am. On the trip he mentioned. He is one complex human. I think I want to unravel him like thread on a spool. Just to see the full color of the spool.

"This is between the two of us. I just want you to know what you'll be in for if we ever cross that line, which I don't want us to ever cross."

I follow him blindly as he goes on and on about the fabrics, patterns, and pattern design.

So far, he hasn't made any untoward advances, but somewhere behind those green eyes, I sometimes catch a flicker of suppressed need. The first morning when he'd come into the room, I'd seen the erection he was trying to hide and because I knew if I seduced him, there was nothing we could do, because of my menstrual cycle, I let it slide.

Now that I'm in the clear, I'm eager to find out what my body sees in him. Why my eyes follow him when he's away from me in a room.

"Si tu sors, je sors," he says, referring to a fabric with birds in cages, some flying out, some flying free. *"If you go, I go."*

"What does that mean?"

"It tells men that if you think marriage is something you can take and leave as you please, I will do the same."

"How many men know the meaning of these fabrics?"

He shrugs. *"It's a means of empowerment for the women."*

"The word you called me leave-a-skate?" That was what he said, right? *"What does it mean?"*

He smiles.

"No running away from this one. I like it."

"It's an endearment. It means a lot of things—"

"Like?"

"I'll send it to you in a text and you'll choose whatever meaning you want of it."

“Hmm. Fair deal. Oh! The 1940 Six Bougies.” I stop by the fabric Maama once owned. “It means the wearer can afford a car.” Glancing at George with pride that at least I know some meaning behind these fabrics.

George places his pinkie to his lips, smiling. “Look at the updated 2011 version.”

The color is more vibrant with eight spark plugs and a man in the middle instead of a woman. “What about it?”

“It means the woman wearing the fabric has a vagina to handle eight men.”

“George!” I whisper, chuckling. “How is there a sexual meaning to everything?”

Smirking, he lightly scratches his short-cropped beard. “Humans are wired to think about sex.”

“And this one?” I point to the popular jumping horse fabric Igbo women wear to the women’s meeting in August.

George’s brows narrow, forming a little bulge between his eyes as he tries to come up with a meaning. “In Ivory Coast, it is called *Je cours plus vite que ma rivale*.”

“Meaning?”

He turns to grin at me. “I run faster than my rival. It signifies rivalry between wives or people.” Then points. “The horses are in a race.”

“You’re making so much sense with these perverted explanations.” I smile, slowly shaking my head. “How do you know so much?”

“This is my world Chiluba.”

“I know alright.”

We resume our tour to another section filled with old Vlisco sketchbooks.

“Nature inspired his work.” George has one hand on his tummy, the other on his chin, studying the sketchbooks of a guy called Johan Jacob. He was the chief of Vlisco’s drawing room and from time to time, took his co-workers out of the drawing room to different places for inspiration. “What inspires yours?”

“Money?” I grin, teasing him.

He smiles. “Be serious.”

I shrug, searching deep within my heart for what pushes me, besides money, that is, and the need to never be poor. Not to be like my mother? Every other day, I answer this question on the red carpet without thinking, but here and now,

I don't know how to merge my thoughts.

"A lot of things," I say, looking around to confirm we are done with the exhibition. "Ready to go?"

"Eager as you are."

We make it out of the building, and I opt to drive us to the Vlisco factory, which is an hour away from the Arnhem Museum. George doesn't argue, simply busies himself with his phone, playing Tetris as I drive. Something I noticed him doing during the flight.

Focusing on the road ahead, I rehash the discussions we had at the museum. Something was missing with the exhibition... what was it? Hmm... Vlisco's story. Why didn't they share more of Vlisco's story? Their history? How far they've come? What they did to become who they are.

In this moment, the answer to George's last question comes to me. I mutter it out loud, smiling. "African prints... What could be. Untold stories... and romance."

"You said?"

I toss a glance at my passenger, grinning, excited. "My inspiration."

His eyes widen with joyous curiosity. "Please share."

"African prints inspire. They tell a lot of stories." I shrug. "That's why I enjoy working with them. Next is what could be. Untold stories... and romance. They are personal for me, and I don't think I'm in the headspace to share just yet."

He nods in understanding. "I hope you share them with me one of these days."

Sure. When I learn how to put them together.

We arrive the factory and get a private guide who takes us on tour round the facility. The building looks old but everywhere the fabric lays remains colorful and beautiful. Fabrics for the African market with a splendor of colors and ideas of what could be done with them.

George, with the help of our guide, tells me the story of how Vlisco came to be.

In 1844, twenty-year-old Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen who had big dreams, bought an existing textile and cotton printing mill in Helmond which is less than fifteen minutes away from the lovely hotel we're lodged. Two years later, after the sale was finalized, he renamed it to P.F. van Vlissingen & Co., now known as

Vlisco.

The initial aim of the company was to produce and sell hand block-printed material like bedspreads, chintz style clothing and kerchiefs, within the Netherlands.

Pieter was in charge of fifty employees and wanted to compete with international cotton printers. With the economy booming and recent technical innovations that could increase productivity by the nine-fold, Pieter's dream was realistic. Everything was in his favor—the economy, technology, and even his family members!

Eight years after taking over Vlisco, Pieter's uncle, Frederik 'Frits' Hendrik Fentener van Vlissingen, who owned a sugar plantation on the island of Java, in the Dutch East Indies, present day Indonesia, visited a small factory in the southern part of Java, where people were drawing lines and dots on cotton using the wax-resist dyeing technique, known as batik and he was impressed. He asked what each pattern and colors meant, the people explained to him they showed if the wearer was of noble descent, was in mourning, a warrior and the likes.

He thought of Pieter, the booming economy, and how Pieter's machine could imitate what the people were doing more efficiently with less waste—how to industrialize the production. With that in mind, Pieter's uncle shipped samples of the fabrics from the island of Java to Helmond, reminding Pieter to stay true to the colors and pattern codes.

Pieter tried imitating the wax-batik and, after many attempts, it was a success. He shipped the first samples to his uncle and waited anxiously on the news of how it was received by the indigenes. Turns out they received it well, and Pieter was in business! His imitations were cheaper than those locally made in Java, so it made sales boom. Pieter progressed to using different colors, trying other patterns and selling to the Dutch East Indies.

With every success story comes trials and Vlisco wasn't left out. Five years after their successful launch, people started forging their fabrics and design, not only that, but putting the Vlisco seal on it, which then was, 'Dutch Wax' or 'Wax Hollandais.'

It didn't deter Pieter from pursuing his big dreams. Together with his brother-in-law, Pieter expanded the company, erecting new buildings every year that by 1864, over 250 people were in his employ.

Pieter died in 1868. His brother-in-law took over the company. Then another decline in trade began around 1870, with many companies having a challenging

time.

By 1875, Pieter's son, named after him and his brother-in-law's son Jan, took over the factory. Things were still bad, not just for them, but the textile industry as a whole. Just like his father, Pieter was ambitious, and he took an enormous gamble with Jan. They invested an enormous amount of money to double production and lower production costs.

Their investment paid off and five years later, they were back on track. However, in 1883, a huge fire destroyed the entire factory. Pieter and Jan took it in good stride and built a bigger, better, and more modern factory.

How did the fabric get to Africa? Between 1837 and 1872, thousands of West African soldiers served in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army and when they journeyed home, took bundles of Vlisco textiles as gifts for their families. To Africans, the wax print fabrics were not cheap imitations of the local originals, it was a unique luxury item.

The Dutch East Indies had banned the Dutch imitation fabric, so the company was looking for new markets for their goods. Soon, the demand from Africa increased. It took a lot of research for Pieter and his team to understand what their new market wanted, but they soon got the hang of it—creating colorful, meaningful, patterns and appropriate clothing for a much stronger sunlight inclined climate, worn by women with black rather than white skin. They became the first Dutch fabric factory to hire an in-house design team in 1894.

Around the late 1800s Vlisco's first shipment to Africa set sail. By 1930, they were one of the top luxury fashion brands in West and Central Africa. African ladies turned Vlisco fabric into high fashion, creating their unique and personal couture.

Other companies were on the rise. Claiming to be Dutch Wax, so from 1963 onwards, Vlisco started stamping, 'Guaranteed Dutch Wax Vlisco' on the borders of their fabric to reassure their clients they were the real deal.

170 years later, they still produce batik-style textiles for both the Indonesian (Java wax-print) and West African (Wax hollandais) markets. A wide variety of sources from China, India, Indonesia, Africa, and Europe inspire the Wax hollandais designs.

Two years ago, Actis Capital bought Vlisco to save it from going bankrupt because of cheap competition. Much of Vlisco's fabric is still made in Helmond. However, it intrigues me they have sales offices in Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Togo, Congo, Burkina Faso, but none in Nigeria. Silhouette a strong

competitor for Vlisco has sewn up the Nigerian market having established their main factory in Nigeria.

The drive back to Little Grand is less than fifteen minutes from the factory. I spend the rest of the evening catching up with Àbẹ̀bí and some decadent chocolate ice-cream while watching Two Broke Girls.

At the end of every day, there are messages on my phone I choose to ignore, but when I read one from Zoya, I go through my social media to make sure I didn't mistakenly post an incriminating pictures. How do I explain that I'm on a work vacation with her uncle? Just the two of us?

08:13 PM

Zoya: You are balling! Zena sent me pictures.

Where are you? Your number isn't going through.

I'm sorry I've not been available.

But if you let me know on time, I can be available this weekend.

Thrashing and unable to find sleep, I sit up in bed. I'm so stressed and worried, my senses are hyped. There are several ways to relieve the tension I feel. Either by partying it out or sex. Getting off the bed, I slip the door open to check and confirm George is asleep.

He is.

For extra protection, I set my tablet to play a movie, before setting myself up to relieve the tension I feel.



TWENTY-THREE

RAW EDGE

George

ANOTHER DAY OF TORTURE AND INFLAMING desire. Last night must have been a dream. Or I'm getting pussy-whipped. The average man has at least eleven natural erections a day.

About five when they're asleep.

The rest when they're awake.

For me, the past five days have been constant peace talks with my erection. Once I'm awake, voila, the dark knight rises. When it remembers who I'm here with, he lengthens, like he's seeking her out. The moment I spot her, or when she does inconsequential things, like nibbles on snacks, rubs the back of her neck, asks me a question, asks for my opinion—*Kak!* Just as much breath beside me, he pulses, turning into a boner.

A boner doesn't hurt.

Never.

Boners give the sweetest feeling ever.

It starts with a rush of blood. Slight puffiness. Expansion of blood vessels. Stretching of the skin to achieve full mast length. Veins popping along the length. The pulling feeling of the skin at the base. Ah... the firmness of my balls

in my scrotum, or when they're dangling. And the head of my boner looking shiny and slightly blue. Or is it purple? Whatever. In that state, it is ready for honeyed moisture. Ready for release.

It only hurts when the person you want to relieve it with rejects you or isn't there. Or when you're in a situation when you can't relieve yourself without giving what you're doing away. Worse when you wake up at midnight with a boner, to the sound of music. Then walk to the bedroom door that's slightly ajar, only to find your guest using a toy on herself, calling your name, and cussing till she comes.

I brought this upon myself. I don't think I can go on. Truth be told, I want to go all the way. Discard this idea of chivalry that's mocking me and see where things end. I've resolved to sleeping on the couch because after evening outings and freshening up, Chiluba calls her associates and sometimes friends, telling them how her day went. Not wanting to disturb her, I opt to close my eyes on the couch, and I'm gone. To dreamland. The following morning, I wake up, think nothing about it and the next night, same thing happens.

We are polar opposites. She sleeps late. I sleep early. I wake early. She wakes late. She enjoys afrobeats music by Wizkid and the new boy called Davido. I enjoy afrobeats music by Wande Coal and Banky W.

Same thing with western music. She enjoys listening to Lady Gaga and Rihanna. I enjoy Don Williams and The Corrs. The only things we agree on so far is food and fashion—she loves exploring with food and my eyes love exploring the decent and indecent cleavage she offers.

Oh. She doesn't like coffee.

"I'm ready." Chiluba calls from the bedroom, and I turn off the TV screen.

We're doing something different today. Driving to Keizersgracht, which is an hour-thirty minutes away, for an Amsterdam canal tour. An opportunity to do something outside of fashion and museum tours. Such a smart lady. She'd been the one to suggest it. I wouldn't have forgiven myself if we returned to Nigeria and she didn't tour the canals.

She sexy walks into the living room space wearing a satin V-neck, wraparound thigh length mauve pink gown that has wide sleeves. We purchased it some days back, along with the strappy heels she's wearing.

Raising my gaze from her legs up to her face, I nod in appreciation.

She's innocently but sensually tracing the neckline with a finger. "You like?"

Too much. It's looks perfect for all the wrong reasons. For one, the hem is riding too high, giving more view of her toned thighs than I've ever seen. She has not worked out since we got here, making me wonder how she keeps them that way.

"It's okay." I say, getting up and picking the car keys from the center table.

She's poking her tongue into her cheek, watching my movement and I know she's having second thoughts.

"You think it's too much for a canal cruise?" Her brows are raised as she twirls a long strand of hair, her other hand on her on her hips.

I stop in front of her, shaking my head. "Chiluba, it's your personal style. Nothing is too much with you."

She hesitates. Smiles. Drop her hands, then nods slowly. "Hmm. Thank you."

She reaches forward, adjusting the collar of my long sleeve black shirt. "Thank you."

Her hands linger there.

"What if..." she begins.

I watch as her hands trace the length of my shoulders down to my wrist and I hold my breath.

She unbuttons the cuffs and when her skin makes contact with mine, arousal stirs awake in my body. Blood turbulently streams from all veins and capillaries to my crotch.

Godverdomme...

Chiluba, what game are you playing at? Do you know what your touch is doing to me? Have you no mercy? You're smiling. Are you enjoying this? Because I'm not. This is torture.

It hasn't been easy living in a 100m penthouse suite where the human of my desire prances about in fabric patches. How many times have I cursed and wished I had bolts of Silhouette fabrics to cover her up with, nights she struts into the kitchen to take snacks from the fridge? After the first two nights, it has not been easy sleeping peacefully, knowing she is within arm's reach.

"We fold this?" She begins meticulously rolling up my sleeves. "You look good in your black attires, but I think you should relax a bit." She darts her gaze to mine. "Maybe wear some colors too? You wear..."

Relax? A bit? Watching you sensually strip off this dress will help me relax a

great deal. Her voice fades into my subconscious as I get lost in lecherous thoughts, and I slowly release my breath.

My dick is hard in my pants and I'm glad it's not visible through the fabric.

It feels good.

Even without being touched.

I move a foot as she asks me a question and I answer no.

The head of my boner brushes the fabric, sending a tingly feeling through my body system.

All it takes is to hold her wrists and look her in the eyes. I've seen the look of desire in her eyes. It mirrors mine. Mirrors the way I feel. I can tell. I've been backing away from every bit she tosses my way. It will be so easy to have her here on the couch. Would she love it if I be *the man* and— *Kak!*

I blink, breathing hard. There's no way I'm crossing the line I created by myself.

Kak!

I'm slipping. Erasing the lines.

"There." She steps back before I do as I return to my senses.

Grinning at her work, she continues. "We're tourists enjoying the city—George, are you okay?" Concern laces her voice, branding my heart with guilt.

"Thanks." I say curtly. "Let's go."

Opening the elevator door, I step into it and the ride downstairs isn't an easy one as she keeps stealing speculative sidelong glances at me.

"You know, you've been acting funny all day. Because we took a break from going out today doesn't mean I don't want you around the suite."

"Needed to do some things alone."

"Business?"

"No."

"Fine." She clutches the evening jacket that rests on her arm to her tummy.

Why am I being rude? Who is throwing tantrums now?

The elevator dings.

"Can I drive?" she asks as we step out of the stifling elevator ride.

"No. There's a chauffeur."

We get into the rental car, greeting the chauffeur who understands both Dutch and English. The trip to Keizersgracht, so my high and mighty fashion queen can explore Amsterdam's canals in the comfort of an electric boat begins while I remain the chivalrous male escort.

'Are you okay?'

How will I be? When you're pretending nothing untoward happened last night.

I'll pretend last night didn't happen too. That my sick peevish mind and imagination conjured the fevered sexual dream.

One where I moved like a knight to the bedroom. Only to stop by the door because I couldn't believe what was before me.

How you conveniently adjust your widespread legs to face the door. My boner stretching further within my loose pajamas as you gasp and pant my name repeatedly. It took a lot for me not to cup my boner and start wanking as I watch you. A fevered sexual dream where you were calling out my name.

The painful pleasurable feeling in my pants when you started pulsing on the bed like a police officer held a taser to your neck. How you instinctively raised your head to glance at the doorway, then sigh, returning to lie back in bed.

It took a while to find sleep because I felt sick at first. But later this morning, while on the longest walk I've ever gone on, I realized you most likely set me up.

Look at you. All dressed up in that satin gown. Knowing I can't do anything.

What are you doing on your phone?

You're laughing, what's so funny?

"You should try this test." Chiluba says, briefly glancing at me from her phone's screen.

"What test?" The one you put me through last night isn't enough?

"It's a personality test my friend sent." She leans her head on the headrest, turning to look at me, grinning. "But this time around, it's about your level of kinkiness."

I raise a curious brow at her.

"Want to try?"

Smiling softly to ease my answer, I say, "No."

There's a line that's getting blurred and it will only take a matter of letting my guard down for it to completely wipe out.

“No? Common Georgie. You, of all people, should be interested.”

She adjusts till she’s seated right beside me.

What’s wrong with this young lady? She’s tugging at my strings, and it’s not fair at all.

“Common.” She rapidly raises her brows, leaning her shoulders into mine. “Do it for me. I’m curious to know.” She leans away. “I’ll cancel my progress and start all over again.”

I sigh, a long and exasperated sigh that has her smiling in triumph.

“Yes!” she whispers as I close the book I’ve been pretending to read and pull out my phone.

“Just because...”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” She hurries me on. “Insert bdsmtest dot org on your browser. I’m starting all over.”

“BDSM? Because I told you—”

“Indulge me, okay?”

“Okay.” I do as instructed.

The webpage loads fast and the words, *let’s test the kink out of you!* has me swallowing. “What next? Do I register?”

“Don’t register, continue anonymously. When you’re done with your details, let me know. And choose the longer test. I want us to play together.” She eyes me with a gleam in her eyes.

Like a sheep to the slaughter, I follow her guide. When the statements about my preferences and my degree of agreement appear on the screen, I chance a curious look at her. She’s watching me.

Oh kak. It’s another trap.

What’s wrong with me? Suspicious of a young lady whose companionship I should be enjoying instead of calculating how not to fall victim to my urges and her natural charm.

Yeah George. Enjoy this. Stop over thinking things.

She smiles. “So, do you like to be dominated in the bedroom?”

Godverdomme. Are we going to do this for all the questions? “No.”

“I do. But I love resisting it.” She winks.

And she continues, till I’m loosening up, asking her questions that on a

normal day I won't dream of asking her. Turns out she doesn't like the idea of having sex with multiple people at once. Wonder what the driver is thinking of us, but he minds his business.

I widen my eyes when I find an interesting question. "Do you enjoy people watching you being naked or having sex?"

"Hmm." She sucks on her cheeks. "Naked, maybe? But having sex? I've never done that before."

Never done that before? With last night's show, I'd say otherwise. What's your definition of sex? I don't want to go into details, so I opt for the easy way out, smiling. "I've noticed you love apparels that flaunts your cleavage."

She glances at her chest, then smiles up at me with a knowing wink. "Guilty."

"Do you like being totally helpless at your partner's disposal?"

"I've never done that. But if they know what they're doing, why not?"

My member twitches at this revelation, imagining her wrists tied with silk fabrics.

"Do you have a thing for large age differences in sexual encounters or relationships?" she asks.

"No, I don't." Until you. And it doesn't make it a thing.

"Same here." She nods, swallowing.

Why are we deceiving ourselves?

We keep playing. Asking questions. And when the result comes out, her top five are that she is, 95% Vanilla, 94% Brat, 83% Submissive, 63% Exhibitionist, 57% Rope bunny. While I am 96% Dominant, 88% Voyeur, 70% Brat tamer, 68% Master, 67% Rigger.

Almost like a perfect match made in heaven. But I don't say it out loud.

"Satisfied?" I ask.

There's a twinkle in her eyes when she responds. "Very much so. But I'm no Vanilla."

Before I can ask what she means, the driver says, "*We zijn hier.*" Looking flushed.

I bet he has never attended to clients like Chiluba, and I who spoke about nothing but our sex tastes throughout the ride.

We arrive at Keizersgracht around six, warmly welcomed by our captain and

tour guide, Daan, and settle into the boat for our private canal cruise. Daan hands Chiluba a blanket which I help arrange around her waist, down.

“Keizersgracht is also known as the Emperor’s Canal and was named after Emperor Maximilian of Austria.” Daan begins his job immediately the boat sets into motion, completely charmed by Chiluba’s childlike curiosity.

When Daan directly asks where Chiluba is from, I almost piss to mark my territory, but I quickly realize he is just doing his duty and being friendly. Trying to help us settle into his boat. With the loaded open bar, stocked with drinks and locally sourced snack platter at our disposal, we begin a history class about the city’s history, landmarks, and modern culture.

Leaning into me as the evening becomes chillier, Chiluba becomes intrigued by the history and heritage of Amsterdam’s old canals, including the beautiful canal side houses. I don’t take the moment for granted. I wrap one hand around her shoulders.

When she laughs, I feel it.

When she gasps, I hear it.

When she tenses, I know.

When Daan tells us where we are, what it means in history and to the city, I take it upon myself to give Chiluba an expanded version of Dan’s report. And she has a lot of questions—Anne Frank’s Statue, The Jordaan, Torture Museum—especially when we get to Oudezijds Achterburgwal canal.

“And here’s Amsterdam’s famous Red-Light District.” Daan announces. “There are live sex shows, sex shops, brothels and strip clubs.”

“We’re at the most talked-about neighborhoods in the city.” I murmur to Chiluba, who is ensconced in my arms, sucking grapes.

“What’s special about it?” She cranes her neck to view the streets that are coated in neon-red hued light spilling from the buildings. “And why are so many people over there?”

“It houses the world’s oldest profession. People offer their services from behind a window. What do you expect?”

“Oh... like Pekas, Ikeja?”

“Pekas?” I can’t believe this *bella donna* is so exposed but doesn’t know what a red-light district means.

“Allen Avenue in Lagos.”

“Exactly. But this is an industry of its own. They pay taxes.”

Daan continues, smiling at the scenery. “That’s the Red Light Secrets Museum of Prostitution.”

“I’m sure the men are excited.” Her curiosity has her moving away from my arms as she fixates her gaze on the neon-lit red lit streets. I miss her warmth. The weight of her body.

“Everyone gets excited by taboo things.” I move to sit beside her.

She nods slowly. “Sex itself is taboo.” Then turns her head to Daan. “Did you say Museum of Prostitution?”

I hold back a snicker. *Welcome to Amsterdam, schatje*. One of the first major European countries to formalize prostitution’s legality and regulate it like any other industry.

“Yes. Over there.” He points out. “If you tour the streets, I’ll recommend you visit the Red-Light Secrets Museum of Prostitution. It is very interesting and informative. It will educate you about the life of sex workers.”

“Are we?” she starts, looking at me with sparkling, unblinking, inquisitive brown eyes, that tug at my soul.

I want her to finish her question, even though I know what she’s going for.

“Georgie...” she drawls with an impish smile. “We will not walk the streets?”

I smirk. “Not on this trip.”

“Seriously?”

“We’re not prepared.”

More like, I’m not prepared.



TWENTY-FOUR

LIVE SHOWS

Chiluba

“CASA ROSSO IS ANOTHER INTERESTING PLACE you want to visit.” Daan informs me, pointing to a building with neon pink light forming the shape of a standing elephant. Below it, I can make up the word, outlined in red light, Theatre Casa Rosso. There’s a crowd waiting to enter.

Beside us, a party boat floats with groovy music spilling from it.

Overall, the canal smells like a plastic bag containing a two-day-old used swimsuit and towel. With each location we pass, the canal’s smell becomes layered with the occasional smell of food, flowers, brewery, weed—Indian hemp—and more. This area has, so far, the strongest weed odor.

Under the red-orange glow of the bridge lights mixed with the neon lights from the red-light district, I notice George looks uncomfortable. He’d worn that look when I stepped out of the room, ready for tonight’s activity. Tsk. Come to think of it, for most of the day, he has been wearing that look.

Grinning as I lock gazes with him, the earlier chill I was feeling gone, I ask, “What happens there Daan?”

“Um...” I notice the silent communication between him and George. “Eighteen plus live entertainment shows.”

Hmm...

George nods, confirming Daan's revelation.

"What type of shows? Like strip club shows?" If that makes sense.

"More than that," George answers. "The theatre is some sort of small cinema, but instead of seeing a movie, you'll be shown various 18+ plus shows. Think of striptease, sadism, and masochism... live sex shows."

"Like live porn?" If my brows can touch my hairline, I'm sure they are doing that right now.

George pulls me into his arms, and I willingly go into it. He has been acting funny. From disappearing all morning with only one cryptic text to ask Milan for whatever I need and to get ready for this evening, I wondered if I had pissed him off.

Only thing I've done wrong is to endlessly fantasize about him. This infatuation needs to end. The proximity is also not helping. Last night, while I was relieving myself, for one second, I imagined him by the door and figured I should give him a show.

But it was all my imagination.

"Something on that line. Couples use it for their stag parties."

"I'm of the mind that the Dutch loves sex."

"Hmm."

"Imagine dedicating an entire street to the art of it."

He shrugs.

"What's it like? Dating a typical Dutch person?"

"You're asking the wrong person."

I glance at him. He smiles. I smile. Then I return to leaning on his chest as I watch the scenery pass by. "Come on Georgie, entertain me."

"Um, a Dutch person is practical when it comes to love."

"Sounds familiar." I sense him smiling, and I instinctively place a hand on his thigh. It feels strong. "Hmm mm."

"And they like to keep things casual... let things progress naturally."

"Would you say you're Dutch in that aspect? Letting things progress naturally."

"Maybe."

“This is the Hash, Marijuana and Hemp Museum.” Daan calls.

I scoff. “Are you kidding me?”

“What is it?” George asks, picking a *stroopwafels* from the platter before us.

I’ve come to love that waffle since he introduced it to me two days ago during one of our walks.

“You guys have a museum for everything.”

He chuckles mirthlessly.

“I wonder how everyone in this area isn’t stoned.” It is the blue hour. A lovely backdrop for the picturesque historical houses and people milling about. Daan points out that the bridge lights will be turned on soon.

After much convincing, George agrees that I deserve a walk around the Red-Light District, so Daan docks the boat, while George and I go on what I call a sexual adventure.

“Be careful,” George mutters, “there are pickpockets around.”

“Yes daddy.”

He stares at me for a millisecond, swallows, then takes my hand in his. We get off the main street, into an alleyway where there are see-through doors spilling red light on our path. Sex workers, dressed in beautiful lingerie and bikinis—a Victoria secret lingerie show, I chuckle—pose and wave from the see-through doors as we walk by.

So friendly and welcoming.

“Don’t gawk.” George teases, pulling me along.

“I’m not staring. Just admiring them.” My heart is pounding from the taboo of what’s going on behind most doors and walls of this street. Thick, gooey liquid slides from my pussy lips, causing the scrap of fabric covering my vagina to feel sticky. I grin at my naughtiness.

The people milling about are so open and carefree about what’s happening here. A cute guy who should be getting pussy from his girlfriend knocks on a window.

“What’s he doing?” I try not to stare.

“Seeking relief?” George says flippantly, squeezing my hand that’s holding on tightly to his.

My pussy involuntarily twitches with desire. I want to live on the edge. Try something fun.

“It costs around fifty to get laid by the women for fifteen minutes.”

My eyes go round. That guy is going to pay fifty for something he will get for free from a girlfriend? Ladies...

“Have you ever?” I ask as we walk away from the red-lit showrooms. The air smells like weed. I see a no smoking public sign, but right beside it, a man is smoking.

“Never. But I’ve been to the Casa Rosso.”

I glance behind, at the spot we just left, and the lady ushers him behind. Looking forward, another guy is stepping out of a room. Another window has the curtains shut, but light spills through the edges. My senses are on high alert, my nipples tingling. What was it like wandering through Sodom and Gomorrah? It’s on the tip of my lips to tell George we should try one window.

“See that one with blue instead of red light?” He subtly gestures with his chin to the window before us. “The person behind the glass is transgender.”

“So many people.” I mutter as we navigate our way between bicycle riders out of the alley.

“Not enough. Once it’s around 11 PM, the crowds increase.”

“Let’s go to the Casa Rosso. I want to see a show.”

George’s gaze meets mine, and he’s shaking his head. “Chiluba, I don’t think —”

“Georgie...” I drawl, pulling him along.

If we won’t act on the sexual tension we’ve been ignoring, I can as well enjoy myself watching strangers.

By the time we arrive at the Casa Rosso, the crowd at the entrance has doubled.

“I don’t think attending a show tonight will give you an enjoyable experience.”

“But we leave the day after tomorrow. When would we find time?” I lean into the side of his arm, like we’re some old couple, used to travelling the world together and bartering what we should and shouldn’t do. “This is a once in a lifetime experience.”

He sighs, putting his other hand to his mouth as he contemplates the crowd and our options. His eyes brighten when they land on me. “What about your next visit?”

“Next visit?” I repeat like a bimbo.

“Don’t you want to visit another time?”

“Georgie...” I peek longingly at the entrance lined with people trying to barter their way into the cinema, returning my gaze back to him.

“That crowd will ruin your experience.”

Why do you have to sound so correct?

“There’s an alternative.”

Hmm? My ears perk at his words. “I’m in.”

“It’s the only one of its kind left in the entire city.”

“Yes.” Let me have something to share when I return home.

Who will you share it with? Zoya? Brushing off the thought, I follow George’s lead and after a passing through a couple of buildings, we stop in front of a building with a neon sign that reads Sex Palace above it. It has the Casa Rosso’s elephant sign on it too, with the neon lights that read, Peep Show. A bright yellow light in cursive says; Live Show. Live Couples. And more about bondage, teen sex—Teen sex?

“Is that legal?” I point to the yellow sign.

“Yes.”

“Let’s go for the live show. The one with couples.”

My heart beats faster as we walk through the entranceway, under the neon bright lights, further into a world I never imagined finding on this trip. I squeeze George’s hand and he squeezes it back reassuringly, looking down to smirk at me.

“You want to go back?” he asks in that annoyingly understanding voice of his.

I shake my head, turning my head to scrutinize the wall posters and screens showing ladies in various stages of undress and couples in arousing sexual positions. There are other distractions, but I know what I want. Who I want to do it with. Because I can’t do this alone.

George directs me to a circular structure that is on the lefthand side of the entrance, with small doors along its walls. Green, red, yellow neon lights with similar words like I’d seen outside, and images of sexy ladies dot the walls.

“Go in,” he commands.

As I enter a small door that leads me to a small room that has a viewing window that is blocked, I notice George is no longer behind me.

“George,” I whisper furtively, and he appears. “What are you doing?”

I can’t believe my voice is this breathy. The adrenaline rush. The fear of the unknown. The act of doing something taboo. Who I’m doing it with. Everything makes me feel more alive than I’ve been for weeks.

“Giving you privacy. Need some coins?”

“No. No. No.” I grin, latching onto his arm as I drag slash squeeze him into the room that looks like a UK phone box. “We’re doing this together.”

The room smells of stale sex and I will the odor away as George does the honor of shutting the door behind us and inserting money into the slot. There’s a toilet paper dispenser on the wall. For cleanups, I guess.

“You seem like a regular.” I tease, folding my arms.

“Curiosity brought me here. It was fun.”

When he inserts the amount of money needed into the slot, my heart beats faster as the window becomes clear, opening to two very good-looking people doing what I’ve only seen on my phone screen. The pounding of blood in my ears has me instinctively taking a step back and I lean against George’s solid chest. He quickly has his arms around me.

“Are you okay?” he whispers in my ear.

His husky voice and the vigorous doggy act which the couple, just a few feet away from us, on a rotating bed, are performing causes me to swallow as I nod.

My pussy twitches.

I press my ass into what I imagine to be George’s crotch, not caring that he never asked to be part of this, my gaze firmly rooted on the couple fucking before us.

He doesn’t move. Just holds on to me. Only the press of his finger against my rib cage reassures me I’m not alone.

Honestly, I’ve felt nothing while watching porn, but this is entirely different. There’s nothing like watching two beautiful people having clean, raunchy sex. Even if it’s scripted.

Or it’s because of the person I’m with?

His hands are patiently holding on to my waist as the couple fuck, giving us different angles in the rotating bed.

When I find a way to breathe again, I whisper, “My cycle is over.”

I don’t know what I expect George to do with that information, but he does nothing. I wish I can see his face, but the mechanical motion of the couple before us has me glued.

The initial shock of watching two people having sex wears out and I look up and around to find that there are other voyeurs in similar rooms—about seven—watching the show. And we all can see into each other’s room.

I regret glancing at this dude who has his dick out and is wanking. My gaze quickly moves to a screen where a lone lady looks both aroused and disgusted at the same time. And another screen where a lone man is leaning into the windows. Other curious tourists like me. Then back to the couple fucking.

The window closes and I let out a long breath. “That was weird.”

“Another one?” George asks. I can hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m too horny to watch others having sex without raping you.”

That seems to shut him up and he leads me out of the booth.

The trip to the Little Grand is fast, smooth, and quiet. When George asks if we should stop for dinner, I tell him I want to eat in.

All that’s in my head is to shower and find relief again, just like I did last night. I can’t believe a day of touring the city has me in a knot. I glance at George as we near the end of our trip and he is snoozing, resting his head on the window.

When the chauffeur announces our arrival, I place my hand on George’s thigh to shake him awake. I’m tempted to do more than that. All I need to do is move my palm higher and I’ll be touching his penis. Is it hard in his sleep?

“Chiluba...?” his voice thick with sleep as he slowly blinks awake.

I remove my hand from his thighs like touching him scalded me. He’s been showing so much control that during the boat ride, I’ve calculated how to bring him to his knees.

As usual, he showers first, and I go in next.

Milan has already set the table and disappeared by the time I step into the living room in my thinnest nightie. The only response I get from George when he notices my attire is a single cursory glance.

We’ve not had dinner in the suite since the first night. More of breakfast on the balcony, like two well-mannered adults.

Well, tonight, I don't want to be a well-mannered adult, I want to be a matured adult. He sets the surround sound system to play some country music and we begin eating, both of us pressing our phones as a source of distraction. Either of us is too hot and bothered to talk about my first red-light district experience. Or what I blurted out in the peep show room.

After starting and ending the conversation a million times in my head, I put my phone down. "I know you've been thinking about me." I begin, licking my lips.

George pauses, looking at me with narrowed eyes. "I have?"

Stopping all form of pretense, I drop my fork, folding my arms under my breasts. My expression shifts from coy to sexually suggestive. "You've thought about fucking me."

He is turning crimson. His fork plonks onto his almost empty plate.

"At least, if not in the past. During this trip."

"Chiluba, you shouldn't—"

"Why don't you sleep on the bed with me?"

His brows furrow in confusion. "I'm a light sleeper. You're always on the phone."

Swallowing, I nod. "Good point."

"If this is about the ongoing sexual innuendos—"

"It is, actually." Dropping my arms to the side so I don't come off aggressive, I ask, "Why haven't you touched me? Low libido?"

He locks gazes with me then looks away, cursing under his breath.

"We've talked about everything, George."

His gaze swiftly returns to me. "What are you trying to do?"

"To get laid." I smile, nibbling the insides of my bottom lip. "Do I have to pay you to fuck me?"

We hold a staring contest.

He blinks.

I win.

Nodding, his fingers tap the table, his expression wary. "You know what you're asking for?"

"Duh. You know what I want. Can you get it up or not?"

He gives a soft, suggestive chuckle. "That's what you should have asked last night."

You saw me last night?! He doesn't answer, but his eyes say enough. And his grumpy evasive attitude all day. That's it.

He stops tapping his fingers. "How horny are you?"

"You can come check if I'm wet enough."

"That desperate?"

"Never. I can take care of myself."

Leaning back in his chair, he studies me. The hair on my skin stands in attention. This is no ordinary stare. He is deliberately raking his gaze over me, forcing me to bear his scrutiny. I can imagine all the things he's thinking of doing to me with those green eyes and it makes me stretch in my seat. My vagina develops a heartbeat of its own, rhythmically pulsing to the beat.

"I remember you love watching." Holding his gaze, I hold both hands to my ribs, raising them up till I'm cupping my breasts. Bringing them together.

Tightening the muscles of my ass and thighs as I imagine his hands on me.

Panting, I let go of his gaze, throwing my head backwards. I continue rubbing my hands against my breasts, the sheer, velvety satin fabric whispering to my skin.

"Hmm..." I moan, imagining us as the couple in the live show and everyone watching us.

It will be so bad... so dirty... so erotic.

My breath comes in short, slow gasps.

Sliding my arms across my chest, I put four fingers into my mouth, imagining he is the one doing it, while my other arm wraps around my waist.

Oh yes... oh yes...

Clenching my thighs harder, knowing he is just across the table, watching me, a sense of freedom and power saturates through me.

"Hmm... Hmm..." The low humming sounds I make vibrates within me.

I've imagined sex. Had sex. Watched sex. But never like this.

"I'm so fucking hard," he whispers huskily, his voice coming from faraway as I trying to find release. "But I promised not to have sex with you."

I slowly pant. Baring my teeth. Forcing air through my nostrils. "Fuck you."

“So fierce.” His voice is like butter, melting all over me.

I bring my hands down, dipping them into my nightie to fondle my breasts.

“Oh fuck,” he gasps.

“Fuck you.” I gasp, feeling heady. “Hmm... Hmm...”

“You have no idea how lovely you are. Those breasts. And nipples. They look lovelier than my imagination. Please touch them for me...”

“Ah...” Thrusting my hips. Imagining he’s the one with me. His praises go in and out of my senses.

“You’re so independent. Amazing...”

“Ah... Ah... Ah...”

“That’s my girl. That’s a good girl.”

A dam breaks in me. I convulse on my seat. Holding myself so tight. It’s happening all at once. “George... George...”

George is lifting my lethargic body from the chair. Murmuring, “Good girl... good girl...” As he carries me into the room. I cling to him as the tremors in my body subside.

“Sleep with me...” I murmur, holding his shirt. When he sighs, giving into my request, I realize I just orgasmed without touching my pussy.

The last thing I remember is his warmth as he spoons me to sleep.



TWENTY-FIVE FINGER PRESS

George

DRESSED IN SHORTS AND A LOOSE round neck, I walk out of the shower to find Chiluba laying on her side, frowning at her phone. I'd reluctantly gotten up from bed earlier, skipped the gym and gone for another long morning walk instead, calling myself all the hypocritical names I can think of. Returned to have breakfast and catch up with Dáre, then shower.

Last night was surreal. Watching her orgasm through tantric masturbation was a first for me. And I'm sure for her as well. A memory I want to remain in my head, even though my conversations with Alfred from last week haunts me. We had not gone heavy on the wine last night, so I can't say that's where she got the boldness from. But man... was she bold.

"My cycle is over."

I'd heard her loud and clear but ignored it.

Chiluba is... what can I say? She's out to get me.

How the fuck do you tell a red-blooded male, while watching a live sex show, that you're available? It would have been so easy to flip that gown she'd had on, and give the performers a show of their own. So, they'd know how it is done.

Slow and sensual. Then fast and hard.

Blinking, I clear the thoughts from my head.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, walking to the foot of the bed.

She has the guts to roll her eyes at me.

Such a spoiled brat.

“Hmm?” I press.

Flopping her back on the bed, she crosses her arms. “Dress ‘n’ Tees.”

“What’s that?” I keep forgetting how similar and unlike our worlds are.

She sucks her lips, moving it from side to side before deciding to share, sitting up with her elbows on the bed. “I just read an email from my production manager that we have excess stock. 34 Threads creates apparels for private labels. Barely two months ago, Dress ‘n’ Tees cancelled their contract with us.”

“Oh.” Sitting on the bed’s edge. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Yeah. A couple of others are doing the same, and there’s nothing wrong with our products!” She falls back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. “Just because someone is offering an imitation of what we produce—Àbèbí just confirmed this—at a cheaper rate. And they know me. I won’t shirk quality for quantity.”

“I know. So how can I help?”

Slowly, she sits up till her back is on the pillows, looking at me through guarded, narrowed eyes. “You want to help?”

I nod. *Why did you tell me about it if not to help you?*

She scoffs, tilting her head to the side. As though seeing me for the first time. “George...” she says with a sedate, musical chuckle, placing her hands on her lap.

My eyes follow their movement before returning to her face.

“I can handle it myself. I just needed to share—”

Eikel? “Just like last night?” I don’t know what made me blurt that out, but I guess it’s all sexual frustration.

“Last night? Last night was different.”

I raise both brows. I’m causing nonexistent wrinkles to form, and I don’t care. This lady wants to be the death of me.

A tiny, mirthless laugh escapes her. “I asked you to fuck me and you couldn’t —”

“Wouldn’t.” I correct her.

“Why? Huh George? Why?” She turns up her nose at me, expressing her insolence.

“You know why.”

“Ugh. Spare me.”

“Chilu—”

“Don’t Chiluba me please.”

Uhn?

“You can do everything, but your dick is too good for me.”

“What the heck?” Where’s this coming from?

“Yes...” She leans forward, crawling to me on the bed. “You can help in every way. Show me the world, but you can’t fuck me.”

She stares at my crotch, and I curse. My shorts does nothing to hide my desire. It is obvious with the way my boner is curved to the side, ready to be unleashed.

“See?” She gestures with a sneer, proving her point.

“Stop this right now.” Blood pounds through my veins.

She stops before me, nose to nose. Eyes to eye. Licking her lips. “You’re too good for me? You don’t want to try? You don’t last long?”

One long inhale has her heavy fragrance seeping heavily into my senses. “Stop it.”

“If not, what?” Her eyes dare me.

Don’t do it.

Don’t.

She just wants to get a rise out of you. She already knows you want her.

You shouldn’t even be considering it. There’s Mirabel’s memory to consider—something inside me knows that once I cross this invisible line there’s no going back. Then there’s her friendship to consider.

Don’t do it.

We shouldn’t be doing this.

Don’t—I push her shoulders and she willingly falls on the bed, a coy smile spreading on her lips, her terry robe partially opening to reveal her breasts and one toned brown thigh. Feeding my eyes with the sight of her heaving,

beautifully formed breasts, I don't know where to start from.

Her nipples are already engorged. All I need to do is suck on them while I place my fingers in her tight pussy. Pussy, I'm sure is sensitive, slippery, and wet from the sick mind game she is playing.

"What are you going to do?" she taunts, slowly placing one hand beneath her head, the other moving to sensually cup one breast. Her nipple peeking at me between her fingers. "I woke up wet and ready for you, but always, you find a way to disappear." She continues like we're having a normal, everyday discussion about the weather. "You should check if I need help there first. Because I really do."

Against my will, I push aside the nightie covering her wetness and swallow audibly from the beauty of the glistening black curls between her legs staring at me. I'd assumed her to be the type that trimmed their pubic hair but she keeps surprising me.

My eyes meet hers. "You are one horny bitch."

Her lips curve in a wry smile, daring me to go ahead.

Godverdomme, what am I about to do?

I flex my fingers repeatedly. The urge to touch what's sandwiched between those curls in the middle of her thighs calls to me.

"Come on Georgie..."

I look at her, holding her gaze.

"I want you to touch me."

Images from last night taunt me. Asking me, can you do better at caring for her?

Fuck it.

She gasps when I touch her, bucking her hips forward. "Yes..."

I sigh with a controlled breath, absorbing the delicate warmth of her softness beneath my fingers. Skimming my fingers around her lips, I luxuriate in the kinky hair surrounding her softness.

I care about you.

She moans, bucking her hips again. Knowing her, she doesn't need me to find fulfillment, and I don't want to miss the opportunity of being a part of this sensual, beautiful moment.

"Are you making a new friend down there or will you do something about

this urge?”

You're talking too much.

I move my fingers between her slick wetness, the sound of her moans encouraging me to spread them open. I play around her entrance. Massaging the swollen tender lips of her vagina that's tempting me to do more than touch them with my fingers. Loving the slick, velvety feel of her beneath my fingers. Her responsiveness. The pounding of blood between my ears. Their descent of liquid desire to my crotch. Hardening my erection. My painful, sweet erection.

“You like that, don't you?”

She moans in response.

Still playing with her lips, I adjust my sitting position till I can bring my other hand to touch her breast.

Ah... Gad...

They're so warm to the touch. Firm. Full. Throbbing.

I begin caressing them. Molding and reshaping them with satisfaction. How long ago did I wonder what they'll look like and now they're hardening beneath my touch.

“George.” She looks at me with dark eyes that say, fuck me or stop this torment.

“You don't tell me what to do.” Taking this as a cue, I plunge two fingers into her. She gasps. Rolling her hips with an appreciative moan.

“Why... why? Uhn?”

“Because I know what's best for you.” Slowly working my fingers inside her. *Such beauty. So responsive. So needy.*

“Oh daddy...” She closes her eyes, bucking her hips against my fingers. Her hands on over mine that's massaging her breasts. I flick a nipple and she hyperventilates.

“Am I?”

She doesn't respond. Still chasing the high my fingers promise her.

I stop moving my fingers inside her.

“George!” Her eyes meet mine. Accusing me. Telling me I'm a traitor.

“Am I?” I ask again.

“No.”

Unable to resist the temptation of her slick warmth, I begin working my fingers insider her, only this time, I don't use as much pressure. Just a little rhythmic come-hither flick.

"Who am I?"

"Can you just get on with—"

I squeeze her breast tight, working my fingers faster. She swallows her words, moaning in pleasure. Thrusting her hips. I know she's close because her moan is going on and on. No breaks in between.

The excitement of the game we're playing makes me feel flush all over. My erection is getting sweeter. Stretching. Yearning to take control.

I stop.

Her back rises off the bed and her eyes shoot daggers at me. "What the fuck George!" Panting.

I resume stroking her insides gently. Nicely fondling her orbs.

Her eyes close into slits and she relaxes her back on the bed. Moaning to the movement of my fingers.

I stop again.

Her chest rises and deflates in frustration.

"Who. Am. I."

"George. George..."

I resume flicking her insides, warmth spreading through my chest. "Good girl."

"Hmm..." She stretches a hand to my knee, then my thighs, blindly looking for the aching bulge in my pants.

"Don't."

But she doesn't listen.

The sexual Chiluba I know is a brat. And I like her like that. Even though she tests my patience.

When she finds my erection, her fingers skate across it. Smoothen it. Stroke it. Sending bolts of pleasure down my spine. She wants to take control and I won't let that happen.

"I make the rules, *lieve schat*." Making come-hither notions with my fingers insider her, while I flick her hardened nipples.

“Hmm. Hmm. Hmm.” She moans, her body twitching. Thighs spasming.

Yes... yes... I continue working her insides. Deriving primal satisfaction from her raw response.

“If I’m going to fuck you, I don’t share. D’you get it?”

“Hmm...”

“Use your words.”

“Just. Fuck. Me.”

“No *schat*. I don’t want to share.”

“Fuck.” Thrusting her hips upwards. “Oh George. George.” Closing her eyes, she grasps for release.

But I stop.

Her eyes shoot daggers at me. “What the fuck George!”

“D’you want me to fuck you.” I begin sensuously rubbing her pussy lips. Can’t help it that I want to see her satisfied but we need to finalize some things.

Trying to steady her breathing, she holds my gaze. “How many times do you want me to tell you? Does it make you harder?” Her fingers flex around the bulge in my pants.

“It does.” I slip two fingers inside her again, fanning the flames.

“Hmm...” she moans, her legs rubbing on each other.

“You want my dick inside you?”

“Please...”

“No sharing?”

She pants, “Yes. Yes... Hmm...” Her hold on my erection loosens as her vaginal muscles clench and unclench around my fingers.

I don’t remove my fingers till she is thoroughly spent. My fingers are wet. Slick with her juice. Starting with my middle finger, I suck her salty juice off my hands.

When our eyes meet, she has a knowing smile on her lips. “You’re so good with your fingers.”

“Practice.”

“I want you inside me.”

I get up, staring at her with an unreadable look. “You’re really a brat.”

She sizes me up. “Don’t you like it?” Her gaze narrows to my shorts. “I see how hard it makes you.”

I let my eyes travel from her legs to her hair. Disheveled. Looking like a woman who just had sex and is expecting her lover back in bed. I force my gaze to her face.

“You’re not going to...” She lets the word hang in the air.

Sighing, I shake my head. “I already told you.”

She nods in understanding. But behind her eyes, I see the plotting and scheming.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

“Let’s get breakfast and prep for the fashion show.” I say in my firmest voice, walking out of the room from the one lady who can relieve me of the sweet-painful feeling between my legs.

For the rest of the day, at every given opportunity, Chiluba brushes against me. Leans into me. Touches me. Smiles at me—mocking me with those brown eyes.

Kak! I am tempted to go into the closest bathroom to relieve myself.

She knows how to play to win.

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TWENTY-SIX

GOOD GIRLS SOCIALIZE

Chiluba

THE MAIN EVENT WE'RE IN NETHERLANDS for, which is the private fashion show, is worth it. It is holding in a historic building with rustic vibes. While hip hop music plays, the models walk down the stairs from a curving balcony, while we, the guests, remain downstairs, sharing drinks, meeting people, and having discussions. The people in the fashion industry, George has introduced me to. And the ones I recognize either by placing name to their faces or vice versa? It's crazy.

Representatives from top fashion houses are here. The number of times I've wished I knew about this show. But thank God we're here. Sad that by this time tomorrow, we'll be on a flight back to Lagos.

"She should register for the African Fashion Week," Mariam, a lady who gives George too much attention, says after our introduction.

"Where and when does it hold?" I ask, not waiting for George to be my mouthpiece.

She raises one dark blond eyebrow, which dissolves into a warm smile. Darting a glance at George before returning to me, she fills me on the information. "It is *the* exclusive African fashion event in the world. It's all about skill and creativity. A chance to go global."

The largest, prestigious gathering of designers, models, artists, buyers, retailers, press, media, and fashion professionals. There are three different week-long shows in July, August, and October, in two continents, Europe and Africa.

In July, they select only fifteen fashion designers from different African countries to represent their cultural heritage in the fashion cities of Rennes, France and Brussels, Belgium. Same thing in August, but it will be in the city of Amsterdam alone. And for October, they will select only thirty fashion designers to represent their countries at a chosen location. This year, it is in South Africa. In order to be a part of it I need to apply now because the application closes end of May.

“Thanks, Mariam.”

“It’s my pleasure.” She turns to George. “Will you join us after the show?”

Join where? I don’t think so.

“Yes, Mariam.” He grins. “It will be an honor.”

“Wonderful. Your guest is invited.”

When the lady leaves, George whispers in my ear as a model in raffia-made dress struts down the stairway. “You should sign up for the fashion week. Showcase 34 Threads on a global level.” It is his first attempt at starting a conversation since we left the hotel.

“I’m thinking about it.”

It sounds expensive. I’m not sure I want to do it now. I never planned or budgeted for it. And all that gallivanting from one city to another sounds fun, but with the other shows in Nigeria...

Do you want to remain a local champion?

“I can help if—” George starts.

But I cut him off. “Thanks. There’s no need.”

His gaze meets mine.

I smile shrewdly, remembering how he left me in bed earlier. “I only need your help with one thing. You haven’t fulfilled that. How do you expect me to trust you to help me with this?”

He shakes his head. Starts to speak, then stops, turning his attention to the stairs where the fashion designer leans on the landing, before walking down the stairs with her models. I join in the clapping that ensues.

Servers move around the guests with trays of finger food and colorful

cocktails. The cocktails are deceitful. Sweet with a slight burn at the back of the throat. So easy to get drunk on. Knowing this, I still indulge in them. When George tells me, this is my last glass, I frown at him, but heed the warning in his eyes. Since he is driving, he has been nursing one drink since we got here.

“Come.” George mutters and I only hear it when we begin moving through the audience.

He doesn’t stop until he finds a room that’s not occupied. Shutting the door behind us, he begins pacing the length of the room. He runs a hand over his neatly styled hair until it rests behind his head, blowing air through his mouth.

While he stalks, I look around. The room is a study or library. Either of the two. Because they lined the room with shelves of books, with three cozy chairs strewn around. Only one has a table before it.

Bored with my findings, I fold my arms and return to watch the sexiest man alive, dressed in black-on-black ensemble. He looks good. And young. Prime male. So in control. I don’t know when I started seeing him as sexy but his dedication to taking care of his body, the way he dresses, his natural charm, his fragrance, wealth, the power that oozes from him, level of maturity, those eyes and most of all, his support for me and my career does it for me.

He stops in front of me. “You can’t keep doing this. I don’t like this game you’re playing.”

Flinching, I narrow my eyes at him. “You were not saying this when you had your fingers in my vagina earlier.”

Under the bright light, his tanned skin is changing color. Into shades of pink. Haha! He is flustered.

He grabs my arm, whispering furtively. “Chiluba, this is not some childish game!”

“Oh...” Widening my eyes. *Now I’m acting childish because I know what I want...*

“Sex with you is not something that should occupy my mind two-four-seven —”

“Says who?” Moistening my lips, I take a step closer.

“You’re not helping. I walk around all day with a boner. For chrissakes, *lieve schat*, stop doing this to me. I told you I don’t—”

Tired of his tirade, I throw my arms around his neck and press my moist lips against his.

He stiffens.

Eish. I've gone and messed this thing up. My heeled sandals give me an extra edge to see the cosmic display of emotions on his face.

"Chiluba..." He breathes in frustration against my lips as his hands go around my waist, pulling me closer into him.

Oh yes... I smile against his lips.

His tongue dips between the seam of my lips and I press against him, opening my mouth to give him access.

He's got years of experience working for him because he knows how to use his tongue. Plundering every corner of my mouth. Taking those that will not surrender into captivity. Making my body sing, *oh victory!*

He tastes like mint and alcohol.

He tastes raw.

He tastes like George.

Sweet. Clean. Passionate. Everything. All packed in one.

"Hmm." It's as though we are performing a kissing dance.

He devours my mouth with deep sweeping strokes of his tongue, taking hungry possession of my lips. His hands move up to cup my ass, while I move one hand from his neck to his jaw, wanting more of him. Pressing into his hardness. Oh God... I want him inside me. They're so thick. I want them to stretch my walls. Have him plunge into me in missionary style, then finish up as a cowgirl.

I whine when he pulls away from me, resting his forehead on mine.

"You win." He smiles, staring into my eyes. "Later," he promises.

Later? "We can—"

"No. Later."

"George..." I can't believe this. Me, who just has to pick a guy, is pleading with him.

He pulls away, arranging what he can of my stretchy black African print dress. "Later. After our night out with Mariam."

"But—"

"We're building anticipation. And in case you change your mind."

"I'm not changing my mind."

He swallows, looking at me through slitted eyes. "Are you wearing undies?"

"Yes."

"Take them off."

Oh... I like this play. Grinning slyly and with all the sensuality I can muster, I remove the barriers that's soaking wet, placing it in his outstretched hands. He takes it to his nose, sniffs it then licks my wetness and my pussy pulses. Throbbing with desire.

A slick of gooeyness slides out of their lips as I listen to his logic. "I want to watch you socialize tonight. No more frowning at ladies who walk up to us."

"I don't frown."

"You do."

Only when they are being exceptionally nice.

"I'm here with you. They're not a threat."

They're not a threat. Do I look threatened?

"If you're a good girl," He hesitates, shoving my panties into his pocket. "Maybe I'll damn the consequences and fuck you tonight."



TWENTY-SEVEN WEARING PREFERENCE

George

SHE WASN'T A GOOD GIRL.

When we get into our suite, knowing I will stick to my promise, she changes into a short, purple lace and silk nightwear, and gets into bed.

I'm still trying to take off my shirt when I hear the buzzing sound of the familiar wand. All sane thoughts leave my head.

Turning to face her, I find her wicked eyes me. Asking, what do you want to do about this, you tease.

Oh, you'll find out soon enough.

Mechanically, I roll up my shirt's sleeves, like a professional about to get dirty.

A glance at her confirms she has her eyes closed in blissful passion. Almost there.

Not so fast.

I take the wand from her and her eyes open in shock.

Instead of using the wand, I use my fingers. Stroking and working her tight, slick pussy. We engage in a staring contest, till she is thrashing, her eyes closing

in passionate bliss. Silently gasping, yes... yes... her eyelids fluttering close.

She writhes. Rolls her hips. Tenses, then jerks her release.

When I turn on the wand, her eyes widen in surprise.

“Fuck me, George. Please...”

“Can’t.”

“Or won’t.”

“You disobeyed.”

“But—”

I kiss her into submission, placing the wand on her pussy lips. Another round of writhing begins and soon, she is biting on my lips. Holding back screams. I taste copper from her clamped lips on mine when she bites harder.

“Oh. Oh... Oh! George.” She jerks forward, thrusting her hips. Fisting the bedding. Eyes wide open. Staring up. Screaming my name. “George! Fuck! George!”

She shatters like a glass hitting the ground.

I place a kiss on her forehead, and she whimpers a, fuck you, struggling to keep her eyes open.

“Soon.” I smirk.

She yawns and a tear slips from her eyes as she drifts to sleep.

Getting off the bed, I shed my clothing—everything but my briefs—and get into bed with her. And like the night before, she curves into my warmth.

Chiluba is trouble.

Embedded in my memory is her look of shock when I took the wand from her.

My hand is behind my head as I stare at the ceiling while she is pressing her breast into my rib. Causing me so much delicious pain. Pain she is ready and willing to relieve me of, but there are so many thoughts holding me back. Thoughts I’m forgetting as the days go by. With every moment we spend together.

Every time we touch.

Those kisses. Another one and I'm a goner.

"Stop squirming." I say through gritted teeth, pressing her shoulders down. Some hours ago, I'd instinctively wrapped my arms around her, drawing her closer. Deep in sleep, she'd snuggled into my chest. Her head on my shoulder.

"You know what I want." Her voice is muffled with sleep.

Will you tire of asking?

Oh God. I want to taste her again. Those beautiful thighs on my shoulder. Fingers wrapped up in my hair. As I use my fingers to spread open her vaginal lips and use my tongue and lips to bring her to breathtaking ecstasy. Make her scream my name. Over. And over. Again.

The image is so vivid and with her being so close, I refrain from bucking my hips.

Ignoring her statement, I ask, caressing her shoulders. "How did you sleep?"

She fidgets, getting comfy. Placing her hand flat on my chest. "Was okay."

"Exhausted from the work you put in last night?" I remove the hand under my head, stilling her hand that's now working on my nipples.

Those buds are traitors. Most sensitive part of my body. They send beads of arousal down my spine to my penis.

"That was nothing."

"You think so?" I pause to ponder. Underneath my hands, she's using her nails to scratch my chest. I love the feeling. "I should have left you high and dry. But I'm glad I didn't because you're looking so good... Maybe it's the sun on your skin."

In our wrestle for control last night, we didn't close the drapes. Now sunlight fills the room through the sheer curtain fabric.

She rolls her eyes at me. "My skin is flawless."

"It's the sun." I affirm, grinning. She moves to pull out of my embrace, but I lock her to me, needing her warmth. "Speaking of sunshine... what do you say about breakfast?"

She shakes her head and resumes stroking my chest.

"Not that type of appetite, uhn? What does the queen want? *Mijn schat*, what do you want?"

She pauses and looks at me with sleepy, brown eyes. Her lips are mere inches away from mine. Without thinking about the consequences of my next move, I

lean in to capture her lips, taking hungry possession of her mouth. My penis jerks in response, stretching within my briefs. Good thing I have them on because—*Oh...* I see stars. She is stroking my erection. The thin fabric of my brief is the only barrier between us.

When I lick her lips, she instinctively curls her lips around my tongue, and I lash at her tongue with mine. Our breaths are audible. Mingling. My hand goes underneath her nightie, seeking her breast. When it finds the warm, luscious curve, I groan in satisfaction. It feels so hot against my skin. So good. Natural. Succulent.

I circle my fingers around her nipple. When I capture it between my fingers, it is rock hard. Swollen. And taut. She moans her pleasure when I roll it between my fingers, then tweak it.

“George...” she starts in a quivering breath. “The other one...”

My penis jerks in pride at her demand and beneath her ministrations. I thrust my tongue further into her mouth, seeking her sweet nectar.

I want to fill her up. Thrust into her as she moans my name.

She tugs at my briefs and I smile, reluctantly pulling my lips from hers. “Ah...” Dropping lingering kisses along her swollen lips. “My bratty queen is impatient,” I murmur.

Her warm breath lingers on my face. “Are you going to give me what I want?”

“You didn’t stick to the plan but I think... *Ik ben verliefd op je.*”

She giggles, her breath fanning my face. Her voice, husky. “Have I told you I like it when you speak Dutch to me?”

“*Je vindt het leuk, niet?*” I plant a kiss on her neck, resulting in more giggles. “*Ik kan andere dingen doen waar je van zult houden.*” I trail more kisses on her body, moving the silky blanket off us as I go.

Soon, her giggles fade, turning into breathy sighs and moans. “These collar bones... so pretty and regal. Fuck... your nipples... I’ve dreamt about them for so long.... Your stomach...” Smoothing my palm across the accentuated curve. “So many things I want to do.” I look up to catch her eyes. “On it.”

Fuck. She looks so beautiful, staring down at me with those kiss-stained lips.

Her breath is jerky as I continue the onslaught of her senses. Telling her things I want to do to her. Things I’ve thought of and locked in the darkest corners of my mind. Sounds of my lips teasing her skin fills the room.

By the time I get to the moist warm folds between her thighs, she is lifting and thrusting her waist into my face. Moaning in strained, pent-up breath. Asking for more, her hands on my head. Guiding me to where she wants me the most.

“Keep grinding into my face... Take what you want...” I tell her, darting my tongue between her drenched, sticky vaginal lips. “*Ik vind je lekker...* Such a good girl...”

Pausing, I stretch one hand to fondle her breast, while I use two fingers to spread open the slippery softness between her legs. Wider.

Oh God.

Her pink lips stare at me. Gloriously weeping.

So. Fucking. Glorious. *Why the fuck am I shaking with need?*

“George...” she moans, bucking her hips forward.

“I’ve got you *Snoepje...*” Thrusting my tongue into the warmth of her sex, I tilt my head to her thigh. “Keep your legs on my shoulders.” When she does as instructed, without her usual comebacks, I resume working her with my tongue.

God... I love the feel of her pussy on my tongue... *Lekker ding...* Lapping at her unending wetness. Kneading her breast. Stroking her with my fingers. Looking for the spot that will send her over the edge. When I bury my fingers into her, she locks her legs around me, pumping into my face. Then she drags my hand on her breast to her lips, sucking them.

“Hmm...” she moans.

“Such a good girl.” I keep lapping and sucking. Dropping words to push her over the edge. “Grind my face *schat...* Get yourself there. A little faster... Good girl... Yes... Common...”

“George... George... Hmm... Georgie... Oh...”

“Hey *schatje*. Almost there... *Schat...*”

“George...”

“Yes... good girl.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” Her tight grip of my hair loosens as I feel the weight of her back rise off the bed. Legs quaking on my shoulders as she squirts liquid on the bed. I rub my beard on her pussy’s lip, savoring the warm fluid.

When she relaxes, I kiss her vagina one last time before moving back up. “Kiss me so you can have a taste *snoepje.*”

With a rough, shaky breath, she captures my mouth in an ardent kiss. “I want more...” She rubs against me.

Against her face, I smile. “I’m not done with you yet. I am committed to making sure you have a brilliant morning. Even though you disobeyed me yesterday.”

“I couldn’t help it.” Her hand caresses my chest, then moves down to my lower abdomen.

My penis lengthens in anticipation.

“I see no reason we should deny ourselves.” She continues, trailing her fingers over the hem of my briefs.

“*Je hebt zulke mooie ogen,*” I say, searching her eyes. “Kiss me...”

She does. One... two... three... Then withdraws to stare at my erection.

“See how hard you make me feel...” I proceed to remove the barrier, damning the consequences. Her gaze returns to mine. “You’re the only one who can get me like this all day.”

We both sigh when I complete the task and when she finally touches my hot flesh—proof of unabashed desire for her, one I’ve been having since the first day I laid eyes on her—I lost all control.

“Take off your gown and hand it over.” I command.

Once she hands it over, I get above her, tying her curious hands hostage with the satin and lace material.

I tweak her nipple and her back arches forward. “George...”

“For a brat, you are quite eager for me to plunge my penis into you.”

She begins to respond, but I tweak her nipple again. Harder. Swooping in for a kiss that shuts her up. My arousal lengthens at the junction of her thighs, and I rub against her.

“Fuck me, George.” She cries.

“It’s just my tip on your pussy. I’m rubbing it on your entrance.”

“George.” She warns, like she has any control in this situation.

“Beg for me, princess. Beg me. Come on. You want me to stretch you...”

“Please...”

The soft words from her lips reinforce my need to dominate her. “Yeah.”

“Please...” she cries again, undulating her hips in frustration.

“I know.” Capturing her lips in an open-mouth kiss. “I’ll make that happen. Just relax.”

I hold my breath as I slide into her. Squeezing my eyes shut. “Oh fuck... You’re so warm...”

My erection pulses at my declaration. Filling her tight hole.

Her breath comes in tiny pants as she wrestles against the fabric.

“Yes...” I whisper shakily. “So, fucking warm...”

“Hmm...” She undulates again, and I thrust out of her. Slowly. Then sink into her. Gently. Out slowly... In gently...

“Oh...” she moans, her thighs tensing. Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears.

“You really like this, don’t you? Hmm... Yeah? Let me put my hand there. You like it?” She lifts her pleasure-seeking hips into mine. “Me rubbing it? Right there? Rubbing it on this swollen bud?” Still sliding in and out of her, I’m almost taking off-guard as she thrusts her hips upward in a frenzy. “Oh yeah... You want it faster, brat? Uhn?”

“I’ll kill you.” A lone tear slips from her eyes as she struggles against the fabric tying her hands. “Ugh!”

I laugh mirthlessly. Taking my hands off.

I continue sliding my hardened penis in and out. Enjoying her slippery, tight walls. “Slow down *snoepje*... Let me take my time worshipping you, *schat*. Slow down...”

I feel sweat beads forming on my skin as I plunge into her. Repeatedly. Building something.

Something good.

Better than all the times I’ve had meaningless sexual encounters to give me reprieve from immeasurable pain and numbness.

Her pussy doesn’t feel as wet as it was before, so I bring my lips to hers, taking it in a mind-numbing, carnal kiss. Making little satisfactory noises for her. And myself.

“Oh... Oh.” Her vaginal wall muscles tighten around me.

“Ugh!”

“Oh... George.”

“Fuck... Yes...” The smacking sound of moist flesh hitting moist flesh

permeates the room. “Look at me.” I command, thrusting deeper into her. “You know your body is mine.” I don’t know what has taken over my senses, but I need to let her know. “Your clit is mine.”

“Hmm...”

“You get it?”

“Yes! Yes! Just fuck! Me!”

“You want me to fuck you faster?”

“Please...”

Her plea spurs me into action. Placing both hands on her sides, I plunge vigorously into her. The wand from last night rolls into my hand.

“George... George. George! George!”

“Come on. You want to come with me?”

“Yes. Yes.” Thrashing her head.

Still thrusting in and out of her, I pick the wand, turn it on, and place it on the apex of her thighs.

“George, that’s a lot.”

“Don’t think so.”

“George—George—” The whirring sound of the wand and our harsh breathing fills the room.

Her legs tense as she thrusts her hips, selfishly asking for more.

Fuck!

She’s getting wetter.

Oh... so good. “Hmm... *schat... lieve schat...*” I want to cum on her tummy. I’m going to do it soon. So close. Hmm... I thrust into her, managing my hold on the wand.

“Oh yes...” She stiffens. Then she starts bucking wildly. Against my thrusts. Against the wand—that is on her mound.

“Keep cumming *schat*.” Her pussy is slicker. Drenched from her cum. The smacking sound of flesh on flesh titillates my senses.

Moments after she stops bucking—numb and calm—I feel the pressure rising in my midsection. I’m about to explode. It’s so tempting to keep thrusting into her, but I pull out immediately. Shooting my seed on her heaving tummy. “Ugh! Oh my God...” I shudder as orgasm upon orgasm wracks my body. Till all that’s

left of me drips onto her dipped navel.

Feel-good neurotransmitters and pain-reducing hormones wades through my bloodstream and I carefully lay on her side, before seizing her mouth in a kiss.

She peers down at her tummy, grinning smugly. “Oh... That was so much.”

I glance at it too. Smirking. “A lot.”

I untie her hands, kissing them, before using my brief to clean her tummy. “You did good. So fucking good. I love how submissive you get.” Capturing her mouth in a lingering kiss. Then another. And another. “You’re so naughty... And perfect. I guess this means you’re a morning person now.”

“You wish.” Something flickers across her face.

“What is it?” I pull her closer, tucking her to my side.

“Nothing.” She hesitates. “Later.”

Yes, it can wait. Wait while we luxuriate in this euphoric feeling.

Other sexual encounters I’ve had after Mirabel felt isolating. Guilt-ridden. They were arranged encounters where I crosscheck their sexual health history before engaging. However, with Chiluba, I feel complete. Sound. Whole.

We have an amazing, meaningful physical and sexual connection.

I don’t know how long it will last, but... if this is my one-off experience after Mira, I’ll take it without batting an eyelid.



TWENTY-EIGHT

BOYFRIEND JACKET

Chiluba

A QUIET VIBRATION STIRS ME AWAKE from dreamless sleep. I blink, trying to get myself together. Understand where I am.

Oh. I blink again, sluggishly rubbing my eyes.

My sense comes fully alert as the warm, hairy skin touching my leg eases me into the present. I'm in George's Radisson Blu suite.

The quiet vibration is coming from him. He is lying flat on his back. Making quiet vibrating noises through his nose or is it his mouth?

Snoring? I have to deal with this?

Not me and you.

I gently push him.

"Hmm? Everything alright?" he murmurs in his sleep as his hand reaches for me till he has me in a sleepy embrace.

See what good sex can do to a light sleeper? I hold back a chuckle. Shifting till I'm comfortable in his embrace. "Hmm mm. Go back to sleep."

While I take deep, shuddering breaths, I listen as his breath turns deep and steady, letting me know he is returning to *la la* land.

The vibrating sound he was making, a thing of the past.

Better.

Cuddled in his embrace, my heart thumps so loudly in my ears as I let my body relax in his embrace. He is so at peace. In a world of his own. Is he dreaming about us? About how, barely two weeks ago, we spent all day in bed at the Little Grand. How I told him, he was the first to make me squirt and no more sex without condoms, which he'd agreed to. Or the things when we got up to when we boarded his private jet. Or that time when I finally agreed to visit him at his Radisson Blu base, all because I was missing the games we play.

It's not just the sex.

Okay, yes. It is.

Sex with him is more than I'd imagined. *Chei*, I never imagined it. It just... It just happened. Something came over me in Amsterdam and since then, all I think about is him. Taunting him. Getting naked. His dick.

George is more athletic than I thought him to be. He has the strength of a man half his age and his girth is thicker than most men I've been with. His solid wall of male chest dotted with sliver-gray hair that stares at me when he's half-dressed or buck naked. And the feeling whenever he pulls me close to his chest or holds me tighter... We fit so perfectly that it feels like home. It makes me scared. Makes me wonder what we're doing.

Is this part of our business? Partnership, I mean.

What we're doing, it won't mess with anything I've worked so hard to build—*ewish*... If people find out that I'm with a man old enough to be my father, they will automatically think the worst. We are yet to be seen in public together and I don't think I want that.

I'm thinking faster than my shadow. That has always been my problem. Why I almost bankrupted my company by investing where I shouldn't because I want to be ahead of the game.

Sighing, I close my eyes. *Focus on the positives Chiluba. He's not some young boy who will cry foul when you don't have his time.*

Sex with George is great.

Hot.

Fun.

I'll think about the implications and complications tomorrow.

“*Slapen schat*, sleep,” George murmurs and an intense emotion fills my heart, which I try to squelch. It’s that feeling of home.

“Hmm...” I murmur back, feeling his penis rising with another erection.

I swear, this man is insatiable. But he knows how to please a woman—he knows how to please me—so cheers! With him—I mean with this arrangement—I know I’ll have peace on inside-outside. He’ll push me to go beyond my limits and won’t be bothered by success. Or ambition.

Lucid by Silhouette designed by Chiluba of 34 Threads is going to be a trendsetter for years to come. I can feel it deep in my bones and I’m so glad he’s the one I chose to do this with. God bless the day I met him. A business deal and on the side, a man willing to do anything for me. A side dish better than most motherfuckers I’ve been rolling with.

Slowly, I close my eyes to what I know will be another dreamless sleep as he enters me from behind and begins rocking me gently to sleep.

“We have to do something about the stock in that warehouse.” Àbẹ̀bí urges me as she drops a cup of parfait on my table. “Give it to charity or something.”

“Thank you. And who will pay for it?” I lean back, studying the framed fabric designs on the wall. We’re still working from Silhouette, meeting with their designers. Turning to face her, I shake my head. “I can’t give it out for free. We need money.”

Her shoulders slump as she moves her mouth but doesn’t open them to say a thing. Then she smiles. “We can distribute to small stores. That way we can clear out the warehouse and save money too.”

Small stores can’t pay for half of those goods upfront. That’s extra stress for the accountant. Following up on payments. Who will pay for the marketing promos? 34 Threads?

I pick the parfait, digging into it as Àbẹ̀bí thinks on her feet. It’s not her job, but if she enjoys doing it, why stop her? It’s for our benefit.

She rushes to my side, bending close so she can whisper in my ears. It’s comedic because we’re the only ones in the space. “How about the money Silhouette is supposed to pay us for this?”

I take out the spoon from my mouth, licking my lips. “That’s Lucid money.

You want us to pay Peter with Paul's money?"

She sighs, stepping away. "We have to—wait." She stops, turning to face me with narrow eyes.

"What?" Dipping my spoon into the cup of parfait. This one is so nice. With coconuts flakes and slice almonds.

"Why are you so calm about this?" Cocking her head to the side as she studies me.

I shrug, placing a spoonful of parfait in my mouth. "I'm calm?"

"Two months ago, you were literally screaming at the top of your lungs—is this about Amsterdam?"

She knows about the trip. Everyone knows about the trip. But no one knows who I took it with. That's my personal business. I'm here thinking of who I can reach out to for help. Kólá has not been forthcoming with his contacts. And George, I don't want him to think I'm using him because we're smashing. His friend who was—his friend! Alfred.

"Why are you smiling?"

"If I can confirm something, then we might be able to clear that stock and make profit."

Àbèbí looks at me skeptically, before going to her seat. "Work your magic. And are we signing up for that Fashion Week stuff?"

Oh shoot!

Scrambling to pick my phone to check the dates. I breathe a sigh of relief when I note we have around four days to put in our application. 34 Threads to the world.

It's been one fun thing or another with George. Never a dull moment. He is completely different from what I had imagined him to be. I misjudged him the first time I met him. Thought him shallow. A man who will do anything to get into the pants of young girls. Turns out I am the shallow one. I am the one who can't wait to get into his pants. And into his bed. While he just wants to spend time with me. Take me out. Introduce me to people.

We've *accidentally* met ourselves at one event or the other more times than I

care to count. When you get attention and sex that good, I feel it's natural to want to be around that source.

As soon as he introduces me to his friends as his friend, most of which are expats, they become curious. They are friendly too. Complimenting my attire. Asking where they can get it. Doting when I tell them it's part of my collection and before long, the conversation moves on to their hobbies.

However, when we hang out with the few Nigerian friends he has—my fellow Nigerians—what I get is judgmental scrutiny. Either the men are making salacious, sarcastic comments or the ladies are wondering with their eyes if we're doing it or how to take him off my hands with their extra niceness. It's not rocket science if I confess to prefer hanging out with his expatriate friends.

Like now, at this British Council fashion sponsored event, instead of bothering myself with what they're thinking, I'm basking in the attention George bestows on me.

I'm living my life, right?

After the British Council event, I join George at GadaBounce House in Ikoyi for a night of music and poetry. It's an intimate outdoor event with a clear, star-studded sky. I spot some folks from the private beach party, including Alfred whom I do my best to ignore. I don't need to do so much because he's acting like I don't exist. Too bad they run within a tight-knit circle; I can do without seeing him. George doesn't bother spending time with him, and it makes me wonder if I've caused a strain in their friendship.

"Jeez," I lean to George's side, murmuring for his ears only. Beside me is the wife of his expat friend. "Did you see how that lady stared at us throughout dinner?" Referring to the British Council event.

"Noticed."

His adoring eyes make my skin warm, but I continue. Besides him, there's no one to share these incidents with. If I ever start the conversation, the other party will want to know who I was with that made others stare at me.

"Tsk. It's crazy how people are just so nosy about other people's lives."

"If you're not comfortable with it, we can—"

"Stop going out together?"

His lips form a tight smile as he nods. "I understand you have an image to keep and if being seen with me will ruin it, I think you should do what's best for you."

“Not on my watch. I am enjoying the attention.” The only attention I don’t want to call to myself is that of his family members—Zoya, to be precise. But what she doesn’t know wouldn’t hurt. And if she ever finds out, all this was for business purposes.

“You’re such an attention seeker.” George grins, clapping as an act moves off the makeshift stage.

Joining the audience in clapping, I shrug. “It’s only natural.”

“Like how wet you get when you say shit to me?”

I gasp, taking a quick survey of our surroundings. The subsiding clap or his voice, I don’t know which was louder. Just as I’m about to return my gaze to him, my eyes locks with Osaze’s, knocking the breath from my lungs. His eyes are sending piercing darts of guilt my way.

Oh shit.

Shit.

“Are you okay?” George places his hand on mine, which is resting on my thigh, and I tense up.

Breathe Luba. Breathe...

“Um yes. I need to, um, use the bathroom.”

I don’t wait to hear what he has to say. Getting up from my seat, I make my way, with the help of staff, to the bathroom. All naughty thoughts I was having dissolves into nothingness. It’s like someone poured an ice bucket over me.

I thought Lagos was a big city. Is he not supposed to be off training somewhere outside the country?

Tsk.

I need to calm down... it was just a one-night stand. I tell myself, staring at the bathroom mirror.

But he didn’t know what he was going into. He made breakfast for you.

I didn’t want his breakfast. Told him I wanted to leave, but he insisted.

And you ended up ghosting him. Didn’t give him your number and never respond to his Facebook messages.

Tah! He wants a relationship. A relationship that won’t last. I know the people I get into relationships with. I’ll just hurt him. I know what I’m doing.

Breathe... Breathe. It’s nothing new. I’m not doing anything wrong. What if

that was Zoya?

Nonsense. It wasn't.

I explained to Osaze, and he's a big boy. He should understand. I don't know why he was looking at me like I was doing something wrong. Maybe it's my conscience—whatever. Before I leave, if our path's cross, I'll have a normal chat with him, and I move. There's nothing much to this.

I dab lip gloss on my lips and, gaining my confidence, I decide to head out of the bathroom. As I walk into a corner, I bump into someone.

"Sorry—"

"I knew I saw you walk in here." He smiles.

"Osaze. Are you following me?"

His forehead puckers in confusion. "I thought you wanted me to come." Scanning me from head to toe and I can't help but grind my teeth.

"No. How are you, though?"

He walks towards me until my back is against the wall. With his height, I feel so small beneath his gaze.

"I've missed you."

I swallow. Pressing my lips, shaking my head.

"You didn't call me as promised, and I still don't have your number."

"Grow up Osaze. That was months ago. You knew what you were getting into."

"I didn't."

"I told you. Later."

He sighs before darting his eyes to the exit.

Anyone can walk in here. And this doesn't look good. I don't think there are media personalities on ground, despite that, I don't want to get into someone's blog for nothing.

His eyes twinkle with a dare. "Ditch your friends and let's head out."

Chiluba of two months ago would have happily done that, not this current Chiluba.

"I can't and I'm not interested."

Thinking back on that night. I am sorry I left my friends and followed man.

I move to pass him, but he blocks my path. “Excuse me?”

He puffs his breath. “Are you fucking the old white guy?”

I blink.

“Will you leave him hanging, too?”

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the implied insult when I hear a thwack sound. The stinging feeling on my palm and my jerky breath makes me realize I slapped him before I was done processing his words.

“I’m sorry. So, sorry,” I mutter, before hurrying away.

“Chiluba, are you okay?” George asks the moment I sit beside him.

I’m calmer, having convinced myself I’m doing Osaze a great service. “Never been better.” With a bright smile, I ask our companions. “What did I miss?”

After the show I get into my Range, wishing I could stay over at George’s but duty calls. Tomorrow, I have to visit my boutique at Ikeja GRA and do some mainland runs. My phone beeps with a message.

09:21 PM

Funsho: Are you avoiding me?

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TWENTY-NINE

PLACEMENT DOTS

Chiluba

“WHAT’S UP BABE, WHEN AM I getting my dress?” Zoya asks over the phone. “The wedding I’m wearing it for is next weekend.”

“I’ll send someone to deliver it to you.” I chose to be lazy this weekend. Lying on my couch in shorts and a loose tank top. Watching TV shows. Later in the evening, I get to dine with George at this new rooftop Italian restaurant.

“Haba Luba.”

What did I do? “Hmm?”

“But you said you were coming around this weekend.”

“Yeah...” I stall, looking for an excuse that doesn’t blatantly say, I’m shagging your uncle but can’t tell you to your face. “A couple of things came up.”

“Luba...”

“I’m sorry.” I sigh. Last time, she wanted me to come for some sort of family dinner to meet with her *bobo*, but I dragged my feet. There should be a way around this thing. Just that Zoya is a moralist to the core, while I’m more... individualistic? Is that correct?

“Serious?”

“I’m sorry, babe. I promise, you’re going to love the dress. You won’t even think about me when you lay eyes on it.”

“I always love everything you do.” She hesitates. “I just thought we would have time to hang out.”

“Yeah...” And eventually, talk about the men in our lives. Then I’ll let it slip that I’m with your uncle. *Mba*.

She hisses, her voice betraying her frustration. “I’m the one that’s supposed to be busy doing shakara for you, you know?”

“Life is not balanced, my dear. This entrepreneur stuff is not easy.”

I don’t know how Zoya carries on with this long-distance relationship thing. It will never work for me. I once dated a guy based in Abuja, eighty minutes away by flight, and it didn’t last up to one month. Nights where I can’t hold body, I should be able to jump into a car or he does that, and we ease body. It’s the scary thing that has been going on between George and me. I fear I’m catching feelings.

“And *shey*, when uncle Manir is around, you rarely have my time.”

“*Haba nau*. You won’t let me rest from that one time. Just that one time you called, and I was not available. Now it’s a problem.”

I laugh. “Ah, it’s my escape card for anything that happens. Besides, your mother’s family, how often do you visit them?”

“Which one?”

“Like them, Uncle George and his kids, how often do they visit?”

“We do the visiting. But now that everyone is grown, I can’t remember the last time—wait. Why are you asking? Is it because of George? You people are having issues?”

“No. Nothing. Simply curious. And you? How is work?” Shifting the conversation so I don’t start explaining something I shouldn’t over the phone. “And your work husband—Peju, or is it Pelumi?”

Why did I say something like that? I should have left it simple. That’s the thing about lying. The truth will haunt you.

“Pelumi *jare*. He is doing fine. Would you believe that—”

The doorbell chimes, and I tell her I need to go. Letting out a long sigh of relief, I feel my phone vibrate. I unlock it to find a message from Funsho telling me to open the door.

“What do you want?” Folding my arms, I lean on the door post, not giving him room to enter my space. I had contemplated not responding, but curiosity and the need for closure got the best of me.

He grins snidely, bending his low-cut haired head to the side, made cute by his signature black framed Ray Ban glasses. “Is that the greeting I get?” He looks dapper in a black shirt under a black and gold embroidered blazer on black pants.

I hiss, rolling my eyes. “Don’t test me.”

“Baby...” He smirks, trying to touch my cheek, but I slap his hand away.

“Don’t baby me. I’m busy.” Standing to my full height, I ask again, “What do you want?”

“You didn’t like the birthday gifts?”

“You want them back?” It will hurt, but I’ve not sold my Toyota. I will happily return to using it in a blink.

“At least let me inside. I got some things for you.” He gestures. That is when I look down to find three designer shopping bags in his hand. “See? I come bearing gifts.”

Before I can pull myself together, he pushes his way into my space.

“I’ve missed you, baby,” he announces.

I slide the door shut. Joining him on the couch, I let out a frustrated breath. “Funsho, roughly four months ago, you came into this same space, accused me of cheating.” I make a list with my fingers. “Of not making you priority. Broke up with me and travelled out of the country. What do you want?”

“Eh en.” He shakes his head, placing the bags between his legs on the floor. “I didn’t break up with you.”

“Then what did you do?” He didn’t return my calls for weeks. Then out of the blue, started sending me text messages. And stupid expensive gifts. Okay, the Range Rover is not stupid. Just...

“I only told you I wasn’t sure where our relationship was heading—”

“And disappeared.”

He flinches. His elbows are on his knees as he lets out air through his mouth before forming a prayer pose with his hands. He stares off into space briefly, then turns his head to face me. “That’s in the past. All I’ve done is to show how I’ll take care of you if you’ll let me. I want you back.”

I want you back.

I snort.

I want you back...

A bubble starts from my tummy, travelling up my chest, till it escapes my mouth in roaring laughter. I laugh at the absurdity of it all.

What happened to, I want you?

I'm not an afterthought. Not someone you go into a committed relationship with and decide to leave because of your insecurities.

I want you back.

Like I am a commodity. Like-like-like I'm a thing to be kept aside when not functioning as wanted, then accessed when needed.

Like I'm Maama.

Ah! God forbid!

I love Maama more than anyone in this world. But I will never thread the path she did when it comes to men. Never!

Getting up from the couch, I pull down my creased tank top before gesturing to the door. "Funsho. Get out."

He scoffs, looking up at me. "Chiluba, what are you doing? Sit down let's talk a—"

"I said get out. If not, I'll scream." He has a political career to consider.

Standing up, he moves towards me, but I give him a wide berth.

He waves his hands. "What's up with you? I thought—"

"I've moved on. That's what's up. Take your gifts and go."

He sneers, sizing me up. "I knew you were keeping someone on the side."

"Haha. If that makes you sleep well at night, recite it as often as you can so you can sleep better."

"Bitch." Tiny saliva foams form on the side of his mouth as he fumes.

"Eh! Funsho, don't call me names." Wagging a finger at him. "You don't want me to reciprocate."

During last year's Detty December, we saw his mom wining and dining a boy younger than him. With the giggles and smiles those two were sharing, we realized it was no ordinary dinner. So, he had better not start calling me names

because...

Licking his lips, he nods. "Whatever." Then moves with long strides to the door.

"Take your gifts—"

"Keep them."

I will! "Delete my number, cause I'm deleting yours."

"Breathtaking." George grins, taking my hand in his to drop a kiss. "As always."

"Thank you." I smile, assessing his senator attire. "You don't look bad yourself. Not like I'm taking note," I start as we walk to the stairs leading up to the rooftop restaurant. "But as a *fabric lord*, your wardrobe seems to favor the color, black."

He shrugs. "I guess I just got used to wearing that."

"For the mourning period?" I shouldn't have said that so freely. It's been eight years, but this man is not living in his house because he doesn't want to be reminded of his loss. That says a lot.

What am I doing?

What are we—his voice breaks into my thoughts.

"Before the mourning period." He smiles, but I can see the tight lines around his lips. "It makes my wardrobe easier. I don't need to think about colors. And when I do wear colors, it makes the difference glaring and striking. The first time—"

I grasp his hand. "I'm sorry George."

We stop walking, staring at each other for a heartbeat.

"It's alright." He assures me with a warm smile, tugging my hand as we resume our walk to the stairs. "Life goes on."

Sucking on the sides of my mouth, I nod. "If you want to talk about—"

"Hmm mm." Shaking his head. "It's fine."

Faking a smile, I concede.

He's shutting me out. Well, what did I expect? That fucking him will make us become buddies? Besties? Fuck buddies, yes. Not besties.

We climb the stairs, but my wardrobe choice—a simple free flowing illusion maxi dress with deep V-neck on four-inches heels—cause me to lag enough to admire his butt clad in black pants.

“Look at that ass!” I whisper furtively as we reach the landing.

“Chiluba!” he whispers back.

I suppress a giggle at his reprimand as heat floods my nether region at the sight of color rushing up his neck. He is thinking what I’m thinking—the last time I visited his place. Someone must have pissed him off that day because he fucked me so hard and fast, that I hard to grip on to his ass for dear life.

“Do you still have my marks?”

“You’re a naughty girl.”

“You naughty girl,” I whisper, my voice low and flirtatious, “you mean.”

I take in the view as a server approaches us, leads us to our seats, then points to the menu book on the table before retreating. The restaurant is a lovely setup that overlooks the bustling city of Lagos and is high enough to tune out the night sounds and traffic into the soft humming sound of a vacuum.

Peeking at him from the top of the book, I wink. “Want fresh marks for dessert?”

He laughs, looking around before putting a hand to his mouth as his gaze settles on me. “What has gotten into you tonight?”

A broad and mischievous grin rests on my face. “Maybe I’m choosing to live on the edge?” Pulling out my phone, I smile into the camera, taking one shot after the other. I lean into him. “Smile.”

He grimaces, but I nudge his shoulder.

“Georgie...” That does the trick as he leans in, smiling at the camera.

The server returns to take our orders. Since he promised me an Italian meal paired with good wine, I let him place the order. With my input, he orders fried calamari, fettuccine alfredo, garlic bread and a bottle of Chardonnay.

I resume our photo slash video session immediately the server leaves. And our discussion moves on to what my week was like. When the food arrives, my tastebuds salivates but I manage to take some pictures before we begin eating.

I want to ask questions. Like what date did his wife pass, but the way he’d diverted the talk downstairs. I think I brought it up at the wrong time. Maybe what he’d shared that evening at Surface Bar & Grill should be enough. But

recently, the urge to know more about him taunts me.

I really like what we have going on, despite that sometimes I feel it's one sided.

I don't want to jinx it.

He's becoming an important figure in my life, and it will hurt me, not just my business, if this relationship doesn't end well.

"Are you fucking the old white guy?"

"George doesn't do small girls like you. No lady will ever replace his wife."

I am not trying to replace his wife!

I shut down the voices in my head, concentrating on the food as George entertains me with tales of his recent dealings with the Lagos State Government. He's becoming loquacious the more time we spend together.

This thing with George can be a good thing, if I let it, as he is a rare catch. Not like some people who send cryptic messages about things they can do for me and where to meet up if George bores me.

I just need to tell Zoya. It will be unfair for her to find out from someone else. *Eish...* how do I go about doing this?

But wait. Must it be me? I cast a sidelong glance at my companion.

Why can't George do it? He is her uncle. The matured one in all of this. Maybe if I post a picture of both of us online—*mbanu*. In this crazy society? I will suffer the backlash.

The sneaky looks we've gotten while seated at events—especially from women—has been overwhelming.

Do they admire me or think I'm a gold digger?

I'm sure it puzzles the staff at Radisson Blu that their Long Stay gentleman guest calls room service to change to his soiled bedding every time I'm around.

It is none of their bleeping business what we do behind closed doors. And if he makes me moan and squirt like my ex never did, so?

The sex is great.

What we have is gold.

George is a man and more.

But isn't there a problem somewhere? We haven't had a major disagreement or fight. Except when I joke about his kids and meeting them, and he says

they're not in town or it's a lot of work bringing them together. I read somewhere that it's important for arguments to happen in relationships.

Relationship. Is that what this is?

Never mind, is there a support group for those dating older people? Or interracial dating clubs where I can sign up? I want to check the boxes to see—I'm overthinking this thing. I need to focus on here and now.

But... I still need to tell Zoya about George, and I. Would she infer that I'm doing this because of my rough childhood? But really, what is my incentive for dating an older man?

Maybe this thing between us will fizzle out before the end of this month.

I smile.

George's hand touches mine. "What's the joke?" He smiles affectionately.

"Joke? Nothing." Spinning my fork in the pasta dish. "I was only..."

"Only what?" he presses, still smiling, intertwining our fingers.

Hmm... one of the best pastas I've ever had.

"Whenever you close your eyes while smiling, you look so cute."

This is it. Ask what we're doing. *Chi m o...* I can't believe I'm belittling myself to be that kind of babe.

"My ex came around today."

He nods, his silence prodding me on.

"He wanted us to get back together, but..." I shake my head, picking my glass of cocktail. "I'm over that. Done."

"You know your worth. I..." He swallows, then smiles, looking at our intertwined fingers, then back at my face. "I tell my daughters that a good woman will always be a good woman. That's why every guy she had wants her back."

Hmm... "Will you ever want me back?" *Eish! I sound so pathetic. So needy. Clingy.*

"Never."

I fight back a gasp, but my hands tighten in his.

He smiles. "Because you give me so much pleasure, in and out of bed. And I take my pleasure seriously. I've been without it for so long and now that I've found it with you, only you can deny me."

“George...” I try smiling, but it falters. “I can’t—you have a way with words.”

He squeezes my hand, then winks. “Blame it on the time I’ve had to experience life.”

“Ah...” I keep seeing him as my equal. That’s a good thing, right?

He leans in to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“I think this is the first time you’re completely speechless.” He chuckles.

“Don’t get used to it.”

“I’m not. I’ll be out of the country this week. Want to leave this place so you can give me some souvenir marks that will last me till next weekend?”

06:46 AM

Unknown number: Hey.

Am still interested in you dear.



THIRTY

NOTICEABLE ALTERATION

Chiluba

“HELLO LUBY.” ZENA SAYS THE MOMENT I accept her call. “Can I come over?”

“Tsk.” I sigh, coming down from George’s bed.

I’ve been feeling something is going to happen since last week, when I went to that Italian restaurant with him, but so far, nothing. Just me, overthinking.

“To do what?”

“Luby...” she trails off. “What kind of question is that? Can I come to your place? Yes, or no?”

I roll my eyes, not believing the audacity of Zena, before leaning back on the fluffed pillows. I’m also wondering just like Zoya had months ago.

“Weekends like this,” I begin, “people go to their boyfriend’s house. Not looking for trouble in someone else’s house.”

“I’m not—it’s Zoya.” She gives a quick hiss. “She has been acting up since yesterday and it’s getting on my nerves.”

“What happened? Work stuff?” That one loves her job and is intent on getting that promotion.

“If it’s that one, it would have been cool. It’s the wedding we went to with her boyfriend. They’re fighting. It’s like a cold war. They’re not shouting, but you can feel the ice biting into your skin by just being around them.”

Ah... relationship wahala. I smile, rolling off the bed to use the bathroom. “See... that’s what comes in a relationship package. They will be fine. What about you? You need to find a boyfriend. I can help you look for one o.”

“I don’t need a boyfriend, Luby.”

I chuckle.

“I’m serious.” She must be frustrated; I can imagine her stamping her feet. “Can I come over now? I can sleep over too. We can watch *Jumong*. I have the latest season—”

“I’m sorry. But I’m not home. Don’t know when I’ll be back.”

She grimaces.

When I end the call and return to the room, George calls me to please join him in the living room. Without thinking about it, I wear his black round neck shirt, which ends up being oversize at the shoulders, the length barely covering my under bum.

He’s standing by the sliding glass that leads to the waterfront patio, wearing only loose sleeping trousers. When he senses my presence, he turns with a smile, a black mug in his hands with the lingering smell of coffee in the air. I’m not a fan, but George is.

“Ready for brunch?” He moves to the kitchenette island where I spy a mini buffet.

Room service came in earlier and he’d left me to receive my call. Spending the weekend in and out of bed with him, and not going to church this morning, is one offense. Him thinking only the two of us can finish this meal is another.

“You want to add gluttony to my list of sins today?” I grin as he pulls me into his arms, my back to his chest. I wish I was naked so my back can rub on his silky hairy chest.

He holds a slice of cold pineapple in front of my mouth, and I accept it, sensually licking his fingers with an exaggerated moan.

“Food is for the belly.” He cuffs the arms he used in giving me the pineapple around my neck, while his other arm roams under the round neck. “Sex is for the soul.”

His hand covers my breast and my pussy clenches in response. Such a

wanton thing. A tingle runs from my breast to my nether region, and I lean into him, sighing my acceptance of his hands fondling my breasts.

“Have I told you these were one of the first things I noticed about you?”

His hot breath in my ear weakens my knees. I hold on to his hand on my neck for balance. Swallowing, I shake my head, closing my eyes. My nipples turn to pebbles between his fingers. All I want to do is enter into him. Pushing my ass against his growing erection, I moan my pleasure.

“Hmm... I love them.” Circling my other nipple. “Especially when these guys are hard like they are now.” He tweaks my nipple and I let out a yelp. The next time he tweaks my nipple, his arm around my neck moves to my mouth and I clamp my mouth over it, biting, then sucking on it.

He groans his approval, thrusting his hips against mine.

We’ve been indulging in some biting during sex, and it has been exciting. I never knew there was this side to sex where you can do anything. Be anyone. Just be... yourself, while being the most physically vulnerable you can be.

“Want to play with your pussy?”

“Say pussy again, you perv.” There’s nothing sexier than George calling my vagina, different names.

He moves his arm to my neck again, in a light chokehold. “*Schatje*, touch your clit, and stop being a brat.” He licks my ear and I twist my head till our lips are touching.

“I want you to touch me.”

“Do it *schat*.”

“If I don’t?”

He sighs, like he’s tired of our game when his dick is getting harder against my ass. The simple fabric between us making me more aware of him and his pulsing erection. “I’ll touch you. I need you to prep her for me.”

Obediently, I move one hand to my moist, wanton, needy core and begin rubbing myself.

“Good girl...” He removes his arm from my neck and begins using both hands to fondle my breasts.

“Yeah?”

“You can feel what you’re doing to me.” Poking his erection against me. “Fingers *schat*... put your fingers. I want to hear those lips below speaking to

me.”

I moan falling into another realm. His tongue is licking up my collarbone. Teeth biting. Going up my chin. Then down again.

I can't give any fast retort to that command because I'm in a pleasure haze. The wet sound of my fingers moving in and out sending me farther and further into the realm.

“You're getting close...”

“...need you to fuck me.” If I said what's in my mind right, I hope that's what I said, because I don't want to go this round alone.

“Don't worry, *schat*. I'll fuck you senseless.”

“You will...?”

“I'll fuck you in the shower again. You liked that?” he begins saying things we've done in the past. “Or on the plane?... I know you're fucking high maintenance and I don't mind arranging that for us. I'll make you cum with my tongue, my penis and your toys... you'll cum as we touch down... Hey *schatje*... Yes *schat*... come for me now. I love it when you let go.”

With his words painting pictures in my head, his tongue on my skin, I press harder into my clit, rubbing faster. Release so close.

“I've got a gift for you. Something special... gifts turn you on yeah? That excitement. I see your nipples harden when you're happy. Come on *schat*. Cum so you can get your gift for being a good girl...”

I cum.

Hard.

My thighs freeze, squeezing together. My breath hitches. Toes curl. Then my pussy begins clenching. I roll my head back, pressing against him as the force of my release hits me. My thighs quiver again and again as he mentions different positions and how he wants to show me something special with his penis.

Oh George... He's so good at turning my insides to mush.

The way he says penis make it sound like the dirtiest word ever invented.

His fingers rest above mine, before moving under, wetting themselves with my juice.

“Your gift is here.” His voice breaks through my sedated state as he turns me around.

What? I'm still breathing hard. My brain is trying to reconnect with my body

so I don't stagger, when he adds, "*Luister schat*. Watch me."

His skin is flushed with need as he uses the hand, he had on me to stroke his exposed bobbing erection. So, he had pulled his trousers off and couldn't bend me over? Oh—what the heck! My eyes stay glued on him as he slowly strokes himself.

I have never seen a man masturbate before. On the screen yes, but face-to-face? Nope. The experience is different.

He grunts, gradually stroking faster. "This is for you *schat*..." Veins on his neck pops as he bites his lips from talking much.

My heart overflows with need as he stares into my eyes with something I've never seen before. His hands move in short, violent strokes as he watches me.

I recall the times we've had sex, the different positions and no time have I ever seen him this vulnerable. My pussy clenches and I place a finger on her lips.

He notices my movement and I see the flash of a grim smile on his lips.

You like that?

Watching him closely, I press my palm against my pussy lips. Rubbing. Watching.

"Fuck." He mutters, straightening his stance.

And I know. He is about to cum.

And I'm going to be watching him.

His strokes turn long and less violent. From the base of his straining erection to the head and back.

I wish I have a camera to record the moment as his hand slows down and I see the first shot of his cum pulse out.

"Ah..." he moans and continues to slow rub out spurt after spurt. Making a beautiful mess on the hotel's tiles.

When I finally raise my eyes to his face, he is smiling but breathing hard.

"Impressive." But my words don't have their usual bite.

"Schat."

I blink. Too stunned to speak.

He nods to my thighs. "You're dripping."

I look down at my thighs. *I am*.

“Want to play with toys?”

“Would Mike drop me off later?” I ask when we finally settle down to eat. He has some club meeting he’s supposed to go for and I need to complete my laundry. “Or I can book a taxi.”

When he landed in Nigeria on Saturday morning, he drove straight from the airport to my house and wanted to stay over, but I convinced him it was best we come to his hotel. I didn’t want to put fate to the test. What if Zoya or Zena decided to stop by? Or worse, robbers decide to attack. I’ve been researching about life as an expatriate in Nigeria and although most blogs paint butterflies in the sky, the few that tells of doom speaks more to me.

“You’re sure you don’t want to stay?”

“George—”

“Okay. Okay.” He laughs. “We’ll drop you off.” Then winks. “And see how we can get you to come over again.”

I open my message app the moment I get into George’s black sedan wearing what I’d worn yesterday since I didn’t have time to pack an overnight bag—a plain blue shirt dress, black leggings, and a pair of Michael Kors stiletto pumps. One message sparks my curiosity. It’s been months since we hung out at my place.

4:58 PM

Zoya: What’s up? Home?

What does she want? Is it because of Zena’s call? Ooh... whatever drama they’re having, they better not bring it to me. This weekend is for me to chill and relax. It’s been a long week, and lord knows I deserve a stress-free Sunday.

5:03 PM

Chiluba: I'm close by. Home in twenty minutes.

Zoya: I'm headed to yours. Will wait.

Chiluba: Kk.

Will wait. Ugh!

If she didn't say no worries, was only passing by, that means she's most likely headed to mine.

George massages my thigh. "What's wrong?"

His ability to sense my mood is something I'm coming to love. If only he will share more about his family. Let me know him beyond this person I've come to know.

What do I want?!

"Nothing." I place my hand on his.

"We can go to my club instead." He teases.

"Tempted. But I've got laundry to complete, and I need to clear my fridge."

"Hmm." He squeezes my hand in his. "You cook a lot?"

I scoff. "I don't. I'm hardly at home."

"Cause you're always out with me?"

I snatch my hand from his, folding them below my breast, looking at him incredulously. "What are you feeling like?"

He smirks. "The center of your world?"

I shake my head.

He laughs. "It was a joke."

"Hmm." I huff. *I don't think so.* Edging to lean on the door.

"Do you love cooking?"

Is this a trick question? "Sometimes." What am I trying to prove? Better let him know the truth now. "But I love pointing out what I want to eat, and, like magic, it appears before me."

He shifts till he's by my side, wrapping an arm around me. "If you don't like cooking, that's fine. You shouldn't feel bad about it. After all, most men I know don't cook, myself included."

It's my turn to smirk. "You don't? That's going to be a problem."

“What do you mean?”

“Men have come and gone in my life. And they have created standards you need to hold up to.”

“So, have those men done this for you?”

Before I can ask what, he trails open-mouth kisses on the base of my neck, a spot he found by mistake one of the many nights we explored our bodies, causing pinpricks to trickle down their length.

“George... Stop.” I pant from suppressed laughter. “Stop it.”

Good thing I don’t have make up on. I’ll have messed up his shirt the way I’m wringing my neck from side to side, then my ribs.

Unable to hold back anymore, I laugh out loud.

“Ssh...” He captures my lips with his and I’m moaning. Regretting my decision to return home.

When we come up for air—aroused, flushed, and excited with strands of hair out of place—his smug look turns serious. “I am setting new standards and records.”

Nodding, I place a soft kiss on his chiseled, sensuous mouth. “You are. Thank you.”

By the time Mike brings the car to a stop at my compound, George and I are back on a lighter note.

“When will you be done so I can return for you? Or should I order a house cleaning service?”

Smiling, I shake my head, opening the door. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

The window winds down and George’s voice calls. “That’s it *lieve schat*? Not even a goodbye kiss?”

“Big baby.” Giggling, I lean into the window to plant a kiss on his lips. “Mike, please leave before he misses his meeting.”

George chuckles.

I watch as they leave, then turn to enter the compound. When I look up, my eyes meet Zoya’s who is on my apartment balcony.

What. The. Fuck.

I completely forgot she was waiting for me! *What did she see? I’m so fucked. I’m so sorry. Oh shit.* My mind races as I walk into the compound, up the stairs,

to the sliding door of my apartment.

Play it cool.

Act cool.

Not guilty until proven otherwise.

I close my eyes and the sudden vision of cum erupting from George's dick fills my vision. *Not now. Stop thinking of cum spraying dicks.* My pussy clenches. *Oh no... take a deep breath, now is not the time to think of these things.*

Be remorseful.

Three... two... one... I slide open my apartment door with Zoya's voice welcoming me. "What took you so long?" My heart beats like a talking drum as she assesses me.

I'm not ashamed. What George and I have is natural. Predestined. What we have is good and... Zoya. She's a reasonable friend. She'll understand if I explain it to her. But remember, play it cool.

Closing the door, I kick off my shoes, walking to the couch. "I have a life besides work, duh." I sit, relaxing on the couch, dropping my phone beside me. "This heat, *ehn. Chineke meh.*"

"Hmm." Tossing herself beside me, pushing my phone to the side. It doesn't take her long to ask. "You didn't tell me you started seeing someone. Who was that?"

Is she being nosy, or she's playing dumb? "My boyfriend." I smirk, trying to make my revelation light by smiling. *Boyfriend?*

"You *ehn*. You didn't wait for Funsho to leave before you replaced him."

Funsho-who? Tsk.

"I'm following your footsteps, Zo. You're the one with Mr. Dosu-Andrews who I'm yet to meet."

"He is the reason I'm here." She pouts her lips, and lines appear between her brows. "He's pissing me off."

Trouble in paradise? "What happened? Did you guys not go to a wedding yesterday?"

"That's where the whole drama happened. I met with Arinze yesterday. You remember Arinze?"

"The tall one with rich parents?"

“Yep.”

I smirk. “Your crush.”

“He’s no longer my crush anymore, *jare*.” Scratching her ear. “I was young and infatuated.”

I scrunch my nose at her. “So...?”

“I met him at the wedding yesterday. And we danced... together, even after he told me he was leaving. Manir saw us.” *Eish*. “Not that I was hiding or doing anything wrong—he saw us and had the guts to tell me, in so many words, that I was openly flirting with the guy at a wedding he invited me to.”

“Hmm.” Tsk. This does not sound nice at all.

“Even told me to delete Arinze’s phone number. Which I did, because I was expecting him to apologize for all the mean things he said.”

Leaning back, I cross my arms. “Did he?”

“Would I be here if he did?” She pouts.

“So, you came here to vent.” It’s been years since Zoya came to me with real man trouble. She always had Manir to help her. That’s until their latest development of them being a couple. Disadvantage of dating your friend, you’ll have to find another friend to confide in. I chuckle, getting up. “I’m coming. Let me get cold water to wash this gist down.”

She continues, still sitting on the couch, while I head to the kitchen. “The worst thing is that Zena experienced most of the whole tension. Like if he...” her voice trails off.

Zoya o... Coming to complain to me about man. But what she did was also not nice. Dancing with a guy you used to like at a wedding you were invited to.

Returning to the living room, I uncup the bottled water. “What is it?”

Taking my place beside her, I gulp down water to quench my thirst that resulted more from fear than any other thing. *Ah...*

“Zoya—” *Why are you looking so funny?* I look down at her hands. *And what are you doing with my phone?*

Screwing the lid on the bottled water and placing it on the floor, I take my phone from her hand.

“What now?” I glance at the screen. It’s still locked, but there’s a pop-up message on it.

07:05 PM

Georgie: Missing you already, *schat*.

Georgie: I can turn the car around.

Oh shit.

Shit.

Shit.

“Um... Babe.” She starts.

I swivel my head to face her.

“I-I-am confused. Is that Uncle George? My Uncle?”

Play it cool... I pull my hair, smoothening them on my breasts.

How many Georges are there in the world? What is a little white lie?

Her expression tells me otherwise. I think she knows. The car. She saw me get out of it and was looking at me funny. Zoya is smart. That’s why I’ve been avoiding her for the longest time.

Oh God, help me make her understand. He’s simply her uncle by marriage, not like he’s related to her by blood.

“Erm... yes?” I smile, holding my breath. *I’ll explain everything to you later, not now when you’re hyperventilating.*

“I-I am not...” she starts, then stops, tilting her head to the side, introspecting.

What is the verdict Zoya? Are we going to fight about this? I bow my head, crossing my arms on my lap, right palm patting my left elbow. When she gets her voice back, I raise my head.

“Is he—Uncle George?” Her voice is low and reliable. “Is he the boyfriend?”

“Zoya.” I smile carefully, seeing she is trying to be understanding. “We are seeing where it goes. But I think I love him already.” I try to smile, but it falters. Yes, I love spending time with him. Yes, there are some things—habits—I still can’t wrap my head around because he’s older than me. But yes, I think I love him. I love him!

She scoffs, getting up. “You’re in love?” She smirks, but her expression turns serious in a flash. “If you didn’t remember he was my uncle, do you realize he is, give or take, thirty years older than you?”

“Yes.”

“Did he force you?” She paces the room. “Did he make threats? Because if he —”

“Zoya, nothing of such happened.”

She stops pacing and I get up, moving closer to her. “It was a natural progression.”

I try touching her arm, but she jerks away.

She places a hand to her forehead, taking audible deep breaths. Her eyes squeeze shut, then open within seconds. She grimaces. “You guys are already sleeping together. Chiluba. This is sexual assault—”

Sexual what? “Zoya. Don’t hold that thought. It doesn’t apply here.” I state firmly, shining my eyes at her.

Staring at me in wonder, she moves to sit on the sofa, her head hanging low. “Luba, I want just the truth. Are you pimping my uncle?”

Really?! “Oh, shut up Zoya.”

“Me, shut up?” She looks up. “You’re pimping my uncle for money, and he is too blind to see it. Is this the business help you wanted?”

Don’t react Chiluba. don’t react. I chant in my head, taking deep, calming breaths. I understand that she’s trying to make sense of this situation, but... what’s with this nonsense? She has every right to be angry. I will probably do the same if the tables were turned, but I wouldn’t go as far as calling her names!

She mumbles something under her breath. But I hear. “I would have never taken him to be this type of man. Was that the only way he was going to accept your business proposal?” Before she moves to the edge of the couch, her gaze still on me. “Tell me, Luba, no matter the threat, tell me and I’ll make sure we find a way around this. I’m so sorry Luba, I—”

“Zoya! Listen!”

“What?” She looks affronted. “I’m trying to make sense of all the-this.”

That’s where the problem lies. “You don’t have to make sense of anything.” I rush to sit by her. “I already told you. We love each other and that’s that.”

Speak for yourself. His actions show it.

“He’s my uncle...” Zoya presses her fingers like she’s counting them. “He’s... He’s old.”

“Age is a number.”

“Is this because of money?” *What is wrong with you?!* “Or because you’re

trying to make Funsho feel sorry?”

Funsho, that wants me back. I don't want him. I want George. I love what I have. I think I really do.

Releasing my long breath, I take her hands in mine, separating them from doing that thing she was doing with her fingers. “Can you stop thinking for a moment?” Squeezing her hands like George does for me. “Just breathe.” I place my hand on her back, smiling into her eyes. “And be happy for me. He makes me happy.” Waiting for her response.

We're not pulling wigs, screaming our lungs out or coloring ourselves with distasteful names. Maybe she understands.

“Happy? You mean happy, happy?”

My smile widens as I bob my head.

She scoffs, shaking my hand on her back off. “Uncle George's last born is twenty-eight years old! Twenty-eight!”

Ouch. I knew she was young, but not two years older than me.

“You want to be a stepmom and grandmother to—”

“Zoya, stop it. Please.”

“So, I won't remember you're a traitor?”

Hissing, she snatches her hand from mine, stand ups and begins looking around till she finds her bag. Picking it up, she makes to move for the door. I try to stop her, but she walks around me.

“F you Luba. F you!”

Tossing my hair to the side, I plead. “It hasn't come to that.”

“You're despicable.” She points at me.

Huh?

“An opportunistic gold digger.”

That's enough Zoya.

“And a-a-a a backstabbing friend!”

Oh... I clench my fists, pressing my lips together.

Her eyes rake over my form, like I'm a dumb goat walking towards the edge of a cliff. “When you come to your senses, you know where to find me.”

Backing away, she hisses, then storms out of my apartment.

Time stands still as I try to analyze everything that just went down. Everything she said from the beginning didn't hit or touch me, but those last insults.

Me... Chiluba Immaculate Ndukwe, an opportunistic gold digger?

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THIRTY-ONE

ALTERNATING TWISTS

George

I WALK INTO THE FAMILY LOUNGE room to see Anita doing trivial things that cause my heart to sing as Chiluba speaks to me over the phone. “You’re not—I thought we were spending the evening together.”

“I’m so sorry *lieve schat*. Something came up.” *Don’t do that Anita...* my thirty-month-old granddaughter is smart. I try telepathy, to warn her from pouring her Skittles into the flowerpot—it will never grow.

“I’ll be missing you.” Chiluba’s understanding voice comes through the speaker.

She wants to pry, but I don’t know if she’s ready for everything I want to offload on her. It’s best we take it one step at a time.

“Not as much as I miss you.” *Annie...* Taking long strides, I watch in horror as she mixes dirt and Skittles, ready to snack. “Take care *schat*. I need to go now. I’ll call you back soon.”

Ending the call, I place my phone in my pocket, crouching to carry Anita. “You don’t eat that.”

“Papa...” She looks forlornly at the flowerpot.

I hold her hand from her mouth, and she squeals her displeasure. “No, no,

Annie.”

“What has she done?” Adesuwa, my second daughter, rushes out of her bedroom into the family lounge room.

Swiveling, I turn to face her, releasing Anita, who is clamoring for her. “She poured her Skittles into the flowerpot.”

Adesuwa chuckles, going to check the damage Anita has caused. “She will do it again. I’m going to wash her hands, I’ll be back.”

Kids... I smile dotingly, sitting on a couch, reading online news. It was Mirabel who wanted plants in the house, so I kept it that way. Bought the house ten years ago and even though it is peaceful, offers views of the lagoon, I still can’t live in it. When the kids are not around, it becomes a vacuum, an empty space.

Adesuwa returns with Anita on her hip, setting her on the couch to play with a fluffy bear. Anita starts chatting the bear up, forgetting we exist.

“So...” Adesuwa drawls, “who is this sweetheart that’s going to be missing you?”

I narrow my eyes at her. *You heard that? My phone wasn’t on loudspeaker.*

Smiling, she shakes her head. “Dad, I have sharp hearing.”

“That’s a lie.”

Grinning smugly, she confesses. “I surmised the other person said they will be missing you.” Waving a hand, she continues with her questioning. “Was that the lady Nosaze told me about?”

“Nosaze is spreading words around about me?”

Anita begins a struggle for her mom’s phone.

“Let her have it.”

“She’ll fill my gallery with pictures. I don’t know who taught her that.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“It’s only because we’re in grandpa’s house,” she tells Anita before handing her the phone. Anita squeals away, wielding the phone like a sword.

“So, dad...” She smiles, returning to our conversation.

“What is Nosaze saying?”

“Well, we all have to know at some point. If I can recall clearly, he told me you threatened to get a new heir.”

These kids! I laugh.

“You know your son.”

“Hmm. What else did he tell you?”

She smiles mischievously and her next words confirm why she’s doing so. “That you were ready to start seeing people—of which I have no objections—but from what I heard.” Dramatically clearing her throat. “I see it has gone farther than that. So... are we expecting a stepmother...?”

“Get that idea out of your head.” I dislike when people—now, my children—think Chiluba is some kind of paid escort. She’s more than that. “Chiluba is a brilliant lady with entrepreneurial skills—”

“Chiluba.” She grins. “That’s her name.”

“Yes.”

“I like her name. Not that her being a stepmom counts since everyone is out of the house—”

“I’m not trying to replace your mother.”

“You’re not?” She stares at me quizzically.

Mirabel is irreplaceable. There will never be another woman like her. I’ve never tried to find her in any woman and even in Chiluba.

With Chiluba, it’s like learning... learning to love again. Seeing a whole meaning to life and—did I just think of Chiluba and love within the same thought?

Echt. I smile, rubbing my knee. “No one can replace her.”

“Hmm.” Anita urges Adesuwa to play her cartoons on her phone. “Why don’t you invite her for dinner?”

“She has other plans.” We’ve not discussed meeting you at all. I can’t recollect Alfred’s advice the last time we ventured into this discussion. But as much as I’m excited about having Chiluba meeting the kids, I—

“No, she doesn’t. I ruined your plans by coming around.”

That’s true. On a whim, she’d decided to visit the family house, but I know she’s running away from something or someone in her home. And being the loving father I am, after the staff revealed she is here, I made my way home last night.

“You didn’t. You’re my priority.” If Mirabel were here, she would know the right words to use, but I’m the only one acting for both of us. Acting parent for

the past eight years to children who don't need me as much.

"Come on dad. Don't change the topic. Don't you want us to meet?"

Meet?

"Please... I'm already planning a dinner that can feed six. Nosaze and Angela are in town. Don't worry, Imelda will be fine hearing about her from us."

"I don't think—"

"Don't say no. Don't, please."

"Okay. Only if she can make it."

Adesuwa grins triumphantly. "See! You want her here too."

No. I want her to myself. Because I miss her terribly.

It's been over a week since we last saw and it feels like an eternity without her.

She's been busy with work since that Sunday, I dropped her off. Only available on the phone. Last time we spoke about her fashion line, she said her workstation has shipments she needed to oversee. And she is also preparing for upcoming fashion weeks, working long hours.

I send her a text containing my address, telling her to stop by when she's chanced, that I'll be here all night.

Almost an hour later, I'm under the iron rule of princess Anita who wants me to keep repeating the alphabets so she can dance, I hear the front door open.

Chiluba.

My heartbeats in a staccato rhythm at what her reaction might be. I should have added to the message that my family is around. But I don't know if that would send her running the other way. As I go to the balcony that looks into the living room downstairs, I see a feminine figure come in from the anteroom.

"Hello fam!" Nosaze bellows, stepping into view. "Dad!" He laughs, wondering at my confusion. "This is Evelyn, Angela's cousin."

Echt?! I've never been so disappointed in my life.

"Nosaze. Hi Evelyn. Angela." I greet his wife when she steps into view, two children racing ahead of her.

My heart resumes beating in slow motion. I never knew at this age I would have this type of experience introducing my younger girlfriend to my children.

“You made it.” I smile, holding the door for Chiluba as she alights from her car. I made it my duty to come outside to get her. This is a trap. Set by my savvy daughter and son who have been quizzing me about her non-stop. I don’t want her walking into it alone.

Wearing a thigh length Ankara dress with puffy sleeves that narrows after her elbow, she stares at the house in mild awe.

How long before they realize I came out to welcome my guest?

“You thought I wouldn’t?” She grins, stepping confidently into my arms for a long, full-body hug. “Is this some sort of surprise getaway?” Leaning away, in my embrace, to admire the enormous structure of my family house.

Despite having not heard it from her lips, I see it in her eyes—her devotion to me. The first night we met up after Amsterdam, she’d been so brash with her words, but after our love-making session, she’d sought to lie on my chest. I don’t know how long it will last. If I’m a shiny toy, she’s having fun with.

I steal a kiss from her lips as our hug turns one-armed. “Thanks for indulging me. I—”

“Ssh.” Placing a finger on my lips, still wearing her permanent cheery grin. Her fingers trail down to my chest. “I’ve got great news.” Her beautiful, expressive brown eyes sparkle under the late amber sun.

I nod, tilting my head to the side. “I think my news can wait a minute.”

“Sure. Sure. I’ll hear you out soon, but... let me get my phone.” She turns to her car to retrieve her phone from her handbag. “Remember the stocking problem with Dress ‘n’ Tees?”

“Yeah?” My penis twitches at the sight of her ass bent over. *Kak*. I wish the kids are not home.

Swiveling, she turns to me with the phone, taps the screen, then shoves it in my face. “ARTSTY ordered 34 Threads backlogs and commissioned us to work on their luxury private label.”

I glance at her, hesitating with my response. Should I ask the burning question on my mind? It would mean I doubt her credibility as a businesswoman but clarify a whole lot. Should I be excited? How did—

“And it’s for all their stores. Everything in Africa.”

“Congratulations, *schat*. That’s a... brilliant feat.”

“Thank you.” Her smile, wide-eyed and bright. “I wanted to tell you in person. Got the news yesterday evening.” She sucks in several breaths to calm herself, one hand akimbo, the other fanning her excitement. “Even though it won’t be our name on the labels, secretly, 34 Threads will be in every ARTSY store and airports across Africa.” She wraps her arms around my neck, looking into my eyes. “Georgie, tell me I’m dreaming.”

I swallow all the questions threatening to spew out. “You’re not.” Placing my arms around her waist.

“This sounds cheesy.” She giggles. “But ever since I met you, the good days have outnumbered the bad. I really—”

“Is it a coincidence Alfred is part of ARTSY?”

If I didn’t know how to read her, I wouldn’t have felt her slight recoil. “No...” She withdraws her arms from my neck, and I let her go. “Alfred played his part, but my business development team handled everything.”

Alfred played his part... Just like I did? “You spoke to him about this?”

“Um...” Lines appear between her brows. “Yeah.” Shrugging.

I blink, trying to process her statement. I wasn’t expecting her honesty, but I’m glad she’s not playing me for a fool. “You told me about it in passing.” I force air through my nostrils, then briefly cover my mouth with one hand before moving the hand to my breastbone. “But why didn’t you let me help?”

She sucks on the sides of her mouth, her brown eyes defiant. “You already did the introduction. All that was left for me was to pick it up from there. Speaking with Alfred without your knowledge, is it going to be a problem?”

I want to beat my chest yelling, *Yes!*

It fucking is!

You are my woman! *Mijn vriendin!*

Mijn schat! He doesn’t respect you! Sees you as nothing.

But I know if I react that way right now, it’s going to cause a scene and I’ve missed her too much to have her drive away in anger. *Godverdomme*, I don’t want her driving in anger. If anything happens to her, I won’t be able to live with myself. We’ll talk about it later, but for now... I open my arms, beckoning her to them and she hesitates.

“Come here, *schat*.” I force a smile and she glides into my arms. “It won’t be

a problem.” Because we would resolve it soon.

“There you are.” Adesuwa’s voice drags us from our moment as we both turn to face her, slowly disengaging from our full hug into a one-arm hug. Anita is toddling behind her as they make their way from the house’s entrance to us.

“Who is—” Chiluba asks with an edge to her tone, but I feel her back tense even tighter as realization dawns on her. “Never mind. She is the feminine version of you, just shades darker.”

“That was the news I wanted to share with you.”

“That your daughter is around?” Her gaze is still on Adesuwa who turns around to carry Anita.

“Two of them are. With their kids and a spouse and an in-law.”

“Full house, huh?”

“I’m sorry *schat*.”

“I didn’t get any gifts—”

“It’s fine. They tricked us.”

She pulls out of my embrace, takes her handbag from the car which I collect quickly—in case she changes her mind—and locks her car doors.

We reach Adesuwa half-way. “Welcome Luba.” She grins warmly. “Oh sorry, Chiluba.”

Chiluba smiles. “Luba is okay.”

“Great. I am Adesuwa. Call me ‘Suwa. My old man here has been ranting about you.”

“Oh.” Chiluba smiles, raising one delicately made-up eyebrow.

“I know, right? Imelda will be jealous that I met you before her.”

“Um... can I—” I begin, but Adesuwa cuts me short.

“I’m sorry, dad but I really want to catch up with Luba.” She winks.

“We can do that inside. Over dinner—”

“No, no.” Chiluba waves. “It’s fine.”

“See...” Adesuwa grins, carrying Anita and placing her on her hips. “She’s okay with it.”

Women. “Please be nice.”

Adesuwa gasps, laughing maniacally. “I always am.”

Whatever prank Adesuwa is up to, I can spare Chiluba. But Chiluba smiles when I turn to her, waving me in. “I’m good.”

I’ll give Adesuwa five minutes.

Max.

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THIRTY-TWO

FLAMMABILITY TEST

Chiluba

GEORGE HAS NOT EXPRESSLY SAID IT, but this spreading mass of white two-story building in Ikoyi, a stone's throw from Banana Island, is his family's house. He has mentioned his home in passing, but I never imagined it was this... this huge.

The moment the lady called our attention to her, I was slightly pressed to be jealous, but then I looked closely, and I saw the resemblance. A feminine imitation of George—facial bone structure, shade of eyes—her skin two shades darker than his, from her mother's genes and full-bodied wavy, waist-length hair.

"Thanks a lot for coming." Adesuwa smiles after handing her mobile device to the toddler. Dressed in loose ripped jeans and a fitted top, with her hair falling loose on her shoulders, she looks even younger than I am.

Standing before her brings a likely future to my reality. This lady is give or take two years my senior. Married. With a child. Who is going to be caring for who?

Oh, shut up Zoya! It's her voice that's in my head.

"My pleasure."

The toddler keeps staring at me, absent-mindedly matting her mother's

tresses. *Hello? I'm also wondering what I'm doing here, talking to George's daughter—Zoya's niece—without prepping for it.* Waving, I smile at the toddler, going to friendly, calm Chiluba. "Hello, what's your name?"

She stares at me for a heartbeat, biting her pink lips before turning her head away.

Adesuwa's laughter is throaty and genuine, like every mother does when their children don't skip or jump as they are trained to do. She tries compelling the toddler to recite her name, but the toddler isn't having it.

I keep a small, mirthless smile on my face as I watch their interaction.

"Her name is Anita. My daughter. She's going on three."

"Anita." I repeat, smiling.

The toddler turns to watch me again, her expression asking who I am but not voicing it as her words lodge in her throat.

"Okay Anita," Adesuwa starts, adjusting the girl on her hip, "time to go inside. Mummy wants to talk." She collects her phone from Anita and dials some buttons. "Once she gets to know you, she would talk your ear out. She's starting school this summer."

A maid appears to take Anita inside. She doesn't leave without a fight. However, with enough promises, she agrees to say goodbye for now.

Left with Adesuwa, my mind races on questions she wants to ask and how rude it is of her to keep me, a guest, out here for this long.

You want to know why I'm with your dad? How long I've been with him?

Putting her hands in her back pockets, she smiles nervously—if it is fake, she is doing a thorough job of making it look real. "I don't know how to begin this, but... you've made an impression on my dad—he really likes you—and I don't want you coming into our home, feeling like a stranger. And oof..." She shrugs, quickly bringing her hands out from her pockets with an embarrassing grin. "Doing this makes it awkward." Shaking her head. "But that's not the intention." Inhaling deeply. "I just... you know... I want you to know that you're welcome, and you've made my father happier than he has been in years..."

Oh no, not this speech. I was expecting something more dramatic. Maybe something along the lines of what Zoya told me. You're a gold digger, so I just want to clear some things with you. I'm yet to tell George about Zoya's accusations and them being the major reason I've thrown myself into work and had little time for him—for us. But maybe I'll tell him sometime today.

“And.” She claps. “I also want to let you know that if my brother starts with his jokes, give it back to him.”

What’s all this goodwill speech for? I’m waiting for the catch.

She brings her clasped hands to her lips, grinning. “I am the talkative of the family. You should have guessed as much.”

I nod, forcing an appreciative smile. Unnecessary information dumping.

“Actually.” Her hands come down, and her eyes twinkle. “My brother placed a bet that you will not last over six months as daddy’s girlfriend...”

Six months? Her voice fades into my subconscious. George and I are barely three months into this personal arrangement. “Um... Adesuwa.” Cutting her speech short. “I am not your dad’s girlfriend. We are business partners.”

Until we agree otherwise, we are the business partners. Yes, the sex is great, but... being packaged as George’s girlfriend is not on my bucket list. My announcement causes her to raise her chin, nodding her head in slow motion.

“So, you and dad are not...”

“We’re not dating.” Forcing a smile. And is it my head of did I hear her say Osaze and he’s an athlete?

“I-I I’m sorry. I assumed otherwise.”

It’s my turn to nod, my heart beating as I withhold from asking her to repeat herself about her brother. “We are two matured individuals who enjoy spending time with each other.”

Never in my life have I imagined myself talking to the grown-up daughter of a man I am shagging. My village people are laughing at me.

“Hmm.” Her brows go up, quickly coming down. “Fair enough. I’m sorry for the rants and lectures. I just wanted to make you feel comfortable before...” She looks at the house, pointing at it. “Please let me take you in.”

“Thank you.” I give a perfunctory smile and she ushers me into the house.

It’s a mansion.

What was I expecting from a man who flew me on a private jet?

Wow!

Taking in the double volume spacious living area we walk into; it takes my years of exposure not to let my jaw drop in awe. Cream colored curtains line the floor to ceiling windows that are no doubt automatically operated because I can’t imagine climbing the walls to pull those things closed. Artful glossy brown tiles

line the floor, matching the room's décor of brown and cream contrasting with touches of greens—plants. Above the sitting area, with cream cushions and a wide flatscreen TV, star lights surround a low-hanging chandelier, and a mini-bar stands to the side. The dinner table that sits about eight lies on the other side of the room, with a floor to ceiling view of the backyard—is that a swimming pool?

Wow!

No wonder he prefers staying at the Radisson Blu. I will too, if there's no one to make noise and disturb the peace of this place.

"Hello..." I turn to find a young man who looks nothing like George standing in the hallway that leads to other private areas of the house.

"Hi."

He walks towards me with a grin, one arm stretched out. If I was taken with his handsome appearance and blinding smile, I wouldn't have noticed his slightly bowed legs.

"Nosaze." He clasps my hand in his, shaking it lightly. "The one who has been pushing your matter." Winking as he withdraws his hand.

"Osaze?"

"With an N."

Shrieks of children from somewhere upstairs breaks into our conversation. "Chiluba. nice to meet you."

Thank God for miracles. Even though I wish his name doesn't remind me of my nemesis.

"That's my big bro." Adesuwa says fondly. "Former goalkeeper for AFC Ajax until an injury and several other factors made him quit."

"Thanks for louding it."

"Just a proud sister."

It doesn't take long for Nosaze's kids to file in before their mother and her sister. She's a Yoruba lady and talk leads to talk. And then I'm not talking to anyone, just listening to stilted conversations between Nosaze and Adesuwa as mouthwatering aromas from the kitchen, which is opposite the dining table, wafts into the living room. I check my phone for messages, and I get pissed at the constant message he keeps sending. When would he get the hint?

05:27 PM

Unknown number: Stop being stubborn.

This will be fun.

You've seen what I can do.

After seconds of staring deadpan at my phone, my ears pick the conversation between siblings.

"She's never happy for anybody or anything."

"Says she'll be home in December."

"Didn't think it will last long."

"I'm back." George smiles from the hallway and my heart beats fiercely with pride and something else I know best not to mention as he walks towards me. "You've all have met *mijn shcat*."

Chimo! George! Not here... my skin grows hotter as he sits on the arm of the chair I'm occupying.

Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he nozzles my ears, in the presence of his children and daughter-in-law, who are smiling in glee. "I hope Adesuwa wasn't harsh on you."

I try to keep a straight face, but a smile curves on my lips. "She wasn't."

"Dad... I'm the nicest."

Raising his head, he darts a glance at her before telling me, "When she wants to." He whispers in my ear, "I want to suck on those nipples." Clearing his throat, he stands up, gently tugging me to my feet. "Come *schat*, let me give you a full house tour."

"Go on dad." Nosaze smirks. "We just don't want any audible sounds or—"

"Nosaze!" Adesuwa reprimands.

Their banter is so hearty, I decide to shed some armor off my skin. "Don't worry, I'll keep him straight."

True to my words, I keep him straight as he takes me into the kitchen where a maid is hard at work, points to the swimming pool in the backyard, shows me the two visitors' room on the same floor with the living room. Then using an elevator, where he fondly massages my breast looking into the mirror—and I reprimand him, though leaning into his touch—we make it to the second floor which has three bedrooms—the kid's—an eight-seater cinema, a library, home office, family lounge that overlooks the living room, terrace overlooking the

Lagos lagoon, and then we get to the last floor, which he says, has only the master bedroom.

On the other side of the room is an open curtain that leads to a spacious terrace overseeing the Lagos lagoon, Lekki link bridge and a view of the distant parking lot where I'd parked.

As we return to the spacious bedroom with mirrors and reflecting surfaces, I tease him. "You have me where you want."

He scoffs, sliding the glass door shut. "You have no idea."

"So, this was your intent?" I look down at his crotch and true to my nasty thoughts, he is tenting his trousers. Running my tongue over my lips before grazing my lips with my teeth, I wink.

When it comes to George, all sense of propriety disappears.

He closes the distance between us, claiming my lips in a passionate, scintillating kiss. His beard rubs against my face. I caress his shoulder. He grabs my ass, squeezing it. I thrust against him, sighing when his hardened erection pokes me. Passionately glued to each other, he moves me, till I feel my back pressing against the sliding doors that leads to the terrace. Cool air touches my thighs when he raises the stretchy Ankara fabric I have on. I shudder when he finds my wetness.

"Always ready," he murmurs, kissing me with a passion that takes my breath away.

He works his fingers inside me, and I hold on to him for dear life, biting my lips from making loud mewling sounds.

Oh, God... my eyes roll in their sockets as the pleasure ripples through me. Fuck you Zoya! I'll have this man and his dick for as long as I want.

I go for his loose pants, desperately needing to touch his throbbing erection. He shirks off his trousers. His penis is dripping with pre-cum.

Just a taste. Something to prove to Zoya and myself that I can do whatever I like with whomever!

"No time for that *lieve schat*." He lifts me up, dropping me on the bed like a prize. He looks up and chuckles. "Fuck..."

I look up.

Wow!

There's us up there. On a reflecting surface.

We look so good!

I'm about to get fucked on a massive bed with mirrors on the ceiling.

George curses, stroking his throbbing, veined erection. "I don't have condoms here."

With every muscle in my body tensed with expectation, it takes a split second for me to convince him and myself that we've done without it before and can do it again.

Guiding him into me missionary position, I gasp as he fills me up, staring into his eyes. Hoping he understands all the words I cannot say. Words my mouth has not agreed are true with my heart. The only words my mouth can say are, "Ah... I've missed this..." *The feel of your penis inside me.*

"*Mijn schat...*" He murmurs, landing kisses on my lips as he slowly thrusts into me.

My body quivers with desire and a rush unlike I've felt before. "They know what we're up to." I smirk, stroking the crack of his ass. "Dirty daddy—" My breath hitches as he pounds into me.

"Don't."

It is doing the trick. Yes... *Hmm...* This feels so good. Irreverent to his children and guests waiting downstairs. He pounds into me like it's been years since we last fucked, and suddenly he stops. Doesn't move. Just freezes. Maybe he heard something that I didn't? I don't know. Don't care.

"Georgie..." I thrust against him, urging him on.

That was all he needed.

He cums on my tummy, just as I love it, before saying the sweetest things as we watch ourselves in the mirror, while he finishes me with his fingers.

Sated, he cleans me up, adjust our clothing and I excuse myself to use the bathroom. The grandness of the house still makes me feel tingly inside. In my curiosity, I open one of the walk-in closets and what I see causes my heart to pound in my ears, recalibrating my senses.



THIRTY-THREE

ABRASION RESISTANCE

George

The kids wish Chiluba goodnights after we—Chiluba and I—announce for the hundredth time that it's time for her to go. By the end of dinner, Nosaze's kids had warmed up to her and even Anita, the youngest of my grandkids was warming up to her.

Calming, harmonious night sounds of crickets against the backdrop of the crescent moonlight sky surround us as we walk to her car. I wish she would spend the night here. The way dinner had gone has placed ideas in my head, that only for tonight, I want to let them permeate my senses. The knowing looks we had shared when we came down the stairs. Her laughter when Nosaze told jokes about his soccer days. The way her longing eyes occasionally met mine as conversation flowed with everyone on the table.

I squeeze her hand. "Had a wonderful night?"

"Kind of."

What is the problem? Holding her hand till she stands still before me, her car less than six feet away, I see it, the tightness around her lips. *Kak*. I have been too engrossed in the jolting, very real, and confusing epiphany I had during sex earlier. Then holding her hand during dinner with the kids felt so natural.

“Is this because I didn’t warn you before inviting you over?”

Placing her hand in mine, she scrunches her nose. “I should be used to that already.” She shrugs when the corner of my lips curves with a small smile. “It’s not the first time you’ll invite me out without giving me the details.”

Her phone chimes and I gesture to her to respond.

Nodding, I watch as the blue light from the screen envelopes her beautiful, impassive face. I wasn’t peeking, but our slight height difference enables me to glimpse the sender.

“A text message.” She swallows, tapping her phone to the side. “Nothing important.”

Why is he messaging her at this time of the night? I thought it was just business as usual between them. For whatever reason fueling me, I push in my usual calm voice, wanting to see her reaction. “I don’t want you to go yet. You can respond to it.”

“Hmm mm.” Shaking her head as she begins her walk to the car alone. “I can always respond to it later.”

I can do better. Is now the best time to confront her with what I saw? Maybe that’s why she has been distant this past week. Avoiding meeting up with me. Because she’s seeing him? Or are there more?

Godverdomme! This is not right.

Not healthy.

Moving along, I join her by the car, handing her handbag to her. “You’re sure you don’t want to sleep over?” *What the fuck is wrong with you? Have some pride! She doesn’t want to be around you.*

“I can’t.” Searching for her car keys in the bag. She smiles triumphantly when she brings it out. “The children.”

After unlocking the car, she turns to face me as she gets into it, a twinkle in her eyes. “We sound like an old couple.” Chuckling. “The children are around.”

Reality is dawning on her. She’s not comfy with the arrangement?

“Trust me.” Standing between her legs, hands on her sides, I lean into her. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Mba not now.” She giggles against my face, the tickling sound of her laughter causing my dick to stir.

Not now. Not when you feel confused. Get your head together, then you can

play.

But I don't listen, rubbing my nose against hers. "When?" *Shit.*

"I'm... young." She smiles against my mouth, stealing kisses in between her declarations. "And I'm... enjoying it... flexing life."

Nodding, I wrap one arm around her waist. "You have just one life to live."

I bend my head for a long, soul-searching kiss. Affirming her words. Reminding myself she's with me. Sending a knife through my chest. Knowing she believes I'm just a fuck buddy. Why am I doing this to myself?

Her hands move around my neck, pulling me deeper into the kiss.

Does she feel what I'm feeling? Like something dark is looming above us and we need to take what we can while we can. I can't ask her for more than we have. It has to come from her. I can't blurt my fears to her. What keeps me up at night when she's not there to stop me from thinking.

She's pressing her chest into mine. Why is my head not into this kiss? Because I saw the ease with which she blended into my family, laughing at the jokes, sharing some of hers and listening intently as my daughter and daughter-in-law go on about their toddlers.

It will be selfish of me to ask of her what she cannot give. Her youth. Trade her youth for a life with me. And this thing with Alfred. How long has it been going on? Is this all about how much she can amass?

"Georgie..." Withdrawing her lips from mine, holding the sides of my face. "What's wrong?"

Smiling wryly, I gently tug her hands from my face, looking at them as I bring them between us. "Nothing is wrong." Looking at her face. "Everything is fine."

"Okay... okay..." She smiles. "I had an amazing time with your family." Her smile turns sad. "Your kids are lucky. You are too."

"Come on." Tugging her hands. "Give me a cheerful smile."

A mirthless chuckle escapes her. "Okay... You have a beautiful family."

Would you like to join my beautiful family? *Hou daarmee op.*

"*I'm not here to stay,*" remember that? She's here too please your every desire. Don't ask for too much. You can't give her everything she needs. What? When she's your age, will you be able to chase a ball and catch it?

"You have a beautiful life ahead of you."

She grins. "I am living the life now."

You are. Taking life by the jugular. Making everything work for you. You don't need me. Look at you, you got a deal with ARTSY malls without my help. You have my people working on Lucid and you're going for international fashion shows not as a spectator but as an exhibitor. In two years, these seeds you're sowing will be giant trees, enough to make a forest, since you keep sowing.

"I am happy for you."

"I'm glad you came into my life when you did."

Is this some sort of farewell? Why are we having this sentimental talk? I'm overthinking. It's because I'm in the house. "Will I see you this week?" Placing a hand on her smooth, cold thigh.

"Actually, there's something else I need to tell you."

About Alfred? What have you done? Doing my best to sound normal, I ask, "What is it?"

"Zoya found out about us."

Fuuuuuucccccckkkkkkkk... Running a hand through my hair.

Closing my eyes, I suck air into my mouth, releasing it in a long exhale. In the beginning, I never—I thought this thing between us would burn, fizzle, die and no one needed to know. And as it progressed, I didn't—*kak!* I should have spoken to Zoya about this.

"When?"

"That evening you dropped me off..." Her lips curves in a broad, false smile. "She was on my balcony."

I attempt pulling her into my arms, but she resists. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that alone."

"It's fine." Her laughter is wobbly as she wrings her fingers. "She was mad. Furious. Called me names."

She won't let me hug her, so I resort to holding her fingers apart so she can stop wringing them and look at me. "I am so sorry you had to deal with that alone. Why didn't you call me? Is that why you've kept your distance? Made excuses?"

"I doubt there's much you would have done if you were there. It was an issue between her and me."

“Still, I’m sorry.”

She scoffs, smirking. “Apparently, you need to be protected from me at all costs because I’m a gold digger.”

Godverdomme. “Zoya said that?”

Shrugging, a faint, self-deprecating smile replaces the smirk. “Amongst other things.”

“Have you... are you guys on talking terms?”

Sighing, she shakes her head. “Our friendship meant so much to me, but with how she handled it, I’ll let her stew until she comes to her senses. You can imagine, she came into my space, calling me names... because of the dick I decide to ride. Mtshewww. I don’t want to talk to her. When she gets off her high horse, she’ll come to me to apologize. It really affected me. And it wasn’t until I got the news from ARTSY that I realized, fuck her, I don’t need validation from her on who or what is right for me. It’s my life and I’m going to live it to the fullest.”

Ignoring the part where she reduced me to *a dick she decided to ride*, I focus on the problem at hand. “I’m sorry about the state of your friendship.” Holding her chin, I lock gazes with her. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to continue seeing me. Like I said, you have a beautiful life ahead of you.”

She nods, sucking on the sides of her mouth and pressing her lips. “Yes, I do.”

Just that?

You will not challenge me? Tell me what I’m saying is nonsense and that you want to spend every living hour and day with me. Want to join my beautiful family?

Maneuvering her legs till she’s properly seated in the car, she tosses a smile at me, powering the engine. “I need to hit the road now. Thanks for the invite.”

What the fuck have I done?

“Chiluba...”

She glances at me.

“What else is wrong?”

She balks, a line appearing between her forehead. “The part I realize you’re still in love with your late wife and that I can never fill her shoes?”

“How did—”

“You don’t need to explain anything, George. I read some articles online, and they explained things that were visible from the start, but I was too naïve to understand. This thing between us is a mere, temporary tryst to soothe your sexual restlessness.”

“Luba don’t—” Belittle what we have.

“George, stop it. The shrine of her in your master bedroom says as much. And I know you didn’t trick me into this because you’re also trying to run from the reality you shared with her, but my bad that I discovered too late and even started developing feelings.”

Wind blows and it smells like rain. “I’m sorry you feel this way, but that’s not the whole truth.”

“George, I’ve taken enough insults without fighting back. I need to recover. I only wanted to share my good news with you, but as usual, I got tangled up with you... your beautiful family... children... something I want to have someday. Something you already have.”

“I...”

“Please move.”

Like a fool, I move out of her way, and she shuts the door.

Will I ever tell her that for a split second, while passionately thrusting into her in that room, I had a flash of being with Mirabel, then back to her?

*Love is not materialistic.
It's intangible yet somehow an undeniable feeling.
You know it when you have it.*

—Melanie Iglesias

*Never let your pride keep something broken that your heart
wants to fix.*

—Anonymous

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THIRTY-FOUR

CUT SOME SLACK

Chiluba

THE WAY THIS MONTH STARTED WITH rain almost every day. It's as though it's warning me to add a boat to my collection. Thank God my Range Rover does well on the streets of Lagos and I'm back to my usual base, shuffling between my boutiques and The Sewing Factory.

For weeks, Ese has been convincing me to go out with this friend of hers. "Don't worry, you're going to like Máýòkún." She'd said on the phone. "His father is a Senator Ajibola."

Days after connecting with him via phone, I'm seated in shy, conserved, Máýòkún's Toyota Corolla, praying it doesn't get stuck in the stagnant waters as we head to Surulere for a paint and sip event. He'd said telecommunication doesn't work for him and would prefer we see in person.

Accelerating the car as he navigates a pothole, I ask myself, *why didn't I drive?*

Because you are deluding yourself with moving on from George. The guy insisted he pick you up since his place is around Maryland and you accepted.

Turns out Máýòkún Ajibola is the bastard son of Senator Ajibola because that's all he has been ranting about since he took his second glass of wine, his

Americana accent deepening as the day progresses. I don't know if we're drinking the same thing or if he's trying so much to impress me.

It's either his head is too light, or by the time he left the outdoor canopy where we're painting with a group of couples to use the bathroom, he took something. Because when he returned to my side, his eyes were brighter, and he was more conversational.

He is spilling the evil his father's people have done to him and his mother. I feel for him, knowing from my experience how mothers and children suffer in the hands of the husband's family. There's a missing link somewhere which I don't understand. Why does the husband's family maltreat the wife and make everything that's wrong in the family her fault? This should be someone's research study, so we can know how to manage family crisis.

Tsk. We shouldn't be talking about this on our first date.

It's as though he can hear my inner thoughts because his monologue switches to his ex-girlfriends. They don't look as good as I do. Not as artistic as I am. And how much he would like for me to be in his life.

On the phone, he'd seem like the perfect guy. We spoke like what, three—five times before scheduling this date. Not like I'm counting. But he'd insisted on today. I thought it was because he couldn't wait to meet me in person, but nope, the goat wants *listening ears*.

All I do is nod as I make last strokes to what I hope looks like sand in my watercolor painting.

Taking a step back, I tilt my head from side to side. *Ah... this looks perfect.*

"Wow Chi-baby."

I cringe at his self-professed nickname for me. Chose it without consulting me.

"This is lovely. Guys!"

Oh sheesh, what's this guy doing? And that stupid nickname!

"Look what my baby did! Can anyone beat this?"

"Lovely." "Awwn." "Nice." Different compliments echoes around the canopy, shielding us from the drizzle.

Forcing a smile, even though I feel so humiliated, I smile my thanks to everyone who is busy working on their art.

Máyòkún wraps his arm around my waist, leeching on me. It takes everything

in me not to tear him off my skin.

“We can make this dream come true.” He points to my watercolor painting of a house by a river with flipping fishes set on a beautiful sunset that’s not as beautiful as the ones I’ve seen with George.

George and I have... I can’t fill the shoes he’s not offering, so why bother build what I can’t have? We message from time to time. Like we used to before Amsterdam. He has called and even waited outside my compound, but I don’t want to speak with him.

“You and me.” Máỳòkún’s voice breaks my reverie.

“If we get to know ourselves better.”

“We will.” He smiles, what he thinks is a killer smile because of his dimples and pleads with me to help him complete his painting. He has been focused on the wine instead of the art.

“Are you okay?”

He sobers in a flash. “Have I been poor company?”

“Yes.” Not mincing words, stepping out of his side embrace.

“I’m so sorry Chi-baby.”

“Please, call me Chiluba.” Wearing a smile to ease the punch of my words.

He inhales deeply, then rubs his nose. “I’m so sorry. Today’s been a shitty day.” Then drops his hand, taking a sip of his wine. “But you...” He smiles again, his eyes roaming my body. “You made it better. Just sayin’ every moment with you gets better.”

Máỳòkún is a confirmation that beauty and privilege doesn’t equate sense. Dude is blowing hot and cold. Why didn’t I drive myself here? If he does more than himself, I’ll bail and order a taxi. Ese’s praises about him were superficial. I didn’t want to go until she sent his picture. I was like, sure.

As the evening progresses, my company doesn’t get better. When he finally completes his painting which ends up being not as bad as I imagined it will be, he asks if we can have dinner, then go clubbing, but I dead the idea, telling him I don’t feel fine.

“Let me drive.” The thought of him driving me all the way home causes me to squirm. His eyes, the way they stay unfocused. I doubt we’ll make it past third mainland bridge without an accident.

“No, I’m driving.” He laughs, tossing his keys in the air. “Get in...” he

drawls.

Shaking my head, I stand my ground. “You’re woozy. Let me drive.”

He blares his horn before sticking his head outside the window. “Get in the car Chi-baby.” Grinning smugly, he corrects himself. “Chiluba... Princess, come on. You’re not feeling fine and, this weather? Getting a taxi isn’t safe. Just sayin’, won’t let you do that.”

Oh, God. This is a nutcase.

Ugh!

If I hear another *just sayin’*, they will arrest me for battery and assault.

I should have driven here. It’s something I’ll warn any girl around me to do. I’m never trusting Ese with opposite sex recommendations. This is my penance for trying to be a good friend to her, all because I don’t want to consider reconciling with my *best friend*.

Thankfully, the drizzle has stopped, and Máýòkún has learned to shut up. Whatever he took must be wearing off, or it’s the hip-hop music he’s rapping to that has him minding his business.

My luck doesn’t run for long because as we near a traffic light so close to my compound, I hear him mutter, “Nasty old hag.” Directing his gaze at a lady begging for alms.

She’s in a dress two sizes small with young kids I suppose are hers. While she looks cared for, the kids look unkempt.

It’s not my business what he thinks about her, but I can’t help my tongue. “You don’t have to say something if you have nothing nice to say.”

Glancing at me, he reduces the volume of the stereo. “You heard me.”

“I did. Nothing gives you the right to call her names.”

“How did she get the children?” Leaning forward, with one arm stretched as he lays his point. “And, you tell me, why couldn’t she keep her man?”

I stare at this bright-eyed being I’m sharing a car with. *Whatever possessed you to accept Ese’s proposal in her choice of men will never befall you again. Never.*

“Because if you ask me... she’s a slut.” His measured cadence conveying the few years he spent in America. Brushing his nose like an addict he continues. “Look what she’s putting on to beg with her children. She coulda done better and stuck with her man. Just sayin’.”

“It makes little sense to call a woman slut, because she’s begging on the street or without her husband.”

Ugh!

This dude keeps getting worse. *Just sayin.’*

Worst. Date. Ever.

The award goes to... Máýòkún!

He was cool until he took that bathroom break and started talking with bright, shiny eyes. One bathroom break and he completely lost the shy cuteness he had going for him.

Where did Ese find him? How did they meet? Why did she conclude we’ll be a good fit? I don’t do junkies.

“Look at you.” He begins the moment the light turns green. “Dressed decent.”

Dude! You’ve been staring at my cleavage. What’s decent about that?

“Anyone would want to marry you. But see the way she was dressed like Rahab, harlot of the town.”

Um... “Who is Rahab?”

“The famous prostitute from the Bible. Joshua and the walls of Jericho.”

Wow. *You’re supposed to be a Christian?*

“That was ages ago. This is the twenty-first century.”

“Why are you fighting for a woman you barely know, whose problem has nothing to do with you?”

“Because I could as well be that woman and you’re passing judgment without knowing me.”

“Mtsk. I know you.” His gaze turns sleazy.

I hold back from visibly cringing.

“The time I’ve spent with you, I know you’re a lady I want to take home to Mama.”

“Not interested.”

His fingers grip the steering wheel and I almost slap myself for saying that out loud while my life is in his hands.

“Did you just insult my mother?”

I'm not responding to that. Keep calm... you'll be home soon. We're less than three minutes away.

"I'm talking to you, Princess."

Say nothing. Mind your business. Keep looking ahead and remember to give Ese a piece of your mind.

"Princess..." His voice takes on a deadly note. "Why don't you want to see my mother?"

Oh, God. What in the psychosis is this? "Máýòkún," I hesitate, "I have a headache. I was excited to meet you but this... you and I?" Shaking my head. "Not going to work."

He chuckles sinisterly, tossing a glance at me. "You won't wait for me to drop you before you spout nuisance from your mouth? All because of that nasty hag?"

O... Chi m o... I don chop shit!

Chei!

Sucking on the insides of my bottom lip to keep from talking back.

Before the car comes to a stop, I hop out of it.

"Princess!"

Princess my ass. Princess, until he turns me into a ghost of myself. So judgmental, finicky, and picky.

Noting no one is in front of my compound, I warn him in my coldest voice, "Forget you know me, where I live, and never come looking for me." Before shutting the door.

He doesn't wait a second. Reversing the car in a screech, he zooms out of my street.

Good riddance. Thank God I didn't set out to impress him.

In the dimly lit darkness, I begin walking to my apartment's entrance.

First, I hear the door to a car slam shut. *Is the maniac back? Should I bolt?*

Then I hear my name and the voice commands everything within me to come to a pause.

It's been weeks since I heard his voice. *Breathe Luba, breathe...*

"How are you?"

Perfect day for a reunion.

I face him, intending to transfer the aggression from the Máýòkún experience, but his smug look coated in grey round neck long sleeves, blue jeans and Nike sneakers takes me off-guard. He looks great. A pleasurable, welcome sight.

We can't stare at each other all evening, so I ask, "You shouldn't be on this side of Lagos at this time of the day. It's not safe for people like you." I don't know what got into me the other day, but I did more research about living as an expatriate in Nigeria.

He advances, ignoring my well-researched point. "I came to check up on you. Rang the bell and no answer. Thought to camp out here until you let me in. What's wrong with your phone? I've been worried." Stopping in front of me.

He smells so nice in this damp weather; I want to wrap my arms around him. Instead, I shrug, folding my arms. "Battery's dead."

"Can I come up?"



THIRTY-FIVE

BLEEDING

George

SHE LEADS ME UP THE STAIRS, to her apartment. From the structure of the house, it's a four flat apartment, and hers faces the street. She doesn't give me the opportunity to inspect her spaces as she turns on me. Her expression says, how can I help you?

"Who was that?" It comes out rougher than I intended, but I can't take it back.

Lifting her chin, she draws herself to full height. "Who was who?"

"Come on Luba, I'm not a child." The urge to take her into my arms is so strong, I restrain myself from doing so. "You know who I'm talking about."

I was playing the addictive Candy Crush game Nosaze's daughter introduced me to when I saw Chiluba's silhouette alighting from a strange car.

My first instinct was to ask Mike to wind down as my heart thudded against my chest wishing it wasn't her. The urge to get out and pull the guy through the wet asphalt road till he is raw and bleeding burnt my eyes, but I did nothing. Just sat there, hearing bits of their conversation before the driver sped away. Such nonchalance in a residential area.

She's angry, sucking on her cheeks.

“Did he do anything inappropriate?”

“What business of yours would that be?”

“I need to know—”

“No, you don’t.”

“*Schat*—”

“George, I’m fine...” Dropping her arms to her sides. “Can’t you see? I’m fine.” Her voice is patronizing, making me irritated. “Thanks for stopping by. Good—”

“Don’t play that trick on me. I came to check on you—”

“And I’m fine!” she says through clenched teeth.

“What’s wrong?”

She scoffs, visibly blanching. Her eyes asking me if I’m really asking the question.

“You can talk to me.” I reach for her hand, but she shrugs it off. Why do you have such hold on me. I’m mad and considerate at the same time. I want to shake it into your senses that we’re together, but we’re not. I’m yours and you should be thinking about being wholly mine. Not throwing childish tantrums. Blowing hot one minute, cold the next.

“I can’t believe you’ll ask me that question when I’ve lost my friend. When we both know you’re still in love with your wife—”

“Who told you that?” My stomach hardens with disbelief.

“I don’t need to be told.” She snorts. “And you don’t trust me. Why George? I’ve had time to think it through these weeks and I’ve been wondering, too scared to know the answer, but why did you fuck me when you don’t trust me?”

“Wh—what are you talking about?”

“ARTSY? Alfred?”

She’s staring at me, waiting for answers. What the fuck do I want to say? That I trust her? I do... Covering my mouth, I blow air into it. I trust her. It’s just that I felt blindsided. And this? This shit happening here? Happening these past weeks? Is me keeping my cool.

“No answer?”

I sigh. “*Schat*, I understand you are hot-blooded, ambitious, with a lot of things you want to accomplish—”

“Don’t make this about me. I asked you a question.”

“I understand you are ambitious with a lot you want to accomplish, but that doesn’t justify you hanging out with Alfred without notifying me.”

“That makes little sense. Do I look like your daughters?”

“Chiluba?”

“I’m sorry, but really, why should I tell you about my dealings when you don’t tell me about yours?”

She’s not sorry, but I let it slide. “What about me do you want to know?”

“I don’t know.”

I raise a brow. *Godverdomme schat. What the fuck do you want to know?!*

“Everything.”

“Like?”

“Your birthday?”

“July nineteenth.”

“Day you lost your wife?”

“November first.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “What else?”

“Will you ever remarry?”

“I don’t know.”

“See. See, that? What about me attracts you?”

“Everything. You’re smart. Beautiful. Make the best of what you have—resourceful. *Schat*, you’re the most important person in my life right now.”

She gives a small, scornful laugh. “Important? You never told me about your family’s house but invited me over because you knew I would come running. *Eish!* My choice in men keeps getting worse and I keep doing stupid things. Falling for one whose last born is older than me should have been a sign.”

“Don’t talk that way.”

“O...” Widening her eyes. “There’s a way I should talk to you. I’m sorry, sir.” She makes a mock salute before folding her arms. “I thought you didn’t listen to me. I thought you saw me as some escort you—”

“Shut the fuck up, *schatje*.”

She gasps.

“You have me confused with someone else.” Pointing, I continue. “I see what you’re trying to do here.”

Her eyes widen, screaming, *what!*

“Self-sabotage.”

She blinks.

Godverdomme. I should have seen it. Barking a laugh, I run my hands through my hair. She wants to push me away. Has been pushing me away. It all makes sense now. Her off-hand comments about how people look at us when we spend time together.

“You feel guilty about us? I wasn’t what you expected for a partner? Face it *schat*, I’m not who you expected—”

“This is nothing. What I feel about you is nothing. Because I love you now don’t mean I will tomorrow. Yes, I enjoy spending time with you. Chemistry is great, too. But for what? Everyone would think you’re the reason I am who I am. Would think I’m with you for your wealth. You’re already set in your ways. George, I have thought about this—did you know your kids made a bet on how long we’ll last?”

Smiling as heat radiates through my chest, I crowd into her personal space. “You love me?”

“Um, where did you hear that nonsense from?”

It’s a bit confusing that she confesses to loving me but is having a shady affair with Alfred. “I wish this was on record. You mentioned you love me. Is that true?”

“That’s not the point.” Taking a step backward. “It’s not what we are talking about—that is not what I am talking about.”

“Obviously not what you’re talking about, because I don’t know why you’re with Alfred when I’m always here for you.”

“You think I fucked Alfred?” She blinks, placing a hand to her chest. “I shagged him? Slept with him to have ARTSY stock 34 Threads?”

What am I supposed to think? Girls sleep with Alfred for the barest minimum. He prides himself on having access to girls and the pleasure he derives from giving them what they need. A justified exchange.

When I don’t respond, she points to the door. “I need you to get out right

now. I have taken it up to here.” Making a gesture to her throat. “Please, out.”

“It’s fine if you did. I know you’re a free bird. But we made promises in the throes on passion. I only need you to tell me the truth. Yes or no, did you have anything to do with Alfred?”

She takes a deep breath. “And if I say no, would that make you sleep better at night?”

“*Schat*, yes or no?”

“This was what you came to confirm. Not to check on me.”

“Not true.”

“Follow your guts George. Whatever conclusion you come to, that’s the truth. Because no matter what I say or do—fuck you, George!” She rushes to me, slapping a hand on my chest. I hold them there. “You are the first older man I ever spent time with. I don’t even like spending time with my father and here you are accusing me of doing something—and you kept going on and on and on, over and over, of how I have a beautiful life ahead of me. If you want me out of your life, say it to my face and stop beating about the bush. Yes, I have problems in my relationships. I know I am difficult to love and care for. I admit that I have daddy issues. I’m selfish. Vain.”

She jerks against my hold. Her fingers flexes against my chest. But I don’t free her.

“But it’s different with you. I feel different when I’m with you. I thought you knew me. Understood me. That we had a connection. Something binding us that’s more than sex. But I guess it was my girlish dream. What kind of friend am I? Defending my affair with you to my friend. Your niece. I promise you; I am trying to get out of this hold you have over my heart by going out, but I get irritated easily. It’s like all men I want to spend time with are the same. Wearing different stripes, but beneath that stripe is the same thing that lives within them. Dark heartless souls.”

“I should take you to my knees and spank you for believing you’re difficult to care for or love.”

Her lips curve into a brave, waning smile. Chest is rising and falling with each long-drawn breath she takes.

“You’re not. It came quite easy for me.”

She tugs her hand, and I let go.

Rubbing her arms, she doesn’t look at me when she says, “It dawned on me

you have grown up kids like myself, and it's been... it's been overwhelming to say the least. I didn't think of this until I was by myself." She sighs deeply, raising her eyes to mine. "I don't know George."

"You've always known I had kids. I never hid that from you."

Nodding, she places a hand on her elbow. "I've had a long day and I need time alone."

I nod, rocking on my heels.

"Please."

No need waiting around. This might as well be the end, but something within me will not let sleeping dogs lie. Moving closer, I wrap my arms around her waist, before chucking up her chin. Her gaze locks with mine.

"Do you really love me?"

She turns her face away, staring into space. "I want to remain friends with you. The way it was before Amsterdam."

Licking my dry lips, I chuck her chin again. Gone from her eyes are the fire and light I used to see in them. The sensuous lady has been replaced with a bewildered one.

She needs space to grow into this phase of her life. To spread her wings. And learn to use it. Know the power. Understand it's worth. And become. It will take time. We might never happen, again. Whatever it is, I am willing to do whatever she needs. If a fluke brought us together, then I pray with all my heart, it does so again.

With one hand under her chin, I place the other on her waist. Her silk gown is cool to the touch. "Do you know how silk is made?"

She blinks, nodding slowly.

"From the larvae of silkworms," I continue. "It's rather a fascinating and tedious process but it produces the most strong, lustrous, and lightweight fabric that has one of its filaments stronger than a comparable filament of steel."

Her eyes darts around my face, her brows furrowing in confusion.

Swallowing, I say the closest things to a fealty that I can. "*Schat*, I really care about you. I meant it when I said you have a beautiful life ahead of you. And I also meant it when I said only you can deny me my pleasure. If it's friendship you want, I am just a call away."

Pressing her lips, she forcefully nods. "Thank you, George. Thank you."

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THIRTY-SIX

END OUT

Chiluba

IT'S BEEN TWENTY-FOUR DAYS SINCE GEORGE stepped into my apartment for the first time, and his presence never left. I make it my duty to spend as much time outside my apartment as I can, working and partying it up, but it doesn't help. Nothing makes sense anymore. How I went from that girl who doesn't give a shit to this girl who feels like shit—it makes no sense. Just like I woke up with the pressing need to prepare concoction rice with palm oil and like a robot set on autopilot, that's what I'm doing.

When the year started, I only wanted one thing—lots of deals that would increase my cash flow by a hundred percent. I didn't ask for my boyfriend break up with me. For my best friend to stop talking to me. The man I gave up my best friend for, telling me I have a beautiful life ahead, accuse me of sleeping with his friend—I would have preferred he'd come out straight and say he's done with us—and let me go so easily. What was I expecting spending time with a widowed man who has enjoyed and seen everything in life?

He doesn't need me.

For his birthday I couldn't think of anything special besides delivering a bottle of wine and a spa gift card. Oh... and when I checked the meaning and variations of *shcat*, I couldn't stop myself from feeling hot all over.

We talk from time to time, but only work-related stuff. I don't want to go on dinner dates or try a new cuisine. There's work to be done. My plate is full. Overflowing.

There are things I want to focus my energy on and focusing my energy on something I see no future in, no matter how happy it makes me feel in the moment is smart.

As I rinse scent leaves needed for my concoction rice under running water, I let my mind wander.

Self-sabotage.

I had to go look in the dictionary for the meaning.

How is it possible? That I, who wants to have the best kind of love and relationship, undermines my ability to get it. How is that possible?

I'm not Funsho, who called things off when he wasn't getting the attention he needed. Neither am I Osaze, who doesn't get it we'll never work out—he's not my type. I just can't... I can't imagine myself with him for a long time. Or George, who has had a beautiful life with his wife. He has the cutest kids and grandkids. The way they talk to him, I could feel the bond. After much introspection, I admit I was jealous. Why couldn't I grow up in that kind of household? What do I want to offer him he doesn't already have?

"My kids are my pride. I didn't want to have any..."

No matter how I look at it, up, down, sideways, there's no forever with George. Just now. Maybe I should go with that instead of tossing everything away. But why didn't he fight for me?

"... you give me so much pleasure... I've found it with you, only you can deny me."

Smiling, my tongue salivates in anticipation as I add the scent leaf to the almost ready concoction rice. It brings memories of home. Of childhood days when I had to revolutionize the preparation of so many meals. I invented dishes my siblings swore were the best. I wish I was taking notes then, so I can write and launch a cookbook.

The doorbell rings, but I don't move. *I didn't invite anyone. No one told me they would come around.*

Another chime of the doorbell, but this time it follows a familiar rhythm.

Ugh!

Reducing the cooker heat to prevent the rice from burning, I drag my feet to

the door. As I unlock it, I complain. “What are you doing here?”

Zena smirks smugly when her gaze lands on me. “There’s a saying about Muhammad and the mountain.”

Shaking my head, I widen the door’s opening so she can enter before locking it.

“What’s cooking? Smells divine.”

“Thank you.”

Zena follows me like a shadow to the kitchen. Having completed her NYSC thing two weeks ago, she is fully back in Lagos, looking for a job.

“How is Zoya?” Not like I care. Just want to know. Courtesy.

I don’t need to look back to see she’s scrunching her face at me. “She’s fine. If the two of you would just bring your lovely heads together and settle this difference you have, everything will be fine. I’ve asked her, but she will not talk. Do you care to tell me what happened, or should I find out myself?”

There’s no way I’m telling Zena the cause of our fight. It’s none of her business.

“It’s between the two of us. We’ll sort it out.” Opening the pot, I use my fingers to pick hot rice grains, tossing them into my mouth. Ah... food is ready.

Zena leans on the counter. “It’s almost two—” Slightly stretching her neck to peek into the pot. “Palm oil rice.” Grinning, she holds her hands.

“You want?” I ask, turning the meal so the smoked fish, *kpomo*, and scent leaves are evenly distributed.

She sniggers, magically producing two dishes.

“Your phone is ringing.” Zena blows on the spoonful she’s about to shove into her mouth. She’s not even done chewing the one in her mouth.

“Ignore it.”

It’s work. Àbẹ̀bí and John are preparing for the African Fashion Week in Amsterdam barely three weeks away. 34 Threads made it to two of three exhibitions—Amsterdam and South Africa. More wins. Expansion. And recognition.

“Go an’ sit down an’ eat now.” I tell her, taking water for two from the fridge.

“Hmm mm.” Shaking her head as she places the spoon in her mouth, barely closing her mouth as she chews. “This rice is so...” Using her hand to cover her mouth as she makes breathy sounds, blows steam from out of her mouth. “Good.

Hmm. Your phone.” She points to the device by the sink, then blows steam out. “It’s your mom.”

“Please.” Motioning for her to pass it.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” Maama will be excited to hear I made native jollof rice, the senior sister of jollof rice. “Hello Maama...”

There’s a strange noise coming from the speakers. It’s a shrill joint cry of women, or is it shouting? Their voices are intertwining with each other for me to make sense of it. Zena is staring funny at me. “Maama, what is it? How are you?”

“Your father... eh! Your father oh...” A piercing scream follows her words.

“Maama! Stop stressing yourself.” I knew there was no giving this man a second chance. He is causing this woman a lot of pain and she’s too blind to see it. “What did he do this time around? I warned you—”

“*Nna gi apụọla.*” Her voice is firm amidst the chaos. “*Ọ pụọla* ooooo... Oh!”

“Maama *chere.*”

“Your father is dead. He left me after everything—only me here, oooo...”

Why is Zena rushing towards me? She needs to sit down and eat. Something crashes on the kitchen floor and I blink as Zena shakes my arm.

“Luba!”

I blink. Once. Twice. Taking deep, long breaths.

“Luba what is it?” She looks at the floor, then back at me.

I look down to find my phone on the floor. *Oh.* Zena asked me a question. “He is dead.”

“Who?”

Looking up at her, the corners of my lips lift in a smile. “My sperm donor.”

My head struggles to blur the days after that phone call but I can remember key moments. Like when I got the news and what I did after. I ate my native jollof, laughing, asking Zena what she wants to watch. She looked at me strange asking what my plans are and I tell her I don’t have any. But by the time she’s leaving, I

had a plan. My oldest brother, Chido, had magically created a family WhatsApp group, saying we have to move fast so we don't pay extra to keep him in the mortuary.

Another is when Chido and I had a disagreeing agreement that I'll cover over half the bill for the funeral.

"You don't have to do this."

"I want to."

Besides helping him save the meager salary he earns as a banker, I started feeling guilty days after I got the news. The money I didn't give my father when he was alive, I gave it up to bury him.

Touché. Excellent job, Chiluba Immaculate Ndukwe.

Àbèbí didn't complain when I told her we're not canceling on the African Fashion Week in Amsterdam that's four days after the burial. Instead, she volunteers to come along with me for the funeral.

Yeah, the day after I mentioned to Zena I will drive the eighteen hours round trip to Abia State myself. I don't trust public transportation. It was part of what wrecked my business. I was stunned to see Zoya in my space and she didn't mince words about my travel plans. It ended in cries, hugs, strategic phone calls and booking flight tickets. We never spoke about our other misunderstanding, only dealing with the matter at hand.

When I saw Maama and how she tried to keep a smile on but failed. Even in death, she still loved the man. It is not healthy. Not right. Is madness part of love? Because only a crazy person would love someone that uses them. I'm not saying Maama is mad... I just want to understand.

Daadi is dead for good, can you all stop crying? Don't act as though he was a good man. At least he didn't cause us to carry him from one hospital to another.

At the burial site, while the preacher preached about life, death and living, my numb brain recognized it had missed Zoya's presence in my life. What if one of us dies tomorrow? Would we let my actions separate us?

"It pains me when parents think giving their children the things they never had is the best thing they can give when their children, knowing their children would prefer they can spend thirty minutes of their time playing or chatting non-judgmentally with them." The preacher says like he knew my family history. "What will that child remember you for? Or your family and friends? What will

they remember you for...”

Slightly turning to Zoya, I whisper, “I’m sorry for not telling you about him. Us.”

“Shh... Now is not the time or the place.”

The way Zoya, Zena, and Àbẹ̀bí flanked my sides when we, the children, started tossing sand into the grave. Did they think I was going to jump into the grave? With all the display Maama’s making, they would do better holding her.

Why do people love people who give them so much pain?

After the thanksgiving service, where I tell Maama we’re leaving for Lagos, her blank expression turns wary. “You won’t stay a while?”

“Maama, I have work to do.”

She nodded her head in understanding.

“Will you come with me to Lagos?” I ask Nneka, my half-sister, because I know Maama will never return to Lagos. She’d said so a long time ago.

“I want to stay with Maama.”

“Toh my child.” Maama’s leg shakes as she kept a strong front. “We will visit you now that your father is no longer—” Tears spilled from her eyes and she used the edge of her wrapper to wipe her eyes.

Yes. He had banned Maama from visiting me because he didn’t like what I did, right from my pageantry days till his death. It was a power struggle between us. I visited when I could, for Maama’s sake, but after my last visit, I chose not to.

How can she feel something for that man? A man who gave her nothing but pain and sleepless nights.

Zoya is running her fingers through my scalp, between my cornrows, as her ex-boyfriend drives us from Abia State to Port Harcourt International Airport. He still likes her and she knows this. I can’t imagine asking an ex for help because of a friend. Zoya is a loyalist. She deserves to know why I was headstrong about not using public transportation to the east, so I tell her.

“Last year, when I travelled home, on my way back, after a long weekend of matching words with the man called my father, I met this charming guy on the

bus that made me smile. We began talking about what we do. He said he was a broker. And he seemed legit. Spoke about this investment opportunity and at first, I was hooked. Line and sinker. Then skeptical.

Before we parted ways, he gave me his card. I can't explain what happened next without sounding crazy. Zo, less than forty-eight hours later, I was sending lump sums to this guy to invest for me. I only know this because Àbèbí said I was always joking about how much I was expecting once my broker got back to me. Within a week, Zo, I had used up funds I would have never touched, picked a fight with the accountant, and made some decisions I'm not proud to say. I don't know if it wore off or Maama's prayer worked for me, but I came to my senses. I swore off public transportation. I guess I didn't want to put myself in such situation again. Maybe I should have been a better daughter. More compliant. Not hungry for money."

My last words makes sense for only a minute and then I start vibrating with a chuckle. *How would the family have survived if I didn't go against Daadi's wishes?*

"Do you mind staying with her for a week?" I overhear Zoya asking Zena the moment we arrive in Lagos.

Why are they speaking hush, hush around me? I don't have to think about my father anymore or waste my energy hating him.

The question they should answer is this energy I have left, what do I use it for?



THIRTY-SEVEN

MELTING POINT

Chiluba

I'M SO BAD AT KEEPING TRACK of time these days. It flies so fast, yet I feel stuck in the past. We laid *Daadi* to rest about two weeks ago... Zena stayed with me until the day I travelled to Amsterdam with my crew for the fashion week. It was a different experience. Not bad. Different from the luxurious one I had with George.

My phone rings and I peel my eyes from my bedroom's ceiling, rolling the distance to check my phone's screen. It's a strange number. When the call is about to disconnect, I accept it.

"Hello?" Scratching my half-way loosened cornrows.

"Hello Luba, it's 'Suwa."

Ugh... she doesn't have to introduce herself. I'll never forget the unique voice of the daughter of the man I last fucked. "Hi Adesuwa."

I can't bring myself to call her 'Suwa. It's strange. We're not friends. I hope we could be, but I and her dad we're over.

"I've been trying to reach my dad; can you please tell him to call me when you get him?"

"Sure. Sure. That's all?"

“Yes. Thank you. Bye...”

What just happened? Staring dazed at my reflection in the vanity mirror opposite my bed. They don’t know we’re no longer together? Tsk. Recalling my brash statement weeks ago, *I am not your dad’s girlfriend. We are business partners.*

Look at how I took up the task without thinking twice. And what am I doing dialing his number? It hasn’t even started ringing when I want to hang up but he picks.

I hesitate. “Hello?”

“Schat... how are you?”

The deep cadence of his voice and how much I’ve missed it causes me to hold my breath. My eyes cloud with unshed tears. *What is wrong with me?!*

“Chiluba? Are you there?”

Swallowing, I respond with a nod, then realize he is not beside me. “I’m here.” *Oh no! Was that my voice or a rat just learned how to talk?*

“What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“Nothing is wrong. I’m home. Um... Adesuwa said she was trying to reach you. Please call her back.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Please hang up. Hang up.

“And how have you been? Congratulations on dominating Amsterdam.”

A dry smile teases my lips. “Thank you. I lost my dad.” *No. Shit. Why. No. No. Why did I tell him that?*

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Yeah.” A short, nervous laugh escapes me, I tap my thighs. “Just my mom now.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Please call Adesuwa.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

I flop my back on the bed the moment the call disconnects. Back to staring at the ceiling. I’m not fine! I’m not... The closest I’ve come to crying since I heard of my father’s loss was just now.

Am I normal? Is this normal?

Because things with 34 Threads and Lucid have slowed down, I took some days off to get my head together. To analyze my feelings. To grieve. But I don't feel anything.

I feel numb.

I should be feeling sad. He was my father.

I was there when Zoya and Zena buried their mother. I wasn't up to fifteen. We all bawled our eyes out. She was a good woman. Why don't I feel sad? During the burial, why did I feel this bubble in my chest that made me want to shout, *Daadi is dead for good, can you all stop crying?*

It doesn't help when I try to talk to my brother about how I feel because he doesn't want to talk about *Daadi*. My immediate youngers one are bothered about school, while Maama is the last person I want to talk to about this.

Everyone knows we had a strained relationship. When I think of talking to anyone about it, I sound like a hypocrite to myself. With heavy hands, I resume loosening my cornrows.

My phone rings, jarring me from sleep. Blinking, I rub a hand over my eyes. Glancing around, I find my phone just as the ringing ends. It vibrates with a new message.

05:34 PM

Georgie: I'm at your door.

05:37 PM

Georgie: Please open up.

What?! I blink again.

What is he doing here.

The phone rings again, vibrating angrily in my hand.

I don't bother picking. Instead, I move swiftly to my door. I open the curtain to find him standing on the other side of the sliding door.

My fingers don't move as fast as I want them to as I open the door.

"George." I cry, wrapping my arms around him. Inhaling his scent alongside the musky smell of rain. My eyes pepper and like that, tears well up my eyes and spill down my cheek.

"Oh *Snoepje*. I'm sorry." He murmurs soothing words that, for no reason,

make me bawl harder. Managing to close the door without untangling himself from my arms, he navigates us to the couch, cooing kind words to me.

Seated, I crawl onto his lap, clinging to him, crying my heart out.

I cry for the man my mother fell in love with.

The father I had.

The one I wanted.

For the men I sought my father in but pushed away.

The man my mother lost.

Weep for the father I never had.

"I forgive you... I forgive you..." I mutter under my breath repeatedly, clutching on to George's shirt.

He runs his hand over my hair for the millionth time and I smile lazily.

"Feeling better?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah."

"Want to talk about it?"

Sniffing, I nod, swallowing phlegm. "It happened in July. This is the first time I'm crying about it."

"From what I could glean of the relationship you had, it's understandable."

"I... I felt like a fraud at the burial. Everyone was crying, saying how good a man he was, but I just stood there like I fell from space. It was not the same man we all knew. Most selfish person I have ever met. Maybe he changed like my mother wants to believe, but how can someone who's changed tell me to stop what I'm doing because I'm painting a terrible picture of his name?"

The time he left us, he didn't think of that, oh. He returned and believed he could tell us how to go about our lives. Would you believe he told my mom not to visit me because he was sure I will not let her return to him?

There's no one in the family I can talk to about the way I feel about the whole situation. Truth is that I've forgiven him a long time ago, but it's difficult. It's difficult to forget. How do I forget the day he kicked the meal my brother, and I were eating because Maama confronted him about Nneka's mom? That's the core memory I have of my father.

He was an awful father that I can't find words to describe what he put my mother and my siblings through. I hated him so much because he was useless as

a father. Never respected him because he never tried to put effort into making life easier for Maama when he had plenty and worse when he had none.

Other memories I have are of my mom crying at night when she thinks we're all asleep. I feel... I feel..."

"*Schat...*" He rubs my back and I mellow. "You are justified to feel the way you feel."

"Thank you."

Silence ensues with only the distant sound of my refrigerator and air conditioning system breaking through my thoughts.

It is so hard to forget. All the times he could have been a better man. The time Maama took him back. She danced in church and women used her testimony as prayer reference for their lost husbands.

Mtsheww.

"What do I do with all these emotions bottled in me?"

"It's grief. It will pass."

"Is there a drug that makes it go away?"

"You'll be surprised."

Raising my head, I look at him. "You're serious?"

A small smile is tugging the corners of his lips. "Hmm mm."

"What is it?"

"Time."

We both chuckle and I fall back on his chest.

For the first time since he came in, I notice he's putting on a suit. Playing around a button on his inner shirt, images of happier times with my family comes to mind and I smile again.

"What is it?"

"I think I'm glad he died. This is the first time I'm saying it out loud. Is that a terrible thing?"

He inhales deeply. "*Schat*, what you feel is complicated. You don't need me to validate it. I'm here to listen and help in whatever way possible."

"Hmm." I never asked, but how does it feel when it's someone you loved? "I know I am prying, but I want to know, how was it for you when you lost her?" My voice is solemn.

“Hard. Tough. For a while, I felt I was dreaming.”

“O...”

I feel him nodding in agreement. “One moment she was there, laughing, smiling, repeating instructions to the kids, the next she was gone. I cried like a baby. Didn’t know if I would go on. I had three kids on my hands. The last was graduating from college the following year, others were already doing their own thing. The house felt so empty without her. I felt I couldn’t do anything. It was hard. Would the kids leave and never return? But here I am...” He rubs my back. “Living. Dreaming. Learning every day that wherever she is, she is happy. I am doing my darndest to stay happy. Going for the kids’ weddings and crying because she’s not by my side to witness it with me.”

“Did it get easy as the years go by? Do you... do you forget her sometimes?”

“For me, it hasn’t gotten easier. It has simply become a part of my life. Like how we need to drink water to survive. There are some dates and experiences I’ll never forget, as they hold so many memories. They are forever etched in my head. Like her birthday. The day I lost her—on a Saturday. Funny, I also met you on a Saturday.”

“I think I’ll forget I ever had a father.”

He scoffs. “With time, you’ll remember only what you want to remember. I’ll suggest you remember the good. No use loading up your heart with negativity. Tyrannies like that are dead. Don’t let them control you from the grave. When you tell their stories, tell the good and the bad, but always emphasize the good. For your own sake.”

“Have I ever told you, you’re wise?”

“Clearly not wise enough.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to stay away, but I stayed too far away.”

“What do you mean?”

He runs his hand over my hair, then kisses my head. “Never mind. Just a wise man musing.”

We stay like this for a while—his arms wrapped around me, my head on his chest, thinking of how good life could be if he wasn’t my friend’s uncle—until his tummy makes a rumbling sound.

“Someone’s hungry.” I say, uncurling myself from his body.

He runs his hand through his hair, shrugging. “Someone needed me.”

I don’t want to ask how he knew I needed him. He came around and I am glad he did. “I don’t think I have anything to offer.”

Standing up, a glance at one small hanging mirror reflects my image. I look a sight—my loosened hair looks pointing in all directions. He’s seated comfortably on my couch, not looking horrified or fazed. Held me while I cried all over him.

I fork my fingers in my hair, impishly looking down at him. “I’m sorry. I look a mess.”

He blinks. “*Schat*, are you okay?”

Startled, I glance around the room. “Me?”

He is standing up and by my side in seconds, taking my hands in his as he looks earnestly into my eyes. “You’ve never apologized for your appearance. Don’t start now. *Je bent net zo mooi als altijd lieve schat.*”

I smile broadly, my heart swelling at his compliment, whatever they mean. What I would do to be with this man...

“You have no idea how your smile makes me feel.”

“Hmm?” Still smiling, my heart threatens to explode.

He winks with a knowing smile, and I feel hot all over.

It’s time to step back and regroup. This type of happiness will make me dizzy.

Pulling out of his arms, I make my way to the kitchen. “I could make concoction rice for you...”

“What’s that?” He chuckles, following me. “Sounds poisonous.”

“Want to find out?”

Turns out I have some left over ingredients in the freezer that will make the meal extra delicious, so we get to work. It’s the first time I’m cooking for him and I like how comfortable he is with being in the kitchen.

He tells me tales of his kids’ first cooking experiences and I tell him mine and my siblings. We talk about everything I want to talk about, from our favorites to things that fuel our emotions, our weaknesses, and strengths.

“Maybe when I try this another time, I’ll say it’s better than jollof rice?” He confesses, laughing as we consume the meal.

It’s the best I’ve ever made.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

GRADING

George

“THESE MUSICIANS... WHAT IS BARKING LIKE a bingo? Dancing like alinko?” Alfred laughs, his eyes following a young server at Colonel Gambo’s 60th birthday party.

The party is a glamorous but intimate gathering of friends and members of various associations and clubs in Colonel Gambo’s spacious backyard. Although it’s almost eight, because it’s a birthday, grandkids are running around, while the older kids are dancing to the music playing. There’s a three-tier cake amongst others on a table before a banner where well-wishers go to take pictures with the celebrant and his wife. With what I’ve witnessed, his wife is the chief celebrant because of the way he dotes on her.

I wish I have someone to dote on, but after that night at Chiluba’s, things kind of returned to the usual pace. I’m glad I was there for her at her lowest. A little pissed, I was the last person to hear about her loss. But glad all the same.

I’ve been feeling a lot lately. And it’s scary. Knowing someone can have this power over me again. I thought we have one soul mate in life, but... this thing between Chiluba and I, it’s inevitable. What I feel for her is beyond anything I’ve felt in the past eight years.

Eight years.

The other women I've spent time with could have built this desire in me. But none came near...

I can't run from this.

All the while I've been running, it makes a fool. A hypocrite. A second chance at love staring at me. But like Chiluba, I am denying it, playing on the edges.

Why have I been running away from what is obvious between the two of us? Scared to explore and express my feelings for her. Is it too late for me, for us to start, or should I let go?

Thing is, I thought I had done everything I needed to do in life. I had it all. All I needed to do was work, be a great grandpa and wait for my time. The time when I get to meet Mirabel. Until I met her.

Now I want to live.

When I'm on call with the kids, they joke about her having something on me. But from the first day I set my eyes on her, I knew we were destined to do something together. Just didn't know it was to this extent.

Will you ever remarry?

For now, I don't know.

Funny how I've lived this long, and I don't know how this will pan out.

With marriage comes kids. I have been there. Done it. And although I didn't want kids, I am glad I have them now. Do I want to do it again? She is young. She deserves whatever she wants. She deserves the world.

What will I be promising her?

A lifetime?

I can't promise her that. Having spent half of my life living in my world... there is nothing much to offer.

But... I can promise her the time I have left.

And when I can't satisfy her needs?

She's so young. Full of life. Ambitious...

Will I be able to keep up? Ten years, twenty years... will I be able to keep her interested and invested in me? In us?

How do I show her I care? I don't want it to be all about gifts, since that's supposedly her love language, but how do I show her I want it to be us?

Just us.

I've not been the best at showing my displeasure. Maybe going berserk with every guy that approaches her or that she smiles at will let her know I care.

What if this is just a phase for me... just like my friends? What if she's the first young girl I am supposed to fall for, then after a time, a series of younger girls will catch my eyes?

Horseshit.

Utter nonsense mixed with shit.

Alfred says something I don't catch. My mind returns to the bubbling environment as I watch everyone rise. I go with the motion. Colonel Gambo holds the hilt of the knife buried in the cake.

"On the count of J E S U S, cut the cake," the MC says.

A cheer goes round after the count and as we seat, I watch Alfred, wondering how to deal with our unspoken business. I didn't plan on meeting him here. For most of summer, he has been going around the globe buying artwork for cheap so he can organize a big show towards the end of the year and cash out. The Colonel is a highly respected man, so I guess Alfred returned to the country to show him respect. Albeit he is pissing me off with his roving eyes.

"Van Cleef," Alfred leans to my side, speaking in a hushed whisper. "I've been wanting to ask..."

My ears perk up.

"What is your current deal with that Chiluba girl? Still with her?"

"Why are you asking?"

He smiles, a lazy, arrogant smile tilting his chin to the space beside me. "She's not here."

"She's busy. The lady has a life." I didn't ask her to join me. She's got multiple fashion shows she is attending and preparing for, on top of her retail expansion with ARTSY, employing extra hands—there's more than enough on her plate that we only occasionally dine out these past weeks.

"Hmm... I've been trying to get on her good side, but she keeps putting me at a distance. This was after I put in a word for her so ARTSY can stock her goods. She's superb. You know." He leans in like he's about to tell a secret. "The other time my wife caught me with one of my small chops, I sent her a box full of 24... It should be 24, I know there's a four in it. A box full of 24 Threads designs and my wife has been out of my hair ever since. Going out at every chance. Even

my small chops loves her designs. Chiluba is gold.”

“Hmm.” *What’s new?*

“Even ARTSY has seen their fashion sales increase because of the 24 Thread styles. It’s a trendsetter. You want to know what puzzles me?” He taps a well-manicured finger on the table.

“What?”

“Chiluba hasn’t called to say thank you.”

Horseshit. “For what?” If he says 24 Threads again, I’ll shove cutlery into his mouth.

He balks. “*Ahan*, to thank me.”

I should have known it was impossible for her to do anything with Alfred. Although I know she disliked him on the spot, somewhere in my brain, I wanted to push away that budding sliver of happiness I was deriving from another woman who wasn’t Mirabel or a family member.

“But she’s making the money. You’re benefiting from her.”

It should never be Alfred’s words against hers.

We don’t deserve that.

She doesn’t deserve that.

“Yes, yes. But...” he snorts, “You will not understand. You’re too...” He gestures, his hands molding invisible playdoh. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

He grins, waggling his bushy brows. Now I see what Chiluba meant. It’s not *cool*. He should take care of it more. “You’re taking your time with her?”

If only he knows... “Alfred, thanks a lot for supporting my girlfriend.”

His brows draw together. “Your girlfriend? Van Cleef. You’re serious?”

Do I need to answer that?

“*Ei* George... I did nothing with her. If I knew you were officially together, I would never have propositioned her. I’m sorry man.”

“Are you?”

“I said I suspected nothing between you two—stop looking at me like that. You want to beat me?” He gives a short, nervous laugh. “We’re not boys who fight over girls. I’m a red-blooded man and know when to call quits.”

“Chiluba was always mine. Who reached out first?”

“Not me!” His forehead creased. “I don’t think she knows she’s yours. Why do you let your women roam wild?”

“Watch your tongue, Alfred.”

“It was an honest question.”

“I’ll deal with Chiluba.” I get up but lean down to drop some last words. “You told me how it goes with dating these younger girls, but you don’t even live by the rules.”

“What rules?”

“Letting them beg you. My advice? No one needs your dry, wrinkled dick. Save it for your wife.”

His face turns dark, and his lips move to form a retort, but I don’t wait to hear what he has to say, making my exit, my phone to my ear.

“Mike. Meet me in front. We’re leaving.”

The drive to Chiluba’s apartment takes a while, but not as bad as it would have been where it a weekday.

Godverdomme.

I really want to leave Chiluba out here for this kind of wolf when we have so much chemistry? *What do you want to offer her?*

Fragments of my thoughts from not so long ago return to haunt me.

...looking for a matured woman... Not some young girl wet behind the ears, who thinks the world is about her having fun and throwing tantrums when she doesn’t get what she wants.

Telling her she’s self-sabotaging when in reality, we’re two peas in a pod.

For now, I still don’t know what I want to offer. Nevertheless, I want to face the naked truth.

First, I will apologize to her.

For the things I’ve said and those I never uttered.

Take back all the words that hung loose on my tongue but never came out, like her being childish and throwing tantrums.

Praise her daily on how, from nothing, she successfully grew her business. That her ambitions are valid and if she needs any help, she can come to me. And I mean it. She doesn’t have to do things alone. I want to be here for her.

If she sabotages personal relationships by making her ambitions her lover, how can we find a balance? How do I make her see that she can have the relationship she has been imagining for herself with me when I've not handled what we have well enough?

She needs to discover that there's happiness beyond her ambitions. That without the partnership between us, there are so many things we can do together.

In life, there are people that know what they want and those that don't. The groups are further divided into those that go out and those that wait. Further into those sections are those that find what they are looking for or not looking for. We can finally divide it into those that don't know how to keep what they have or are too scared to keep it.

Chiluba falls into the category of people that know what they want, goes out to look for it, finds it and...

I thought I had the answer, but with Chiluba... I am never sure.

Right now, she's in both final categories—she either is scared to keep it or doesn't know how to keep it.

Scared to keep it because of her experiences. Doesn't know how to keep it because of her background.

For me, this is the first time I'll blatantly admit it. I fidget as Mike hits a bump. I am scared to keep what we might have.



THIRTY-NINE

SEAM FINISH

Chiluba

THIS IS WHAT HELL FEELS LIKE. And I’m not talking about the thought of the man who keeps occupying my headspace, call logs, emails or text messages. I’m talking about the stupid blade that cut my skin—behind my knee—three days ago.

Chi m o... I grimace, gently sitting on the edge of the couch before tenderly stretching my foot forward, wincing.

The cut is causing problems in my life. Besides this cut on my leg that I got when I visited The Sewing Factory, this week has been great. Long, but great. However, I’ve not been able to go out today. Cancelling meetings with vendors because I felt weird when I woke up today.

I took a nap earlier, only to wake up extremely hungry, nauseous, and irritated with a temperature high enough to boil water.

Just the thought of the word nauseous has me involuntarily leaning forward and retching without vomiting.

Who did I offend?

My eyes water with reflex tears and I press my tummy.

“If you want to throw up, throw up now... What’s this? What’s this now...”

Ugh.

Man... my breath stinks.

I slouch into the couch. A lone tear slides down my cheek as I drag in my breath, breathing with my mouth open.

The dry heaving started earlier, before the nap. I have shoved my hands down my throat to aid the vomiting process, but nothing. Only gas comes out.

The delicious yam porridge Zoya and Zena brought when they stopped by last weekend is in the fridge, however I am too irritated to eat because of two dirty dishes in the sink. And I don't want to wash those dishes myself because I don't want to dip my hand in soapy water.

Oh...

Everything irritates me. Even the face of the cut I have applied first aid to.

I should call someone... what if I'm dying?

Some weeks back, I had a sit down with Zoya and we agreed to disagree but ended up choosing our friendship. I am working on being a better friend to Zoya. It shows the kind of person I am that even after so many years of friendship, I messed things up with my personal person. All because of man.

Just like my—we're not going there. *Let the past be in the past.*

If only this thing with George can be more... I really like him.

Who am I kidding?

I love him.

Too bad... he doesn't want me.

His actions say otherwise.

What am I thinking? This fever is eating into my brain cells.

It's not like he doesn't want me... but from our conversations, he doesn't want a permanent woman in his life. He just doesn't know how to say it. The other night, while we dined at the Radisson Blu restaurant, he told me tales about his wife. Her beliefs. Values. And more.

If she were alive, and we were agemates, she and I would have been friends.

Ugh.

She sounded like someone that will make you her friend, no matter the age gap. When he spoke of her, she sounded cool. How can I compete with someone like that?

“I’ve done everything that needs to be done with a good woman. What’s the use of doing it over again?”

I should have been cautious when I tossed myself at him in Amsterdam. All the signs were there. He has been open about it.

“What’s the use of doing it over again?”

Why do I find the perfect man—a perfect match in bed and out—only to feel this way? Since I started seeing him as more than Zoya’s uncle, I was never concerned about his age.

“... again?”

It’s high time I visit the village with the sole purpose of confirming if my parents did anything to annoy anyone.

Don’t get me wrong. I am happy. My life, business and now my friendship has not felt this good in a while, but there’s this piece of my heart that wants more.

The doorbell chimes.

Eish, Chi m o... I just sat down now. Why didn’t the person ring the bell when I was standing?

Come back later abeg.

Come back when my body doesn’t feel like a truck ran over it and was left to dry under a blistering sun on an asphalt road.

The doorbell rings again, followed by my phone ringing.

“What is it!” I mumble furtively, hissing.

Dragging myself off the couch, I limp to the door, casting a quick glance at the living room space.

It looks decent.

Tsk. Even at that, I don’t want to entertain any visitor.

Removing my satin bonnet, I shake out my waist-length box braids.

It could be a delivery guy. Lately, George has been sending thoughtful gifts—food, snacks, cards to make me smile, a journal to process my grief, a blown-up framed picture of us in the canal, weighted blankets so I can sleep better—to my apartment, at work... like once he knows where I’ll be, he sends something.

Opening the door, guess who is here?

You guessed right.

Mr. George Van Cleef.

All six feet plus of him. Clad in a dark Senator attire, looking the opposite of me—put together.

I don't need him here. Not when I'm at my weakest again.

I try to shut the door but too late... he pushes it open and steps in, sliding the door behind him.

"What do you—"

He claims my lips in what is supposed to be a deep, sensual kiss, but I stand frozen. Dazed and confused. The sudden movement shakes the juices in my head, and I try to balance it.

He pulls back immediately, slowly releasing a deep breath, unabashedly staring at me. His gaze fixed. Like he just discovered sugar.

Has he realized his error? That he just deep throated a mouth that tastes like stale bread? Slowly, I move my hand to cup my mouth, so I can at least blow air into it and see how bad, but he reaches out, holding me. The sudden motion causes my head to feel heavy. My eyes feel like they're rolling in their sockets.

"What was that for?" My voice sounds weak. Too weak for my liking.

"I've missed you. I had to do that." As he speaks, he stylishly pushes himself into my apartment and weak me, allows myself to be guided towards the couch.

We dined out barely a week ago. Even fucked in your suite after.

Biting back a wince as every step I take feels like three people are pounding yam on my head, I ask, "How can I help you?"

He gestures to the couch. "Please sit."

"Thank you."

I watch as he sits, thinking I'll join him.

"I'm in my house. I get to choose what I do."

He hesitates. Shakes his head.

Tired of my stubborn self?

Then stands up to hold my elbow.

His eyes search mine. "Chiluba, I love you."

Where is this revelation of sorts—where is this coming from? Am I having fevered dreams? Should I slap myself awake? I take a cursory glance at my elbow, where his creamy skin touches my brown skin. For someone who hasn't

noticed something is wrong with me, my expression must betray how I feel about his declaration.

“I know this might come as a shock to you. And I know this is no fancy restaurant, no roses. They can come later—I want to let you know how I feel about you.” His eyes skimming my face. “I love you.”

“George...”

His other hand holds my other elbow, sliding up and down my arms as he speaks. “It took me a while to come to terms with how I feel. Swallow my fear and-and let you know... *Schat*, I love you. It is the truth.”

I snort. The feeling of denial is stronger than all the pain my body is going through.

George can't love me.

He can't.

This only happens when the *punani* is astounding. I would have loved to engage too, because he knows how to use his dick, but I feel woozy.

I'm having a feverish dream where George is declaring his undying love for me.

“What do you have to say?” He looks at me, eager for my response.

I know just what to say because I feel the same way too. “You love me.” I shrug, holding back a whimper. “What next?” Enough of this Telenovela drama. I need to lay my head down and get some rest.

“*Schat*, I—” His expression turns grim, pulling me to his chest. “Are you okay?”

“... be better when you leave.” I mutter as he gently makes me sit on the couch, his hand on my forehead, neck and forehead again.

“*Schat*, you're burning.” He mutters some curses. “What is wrong?”

I attempt to push his hand off my forehead, but my hand suddenly feels heavy. “I'm fine. Just a little fever... Stress... Maybe malaria?” I should have sent someone to buy drugs.

“Have you eaten today?”

I woke up hungry but... “Yes daddy,” I simper, but he's not having it. “Noodles. In the morning.”

Last time I was aware of time, it was past ten, so I understand his deadpan look.

“Why?” I taunt. “Do you care?”

“More than you ever know, but first I need to make sure that you are all right. Do you have insurance?”

Insurance? I stifle a laugh. *How many Nigerians have insurance?* Tsk. *Joker.* And who says I want to go to a clinic or hospital? So they can inject me. *Mbanu.*

“We’re going to a clinic.”

“I’m fine.” Eyeballing him. “You can’t just come in here and start bossing me around.” *Yes! You can’t!* “This is my house. My space.”

Determined eyes smile affectionately at me. “You’re right *Snoepje.* Everything you said is true. But first I need a doctor to confirm everything is alright with you.”

“No clinic.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like the smell. I don’t—” Involuntarily, I begin retching without anything coming out. It was the thought of antiseptic smelling hospitals that set me off this time. “I don’t feel good...”

When I’m calm, George assures me I’ll be fine before placing a call.

Folding my arms petulantly, I try to save face by not grimacing each time the feeling that someone is shaking a tambourine in my head occurs.

“*Schat,*” He returns his attention to me, cuddling me closer to his side. “Ever since I’ve known you, you never complained about headache or being sick even when under the craziest pressure. Trust me. We need to see a doctor. Your face looks puffy.”

I click my tongue at his heartfelt speech.

George the daddy.

In one swift, gentle motion, he gets up. “Where’s your bedroom?”

I point. *What do you want to do there?*

“I’ll go pick up some change of clothes, okay?”

He doesn’t wait for my response.

Moments later he’s back with a change of clothes which he persuades me to put on.

“I don’t want to...” I whine.

“You are lovely even when you are sick, but I prefer you feisty and sassy.”

He guides my foot into slippers, cussing when I show him the injury and how I got it. As he opens the sliding door, he asks, "Where's your ID?"

My ID... *what's that?*

"*Schat...* your ID card?"

Oh. ID card. "It should be in my purse."

"And where is that?"

"I don't know. The room?"

He takes me back into the living room, sits me down, before going in and out of the room multiple times, until I affirm which purse is the right one.

Mike greets me, holding the door as George helps me into his Land Cruiser.

When George comes in from the other side, he moves till we are sitting hip to hip, then holds my hand.

"Can you explain the symptoms you've been experiencing? And for how long?"

So, I don't get to wait till I meet the doctor? Is this how they do it?

All my life, I've never been to the hospital or clinic.

Not feeling fine? Maama will wash *ugwu* leaves, mix it with *iba* leaves, malt and milk, like magic, you'll feel better.

I grew so strong that I evolved to not using drugs.

Just lay down, cover myself with a blanket from head to toe, and I'm feeling better.

It never fails.

Until this afternoon.



FORTY

FUTURE STATE

George

SHE'S STRUGGLING TO DECIDE WHETHER TO tell me what's wrong because she's doing that thing with her tongue and cheeks. The little things that make me love her more. That makes me want to go all the way.

When I arrived her apartment, I had mapped out all I wanted to say. How I would apologize and make amends. But the moment she opened the door, all I wanted was a kiss and to declare the feelings I've been scared to admit.

I don't want to ever let her go. Once a doctor clears her, I will let her know that no man, young or old, would tear us apart. Only death.

Just like what Mirabel and I had. Even more.

Chiluba is my now. My future. Till we both agree that we're over. Of which I know we both suffer from not being able to withdraw completely. That's what we've been doing for the past months. Anyone who thinks they can come after me while I'm still alive will experience toxicity at its highest because Chiluba and I are 5 & 6.

Squeezing her hand, I raise it to my lips. Place a kiss on it, then hold it to my chest. "Talk to me *schat*. What symptoms have you been experiencing?"

"Started today... First, I was bloated. Then this nauseous feeling and trying

to vomit with nothing coming out.”

This is it?

Tiny light bulbs spark in my chest but quickly dim when I remember she’d mentioned bloating in the same sentence with getting nauseous feelings. Being married, having three children and a couple of miscarriages in between gives me an idea of what this could be...

Strange.

Why am I happy at the thought of the possibility that she—she sighs, adjusting on her seat.

“I feel so tired. I can feel all the muscles and joints in my body. Ugh. Can’t remember the last time I had malaria or fever. This one is the worst.”

I keep my thoughts to myself because it is uncalled for. I’m out here looking for silver linings. To have her look at me the way she did while dining with my family.

When we arrive at Bloomfield Hospital, we go through registering her into their system and they assign a room to her. It’s shocking to know that she doesn’t have any medical record. She is leaning on me, murmuring comments about having a birth certificate to which I smile loosely.

“What’s your relationship?” the nurse asks grimly, her nose stuck in the air.

“Partner.”

She blinks, then writes whatever on a pad.

Is this what our life will be when we step into a room? People wondering who’s using who?

Chiluba sighs and I’m impatient. I want her back to herself.

“Can you get someone to take her in? I’ll do the other necessary stuff.” The nurse swallows, nodding as she calls another nurse. Pressing a kiss to Chiluba’s forehead, I squeeze her to my side. “*Schat*, please follow the nurse. I’ll join you soon.”

I’m standing by the door to her designated room when the doctor turns to leave. It’s someone I’m familiar with. Ugh. Great.

“Dr. Abimbólá.” Darting my gaze to Chiluba, who is laying on the narrow hospital bed with a nurse standing by her side, ready to draw blood. “How is she?”

Dr. Abimbólá glances at me, dipping a hand in her pocket. “Mr. Van Cleef?”

“I’m sorry, I’m—”

“He’s my boyfriend.” Chiluba winks from the bed but the *good doctor* didn’t catch it because she has her back to her.

Are you playing or serious?

Dr. Abimbólá gives a cursory nod, turning to face Chiluba. “An infection? I can’t say for now. There’s no connection with her fever, dry heaving, and the cut on her leg. So, we are taking blood samples to check for the type of infection.”

I take a quick walk outside the room with her, discussing Chiluba’s habit and whatnots—I’m also learning about her and have little to say.

“I have a favor to ask.” I say, as we come to a stop, so she can leave. “Can you please check if she’s pregnant?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Van Cleef.” She begins walking away but turns back immediately and in the politest voice ever, tells me, “I’m sorry, Mr. Van Cleef, we don’t offer such services here.”

“Pregnancy tests?”

“No sir. We don’t do D & Cs.”

I’ve never felt the urge to hit something this bad before.

Eikel?!

We don’t know if she’s pregnant and here you are talking about—about—*Godverdomme!*

Swallowing the boiling rage inside me, I nod. “It’s fine. I just need you to confirm.”

“Alright sir.” Her smile is patronizing. “I just wanted to clarify, so we’re on the same page.”

Before stepping back to the room, I place a call to Zoya, the only person like family, to her here in Lagos. And another call to Dáre, telling him I’m out of office for an unknown period of time. He tries to cajole me into telling him what’s happening, but I guess Mike will fill him up later. No time for dallying.

Chiluba is not being a good patient. She’s playing mute, swapping colored pieces of candy on her phone.

When Zoya arrives about an hour, thirty minutes later. There’s mild contempt in her eyes as she greets me before hurrying to Chiluba’s side.

Chiluba smiles wearily immediately she spots Zoya. Something she has not been doing since we’ve been here.

“Babe, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

“How did you know I was—”

Zoya’s gaze sweeps my way before returning to her. “He called me.”

Chiluba’s evil eye meets mine and I shrug, dipping my hand in my pockets. *I did right by reaching out to Zoya.* “I had to.”

The steam leaves her, and she breathes a, “Thank you.”

“Thanks Uncle George,” Zoya tosses my way.

I’m wondering if I imagined it because her hand is on Chiluba’s neck, asking how she’s feeling.

I never called Zoya to tell her what’s going on with Chiluba and I, even after Chiluba told me of their confrontation. Their friendship is between them. They’ll sort whatever it is between them. That’s why I called Zoya to come over.

Rocking on my heels, I watch the exchange of honest soft smiles between childhood friends. It looks like they’ve resolved whatever conflict they had.

“This is where I leave you folks.” Wanting them to continue their bonding without me lurking around. They should have coffee or something strong somewhere in this building. “I’ll be back. Need to get something to drink.”

“Um, Uncle George.”

I turn to look at Zoya.

“Please spare me a moment outside.”

Nodding, I note the furtive whisper between friends before stepping out into the hallway.

“Uncle George,” Zoya announces her presence, her gaze darting the empty hallway as she steps out of the room.

“Zoya, thanks for coming.” Curving my lips in a small, appreciative smile.

Unspoken words hang in the air between us.

She shrugs, hugging herself. “I had the choice not to come down but...” She shrugs again, her probing eyes searching mine. “I love my friend too much not to.”

Swallowing, I nod. Her meaning is clear. “I’m sorry—”

“Would you have ever told me about it?”

Anyone passing by would think we are talking about the weather, but her words and the undertone in her voice makes me feel like a criminal.

“I wasn’t—”

“Do you know how stupid I’ve been feeling all these months? All the questions I’ve asked myself. And you’re supposed to be my uncle?” She snorts, licking her lips. “Do you know how bad this thing got between her and I? Yet I’m the first person you’re calling.”

“Zoya, I know how sensitive you get.” I try laughing, but it ends up being a grimace. “I honestly never thought of telling you about it because—”

“I’m not important?”

“Not that. You know better.”

“Jeez... so why?”

“We weren’t sure what we were doing.”

“And when you guys figured that out?”

“We’re only figuring that out now.” Would she believe that I just told her friend less than three hours ago that I love her?

She stares askance at me, then briefly takes her gaze off me, licking her lips. “Doesn’t matter. Jeez... You should have told me first.”

“Zoya, you know how you get when things are not the way you imagine them to be.”

Her eyes flash daggers at me. “Still, you should have told me so I can decide on my own. You guys are adults, you would have done whatever you wanted no matter what I thought.” She loosely waves a hand. “Jeez, keeping it from me makes me feel you don’t trust me.” Placing her hand to her chest. “Like my friend can’t trust me. You don’t want to be the person in the middle whose uncle and best friend can’t come out to. It’s like I’m insignificant. Even courtesy demands you tell me. I know Chiluba has her issues, but you—”

She stops abruptly, her eyes say everything she won’t say with her lips.

“We’re sorry. No excuse is valid for the position we placed you. Please accept my apo—our apology.” I move close until I have one arm around her shoulder. “Chiluba is precious to me, and I know how important your friendship is to her. I’m sorry it got to where you had to confront her. Hmm?” Shaking her slightly. “Forgiven?”

“I guess. Thing is... before you, she was very open with me. Told me everything. She tends to be open but secretive—”

“Secretive.”

We say at the same time and laugh at our summary of the woman we both love.

“Chiluba is the most open but secretive human I’ve ever known. When she told me she loved you, I knew what you guys had was beyond me. It was as though you have taken my friend from me and—”

“She told you she loved me?” I can’t get past that statement.

Zoya withdraws from the side hug, looking up at me. Her crestfallen expression reflects the way I feel.

How come Chiluba told Zoya she loves me when she hasn’t told me herself?

“Oops.” Covering her mouth to hide her shit-eating grin. “I guess this is penitence for keeping your relationship secret from me.”

“Nice one Zoya.”

“Sorry, not sorry.” She shoots hand pistols at me, not bothering to hide her satisfaction at my plight.

“I need a drink.” I stare down at her finger. “Is that fashion?”

She grins without looking down. “No.”

“Congratulations.” Whirling on my heels, I take long strides down the hallway.



FORTY-ONE

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Chiluba

THE WAY GEORGE DOTES ON ME reminds me of that night on Snake Island, after I got wet with Ese. He was so concerned; he didn't want to leave me alone. So, he called Zoya here because he didn't want to leave me alone?

George.

What a man.

"I love you."

My toes curl as I recall the moment. Not the most romantic, but...

I skim the private ward—Just my type of man, booking a private ward at Bloomfield Hospital because I have a fever.

It's some hospital I've never heard of before. The exterior looks like an elegant home and the interior doesn't make me feel like I'm in a hospital. Yes, my nose picked up the faint antiseptic smell, but it is almost unnoticeable, replaced with a nice, light, lemony fragrance.

Unbidden, my mind goes to a proposal that should never have happened.

"Qmọ to rewa, how are you?" The cadence of the voice like nails scratching a chalkboard makes me cringe.

Refusing to think on the ambiguous greeting, I respond flatly. "Can you please confirm they are going to come through?"

"Don't worry it's all sorted."

Good. I am about to hang up when his voice stops me.

"When are you going to service me?"

I should have known he would not change his spots overnight. "Service you?" Deciding to play dumb, I ask, "Do you need new clothing?"

"New clothing." He laughs, a deep bellied laugh. "Chiluba, don't play with me. You're a beautiful lady. You know how this works. I have what you need. Let's see where we can help each other—"

"You know I'm with your friend—"

"George? George doesn't do small girls like you. No lady will ever replace his wife. Or is it because he's oyinbo? Ma lo go o. Those ones have tight fists. While you're thinking about it, I'll put in the word for..."

Zoya clears her throat as she swaggers into the room wearing a broad, devilish, and disturbing grin.

"What did you do?"

She plops on the seat by my bedside. "Me? Nothing."

"Babe, I told you not to do it now... What did you tell him? What did he say?"

Although I mean everything I just said, a perverted side of me is glad I'm not the only one she gets to rant at.

"Trust me. Nothing serious." She crosses her leg, picking a brochure from the bedside table. "Simply told him how you enjoy being my friend." Pouting, she flips through the pages. "And how grateful he should be that I brought you into his life?"

Why is she acting nonchalant?

Flipping the annoying book that keeps making that annoying sound.

"Zoya." Grimacing, I manage to sit up. "What are you not telling me?"

Shutting the brochure with a snap, she turns to me, still grinning. "I've got great news."

"Okay..." George told you he loves me?

"I really did not think it through, but I know—"

“Spill it.”

“Ah...” Scrunching her smiling face, lips pressed together. “I said yes.” Pressing her lips. Waiting for my response.

You said yes... so...

Her brow raises, and she nods her head like I know what she’s talking about.

She looks down at her hands resting pretty on her knees. My gaze follows but notice nothing amiss.

When I meet her gaze again, she rolls her eyes. “Jeez.”

“Talk *nau*. You can see I’m not feeling fine.” I hiss. “Stop stressing me.”

She sighs, dramatically placing a hand to her forehead.

“You said yes to what?”

“Jeez.... look at the ring now.”

Like magic, my eyes find the ring finger that has a discreet band around it. Who proposed? How can she say yes to someone I don’t know? Or is it her ex?

“Manir...” she says with a permanent big grin plastered on her face.

What’s happening to us?

How could she say yes to a man I have only met once? My words to her when I met *Mighty Man* were to have fun while it lasts. He’s good looking. Loaded. And from a tricky family background, but how could she?

What is happening to our friendship?

“Zoya... see my face. I am happy. And in shock.”

“What is it?”

“This was not the plan now. You said this guy ghosted you without notice.”

She shakes her head. “We’ve resolved all that.”

“Are you sure?”

She laughs, tapping my arm playfully. “We’ve moved from that spot, Luba. Come on, join me on this side. I’m thinking of wedding dresses. Bridesmaids. Event planners. Caterers. The works.”

Close your mouth, Luba. This should not come as a surprise to you. Look at you and George.

“And no one but you is going to design my wedding dress.” She stifles a giggle. “He wants the wedding to hold next month.”

“Ahan, why?”

She winks and I laugh.

Manir is in for the ride.

“I’m looking at a September or October wedding in Dubai.”

How and when did all this happen?

How did we lose track of each other’s life? Meeting people. Getting engaged.

My best friend is engaged and I’m the last to know. I feel like a kid longingly staring through the window. I guess it’s all part of adult hood and growing up.

I hold her hand, staring at the ring. “It looks beautiful.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“How did it happen?”

“It was earlier today. I got home to find Dad, Zena, and Aunt Clara’s family at home. I suspected nothing because it’s Dad’s birthday. Manir joined and next thing I know, he is proposing. Uncle George’s call came in minutes after I saw Manir off. I thought something had happened to you. I rushed down here.”

Oh Zoya... My throat constricts with emotions. “Thank you—congratulations. Thank you Zoya.”

There’s a knock on the door before Dr. Abimbólá strolls into the room, holding some files in her arm.

“Miss Chiluba.” She smiles, scouring the room with her eyes.

“Hi.” I reciprocate the smile. I feel much better with the treatment of my cut and Zoya’s news.

“I have your reports from the lab.” She turns to Zoya, a polite smile on her face. “Can you excuse us please? Only family can stay, and she has to authorize that.” She returns her gaze to me, grinning like she’s advertising Close-Up for Unilever.

The sweetness Dr. Abimbólá is oozing makes my skin crawl. My heart palpitates and I feel a tingle in my chest.

I lied.

I don’t feel good anymore. Trying to suck enough oxygen into my lungs. The dry heaves are... *Chi m o...* Leaning forward, I retch nothing but gas. My eyes grow wide with panic. Whatever the doctor will tell me, I doubt I’ll be able to process it properly. And where is George?

“She’s fine,” I hear Dr. Abímbólá tell Zoya, who is panicking.

When I’m calm, I shake my head. “She can stay.”

“Are you sure?” Dr. Abímbólá raises a brow.

Zoya nods her head, mumbling something about being okay to step out for a bit.

I shake my head.

I want her here.

This year has been crazy. And I’ve learnt a lot. The major one being to cherish and respect my friendship with Zoya.

“Please stay.”

“That’s fine then.”

Dr. Abímbólá goes on and on about what they found in my blood samples and what they mean. What is good and options to run more tests if I want... The last bit I hear is. “...two months pregnant. But we need to be careful because you have a viral infection which we believe is from the cut. Here are...”

Pregnant?

The droning sound of Dr. Abímbólá’s voice continues at the back of my head. How is that even possible? I feel, more than see Zoya move close to me, holding on to my hand. I hope she’s listening to what the doctor is saying because I’m still stuck on the pregnant and infection part.

“... and still, I would advise—”

“I always use protection.” I blurt. Okay, except or the two or is it three times George, and I went raw. None of those times matches with the age of the pregnancy.

My sex life has been active for over seven years and now my vagina turns on me?

Zoya’s grip on my hands tightens. She’s telling me to calm down, but how can I? I need some explanation. Justification too. For why the eggs in my womb think now is the perfect time to become a mother. And these last weeks, I’ve been so busy, I didn’t think of my period’s lack of appearance.

Dr. Abímbólá smiles like she’s the one carrying a baby without planning it. Without being married.

I know I’m not the conventional, go to college, get a job, marry kind of girl, but I wanted to be married before kids.

“George doesn’t do small girls like you. No lady will ever replace his wife.”

Maama... how would she react when she finds out?

I’m the first daughter. I’m doing well. Before the kids come, I should be married.

Ei! *Chi m o...*

This was not what I planned for Maama. I wanted to give her the traditional, court and white wedding. All to shame her neighbors, family members and those insulting her for allowing me to pursue my dream and career as a model, then a designer. Leaving home to be independent at such an early age.

“It happens sometimes.” Dr. Abímbólá starts. “Maybe the condom broke, or it was expired. All the same, congrats. I will leave you to process the information. There’s a patient portal where you can access your records. A nurse will return with prescriptions to help treat the infection but there’s nothing we can do for the dry heaves and dizzy spells. For the prescription, there are two we might not have, but your friend can help you get them from MedPharm two streets away. I believe they’re open until midnight. Do you have questions?”

“No.” Is that my voice? So mellow. Humbled?

Dr. Abímbólá smiles politely, excusing herself. Leaving Zoya and I in a charged silence that crackles with every breath we take.

“Jeez,” Zoya mumbles, “we’re getting a lot of news today.”

“Hmm. You don’t say.”

She stifles a giggle. “I just want to say—”

“Zoya don’t.”

“I’m going to be an aunty and a cousin by marriage.” Zoya giggles.

It’s not funny.

“Okay.” A small smile escapes me.

It’s funny.

Soon, we’re giggling.



FORTY-TWO

SLASH AND SPREAD

George

CHILUBA IS TROUBLE. CHILUBA IS DRAMATIC. Chiluba is secretive. Chiluba is fun. Chiluba is ambitious. Chiluba is open. Chiluba is addictive. Chiluba is stubborn. Chiluba is sassy. Chiluba is bratty. Chiluba is my future. Chiluba is a Queen. Chiluba is high maintenance. Chiluba is *mijn schat*. Chiluba has me running around Lagos like a clown.

Thoughts of what Chiluba is stands still as I press her doorbell, waiting for a response. Adesuwa had called with an emergency and I had excused myself from the hospital, dropping a message with Zoya.

“What happened?” I ask the moment Zoya slide-opens the door.

I step into the living room behind her.

“About time you got here.”

“Where is she?”

When I returned to the clinic, they told me she requested they discharge her, and they did.

Zoya is wearing a smug smile, her intent gaze on me as she picks her bag, adjusting it on her shoulder as she speaks. “Ah-em, you two have a lot to talk about. So... I’m going to leave you guys to sort this out between yourselves.”

Then as she passes by me, she leans close, tiptoeing to whisper in my ear. “She is scared. She loves you.”

Um... I’ve heard that before, long time ago. But it seems like I need to drop a million bucks to hear it again.

“Chiluba,” Zoya calls towards the direction of the bedroom. “He is here.” She nods her head in the direction, winking at me before exiting the apartment.

Godverdomme. What just happened? What is happening?

I lock the door after Zoya before storming into the bedroom, coming to a halt by the door at the image I find on the bed.

The room has the lingering smell of lilac. And seeing her sitting yoga style on the bed in that familiar nightgown she’d worn at the Little Grand, the night I finger fucked her to—shit. On impulse, I feel a budding arousal between my legs.

Godverdomme.

I need to focus on the matter at hand.

Is she—*eikel*? “You’re crying?” Closing the distance between us as I join her on the bed. Hesitant to touch her just yet.

“I’m two months pregnant.”

Fuzzy warmth spreads through my chest at her assertion. It will be insensitive of me to smile broadly at her dilemma, so I keep my joy in check. Later. When we’re past this.

“And I have a viral infection, which is not the problem—it is going to go away but with the drugs they gave me, but George...” She focuses enticing eyes on me, rushing on.

Why am I hypersexual at this crucial moment?

“I am pregnant. It is yours and I know you have your children, and you don’t want more children, but I can’t imagine myself going through with the other option. So-so-so it’s fine if you don’t want to be a part of our lives.” She snuffles, looking sexier than I’ve ever seen her before. “This is just too much. The year started so good. I never imagined myself to—”

I claim her mouth in a searing kiss. At first, she doesn’t respond, but ever so gently, she relaxes into the kiss, and I gently guide her to lie on the bed with me. Putting all I can in the slow sensuous kiss. Using the kiss as a preamble for everything I want to tell her. Her hands frame my face. Runs through my hair. I press into her. Bite her lips, then withdraw, staring at her.

How did I land such a powerful big baby?

She sighs, taking deep breaths like her life depends on it. Turning to the side, she pulls a tissue from a box, blowing her nose into it.

Inside her, a baby is growing. A life that we formed is coming together.

It was fun having children with Mira. Fifty-five is not the age to think of babies, changing diapers and running around with them. I did that years ago. I should be thinking of my grandkids. How to help my children train their kids, not how to give them more siblings.

Where is the George who wanted to settle with a widow, divorcee, or someone his age? Someone who will not stress me like girls in Chiluba's age category who are nothing but spoilt drama queens?

When she puts the tissue away, she turns to face me. We both lay on our sides, staring at each other.

I don't want her raising the baby alone. We're doing it together. "I'll take you and the baby."

She narrows her eyes at me. "Tsk. Who is offering themselves to you? Tsk, making it sound like it's one ritual. Do I look like I—" She reaches for the box of tissues, blows her nose, then whimpers.

"I don't want to be a mom yet. My business is kicking it off. Next year, I have triple the amount of international travel than I'm I used to traveling. How would I be traveling with a baby?"

Having a child is scary. Daunting. At my age, I'm still trying to understand what the fuck I'm doing with my life, but it's all about learning daily. Three living healthy kids are a testimonial to my experiences.

Fear and shock are wreaking havoc on her mind, but now is not the time to step in.

"And then..." She sniffles, her braids falling to the side of her face when she places her hands as a pillow under her cheek. "Then I'll have to deal with the whisperings. The blogs. Presenters. People will ask questions. My baby..." She holds her tummy in that protective way mothers have been known to do when protecting their child. "My baby will ask questions. Better not to have a father than have one who would—"

"That's enough *schat*." I know I said it's not time to step in, but I need to kill that thought before it grows.

"What?" She regards me like she's only noticing I'm with her. Listening to

her random thoughts. The voices in her head.

Smiling, though I'm still mad at what she said about the father thing, I arrange her braids to fall behind. "You will be the best mother for that child, and I'll be here. I'm—"

"Stop it, George. This is my life we're talking about. My plan was to get married before kids. And you don't want to get married. Tsk. I don't think I want to get married to you."

"Hey, hey... *Lieve schat*—"

"Do you want to get married?" Fixing her wide-eyed gaze on me.

To you. Yes!

In a heartbeat, yes!

However, I don't think now is the time for me to make a drastic decision. She has to know what she'll be dealing with. I'm old and stuff, but I think we need more time to figure things out. Where would we live? How many children after this? What birth control method besides condom would we implement because I loved those times, we went raw—I'm not wearing rubbers from this day on. Then there are my kids to consider. Her friendships. Business. And growing social status. There will be men like Alfred, even younger ones, waiting around for her to get bored with being married to me. I don't want her to wake up months after I do, regretting her actions.

"I thought as much."

I blink, returning to the present. "*Lieve schat*, you're getting it all wrong."

"You didn't answer the question. You might as well just have said a no." Sitting up, she moves pillows around then leans on the headboard, raising her knee to her chin. "I don't even know why you're here."

"I have a confession." Smirking, I sit up till I'm beside her, one arm wrapped around her shoulder.

We lapse into silence, watching each other in her vanity mirror.

"You don't want to ask?"

She shrugs. "You'll tell me. Eventually."

I chuckle, nodding my head.

Silence descends again, but this time I'm filled with trepidation.

She is plucking at her lush bedspread. Thinking a million things.

“*Schat*.” Her ears perk up, but she acts like she’s not listening. “Remember the first time we met? When I gave you my card?”

“That Dáre didn’t grant me access to you?”

“Yes. I told him to.”

She turns in my arm. “I’m still pissed about that. Your point?” Waiting for an answer.

Best to go through with it. “I told him I didn’t want you to access me. To block your calls.”

Her mouth falls opens as she tries to make sense of what I’m saying. Gently, she pulls away from my hold, still staring at me.

“*Schat*, I’m going somewhere.”

“How could you?”

“I know. It sounds crazy. But I thought I could shield myself from you. You literally stormed into my life. I had to take cover. I couldn’t deal with the emotions you awakened in me.”

“George you—”

“I knew we were inevitable. This, what we have, is inevitable. No matter how much I tried to avoid you. Do you think I was in the right frame of mind when I cleared my schedule so I can travel with you on the thought that I wanted to help you see the world? I was lying to myself.” Closing the space between us, I hold her hands, staring into her eyes. “Seeing you that day at The Deviant had me in a loop. *Schat*... you were the harbinger of my sexual awakening. I am done denying that. I love you. I enjoy being with you. Sparring with you. You’re like a breath of fresh air. You challenge my senses. And you are great at everything you do...” I end with a knowing smile, letting her know I mean *everything*. Everything she does.

A tense silence stretches between us as she swallows, weighing her next words.

“I’ve told you I want to get married to a man who will dote over me. I want to have a loving family, not necessarily a beautiful one—but that is certain. And I want to expand my business. I want everything. The complete package.”

“You’ll get all that with me.”

“The married part. Did you get that?”

Grinning. “I did.”

“George... no offense but, I’ll prefer if you were divorced because now, I have to compete with the mother of your children who is no longer here. I don’t want to compete with her. I want to be happy.”

“I’ll make you happy. Your happiness and growth makes me happier. Yes, I loved Mirabel, but my love for you is past the mind, beyond my heart’s control and deep in my soul. *Schat*, you make me whole again. And I promise to be more than that to you.”

“George...” She hiccups. “Sor—” Hiccup.

I smile, letting go of her hand. “I’ll go get water.”

When I return, she is sitting on the bed’s edge, looking put together, however still hiccupping.

After drinking the water, I brought, she looks at me and sighs. “I’m glad I make you happy.” She hisses fondly, swatting my arms as I sit beside her, the bed dipping with my weight. “You’ve rubbed that word on me. But don’t think I don’t see the looks we get when we go out. Look at what happened at the clinic earlier today. I don’t know how that makes you feel... I am indifferent and used to it already. But I noticed you flinching.” She smiles, scrunching her face. “You didn’t like it one bit.”

“I’ll have to get used to it or ignore it. Looks and stares are insignificant to the way I feel about you.” I wrap my arms around her waist. I can’t keep my hands to myself when I’m around her. “I love you.”

Closing her eyes, she rests her hand on my shoulder, absorbing the warmth the word brings to life.

I never really cared about what people think, but the treatment I got today made me understand a pinch of what she gets every other day we spend time together.

“There are a lot of things we need to work on. Like you keeping things from me when you have problems. I would love for you to open up and share with me instead of sorting things out yourself. And I want to be a part of your world, too.”

“But I—”

“I know you can do things yourself. Apparently, that’s what drew you to me or me to you, whichever. I just want us to be vulnerable with each other, open with everything we do.” In the same breath, I add, “I’m sorry for insinuating you got with Alfred.”

She stills.

“I felt left out. That I couldn’t protect you from him. He has a thing for young girls, you know. So... when I found out, I—I lashed out. *Schat*, I’m sorry. Forgive me?”

She nods and we fall into comfortable silence.

Her fingers make doodles on my thigh, while I draw in ragged breaths to keep from pushing her on the bed, easing into her and avoiding the rest of the conversation. There’s something else.

“Can you spend Christmas with my family?”

“Hmm?” Her fingers freeze in motion.

“You can invite your family over.” *Kak. What am I saying?* “What are you doing for Christmas?”

“Better.”

“You’ll always make me feel this way?”

“Feel stupid?” She laughs, staring at me with those wicked eyes.

“*Schat*. I can swat your bum—”

“Something we’ll both enjoy.”

“Oh *schat*. I’m serious here. Can you make plans for Christmas where you’ll spend time with my family? And vice versa?”

“Your family, sure. Mine? Not yet.”

“But I thought—”

“I need to confirm if I am comfortable being with your family. Being Adesuwa’s stepmother.” She smirks.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I’m glad she’s no longer crying or feeling sorry about her state. “I will work on them.”

I reach for her again, pulling her into my arms.

“You know I’m a drama queen, right?”

“I think that’s one allure of being with you.”

“And that I love you.”

Her words push my heart rate to unhealthy territories, and I tighten my arms around her, taking deep breaths to slow my heartbeat to a normal rate.

... *I love you.*

The only humans I hear that word from are my kids and grandkids. But coming from her... *whoosh*... She just launched a vortex of mixed-up emotions.

“You’re going to squeeze the life out of me, George.”

“Never. *Ik houd van jou*.” Releasing my hold around her waist, I plant kisses around her face—forehead, eyebrows, cheek, nose, top lip, bottom lip—ending with a soft, lingering kiss on her mouth. “Say it again.”

“I love you.” She smiles, staring at me with bright eyes.

A kiss.

“I love you.”

“Uh huh...” Another kiss.

“I love you, Georgie.”

“*Ik hou zoveel van je, lieve schat*. I love you and I want to get married to you. But I need you to be sure. Whatever years I have left, I want to spend it with you. Creating beautiful memories.”

“George...” A shy smile on her lips. “You don’t have to be considerate or nice.”

“When have I ever been considerate with you?” Shaking my head. “We are here because of my selfish acts.”

Her face goes blank, then slowly, her lips curve into a peculiar, sexy smile.

“I’m not without flaws, *snoepje*.” I capture her lips in another soul-searing kiss.

Her hands move to my thighs, brushing against them. “You’re going to teach me Dutch and tell me the meaning of the words you keep saying.”

Smiling, I whisper against her mouth. “Can you recall how you got pregnant?”

She whispers back, smiling. “You’re thinking about that right now?”

I glance at her hands on my thigh, making their way to my crotch where the trace of my arousal is visible. “It’s not been easy having that serious conversation when I’m curious to know how it happened.”

“I think we both know how it happened.” Her manicured nails rake over the bulge.

“Are you sure?” Nuzzling her neck, licking her earlobe, I guide her, gently laying her on the bed. Small breathless whispers escape her lips in anticipation.

“We can perform something to help boost your memory.”

“Such a dirty mouth.” Trailing my tongue over her puckered lips before dipping it into her mouth. She opens her mouth across mine, her soft tongue lashing against mine. Soon, our tongues and bodies are dancing to a tune as old as time.

When I finally ease into her slick, moist, tight walls. Something clicks in my head. Closing my eyes, I joyously accept my fate—Chiluba is mine.



EPILOGUE

FIRST LOOKS

Chiluba

Two weeks to Christmas

With Lucid taking shape, Àbẹ̀bí and I spend more time at Silhouette. And George, whom I hardly ever saw, the first time I worked with the Silhouette designers, has secured an office in the building.

He's insufferable.

Not that I mind the extra activities we get into during and after work hours in his office and maybe... some other parts of the building.

I expected George to be a know it all, since he is the father of three, but my surprise when I find, *What To Expect When You're Expecting*, in his suite.

Instinctively rubbing my flat tummy, I narrow my eyes. "What? You should be a pro by now."

"Every pregnancy is different."

"Excuses."

That exchange led to a hot romp on the couch.

As the days go by, his concern for me keeps increasing, and soon I will have to get a bodyguard to get him off my back. He doesn't care about himself! He comes to my area every other day—which I believe isn't safe for him—to check on me.

I'm not showing yet. No one but Zoya and Zena knows what's up with me. George and I have agreed to tell his children during Christmas. As for Maama, I don't know when is a good time to tell her, but I'll tell her before the sixth month. I don't want a repeat of what happened between Zoya and I.

I think Dáre and Mike already know I am with child. The warm smiles they emit when they see me tell me all I need to know.

“We’re early.” George says with a sigh of relief as Mike drives into Arc. Ainabe’s compound.

A simple welcome sign hangs on an easel outside the homely structure.

*You’re in the right place.
Come in and celebrate,
With Z & M.*

Nothing outside shows that a party is happening inside, but as we draw closer, chill afrobeat music serenades our entrance. It is Zoya and Manir’s engagement party. Although she hasn’t told me what went down—why he ghosted her for months—I’ll give it to her for keeping herself this long and snagging a man who is worth his weight in gold.

The only decoration in the living room is to one end—beautifully arranged flowers around pictures of the couple.

Arc. Ainabe—Zoya’s dad—welcomes us, raising curious brows to George’s hold on my waist and I lean into George.

“So, it’s true.” He smiles at George, who shrugs.

I didn’t think of this situation, but it’s not as awkward as I would have imagined.

“Love works in mysterious ways.”

Oh George... What kind of pun is that? His thickened accent and arrogant smile is killing me. I side-eye him, stifling a laugh.

Arc. Ainabe nods with a broad smile, patting George on the shoulder. “Good. Good.”

Soon, other guests arrive, and I can remember most people from Zoya’s side—her dad’s sister, colleagues from work, a couple of couples and some faces from church.

Manir arrives with some friends, and I must say, most are hot! Even the married ones. *Eish*. I slide a sidelong glance at Zena, she doesn’t seem interested in anyone of them. If I were single, I’ll be introducing myself to them, especially the one called ‘Sanmí. On the other hand, Manir’s family, are standoffish. Except for his uncle who is Zoya’s boss.

With Zena as the MC, we laugh into the night, though she remains deadpan, making her more hilarious when she cracks jokes only smart people can get and

by the response of her audience, most of us are smart.

We ask the couple fun questions and play dancing games. With every move make, I feel George's eyes on me. Touching me. Making heat crawl up my neck.

Manir's friend, Bucknor, tells the story of how his friend fell, fast, and hard for Zoya while we all laugh, corroborating and contradicting the facts of his story.

I notice the way Manir, who is a closed off self-made millionaire or is it billionaire—how he came into wealth is tricky—genuinely cares for my friend. Cracking personal jokes with her. His eyes following her every move.

When it is my turn to toast, I talk about Zoya and I's friendship. "For a while it was just us—maybe with Zena bursting in sometimes." Everyone laughs. "And then Manir came along, becoming the secret male bestie until he was not. I don't know how it happened, but the guy is fast." Everyone chuckles. "He was persistent and ultimately persuasive with Zoya's best interests at heart. From what I have seen, I know he loves her, and she loves him. Look at the pictures." I point to the decorations. "They don't lie. These two make a perfect couple and I am happy he's come between us." Raising my glass up that's filled with lemon flavored water, I smile. "To Zoya and Manir. I'm going to have so much fun at your wedding."

When it is time for the couples' speech, Manir starts by thanking us then cracking what's supposed to be a joke about Bucknor's wedding and how he didn't pay attention. "And I'm proud to be joined in God's eyes and yours to the love of my life." He kisses her wrist, looking into her eyes. It's as though, we the guests, we don't exist. Like we're witnessing a private moment. "To someone who truly loves me, who has seen the mess I can be, how moody I can get." His friends cheer him on with shouts of encouragement. "And how hard I am to handle but still wants me in her life." He turns to face us, the spell broken as a small smile curves his lips. "I can't wait to call Zoya my wife. Please tell her to make the wedding next week."

We laugh, clapping but disagreeing to his appeal.

It takes Zoya a while to regroup. After such a public confession from a powerful man, I would too. I cast a glance at George from across the room and my heart thuds faster.

Will this jolting feeling ever end? Would we have our day to invite family and friends to celebrate with us? I'm not like Zoya. I don't want an engagement party. I want a big traditional wedding and a stylish church wedding.

“Manny, you’re looking for trouble.” Zoya smiles before clearing her throat to begin her speech. “I’m glad you all are here today to witness my official declaration that I’m a fool for love. Manny,” she looks fondly at him, scrunching her face in a cute smile, “your choosing me to love and to marry is the fulfillment of a dream. I love loving you.” Her look intensifies as she stares deeply into her fiancé’s eyes. “To us, may we grow more in love and life, nurturing the best in each other and those around us. You are my best friend, my mate and soon to be my husband. Once I was merely me. With you, I am more than I ever thought possible, and this is just the start.” Zoya turns to face us. “And to you all, my thanks and gratitude for your support; past, present, and future.”

“Should they kiss?” Zena asks, grinning unabashedly. *Such an excruciating pain in the ass.* I chuckle. “Okay, we’ll wait till the wedding day, even though we know—” Clearing her throat she continues her MC duties, closing the three hours plus long event.

From what I glean about Manir and Zoya’s relationship, looks like Manir is the one getting the best out of the deal—Zoya. Dude is obsessed with her. And I know Zoya is hiding something about him, which is their business. As long as she’s happy, I’m happy for her.

Manir getting familiar with other Ainabe men, including George, gives Zoya and I the perfect opportunity to gang up on Zena.

We find her standing in the kitchen, biting the flesh off a turkey drumstick.

“So...” I start, standing in front of her, “who will be your date for the wedding?”

She recoils, her gaze darting from me to Zoya, then me.

“Me?”

“Hmm mm.” Zoya hisses, folding her arms, brows raised. “Me.”

The hand holding the drumsticks falls to her side. “You guys are serious?”

I remain deadpan. “As serious as a heart attack.” *Thanks for the punchline, George!* I hold back the joyous smile that threatens to break my character. “You have to bring someone. Most preferred individual is your boyfriend.”

An annoyed expression briefly crosses her face. She glances at the drumstick, then at us, shaking her head. “Thanks a lot for being concerned about my romance life but I will be too busy with the wedding preparations.” She scoffs, biting a piece off the meat. “What can I say? You guys can’t function without

me.”

“Duh... Zee, once I finalize the date, I’m getting a wedding planner and an event planner.” Zoya threatens. Older sister mode activated. “I’m paying people to handle everything we need so we can have fun. Enjoy ourselves—”

“We are going to Dubai, Zee.” I add flare to the newsflash. “And our husband is paying for close family members and their plus one.”

“You mean my husband.”

“Tsk. I’m not dragging husband with you, *jor*.”

Zena laughs at the confusion in our camp.

“You think this is funny?” I give her a look of mock contempt. “Ah. You must bring a date, o. If not, you are safe to come out to us—”

“Hey sis... haba.” Zena’s expression shifts from playful to irritated.

“We’re concerned. If that’s the case, we love you—”

“Fine.”

“Huh?”

“Fine. I’ll bring my boyfriend.” She turns her nose, eyeballing us. “Just make sure none of you snatch him from me.”

“There’s a boyfriend?” Zoya grins broadly, hands akimbo.

Zena shrugs, taking an angry bite at her drumstick.

Grazing my bottom lip with my teeth, I wink at Zoya. “Told you.”

“Luby, you’re going about this wedding like you are going to have the strength to move around when you are heavy with a baby.”

That day at the hospital, Zoya told me I’ll be her chief bridesmaid and will make sure the D-day is set to months after I’ve dropped.

“Don’t worry. Just watch me.” I chuckle. “Be watching me like film. If I’m still heavy, we would postpone the wedding until I am cleared to travel.”

“Zoya, big sis. Are you in support of this?”

“What do you think?” Zoya smiles wickedly. “If you don’t have someone, we can match make you with—”

“I said I have a boyfriend.”

“Well said. Now it’s time to look forward to who this special date will be. Don’t introduce him to us before the wedding. Shock us.”

“Surprise us. Let us see your taste in men,” I add, and we both laugh.

Zena watches us, a brooding look on her face. “Why would you even choose to get married in Dubai when you cannot legally marry the person except the person is a citizen or is a Muslim?”

“Duh, that is my dream. What I want.” Zoya sighs. “I want it on a beach resort in Dubai.”

“Dearest sister, it is official. You need help.” She shakes her head, tossing what’s left of the drumstick into a plate. “And he is going to be funding all these things? Hmm.”

Zoya ignores her, turning her full attention on me. “I have made up my mind. Traditional and court in Nigeria around June, July so you can move around and by October we will do the wedding ceremony in Dubai.”

“That’s roughly a year from now.”

“That is why it is called a wedding ceremony, not a marriage.”

“I can’t believe we’re sisters.” Zena shakes her head in disgust, waltzing out of the kitchen.

“*Schat.*” Zoya and I turn to the doorway where George stands, smiling coyly. He looks so good in a black senator’s apparel with red threading. Power and sex appeal oozes from him as he glances at his watch before running his hand through his silver-gray hair. “Ready to call it a night?”

“Okay...” Zoya grins slowly, watching us. “I don’t think I’m used to you both yet.”

“Get out here.” I murmur.

“This is a family kitchen,” she murmurs back. “Don’t do anything stupid here.”

Do I need to be warned?

Did you enjoy Bottom Belle?
Please leave a [review](#).

Want more Chiluba & George? Subscribe to my newsletter for an extended epilogue! bit.ly/bottombellebonus

Are you ready for Zena & Lékan?
Download [Goody Bag](#) today!



Read on for a teaser...

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CAMAA'S RECIPE

*Preparing Concoction rice (palm oil rice/village rice)
from Chiluba's Kitchen*

Ingredients

2 cups of **Rice** (500g long grain parboiled white rice)
1 cup of **Pepper mix** (red bell pepper, habanero pepper, tomato, onions, ginger)
½ cup of **Palm Oil**
1 big piece of **Stockfish/Dried Herring** (few pieces)
1 medium smoked **Mackerel/Titus**
1 small, chopped **Onion**
3 tablespoons **Ground Crayfish**
Seasoning Cubes (to taste)
2 tablespoon ground **Locust Bean/Dawadawa**
Salt (to taste)
Vegetable: Scent leaves/Parsley/Curry/Spinach

Method

1. Soak the stockfish till soft and separate into small pieces.
2. Wash rice clean and set aside or parboil and set aside.
3. Place pot on medium heat. Add palm oil and heat (don't bleach).
4. Add chopped onions and fry. Add the pepper mix, crayfish, seasoning and salt. Let it cook till oil floats on top of the sauce.
5. Add the stockfish/herring and little water. Let it cook for eight minutes.
6. Add rice and stir. Add little water. Cover tightly and reduce the heat. Leave for ten minutes, then keep checking until it is almost done.
7. Add smoke Mackerel/Titus with vegetable of choice. Cook till soft.
8. Turn off heat and leave to stand for five minutes. Stir and voila! Concoction rice is ready! Serve hot.

AN EXCERPT FROM GOODY BAG, LAGOS LOVIN’

#3

“You made it,” Zena says with a patronizing wry, humorless smile. Her deep, familiar voice washes through me. It has whispered huskily to me in my dreams this past week. In a silky persuasive manner, not curt-like as she’s wielding it now. And those eyes, they were more... welcoming. Right now, there’s a sharp glint in them that speaks of mayhem and chaos.

“You mean me?” I grin.

Ignoring the seat opposite her, I take the seat beside her, trying to unsettle her.

“You’re the Lekan I’m waiting for.”

Ah... she’s being sardonic. Who is this Zena? “How many Lekans do you know?”

Her smile is tight and forced. “I know enough to last me a lifetime.”

Really, how many Lekans has she met in her life? Even if she has met many, I don’t think they’ll be as remarkable as me. “So, you knew it was me on the phone?”

She feigns a squint, as though trying to place my face and voice but quickly drops the act. “I’m tempted to ask the same question, but I am too grown to do that. It’s been what, five years?”

“Five years and seventy-three days to be precise.” Yeah, call me a fool for love but I am not ashamed to admit it—I have loved this girl for the longest time, and I have counted every day we’ve been apart, up until this moment.

Download [Goody Bag](#) today!

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A LETTER TO YOU

Hi there!

How many days year old were you when you found out Ankara fabric is not African, only the prints are? Or that the popular lace worn to *ówàmbẹ̀*'s are originally from Austria and Switzerland? Hint; Swiss lace. *winks.

After reading *Gaga Crazy*, readers were curious about Chiluba and... what's up with her and Zoya's Uncle? Well, now you have it. Chiluba living her best life with George.

Because *Gaga Crazy* was mild with the sex scenes, I went into *Bottom Belle* expecting nothing more, but Chiluba and George knew how they wanted their story told. I struggled with moving their first sex scene to be in Nigeria, but they would not let me. I was literally shouting; "I will not allow you to—ei! Help me! Help me! Help! Dem dey carry me dey go where I no know o!"

I didn't know we'll be delving into BDSM. Nor did I foresee Chiluba being a brat in bed and George loving every minute of it. All I knew before writing those scenes were that there would be praise kink. Lots of it.

Chiluba and George are one couple I enjoyed writing. Get ready for Zena and Lekan's story in the next *Lagos Lovin'* installment, *Goody Bag*, an enemies to lovers/hate to love romance, fake dating and more!

Thanks a lot for reading *Bottom Belle*! If you are a new reader—new to my books—please check out my other books, let's become friends via camaapearl.com/links and... follow [@booksbycamaa_pearl](https://www.instagram.com/booksbycamaa_pearl) on Instagram. I am excited to share more sizzling stories in the upcoming *Lagos Lovin'* series and other collaborations, God willing. [Don't forget to download Chiluba and George's Extended Epilogue here—bit.ly/bottombellebonus](https://bit.ly/bottombellebonus). Till then keep reading and having a swell time!

XoXO



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ABOUT CAMAA PEARL

Camaa Pearl, also known as Margaret Adetimehin, is an international bestselling author and storyteller with a refreshingly unique style that borders between reality and fiction.

As a true ambivert, when she is not reading or writing, she enjoys traveling, tasty meals, behavioral research and talking The Dream's ear off. She hopes to get a puppy soon and if you subscribe to her newsletters via bit.ly/margaretadetimehin.com, you'll be one of the first to know.

Find her everywhere margaretadetimehin.com/links

TITLES BY CAMAA PEARL

Lagos Lovin' Novels

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Bottom Belle (Chiluba & George)

Goody Bag (Zena & Lékan)

All of Me Trilogy

*Every Step I Take (Spring 2024)

Yoruba Demons Billionaire Club

*The Complete Guide to Becoming a F*ck Boy (Summer 2024)

Standalones

Escape (Lola & Onahi)

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** Nine Hours Till Five (Funmi)

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***The Lady of the House (*in the Nights at Club Nova: An Erotic Romance Anthology*)

* - *Dates are susceptible to change*

** - *writing as Margaret Adetimehin*

*** - *writing as Temi Nenyé*

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